

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

Navigating Careers in Cultural Production Industries:
The Case of Stand-Up Comedy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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Professor Gabriel Rossman, Co-chair

Professor Lynne Goodman Zucker, Co-chair

This dissertation investigates patterns of action and decision-making patterns by artists with cultural production industries. In particular, it explores how individuals navigate these uncertain, project-based fields, which are characterized by network forms of organization. Drawing from five years of ethnographic research into stand-up comedians in Los Angeles, I crafted three chapters that examine participants' decision-making and social organization. The first chapter covers the underlying processes and mechanisms for career development among artists. It introduces and defines the model of a layered career. In the case of stand-up comedy, individuals progressively move through three layers. Each exhibits its own distinctive organizational bases, challenges, interactional processes, relationship types, and rewards. While development involves one matriculating through layers, it also requires artists to maintain their participation in prior layers, because each is ideally suited for different aspects of practice, creativity, and social support. Careers

in these contexts involve building a durable infrastructure rather than a simple passage through discrete statuses. The second chapter explores the informal enforcement of intellectual property rights in stand-up comedy. In particular, it focuses on inconsistent sanctioning of joke theft. I illustrate that enforcement is loosely coupled to the severity of a transgression and is more dependent to a comedian's disharmonious status, especially the incompatibility between high commercial success and low peer esteem. Sanctions frequently emerge as a response to one's history of boorish and disrespectful behavior or aloofness. The success of these claims, which heavily resemble scandal processes, depends on the reputations and statuses of relevant actors—particularly the accused transgressor, the moral entrepreneur behind them, and relevant third parties. The final chapter explains comedians' high rates of persistence during middle and late-career stages, despite low and diminishing odds for stardom or optimal outcomes. I attribute this to this labor market assuming the form of a commitment trap. While most entrants have early exits, ambiguous feedback surrounding outcomes or prospects and the specificity of their investments lead aspirants to persist. Taken together, this dissertation illuminates core processes and mechanisms that apply to careers in cultural production industries and, in a larger sense, other forms of contingent employment.

The dissertation of Patrick Michael Reilly is approved

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2016

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Jen, my father Pat, my mother Jean, and the memory of my godfather Bill Brown.

“Walk on with hope in your heart, and you’ll never walk alone.”

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INTRODUCTION

According to National Endowment of the Arts (2005), there are roughly 1.5 million Americans who derive their primary income from being an artist. This figure does not capture the countless others who work in humdrum jobs and pursue the arts as secondary employment or the destination of quest for an occupation that would bring eventual riches or self-edification (Caves, 2000; Menger, 2014). It does not count the thousands of students in conservatories, art schools, or master of arts programs who seek to cultivate the knowledge and networks to develop and, perhaps, sustain a career in the arts. The pursuit of careers in cultural production industries unfolds within various sites that reflect differing degrees of prestige and status. For television writers, it ranges from rooms in broadcast network studios to coffeehouses, where aspirants nurse lattes while toiling over spec scripts. A handful of improvisational comedians gains the distinction of joining the cast of *Saturday Night Live*, while so many more others push through the curriculum of The Groundings or The Upright Citizens' Brigade with hopes of joining the main company. Some actors and actresses earn consistent work on the casts of television shows or films. However, they are outnumbered by those waiting in lines every morning in front of Central Casting or shuffling to an array of usually unsuccessful commercial auditions. Despite the varied scales and statuses that characterize individual cases, the typically common fiber uniting careers in cultural production industries is their weirdness.

There are a few attributes that contribute to their peculiarity. Because careers in cultural production industries have various appeals, the supply of artists greatly outnumbers consumer demand, which drives down equilibrium wages (Caves, 2000; MacDonald, 1988; Menger, 2014). This contributes to profoundly high competition for a comparatively small number of paying jobs. Many fields, particularly within mass entertainment, exhibit strong superstar inequalities (Rosen, 1981; Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006). Cultural production industries are also shaped by intense market uncertainty; gatekeepers have institutionalized responses to it that are generally inexact (Bielby &

Bielby, 1994; Hirsch, 1972; Mears, 2011). Career development in these largely project-based fields typically occurs in an improvisational fashion through the accumulation of experience and on-the-job training (Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). Many workers also face the obstacles in predicting their fit with certain jobs or signaling their competencies because of ambiguity surrounding their abilities (Jones, 2002). This combination of factors contributes to the effectiveness of cultural production industries as cases to craft and refine wider frameworks concerning work and occupations in alternative employment arrangements like contracting, freelancing, and project-based fields. Likewise, it also makes them difficult for scholars to analyze and capture.

Following this tradition, my dissertation presents a series of chapters based upon an ethnographic study of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, California that explores careers and labor markets within cultural production industries. I examine how participants contribute to the structure of this field and careers within it. Furthermore, I investigate the relationship between the organization of the art world and industry of stand-up comedy, its underlying creative processes, and the social dynamics of its community. The relationship between these mutually constitutive aspects shapes patterns of behavior, decision-making, and action among its various participants. Particularly, I chart the processes and organization of career development among stand-up comedians. I illustrate how comedians' perceptions of status inform their reactions to peers' or competitors' behaviors. Lastly, I outline why performers persist within this field, even when the promise of earning rewards appears increasingly remote.

Outline of Chapters

This dissertation focuses upon careers in creative industries to uncover patterns of individual and collective decision-making within such markets, which are characterized by network-based organization and informal institutions. These three chapters address these themes through exploring various aspects of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, California. Taken together, they introduce

frameworks and refine existing theories that attempt to capture individual or community decision-making patterns under uncertainty, disorderliness, status differentials, and the constant specter of failure.

Chapter One uses the case of stand-up comedians to explore career development within cultural production industries. Rather than occurring through deliberate training systems and progression up a job ladder, these careers develop in a more informal and improvisational manner through experience, on-the-job training, and reputation building across multiple projects (Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). This degree of unpredictability and apparent disorderliness is especially evident among those who participate in the more expressive and creative inputs of content production. They tend to possess ambiguous skill sets that are difficult to signal and are less portable between settings (Jones, 2002). They are also more subject to uncertainty surrounding audience tastes and gatekeeper preferences, because their work involves a greater emphasis on novelty and conformity to temporary trends or fads (Caves, 2000; Hirsch, 1972; Menger, 2014). To account for career development within this aspect of creative industries, I introduce the concept of a *layered career*. In these settings, participants progress through overlapping layers. Each one features distinct organizational arrangements, relationship types, goals, challenges, rewards, and interactional patterns. However, career development within a layer career does not involve the simple movement across discrete stages. Instead, participants actively engage within previous layers, because each is suited for distinctive aspects of work or creative process or career development. In this chapter, I describe the attributes of and interactions between these layers—which, in the case of stand-up comedy, are the *proximate*, *community*, and *industrial*. Through outlining these arrangements, I emphasize how social relationships, the accumulation of tacit knowledge, informal institutions, and decentralized field structures contribute to the emergence and presence of layered careers in cultural production industries and, by extension, other forms of contingent labor.

Chapter Two explores how status shapes the uneven enforcement of norms through investigating the informal intellectual property rights systems that govern stand-up comedy. I focus upon inconsistencies in joke theft accusations. Participants within certain contexts define and adjudicate intellectual property rights through norms and community-based systems when legal interventions (e.g. copyrights and patents) are absent or ineffective (DiStefano, King, & Verona, 2015; Fauchart & von Hippel, 2008; Oliar & Sprigman, 2008). Prior scholarship stresses how enforcement depends upon one's reputation for bad acts or the potential costs of sanctioning. Through my exploration of joke theft accusations, I find these forms of moral entrepreneurship are loosely coupled to the egregiousness of one's violation. Instead, comedians attract accusations when they exhibit disharmonious statuses in the form high commercial renown and low peer esteem. The adjudication of joke theft more resembles scandal processes that account for such incompatible statuses. Community members and observers tend to impute guilt when an accused individual exhibits a track record of boorish behavior, disrespect, or marginality from social groups. The social positions and identities of the involved parties—particularly the directly aggrieved comedian, alleged transgressor, moral entrepreneurs, and interested third-parties—also shape the perceived effectiveness and veracity of these claims. Therefore, the adjudication of joke theft could reflect backstage politics more so than an onstage transgression. By stressing how status dynamics mediate enforcement, these findings identify the weaknesses of property rights systems based within informal institutions and community-based organization.

To close, Chapter Three investigates patterns of commitment and exit among stand-up comedians. It addresses the remarkable persistence of aspirants in intermediate labor market positions despite remote odds for stardom. In particular, this field exhibits significant rates of mortality among newcomers within their first six months of performing and roughly consistent participation by survivors over the next eight to ten years. Research into individuals' motivations to

partake in artistic careers tends to attribute their involvement to a desire for certain rewards, such as the satisfaction of a calling, psychic rewards, or outsized returns of fame and wealth that accompany superstardom (Menger, 2014). This chapter reflects an alternate approach. I explain such persistence through exhibiting how these labor markets assume the form of a commitment trap. This escalation of commitment occurs because these labor markets include two overlapping, but basically sequential, stages. First, aspirants make investments in the face of ambiguous feedback concerning outcomes, necessary strategies, and career position. Notably, discontinuity between low-quality long-term feedback and high-quality short-term feedback may bias aspirants toward the latter in basing their career decisions. In the second stage, the specificity of human capital or social relationship accrued in the first stage compels further persistence, because the time devoted to pursuing these resources may scar aspirants from alternative labor markets. The level of intensity of ambiguity and specificity increases the rate of persistence—even at a labor market's bottom rungs, which may contribute to high future costs, potentially diminished prospects in other occupational career paths, and delayed life-course events. Investing significant time and effort toward discovering one's prospects and developing skills or relationships that are specific to stand-up comedy traps individuals into committing to this path, even though they frequently concede that stardom is an incredibly remote outcome.

Stand-Up Comedy in Los Angeles

Stand-up comedy occupies two key roles within the entertainment industry in the United States. First, onstage performances constitute a form of live entertainment that attracts audiences to comedy clubs and independently produced shows across the Los Angeles area. In addition, they are a genre of cultural content that appears in myriad media. This includes free video clips on YouTube, five-minute segments on late-night variety shows, half-hour cable television specials, and feature-length releases distributed through home video or movie theaters. Second, it is a source that

Hollywood studios regularly scout to discover new talent to cast in television and film. Over the past few decades, some of the most successful and prolific luminaries in comedy developed their early careers within the world of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles. Superstars like Jay Leno, David Letterman, Robin Williams, Judd Apatow, Janeane Garafalo, Zack Galfinakis, and numerous others emerged from this farm system. Countless television situation comedies feature former and still active stand-up comedians as members on their writing staffs. Pilots created by these performers—who generally draw from their onstage sets for core premises and storylines—frequently populate television networks’ development schedules each season. For decades, the stages of comedy clubs and more improvised venues in bars, coffee houses, or comic book shops have served as the headwaters of talent and projects for Hollywood’s comedic output.

While stand-up comedy (or at least its stylistic predecessors) was a fixture of Los Angeles’ Vaudeville theaters, nightclubs, and strip joints throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, its current form began to solidify with the establishment of the showcase club system (Knoedelseder, 2009; Zoglin, 2008; also see Stebbins, 1992 for a similar arrangement in Canada). In the 1970s, two clubs—The Hollywood Improv and The Comedy Store—opened in West Hollywood. They were unique, because stand-up comedy was the main focus of the audience rather than a side attraction, component of a mixed bill, or a means to warm-up the crowd between acts. As they gained popularity throughout the 1970s, the clubs assumed a few important capacities. Their bookers acted as effective brokers (DiMaggio 1977) who acted as intermediaries between aspiring stand-up comedians and Hollywood scouts. These venues became stable, centralized avenues for industry gatekeepers to monitor and to evaluate burgeoning acts. They also provided a place for casual audiences to get some laughs and to witness rising stars before they achieve fame and notoriety. These clubs served as somewhat formalized career development systems by providing their stable of aspiring comedians who passed an initial audition with consistent and ample stage time according to

their position in the club's hierarchy. While there was a handful of peripheral venues in Los Angeles, the strength of the major showcase clubs as brokers, endorsers of talent, and sources of large audiences reinforced their control.

These clubs produced an impressive roster of comedy's most renowned stars of the 1970s and 1980s—such as David Letterman, Robin Williams, Sam Kinison, and Andrew Dice Clay. However, the sizable influence wielded by showcase clubs as gatekeepers caused some unconventional performers to be screened out due to incompatibility with a booker's tastes or their perception of the television and film industries established preferences. A common critique by some comedians concerning the showcase club bookers of that era was that they preferred acts who were “TV ready” and tended to dismiss those who deviated from this quality, which included female and minority performers or those with long-form material. The showcase clubs' rather conservative approach to sorting talent led to a long period of creative stagnation. As comedian Dana Gould recalled about this early 1990s lull during an interview on the *Kevin Pollack's Chat Show*, “Comedy fans didn't go to comedy clubs. They had been driven out by just the sheer number of people with jackets rolled up to their elbows” (Pollack, 2011).¹ Furthermore, many aspiring performers resented the alleged exploitative practices and overreach of bookers regarding low or no pay for performances, informal obligations for exclusive loyalty, intrusions upon creative autonomy, and favoritism. Such tensions particularly manifested in the 1979 Comedians' Strike concerning fair pay (Knoedelseder, 2009). These mounting frustrations and creative stagnation threatened the showcase club's centrality as the organizational basis for stand-up comedy in Los Angeles. They eventually contributed to the ascendance of the *alternative comedy* model.

¹ This is a reference to the seemingly uniform fashion of male stand-up comedians in the 1980s. Contemporary comedians use this or cliché topics, such as airplane food, as symbols to deride the incredible stagnancy of the later stages of that era.

Although the moniker tends to be employed by some comedians and industry insiders to connote a standard of stylistic formalism, the alternative comedy model in Los Angeles features stand-up comedy shows occurring outside of showcase club and organized by independent producers. It emerged during the mid-1990s as a conscious alternate method of career formation and exhibition to the perceived homogeneity, rigid tracks, and lofty barriers of entries of the incumbent clubs. They occurred in a hodgepodge of venues, such as black-box theaters, bookstores, and coffeehouses. Regular shows—like Un-Cabaret, Monday nights at Largo, and the Onyx Café—attracted sizable audiences of comparatively hipper comedy fans and, eventually, an influx of industry scouts. In addition, a small fleet of open-mic nights—such as The Open-Mic of Love—provided comedians a venue to hone their routines and perform before their peers. Despite their distance from the traditional channels of the showcase club environment, a cohort of eventual superstars—particularly Zach Galifianakis, Patton Oswalt, and Margaret Cho—and a host of other comedians appeared on the radar of the film and television industries. The diminished constraints contributed toward the growth of personalized routines and atypical performers.

Over the past decade, the alternative comedy organizational type dramatically expanded within stand-up comedy in Los Angeles. As a result, it has morphed into an expansive and decentralized collection of venues. The three major showcase clubs—The Comedy Store, The Hollywood Improv, and Laugh Factory—still draw superstars onto their stages and audiences of casual fans and tourists. However, they are joined by scores of independently produced shows and open-mic nights where comedians perform before crowds of varying sizes. This expansion has rendered a field formerly dominated by strong brokerage into a more diffuse and decentralized network based around communities, cliques, and loose circuits of temporary and permanent venues. Career development has become less formal and more improvised. Because stand-up comedy in contemporary Los Angeles—as an art world (Becker 1982), industry, and career path—most often

occurs within and through informal institutions, this situation makes it an ideal site to engage with the concepts and frameworks explored within this dissertation's chapters. Through engaging with various aspects of this site, this dissertation highlights how individuals navigate uncertainty, disorderliness, and irregularity to achieve their aspirations and craft their art.

Choice of Methods

The foundation of this dissertation is data accumulated from a fifty-month participant-observation study of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, CA. During this time, I floated between the diverse venues of this disperse art world—comedy clubs, open-mics, independently produced shows, social gatherings, writing sessions, and talent showcases—to observe various processes of gatekeeping, collaboration, creativity, decision-making, and sensemaking. Starting in the second month of my study, I participated as a performing comedian. This allowed me to adopt the perspective of a “observant participant” (Mears, 2012; Wacquant, 2011), which enhanced my access into this fieldsite, develop rapport with participants, and accumulate tacit knowledge concerning onstage and backstage processes.

Sociological studies of cultural production industries—particularly those following the Production of Culture approach (Peterson & Anand, 2004)—tend to rely upon quantitative or network methods applied to archival data. This is partially due to the availability of high quality, field-level data covering sales figures, credits, and exhibition patterns. They can be used to craft theoretical models concerning collaboration (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005), industry structure (Dowd and Blyler, 2004; Lopes, 1992; Peterson & Berger, 1975), or diffusion (Rossman, 2012). Furthermore, there is also a sub-literature within the Production of Culture that uses historical (e.g. Accominotti, 2009; Peterson, 1997; Lena, 2012) or interview data (e.g. Cornfield, 2015; Espeland & Sauder, 2007) to highlight the relationships between production systems and content.

Ethnographic methods enable the analysis of many crucial aspects of cultural production industries. It provides insight into the processes and rituals of gatekeeping mechanisms and how artists interpret and react to endogenous and exogenous effects in their creative practice or career choices (e.g. Craig & Dubois, 2010; Lee, 2016; Mears, 2011; Peterson & White, 1979; Velthuis, 2005). In addition, it elucidates the social organization process of an art world's participants, which permits the analysis of its effect upon teamwork or career outcomes (e.g. Bechky, 2006; O'Mahony & Bechky 2006). While statistical methods privilege status according to commercial performance or awards, ethnographic methods resituate the focus to the micro-level of participants. This permits investigations into nuanced status systems or dynamics within cliques or communities. Furthermore, ethnography allows researchers to capture earlier career stages that precede formalized employment or inclusion in conspicuously exhibited projects.

Ethnographic studies also illuminate the micro-level processes and mechanisms involved in the hiring and career development of contract or project-based employees. Scholars (e.g. Barley & Kunda, 2004; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Osnowitz, 2010) have employed this method to capture workers' patterns of network formation, strategy development, and skill accrual to account for conditions within these external labor markets. It allows access into micro-level processes involved when participants assess their potential outcomes, evaluate their competition, realize their constraints, and discern the requisites for advancement or the rules of the game.

Ethnographic methods can also partially compensate the weakness of quantitative data. Most survey data sources—such as the United States Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics—exclude aspirants who do not receive their primary income from a particular occupation. This bias is especially problematic in cultural production industries, where a significant proportion of participants earns little or no money from their artistic pursuits. They must rely on day-jobs to subsidize their everyday expenses (Caves, 2000; Menger, 2014). Furthermore, some labor markets or

art worlds—particularly those without centralized bodies like guilds—lack records to account for the setting’s population. These blind-spots complicate the singular reliance upon quantitative methods and speak to the contributions of ethnographic studies.

In the context of my fieldsite, participant-observation exhibits some shortfalls. This leads me to include additional complimentary data sources. My fieldwork focuses upon certain venues occupied disproportionately by lower status participants. To overcome these limitations, I integrated data obtained from interviews that appear on podcasts featuring star and superstar comedians. These podcasts act as informal trade publications. In addition, I included archival data that summarizes individuals’ participation patterns and career achievements. This allowed me to grasp career trajectories and rates of exit. I also conducted semi-structured interviews (n=30) with comedians in my fieldwork to gain insight into their backgrounds, motivations, and opinions about events within stand-up comedy. While interview data in isolation exhibit weakness due to its divorcement from action (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), I employed them as a frame of reference to contrast with behavior. The resulting points of compatibility or contradiction proved informative to uncover key mechanisms and process more completely.

CHAPTER 1

THE LAYERS OF A CLOWN: CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN CULTURAL PRODUCTION INDUSTRIES

Career paths in cultural production industries remain a source of curiosity for scholars. In a basic sense, careers in cultural production are weird. Progress within most of these fields does not follow orderly career ladders. Instead, careers appear to involve disorderly sequences of projects or gigs (Jones, 1996; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Peterson & Anand, 2002). They are also unpredictable, and participants must shoulder the uncertainty of these markets and withstand the churn of trends, audience tastes, and technologies of production and distribution (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Frenette, 2013; Mears, 2011). Many fields are characterized by profound labor surpluses, and the artists within them express varying motivations for their participation (Caves, 2000; Menger, 2014). The increasing ease of self-production and distribution further compounds and complicates this unpredictability. Given these peculiarities and challenges, two fundamental questions persist. How does career progress in cultural production industries occur? How are these seemingly disorderly career paths arranged?

To discover the answers, I drew from a roughly five-year participant-observation study of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, California. Through my research, I discovered that comedians' development follows a model that I call a *layered career*. Within this framework, a performer's progress involves gradual advancement through three overlapping layers of participation. Each involves its own distinctive social dynamics, organizational attributes, and audiences. Stand-up comedians face different core challenges within each stage. Their success within these stages yields particular resources to advance and sustain them within the next level. However, even as they advance, comedians continue to operate within the prior layers as their careers develop. Each level remains ideally suited for various aspects of creative process, network cultivation, and support.

Career progress involves constructing a durable, multi-tiered infrastructure rather than a simply passing through discrete statuses or credits. Maintaining a career within stand-up comedy requires individuals to actively preserve their ties to prior layers, because these levels serve as the foundation for everyday practice and also haven during lags in employment.

I also discovered what leads certain segments of cultural production work, particularly stand-up comedy, to assume the pattern of a layered career. First, participating in this field requires individuals to collect and use tacit knowledge that is only accessible through experience and immersion. This is a common attribute of labor within many creative industries (Bechky, 2006; Faulkner, 1973; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). Stand-up comedy exhibits some important distinctions. One cannot achieve fluency with on-stage craft and backstage processes through prior training, but rather through continual practice and regular interactions with fellow participants or audiences. In response to exclusion by incumbent community members, newcomers regularly form cliques to pool information, assistance, attention, and ideas. This allows these novices to map and navigate an unfamiliar world cooperatively. These informal collaborative groups regularly endure in higher career layers as trusted creative and support circles. In addition, comedians rely heavily upon *mentoring* to facilitate their development. By cultivating strong and prolonged ties with a protégé, a mentor can establish effective and individually tailored lines of communication to share and translate esoteric knowledge. Stand-up comedy lacks formal career development systems and uniform credentials to initiate progress. While part of progress comes through skill development, a main component of advancement is *endorsements* from esteemed or socially central insiders. Endorsements bolster a comedian's credibility through visible association or references. Career trajectories—even at the highest echelons—regularly fluctuate between boon periods and employment lags. Downward mobility is a real and present risk. Continually revisiting the earlier layers, where close cliques or peer audiences predominate, ensures a relatively steady environment to self-produce or to join smaller

projects, which allows a comedian to cultivate new works, maintain exposure, and garner peer esteem. These combined aspects of knowledge transfer, work process, informal development systems, and instability influence the appearance and persistence of layered career structures.

To define the layered career model and depict mobility within it, I adopted the following format for this article. In the first section, I briefly review the existing literature concerning career progression in cultural production industries, and I introduce the layered career framework to address particular gaps in prior scholarship. After outlining my methods and fieldsite, I define the three layers—*proximate*, *community*, and *industrial*—in detail through the experiences of Los Angeles’ stand-up comedians. I devote particular attention to the particular challenges and rewards engendered in each. Furthermore, I outline how they work interdependently as enduring sites within an upwardly mobile comedian’s career. Next, I illustrate how mentoring and endorsements act as catalysts for progression. To conclude, I comment upon the appearance of layered careers in other occupations that involve the production of cultural content, which cover roughly 1.5 million workers in the United States (National Endowment for the Arts, 2008) and countless more aspirants and hobbyists. I finish by highlighting to this model’s contributions to the wider literature concerning informal and contingent employment.

Career Development in Cultural Production Industries

Initiating and developing a career within most cultural production industries tends to be an unpredictable and messy process, because these fields usually lack traditional recruiting, selection, and training systems (Jones, 1996; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006). There are some cases—such as French art painting within the Royal Academy (White & White, 1965), the Hollywood studio system (Caves, 2000; A. Scott, 2005:118-119), or “boy bands” in popular music (Stahl, 2012)—where formal employment or patronage arrangements make career development more routine and systematic. However, such formation tends to be especially disorderly in many creative industries, particularly

those shaped by strong market competition or uncertainty (Peterson & Anand, 2002). Workers frequently move between organizational settings through a loose sequence of temporary jobs that last for the duration of a singular project or gig (Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Mears, 2011; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005). Employment in such arrangements is typically irregular and inconsistent. In addition, this haphazard system requires relative newcomers to shoulder the responsibility for their development. Through practical experience and improvisation, newcomers must map these decentralized organizational fields, ascertain available career paths, and determine the necessary skills, experience, or contacts to secure work and spur career progress.

To address the riddle of how project-based creative workers develop and sustain their careers, scholars have offered some useful frameworks. Jones (1996) presents a four-stage model, in which newcomers (1) begin their careers through exhibiting sound interpersonal communication skills and expressing their enthusiasm and perseverance to established workers within an industry. Such impression management (Goffman, 1959) strategies are crucial to cultivating initial references and showing potential capability and compatibility. Blair (2001) finds through her study of the British film industry that nepotism is a common mechanism for entry. Once an aspirant gets his or her foot in the door, (2) he or she attempts to accumulate as many jobs as possible in order to “craft” a career through developing practical knowledge and becoming socialized into the given industry’s culture. Cultivating experience across projects familiarizes neophytes with the duties and conventions concerning particular roles and how they allow for coordination within these temporary team settings (Bechky, 2006). O’Mahony & Bechky (2006) observe that aspirants, especially in early career stages, frequently resort to “discounting” their wages, strategically “framing” their abilities (or outright “bluffing”), and conspicuously displaying their work ethic to gain formative jobs. Next, (3) aspirants try to “navigate” their careers by establishing reputations from their work histories and

cultivating social networks. At this stage, they may attempt to specialize and conform to a certain type, which leads to more consistent employment (Zuckerman et al., 2003). Building social capital and maintaining wide-reaching contacts increases an individual's financial incomes and likelihood of securing more regular and higher quality work within cultural industries (DiMaggio, 2011; Dowd & Pinheiro, 2013; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009). Because of these benefits, artists and workers devote significant time and effort toward networking to secure potential references, exchange gossip, and gain information about new developments within the industry (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Neff et al., 2005). Alternately, workers may seek representation from talent agencies to broker employment opportunities—especially with elite firms whose centrality and prestige can bolster even obscure talent's status and attractiveness by association (Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Mears, 2011). Lastly, established individuals (4) “maintain” their careers through building relationships with entrants through mentorship and addressing their work-home life balance. Ultimately, these models emphasize that experience and social capital are central to career development.

However, by characterizing careers in creative industries as a simple sequence of jobs or credits and human and social capital development as the catalysts for progress, existing models (e.g. Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006) do not fully account for the dynamic attributes of certain fields. These studies mostly focus on technical staff (e.g. gaffers, cinematographers, and grips) whose skills are typically standardized and require specialized expertise. These frameworks therefore miss many conditions experienced by content creators like writers, film directors, stand-up comedians, or singer-songwriters. These pursuits tend to involve qualities and competencies that are ambiguous or difficult to signal (Jones, 2002). The boundaries between roles are more porous, and roles are frequently combined (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Bechky, 2006). In addition, these fields feature comparatively more erratic employment, shorter career lengths, and “winner-take-all” dynamics (Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Frank & Cook, 1996; Mears, 2011; S. Rosen, 1981). Therefore, content

producers must endeavor to mitigate downward shifts in their careers, which are usually inevitable. Especially among newcomers, the rise of inexpensive and widely accessible technologies for self-production and mass distribution disentangles making art from employment relationships. Furthermore, these models miss the micro-processes involved in building social ties, chiefly the initial ones, and how they potentially persist or shift longitudinally across career stages and inform patterns of career development. While these present frameworks generally situate these relationships as sources of references or referrals, they diminish how they may constitute the basis of material and emotional support, learning, and creative processes. This is especially evident, because the production of art is a collective and cooperative action (Becker, 1982).

Drawing from my research into the careers of stand-up comedians, I discovered an alternate model: the layered career. This new framework proves more compatible with the attributes of most content production occupations that occur in project-based arrangements, especially when the careers happen within decentralized or disorderly organizational fields (particularly in earlier stages). Participation in these settings happens within distinctive layers. Each layer involves characteristic audience types, organizational arrangements, interactional patterns, goals, and sources of recognition or compensation. Career progression involves an individual satisfying a layer's requisite challenges and accessing the next stage. Many aspirants do not achieve such upward mobility, either because they lack the aptitude and resources to do so or they merely choose against it. However, advancing to the next layer does not constitute a departure from the previous one. Instead, cultural producers continue to participate in the prior levels. They revisit them because each layer is especially adapted for addressing distinct demands surrounding creative process or career building. These lower levels serve as a foundation for careers, and they provide channels for addressing present challenges or venues to mitigate lags in employment or downward movement. Therefore, it is incumbent to

maintain participation within prior layers and to align it with one's current level of participation in order to sustain and progress within such fields or occupational types.

I will devote the remainder of this article to describing the requisite characteristics and mechanisms of layered careers through the experiences and behaviors of stand-up comedians. After outlining my methods of data collection and interpretation and the basic organizational structure of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, I will illustrate the three layers of careers in this world and how they interact. I will follow this by highlighting how social relationships, mainly informal mentorships and endorsements, initiate career progression within stand-up comedy.

Data and Methods

The foundation of this paper is data that I accumulated from a participant-observation study of the stand-up comedy industry in Los Angeles, CA, which spanned from February 2010 to April 2015. Situating the primary unit of analysis as individual comedians' careers, longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork (Barley, 1990) allowed me to witness my subjects' career trajectories and individuals' reactions to changes within the industry in real time. I quickly discovered in my research that stand-up comedians were rarely tethered to a single performance venue or comedy club, but rather moved between spaces. Therefore, I adopted a multi-location ethnographic approach that permitted me to observe individuals as they navigated various social contexts throughout their careers. Though I semi-routinely attended a set of seven performance venues (i.e. comedy clubs, independently produced shows, or open-mic nights), I would also move across sites as I shadowed particular comedians or small groups of them. Given that participation in this labor market bleeds into stand-up comedians' extracurricular lives, I observed and participated in writing sessions, social gatherings, parties, and public online interactions. This movement permitted me to witness the various processes of creative production, decision-making, collaboration, and association within and

across these localized settings. I typically conducted fieldwork three days per week. Furthermore, I participated in the industry as a stand-up comedian.

As a complete novice without a previous inclination to perform stand-up comedy, there were two central motivations behind my decision to adopt this quasi-career as a component of my ethnographic methods. First, it is extremely difficult for ethnographers to gain access to fieldsites within mass entertainment and cultural production industries (Ortner, 2010). While the barriers to entry are somewhat relaxed in the context of stand-up comedy (i.e. anyone can sign up for open-mic nights and shows are quite cheap to gain admission to), the marked isolation of audiences from the backstage and the social insularity of stand-up comedians necessitated my active participation. Second, subjecting myself to many of the front-stage and backstage processes experienced by stand-up comedians afforded to me some intimate familiarity with the technical, economic, and cultural practices within the field. Such immersion allows the ethnographer to experience and embody many of the latent and hidden processes, sensations, demands, and constraints that accompany active participation and embodiment within a particular social world (Mears, 2012; Wacquant, 2011). As an “observant participant,” I accessed tacit knowledge, which allowed me develop more compatible lines of communication with my subjects. Nonetheless, such a strategy presents particular obstacles. I faced the challenge of penetrating already entrenched social networks, which is a difficult achievement as an outsider (and someone whose early forays on stage were generally quite awful). This may have disqualified me from some potentially informative engagements and rituals. Although most comedians were aware that I was researcher, more entrenched or senior comedians regularly ignored me due to my status as a newcomer. However, these episodes of rejection proved helpful in forming my understanding of the social dynamics of stand-up comedy. Another caveat is that I could not maintain the intense schedule of most aspirants, who typically go out to hustle for stage-time and network every night—including holidays like Christmas—well into the wee hours.

Because stand-up comedy does not involve structured tasks, outside of the brief time on stage, this flexibility allowed for porous “role boundaries” (M. Rosen, 1991) between my stand-up comedy and research. However, some local norms limited my capabilities to collect data. As I discovered through a naïve gaffe during the second month of my research, which almost led me to be banned from a certain showcase club, I could not actively take field jottings in my notebook within performance spaces. This gesture stirred suspicion among unacquainted insiders that I was attempting to steal their material (fieldnotes, 3/28/2010). In response, I would covertly take notes on my phone while stationed outside the venue or in the bathroom. These jottings were later expanded into fieldnotes.

I integrated data from thirty semi-structured and ethnographic interviews that I conducted with a snowball sample of comedians whom I directly observed and engaged with in my fieldwork. Interviews allowed me to gain insight into less directly observable information like comedians’ histories, motivations, and opinions about the stand-up comedy industry. While interview data in isolation may possess limitations due to their retrospective quality and divorcement from social action (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), the data I collected provided cues about important social process that might warrant more involved engagement through participant-observation research. I transcribed the interviews and analyzed them in concert with my ethnographic fieldnotes. I outline details concerning the backgrounds and characteristics of my interviewees in Appendix 1.

I coded my interview transcripts and fieldnotes according to the conventions of grounded theory, wherein my coding scheme and theory construction emerged through an inductive process (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). In this article, I will refer to comedians from my fieldnotes and interview data with pseudonyms and employ discretion concerning identifiable information.² Although most

² In this paper, I do use the real names of star comedians who are not subjects of my observational research and whose actions are visible and widely publicized.

individuals directly remarked that they did not have reservations with me using their real names, I did this prevent any potential ill effects that could jeopardize anyone's career, reputation, or social ties.

Empirical Case: Stand-Up Comedy in Los Angeles

Leading up to the time window of my study, stand-up comedy in Los Angeles was undergoing a shift in its fundamental organizational structure and model of talent development. From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, three showcase comedy clubs located in West Hollywood held oligopolistic control. These venues acted as the locus of exhibiting performers to paying audiences, brokering connections between comedians and representatives of Hollywood studios or touring circuits, and cultivating new acts through apprenticeship systems (Knoedelseder, 2009; see also Stebbins, 1992 for a similar system in Canada). However, the "alternative comedy" model of independently produced shows emerged in the late-1990s in response to these clubs' dominance. The alternative comedy model persists as a highly influential, yet decentralized counterpart to the more traditional club-based route. The three major comedy clubs in Los Angeles continue to occupy a key position within the field, but their general focus has shifted to exhibiting pre-established stars for audiences of typically casual fans or tourists. Only one club, The Comedy Store, maintains its apprenticeship system of developing new talent. At the same time, there is an alternative comedy infrastructure, which comprises roughly seventy independent shows and 100 open-mic nights per week. Comedians themselves typically produce and promote such shows, which consist of bills featuring emerging acts, stars, and occasionally widely recognized superstars. The shows occur in a hodgepodge of brick-and-mortar venues, such as movie theaters, backyards, and comic book stores. They range from sparsely attended one-off events to a few weekly series that regularly draw a couple hundred attendees. Open-mics are opportunities for volunteers to perform typically three to five minutes of material often before a completely peer audience. They generally serve as the initial entry

point for newcomers. Though comedians may routinely attend or perform at certain venues, their movement around this expanded environment can be fluid across Los Angeles.

Because of decentralization within this field, it is infeasible to achieve an accurate, comprehensive count of performers in Los Angeles. This is due to rapid turnover of early-stage entrants, lack of a formal guild, and the U.S. Census' undercounting individuals within this field since it rarely constitutes a primary source of income—a common obstacle in many artistic fields (Menger, 2014). However, there are some clues concerning the size of this labor force. The show calendar on The Comedy Bureau—a widely read local comedy blog—features 1,433 unique stand-up acts that performed on advertised shows held between April 2011 and August 2013 in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area. While this list includes some comedians visiting from other cities, the limited scope of this source partially counteracts this bias. It leaves out many shows at comedy clubs, certain niche venues, and obscure spaces. It also censors newcomers who have yet to be booked into a show and perform only at open-mics. Therefore, an estimate of roughly 1,500 performers in Los Angeles at any given time is a conservative count. It is also difficult to arrive at a detailed demographic breakdown of participants. Nevertheless, I at least observed that comedians in Los Angeles are disproportionately male.

Comedians in Los Angeles rarely receive monetary compensation for their performances, and the share that actually earns a nontrivial income from performing is very small. Currently, paid gigs at the major showcase clubs yield fifteen to sixty dollars per performance.³ Comedians tend to achieve this “paid regular” status only after years of gratis performances and socializing at a given club. Furthermore, the number of such gigs is quite limited. Alternative comedy shows almost never pay comedians in cash, and the few that provide compensation usually do so in gift certificates to

³ Superstars can command a share of the box office receipts in a few circumstances. However, such arrangements are not consistent. Even comedians at the highest echelons typically perform for such modest rates or gratis in Los Angeles.

the venue or via complementary bar tabs. One key reason behind this is that such events either have free admission or charge patrons just enough to cover costs. Touring and performing at private functions or colleges are the main means for comedians to earn money through live performance. Stardom does provide stand-up comedians the distinct privilege of making a living by pursuing a craft they love. Notwithstanding, performers at this level in the comedy world still tend to earn a decidedly middle-class standard of living despite symbolic achievement, which may include rare accolades such as television specials or appearances on late night variety shows. In the field, I heard a recurring joke that stardom brings “teacher money” (i.e. annual wages comparable to that of a public school teacher). Superstars can earn many orders of magnitude more.

Many comedians aspire to use stand-up comedy as a launching pad for work in related fields, such as screenwriting and acting, and pursue these fields simultaneously. These related avenues tend to pay better and are slightly more secure. Stars work in these domains in a symbiotic fashion. A comedian could use exposure and material developed through stand-up comedy to earn a writing job, which will lead to credits to earn more road bookings. Stand-up has declined as a distinct career; it is increasingly the unifying component of a “portfolio” (Neff et al., 2005). However, television writing and acting are tough fields to access, inconsistent, and subject to similar patterns and mechanisms of superstar inequality (see Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Caves, 2000).

Layered Careers in Stand-Up Comedy

Through my research, I discovered that careers in stand-up comedy consist of three overlapping layers. The first is the proximate layer, which is the initial stage for newcomers when they begin performing in Los Angeles. Almost every comedian—regardless of status—operates within it to some degree, and its organizational basis is tightly bound cliques of performers that are typically from the same cohort of entrants into a venue or circuit. For newcomers, the main objective is acceptance into the stand-up comedy world. Second, there is the community layer. It

shares many characteristics with “occupational communities” (Bechky, 2003; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), local artistic communities (Becker et al., 1989), and “scenes” (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Lena 2012; Lena & Peterson, 2008). It mainly consists of fellow stand-up comedians. It also includes, to some degree, devoted aficionados, local journalists, and showcase club or alternative comedy bookers. Within this level, comedians aspire for peer esteem. Finally, a select group of performers reach the top industrial layer. Here, individuals count on stand-up comedy as an occupation, whether as a touring performer or as the basis of their work in other media (e.g. television writing or acting). Here, comedians typically engage with firms within the entertainment industry and seek renown to maintain and increase their success. I summarize the key aspects in Table 1.1. I sketch the layers and their durable roles within careers in the following section in detail through the experiences, decisions, and lamentations of Los Angeles’ stand-up comedians.

Proximate Layer

When newcomers enter into the world of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, they face equally difficult task of developing basic fluency in both the conventions of on-stage performance and the social dynamics backstage. Almost all of the comedians in my study observed that doing stand-up comedy required uniquely esoteric skills and demands, for which training in other art forms—such as acting, live music, scriptwriting, or other types of public speaking—could not fully prepare them. Joshua, who had 2.5 years of experience at the time of our interview and is currently a rising star in the industry, encapsulated the craft’s steep learning curve:

When you start, like, everyone is so bad. Like, you are just terrible. Even if you are funny, you’re still doing some things, like some habits: the way you’re holding the [microphone], or flipping the cable, or yelling, or speaking too softly, or shaking, whatever you are doing. Even if your content is good, you’re a terrible stand-up comedian. You can’t possibly be good. Like, you have no idea; there is so much to learn.

The primary means for novices to grasp the nuances of proper stagecraft and develop their routines is logging as much time on stage as possible. A common analogy that I frequently heard is that

stand-up comedy is like weightlifting, and each performance being a “repetition” to build your “comedy muscle.” After I vented outside of a comedy club about my on-stage struggles, Terrance explained how novices should approach early development:

“You have to understand, [author], you are still a baby-babe in the grand scheme of stand-up. You have only been doing this for a few months. You shouldn’t walk into this thinking you need to be perfect or set the world on fire. You should not absolutely obsess about your material. This is new ground. You have to grow in this experience.” (fieldnotes, 9/16/2010)

However, learning can be an extremely frustrating process for beginners. At open-mic nights, established comedians frequently leave the room during these sets to socialize, use the restroom, or smoke a cigarette. Therefore, rookies often deliver their sets to decidedly smaller and more apathetic audiences. They obtain less feedback about the content of their performances, which limits the signals that they receive concerning which bad habits to correct or how to refine their jokes. Given that devoted newcomers typically participate in fifteen to twenty-five open-mic nights per week to develop their basic skills, audiences’ regular apathy and the demands of satisfying such a rigorous regimen makes an extremely frustrating process.

In addition, understanding and integrating into the backstage social aspects of stand-up comedy tends to be equally vexing. Building rapport with incumbent performers can be as intimidating as performing on the stage. During the hour and a half wait before an open-mic, Joe—an aspiring comedian who started during my research—described the confusion typically faced by newcomers in negotiating the social aspects of stand-up comedy:

[Joe] recalled, “Yeah I remember when I started, it was impossible to get anyone to talk to me. Like, [author] talked to me at the Unurban. You remember? But, I remember explicitly being at ‘The Open Mic of Love’ and there being two circles of conversations and being right in the middle of them not talking, right in the middle, and thinking, ‘What the fuck should I do?’” (fieldnotes, 11/24/2012)

Such uneasiness can be staggering, because a substantial portion of stand-up comedy involves prolonged socializing—especially as performers have obligations to network or just “hang” with each other as a coping mechanism during the typically long waits before their sets. This can be

especially difficult because incumbents tend to ostracize newcomers. They frequently assume that most of these wannabe comedians will quit within six months. Furthermore, newcomers frequently exhibit a lack of social tact—whether due to ignorance or intimidation—that hampers interactions with established participants. Newcomers may be overly eager to impress fellow comedians and may commit such egregious blunders as aggressively attempting to work routines into conversations (not “turning it off”), excessively self-promoting, or claiming expertise they do not actually possess.

During our interview, Tre recalled such a gaffe when he began stand-up comedy and attempted to integrate into Anthony’s clique:

They were there the first time that I [did stand-up], and they weren’t talking to me. I wasn’t outwardly talking to them. And everyone went to Carney’s, and I followed them because there were people and there was food down there. And I found out that the beers were a dollar... I offered all of them a drink, and they were like, “No, naw, no!”... Now we are great friends, and, like the funny thing is once they saw me and acknowledged that I was funny, they started talking to me and we actually talked about the first day, and they were like, “We thought you were fucking creepy, dude! Buying us *alcohol*? What the hell is wrong with you? Don’t do that!”

These social boundaries force recent entrants to develop relationships among their fellow peers in the periphery. Within this environment, the initial forms of organization emerge within the proximate layer among newcomers from the same cohort.

Within stand-up comedy, a new entrant joins an informal cohort or “class.” On one hand, it acts as a ready and durable reference group to monitor career progress and development. Though, in a more profound sense, one’s class is the basis from which cliques emerge. Such small concentrated networks arise out of necessity and proximity. They form out of newcomers’ perceived marginalization from incumbents, lengthy waits before open-mic sets, and the need to accumulate information about this new environment. These cliques consist of “comedy buddies.” They are fellow stand-up comedians that tend to synchronize their schedules, attentively watch each other’s sets, exchange information or feedback, and consistently socialize during downtimes. They develop these relationships while spending many hours together—whether at venues, transiting between

locations, grabbing meals, or partaking in shared recreational activities. They share information about new shows, exchange advice, workshop routines, and develop premises for new material or hypothetical projects. Furthermore, cliques of comedy buddies provide valuable material, creative, and emotional support. Greg, a performer with six years of experience in Los Angeles at the time of this conversation, reflected during a conversation with Professor Octopus—who was one of my comedy buddies—and me about the difficulty of sustaining without such support:

As they discussed the possibility of skipping the BrewCo [open-mic], [Greg] complained, “The thing that sucks is that I can’t will myself to do any of this shit. I don’t have a buddy... you have to have a buddy to ride with you, so, when you get, lazy, they can give you that kick in the ass to finish the trip out. I don’t have that...so it makes the wait at, like, Brewco on Friday suck so much shit.” (fieldnotes, 8/3/2012)

In these early stages, clique membership defines a new entrant’s identity, because it is such a conspicuous unit. They constitute the original audience for both on-stage and backstage performances and serve as the conduit for early career development within stand-up comedy.

The close relationships cultivated between comedy buddies are optimal for engaging the process of creating and refining jokes and routines. While stand-up comedy appears to be an exceptionally centered upon the performance of the individual on stage, it is fundamentally collaborative like most forms of cultural production (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993). A key component of the development of jokes and long-form routines often entails prolonged advising, brainstorming sessions, or discussions among comedy buddies. New ideas and directions emerge when such informal teams “riff” about an individual’s premise through improvisation. For example, Wayne, a comedian with then seven years of experience that I befriended and shadowed, engaged with me in such a session in his car after spotting a billboard for a biographical film about Shakespeare:

[Wayne] observed, “Yes, the thing is that [Shakespeare] was popular theater. He had something for the aristocracy, but a lot of it was for the common classes. It had the lowest common denominator aspect.” I responded, “Of course, like blockbusters now!” He countered, “Yeah, like, you see taglines for remakes of *Romeo and Juliet* now. ‘My only love

sprung from hate.’ That was probably the tag line back then. It was probably completely over the top. ‘Stepfathers—they’ll drive you mad! *Hamlet*.’” Laughing, I proposed, “It’s the perfect storm, *The Tempest*—live at the Globe Theater.” We rattled back and forth cheesy taglines and fifteen-second bumpers for Shakespeare plays... After we riffed about the concept... he asked me, “Hey, is it cool if I run with the concept for a bit? I mean, do you mind?” I gave him my permission. (fieldnotes 10/18/2011)

Frequently, comedians will consult their comedy buddies after they attempt new routines to receive their feedback or to discover new “tags” (i.e. smaller quips that accompany a punchline), directions, or manners of pacing the joke. Comedy buddies may propose improvements voluntarily, which is typically followed by the assurance, “You can take that.” They tend to restrict such advising to their comedy buddies, and do so respectfully—so as not to give the impression that they are better writers. Likewise, the conspicuous granting of permission follows norms against the impression of joke theft (Oliar & Sprigman, 2008; Reilly 2016). It also may inspire reciprocity in the form of future constructive criticism or another commensurate favor. Clique-based organization and comedy-buddy relationships prove optimal in stand-up, because they involve the necessary chemistry and trust to satisfy the demands of the creative process. These benefits correspond with observations by Uzzi and Spiro (2005) concerning frequent repeated collaboration within small world networks.

Even if a comedian matriculates into the upper levels of this career model, he or she still operates within the proximate layer. Comedians regularly rely upon their initial clique of comedy buddies to develop new material or invite them to participate in high-profile projects. For example, Malcolm, who moved to Los Angeles in 2008 to pursue stand-up comedy after very briefly performing in his home state, quickly formed a clique of newcomers, which eventually included Anthony. He reflected during our interview on their continuing role in his development:

I am honestly, genuinely influenced by my friends. I’m heavily influenced by [names two of his early comedy buddies]. I am inspired by my friends... We love being around each other as people. Right? So, it is like any other sort of friendship in that sense. Um, then also, you know, with them, it was sort of an instant thing.

Rapidly, Malcolm experienced a meteoric rise. By his sixth year in stand-up comedy, he earned an hour-long HBO comedy special and landed a development deal for a prime-time sitcom on a major broadcast network. In staffing both projects, Malcolm hired numerous early comedy buddies for key roles, despite their lack of television experience. He included two on his sitcom's writing staff, because many of the series' premises and plotlines developed through repeated riffing sessions with his fellow clique members during their earliest stages. In addition, they shared the necessary rapport and familiarity to create and communicate new concepts for scripts and character development. Such integration of early stage cliques also characterizes the teams involved in other rising stars' projects. For example, Amy Schumer includes many of her comedy buddies in the writing staffs or casts of actors in her films and television shows (McCarthy, 2015). In addition, the producers of the TruTV series *Friends of the People* recruited stand-up comedians from the same long-standing group of friends to construct the team responsible for the show's comedy sketches. Some of the projects that were self-produced within cliques of comedians, such as on-line sketch comedy videos or podcasts, have become avenues for progress and occasionally become large-scale television series (e.g. *Broad City*, *Workaholics*, and *The Grawlix*). Overall, established comedians regularly consult their early comedy buddies in the development of new jokes. Thus, comedy buddies can progress on their career paths as a formal or informal team. Ultimately, the residual organizational forms of the proximate layer remain especially suited for undertaking the creative process.

In addition, these cliques also constitute an enduring source of emotional support for comedians. For example, a group of comedians that began at a certain open-mic two decades prior—which included a mix of eventual dropouts, hobbyists, and superstars like Zack Galifianakis and Maria Bamford—would maintain regular correspondence and hold occasional reunions (fieldnotes, 7/23/2013). Early-stage comedy buddies develop fictive kin relationships, as I frequently heard comedians refer to their “comedy brothers/sisters” or clique as a “comedy family.” They also

attend high-profile shows and showcases of advanced clique members to lend encouragement. At the taping of one comedian's live album, I conversed with many of his "classmates" who echoed the sentiment that one comedian who regularly attends open-mics with him shared with me: "Are you looking forward to this? I can't wait for this to happen! I'm so happy! I feel like I'm part of this; that we are all part of this" (fieldnotes, 12/4/2015). The feeling of being a part of a clique member's success is a key source for lending intrinsic meaning to stand-up comedy. As Anthony observed:

Oh, it's the best to see [my friends] do great. It's the best feeling! And I'm like, "Please still let me stay on your couch when you're huge. Please don't forget about [Anthony]! [Laughs] Let me stay in your guesthouse when you are filming and working on Pixar movies... I'm just glad when I can be, 'Oh, man! That's my buddy, and he's doing great!'" It's phenomenal!

Ultimately, the proximate layer works as a durable and regularly revisited source of emotional support, friendship, and psychic rewards.

A main objective for newcomers within the proximate layer is to gain acceptance from peers and established incumbents. The most reliable avenues for achieving this are commitment, visibility, and, most importantly, performing well on stage. Newcomers may also achieve this through producing small alternative shows. Beyond providing stage-time for their comedy buddies, newcomers can form acquaintanceships with established and star comedians through booking them. By providing more experienced performers an audience to practice before, newcomers gain a direct venue to develop rapport with incumbents. Such strategies of social capital formation constitute the major cause for the proliferation of independently produced shows within the alternative comedy model, despite disproportionately low audience demand. By gaining acceptance from incumbents, stand-up comedy beginners in Los Angeles expand their audiences beyond their clique and start to earn advice from their more experienced counterparts. In addition, increased inclusion allows comedians to enter into the extracurricular social circles of established performers. During our interview, Joshua articulated its importance of entering into incumbents' social world:

Then, I don't even know who started first, now. You know what I mean? Um, so, the social part of [stand-up comedy] is so weird, because then you get invited to parties. Your *first party!* Because when you get invited to your first party, everyone is like, "Hey, man! What's going on?" As opposed to an open-mic, where no one talks to you. Once you are at the party, it is like, "Oh, I get to hang out with the seniors now? Oh, cool!" It's like high school. Stand-up is a lot like high school—just a very ambitious high school... But it is like being invited to hang with the juniors. "Have a beer, dude! You want a beer? You want some weed, man?"

Gaining access to gatherings like parties or post-show meals with incumbents marks an important rite of passage for beginners. By gaining access to these venues through their comprehension of on- and off-stage processes, exhibiting potential, and developing social affinity with comedians from "higher classes," newcomers receive the necessary acceptance to transition from the proximate layer into the next stages of career development.

Community Layer

Once comedians develop their basic social and practical skills and gain necessary acceptance into the social world of stand-up comedy, many opt to advance into the community layer of their careers. The vast majority of performers in this stage aspire to earn an occupation as a comedian by accumulating enough esteem of peers and insiders. Much like an artistic "scene" (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Lena & Peterson 2008; Lena, 2012), its organizational basis is a community of intensely involved comedians, showcase club bookers, high-level independent show producers, specialty journalists, and hardcore audiences of "civilian" (i.e. non-comedian) fans. While comedians at this level typically receive trivial pay and must still hold day jobs, their success at this level yields rewards of recognition and respect from insiders. The community layer lacks the proximate layer's heterogeneity in performers' motivations and levels of engagement. As comedians seek wide esteem from peers in Los Angeles and other locales, they must conform to certain behaviors and standards associated with the "comic" identity and lifestyle. The experiences of aspirants at this level tend to become more uniform, as they perform at particular shows or clubs, doggedly pursue bookings, engage in certain side projects, encounter failure, and partake in certain sacrifices. As participation

becomes much more predicated upon achieving on-stage and backstage mastery than on building friendships, stand-up comedy in this layer assumes the shape of an “occupational community” (Bechky, 2003; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

The focus of relationship formation at this stage shifts from building strong friendship bonds to accumulating acquaintances and contacts with insiders. Community layer comedians develop broad networks of fellow comedians to develop and circulate a reputation and to accumulate respect from other performers. They achieve this through regularly performing and socializing with peers at shows, both locally and nationally, or extracurricular gatherings. One rapidly expanding venue for this are comedy festivals, like Bridgetown in Portland or the Hell Yes Festival in New Orleans. These events allow comedians to perform before their peers and cultivate acquaintanceships and familiarity with each other. Jonathan told me in an interview about how these programs can solidify one within the community:

Bridgetown is where we all go to summer camp, and we frolic around. It is one of the most amazing things one can do... I went to Bridgetown. The thing about Bridgetown that is so interesting is that you are not showcasing for industry. You are showcasing for your peers. You are establishing yourself... And you go for the socialization with people. I was doing a show with Sean Patton. Would I have said “hey” to him if it never happened? We come back thinking of each other in a new way. It is a way of saying, “I’m here! Remember me?”

Although the community layer involves finer skill development and identity formation oriented toward one becoming distinctive and novel, aspirants must also establish their membership into the wider community of stand-up comedy. While the proximate layer’s goal is acceptance, comedians at this level seek recognition and esteem from their peers. Through crafting impressive routines, exhibiting noteworthy commitment or work ethic, and respecting the fellow members of stand-up comedy’s “fraternity,” a comedian earns the admiration of insiders. This assures him or her certain stable rewards or support during the ascent to the field’s professional ranks. This respect becomes valuable resource throughout one’s career.

Because stand-up comedy in Los Angeles is spread-out and decentralized, it is difficult for individuals to gather wide reaching social ties. Federico, a comedian with seven years of experience in Los Angeles who tended to gravitate toward the showcase clubs, reflected as we waited for his first set at a popular weekly open-mic held in a comic book store:

“The thing that always surprises me when I go to new mics is seeing all of these people that I have never seen before... it seems that there are so many small cliques, uh, micro-sets of comedians that seem to group up at particular mics, and you don’t see them anywhere else. Los Angeles is so expansive!” (fieldnotes, 11/25/2012)

To address this challenge, comedians aggressively pursue multiple avenues to generate exposure and build contacts. Many produce independent shows where they book established and star comedians and feverishly promote it to draw audiences of peers, who regularly seek future spots at it, and interested civilians. Through providing stage-time, individuals often seek reciprocated favors from their featured acts. Beyond regularly performing at shows and open-mic nights, aspirants attend shows and devote significant time to socializing at venues or social gatherings. While vigorous and wide-reaching networking is a significant aspect of stand-up comedy in the community layer, comedians are cautious about giving the impression of being overly ambitious or a social climber, because most peers perceive such behavior as highly disrespectful.

While clique membership defines comedians’ identities in the proximate layer, they must now develop their individuality in the community layer. They achieve this through finding and developing their “voice.” Comedians in my research generally and loosely define voice as one’s distinctive point-of-view, which serves as the foundation that unites their routines and on-stage persona. When I asked Tom what voice entailed, he observed from his vantage of fourteen years in stand-up comedy:

You know, [voice] is a strange thing, because it encompasses so many things, but in very simple terms, if you hear Jimi Hendrix play guitar, you know it is him. Like, he has certain things that define him: phrases that he is attracted to, the playing, and things that work for him that would not work for other guitarists. And for stand-up, you start out swinging wild,

and you—at a point—start to hone in on the jokes that you like to tell and the jokes that work very well for you. It's the meeting of all those elements. The way you want to present yourself. The truth of who you are. It's just those things.

Voice is the element that comedians develop to distinguish themselves from others. While comedy at the proximate layer is about grasping conventions through trial and error, performing at the community layer is about building a signature act and shtick. This is not confined to on-stage performance, but also involves discovering which medium to pursue. Comedians partake in this experimentation through self-production and using cheap web-based distribution platforms, such as podcasting, Twitter, or comedy sketches for YouTube. John, who splits his time between performing and running the most visited blog about Los Angeles stand-up comedy, observed in our interview:

You've gotta do something else. That's not just a thing for stand-up or in comedy, but in entertainment. It used to be a thing that was made fun of or discouraged, but you've got to be a multi-hyphen. You just can't be a writer, or just a comedian, or just an actor. You have to be good at all of them. You have to be good at Photoshop! You have to have all these random ass skills, and you have to be doing them all the time. When one of them hits, that is what you focus on, but you don't drop everything else completely.

Through juggling all of these platforms in the community layer, comedians hope to discover which one will lead to a feasible occupation and constitute the basis of a “focused identity” that leads to more consistent employment in the entertainment industry (Zuckerman et al., 2003). Undertaking this challenge is a time- and labor-intensive process. Throughout my research, I repeatedly heard comedians reference the “ten-year rule,” which suggests that a comedian develops a voice and only realizes his or her potential after ten years of continuous, regimented performance. Over this time period, an aspirant must develop his or her own distinctive aptitudes and identity. As comedians develop their careers in the community layer, the issue of voice—whether fully formed or appearing in glimmers—becomes the object of peers' esteem.

Performing in the community layer brings distinctive aspects of both the creative process and career development. While cliques excel as sandboxes for the formation of ideas, the incredible frequency of repeat collaboration within them contributes to redundancy and eventual homogeneity in output (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). Relying too heavily upon a clique audience contributes to creative stagnation. Reflecting on a certain clique that frequently features its members on their independent shows, Mitch—an open-mic comedian—complained, “It’s like they are trying to make each other laugh, and their jokes are for each other. But when they get up in front of real audiences, they seem not to do as well” (fieldnotes, 7/9/2012). These tight circles do develop their own discrete tastes and insider culture that solidifies through recurrent contact, which can go unchecked if it becomes too insular. Members may develop an excessive sense of security by remaining in these ranks and may not stray from this comfort zone by performing within different venues in Los Angeles. As Joshua observed in our interview:

I stopped going to BrewCo or The Spot, because I don’t want to be associated with that. I don’t want to be funny with just them. I got out of the area, did more stuff in clubs, the Valley, Long Beach... [Others] don’t like failing. Once they learned how to do well somewhere, they don’t every not do well again. I think that it’s pride, and I don’t think that they want to be the best stand-up comedy. I think that they want to be accepted.

While cliques are key avenues for development, the strong bonds within them become so seductive and self-confirming that aspirants gain a myopic perspective concerning the stand-up comedy industry in Los Angeles.

Comedians remedy these negative effects through using insider audiences within the community to test their new ideas or projects and receive rather instantaneous feedback. Opportunities to perform can be plentiful, which allows such testing methods to be a relatively low-cost, low-risk strategy. Because new jokes tend to have a low rate of success, there is a minimal penalty for such momentary failures. When a routine elicits a positive reaction, this approval confirms its potential and signifies its strengths and weaknesses. Exemplary sets may encourage

community members' respect and generate localized buzz or endorsements from insiders. This is a consistently revisited routine throughout one's career, even among stars who are preparing new projects and specials. It is incredibly common to see superstars—such as Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and Louis CK—making free, unannounced appearances at small showcase club or independently produced shows for this purpose. Comedians might also achieve this through self-producing projects initially geared toward insider audiences as a test case or to generate local excitement. For relative newcomers, this might serve as means to gain early community respect or visibility. Taken together, this suggests a basic sequence for the creative process, where ideas come from close networks and become refined from community ties. Career development involves aligning these two layers.

Industrial Layer

The select few performers that access the industrial layer count on comedy as their main occupation and source of monetary income. This is the point where this art world finally resembles an external labor market. Performers circulate through regular jobs as national touring acts, usually in a headlining role, or with entertainment firms in television, film, or radio. Usually after participating in stand-up comedy for ten years, an aspirant can enter into this level through performing on late-night variety shows, earning a thirty-minute solo television special, or securing a visible acting role or position on a television writing staff. These comedians aim to generate renown, which entails celebrity and acknowledgement from audiences beyond the art world's insiders (Lang & Lang, 1988; Lena & Pachucki, 2013). Through accumulating this resource, individuals may attempt to progress further to superstar status or maintain a comfortable standard of living through stand-up comedy exclusively.

The accumulation of credits is a main objective of performers at this level. They can serve as relatively clear signals of a performer's reputation and quality to casual audiences. Bookers,

particularly outside of Los Angeles, gravitate towards such track records, because they assure larger audiences and credits ease the promotion of shows (Beljean, 2013). However, an impressive credit alone does not guarantee career advancement. During our interview, Rahul addressed his modest expectations surrounding his 2007 performance on a CBS late night show and the results:

Rahul: So I had it in my head that none of this was going to change my life, and I had a friend that did Jimmy Kimmel, who never said anything to me directly about how you should lower your expectations, but I saw him do that. I attended a viewing party for his set and then he was like, "Alright, guys, I've got to go to work tomorrow. See you later!" And I was like, "Oh, it doesn't really change your life for most people." There are exceptions.

Author: Was there anything that came out of it directly?

Rahul: You could definitely say a lot of the work at colleges afterwards, and a lot of the club work—it just helped. I wouldn't say it is the one hundred percent thing. Nobody saw it and picked up a phone right after it and said, "You gotta do my college!" But, a year later, I had an agent who said, "Give me your set. I am going to send it out to colleges." That got me work. So, definitely, it helped, but it certainly did not change my life.

The returns on credits are ambiguous and, in most cases, rather slight. They can invite bookings to paid gigs and temporarily enhance a comedian's visibility or "heat." However, the experiences of those in my research suggest that only such credits rarely yield immediate progress. For example, I heard comedian lament, "I moved to Los Angeles when I absolutely needed to... Shit, I have a Comedy Central thirty-minute [special], and I have to compete for spots now. It doesn't matter. Competing in L.A. is the worst, because I'm not special out here [laughs]" (fieldnotes, 8/25/2014).

The dilemma surrounding credits and career progression emerges because comedians in the industrial layer must shoulder the uncertainty of the mass entertainment industry, which is typical of occupations in cultural production industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Menger, 2014). Their credits and distinctive identity must align with a particular trend in the cycle of audience or industry demands. Therefore, performers must remain patient and wait for the moment where they are compatible with what television, film, or radio producers eventually prefer or seek. This can be an incredibly long and frustrating process. For example, Wayne is a respected "comic's comic" that is a touring headliner, appeared on NBC's reality series *Last Comic Standing*, and performed at the "Best

of the Fest” show at Montreal Just for Laugh’s festival, which is the largest comedy-related trade event in North America. Throughout the span of my research, he experienced numerous near misses in earning a Comedy Central thirty-minute special and sets on various network television late-night shows. He recounted a meeting with producers from Comedy Central after performing at a showcase held by the network where he received three standing ovations from the audience:

Wayne continued, “I was getting lunch with the exec from Comedy Central—you met her—and we talked about my set. And she was telling me how people really liked my set and how excited they were about my set. And then she told me, ‘Yeah, we all really like [Medha]. A lot!’ And the impression that I got was that they were high on her from the beginning, and they kind of had the notion of who they were going to pick anyway beforehand. Really, what is the use of doing well?... Why have this in the first place? But, they have a good idea of who they think is marketable” (fieldnotes, 10/18/2011).

For most comedians in the industrial layer, career progression is an unpredictable venture, as their fortunes are tethered to the prerogatives of television networks and film studios. This instability makes it difficult for comedians to gain and sustain momentum.

Because credits alone provide fleeting and indecisive benefits, performers devote great attention to maintain the impression of a coherent career. To maintain their exposure and “heat,” comedians strive to take as many conspicuous gigs as possible to eliminate the stigma of employment lags. Jonathan outlined this strategy:

You do not always know what is going on with someone. You only see what is going on onstage. If they are not talking about it a lot, that is why you need to be talking about it. Constantly reminding everyone that—in LA your car matters because you are telling everyone how vital you are and how much you matter, because you are able to maintain this car. With stand-up, you need to constantly be telling people that I am not yesterday’s news. And that could be hard if you don’t have a show that you are on; you don’t have a credit that you are on. There is something so cool about that, before you—I started a [small, self-produced] show; it went well... You have eyes on everything that is going on, so their presumptions about who you are can be updated.

To achieve this goal, they may resort to self-producing projects—such as podcasts, sketch videos, or themed alternative comedy shows—oriented toward community or insider audiences to project the impression of being busy and relevant. Star and superstar comedians routinely perform at high-

profile independent shows or showcase clubs, sometimes unannounced, to practice their new material and to remain visible to local audiences, whether consisting of civilians, peers, or industry. In addition, remaining active and visible within the stand-up comedy community and performing at lower-level events generates peer respect. To continue his previous point, Jonathan referenced a series of shows by superstar Whitney Cummings in a fifty-seat annex of a suburban Los Angeles comedy club that many comedians ridicule:

Whitney had a weird year. Whitney had six years of a career in eighteen months. And she's going to be rich for the rest of her life off *2 Broke Girls* money. When I saw the way she responded to having her shows cancelled is that she became receptive to the Yoo-Hoo Room. And I was like, yes! That is the answer!

Comedians regard stars and superstars that frequently and conspicuously return to the relatively lower rungs of the community with incredible respect. Through leveraging their peer esteem, comedians can access new projects and provide an array of paying jobs and credits through invitations from fellow performers or other participants. Furthermore, returning to the community layer provides an environment for experimentation that can lead to reinvention and the refinement of skills. While the industrial layer provides renown and financial incomes, maintaining and progressing within a stand-up comedy career requires frequent engagement with the community level, because it provides a venue for career coherence and new opportunities.

How Relationships Compel Career Progress

Although career progression and sustainability through these layers requires comedians to satisfy particular challenges and to develop social contacts and certain skills, upward mobility is also highly contingent upon social relationships. There are two types of bonds that allow performers to achieve this goal. The first is informal mentoring where a senior or more established counterpart imparts knowledge and translates information based upon his or her experience. Because they involve transferring esoteric or tacit resources, these bonds require the mentor and protégé to cultivate a close, long-lasting relationship. The second variety is endorsements, where a star or

insider attests to the quality of an aspiring comedian. These referrals legitimize relative newcomers and help to distinguish them from the pack.

Scholars emphasize that mentoring in organizational workplace settings is highly beneficial to the development of new employees (e.g. Kram, 1985; Payne & Huffman, 2005). Like in film (Jones, 1996), informal mentoring proves additionally necessary within a comparatively unstructured and loosely scripted external labor market like stand-up comedy. In these arrangements, previously peripheral performers can benefit from a star's pre-existing social ties and direct, personalized feedback based upon experiential knowledge. Because these resources are extremely valuable and sharing them is a time-intensive exercise, mentors do possess a preference for aspirants that currently or potentially could possess strong skill-sets and do exhibit a strong work ethic. They also favor friends or close acquaintances because of these mentoring projects' substantial demands. Translating tacit knowledge to be understandable and applicable to a protégé necessitates rapport, clear lines of communication, and prolonged interaction. Therefore, social affinity also constitutes an important prerequisite.

For example, Danny, who progressed from being an open-mic comedian to being featured on Comedy Central and a touring headliner during my research, attributed much of his early growth to the mentorship of a star performer, Leon. He reflected:

[Danny] recalled, "Yeah, when I met him a couple years ago, he came to me and said, 'Hey! Your material sucks!'. . . But after that we established a friendship and he helped me out giving me advice to become better. He is like an older cousin." (fieldnotes, 8/29/2010)

After Danny's routines and stagecraft sufficiently developed through his coaching, Leon brought him on tours of Texas as a supporting act. This lent Danny practical experiences like performing in front of crowds outside of Los Angeles, managing the demands of the road, interacting with club bookers, and leaving California for the first time in his life. He alerted Danny to the best places to eat while on the road and acquainted him with friends and family that could provide places to stay

for future road gigs. Danny would run errands to get supplies for Leon's frequent barbecues in one showcase club's parking lot, and he would deliberately introduce his protégé to all of the senior comedians congregating around the grill (fieldnotes, 9/16/2010). Danny eventually parlayed his mentor's support to develop his act, establish bonds with other stars, and command the direct attention of local showcase club bookers. After a few years, this strategy provided him the necessary foundation to be "passed" to paid comedian status at one club. He also gained opportunities to headline shows on the road (many of which at venues where he previously opened for Leon) and perform on television. Ultimately, their friendship provided the necessary foundation to motivate Leon to guide Danny, especially as he successfully developed as a performer, and established the proper rapport for these lessons to resonate.

As illustrated in the prior example, such relationships tend to emerge from preexisting friendships or strong ties. Since it requires such a time commitment, mentors prefer aspirants whom they can interact with repeatedly and intensely, and such affinity tends to compel their altruism. For example, Henry, an emerging comedian with five years of experience, formed a mentoring relationship his "comedy son" Kei after they had a lengthy conversation about obscure punk music and horror movies before the weekly open-mic he hosts. It was the newcomer's first time at this venue, and Henry initiated the discussion when he saw Kei's heavy metal attire and realized, "I have to go talk to this guy!" (fieldnotes, 12/4/2015). Although Kei was an absolute novice, Henry introduced him to his circle of comedy buddies. Their mentorship grew as they attended the same open-mics, and Henry provided Kei steady feedback about his sets, involved him in collaborative projects, and invited him to parties. Rapport is especially necessary for mentors that take opening acts on the road. Indeed, they want to bring performers who can successfully "warm up" the room to ensure the best environment to perform. However, touring jointly requires spending prolonged

time together in transit, which necessitates choosing a protégé whom one feels comfortable spending countless hours with socializing and navigating the challenges of the road.

Endorsements are also particularly valuable to catalyze career progression. Unlike mentorships, they usually can either emerge from close friends or weaker relationships. In the latter, a more established comedian has an arm's length familiarity or esteem for an aspirant's on-stage prowess and commitment to improvement. However, endorsements can be costly, because they require comedians to leverage their reputation through making references. For example, Wayne suggested that the selection panel for the Montreal Just for Laughs New Faces showcase pay particular attention to Chuck, a six-year veteran who "Wayne" mentors, during the auditions. Chuck outlined this on the drive to his successful final audition:

Chuck told his roommate and me that he received his first showcase through a reference from Wayne to the guy who was running the auditions. He found that out after his first showcase at the Westside Comedy Theater, when the scout congratulated him on his set and told him, "Wayne was right!" (fieldnotes, 5/22/2014)

I frequently observed (and a few times personally experienced) newer comedians earning endorsements from their more experienced counterparts to bookers, which led to bookings, showcases, or opportunities for stage-time. Endorsements can come from more advanced clique-members. As seen in the cases of Malcolm and Amy Schumer, the inclusion of friends in projects constitutes a powerful form of this practice. There are limitations to endorsements. If a newer comedian severely falters or does not express his or her gratitude, a referrer could spread negative information to their contemporaries and bookers. Nonetheless, they are powerful resources because they can facilitate comedians' signals reaching target gatekeepers and distinguish individuals from the larger and relatively anonymous pool of competitors. While comedians can develop their careers through accumulating and cultivating skills, knowledge, and social contacts, mentorships and endorsements are crucial for initiating progress through and within the layers.

Conclusion

My research into stand-up comedy in Los Angeles allows me to introduce and conceptualize the model of a layered career. It consists of three levels that exhibit their own distinct organizational forms, challenges, goals, relationship types, and resources that enable career development, progression, and the satisfaction of certain creative or business processes. The proximate layer constitutes the first step for new entrants to stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, and it involves tight cliques of comedy buddies who facilitate support, learning, and creativity. Here, comedians seek acceptance into the field in social and practical terms. The community layer features individuals attempting to accumulate peer esteem as they develop their distinctive identity, socialize into the occupational culture of stand-up comedy, cultivate social contacts, and become familiar with business practices. Lastly, the industrial layer resembles a typical external labor market, where comedians earn a living from their jobs. This entails performers to accumulate credits and situate them in a coherent matter. However, within this model, a career is not simply moving from one level to another and exiting it altogether. Instead, developing, progressing, and sustaining on a career track requires aspirants to maintain their participation within prior stages and to align them to address the demands of developing ideas, producing projects, generating exposure, and gaining support. This approach introduces a different definition of a career. Foundational viewpoints concerning this concept stress movement through a sequence of statuses (e.g. Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Hughes, 1958). My approach suggests that careers involve building an evolving and mutually constitutive infrastructure where prior experiences and relationships provide the foundation for current and future situations and are frequently revisited.

I find that this model is suited for contexts that exhibit certain attributes. They tend to predominate where career development does not occur through formalized, directed systems of training and experience generation. This is typical of many cultural production industries (Jones, 1996; Menger, 2014; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). In these situations, aspirants must cobble together

skills, experience, and contacts across a sequence of gigs. However, it is typically suited for careers in certain forms of content production. This model emerges when newcomers must develop their competencies while occupying a peripheral position within the field that is generally isolated from incumbent participants. In the case of stand-up comedians, they develop close comedy buddy relationships with fellow classmates. As discrete relationships coalesce into cliques, the members pool information, creativity, resources, and support. They serve as each other's initial audiences. They cultivate chemistry, familiarity, and trust over time and recurrent interactions. Therefore, these organizational units are optimal for satisfying the challenges of collaborative creative processes and frequently endure throughout careers—even at the highest echelons. These cliques also persist as an often revisited source for emotional support, meaningfulness, and intrinsic rewards. Furthermore, they tend to manifest when cultural producers must maintain coherent careers, yet simultaneously face the challenge of crafting novel works to satisfy audiences' volatile and unpredictable tastes. To achieve this, cultural producers frequently return to their occupational communities to experiment with concepts and projects and remain visible to peers and insiders. While this provides a venue to develop and refine new ideas prior to their appearance in the market, it also allows individuals to bolster peer esteem. Observers do not perceive such performances on smaller stages as slumming, but they are gestures that deserve respect. This recognition can contribute to enhanced opportunities for work and wider support and endorsement from fellow performers. Such processes are particularly important as self-production becomes an increasingly used method for developing and actualizing projects. Therefore, the layered career model ties into central aspects of the field's creative process, social dynamics, culture, and patterns of knowledge and identity development.

I also discovered that mobility in layered careers depends as heavily upon relationships as the simple accrual of experience or skill. Beyond the bonds within cliques, cultural producers develop their careers through mentoring and endorsements from more established or entrenched

practitioners. Regarding stand-up comedians, mentoring relationships prove especially vital, because this craft involves the transmission and cultivation of tacit knowledge. They emerge from thick bonds based in mutual respect and friendship. Such dynamics are important, since the sharing and translation of a mentor's experience require strong lines of communication and prolonged contact. In addition, career development also depends upon endorsements from close confidants or rather distant acquaintances. Because of the heightened competition within this field and the ambiguity surrounding one's qualities, endorsements act as an avenue to distinguish one from the pack. This might emerge through assistance provided by a more successful clique member or comedy buddy; it might come from expressed admiration by a relatively distant acquaintance. Nevertheless, the uncertain and intangible nature of skill or quality among cultural producers intensifies the importance of social relationships in the development of careers. Coupled with the importance of close bonds to achieve creativity, this emphasizes how layered careers within creative industries depend heavily on interpersonal and social dynamics. Thus, I stress that the nature of work process, learning, occupational culture, and interactional patterns in a particular world contributes to the emergence of this career structure.

Implications for Future Research

While I developed the layered career model through researching stand-up comedians, it can be an effective frame to orient future studies of career development among content producers in other creative industries. For example, frequent revisits by established or renowned practitioners into a field's lower levels appears to be a common strategy for achieving career development and coherence. Craig and Dubois (2010) observed that published poets regularly participated in poetry readings alongside less-established writers to develop new material, maintain community membership, and integrate newer writers into their networks. Cornfield (2015) found that "enterprising artists" in Nashville remain consciously active in the local music scene to achieve

greater artistic freedom and to preserve collegial relationships with peers and fans. In Hollywood film, individuals frequently engage in projects associated with previous career layers to reinvent identities, develop novel works, and construct career coherence. For instance, Matthew McConaughey participated in a series of relatively obscure low-budget independent films during the early 2010s to escape his type of a male beach-bum romantic comedy lead and to become a versatile, critically acclaimed actor as a result of his “McConaissance.” Successful television comedy writer Dan Harmon started his popular *Harmontown* live show in 2011 in a Los Angeles comic book shop, which became his main project after being fired from NBC’s *Community*. Its popularity ensured him a stable foundation to preserve exposure despite the volatility of the television industry. Focusing on the stars’ forays into the community layers of their given field, particularly through self-production, provides a venue for richer analysis of careers in cultural production industries.

This model also emphasizes the important role of early-stage cliques in organizing and structuring careers and shaping their trajectories. Field-level analysis of career trajectories (e.g. Lincoln & Allen, 2004; Zuckerman et al, 2003) or repeat collaboration (e.g. Uzzi & Spiro, 2005) within cultural production industries frequently rely upon databases that cover project-based credits. However, proximate layer relationships, particularly in earlier stages, do inform patterns of association, inclusion, and support that manifest in past, current, and future career events. Most notably, the first cast of *Saturday Night Live* consisted of members of Chicago’s Second City Theater and *The National Lampoon* who developed relationships as collaborators and friends before the series began (Shales & Miller, 2003). These prior ties influenced their hiring and aided the creation of the show’s iconic skits, many of which came from Second City sketches. Databases like the Internet Movie Database or others do not capture such early-stage involvement. Because career development involves thick processes and more informal long-term associations, it would benefit scholars to consider earlier stage associations or collaborations in their analyses. For example, they could

integrate data involving film school cohorts, biographical information, or self-produced projects (e.g. online sketches or podcasts) to fill this gap. There is a trade-off, because collecting this information may prove prohibitively labor-intensive or simply impossible, and could thus prevent complete macro-level coverage. Nonetheless, integrating this data could contribute to enriched models surrounding career trajectories and collaboration.

This research also emphasizes some additional points of consideration. First, it addresses the expanding practice of self-production as an increasingly important aspect of careers in cultural production industries and contingent work in general. Such projects are currently a frequently traversed point of entry. For more established contingent workers, self-production may also serve as an avenue to develop competencies, build contacts, and ameliorate downtime, which are all persistent challenges (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Osnowitz 2010). These projects could be a fertile site for future investigation into these modes of employment. In addition, my discoveries stress the key role of mentorships and endorsements in career development. While many scholars share this observation (Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Osnowitz, 2010), future research could address systematic patterns and processes involved in the formation of these relationships or informal associations. Because these are such valuable resources, practitioners should devote particular attention to cultivating institutional strategies to initiate or to streamline mentorship formation. For example, the Writers' Guild of America (WGA) has started a mentorship program to enable the greater inclusion of minority or female television or film writers. Considering these relationships and their dynamic role in shaping career development can allow industry actors to minimize inequality in hiring and make contingent work more secure and worker-friendly.

The layered career model also provides different conception of work in informal and contingent labor markets. Many core studies (e.g. Barley & Kunda, 2004; Bidwell & Briscoe, 2010; Osnowitz, 2010) explore labor markets where workers engage in contract work after developing

their skills and experience within the internal labor markets of traditional employers. My case illustrates a rough inversion of this pattern. Therefore, my findings invite scholars to uncover other fields where contract workers must begin their careers with informal, gig-based work and attempt to advance to more stable, longer-term employment within organizations. In addition, the case of stand-up comedians provides richer glimpses into the formation of networks—whether for referrals, information, or support—and introduces novel considerations for scholars of work and careers in external labor markets. Ideally, this literature can develop further through ethnographic research that outlines some of the thick processes central to this new reality of work.

The upheaval, uncertainty, and insecurity accompanying changing complexion of labor in the New Economy invite and inspire scholars to revisit and revise many core assumptions about work and careers within organizational theory and sociology (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Kalleberg, 2009; Smith, 2001). With the erosion of organizational boundaries, their research has discovered alternative devices for structuring labor markets, such as categories (e.g. Leung, 2014; Zuckerman et al., 2003) and labor market intermediaries (e.g. Fernandez-Mateo, 2005; King et al., 2005). Cultural production industries have long served as a template to study the processes and mechanisms of project-based and informal work (Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Faulkner & Anderson, 1987). Through following this tradition, I discovered a new arrangement for these careers and their development. Furthermore, I illustrate that these fields are not simply a labor market, but they are strongly integrated with their constituent communities and the micro-level of close networks.

CHAPTER 2

NO LAUGHTER AMONG THIEVES: INFORMAL INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS AND STATUS DYNAMICS IN STAND-UP COMEDY

In 2011, the FX Network's series *Louie* blurred the boundaries between the fictional universe of sitcoms and the real-life world of stand-up comedy in an episode that climaxed when comedians Dane Cook and Louis CK passionately debated allegations that Cook stole jokes from CK. Although couched within a scripted narrative, it drew from actual third-party accusations that in 2005 Cook, a superstar performer with a checkered reputation among his peers, stole three short routines from Louis CK, an esteemed comedian who draws substantial admiration from peers and aficionados alike. Frustrated by the criticisms lobbed his way by comedians and stand-up comedy fans, Cook contended that he did not copy the jokes—although they shared similar premises as CK's bits—and that such a charge was ludicrous, because taking a few minutes of material would ruin his reputation. It would severely taint the hours of original content he crafted. He was also angry that CK did not defend him publicly, remaining complicit in these attacks through his silence. Remorseful over the negative toll this cast on a fellow performer, and engulfed in the awkwardness over the direct confrontation, CK stood firm in his assertions that Cook unconsciously and inadvertently appropriated the bits into his act. They never reached a common accord on the matter (in the scene on *Louie*, at least), but they seemed to make amends. This pseudo-fictional scene gave outsiders a glimpse into a central norm within stand-up comedy and a persistent point of controversy: the norm forbidding joke theft and the informal means of enforcing it.

To uncover the contributing factors behind such irregularities, I investigated the case of the enforcement of norms prohibiting joke theft in stand-up comedy, which previous scholars describe as an exemplar of informal, norm-based intellectual rights (IP) systems (Oliar and Sprigman 2008; see also Stebbins 1992). Through a five-year ethnographic study of this industry, I found that

conspicuous accusations of wrongdoing follow scandal processes (Adut 2005, 2008; Faulkner 2011) rather than simple reactive policing. These cases are frequently loosely coupled to examples of misappropriation. Instead, third-party enforcement often constitutes moral entrepreneurship generally directed toward a supposed transgressor who is vulnerable due to disharmony between one's high commercial renown and low peer esteem. An accusation's trajectory and outcome depend upon a possible violator's status among community members, which ties prior social engagement and interactions within the community to one's ability to generate support. When an interested audience associates a targeted individual with a track record of boorish, disrespectful, or aberrant behavior, they appear more likely to impute one's guilt even in borderline or murky cases. This quality defines the majority of instances that may constitute potential joke theft. Such locally discreditable reputations encourage attacks against commercially high-status comedians (see Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). In addition, the outcomes of joke theft controversies are also contingent upon the relevant enforcers' relative position within the community and their ascribed motivations. Ultimately, the enforcement of norms proscribing joke theft is more dependent upon the social dynamics within this occupational community than the violation itself.

While the law and economics literature stresses that informal institutions enable the necessary flexibility to maximize efficiency and conditionality in adjudicating disputes (e.g. Ellickson 1991; Ostrom 1990; Posner 2002), this study illustrates that such systems are in many ways more arbitrary and capricious than formal counterparts. It follows a leitmotif within sociology that informal or clique-based governance can be prone to personalized preference or irregularity and can exhibit frailties concerning coordination beyond a close-knit context (e.g. Abbott 1988; Baker 1984; Weber 1978 [1922]). It also emphasizes how accumulated deference associated with high status (Goode 1978; Gould 2002) contributes to under-enforcement and fewer sanctions concerning violations of norms, even when they are widely recognized. Although informal institutions can

permit minimized costs and context-specific appropriateness, their structural and interactional dynamics can complicate the satisfaction of many core demands. In addition, this study illustrates the multi-dimensionality of status and the consequences resulting from disharmony between these poles (e.g. Bourdieu 1993). Finally, the unevenness of joke theft enforcement upon investigation provides a new perspective to discover how reputation and status interact.

Informal Property Rights Systems and Reputation

Informal property rights systems constitute both the empirical context and basis for theory construction within this study. In general, property rights are a socially constructed guidelines aimed at differentiating ownership from possession by prescribing what objects constitute property, their authorized use, boundaries of exclusion, and the terms of ownership transfer (Carruthers and Ariovich 2004; Stinchcombe 1983). While most research address contexts where law (e.g. copyright and patents) governs these rights and their enforcement, recent scholars have identified and investigated norms-based IP regimes that emerge within fields where such formal interventions are absent or ineffective in protecting property or adjudicating disputes (Fauchart and von Hippel 2008; Oliar and Sprigman 2008). Within these systems, community members agree upon property rights and collectively police violations, levy sanctions against violators, and transmit instances of transgressions to coordinate enforcement. They differ from contexts where norms typically supersede laws due to their comparatively lower cost to employ or ability to accommodate conditionality (e.g. Ellickson 1991; Merges 1996; Peng 2004; Rai 1999), because they do not rely upon pre-existing legal arrangements. Scholars have illustrated these regimes' dynamics through exploring how they preside over such IP as gourmet recipes (Fauchart and von Hippel 2008; Di Stefano, A. King, and Verona 2015), magic tricks (Jones 2011), and stand-up comedy routines (Oliar and Sprigman 2008).

Reputation occupies a crucial role in the enactment of these systems, because it represents the key stake to incentivize conformity and the standard to impute the guilt of alleged transgressors. Drawing from the sociological (Becker 1982; Fine 1996) and organizational studies (Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Rindova et al. 2005; Sorenson 2014), I define *reputation* here as a collectively recognized and shared representation of a social actor's pattern of action. Typically, one possesses a reputation *for* a track record of relevant behavior. It involves both knowledge of these actions or characteristics and their prominence (Lang and Lang 1988; Rindova et al. 2005). Social actors can use it as a valuable resource. Within exchange relationships, one party may consult a potential partner's reputation as a predictive tool to alleviate uncertainty surrounding quality (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Kim and B. King 2014; Weigelt and Camerer 1988) or trustworthiness (Diekmann et al 2014; Kollock 1994). An actor can also appeal to reputation to distinguish between competitors and establish competitive advantages (Bielby and Bielby 1999; Hall 1993; Rindova and Fombrun 1999). Reputation circulates throughout a social world as the recognized shorthand for one's corpus of actions and the underlying meanings behind them.

Reputation proves especially relevant within informal IP systems. Scholars (Fauchart and von Hippel 2008; Oliar and Sprigman 2008) emphasize that participants within a community or market setting generally opt not to violate others' property rights to uphold a positive reputation. The degree of access to knowledge and resources depends upon reputation within these contexts, which is particularly crucial because of heightened competition with them. Therefore, violating others' IP rights is foolhardy and hazardous behavior that severely compromises one's ability to participate in the market or community. In addition, norm enforcers consult a possible transgressor's reputation as a track record to determine whether questionable acts constitute deliberate violations. Consulting prior transgressions is a key consideration in norm enforcement, which is evident in Axelrod's (1984) discovery of "tit for two tats" relationships in cooperative

games. Such methods of judgment are especially instrumental when transgressions tend to be murky. For example, joke theft in stand-up comedy is rarely verbatim, and instead involves the misappropriation of core elements like premises or punchlines of other comedians' jokes obfuscated in the guise of "re-writing" (Oliar and Sprigman 2008; Stebbins 1992). Therefore, these studies suggest that a track record of similar discreditable acts substantiates guilt and therefore justify stigma (see Goffman 1963). Furthermore, the reputations of norms enforcers are also an important stake. Di Stefano and coauthors (2015) find that pursuing sanctions in response to relatively mild transgressions or against peripheral competitors can be prohibitively costly to one's reputation. Ultimately, these studies underscore that reputation constitutes the main reference to adjudicate guilt concerning transgressions and a key motivator for conformity or enforcement within informal, norms-based IP systems.

Some scholars' research, on the other hand, indicates that a reputation for certain socially transgressive acts does not necessarily manifest in widespread enforcement or sanctions. Adut (2005; 2008) stresses that shared knowledge of frequent norm violations might circulate throughout an observant audience as an open secret that may fail to instigate punishment. Instead, penalties can occur as the result of scandal processes that depend upon the publicity surrounding these transgressions and the intensity of resulting negative externalities that may contaminate fellow community members or the observing audience. Likewise, Faulkner (2011) stresses that a core characteristic of accusations is that the effectiveness of such claims depends upon a direct, concise framing based upon an egregious and highly blameworthy act rather than the content of an overall track record. Contrary to the literature on informal IP systems, recent research finds that remarkably positive reputations can actually attract sanctioning campaigns, which is particularly evident in activists' preference for protesting firms whose transgressions contradict their good image (Bartley and Child 2014; B. King and McDonnell 2015). These complexities and discontinuities concerning

reputation in norm enforcement highlight the fallacy of relying upon a reputation of bad acts alone to explain enforcement patterns within these informal institutions. Investigating these social processes' dynamics invites this question: what characteristics or attributes might usurp or interact with a recognized reputation of transgressions to yield public accusations of norm violations and community enforcement?

Also relatively absent from the analyses of these informal systems and their foundational networks are how potential power differentials may hinder the efficiency and efficacy of enforcement. Weber (1978 [1922]) remarked that the bureaucratic underpinning of formal systems like modern law is impartiality and impersonality. Tightly bound, personal systems can be prone to hierarchical domination, which may lead the interests of powerful individuals or parties to inform or bias the adjudication and sanctioning concerning constructs like property rights (Fukuyama 2011; Martin 2009). Written formal law often comes from demands of low status people who are aggrieved by the unfair implementation of oral law, as with the Code of Draco in 7th century BC Athens. This inspires the crux of this study, which ties norm enforcement and sanctioning to the social and underlying relational structure of a given context. Fundamentally, I contend that status shapes the enforcement patterns in these informal institutions.

Status Interactions and Uneven Enforcement

I contend that vulnerability to informal enforcement can be contingent upon the status of the various core participants. In its most basic sense, status is one's position within a particular social setting's hierarchy, but it also entails the requisite esteem and deference from others who accompany a given position (Goode 1978; Podolny 1993; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). Gould (2002) finds that social actors exhibit greater deference to high-status counterparts, which may denote enhanced tolerance of norm violations and significantly decreased likelihood for sanctions. However, later research suggests different outcomes. Phillips and Zuckerman (2005) propose that low status may

protect deviant actors because observers may see their acts as trivial, and that elevated status also protects individuals from harm. Therefore, middle-status actors are the most vulnerable. Other scholars observe that an accused individual's high status does not negate the stigma of being associated with norm transgressors or deviant behaviors (Pontikes, Rao, and Negro 2010). It may amplify the exposure of accusations through publicity, which may allow them to become common knowledge and make sanctioning more likely (Adut 2005). Given such conflicting predictions, how does status inform the enforcement patterns concerning norms like those prohibiting joke thefts?

Such discordance within the literature suggests that it may be especially fruitful to reconceptualize status and discover how it shapes judgments of norm violations. One alternate approach involves distinguishing the multiple dimensions of status and stressing how disequilibria might inspire vulnerability to sanctions. As this study focuses on the context of stand-up comedy, it is important to define how status is delineated within cultural production industries. Bourdieu (1993) proposes that status in cultural production follows two ideal-typical logics: restricted and large-scale fields of cultural productions. Fields of restricted production involve works that align with the tastes of critics, fellow producers, and aficionados. They embody an apparent economic disinterest and, instead, aspire for returns in symbolic capital—roughly analogous to status within a particular field order. Conversely, large-scale production aspires to commercial success through appealing to mass sensibilities. Recent studies find that fields can exhibit dissimilar status orders between commercial success and peer esteem, which may become tangible through patterns of stylistic imitation (Lena and Pachucki 2013; Mears 2011; Rossman and Schilke 2014).

While restricted and large-scale fields can coexist, points of open conflict can emerge when the boundaries between the two are ill defined. Status discontinuities have inspired crusades of entrepreneurship within art worlds to further social norms that promote shifts toward either restricted or large-scale ideologies. The formation of non-profit cultural institutions in nineteenth-

century Boston was a project to delineate boundaries between fine art and lowbrow entertainments, which reaffirmed elites' high social status (DiMaggio 1982). Likewise, “anti-awards” represent movements to police extreme examples that embody the perverse overreach of large-scale (e.g. the “Razzies” for Hollywood film) or restricted (e.g. the Bad Writing Award concerning academics) logics of production (English 2005). When a social figure exhibits strong status discontinuities—particularly high commercial success with low peer esteem—this may invite competitors to engage in strategies of moral entrepreneurship.

Although this approach is couched in Bourdieu's (1993) status orders, it corresponds with more generalized models concerning disharmonies between a social actor's status and an audience's perceptions of it. Hahl and Zuckerman (2014) found through laboratory experiments that observers would “denigrate a hero” when they sensed the hero exhibited a lack of considerateness or authenticity. They proposed that observers supported attacks on a high-status actor, when they judge that the actor's superficially pro-social acts appear motivated by self-interest. In addition, they also attack those who engage in boorish or self-aggrandizing behavior during a rise to a lofty social position, which can actually contribute to a decline in status. In a sense, such negative attributes appear contrary to high status. Therefore, perceived contradictions may invite a certain audience or coalition of them to initiate or to support enforcement efforts against these transgressors more ardently. More notably, they may amplify potentially borderline norm violations to use as a potent weapon to discredit a high-status actor. Ultimately, such status discontinuity may contribute to a possible transgressor's vulnerability to accusations of norm violations and sanctions, especially if the aggrieved audience is particularly central within a given social context.

In addition, there might be greater leniency afforded to individuals who exhibit authentic or considerate behavior, which also correlates with a particular audience's conception of high status. For example, scholars find that it biases observers' judgments of borderline actions or behaviors, as

certain baseball pitchers (Kim and B. King 2014), scholars (Simcoe and Waguespack 2010), and winemakers (Benjamin and Podolny 1999) receive more generous assessments due to their high-status position. Indeed, similar benefits might manifest when assessments of potential wrongdoing occur through collective or cooperative enforcement. On one hand, occupying a high-status position—particularly within a relevant peer group—may provide an effective defense against accusations because of accumulated deference by relatively lower-status counterparts (Gould 2002). Alternately, community members may exhibit a preference to protect such an esteemed individual, despite knowledge of one’s norms transgressions, due to collective affinity or a shared belief that these violations’ detrimental effects do not overshadow the positive qualities that he or she contributes. While condoning or associating with such discreditable individuals may bring negative spillovers (Adut 2005; Pontikes et al. 2010), insiders may disregard these risks and opt not to support accusations of malfeasance. Indeed, they perceive that one’s other behavior or capabilities justify or substantiate their high-status position. Therefore, enforcement patterns may reflect status dynamics to an equal or greater degree than the violation itself.

The influence of status and its multi-dimensionality upon judgment suggest that how its interactions with reputation shape the patterns of accusations, enforcement, and sanctioning within informal IP systems. Sorenson (2014) emphasizes that these concepts are difficult to disentangle. However, scholars have identified how the two constructs relate concerning third-party judgment. For example, Kim and B. King (2014) find that status-based advantages collapse when an individual possesses a contrary reputation, such as when an All-Star pitcher with a track record for wild pitches does not receive the generous ball-strike calls that similarly esteemed counterparts with greater control do. In this case, reputation moderates status. Concerning the enforcement joke theft, I suggest that this sequence may occur in a *reverse* order. An audience may observe or recognize a comedian’s track record of joke theft, and they may acknowledge that these transgressions as

egregious or habitual. However, the status of this potentially controversial individual according to peers or a restricted field order can lead to the censorship of accusations or galvanize community support to counter such claims. Conversely, a comedian with low peer esteem—especially when accompanied by disharmoniously high commercial success—may experience a greater likelihood of attracting enforcement or sanctioning for even borderline violations. Investigating how status dynamics shape enforcement patterns within an informal institution like IP rights in stand-up comedy may uncover and explain why they can appear more arbitrary and capricious than formal counterparts.

Data and Methods

The primary basis of this study is ethnographic data that I collected during a roughly five-year participant-observation study of stand-up comedians in Los Angeles, California. I conducted the majority of my research between February 2010 and April 2015, but I maintained face-to-face and Internet contact with individuals from my study after this window. While my initial ethnographic work was mostly observational, I started performing as a neophyte stand-up comedian six weeks into my fieldwork.

Adopting the perspective of an “observant participant” provided me with particular advantages that enriched my understanding of this context through allowing me to embody many of its core processes and experiences (Mears 2012; Wacquant 2004). This approach acquainted me with crucial tacit knowledge concerning many of the important technical and social aspects of this craft and occupation. The practice of on-stage performance involves esoteric skills and challenges that are not accessible to the detached observer—particularly the intense emotional responses to “killing” (earning a positive audience response) or, more frequently, “bombing” (failure). Ascertaining backstage processes—such as earning show bookings, entering into established networks, gaining the trust of peers, and earning invitations to participate in social or occupational rituals—tends to be

equally challenging. Understanding them is contingent upon experience and knowledge of local scripts. Doing stand-up comedy as a component of my research granted me two advantages. First, it allowed me to gain familiarity with the processes that field participants undergo, which offered me a useful frame of reference to understand and interpret their social actions. Second, it eased my access into this typically insular community by building rapport with various members. As an active and evolving participant, I could go further than open-mic nights, comedy clubs, independently produced shows, and talent showcases and expand into informal gatherings, parties, impromptu writing sessions, car rides between venues, and other settings. I would conduct fieldwork typically three nights per week, which is a relatively slow pace compared to many aspirants who hustle every night (including Christmas and other major holidays) to perform or network. However, this slower-than-average pace still provided me familiarity with the fieldsite and its requisite processes and social dynamics. Engaging in my ethnographic research program as an observant participant afforded me richer data and a more solid framework for interpretation to determine my findings and their theoretical significance.

It was through my early participation in stand-up comedy within my study that I became aware of the intense sensitivity of many field participants to even the suggestion of joke theft or the slightest hint. While I was familiar with highly publicized controversies surrounding Carlos Mencia and Denis Leary's purported plagiarism, I experienced the alarm firsthand while naively taking fieldnotes in the back of a Los Angeles comedy club:

Just as my pen hit the page of my small notebook, [the talent coordinator] jetted over to my direction and loudly hurled a stern directive toward me, "No writing in the room!"... I felt all of the eyes of the comics shifting my way... Spotting the talent coordinator in his booth, I peered into his window. He looked up and smiled. I apologized, "Listen, I am deeply sorry my foul, man. I just had a slip of judgment and I was not trying to copy—" He quickly replied, "It's alright. We have to be careful. I mean, unless you are a talent agent or manager, people see someone writing, they get afraid about stealing jokes. Comedians are paranoid people." I responded, "Oh, I know, I just had something to write down as a note for my

thesis and—” He countered, “Dude, you could be writing a note to your girlfriend, and they will be suspicious. It’s not good to have that energy.” (fieldnotes 3/29/2010)

My inadvertent transgression taught me to become more covert with my field jottings, and I began to take notes on my phone outside of venues or in the bathroom. Couple with many comedians’ reoccurring references to joke theft (whether abstractly or attached to actual events), this episode motivated me to study this phenomenon as a component of my overall research project. On three further occasions, I found myself in private discussions with fellow participants concerning the similarity between jokes that I attempted on stage and those of other performers. These instances were coincidental and not deliberate breaching experiments (see Garfinkel 1967). It became clear that any such deliberate approach would threaten my acceptance in the field. These accidental conflicts, of course, were highly informative interactions that I draw from to develop my framework.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews (n=30) with a snowball sample of comedians who I directly observed within my ethnographic research. I provide greater detail about my sample in Appendix A. These interviews offered access to information that would be less salient within the confines of participant-observation, such as experiences that occurred prior to my research window, life backgrounds, motivations, and detached reactions to current events within the industry. The data collected within these interviews were complimentary rather than definitive, as interviewees’ responses in isolation were abstracted from social action (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). In practice, I employed my interview data as a lens to ascertain ideal intentions. I then contrasted interview data with the interviewees’ and their peers’ observed actions in order to find salient instances of contradiction. This aided the construction of my models. I coded and analyzed my data from my fieldnotes and interviews according to the conventions of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 2007).

After I identified particular cases of joke theft accusations in my fieldnotes and interviews—either conducted publicly or privately—I sought additional information about them in journalistic articles, social media, and comedy podcasts. For comedians, insiders, and interested fans, podcasts in particular serve a similar function to trade publications. Podcasts are also frequently referenced during conversations among comedians, which are fed into my ethnographic methods.

Within this article, I refer to comedians within my data either with pseudonyms signaled either by quotation marks or redacted names. Furthermore, identifying details about a comic, venue, or other subjects—such as credits or social affiliations—will be kept general enough to maintain the confidentiality while not obscuring pertinent information to the development and articulation of my theoretical points. Exceptions were made for widely publicized controversies involving celebrities—such as those concerning Carlos Mencia or Amy Schumer. While some of the more obscure empirical cases have been discussed in public forums like podcasts or on YouTube, I cite these cases without directly identifying the accused comic or the source of the material in question. However, I will cite the relevant publicly available source where necessary.

Empirical Case: Joke Theft and Allegations

In an ideal sense, joke theft is a performer's intentional and unauthorized use of another's material, in whole or in part, in which one makes implicit or explicit false claims concerning its authorship. Community members define and enforce informal intellectual property rights surrounding stand-up comedy routines through a norms-based system, because jokes are generally not protected by formal legal interventions like copyright or patents. In their investigation of joke theft, Oliar and Sprigman (2008) correctly contend that regular shifts in the wording of material performed on stage, the high transaction costs of lawsuits concerning infringement, and difficulty surrounding the documentation of cases contribute to the use of an informal regime (see also Stebbins 1992). Copyright proves insufficient, because it protects fixed expressions and not ideas.

Furthermore, the industry's decentralized structure relegates most monitoring and enforcement efforts to interested third parties. Accused joke thieves receive informal sanctions ranging from reputational damage, social ostracism, decreased access to bookings, or—in extreme cases—physical violence.

Positively identifying stolen jokes in practice is a messy and complicated process. Verbatim copying is extremely rare, especially within the circuit of contemporary stand-up comedy in Los Angeles. Following Stebbin's (1992) observations of Canadian comedians during the late 1980s, the vast majority of incidents that may constitute joke theft involve “re-writing” others' previously performed routines. It is especially difficult to detect such cases. Another complication is the high probability of parallel thinking between two acts working independently of one another. “Medha” echoed a common observation among comedians I spoke with:

I think, um, to some extent, people writing the same joke is unavoidable, because parallel thinking exists. It's, like, comedy covers a set number of topics about everyday living, and people are going to have the same experiences. That's, like, a given.

The sheer fact of coincidence could explain why exceedingly common motifs, such as those covering stock premises (e.g. “Women do x , but men do y ...”) or current events, can cause overlap. Because of this, most comedians in my research instead attribute joke theft to routines that bear strong similarities between routines but are personal in nature, or which feature particularly distinctive punchlines or framings. The incidence of performances with similar material may be relatively frequent, due to parallel thought, but the risks of sanction greatly reduces the rate of egregiously overt joke theft.

Most enforcement of joke theft is self-disciplinary. Comedians devote considerable effort toward censoring any material of theirs that might resemble others' jokes—both on-stage and in other media—in an effort to maintain creative integrity. Before performing a new joke, comedians typically research its novelty; often asking trusted confidants for information to gain wider

knowledge and a second opinion. If the joke is not sufficiently distinctive, a performer will devote greater attention to eliminating the potentially controversial elements or may scrap it altogether. Even when traces of another's joke are faint, comedians typically contend that the risk is still too great. "David" recalled during our interview:

I was in the UK when I first started. I did a show, and I heard a joke that I thought was pretty good. And I did think, "I could probably tell that in L.A, and nobody would know." But I didn't, and my thought was not just that it's wrong. I mean that it would not hurt her, a person in the UK. But, when you do that, you just strengthened your joke-stealing muscle [laughs], and you let your joke-writing muscle atrophy. So, you end up unbalanced, and the next time that you hear a joke, you would steal again, because you are good at that.

Because most comedians take preemptive action to avoid the impressions of plagiarism and take pains to maintain a reputation for trustworthiness and competency, they suppress the frequency of questionable jokes that may manifest in controversies—either publicly or privately. Comedians go to great lengths to avoid the *appearance* of impropriety—either of their own or of others.

In most cases where a directly aggrieved comedian or a third-party marks a potentially troubling resemblance between two performers' jokes, there is a private and usually non-accusatory confrontation that follows. Roughly seven months into my performing stand-up comedy, I received a practical lesson concerning what other performers may construe as possible joke theft. I also got a firsthand glimpse at the stakes of being labeled a thief. When I performed a new, rough routine about doctoring a videotape of me making numerous gaffes while officiating a friend's wedding, a more senior comedian pulled me into a private conversation:

After getting off stage, [a comic]—who has a reputation for being harsh to "hacks" and comedians who take shortcuts—approached me. "Hey, [author]! Did you see *Saturday Night Live* last week—the one hosted by Jon Hamm?" "No, I didn't." "They had a bit about auto-tuning embarrassing events. I mean, it has some connections to that joke you have about taking solace in the fact that you can auto-tune the video of the fuck-up when you were officiating that wedding to make it better." "Oh, fuck!" "Don't worry, man. It happens. Watch it, and try to find the stuff from that thing you actually did that makes it different and work from there. So, if anyone tries to disrespect you and ruin your reputation by saying you stole, you can tell them to fuck off!" (fieldnotes 11/2/2010)

From the perspective of a confronted party, unsolicited post hoc discussions concerning a joke's similarity are frequently received gracefully if provided by a close social tie or a respected peer. However, allegations made in an accusatory manner by rivals or strangers tend to be ignored or construed as offensive, even an act of active disrespect. Performers are particularly sensitive to attacks against community respect, which is an intrinsically and instrumentally valued resource. The penalties surrounding joke theft stigma and the disrespect associated with unsolicited allegations lead to typically private policing, and this covers a relatively small portion of potentially contestable performances.

In few select cases, directly aggrieved performers or interested third parties transcend private consultations or gossip and opt for public accusations of joke theft. I investigated the dynamics of such manners of enforcement and sanctioning through covering the strategies.

When Does a Comedian Become a Thief?

To investigate joke theft enforcement patterns, I situated cases on two axes (see Figure 2.1). The horizontal axis covers the respective comedian's reputation for joke theft, which reflects the degree of shared knowledge concerning one's transgressions and the consensually recognized egregiousness or frequency of these acts within the community. As such, a definite reputation represents a comedian's widely known track record of misappropriation. Conversely, a murky reputation corresponds where the similarity between jokes lacks clear *prima facie* proof of being stolen or a clear-cut pattern of misappropriation. The vertical dimension represents a comedian's status within the local peer community. I assessed a comedian's position according to this order through their observed interactions with counterparts, and the opinions expressed by peers concerning the given individual's onstage prowess and backstage behavior. Because restricted field status is loosely coupled with commercial renown (Bourdieu 1993; Lena and Pachucki 2013;

Rossman and Schilke 2014), I minimized the direct influence of credits or mass popularity to discern peer status. Instead, I used these attributes to determine status according to mass prominence. Through adopting this comparative approach, I could explain with greater coherence the uneven enforcement of joke theft by stressing the importance of status in inviting and supporting accusations. In the following section, I illustrate the respective trends that occur within each cell.

Definite Reputation/Low Peer Status

Accusations directed toward Carlos Mencia represent the most visible and decisive efforts of enforcement against joke theft in contemporary stand-up comedy. For many years, he earned particular infamy within comedians' networks due to his penchant for conspicuously and cavalierly performing others' material—particularly that of his supporting acts—with little rewriting. Such practices are nontrivially common among touring comedians. During our interview, “Inder” outlines this process using the example of another national headliner:

What [the headlining comedian] would do is, when he would get roadwork, he would take some unknown comic with him on the road and let the guy muddle for him. Then, he would take his material and drop him, and they get some other unknown comic. I got offered to tour with him once, and somebody warned me about him and said, “[He] must be out of material. That is why he wants you to go on the road with him.”

Mencia's regular engagement with this practice, which comedians recognize as a common but discreditable act, was infamous within the stand-up comedy community for many years. Indeed, the similarity between his routines and those of other less prominent performers became increasingly more obvious. A notable example is footage on the DVD release of Carlos Mencia's 2006 Comedy Central special *No Strings Attached*, which featured him performing a routine about a scenario in which a father teaches his son how to play football and supports his blossoming career only to have the son say after scoring a touchdown in a televised game, “Hi, mom!” This routine, though not verbatim, appeared to be a direct copy of a routine from Bill Cosby's canonical 1983 special *Bill*

Cosby: Himself. Despite mounting evidence supporting the likelihood of Mencia plagiarism, his perceived status as a joke thief generally circulated among comedians remained an open secret.

However, Mencia also attracted substantial contempt through his regular practice of self-aggrandizing behavior, like “bumping” other comedians (interjecting unannounced into a show’s bill), severely “running the light” (going beyond one’s allotted time at the expense of other performers), and generally disrespecting his peers. He nevertheless earned significant commercial success as a comedian, and as his performances drew capacity crowds in arenas as he gained a popular Comedy Central series *The Mind of Mencia*. His contemporaries bristled even more. Comedians regarded Mencia’s material as extremely derivative and “hack” (hackneyed), but many also acknowledged he possessed talent and charisma. Still, so many insiders found his on-stage and backstage failings problematic and incommensurate with his commercial success that these behaviors isolated Mencia from his occupational community and generated opprobrium from many fellow comedians.

While Mencia’s joke theft was an open secret for many years, Joe Rogan made the first high-profile accusations about Mencia’s transgressions with an entry on his blog and then subsequent radio interviews in 2005. They were motivated by Mencia’s alleged theft of his and other comedians’ jokes and insults directed at Rogan on a Tuscon-based morning radio program. Rogan’s campaign accelerated when he confronted Mencia onstage at the Comedy Store in 2007 about Mencia’s plagiarism and broadcasted the episode in video that generated millions of views on YouTube. Although the video depicted peers confirming his invectives toward Mencia, the Comedy Store’s management blackballed Rogan as a result. He also asserts that lost his talent manager as a result of this campaign. Likewise, reactions to Rogan’s actions were split among the comedians in this study. While some emphatically supported his actions, others found that his campaign against Mencia was

opportunistic or grandstanding. Some felt that the sanctioning surrounding Mencia's thievery should have been kept private. Even Rogan his regret in retrospect, given the damage to his own career:

If I had a chance to do it all over again, I probably wouldn't have [released the video] for a bunch of reasons, because, even if you are right, when you put out a lot of negative energy like that, you are going to get a lot of negative energy from people unsolicited in return. It's just unavoidable...You open yourself up for all of these people to make these decisions on who you are based on that. (Maron 2011)

Even in an instance like this, in which a star comedian like Rogan may appear to have the resources and solid reputation to avoid the risk, the resulting fallout was demonstrably detrimental to social standing and career progression.

Marc Maron undertook an arguably more effective act of enforcement against Mencia's joke theft with his 2010 two-part podcast addressing the topic. The first part featured a roughly hour-long interview with Mencia, where Maron posed multiple questions about the seemingly unavoidable topic of his joke theft. In his response, Mencia contended his innocence. Afterward, expressing his reservations at being "used" as a venue for Mencia to defend himself, Maron decided to consult more people who were closer to the situation in order to understand it better (Maron 2010a). Attempting to maintain a distanced perspective, Maron released a follow-up episode featuring interviews with two Latino comedians, Willie Barcena and Steve Trevino, former friends and collaborators of Mencia and were former friends (Maron 2010b). After Barcena and Trevino chronicled Mencia's overly aggressive pilfering and bumping practices, points which Maron cited in a follow-up interview with Mencia. Eventually, Mencia had a frenzied breakdown that lead to expressed contrition for bumping comedians. Mencia said this stemmed from an underlying desperation for fame and zealous rage towards his peers. Maron did not have a reputation for ferociously policing joke thefts, and he possessed wide-reaching peer esteem. He released an even-keeled, long-form, and heavily researched exposé about the topic. Therefore, it appeared to be a more effective gesture of enforcement—an opinion that Rogan expressed in his appearance on the

podcast a year later (Maron 2011). I observed comedians openly discussing these episodes at length. Whenever I brought up my interest into joke theft, comedians frequently referenced them as a definitive source—even beyond Rogan’s initial video. In the wake of Maron’s special, Mencia’s popularity dramatically waned to the degree that, according to one of his friends, he could not sell enough tickets to fill the 250-seat San Francisco Punchline (fieldnotes 6/5/2011).

This episode illuminates two points concerning joke theft accusations and enforcement. First, a possible transgressor’s peer status—which is tied to his or her counterparts’ perceptions of on-stage and backstage behavior—interacts with a reputation of norm violations and commercial status to shape the trajectory of claims. Verbatim plagiarism or strong similarities between jokes may motivate public sanctioning efforts. However, likeness alone does not predict or shape these accusations’ success or simple manifestation. For example, an open-mic comedian named “Troy” directly copied five minutes of routines previously performed by a recently deceased star and habitually did them at a major showcase comedy club in Los Angeles over the span of many months. Two norm enforcers, who were novice comedians like me at the time, successfully chased him out of stand-up comedy with the assistance and support of a small contingent of esteemed performers who agreed to participate, on the condition that it was verbatim theft. According to one of the enforcers, a major motivation behind their crusade was “Troy’s” practice of bullying fellow neophytes and strong-arming them for money in return for stage-time (fieldnotes 6/21/2011). “Troy” was socially marginal and only interacted with a small handful of fellow comedians, and drew apathy from his counterparts. His low peer status rendered him defenseless to these enforcement campaigns. While many members of the community lauded this enforcement case, I overheard a conversation between two comedians that echoed some individuals’ opinion that “Troy’s” lack of celebrity made this crusade unnecessary:

“William” and “Marvin”... shifted their conversation about the controversy. I caught them having the following exchange:

“Marvin”: “I don’t understand why people are talking about [‘Troy’]. It was not like he was celebrity. He ain’t famous!”

“William”: “Well, I think that the big issue is that he used to hang out around here the most. And, because of that, people feel that they have to discuss it because they attach the controversy more to this place.”

“Marvin”: “I still don’t care. It’s not a big deal! He is not a celebrity! You can just ignore that motherfucker!” (fieldnotes 6/5/2011)

Such responses indicate that accusations and enforcement concerning joke theft may appear suitably appropriate when a transgressor holds both low peer esteem and high commercial success, which may prioritize a case.

Secondly, the differing reactions to Rogan and Maron’s enforcement efforts emphasize that the status, reputations, and methods of third-party observers shape accusations’ trajectories. Ellickson (2001) theorizes that such processes require “norm entrepreneurs” to align with “opinion leaders” who evaluate and can conspicuously endorse change agents’ prerogatives. Opinion leaders attract “cheerleaders” from the social audience that confirm the validity of accusations and galvanize approval. For example, Rogan engaged in entrepreneurship through his attacks on Mencia, which simultaneously aimed to uphold norms against joke theft and to punish a transgressor directly. However, some observers could interpret these efforts as opportunistic or contrary to the localized preference for private enforcement. Alternately, Maron succeeded in the role of an opinion leader. He possessed the advantages of having maintained a peripheral role in such disputes, conforming to the rituals of journalistic objectivity (see Tuchman 1972), leveraging the popularity of his podcast, and occupying a position as a respected comedian among the wider stand-up comedy community. Furthermore, his jokes were not stolen by Mencia, which made it less personal. Therefore, relational dynamics elucidate that the characteristics of the victim(s), norm enforcers, and their supporters relative to a potential transgressor and his or her supporters shape the life-course and perceived legitimacy of campaigns against joke theft.

Definite Reputation/High Peer Status

The balance of a reputation for joke theft and high peer esteem illustrates how status informs the actualization of accusations concerning such norm violations. An exemplary case of this concerns the lack of accusations concerning “Manny,” who is a star touring comedian with numerous television appearances. I observed comedians frequently make private allusions to “Manny’s” penchant for stealing material. However, these muted claims did not manifest in widespread sanctioning. Sam Tripoli posited one reason for this silence on his podcast, when he remarked to his guests, “[‘Troy’] and Carlos [Mencia] get caught because they’re assholes, but there is someone like [‘Manny’] who is lovable, and those are the guys—it’s very tough to catch them” (Tripoli and Redban 2011). Despite shared knowledge of his transgressions, some individuals directly cited “Manny’s” popularity within the community as a disincentive to action. In addition, “Kim,” a superstar comedian, articulated another perspective concerning “Manny’s” practice of stealing jokes:

[“Kim”] showed some ambivalence to stealing. He recalled, “Well, [‘Manny’] stole one of my bits. I was headlining at the Houston Improv, and the club projected a video of previous performances before the show for the people who were coming in. And they had a clip of [‘Manny’] from the previous week doing one of my jokes. And I did that joke the previous day, and it killed, and it had fallen completely flat, and it usually kills. And [‘Manny’] killed with it. And you know what? I didn’t care. I still made the \$25,000 for headlining, and the only thing I can do is write more”...[“Kim”] later made the contention that such stealing is tolerable when a person who is a performer takes the premise created by a [comedian who excels at writing over performance] and crafts it into performance rather than material. (fieldnotes 6/5/2011)

Unlike Mencia, I observed that “Manny” commanded some admiration by comedians for his stage presence and craft as a performer, coupled by his reputation as a “nice guy.” Therefore, these attributes could serve as a bulwark that Mencia did not possess against accusations.

The case of “Manny” highlights how accusations of joke theft are not a simple reaction to a reputation of joke theft. Instead, peer status moderates the manifestation of enforcement campaigns. On one level, observers might perceive that an acknowledged transgressor might possess attributes or make particular contributions that supersede joke theft—especially as evident in their generally

respectful treatment of counterparts or recognized prowess as an on-stage performer. Such authenticity or consideration might dissuade peers from denigrating a high-status transgressor (Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). Even if a comedian possesses a reputation for joke theft, peers may selectively construct post hoc justifications to minimize these norm violations' egregiousness, which characterize "Kim's" rationale. This case suggests that enforcement could be decoupled from a track record of transgressions.

Peer esteem within stand-up comedy is a core resource in the development and everyday practice of comics. While one's likability within the community contributes to it, this order of status is not merely reducible to this. During our interview, "Paul" provided some clarity surrounding it:

Do you like Bill Maher? I like Bill Maher is really, really funny. You know who has a reputation for being the biggest cock? Bill Maher. So, if people like your comedy, they might overlook it. And, if you think you are an intellectual, they will over look it. They overlook it with him... the fact that he is a dick doesn't change my opinion of him or his comedy.

While being "loveable" or a "nice guy" does invite respect and friendly social ties, one gains peer esteem within stand-up comedy through cultivating strong routines and exhibiting an impressive work ethic or commitment. Prior to attaining the privilege of being a professional stand-up comedian, aspirants must perform and participate within the community for years (the rule of thumb among is ten years) for very little or no pay. Very few aspirants achieve this distinction. During this time, aspirants accumulate peer esteem, which can grant eventual access to paid work and is intrinsically valuable on its own. While such recognition and respect is subjectively determined, comedians express a strong preference for stardom to come to performers that the community reveres. Therefore, peer esteem generated through expressing onstage mastery, paying dues, not conspicuously taking shortcuts, conforming to professional courtesies, being humble, or supporting fellow community members may provide potential transgressors some leeway concerning some transgressions like joke theft. At balance, peers might see one's reputation for joke theft as a

necessary evil that may, at balance, dwarf other respectable traits that warrant respect and—in an ideal sense—stardom or renown.

On another level, potential norm enforcers may censor accusations due to trepidation concerning retribution by either a high-status comedian directly or his or her extensive and sympathetic social ties. For example, “Ted” allegedly performed a routine at a well-attended regular show, ignoring a peer’s prior warnings that elements of it very strongly resembled another individual’s rather distinctive bit. Shortly afterward, the story of his transgression spread through the rumor mill of his peer’s extensive social network. After it occurred in early 2013, I recurrently heard comics reference this episode over the following months within their close social circles. I heard many quips in conversations that “he might steal your material.” In one charged incident, a comedian whom I befriended whispered a profanity-laced tirade into my ear highlighting similarities between Ted and others’ material while watching one of his sets. I asked “Patterson,” a comedian who is close to the originator of this allegation, why nobody has publicly confronted the transgressor about this open secret. He admitted, “Because everyone wants to do [“Ted’s”] show... They are afraid of confrontation, and I am too. And I want to do that show... There will eventually be a day of reckoning” (fieldnotes 5/1/2014). A few other conversations about the matter echoed this sentiment. A sizable number of comedians were aware and unhappy about it, but they did not want to risk losing a choice booking at the show he produces. Eventually, the quiet controversy dissipated, and I did not witness any further mentions of this incident or others like it.

Individuals like “Patterson” may refuse to participate in enforcement due to the potential personal costs (see Di Stefano et al. 2015), which highlights the danger of trying to punish a comedian with high peer status. This action carries the risk of reprisal from the accused’s supporters. Although stand-up comedy is fiercely competitive and exhibits superstar inequalities (Rosen 1981), performers are highly mutually dependent upon one another for information, show bookings, and

references. By angering people who have social ties with an esteemed transgressor, an accuser jeopardizes his or her ability to establish or maintain bonds with them and their connections. This may lead to marginalization and decreased access to career-building or sustaining resources.

Furthermore, many comedians tend to regard accusations of joke theft—even many substantiated ones—as an illegitimate act, particularly cries against those with high peer status. Many performers expressed that such claims by directly aggrieved parties implicitly signal a lack of talent.

In our interview, “Malcolm” encapsulated this sentiment by remarking:

If you are the victim of joke theft and it is something you can't get back, I wouldn't spend my time to pursue it and trying to be an officer for justice, because there are other bits. There are other jokes to be told. There are other jokes to be written, um, and you can write them. You have that ability. You had it! It was there! Do it again... And if it ran out, then maybe you have run your course as a stand-up anyway. “You took my *one* bit!” I don't know how you are going to headline Caroline's [Comedy Club in New York City] with that one bit!

Many comedians tended to view such accusations with a kernel of skepticism—even those made by close acquaintances—because they felt that these allegations might have been fueled by jealousy, or were opportunistic, offensive strategies to injure others' reputations or to self-promote. These assessments echo how many comedians view most public third-party accusations and enforcement. If a norm enforcer lobs accusations at a comedian with high peer status, social position may magnify the resulting deleterious effects due to enhanced visibility or positive notoriety of the target—even if observers know he or she is a known transgressor (Adut 2005).

On a much smaller scale, I realized how these relational factors could mitigate the effects of an attempted accusation of joke theft and discredit an accuser's claims. At an open-mic, I performed a new bit about the irony that crystal meth use is high in rural areas where there are no outlets to occupy the sleepless hours caused by the drug. Later, another comedian privately confronted me and claimed that he had used this premise previously. While we arrived at an amicable resolution where I

decided to shelve the joke, a group of more locally esteemed comedians saw my concession as unnecessary:

“Chuck” tried to convince me that the concept was now mine and that he had faith that I would do a better job with it than [the accuser], while alluding to the fact that [he] wouldn’t have the ability for his version to be any good. “Kevin,” later on as we were at the bar, pointed out that [the accuser] likes to make people uncomfortable—not in the sense of bullying, but being an unsettling person... Nobody seemed to care about my deed and shifted the attention to [the accuser’s] rather pronounced and obnoxious eccentricities. (fieldnotes 8/27/2011)

Although this episode did not accelerate for me, the lack of prior respect possessed by my accuser and my comparatively greater support at this venue possibly rendered public accusations by him prohibitive. In addition, while convention prescribes that I should shelve my joke, the low status of the accuser and the lack of perceived legitimacy surrounding his claims contributed to my peers’ assurances that I was free to act contrary to norms concerning the ownership of jokes. Therefore, the outcomes of such attempts depend upon the relative statuses and social standings of the interested parties and the requisite degree of respective support afforded to the accusers and the accused.

Associating with individuals participating in stigmatized activities—either being accused or making accusations of joke theft—can generate controversy and possible negative spillovers (Pontikes et al. 2010). Because of these undesired byproducts, those who are peripherally involved with disputes featuring stand-up comedians with high peer status who allegedly steal material pressure the parties to engage in private adjudication. For example, “Tre” outlined during our interview a representative case in a particularly heated argument between a star performer with numerous television appearances and a comparatively newer aspirant:

[The star] stole one of [“Saul’s”] jokes, and there was a whole beef between them. I never wanted to get involved in it. So, I heard hearsay and shit like that. I didn't want to get on one side either way, but he stole one of [“Saul’s”] jokes and did it in front of him... And then when [“Saul”] confronted him, he was like, “Dude, that's my joke.” And he was just like, “So?” So, there was like a big, for a year, and he went on stage and talked about how he

fucked [“Saul’s”] girlfriend before they got together. They were going back and forth, and it became a big thing to the point that people stopped kind of talking about it.

Although a handful of comedians would occasionally make coded quips about these tense situations during conversations, pressure from performers at the club forced an unsteady compromise between the two.⁴ A couple of “Saul’s” close friends refused to address the controversy with me, even in the detached and anonymous confines of interviews. When adjudication is absolutely necessary, high peer esteem of a possible joke thief compels accusations to be private and the appearance of impropriety to be decidedly less conspicuous.

Murky Reputation/Low Peer Status

The distinction between Mencia, a comedian with low peer esteem and superstar commercial status, and “Manny,” a performer who has significant popular success and relatively high community renown despite his acknowledged plagiarism, hints at how interested parties use joke theft to rationalize such disequilibria. The disharmony between commercial and peer status contributing already introduced accusations of joke theft is exemplified by the case surrounding superstar comedian Dane Cook. They gained legitimacy due to his alleged track record of prior disrespectful acts and his position vis-à-vis other relevant actors in this controversy. Accusations arose in the late 2000s that Cook, who had recently reached monumental commercial success, pilfered jokes from a few comedians. One key point of contention were three jokes in his 2005 album *Retaliation* that resembled bits previously performed by Louis CK on his 2001 album *Live in Houston*. The routines shared common premises, but the wording of each bit differed enough to make deliberate copying hard to prove. Indeed, one of Cook’s contested jokes, which involves giving a child a name consisting of vowel-less gibberish, not only resembles a Louis CK joke, but both Cook and Louis’

⁴ Due to the specificity of the comments made by comedians regarding these instances as reflected within my fieldnotes, I feel that direct mentioning would endanger the confidentiality of the parties involved.

jokes strongly resemble a routine performed by Steve Martin decades prior. It is important to note that there were no significant accusations that CK stole from Martin. Instead, Cook attracted allegations of taking CK's jokes. There were two major catalysts behind these accusations' public legitimacy. First, Louis CK remained silent on the issue until 2011, despite his later-aired belief that Cook unconsciously appropriated the material. CK has, in the past, relayed his support toward the allegations against Mencia, and he publicly accused reputed joke thief Denis Leary on a 2008 episode of *The Opie and Anthony Show* of cribbing his material. He is not a stranger to conspicuously enforcing norms surrounding joke theft. However, his silence in this case seemed to encourage comedians and fans to lob allegations against Cook, who many said did not provide a definitive narrative to contradict the sanctioning campaigns.

Cook floundered in combating these accusations because of his incredible social vulnerability. A few key factors contributed to this. Despite Cook's incredible commercial success as a comedian who sold out venues like Madison Square Garden and earned the first platinum-selling comedy album in three decades, he exhibited particularly low esteem among his peers. Many comedians in my research criticized Cook's material as being devoid of complex premises and personal perspective. His low status according to this order was especially provocative when compared to Louis CK, who holds great peer esteem as a "comics' comic" who carefully crafts his jokes with a workman-like determination. Cook held a particularly negative reputation among comedians for disrespecting his colleagues and abusing his stature in order to disrespect others. For example, he frequently "bumped" other comedians at clubs and would perform meandering sets for multiple hours at Los Angeles comedy clubs like the Laugh Factory. While comedians like Dave Chapelle engaged in similarly long sets, Cook's actions generated much more opprobrium from fellow comedians than Chapelle, because of the difference in how each was regarded. Cook simply did not "deserve" such deference, but Chapelle earned it due to his peer esteem. He also exhibited a

track record of verbally attacking others, which culminated in an incident in which Cook was banned from the Laugh Factory—until then his home club—for aggressively arguing with a manager in 2014 after bumping Judd Apatow (Bickel 2014). Such a track record of behavior and paltry peer esteem contributed to a lack of public support from high-status comedians to counteract accusations of theft. Ultimately, as Cook’s inconsiderateness and low restricted field status left him few allies, joke theft allegations gained momentum and the appearance of legitimacy. Despite the conflicting viewpoints surrounding this issue among comics that I observed and interviewed about its actuality, very few people seemed to express outrage about that such misfortune befell Cook.

As a result, Cook withdrew from stand-up comedy in 2010 and 2011. The accusations troubled him deeply, as he relayed in 2010 on Greg Fitzsimmons’ podcast about the accusations:

“That’s a shitty one. Things stick all the time, and you say, ‘Oh, well, that’s life!’ But the plagiarism thing—nobody gets out unscathed, and I guess that it is going to be my knick on the Wikipedia page.” (Fitzsimmons 2010)

After his hiatus, Cook openly and candidly fielded questions about joke theft accusations on various stand-up comedy podcasts and other media outlets. His important appearance on the critically-acclaimed *Louie* communicated both performers’ viewpoints and reactions. Though they agreed to disagree, this act and perceived honesty by Cook demystified this affair and drew praise from his peers and external observers. In a testament to his relative acceptance, Joe Rogan—who had publicly and vociferously pilloried Cook for allegedly taking jokes, including his own—appeared with Cook on a podcast in the wake of a 2012 bumping incident and defended him (Redban 2012).

Audiences—either of insiders or outsiders—may appeal to borderline similarities between jokes to discredit certain comedians’ commercial success if they perceive it as unwarranted. I became aware of this tie during my interview and interactions with “Wayne.” He addressed the topic of joke theft accusations by making a curious prediction:

“Wayne”: It is basically the comedy community ganging up and telling somebody that they didn’t think deserved it that they are right and that they didn’t deserve it. Because there are some little anomalies, like, I think that it is going to happen to Whitney Cummings soon. I think within the next two or three years that she is going to be accused of something. And everyone will go, “Oh, that’s why it happened. That is why I am not successful. It’s because she cheated.”

[author]: Is there any sort of indication or example.

“Wayne”: No, no, no! What I am saying is that she has blown up out of nowhere, and a lot of people... think she doesn’t deserve it. Nobody knows why the industry tries to anoint somebody.

When he made this prediction, Cummings had just debuted two television sitcoms that she created on network television and was starring in one of them. As a comic, Cummings occupied a rather polarizing reputation within certain segments of the stand-up comedy community, something she copped to herself. Many comedians in my study expressed admiration for her work ethic and dogged devotion to refining her craft through constantly performing. However, echoing some statements that I heard in my fieldwork, Cummings remarked during an interview with Marc Maron that she attracted negativity by some peers for her unwillingness to socialize at comedy clubs:

I will go to The Comedy Store, and I go, and I do my spot, and I leave. And everyone is like, “Oh, she’s so ambitious! Da, da, da!” No, I am not going to hang out around the toxic cesspool of negativity and hate. Why does that make me—I am going home to go to bed. I’m not networking... It’s weird, because I really feel like people say, ‘You’re so Hollywood,’ because I don’t hang out after my sets. (Maron 2010c)

Her aloofness, which may interact with her sudden rise in large-scale status as well as her being a woman with marketable good looks within a largely male-dominated social world, creates an opportune space into which accusations of joke theft might be cast and widely accepted as a means of rationalization and market correction.

“Wayne” revisited this hypothetical scenario after his performance at a talent showcase sponsored by Comedy Central, when we passed by Cummings backstage at the venue. As we stood on the sidewalk of Sunset Boulevard, he lamented, “You know, it is about that misplaced anger that a lot of comedians tend to have. When certain people get big, and there are those people every

couple years that get fucking huge in the industry, comedians tend to focus negatively upon them for whatever reason” (fieldnotes 9/28/2011). Such predictions were curious, since there were no concrete examples or indications that she may have pilfered jokes. Indeed, no publicly observable accusations actually materialized against Cummings. However, the mere potential for such post hoc association of her material with another comedian’s work hints at how community members can explicitly or implicitly manufacture the appearance of joke theft. It also suggests that joke theft might provide a possible avenue for comedians to rationalize an unpredictable entertainment industry. Furthermore, it emphasizes that controversies can be somewhat divorced from joke theft as a specific transgression and, instead, can be a function of status disequilibrium.

Ultimately, the controversy surrounding Cook illustrates that the vociferousness and legitimacy of joke theft accusations are not necessarily commensurate with the egregiousness of the transgressions. Instead, it underscores the premise that disharmony between commercial success and peer esteem can invite such controversies. Furthermore, low restricted field status, which tends to be the outgrowth of boorish behavior and lowly recognized performances, marginalizes a possible transgressor. This prevents individuals like Cook from attracting the necessary support to counteract such accusations, especially when a norm enforcer or directly aggrieved party holds comparatively higher peer esteem. Cook’s self-imposed exile from stand-up comedy, which was similar to Mencia’s fate, and public statements about his regret over the controversy indicates one strategy to remedy the stigma of having the label of a joke thief, which indicating that repair is possible to a relatively modest extent.

Murky Reputation/High Peer Status

In contrast, accusations concerning similarly borderline transgressions by superstar comedian and actress Amy Schumer appear to be less effective due to her comparatively higher peer status than Cook. *She* became embroiled in a plagiarism scandal in the wake of her 2015 *Live at the*

Apollo HBO special. Accusers, most of them non-comedians, posted claims that her final routine about absurd sexual maneuvers strongly resembled one performed by the late Patrice O’Neal during his set at the 2006 Montreal Just for Laughs festival. The two bits did exhibit some pronounced similarities in premise and pacing. Reoccurring themes within the predominant framings and responses by these accusations’ supporters cited the comparatively greater esteem O’Neal held among some comedians and comedy aficionados or an interpretation by these observers that the parallels constituted troubling misappropriation by a commercially popular white woman of an African-American comedian’s work. Comedians close to both Schumer and O’Neal publicly came to her defense and diffused the situation. New York comedian Jim Norton, who had frequently collaborated with O’Neal, posted a long message on his Facebook fan-page, where he stressed that both performers’ jokes constituted parallel thought and their content involved public domain concepts, which he illustrated through attaching screenshots of urbandictionary.com entries defining the sexual maneuvers that predated both jokes. Others like Colin Quinn, who appeared alongside her in the 2015 movie *Trainwreck*, and Vondecarlo Brown, O’Neal’s common-law wife, also relayed similar messages of support on Twitter. On social media and an impromptu interview with TMZ, Schumer directly denied stealing the routine and claimed that this similarity was purely coincidental, because she had never watched the original set by O’Neal (TMZ 2015).

Roughly four months after this original controversy, another array of accusations concerning potential joke theft by Schumer materialized. In January 18, 2016, comedian Wendy Liebman released a post on Twitter that remarked how Schumer also performed the one-liner, “I like it when the man pays... for sex,” two decades after her. Her comment attracted responses by comedians Kathleen Madigan, who pointed out similarities between her jokes and the premise of a sketch on the Comedy Central series *Inside Amy Schumer*, and Tammy Pescatelli, who contended that Schumer pilfered jokes from her Comedy Central special (Prakash 2016). Pescatelli was especially angry about

these similarities, as she called them an instrument of “oppression and degradation.” Although the three performers deleted their tweets and Liebman and Madigan stressed that these issues were rectified (presumably through discussions with Schumer), the exchange exacerbated attention surrounding these accusations. A video appeared on YouTube claiming to illustrate her track record of joke theft by juxtaposing an array of comedians’ previous jokes and Schumer’s allegedly offending routines and sketches on *Inside Amy Schumer* and *Trainwreck*. There was expansive media coverage online that relayed these claims and shared the video, and there was a cascade of social media postings in support of these accusations mostly made by non-comedians.

During the initial stages of this scandal, Schumer appeared to deflect early-stage sanctioning through conspicuous support from many esteemed comedians, who contended that these instances arose through parallel thought and emphasized how these accusations mainly emerged from outside the stand-up comedy community. On January 20, 2016, a supportive Jim Norton invited her to appear on his daily satellite radio show to address the claims of her alleged joke theft, present an explanation for the respective routines’ similarity, speculate on the motivations beyond the scandal, and field telephone calls from listeners. In particular, Schumer stated that the similarities were a product of parallel thought, and she speculated that Pescatelli’s claims were the product of a personal dispute between the two and support of these claims by non-comedians were a backlash concerning her success as a female comedian or her support for gun control (Norton 2016). Furthermore, she asserted that she would undertake a polygraph test concerning these accusations on her television series’ new season. Numerous star comedians expressed their support for her. Notable, of these was Marc Maron, who had previously acknowledged on his *WTF! Podcast* the similarity between his and Schumer’s jokes and expressed some concern that, as he considered this to be a coincidence, observers would interpret her routine to be a case of joke theft (Maron 2015). When an anonymous individual released an edited version of his commentary that implied that

Maron perceived this to be intentional plagiarism, he responded in a future episode by characterizing accusations as a deliberate campaign of “annihilation” perpetrated by Internet trolls outside of stand-up comedy, which he dubbed “an army of unfuckable hate nerds,” who were unjustifiably angry at Schumer’s meteoric success (Maron 2016). Observing the comedians in my research, I saw that their online posts were relatively split concerning the plausibility of Schumer being a joke thief, but a sizable majority appeared to support her. While it is still early to see if sanctions and negative consequences will emerge against Schumer for alleged plagiarism, early-stage support granted by conspicuous, high-status comedians and the emphasis upon the marginal social position of her accusers appear to mitigate punishment against her.

The benefits arising from high peer status are most evident in the benefit of doubt afforded to Louis CK for the similarity between his joke about the child’s nonsensical name and that of Steve Martin, for which Cook received the punishment. This degree of leniency might protect other comedians with restricted field esteem from enforcement. During our interview, “Elliot” articulated a number of cases where this might be the case:

You know what the irony is? Joe Rogan does a bit that Doug Benson has already hit on. Do you understand? Where it’s, like, an issue of somebody that is as clean as Joe Rogan career-wise. There is no way he has stolen. Nick Kroll has done a joke that David Cross has already done almost word for word. Chris Rock has almost done a joke that David Cross has already done—not word-for-word, but the same context, same idea.

Although observers could diminish these cases as instances of parallel thinking, comedians like Rogan, Kroll, Rock, and CK do receive a benefit of the doubt and possess the distinction of being “clean” because comedians and aficionados respect their skill and impressive work ethic. They generally perceive that these performers do not *need* to steal to be successful, and thus these cases are coincidental. Indeed, I never heard comedians make even private claims that these comedians are joke thieves. However, I frequently observed them expressing their admiration for these individuals’ respectful treatment of lower-status counterparts and their penchant for regularly performing in Los

Angeles, even before small audiences, despite their celebrity. Therefore, this high peer status contributes to observers to consider the appearance of impropriety to be senseless. Furthermore, attacking such comedians would carry risks of collective retribution and decreased legitimacy.

There is a common theme that the ability to mitigate the negative effects of accusations and to deter sanction depend upon one's ability to have high-status insiders to intervene on his or her behalf. Such public scandals, especially those tied to superstars, might be tied to a track record of relatively egregious cases of plagiarism, like with Mencia, or borderline incidents, such as with Schumer and Cook. However, as the ties between plagiarism accusations and actual acts can be murky and slightly tenuous, norm enforcement efforts can be socially complex responses to tangentially related transgressions perceived by an observing public. In borderline cases, plagiarism may appear to be a pretext. While it is impossible to delineate this conclusively, status disequilibrium—especially as perceived by insiders of stand-up comedy—and an accused individual's previous behavior—as Hahl and Zuckerman (2014) observed—tends to shape the patterns of mobilization concerning accusations.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how enforcement within informal IP systems can be uneven and inconsistent due to the social dynamics of a market setting. Third-party enforcement against noncompliant transgressors appears to be superficially inconsistent. Participants may acknowledge a certain joke thief's violations and may refuse to make public accusations, but others receive punishments that appear disproportionately harsh compared to their decidedly borderline transgressors. While an aversion for controversy or potential costs may censor many attempts at enforcement, comedians generally attract public accusations when they exhibit disharmonious status in the form of high commercial renown and low peer esteem. Joke theft accusations tend to be loosely coupled to the egregiousness of a supposed misappropriation, as they more resemble

observers' reactions to such disequilibria. In this decentralized industry, accusations less resemble simple adjudication and instead develop as scandal processes (Adut 2008; Faulkner 2011) oriented toward "discrediting the discreditable" (Rossman 2014:47). An enforcement campaign's trajectory and outcome heavily depends upon the controversial figure's recognized peer status. Observers appear increasingly likely to impute guilt and to punish a comedian for joke theft when he or she has a recognized track record of boorish behavior or aloofness. The punishment of Dane Cook and tolerance of "Manny's" habitual violations epitomizes such collective responses. Furthermore, the social position and identity of the respective norm enforcers, directly aggrieved party, or sympathetic opinion leaders vis-à-vis the accused individual also informs the perceived legitimacy of these campaigns. Ultimately, the informal adjudication of joke theft could be a greater extension of backstage politics than on-stage transgressions.

Through my findings, I submit three generalizable claims concerning informal institutions, particularly those covering property rights. First, unlike formal laws or regulations that are impersonal and concrete (Weber 1978 [1922]), norms are prone to conditionality and conditional upon consensus (Horne 2001; Jasso and Opp 1997). While their flexibility allows them to accommodate context-specific contingencies and time-sensitivity of everyday routines (Ellickson 1991), I find this quality exposes them to the influence of status, power, and preference that contributes to inconsistent enforcement. Second, informal institutions appear optimized for close-knit local contexts—such as fisheries (Ostrom 1990) or single comedy clubs (Oliar and Sprigman 2008). However, when their reach expands to include additional locales or peripheral observers, it introduces obstacles to coordination, differing agendas concerning enforcement, and unevenness concerning monitoring or sanctioning. Their informal nature makes them particularly prone to social dynamics and contextual contingencies. This is true of formal regulations to some extent, but informality makes them fall almost entirely under the purview of social conditions, which allows

status, power, and reputation to play the outsized role that they do in this setting. Lastly, the jurisdictional control of enforcement by community members rather than a designated, independent arbiter allows self-interest and costs to prohibit sanctioning, exacerbate personal influence in shaping perceptions of borderline transgressions, and policing to occur through mob justice. Therefore, these aspects allow such systems to be more arbitrary and capricious than formal counterparts.

I suggest that these findings contribute to several subfields in sociology. Most directly, it speaks to the current literature concerning norms-based IP regimes (Fauchart and von Hippel 2008; Oliar and Sprigman 2008). In particular, these findings enrich the understandings surrounding the contingencies and processes underlying the inconsistent enforcement within these systems (Di Stefano et al. 2015) by emphasizing the constitutive role of status and the processes that shape their outcomes. These IP systems not only relevant to gourmet recipes or stand-up comedy routines, but they pertain to other fields like computer code, design, and fashion. In addition, norms-based dynamics also manifest in contexts where formal IP rights exist, especially scientific research (Rai 1999; Walsh et al. 2005) or certain forms of cultural production. Selective enforcement and sanctioning resembling the example of joke theft appear in other conspicuous conflicts. For example, accusations of self-plagiarism involving scholars Bruno Frey (Shea 2011) and Zygmunt Baumann (Jump 2015) occurred through scandals rather than private adjudication through peer-review practices.

In addition, the central role of status disequilibria as a motivator for enforcement also extends the premise of status' multi-dimensionality and consequences of conflict between its constituent aspects. Because this study involves cultural production, I adopted Bourdieu's (1993) bifurcated model of large-scale and restricted field status orders and confirmed prior scholars' findings (Lena and Pachucki 2013; Mears 2011; Rossman and Schilke 2014) that illustrate their distinctiveness. Joke theft accusations also resemble social movements in the arts to control the logic

of production and consecration according to a particular status order (DiMaggio 1982; English 2005). However, this model of disharmony could be abstracted to encompass conflict between insider and outsider status. In a wider sense, uneven patterns of joke theft enforcement provide a practical example of many of the mechanisms observed by Hahl and Zuckerman (2014) concerning backlash toward high-status actors. This study ties them to the interactions between dimensions of status. Furthermore, it contributes to the emerging inquiry into the interactions between reputation and status (e.g. Kim and B. King 2014; Sorenson 2014) through articulating how, in the case of joke theft, status moderates and can supersede reputation. Although the distinction between status and reputation in this real-life process does exhibit some overlap and entanglement, future scholars would be wise to conduct field studies where the two concepts might be more independent.

Finally, the investigation of joke theft accusations also contributes to current frameworks concerning scandal processes (Adut 2008). On one level, it provides an additional case of applicability, where such social dramas function as a means of policing within informal institutions. However, through employing Faulkner's (2011) definition of accusations, I find that scandals surrounding joke theft develop as responses to not a precise transgression or track record of like acts but instead encapsulate a variety of tangential violations. Furthermore, high status and its capacity to accelerate publicity are not simply a precondition for scandal, but its effect is more complex (Adut 2005; Pontikes et al. 2010). Likewise, moral entrepreneurs are not necessarily disreputable actors with nothing to lose in instigating scandals, such as Adut's (2005) example of the Marquess of Queensbury in the controversy surrounding Oscar Wilde's homosexuality, because their infamy can delegitimize their claims. Instead, an esteemed figure can leverage their resources of respect to bypass the potential social costs of accelerating in such controversies and lend them greater resonance and efficacy.

For decades, law and economics scholars have illustrated how norms-based informal institutions can prove effective in bypassing the cumbersomeness of legal interventions and accommodating the particularity of certain contexts to delineate and adjudicate property rights (e.g. Ellickson 1991; Merges 1996; Orlitzky and Sprigman 2008; Ostrom 1990; Posner 2002). My investigation of joke theft illustrates how the enforcement of norms is vulnerable to biases due to collective perceptions and reactions to status' dynamic effects upon interactions and judgment (e.g. Benjamin and Podolny 1999; Gould 2002; Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). My study advances this stream by emphasizing how collective responses to these contentious dramas and the relational components of status, social position, and legitimacy shape enforcement and sanctioning. Ultimately, enforcement is not only about the transgression, but it depends just as much upon who violator is and whom one offends.

CHAPTER 3

HOW SUPERSTAR LABOR MARKETS RESEMBLE COMMITMENT TRAPS

“Tom” protested, “No way! It is not the sheer fact of liking it. It is not so simple that you can sum up why the fuck we are doing stand-up in just two sentences... There is something way more to it than this. You see? The second biggest fear of people is public speaking—above death. Death! You have to invest so much into overcoming and doing this that you can’t sum it up in simply liking it” (fieldnotes 1/7/2014).

In many labor markets, a few “superstars” garner massive incomes or outsized rewards, while the vast majority of workers earn relatively minuscule or even non-existent wages (Rosen 1981). This winner-take-all characteristic is the trademark feature of many fields, such as cultural production (Caves 2000; Menger 2014; Salganik, Dodds, and Watts 2006) and sports (Elberse 2013; Lucifora and Simmons 2003). Aspirants encounter significant uncertainty and costs before they are able to discern whether they can successfully overcome successful incumbents and whether their career path will yield attractive rewards (MacDonald 1988). During this process of discovery, workers in many superstar labor markets earn extremely small wages that may not offset the cost of their search process. For every baseball player who commands tens of millions of dollars in salary and endorsements per year, there are scores of minor leaguers who eke out \$3,000 to \$7,500 for an entire baseball season (Senne vs. Major League Baseball 2014). Mailroom employees in Hollywood’s major talent agencies earn roughly minimum wage working essentially on-call as they endeavor for a promotion to a junior agent position (Rensin 2003). Coffeehouses in Los Angeles are filled with struggling screenwriters toiling over their unsold scripts and buying their lattes from fledgling actors, whose barista jobs hold them over while they go to auditions (Streeter 2012). Despite comparatively minute median incomes and the profound risk engendered in participating in these labor markets, large surpluses of workers are typical in these fields. This labor surplus provides greater competition for new entrants and depresses equilibrium wages. Given these observations, a central question in the literature is why workers enter into these highly risky and uncertain labor markets (Frank and

Cook 1995; Hamilton 2000; Menger 2014). This paper not only builds upon but goes significantly beyond prior investigations into why workers enter labor markets with low odds of success in order to address an even more puzzling problem: why do workers *persist* within these labor markets even when it becomes apparent that they have failed?

Within this paper, I contend that an individual's prolonged persistence within these incredibly risky and costly labor markets occurs because these fields assume the form of commitment traps. To illustrate this, I draw from data from an over five-year participant observation study of the Los Angeles stand-up comedy industry, a setting that typifies the key features of superstar labor markets.⁵ Although there are massive dropout rates among aspiring comedians in the first six months, the sizable majority of comics who make it past the first six months continue to pursue this career path. They endure in spite of modally low or non-existent monetary income and few or no prospects of stardom. Such persistence is especially counter-intuitive when unattractive outcomes are likely and there are profound hazards associated with partial success. However, for those who remain in stand-up comedy, most continue because they (1) receive ambiguous feedback concerning their prospects and proper strategies of career development. During this time, aspirants (2) make sizable investments in developing highly specific skills and social relationships, which comes at the expense of alternate career options or community memberships. Thus, they continue within this costly and risky labor market despite increasingly long odds for stardom or even consistent paid work. This approach follows the premise that, while intrinsic rewards or the potential of outsized riches and prestige may draw aspirants into these labor markets and provide a source of motivation (Frank and Cook 1995; MacDonald 1988; Menger 2014), commitment is the moderating factor in aspirants' decision-making (Duffy, Dik, and Steger

⁵ Notably, Rosen (1981:845) uses stand-up comedy as his primary example to illustrate the existence of superstar inequalities.

2011). Therefore, ambiguity and specificity act as key mechanisms that encourage and explain persistence and commitment in superstar labor markets.

In this article, I will open by outlining the limitations of rewards-based explanations in justifying persistence within these domains and how focusing on commitment can ameliorate these theories' weaknesses. Next, I will outline my two-stage model of how poor long-term feedback and investments leads superstar labor markets to resemble commitment traps. After presenting my methods of data collection and highlighting the characteristics of the stand-up comedy labor market in Los Angeles and aspirants' patterns of persistence within it, I will elaborate on how the two stages of this trap encourage prolonged commitment. I will follow with providing causes behind the relative rare incidences of labor market exit in intermediate career stages. I will conclude by articulating my model and proposing its applicability beyond cultural production industries to explain prolonged persistence in other fields that are developing similar patterns of income inequality.

Reward-Centered Motivations

Scholars have devoted particular focus upon how incentives encourage individuals to enter and persist within superstar labor markets. Drawing from the example of artistic careers and labor markets, Menger (1999; 2014) highlights a few types of motivation that can apply to such fields. The first approach attributes the outsized material rewards and prestige that accompany stardom in these fields as a primary motivator. Industries where consumers have an incredible sensitivity to relative quality and mechanical reproduction allows for an unlimited supply of products, such as cultural production or professional sports. This leads to "superstar" inequalities where a handful of participants command the vast majority of incomes and the vast majority earn little or nothing (Caves 2000; Elberse 2013; Rosen 1981). Because of these pronounced inequalities, aspirants effectively gamble to win in a winner-take-all "lottery-game" (Frank and Cook 1995). However, this

motivation is incredibly risky. Wages within the early-stages or minor leagues of these labor markets are typically miniscule or fail to cover opportunity costs. Participants—such as editorial models (Mears 2010) or rappers (Lee 2016)—typically understand that this work may bring deferred rewards that may eventually contribute to later access into the elite. However, the likelihood of such returns is extremely low. There are so few spots for stars or superstars, and newcomers must overcome cumulative advantage and preferential sorting mechanisms that disproportionately benefit incumbents (Faulkner and Anderson 1987; MacDonald 1988; Rossman, Esparza, and Bonacich 2010; Salganik, Dodds, and Watts 2006). Nonetheless, aspirants following this lottery approach are drawn to the prospect of outsized material rewards.

The second is a “labor of love” approach. It situates participation as an avenue to satisfy an occupational calling. This perspective situates work as an intrinsically rewarding and meaningful pursuit that serves both the individual and community and strongly ties occupations with personal identity (Bellah et al. 1985; Hall and Chandler 2005; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). These intrinsic rewards provide individuals with psychic rewards (Menger 1999). The conceptual foundation of occupational calling arises from a secular application of Protestant Christian ideal, which situates one’s vocation as an avenue to satisfy a predetermined course of moral achievement (Weber 2008). Contemporary scholars’ renderings of the calling concept emphasize a few attributes. It is the culmination of a long-standing sense of purpose based in interests and aspirations that typically arose during childhood or adolescence (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Fraher and Gabriel 2014). Work within a calling addresses a moral imperative that has significance beyond the individual (Bellah et al. 1985; Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Duffy and Dik 2013). Furthermore, individuals generally develop a sense of calling toward a particular domain through eventual discovery that emerges through participation in various institutions and social contexts (Dobrow 2013; Hall and Chandler 2005). When workers apply such significance to their pursuits, occupations become

avenues toward achieving meaningfulness or purpose and answering a perceived invitation to contribute to some common good.

There are significant risks and costs associated with pursuing such “dream occupations.” In their study of zookeepers, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) observe that workers generally accept disproportionately low wages given their education and training to satisfy a sense of calling. Furthermore, Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) propose that callings may lead individuals to accept problematic career or life outcomes and exploitation by employers. Although some can partially satisfy “unanswered callings” through leisure-time hobbies or vicarious enjoyment (Berg, Grant, and Johnson 2010), those who are overly attached toward realizing such aspirations can face undesirable consequences. Fraher and Gabriel (2014) find through their study of furloughed commercial airline pilots that, while many moved on from their childhood dreams through transitioning to other occupational paths, the same proportion steadfastly “stuck” to their aspirations to return to the cockpit. Spurred by a reluctance to change their long-held identities and concede failure, they engaged in disposable jobs to maintain the necessary flexibility to return to their careers as pilots, despite the remoteness of this possibility. The lack of consistent paid employment within such occupations, such as seen in superstar labor markets, may further compound them. Indeed, Menger (1999; 2014) suggests that equalizing differences of diminished pay with the intrinsic “psychic rewards” of participating in a certain world of work represents, in his estimation, the most apt rationale for pursuing artistic careers. However, individuals that occupy low-status or peripheral positions in some labor markets may find both monetary and many symbolic rewards elusive. For example, Pinheiro and Dowd (2009) find that only 28% of jazz musicians earn more than \$20,000 per year and only 21% gain any critical recognition. It is difficult for nonpecuniary rewards to compensate for a dearth of commercial success when most workers have almost none of either.

To address why individuals persist in these risky labor markets, the attraction toward certain rewards or identities may constitute a partial answer. However, investigating how the characteristics of an industry's labor market structure, career development processes, social worlds, or work practices may provide a more fundamental explanation for persistence. More precisely, these foundational aspects' dynamics may contribute to the cultivation and escalation of commitment to these career paths. Commitment can act as a moderator between reward-based orientations and workers' behavioral patterns. Duffy and co-authors (2011) find its significant moderating effect upon the influence of calling upon work outcomes and decision-making. Likewise, Frank and Cook (1995:142-145) propose that individuals engage conspicuous displays of commitment to maintain an impression of higher quality than competitors within winner-take-all labor markets. Adopting a focus upon commitment can circumvent some of the idiosyncrasies of how individuals weigh rewards and can establish a more generalized approach.

Within the context of superstar labor markets, I attribute prolonged persistence within intermediate and latter career stages to two contributors for escalated commitment. In particular, I propose a two-stage model in which there is a different primary impetus for persistence in each, especially when the odds for stardom appear tiny (see Figure 3.1). In the first stage, commitment is a response to the level of ambiguity within the labor market concerning "career scripts" (Barley 1989) or employers' preferences. In the second stage, it is constraint imposed by the low salvage value of the aspirant's career-focused investments, whether concerning skill development or social bonds. I contend that these two aspects allow superstar labor markets to resemble commitment traps.

Superstar Labor Markets as Commitment Traps

The central premise behind the escalation of commitment is the tendency of individuals or organizations to persist upon a course of action despite negative feedback surrounding the attainment of a desired goal (Brockner 1992; Staw 1997). Such behavior patterns are typical within

commitment traps. In these situations, a social actor begins with an idealized conclusion. One makes multiple, sequential investments to realize this goal and receive more complete information about the outcome. Because the costs at each step are sunk, one discounts prior losses and bases continued participation on whether the perceived remaining costs are smaller than the returns (Arkes and Blumer 1985; Staw 1976). While each step superficially appears to be an opportunity to abandon a project and to avoid outright failure, decision-makers frequently not only continue but also escalate their investments. Scholars have illustrated this mechanism through failed foreign policy interventions (Staw 1976), high capital infrastructure projects (Ross and Staw 1993), and inevitable Hollywood box-office bombs (Caves 2000). Beyond aversion to economic losses, decision-makers may escalate their commitment due to self-justification (Staw 1976), self-preservation (Brockner and Rubin 1985; Ross and Staw 1986), or institutional pressures like maintaining legitimacy or positive relationships with co-investors (Guler 2007). The interplay of organizational, psychological, and economic forces makes the escalation of commitment a dynamic process where different causes predominate at each stage of the project (Staw 2005). Nonetheless, being trapped into a course of commitment uniformly involves (1) gradual, sequential clarification surrounding an ambiguous outcome and (2) sunk costs.

Superstar labor markets can assume the form a commitment trap, because aspirants face ambiguous feedback concerning their potential or prospective outcomes. Within such labor markets, participation and experience are generally the primary avenue of realizing capabilities and outcomes (O'Mahony and Bechky 2006; MacDonald 1988; Menger 2014:118). This is particularly apt within fields where there is a lack of formal training or career development systems that alert aspirants to their aptitudes or the fundamental processes that underlie hiring or everyday practice. However, accomplishments within these educational institutions may provide an incomplete perspective into one's potential or compatibility within a given labor market (e.g. if virtuosity within a music

conservatory predicts success in the recording industry or prowess in a college basketball indicates success in the professional ranks). Furthermore, the steps for career advancement are generally improvised rather than defined. Ambiguity may also be elevated when an occupation involves skills or attributes that are difficult to signal. For example, Jones (2002) gives the example of how excellence with design is difficult to communicate, because it is a subjective quality and can only be evaluated after the fact. Furthermore, decisive elimination mechanisms in certain fields (e.g. the up or out model of academia or law firms) may be a clear-cut signal for one to leave a career path. However, moments of failure in other labor markets—like in cultural production industries—may only signal a small diminution of prospects. For example, a stand-up comedian who had trouble getting booked at a certain club can always continue to try for future opportunities or pursue another performance venue. In the latter scenario, persistent ambiguity provides little basis to contradict initial optimism, which is a prevalent bias in the process of goal attainment (March and Shapira 1987; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Therefore, when experience acts as the avenue to ameliorate ambiguity, aspirants must make repeated investments to realize their prospects.

As ambiguity leads to sizable investments in the first stage, the second stage features commitment as a reaction to these investments. In particular, I propose that commitment is higher when these investments are in specific resources. Williamson (1985) defines asset specificity as an investment's quality of having disproportionately high value when applied to particular transactions and comparatively low value in alternate uses. Non-refundable sunk costs accumulated while pursuing a goal can force the suppression of negative feedback and promote escalation into a potentially failing project (Northcraft and Wolf 1984; Staw and Hoang 1995). However, determining the limited salvage value of resources accrued by an aspirant throughout their career can provide a more flexible means for assessing patterns of persistence and risk among workers within particular superstar labor markets.

Some fields require investments in highly specific resources. For example, Tullock (1980) provides the historical example of Imperial China, where the best avenue to wealth was a few choice civil service jobs but accessing them required passing difficult tests that required years of study and had high failure rates. Aspirants' studies, which involved mastery of such esoteric fields as Tang dynasty poetry or royal court rituals, had little application outside of the civil service exam (Buchanan 1980). Asset specificity can be typical within many superstar labor markets. For example, human capital related to the delivery of a stand-up comedy routine or the execution of a long-range jump shot can only translate into a limited array of occupations—typically the occupation itself or teaching classes to hopefuls. This is particularly profound in fields with absence of humdrum employment within related organizations, such as non-profit organizations, educational organizations, and symphonies (Caves 2000; Menger 2014). Likewise, more personalized resources—such as friendships or community membership—can also be specific when social networks are highly clustered and are contingent upon active participation.

Pursuing such a risky, labor-intensive field may lead to a depreciation of an individual's other resources of human capital. These debilitating effects are particularly strong when aspirants pursue work in fields where employment is highly informal, especially when experience cannot be fully articulated on a resume or where employment in more formalized fields must be bypassed. Recent literature shows that unemployment spells over eight months have significantly negative effects on an individual's ability to get an interview for a next job, particularly in low and medium skill employment (Eriksson and Rooth 2014; Kroft, Lange, and Notowidigdo 2013). Eriksson and Rooth (2014) find that the scarring effects of unemployment are low among high-skilled workers, as employers look for the applicant who is the best match. Long unemployment spells within informal labor markets may injure reputations and lead social contacts to atrophy (Osnowitz 2010) However, if a worker opts to pursue a career in an alternative labor market, he/she tends to forego

opportunities for work experience that signals the maintenance of previously accumulated human capital. Therefore, this can limit an aspirant's other options and enhance the effects of specific investments in compelling commitment. Even as it becomes increasingly apparent that stardom is elusive, the aspirant simultaneously experiences general employment scarring and, therefore, the expected returns and opportunity cost of pursuing stardom decline in tandem. Repeated failure may diminish the appeal of striving for fame and fortune in absolute terms, but if this pursuit has made the aspirant less employable for more mundane work then the superstar labor market may remain attractive in relative terms.

Data and Methods

To construct my commitment trap framework, I draw from a roughly five-year participant-observer study of stand-up comedians in Los Angeles, California. My research covers the time window from February 2010 to April 2015, but I continued occasional face-to-face and Internet contact with participants within my fieldsite to stay apprised of developments. For this study, I situated the primary unit of analysis as individual comedians' careers. I employed longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork (Barley 1990), which allowed me to witness my subjects' career trajectories and individuals' reactions to changes within the industry in real time. Due to the relatively long duration of my research, I was able to track aspiring comedians from their entry into stand-up comedy through their initial career stages. Likewise, I could also observe incumbent performers as they attempted to achieve progress in their careers and gain insight into the events and decisions that preceded and proceeded episodes of success or failure. I also accessed responses to such experiences by these individuals and the peers that observed them. While the vast number of newcomers and established comedians within this fieldsite made monitoring the entirety of career developments infeasible, the regular contact that I kept with a few dozen performers provided a strong foundation

to investigate career and decision-making patterns within stand-up comedy in Los Angeles and to construct my theoretical frameworks.

To improve my ethnographic study of this fieldsite, I began performing as a stand-up comedian two months into my research. As a complete novice to this form, my decision to partake in this quasi-career was twofold. The first reason involved negotiating the practical challenge of gaining access. This tends to be a prohibitive obstacle for many ethnographers who attempt to study cultural production industries, particularly within mass entertainment (Ortner 2010). While it is easy to attend stand-up comedy shows as a spectator, the backstage is decidedly more difficult to access due to the spatial limitations imposed upon audience members and the insularity of comedians' local communities. Through plying my trade onstage, I could overcome these boundaries, be more proximate to backstage processes, and develop closer contact with performers. Secondly, being an "observant participant" allowed me to embody many of the requisite experiences, sensations, and processes involved in stand-up comedy (Mears 2012; Wacquant 2011). It allowed me to accrue tacit knowledge concerning many of the technical, social, and occupational practices that comedians regularly undertake. Through gaining familiarity with the form's conventions (Becker 1982) and displaying commitment to my active participation in the community, I could establish rapport and trust with fellow participants in my site. However, there were some limits to my participation. I would typically conduct fieldwork three nights per week. My pace dwarfs that of most aspiring comedians who generally perform or network everyday (including holidays) into the late night. Because I resided at the lower rungs of the labor market, I was not able to access many rituals afforded to more advanced comedians, such as meetings with entertainment industry executives or performances at talent showcases or high-profile shows. I generally could only gain access to these sites vicariously or as a disconnected audience member. Nonetheless, being an observant participant

allowed me richer data and a more informed frame of reference to interpret my data and glean theoretical significance.

My early research occurred at two sites: a major showcase club in West Hollywood and “The Open-Mic of Love,” a well-attended weekly open-mic in the Westwood neighborhood. However, as I shifted my analytical interest into comedians rather than venues, I began including more locations in my research program. Performers rarely frequent a single location exclusively, unless they have a regular job there as a doorperson or bartender. My mobility allowed me to observe aspirants more faithfully, and I could study their interactional patterns in different sites. As I developed rapport with certain comedians, I expanded my research into sites outside of performance spaces, such as informal gatherings, parties, writing sessions, car rides between venues, and podcast recordings. This provided me greater familiarity with the everyday experiences of comedians and expanded opportunities to observe (and participate in) episodes where they talk shop, exchange advice, instill support, and ruminate on career events.

To compliment my participant-observation data, I conducted semi-structured interviews (n=30) with a snowball sample of comedians who I directly observed within my fieldsite. I outline my interviewees in Appendix 1. These interviews alerted me to information that would be less salient within the confines of participant-observation research. They allowed me to gain knowledge of events that occurred prior to my research window, biographical information, motivations, and detached reactions to current events within the industry or community. Interviewees’ responses were abstracted from social action, which limits this data’s ability to uncover processes and to characterize interactional patterns (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Therefore, I used my interview data as a lens to ascertain ideal intentions and contrasted it with observed actions and behavioral patterns to find salient instances of contradiction. I coded and analyzed my fieldwork and interview data according to the conventions of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 2007). Within this article, I refer to

comedians either by quotation marks or redacted names. I did make exceptions for superstars that performers reference to articulate their aspirations or models of decision-making.

Furthermore, I manually compiled archival information on comedians' performances within various venues to clarify patterns of activity, to acknowledge unobserved events, and to estimate the entire population of comedians in Los Angeles (see "Population" below for greater detail). In particular, I drew from three families of sources. First, I digitized five-years of sign-up lists for "The Open-Mic of Love," a popular stand-up comedy open-mic—which are venues where comedians can freely sign up for stage time—held every Tuesday from 1994 to July 2013 in West Los Angeles. I also scraped the show calendar for The Comedy Bureau (<http://www.thecomedybureau.com>), which is a Los Angeles comedy blog that keeps a somewhat comprehensive list of comedy shows occurring in the metro-area. This list features the venue, ticket price, and the bill of feature comedians for 1,699 stand-up comedy shows held between April 11 2011 and August 21, 2013. Lastly, I compiled a list of performers for three long-running regular non-club shows—Holy Fuck, The Comedy Palace, and French Toast—from March 2010 to August 2013. I provide greater detail into this data collection in Appendix 2.

Dropout Patterns

In this section, I will illustrate the general trend concerning persistence and exit among aspiring stand-up comedians in Los Angeles. Because of this art world's expansiveness and decentralization, it would be infeasible to achieve accurate data concerning such actions. However, through my archival data, I arrive at a sound approximation.

Population

Determining the overall population of stand-up comedian in Los Angeles is difficult to rapid turnover of short-term entrants, a lack of centralized guild or union, and the U.S. Census undercount of individuals with this occupation given that it rarely constitutes a primary source of

income—a common obstacle in many artistic fields (Menger 2014). However, there are some clues about the size of the labor force. The Comedy Bureau’s calendar features 1,433 unique stand-up comedians who performed over these forty months. The list of the three shows had 696 unique acts. Together, the lists yield 1,721 stand-up comedians. While this list includes some visiting from other cities, the limited scope of these sources partially counteracts this bias. It leaves out many shows at showcase comedy clubs and shows at smaller, obscure spaces. Furthermore, it does not include newcomers who have yet to be booked into a show and perform at Los Angeles’ roughly seventy open-mics. For example, “The Open-Mic of Love” had 219 unique acts over an eighteen-week period from June 2012 to October 2012. Therefore, an estimate of roughly 1,500 to 2,000 stand-up comedians in Los Angeles at any given time may be a very conservative figure. Some performers within my research estimated the population—perhaps hyperbolically—at a few thousand.

Career Mortality

Combining observational data and longitudinal trends within the “Open-Mic of Love” lists provides provocative clues concerning persistence within this labor market. In this analysis, I isolated comedians who first signed up for stage-time at this open-mic between January 1, 2004 and December 31, 2005 to determine who is still currently performing after roughly eight to ten years and when dropouts stop appearing at this open-mic.⁶ I cross-referenced the names within the sample to their personal websites, public Facebook profiles, Twitter feeds, appearances on

⁶ Sampling entrants at one open-mic may not be an ideal data set, but it is sufficient to provide a ballpark quantitative context for and corroboration of my qualitative data. While this open-mic may attract a particular set of comedians that may be hypothetically disposed to persistence or may reflect a particular regional/field segment, participation in open-mics is relatively fluid and the odds of a particular comedian appearing there once are non-trivial. Furthermore, my ethnographic data finds that showcase clubs experience higher levels of attrition among newcomers. This left-censors my data, which would confirm probable early exit rather than quitting in immediate career stages. Twenty-four comedians coded as active appeared at this open-mic once; continued participation at this venue is not a precondition for persistence within the sample. Lastly, this sample leaves out entrants who bypass open-mics altogether. This feature is not a bug, because I only wish to focus on neophytes and not participating in open-mics is extremely rare among this subset.

advertisements for comedy shows, and other comedians' recall to determine if they debuted during this period and are presently an active performer. I removed all comedians who started before this period and out-of-towners. With the remaining sample of 191 unique acts, I tabulated their active/non-active status and the period between their first and last appearance on the open-mic's sign-up lists. A visualization of entrants' survival appears in Figure 3.2.

Among the cohort, 110 (57.6%) comedians stopped appearing at "The Open-Mic of Love" within the first six months after their first set there. Notably, eighty-one (42.4%) only performed there once. An extremely high dropout rate within early career stages is a common motif in my qualitative data. The revolving door of newcomers, which tends to peak after New Year's Day and during summer, is rather common topic of conversation among more seasoned open-mic comedians who must compete with them for stage time. A rather anonymous, yet conspicuous, fixture of stand-up comedy's minor leagues, these novice aspirants tend to quit almost immediately once they realize that their subpar stage or social performances may indicate that making comedy a paying career will be much tougher than their initial expectations, when their only frame of reference comes from the detached perspective of watching recorded sets or listening to podcasts.

What is even more striking is that my analyses indicate remarkable persistence among those who survived the first six months, as evidenced by the virtual flatness on the graph above starting at this time. Fifty-seven comedians (29.8%) are still active eight to ten years after their first performance at this open-mic. The list of survivors includes a few performers with solid touring records, television writing credits, or significant acting roles. However, the majority of these aspirants are still at the more modest stages of their career. Such persistence is noteworthy, because most comedians earn only trivial monetary incomes from their exploits. Most shows in Los Angeles do not compensate performers for their time, and those that pay typically do so with gift certificates or free food and drink. Sets at showcase clubs bring between \$15 and \$60, and they are irregular and

generally come after years of unpaid performances and networking.⁷ Comedians earn most of their income from touring and jobs as actors or television writers. While stars or superstars can command thousands of dollars for gigs as headlining acts, more obscure performers typically earn only a couple hundred dollars at most and must collect revenue through merchandise sales. Despite their stardom, most renowned comedians earn decidedly middle-class incomes, which some jokingly refer to as “teacher money” (i.e. the earnings of a public school teacher). However, I did meet comedians with numerous esteemed television credits on Comedy Central or late-night variety shows garnering near poverty wages from stand-up comedy (fieldnotes 2/28/2012). In contrast, superstars’ incomes are many magnitudes greater. Therefore, based upon monetary earnings alone, persisting in stand-up comedy is a costly endeavor that, for many aspirants, brings more losses than gains.

Such elevated survival rates invite the following question: why do such a large percentage of comedians persist to such lengths if the odds of success are so low? Within the span between six-months and eight years of participation, only twenty-four performers (12.6%) exited stand-up comedy. Intuition would dictate that this figure would be higher, and the rate of exit would be more linear as comedians realize that the likelihood of a somewhat desired career outcome is essentially nil. While the draw of psychic rewards or the prospect of riches may partially explain continued participation, investigating commitment within this labor market may provide richer insight. This is so, because commitment moderates the effects of rewards upon career-centered decision-making (Duffy, Dik, and Steger 2011) and may explain survival when there is a dearth of intrinsic and extrinsic returns. I cover this in the following three sections. In the first, I will explain the causes for massive dropout rates in the first six months. In the following two sections, I will explain why ambiguity and investments in specific resources lead to this pronounced commitment.

⁷ In some cases, superstar comedians can command a percentage of ticket sales for certain shows. However, these are special, widely promoted events.

Early-Stage Participation and Exit

Among new entrants into stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, the majority quit performing within six months of their first set. This pattern conforms to MacDonald's (1988) "rising stars" model. His framework postulates that newcomers to a superstar labor market generally lack knowledge of their prospects. Their only avenue of discovering their potential is through performing. MacDonald proposes that most novices will realize their diminished capabilities or inability to be eventually competitive with incumbents in their first few forays and will thus quit. Therefore, his model predicts that the majority of aspirants will cease participating in the labor market within their initial set of performances.

Within stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, gaining a most basic indication of one's potential is an rather instant, low-cost endeavor. Newcomers generally achieve this through performing at one of the roughly one hundred open-mic nights held in the Los Angeles metropolitan area every week.⁸ They are held in a hodgepodge of venues like comedy clubs, coffee shops, dive bars, and comedian book shops. At these events, stage-time, which usually lasts from three to five minutes, is either free or can be purchased for a nominal fee (up to five dollars or a food/drink purchase). Hosts usually determine the order of performers through a "first-come-first-served" or lottery system, but some frequently rig it to favor their friends or established comedians to gain approval or invite reciprocity. Therefore, unknowns or novices might end up relegated to the end of the list or slotted in unattractive slots. The audiences at open-mic nights mostly consist of fellow performers. It is rare that "civilians" (i.e. non-comedians) in Los Angeles deliberately attend these shows. Instead, they are

⁸ Some newcomers opt to begin stand-up comedy through taking classes or performing at "bringers," which are pay-to-play shows where inclusion and stage-time is determined by how many tickets an individual sells. Comedians usually dismiss classes and bringers as opportunistic scams, and they generally regard them as not providing novices "real" experience. Therefore, almost all beginners must participate in open-mics to achieve show bookings and acceptance into the community.

an unwitting audience that typically devotes far more attention to conversations, laptop screens, or sporting events on the television than the jokes being told onstage.

In addition to being low-cost, a first (or more often second) performance provides relatively rich feedback concerning a novice's potential as a comedian, and this informs one's willingness to continue. Doing stand-up comedy before a live audience is a task that familiarity with other forms of performance—such as public speaking or acting—cannot adequately prepare a newcomer. Among comedians, first performances at an open-mic are nerve-racking affairs that almost always fail to meet one's elevated expectations. In some cases, a novice's lack of tact may draw open hostility from the audience:

[The newcomer] took the stage, and he went into his first joke, which played off the cliché Asian stereotype of having a small penis. At the end of the joke, [the host] stood up and snatched his pack of cigarettes. He exclaimed, "Deee-lightful!" He left the room as conspicuously as he could... Confused by the situation, [the newcomer] buckled down and continued to do one joke after another that received no audible response beyond unintended laughter from [two comedians] and audible groans from the center of the room. Standing next to me, [the host] snidely exclaimed at the end of one joke, "Oh, wow!" Sensing that his time was up and acknowledging that the time was near to end his "onslaught," he finished with one joke... He left the stage. Everyone clapped reluctantly and in uncharacteristically muted fashion. He slumped down in a chair in the front row of the stage-left seats, clutching his backpack like a life preserver... He sprinted out of the room during the next comedian's set. (fieldnotes 10/12/2012)

However, most initial performances are upsetting due to the pronounced disinterest of the audience. Because open-mics also serve as social events where comedians reconnect with peers, network, exchange gossip, and hold impromptu writing sessions, incumbent participants frequently only devote full attention to performances by friends or familiar comedians whom they find entertaining. Only a small handful diligently watches every set. The combination of a conspicuous apathy, a lack of laughter, and the sight of a nontrivial portion the audience "walking" (i.e. leaving the room) before a newcomer delivers the first joke leads most initial forays onto the stage to indicate poor prospects for continued participation. Therefore, this leads many first-timers to make a rushed exit from the venue shortly after their sets, and they never perform again.

Another frame of reference for newcomers to achieve an initial glimpse into their potential is through their social performance in the backstage. For newcomers in their early stages within Los Angeles, their goal is to achieve acceptance within cliques of comedians (chapter 1). However, incumbent community members are typically reluctant to include new entrants socially. “Tom,” who was a co-host of “The Open-Mic of Love” for seven years, would regularly address the novices at the beginning of the open-mic with a rant steeped in H.L. Mencken-style cynicism that would highlight the pitfalls befalling newcomers that would delight the veteran comedians and discomfort the uninitiated:

[Tom] revived his warning to all of the new people in the room; there were five or six people that I did not recognize. He ranted, “There are a lot of new people here, and I have to tell you: no one wants you to do this. Nobody wants you here! If a friend is telling you to do this, they are toxic. You need to get them out of your life... No one will be nice to you, unless you prove yourself. Until then, you are wasting your time; you are taking up three minutes on stage, three minutes from someone else. Oh, yeah! And the person that is being nice to you is the village idiot... And getting accepted by this peer group—not a badge of honor!” [An older comedian] cackled in the back. (fieldnotes 8/12/2014)

Though it was almost unclear to what degree Tom’s diatribes were tongue-in-cheek, a newcomer slowly orbiting outside of a tight circle of established comedians having a conversation and trying to find an opening or invitation to enter is a common sight outside of an open-mic and a symbol of this social distance. Given these social boundaries, forming acquaintances with fellow newcomers or established comedians can be a positive signal that can encourage one to continue performing, because it indicates that acceptance is possible.

While most comedians in my research recalled that their initial onstage performances were lackluster and embarrassing, most attributed their persistence in these early stages to preexisting friendships with established comedians or bonds formed with fellow newcomers during their first open-mic nights. The former allows the novice to access knowledge about the elementary onstage and backstage processes, advice, and an aid for social inclusion. “Joshua” reflected upon how two close friends who are comedians provided him necessary support during his initial forays:

[My first set] was fun. It was terrifying, but it was fun. And then [“Jonathan”] took me out for dinner after that, and he was like, “Alright, here’s some tips.” And I just kept doing it...I would have panic attacks on the way to open-mics, and I would have to call [them] and be like, “Why should I go? Why should I go?” But they helped me through.

Forming initial bonds with fellow newcomers in your “class” (i.e. cohort) may provide one with the necessary support and social engagement to weather the stresses of starting and an incentive to continuing participating. As they solidify into “comedy buddy” relationships (chapter 1), he or she joins with a peer(s) to exchange information, advice, motivation, and material resources. “Anthony,” a beloved cult figure among local comedians who tragically passed away during my study, glowingly recounted during our interview the importance of his visible circle to surviving his earliest stages in stand-up comedy in Los Angeles:

They were very nice. Jon took me to a lot of spots. It was really sweet. And Tarrell, too, gave me a lot of good advice. They still do that... It was super crucial! You need your class, as they call in the comedy world. It’s like [goofy tone] your class that you came up with. These are the guys you are going to know forever. Then with your class, you move up, and there are new classes that come in. It was cool! Yeah! I lucked out.

Therefore, initial persistence is as much about relying upon new acquaintances for encouragement as MacDonald’s (1988) suggestion of an individual’s assessment of his or her onstage or backstage performance. Because newcomers most often fail to achieve either, the dropout rates within the first few months of a first performance are high. However, the almost half that survive this initial period tend to persist for many years within stand-up comedy, which defies the “rising star” model. I attribute this to two factors—ambiguity and specificity—that allow it to be a commitment trap.

Ambiguity

One morning, I visited “Scott” at the coffeehouse where he works part-time as a barista. An aspiring comedian who moved to Los Angeles three years prior after performing for two years in Portland, he was rather panicked, because he had to scrape together \$120 for rent in two days. When

we went to the parking lot for his smoke break, he communicated his mixed feelings concerning the ambiguity involved in pursuing comedy:

[Scott] recounted to me that he was extra-depressed, because he and girlfriend watched [NBC's] *Last Comedian Standing* premiere the other day. He lamented, "The crazy thing is that I know forty comedians—like really know them—that were on that show. And I just wondered, how did they get on there? They are all fucking great, but how did they get on? It is just representation? I need to get a manager, but I don't know how to start. I need to build a packet, but how? How do I get a tape [of performances]?"...

After his smoke break, he returned to stamping the insignia of the coffee house on the three stacks of sixteen-ounce paper cups in front of him. In an almost complete 180-degree turn from his rather dour mood in the parking lot, he confessed, "I like where I'm going with my comedy. I'm getting little steps—doing little writing things, guesting on podcasts." He walked to the espresso machine, and, as he pulled a portafilter off the machine, he remarked, "Comedy is like the priesthood of entertainment; you have to take the vow of poverty." (fieldnotes 5/28/2014)

"Scott's" episode of frustration and optimism encapsulates the ambiguity that aspiring comedians in their intermediate career stages must navigate. He highlighted certain steps that he perceived to be required clearances to achieve success (i.e. appearing on *Last Comedian Standing* and representation by a talent agent or manager) and signals of progress (i.e. podcast appearances and small writing jobs). However, within stand-up comedy, such achievements appear to be imperfect predictors of one's outcomes and not necessarily prerequisites to achieve the "buzz" that would lead to stardom, career development, or consistent work as a paid performer. His confusion highlights the ambiguity surrounding career paths, signals of success, markers of progress, and indicators of long-term fortunes. In this section, I will sketch how ambiguous feedback, the gulf of fidelity between short-term and long-term feedback, and the lack of defined career scripts feed into the commitment trap.

On one level, short-term feedback within stand-up comedy is quite rich and immediate. When a comedian performs material on stage, he/she receives a real-time audience assessment of the premise, the punchline, the pacing, and other components. Pooling multiple performances together, a comedian can achieve a clear sense of the quality of his/her content. Frequently, comedians in my observations and interviews cited the prompt assessment of their routines as one

of the most attractive and edifying aspects of the medium, which makes it distinct from other artistic careers in Hollywood. Trying to determine why there are so many comedians who gamble on pursuing stand-up as a career, “David”—a comedian who flirted with pursuing stand-up comedy for five years and quit in 2013—remarked during his interview:

“What gets me is that this is a field where you receive instant feedback. You perform, and then there is a noise that comes out of the audience to show whether they liked it or not. It is not like acting, where you can go to acting classes and your classmates can bullshit you and tell you that you were great. Or, like, writing where things have to go out in the world, and you get critiques that you can listen to or not. You succeed or fail immediately. And you see people that they never succeed, and they just keep doing it.”

Based on my data, the massive exodus of novices typically occurs because short-term feedback, which is typically negative through audience apathy and social ostracism, provides the only basis of information for their decision-making. Likewise, the prevailing trend behind survival in early stages is small bits of positive short-term feedback—a good set, a compliment from a peer, or inclusion into comedians’ conversations. However, when feedback about content arrives rather swiftly and somewhat conclusively, what propels persistence in intermediate career stages when there are such long-shot odds for stardom? Where does the ambiguity lie in the feedback comedians receive? It is important to disentangle the sharp short-term component, which is typically focused upon content, and the generally ambiguous long-term horizon of the feedback that comedians receive. Particularly, ambiguous feedback concerning the long-term horizon applies to a comedian’s position, fit within a volatile industry, and the necessary strategy to progress. Furthermore, the high quality of the short-term feedback biases decision-making to promote commitment that appears superficially rational.

One contributing factor for the lack of strong long-term feedback for comedians in Los Angeles is the relative lack of formal career development systems. Although one major comedy club in West Hollywood maintains its semi-formal apprenticeship program for comedians, most aspirants cultivate their experience and contacts through non-uniform sequences of gigs. O’Mahony and Bechky (2006) observe such patterns of development for careers in cultural production industries,

where internal labor markets are extremely rare. Like many such fields (Bielby and Bielby 1999; Jones 1996; Menger 2014), stand-up comedy is a network-based labor market. Comedians' success and rate of employment depends upon the formation of widely recognized reputations and social contacts. However, due to the lack of formalized structure, aspirants must frequently engage in experimentation and speculation, which may lead to dead ends. Market uncertainty and the churn of trends and tastes further exacerbates the difficulties surrounding what strategies are optimal for career development and which attributes industry gatekeepers may desire at a given time (Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972; Menger 2014). Stand-up comedies nebulous structure and volatility contributes to a lack of coherent "career scripts" (Barley 1989) that aspirants may consult to interpret the feedback and information that provides the basis for decision-making, particularly involving long-term strategies.

One indication of the long-term feedback's ambiguity is the weakness of credits as signals of prospects. An illustrative example is inclusion in Montreal's annual Just for Laughs Festivals, which is the largest comedy festival in North America. It is a venue for entertainment industry executives, talent agents, and management companies to scout and court talent for projects. However, comedians perceive that the rewards of inclusion in this exclusive event have dwindled. Reflecting on his recent appearance, "Rick," a comedian who performed extensively live and on television over thirty-four years and is an elder statesman figure in Los Angeles' alternative comedy scene, opined during my interview with him:

You feel great for about three months. You think things are going great. You think that your career—you went somewhere. People talk to you up there. You are going to get calls. You are going to get a manager. And, that's it. That's the end of that. Or something happens. I'm not saying it negatively, but things could happen. I had many conversations when I was up there. People had lunch with me. Nothing happened.

Likewise, many emerging comedians that experienced their first time in the spotlight at Montreal offered some similar assessments of the festival's low direct effects. After surviving an international,

three-tiered tryout process to be included in the “New Faces” program at the 2010 festival, “Wayne” reflected during his interview upon the rather humble results for him:

I got signed to Three Arts. They produce *30 Rock*, and *Lonnie*, and I love their roster; I love them. I got stack of business cards [mimes a 6-inch stack from the table] from Paramount, ABC, NBC, pilots, yadda, yadda, yadda. I come back to L.A., and just nothing happened. Nothing. It was brutal.

I did observe and interview comedians who did experience some discernible benefits from their appearances at the Just for Laughs festival, but the effects are delayed and the causal connection was not clear. Due to the diminished career effects of Montreal as assessed by comedians, an appearance holds mostly symbolic value. Some also shared similar responses to their experiences with appearances on late-night talk shows and thirty-minute Comedy Central solo specials.

Beyond the relative weakness of credits themselves as signals, there are no clear paths to prescribe how to maintain necessary career coherence and visibility after these accomplishments. This is a crucial aspect to ensuring career development and progress within stand-up comedy (Chapter 1), because performers constantly risk downward mobility. During our interview, “Jonathan” shared one cautionary tale:

I was more interested in those people who have success and have nothing to back it up and don’t know what to do. Dat Phan is such an interesting example, because he is somebody who didn’t have a half-hour, and he won *Last Comedian Standing*. Now, he has to downshift and do the work.

It is common for comedians who received accolades that did not immediately translate into sustained success to “downshift” and return to performing within their peer communities or self-producing new projects to reignite their progress. Nonetheless, discovering the correct route for this involves speculation and experimentation. For example, after an unsuccessful invitation to audition for a Comedy Central thirty-minute special, “Wayne” entered into a cycle of touring, failed self-produced ventures, and local shows that inspired incredible frustration and frequent second-guessing of his decision to pursue stand-up comedy as an occupation (fieldnotes 10/18/2011).

Nonetheless, he continued performing with the hope that one path would eventually succeed.

Because of the ambiguity that surrounds career paths and feedback within stand-up comedy, the only heuristic comedians employ to interpret their career prospects is the “ten-year rule.” Kei—a comedian with one year of experience who hustles every night to pursue the goal of making stand-up comedy his occupation—explained this concept:

[Kei] fumed, “I don’t understand how some of these people think what they are doing is comedy. They don’t know what they are doing... The thing that I notice about people going to these club mics is that lot of the people just do those mics. They could be performing for five years and only get up, like, twenty times per year. Do you get better? You can’t! I found it encouraging that I am doing the right thing, but you have to do this for *ten years* before you find your voice and know that you can actually do this!” (fieldnotes, 12/14/2015)

The general consensus among comedians in my study is that ten years is point in which a performer can become viable, as I heard them refer to it as the time horizon for cultivating a full thirty-minute routine, earning a solo television special, developing your voice (i.e. stage identity), figuring out your career’s outcome, or even arriving at the point where “your friends actually want to go and see you.” This heuristic does fit with some trends in the industry. For example, among comedians who received their first Comedy Central thirty-minute special⁹ between 2004 and 2014 who reported their starting year on their website or in a journalistic interview (155 of 212), the median and modal career-length at their appearance was ten years, though there is slight skew toward longer lengths. Likewise, many comedians in my study acknowledged that careers in this field tend to be a marathon, as they frequently cite comedians as Louis CK, Marc Maron, and Kyle Kinane as models for the long waits that precede stardom (see Staw 1981 on modeling processes concerning commitment). Because of this, I observed many aspiring comedians downplay current signal concerning the futility of their efforts. For example, “Greg,” a comedian who performed at over six-

⁹ Initially titled *Comedy Central Presents*, the network changed the title of their thirty-minute specials to *The Half-Hour* in 2012.

hundred open-mics and shows in one year, reflected on his career's stagnancy as we waited at an open-mic:

He observed, "I can't break it. I've been doing it for five years. Nothing's happened, but I keep going back to it, because I realize that it takes ten years before you get a career in this. You can get it sooner, but most of the time it is because of luck... Really, the more you hang, the more you get." (fieldnotes 11/12/2013)

Because career development in stand-up comedy engenders such ambiguity, many comedians that make it past the initial six months appear content to continue performing until they log ten years of consistent experience. Therefore, aspiring comedians frequently regard this vague rule-of-thumb as the most faithful career script and the standard to judge their long-term prospects. However, it supports a bias toward optimism and normalizes ambiguity.

Specific Investments

In negotiating the ambiguous feedback engendered within stand-up comedy's labor market, aspiring comedians continually make investments in cultivating their skills, establishing social bonds, and chasing opportunities. However, when it becomes clearer after eight to ten years of performing that becoming a superstar or even making a living from comedy is an incredibly remote outcome, the specific nature of these accumulated investments compels further commitment to participate in this labor market. This section will provide a sketch of the specificity and scale of the investments made by comedians pursuing their careers, and I will follow with an illustration of how comedians react to these costs in their decision-making and various degrees of commitment.

Comedians during the beginning and intermediate stage of their careers incur various costs to pursue the various facets involved in stand-up comedy's career trajectory. On a foundational level, newcomers must cultivate their front-stage skills through constantly performing at open-mics or booked shows. This practice is time and labor intensive. "Peyton" remarked during our interview about the incredible pace that comedians must undertake:

I try to get up at ten mics a week. Ten a week. I feel that ten is actually low. I feel that, to get really good, ideally—if I could get rid of everything and just do it—I would want to do twenty to thirty. You have to, man! I feel that, in New York, you could do thirty a week. But twenty a week would be a good pace.

While performances for newcomers and less-established comedians are short—usually three to five minutes at an open-mic or eight to ten minutes at a booked show—the opportunity costs are vast. Open-mics require massive waits due to the regular use of lottery systems to divvy stage-time, and invitation to do booked shows are limited to abler (or more socially central) performers and can be inconsistent. Furthermore, Los Angeles’ notorious bad traffic, the sprawl between venues, and temperamental street parking make commuting to multiple venues extremely time-consuming.

Aspiring comedians accrue human capital resources that are particularly specific to work in stand-up comedy. While stage performance may cultivate soft skills that enhance public speaking, it is a rather particular form or presentation that is less informative and more focused upon setting a mood among an audience. Public speaking is common to many fields, but, in most of them, one gives a presentation in formal English with PowerPoint that is tightly structured around explicit key themes, not with a bottle of water on a stool as one rambles through profanity-laced elliptical stories to create the impression of extemporaneous conversational tone. Furthermore, much or more emphasis upon writing and revising content is meant for the context of stand-up comedy. Comedians regard their material as highly valuable, particularly due to its exclusivity (Oliar and Sprigman 2009; chapter 2). While comedians can transition bits into monologues and film and television scripts, those jobs are extremely competitive and subject to the same superstar constraints as stand-up comedy (see Bielby and Bielby 1999).

An almost equally vital resource is the cultivation of social ties. Comedians, sometimes begrudgingly, must spend countless hours attending shows, having conversations outside venues, or going to parties to form social ties that may lead to bookings or collaborative projects. They must

develop and maintain contacts with fellow community members and—in the case of those who rely on stand-up comedy as an occupation—gatekeepers within national touring circuits, film, or television (chapter 1). Therefore, they must devote significant time and resources to self-producing projects like comedy shows, on-line comedy videos, or podcasts to develop or preserve exposure and cultivate reciprocal relationships with the peers they feature in them. Because the demands of career development, content production, and network maintenance requires such attention, it is typically infeasible for aspirants to hold full-time employment elsewhere. Outside of an open-mic, “Chad”—a comedian who alternates between temporary office work, performing at college programming events, and compiling monologue packets to apply for television writing staffs—lamented to two fellow comedians and me:

[Chad] wandered inside and came out with a nauseated look on his face. After we all complained about how bad the room was, he remarked to Atul and I, “I am thinking about getting a real person job. A career thing—because it is tough, because you either have to be 100% doing comedy here or 100% on the road to do anything” (fieldnotes 4/7/2012).

Beyond the requirements of pursuing stand-up comedy, developing the specific resources to excel within this labor market also compels aspirants to commit through placing “side bets” against other aspects of their occupational lives (Becker 1960).

Devoting such an intensely specific focus toward stand-up comedy is especially necessary because fellow community members and insiders may interpret one’s absence or lack of visibility. In one respect, peers sometimes assume an aspirant has either quit or is a non-entity if he or she temporarily withdraws from performing—whether altogether or in a particular local context—without conspicuous signals to justify it. For example, one comedian expressed such a response to my hiatus from regularly attending a particular open-mic:

Afterwards, I walked back up to the front, where I saw [“Ron”], who seemed surprised to see me. “Haven’t seen you around the Westside on Saturdays lately.” “I was there last time.” “Oh, good, because I was afraid that you quit. I hadn’t seen you in a while, and you had that Facebook post about Florida. I was hoping that you didn’t leave. I like your stuff.” (fieldnotes, 1/8/2012)

Regularly appearing within various sites in the community is important, because it signals one's commitment to stand-up comedy. This acts as a precondition for career development. Comedians generally confer esteem to peers of various levels of renown that commit to frequently performing onstage or engaging within the community. Furthermore, it lends to the impression of a coherent career, because contributes to the perception that one is always active, developing new projects, and in demand (see Chapter 1). Maintaining such impressions is particularly crucial for professional stand-up comedians, who must cultivate consistent "buzz" around their careers. It ameliorates the hazards that accompany downtime, which is common for workers within independent contracting or informal employment fields (Barley & Kunda, 2004). Because commitment is a key criteria for building and legitimizing one's career and community standing, it invites greater commitment and investments into this specific world.

Within my study, many comedians observed that a profound trade-off for pursuing stand-up comedy and accruing the necessary resources was the sacrifice of their romantic lives and family formation. While talking to "Alex" in the parking lot of a comedy club, he observed:

He conceded, "I don't know if I am going to get married. When I started comedy, I started late. I've done stand-up for eight years. Between the ages of 24 and 27, I had three long-term girlfriends. Then, I started stand-up, and that became my girlfriend." (fieldnotes 6/23/2014)

"Harriet"—a comedian in her early thirties who has done stand-up comedy since 2005—addressed these trade-offs during her interview:

I still see myself as, like, a dream big, go big person. So, in my head, I still want to believe that 'you could be a millionaire someday, one way or another'... I have given up on the whole normal life thing—like the whole husband/baby thing. And it's hard. As a woman, I don't think—[sigh] it's hard when you are working hard... I feel that you are sort of making a choice that you are probably not going to have a white picket fence.

By devoting so much time to pursuing this career path and sacrificing stable employment elsewhere, stand-up comedians tend to find little time for dating and a lack of support to form households and families. Comedians can bypass the former concern by dating among fellow comedians, which is

fairly common. There are some comedians who have steady relationships with non-comedians, form families, and have children, but this trend occurs most often with a supportive significant other and, particularly, if one has a steady flow of income to support the household while their mate pursues this risky career. While juggling aspirations of a career in stand-up comedy and a romantic or family life is possible, many comedians envision these two as incompatible and tend to privilege the former over the latter (see also Becker 1963).

Comedians also perceive that friendships developed with comedy buddies as specific to participation in the field. Whenever an aspirant exits, they rarely maintain contact with their friends from stand-up comedy. “Sabrina,” who stopped performing regularly in the mid-2000s, recalled during our interview, “I love a lot of these people, and I wish that I had more time to spend with them. I would have parties before I had kids every year, and everybody would come. I no longer do that, and I don’t see them.” Having compatible schedules with still active aspirants is difficult, because participation in stand-up comedy is so totalizing. In addition, some who quit stand-up comedy deliberately break ties with their comedy buddies. For example, when “Scott” quit stand-up comedy after pursuing it for five years in Los Angeles, he instigated arbitrary feuds with the members of his clique and isolated himself from his peers. Such a conclusive strategy severs one from a key source for commitment. A few open-mic comedians who were close to “Scott” hypothesized that he did this as a convenient cover to compensate for his personal feelings of failure in this field. However, “Carlton,” a performer who has diligently pursued a career in stand-up comedy for seven years, remarked that peers would not shame friends who decide to exit:

“Carlton” shrugged and said, “Shit, I commend the people that quit and not the people that stay in it because they feel like they have to do it. I wouldn’t be mad at them at all. If it is not for you, it is not for you. They shouldn’t feel bad and drop off the face of the earth.” (fieldnotes 7/14/2015).

Because friendships in stand-up comedy are so intense and bounded to participation in this field,

exiting typically involves renegeing on these relationships. Therefore, the intense value attached to maintaining these specific bonds constitutes another source for escalated commitment.

The combination of specific resources, scarring from bypassing other life options, and the formation of being a stand-up comedian makes exiting this field an unattractive decision, despite the remoteness of stardom. Reflecting on his career, “Wayne” confessed in our interview:

I don’t know, man. Stand-up comedy has probably screwed me up more than it has helped me. I mean—there is kind of no going back on your worldview... I know, at this point, I am past the point of no return... I have heard it equated to coming out of prison. I don’t know how to get a real job anymore. I don’t have any skills. I don’t know what to put on a resume—how to explain an absence from a real job. How do I explain an absence of four years?

For the few comics who managed to parlay their involvement in stand-up comedy into a living, whether through touring, acting, or writing, earlier in their career, they continue in this labor market and forego other fields where work is more secure or lucrative. During his interview, where he frequently encouraged me to ask him why he continues to be a stand-up comic, “Rick” confessed:

I pushed myself in this direction. I have been very lucky, super lucky in my career that I have been able to pay my rent and get an occasional commercial... and make a little money and live off of that for a while... I am hoping that it lasts for a while. But, that is all I know how to do. I enjoy doing it... I’m doing it, because I have stayed alive doing it.

Because of comedians have develop a specific set of resources, they perceive that they are committed to pursue stand-up comedy. While it does bring a degree of enjoyment, specific investments into this singular path counteracts established comedians’ frequent feelings of frustration and pessimism concerning their occupational lives.

Exiting the Labor Market

The escalation of commitment within stand-up is not totalizing and deterministic. Although quitting is rare when a comic is between six months and eight years into his/her career, I did observe a few cases of aspirants quitting during this time-span. Among my thirty interviewees, five deliberately quit during this time period. (I deliberately selected three interviewees for this reason.)

While individual reasons for mid-career exit can be idiosyncratic, I detected two general potential causes.

The first reason was risk aversion. For example, “Kirk”—who diligently drove from Orange County four times per week to do open-mics and started to earn bookings to major shows—attributes the abrupt end of his promising career to this reason. During his interview, he conceded:

If [I] hadn't felt like that there was other things that I wanted to do with my life in case that didn't work out, then I could have done it forever. But, I, uh, I didn't like the idea of—just in case I am not able to put it all together, of that being who I am... It is just for myself, where—uh, nah, I think that I may want to do something else that I know that, if I work hard, that I would be able to succeed in. Whereas, in stand-up, someone can work as hard as they possibly could and not get anywhere... As soon as I realized that being a stand-up comedian is being a small business owner and you are the small business—as soon as I figured that out, I started looking at myself as somebody that was in over his head.

As a person who, admittedly, ate the same meal for lunch everyday, the high risk/high reward labor market did not fit his preferences “David” echoed these sentiments in our interview:

I started at thirty-six years old. I am forty-one now. I can't work at Starbucks and bring home \$600 a week at 41 years old. I've been poor. I've been broke. I just hate it so much, and making it in comedy is so much a—such a longshot that I just don't have that faith in, maybe, myself. I don't have that faith in myself to put everything in this one basket.

Though I did hear of a few other comics who explicitly cite this motivation, high exit rates of risk-averse aspirants fits with the economist's underlying models of careers in superstar labor markets (Lazear and Rosen 1981; MacDonald 1988).

The predominant reasons behind exit during intermediate career stages are resource limitations and the shock of extracurricular life events. Not having the proper flow of income to defray the cost of pre-existing commitments, such as a family, may provide a suitable shock to force a wannabe comic to abandon their plans. Interestingly, the dramatic rise of unemployment in 2008 led a nontrivial number of individuals to pursue comedy through the subsidy of unemployment insurance. Three comics who I interviewed pursued this strategy; two dropped out when their benefits elapsed forced them to abandon the unpaid world of stand-up comedy for paid

employment. “Brock,” in particular, returned to performing stand-up after such a hiatus. When I bumped into him after not seeing him for two years, he—a father of one son—recounted the circumstances of his exit and reentry:

I asked him where he had been lately. “Shit, dude! I have been in an out for the past three years. I have gotten jobs. I have lost jobs. I have been evicted from two apartments... And I haven’t been able to get up consistently, because of all of this shit, and what is the point when you can’t. Now, I just figured—fuck it. I’ll hit it hard, because I can’t stop thinking about it and writing jokes. It is something that I have to do.” (fieldnotes 9/14/2014)

However, some comedians will take extreme measures, such as sleeping in their cars or on friend’s couches, to ensure that they can continue pursuing this career path. Alternately, comedians that occupy intermediate or advanced career stages might also quit due to the shock of tragedies, such as illness or the death of a friend or family member, or more desired life developments that hold greater priority, such as the birth of a child or a romantic relationship. For example, I met “Karl” at an open-mic who had to quit stand-up due to the former:

He did stand-up for seven-years prior, but he stopped two years ago. When I asked him why he stopped, “Karl” remarked, “I had to be an adult. I had my job, and I had to take care of my house, and—really—I had to take care of a close friend who had cancer. So, I just had no time anymore for this shit” (fieldnotes, 1/18/2013).

While aspirants are willing to sacrifice greatly to continue pursuing stand-up comedy, some shocks can persuade them to exit the labor market or make their persistence prohibitively difficult.

Most aspirants in their later career stages exit the labor market at a slow, gradual pace over many months or years—all while making the necessary investments encapsulated in participation.

“Sabrina” explained this trend about her and her peers’ pattern of exit:

“I think most people just taper off, and you don’t want to bring it up, because I think that it is a sore subject... I don’t think people think that they’re stopping, but for whatever reason—maybe to have a job, and that takes up all of their time, or they’re having a family, and that takes up all their time... Most people, I think that it’s a tapering off.”

Through my observations, I saw that comics in later stages who are not successful tend to slowly diminish the number of performances to one or two performances per week or less, particularly

after their long running commitments in stand-up comedy end—like hosting an open-mic or show. Many eventually stop. However, this tends to occur after a period of still doggedly pursuing and achieving bookings at higher-status local shows, showcasing, or doing auditions. Therefore, their prior commitment to pursuing this path and the incentives of slightly recouping on their prior investments—whether exercising their skills onstage, maintaining contact with their comedy buddies, or experiencing the psychic rewards of participation—makes quitting a prolonged process.

Conclusion

This paper shows that superstar labor markets resemble the structure of commitment traps through the development of specific human and social capital and scarring of generalized human capital. As illustrated in the case of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, aspirants exhibit surprising persistence during intermediate career stages—particularly between six months and eight years. This finding is puzzling because the odds of gaining stardom are distant and the monetary incomes as well as non-monetary rewards achieved in this stage are typically low or nonexistent, but aspirants nonetheless tend to continue despite near-certainty of failure. I suggest a key reason for persistence is that superstar labor markets assume the form of a commitment trap. This occurs because these labor markets involve two stages, each with guiding causal processes. First, entrants encounter high ambiguity surrounding their position, fit within a volatile industry, and the ideal strategy to attain stardom. Aspirants must make investments to develop and assess their skills and outcomes, despite distant odds, incomplete information, and potentially strong negative signals. It is particularly problematic when ambiguity is highly concentrated upon feedback about long-term prospects, and information about positive short-term situations provides an incomplete basis for aspirants' reactions and decision-making. This leads to escalated commitment and may appear in retrospect and to outsiders to be irrational or a mere discounting of negative information. In the second stage, the specificity of these prior investments scars aspirants from pursuing alternative labor markets and

thereby lowers the opportunity cost to remaining in the superstar labor market, even in obscurity. Furthermore, nonpecuniary rewards, like friendships, are contingent upon continual participation when the labor market has a narrow community structure. These structural constraints and aspirants responses to them explain not only persistence during intermediate stages, but also long durations of participation and extremely gradual exits in later years.

The escalation of commitment framework provides a foundational cause for occupational persistence. It also can serve as a reference point to engage more agent-based causal factors. A large body of previous scholarship attributes some of the motivation behind participating in jobs within artistic labor markets to the psychic incomes of self-actualization, community membership, lifestyle formation, or occupational calling (Dobrow 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Lloyd 2006; Menger 2014). While the comics within my data acknowledged that they highly value the psychic rewards of their work, these patterns of preference are idiosyncratic, and they are subject to sunk cost conundrums. Gaining membership into social circles or earning the rush from getting laughs require many of the same investments and entail the same uncertainty as pursuing comedy as a remunerative occupation. The bookings that allow comics to access audiences that provide adulation require the same steps for comics with orientations more toward psychic rewards and material rewards alike. Since comics prove to be a rather insular social circle, sticking around and paying dues allow you access into social networks. Therefore, the sunk costs comics weigh in their decision-making may be in equivalent currency if it applies to material rewards of superstardom or the psychic rewards of self-actualization.

The theoretical model in this paper developed through an investigation of content producers within cultural production industries. Other scholars have used this context to explain mechanisms and processes prevalent within industries where short-term, project-based work arrangements are common (Bielby and Bielby 1999; O'Mahony and Bechky 2006; Uzzi and Spiro 2005; Zuckerman et.

al 2003). While the development of the escalation of commitment to study decision-making patterns in labor markets—especially those with superstar inequalities—requires further testing within other industries, parallel dynamics in other fields, such as the recording industry, illicit markets, and academia, hint at my framework’s generalizability.

Internships in the Entertainment Industry

For example, young workers aspiring to earn employment in the corporate division of record companies are frequently resigned to accepting chains of unpaid internships (Frenette 2013). Recently, the industry features fewer positions for paid, upward employment due to persistent uncertainty, which is further exacerbated by cost-cutting measures in response to revenue decreasing shifts like piracy, digital singles, and streaming. Nonetheless, the allure surrounding the music business motivates recent college graduates to attempt to break into these firms, despite the plummeting odds of achieving this goal. Frenette (2013) concludes that uncertainty about how to gain permanent employment compels aspirants to pursue serial unpaid internships. The model presented in the current paper suggests that, in the long term, the asset-specific training in the subtleties of marketing or managing musical acts could potentially lead these serial interns to remain in the music industry in unpaid or low-paid work at smaller, independent record labels.

Illicit Markets

In their study of crack cocaine markets, Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) situate gangs as tournament structures where corner-boys sell drugs and forego higher pay in unskilled service industry jobs to participate in hazardous criminal activity because they are motivated by the wealth and status awarded to gang leaders. However, why do entry-level drug runners continue to sell drugs when promotion to the highest echelons of the gang is especially remote? An answer is suggested by Pager’s (2003) findings that a criminal record—which is common among drug dealers—is a stigma that scars job applicants and decreases the odds of gaining conventional employment in licit

industries, controlling for the effects of job experience and unemployment. Indeed, Kleiman (2009:22) synthesizes these two dynamics to explain why the labor supply of crack dealers expanded in the late 1980s with the rising demand for crack and high wages for crack dealers, but declined only slowly in the early 1990s with declining demand for crack and low wages for crack dealers since incumbent crack dealers were scarred by criminal records and formed an “industrial reserve army” of drug-dealing labor. While the scarring effect of exiting conventional labor markets in the case of stand-up comics is not perfectly compatible to a criminal record, the combination of this stigma and the asset-specific resources gained in the drug trade leads this criminal activity to resemble the second stage of my model.

Professors and Adjunct Lecturers

Adjunct and part-time lecturers comprise a rapidly expanding share of post-secondary instructional labor in the United States (Hurato et al. 2012; Kalleberg 2009), and the continually growing oversupply and persistence of these individuals within this labor market despite low-wages, insecurity, and nonexistent benefits is both a troubling trend and vexing puzzle. In science and engineering fields, the annual number of new PhD awardees increased and almost doubled between 1982 and 2011, but new faculty openings have decreased per year and the ratio of PhD holders to faculty positions has ballooned to over seven to one (Schillebeeckx, Maricque, and Lewis 2013). This trend is probably even more severe in the humanities, due to less industry demand for humanities PhDs than STEM PhDs (meaning that humanities PhDs have higher asset specificity). The low odds of earning tenure-track positions, which hold comparatively much higher prestige and benefits, does not seem to deter adjunct professors. The 2010-2011 cohort of the HERI Survey indicates that 58.6% of adjuncts see their part-time teaching jobs as a means of entering into full-time and tenure-track jobs (Hurato et al. 2012). Despite cautionary tales of the upsurge of adjunct faculty earning public assistance like food stamp benefits (Patton 2012) and plummeting odds of upward mobility,

many adjuncts without external family subsidy continue. The commitment trap model presented here may help elucidate this trend within academia, where superstar inequality is escalating, with a handful of named chairs at research schools and an army of adjuncts stringing together courses.

Twenty years ago, Frank and Cook (1995) made the provocative forecast that “winner-take-all” labor markets would rapidly diffuse throughout the U.S. economy and contribute to massive financial and social costs as bright workers squander their resources and talent pursuing the seductive outsized prizes of success in these fields. While the complete scope of their predictions is unclear, cultural production industries are an archetypal case of these domains of high inequality. Cultural production industries have been a well-travelled avenue by scholars to unlock the underlying processes of project-based labor markets and the nature of work within them (Bechky 2006; Bielby and Bielby 1999; Menger 1999; Zuckerman et al. 2003). Following this tradition, my study contends that winner-take-all systems—whether superstar labor markets, firm-wide tournaments, or innovation contests—can prove to be especially costly for contestants—not for the love of money or the love of the craft, but because of the commitment to the course forecloses other options

CONCLUSION

As outlined throughout my dissertation, my investigation of stand-up comedy in Los Angeles, California highlights how individuals and groups navigate and react to loosely structured market and community settings. Comedians must account for an uncertain and decentralized environment as they attempt to develop their careers, cultivate bonds, regulate their own and peers' actions, and rationalize their continued participation. However, these patterns of behavior and choice are not simply determined by structure alone. Performers and insiders constantly reproduce the community and network-based organization of stand-up comedy through interactions, associations, localized culture, creative process, and the ideologies attributed to participation and membership in the field. Each chapter explores a manifestation of this dynamic. Taken together, they emphasize how the interdependent relationship between social structure and culture shapes individual and collective action (e.g. Bourdieu, 1972; Sewell, 1992; Swidler, 1986). The chapters also provide rich perspectives into the thick process that underlie participation within network-based organizational forms (Podolny & Page, 1998; Powell, 1990). In addition, they follow the Production of Culture tradition, which stresses how symbolic works are shaped by the systems through which they are distributed, produced, and evaluated (Peterson & Anand, 2004). To close this dissertation, I will outline the key findings from each chapter and their generalizability to other contexts and their contributions to future research.

In Chapter 1, I introduce and outline the layered career model to characterize career development and organization within cultural production industries. Scholars have frequently looked to these contexts to craft frameworks and to refine theories concerning contingent work, independent contracting, disorderly careers, and external labor markets (e.g. Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Peterson & Anand, 2002; Zuckerman et al, 2003). Such research has particular priority, because alternative employment arrangements have become more typical within the New

Economy (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Kalleberg, 2009; Tolbert, 1996). Labor markets in cultural production industries prove quite compatible, because they are generally project-based, occur across multiple organizational settings, and require workers to shoulder market uncertainty. However, there are limitations to such approaches. Most notably, contractors in many fields partake in external labor markets after accumulating experience through traditional employment in individual firms (e.g. Barley & Kunda, 2004; Bidwell & Briscoe, 2010). Conversely, most artists begin their careers in informal employment arrangements that more or less persist throughout their careers. Through articulating the layered career model, I emphasize additional scope conditions that emphasize the possible distinctiveness of career development within cultural production industries, particularly among artists. In particular, I stress the formal and informal organization of these worlds of work, their career development systems, and the work process within them. I introduce these possible points of difference not to downplay the generalizability of career processes in cultural production industries wholesale. My goal is to inform richer taxonomies of careers within alternative employment arrangements. The layered career approach emphasizes where artists are dissimilar from technical workers, but it does suggest how artists' careers might be kindred with entrepreneurs who develop start-ups or research scientists. Therefore, the framework introduced in this chapter provides conceptual tools for scholars to cultivate richer classifications of contingent work and to establish sounder parallels.

Chapter One also illustrates how creativity and the formation of collaborative teams develop through a thick, multi-leveled process. Work within stand-up comedy, particularly in early and intermediate career-stages, rarely occurs within formal institutional structures. Instead, it is dependent upon social relationships. Due to informal organizational constraints, comedians develop cliques with peers that serve as sandboxes to develop new ideas and premises collaboratively. The chemistry and trust formed through recurring interactions enables cooperation and the efficient

development and refinement of creative works (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). These tight units persist throughout one's career and manifest in teams present within high-status projects. Early-stage organization may shape the membership of creative teams and informs their process in other contexts. Therefore, I suggest that future analyses could benefit from including data that might account for initial collaborations. While this may prove prohibitive for field-level studies or may lead researcher to presume too much from participants' early proximity, the potential of richer or more nuanced findings might encourage scholars to be inventive with the formation of their datasets.

On another level, one's community serves as an avenue to test these new ideas before a less familiar audience, which may break the redundancy that tends to accompany excessively repeat collaboration. It provides a relative lower stakes environment that permits experimentation and can bring recognition or respect from insiders for these efforts. It can also serve as a venue for participants to cultivate the impression of activity to ameliorate the negative effects of downtime. Taken together, this suggests that participation before insider audiences through self-produced or voluntary community-based projects may prove valuable in cultural production industries or other fields of contingent work. They may constitute avenues for the cultivation of new skills, reinvention of identities, or minimization of career gaps. For example, Hollywood actors or actresses might participate in obscure independent films to break confining types and expand their identities (Zuckerman et al, 2003). Out-of-work computer programmers may participate in open-source software communities to trade expertise with fellow workers and develop competencies (Castells, 2001; Khapova, Arthur, & Wilderom, 2007). Even though their employment is more formal and standardized within institutions, research scientists and academics might present new projects to express their productiveness between publications and draw the excitement within their disciplinary communities. Scholars of both careers and creativity can benefit from expanding their focus upon

workers' engagement within their communities of practice to investigate how they develop new concepts and redevelop themselves (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1990; Tolbert, 1996).

In Chapter Two, I investigate inconsistent and uneven enforcement of joke theft through the informal intellectual property system that governs stand-up comedy. Sanctions tend to be loosely coupled to an actual transgression and are typically a response to disharmony between high commercial success and low peer esteem. This study extends models concerning how status moderates the enforcement of norms (e.g. Kim & King, 2014; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001; Pontikes, Negro, & Rao 2010). In addition, it provides a real-life case to identify the status-related motivations and mechanisms behind the “denigration of heroes” (Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014). Because disharmony constitutes the main moderating factor for accusations and sanctions concerning joke theft, this study highlights how status is a multi-dimensional concept. As applied to the case of cultural production industries, this manifests in the relationship between restricted and large-scale fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). These findings speak to previous studies that emphasize differentiation between these two status orders (DiMaggio, 1982; Lena & Pachucki, 2013; Rossman & Schilke, 2014). The case of joke theft illustrates the consequences of disharmony between status orders and how participants within a given field regulate such disequilibria.

This study also contributes to the literature covering scandal. Enforcement of joke theft constitutes acts of moral entrepreneurship that unfold through scandal processes, because this property rights system occurs through informal institutions and community policing. It follows the previous scholars' observation that scandals are not merely a reaction to a certain controversial transgression, but they are influenced by social dynamics and strategic framing (Adut, 2005; Faulkner, 2011). Furthermore, I observe that scandals are frequently a response to tangential behaviors or transgressions. I illustrate that high status and its capacity to accelerate publicity are not simply a precondition for scandal, but its effect is more complex (Adut, 2005; Pontikes et al, 2010). I

also highlight that the life-course of these controversies depends on the relative social positions and reputations of the relevant actors—particularly the alleged transgressor, the directly aggrieved party, and the moral entrepreneur. Success is contingent upon each actor’s ability to command the support of esteemed or central community members. The case of joke theft enforcement and its underlying mechanisms provide a richer set of mechanisms that underlie scandals and their role in encouraging conformity in social worlds.

Chapter Three explains extreme persistence within certain labor markets, particularly those exhibiting superstar inequalities, by showing how they assume the form of commitment traps. In the context of stand-up comedy, there is profound attrition among newcomers. However, the remaining participants pursue careers in this field despite long odds for success due to a two-stage process. First, comedians respond to ambiguous feedback in early and middle-career stages by persisting in this labor market to discover clearer information about their outcomes and prospects. Afterwards, they continue as a response to the specificity of the investments that they make to develop competencies and cultivate relationships. This study finds the mechanisms that encourage commitment, which moderates the appeal of rewards (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011). The underlying mechanisms that contribute to persistence in stand-up comedy may also apply to other labor markets. It unifies previous scholars’ findings concerning workers’ extended participation in illicit markets (Kleiman, 2009; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000), adjunct lecturing (Hurato et al. 2012; Kalleberg, 2009), and internships in certain industries (Frenette, 2013). The relationship between commitment and the dual effects of ambiguity and specificity provides a foundation to explain workers’ behavior patterns in other labor markets and potential costs to other aspects of the life-course.

This study also contributes to the literature that covers workers’ decision-making within labor market tournaments (Bothner, Kang, & Stuart, 2007; Lazear & Rosen, 1981; McLaughlin, 1988; Rosen, 1986). In these schemes, contestants, who lack full awareness of the field and the

overall criteria behind promotions, advance through exhibiting greater relative quality than competitors. Prior scholarship attributes individual's patterns of action toward their perceptions of their competitors' performance and the scale of outsized rewards that accompany reaching the top positions. This study stresses that commitment, which is an outgrowth of both specificity and ambiguity, also explains patterns of behavior or risk-taking in these arrangements. Indeed, there are some differences given the scope conditions of stand-up comedy. Unlike tournaments that typically occur within internal labor markets (e.g. Lazear & Rosen, 1981), this case occurs across multiple organizations, and promotions are rarely sequential. In addition, the hazard of downward mobility is more present. Nonetheless, these findings invite two analytical directions. First, it suggests that scholars investigating tournaments would benefit from identifying mechanisms that encourage commitment, especially if they are a byproduct of labor market's structure or the work involved in them. Secondly, it encourages future study to identify the appearance and core elements of tournaments that might exist in external labor markets.

An overarching motif within this dissertation is a focus upon the consequences and negotiation of networks that exhibit weak brokerage systems. Because stand-up comedy in Los Angeles is so dispersed and lacks formal, unifying institutions like a guild or dominant showcase club, comedians must develop their careers, evaluate their peers, and cultivate strategies without stringent guidelines or direct intervention. Such an arrangement has merits. Without a strong broker sorting talent and relying on conservative routines that safeguard audience demand, it allows for a greater variety among performers and aspirants (Fernandez-Mateo, 2007; Fernandez-Mateo & King, 2011). Therefore, this minimizes the risk of creative stagnation. Without strong brokers, comedians also less subject to exploitation by brokers (Fernandez-Mateo, 2007). However, as these chapters illustrate the weaknesses or inconsistencies of the informal systems within this field and the obstacles that comedians face in navigating them, there are costs to weak brokerage. Taken together,

my study arrives to the conclusion that weak brokerage can actually bring its own hazards. Indeed, the paths that aspirants traverse to achieve career development or to regulate their peers may become prohibitively convoluted and capricious.

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW SAMPLE

The following table outlines the characteristics of my sample of interviewees and information about the interviews:

Characteristics of Interviews and Subjects

Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Sex	Active at Time of Interview	Active as of 2015	Date of Interview	Interview Length (min)
Allison	5.5	F	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	78
Anthony	5	M	Yes	No (Deceased)	Sep., 2011	78
Brock	1	M	Yes	Semi	Nov., 2010	45
Charlie	6	M	Yes	No	Jul., 2011	71
David	5	M	No	No	Dec., 2013	70
Elliot	6	M	Yes	Yes	Jul., 2011	111
Inder	7	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	59
Jennifer	4	F	Yes	Yes	Mar., 2013	60
Joe	4	M	Yes	Yes	Jul., 2012	69
Jonathan	10	M	Yes	Yes	Mar., 2013	79
Joshua	2.5	M	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	104
Kirk	4	M	No	No	Dec., 2013	66
Luther	23	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	53
Malcolm	3.5	M	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	64
Medha	5.5	F	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	75
Mike	7	M	Yes	No	Nov., 2010	86
Mitch	3	M	Yes	Semi	Jul., 2011	69
Paul	25	M	Yes	Yes	Oct., 2011	91
Peyton	2	M	Yes	No	Dec., 2013	69
Rahul	6	M	Yes	Yes	Dec., 2011	64
Raza	0.75	M	Yes	No	Oct., 2010	51
Rick	34	M	Yes	Yes	Jul., 2012	77
Sabrina	10	F	No	No	Jan., 2014	63
Shane	23	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	82
Taylor	3	M	Yes	Semi	Nov., 2010	55
Terrance	5	M	Yes	Yes	Oct., 2010	80
Tom	13	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	56
Tre	2	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	61
Wayne	7	M	Yes	Yes	Aug., 2011	113
William	4	M	Yes	Yes	Nov., 2010	64

APPENDIX 2

ESTIMATING THE POPULATION OF STAND-UP COMEDIANS IN LOS ANGELES

As I outline in this dissertation, achieving a comprehensive count of stand-up comedians in Los Angeles is infeasible because the field lacks an overarching guild, features incredible turnover among newcomers, and is quite decentralized. In addition, the U.S. Census does not provide necessary clarity, because it ambiguates stand-up comedians in a larger category of “entertainers and performers,” which includes puppeteers and orators (National Endowment of the Arts, 2008). Furthermore, the census only classifies workers into this code if this occupation is their primary source of income (Menger, 1999). This leads to a significant undercount of the labor pool.

To overcome these weaknesses, I arrived at an estimate of the stand-up comedian population in Los Angeles through using the show calendar of The Comedy Bureau (www.thecomedybureau.com), which is a popular blog covering the local industry. Covering shows occurring between April 2011 and August 2013, the raw data was in a Google Calendar format. Through certain information—such as name, date, time, ticket price, and venue location—was standardized, the respective lists of featured performers were not uniform, because the editor copy and pasted show descriptions from Facebook. To extract the names, I used a name extraction Java program (Vargo & Reilly, 2013) that identified names from two-word strings that started with a name from the U.S. Census list of most frequent names from birth cohorts from the 1980s or a manually compiled list of other possible first names for performers (e.g. Mr., Doctor, or D.J.). Furthermore, to be counted as a performer, the next word in the string had to be capitalized and not separated by a comma or carriage return; the program accommodated entries with three names (e.g. Emily Maya Mills or Josh Adam Meyers). Through manual processing, I deleted certain geographical

or venue names (e.g. Beverly Boulevard), names that were misspelled, and performers doing sketch or improvisational comedy. Although some performers with uncommon or idiosyncratic names were not included, spot-checking indicated that these exclusions were trivial.

The final list covered 7,943 show bookings in the Los Angeles metro-area by 1,433 unique acts. Indeed, this list did include comedians based in other cities. However, this bias is counteracted by other factors. The compilation of this calendar leaves out many shows in obscure venues, showcase club venues, or those consciously omitted by the editor. In addition, the list does not include open-mic comedians that have yet to be booked on show. Therefore, the actual population of stand-up comedians in Los Angeles probably exceeds the estimate from the calendar and might actually range between 1,500 and 2,000.

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TABLE 1.1: CHARACTERISTICS OF CAREER LAYERS IN CULTURAL PRODUCTION INDUSTRIES

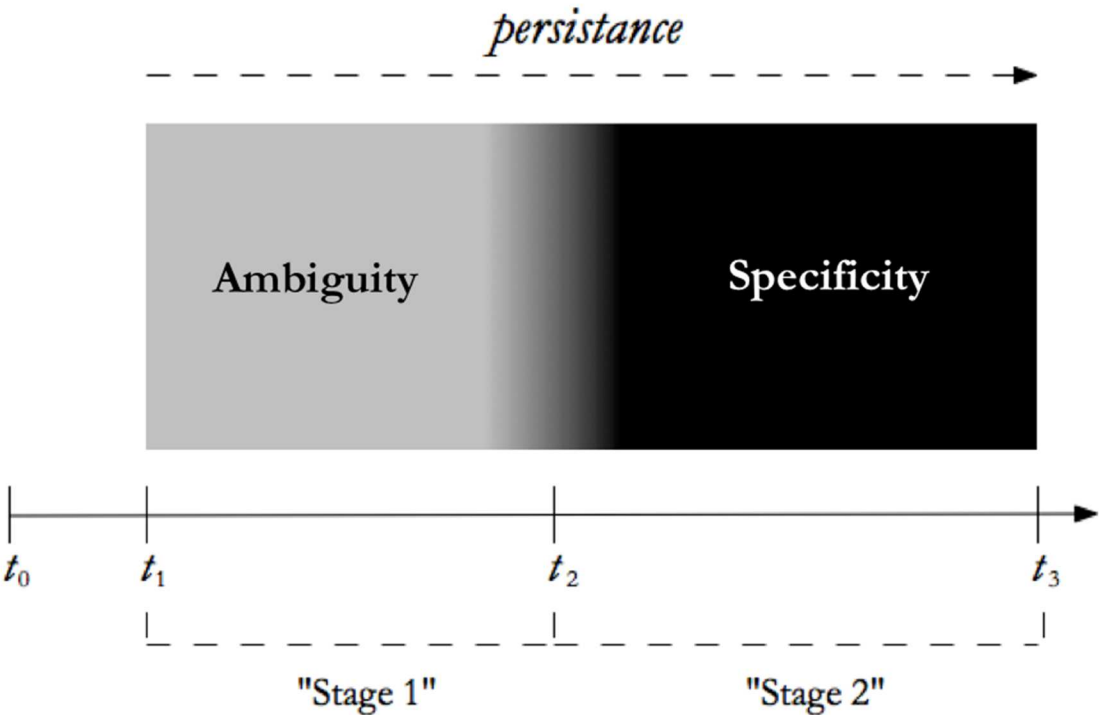
	<i>Proximate Layer</i>	<i>Community Layer</i>	<i>Industrial Layer</i>
Organizational Basis	tight cliques	occupational community or scene	entertainment industry
Audience Type	fellow newcomers and local incumbents	peers, insiders, and aficionados	mass consumers and industry scouts
Resource to Accumulate	acceptance	peer esteem	renown
Requisite Challenges	practical fluency, social fluency, marginalization from incumbents, grasping conventions	generating exposure, identity formation, "voice" development, accruing contacts, community membership	entertainment industry uncertainty, career coherence, maintaining popularity
Key Assets	support, creative/concept development, durable teams	respect, peer recognition, feedback concerning works, insider fandom	credits and monetary compensation

FIGURE 2.1

		Reputation for Stealing Jokes	
		<i>Murky</i>	<i>Definite</i>
Peer Status	<i>High</i>	Louis CK (higher peer status); Amy Schumer	"Manny"
	<i>Low</i>	Dane Cook	Carlos Mencia

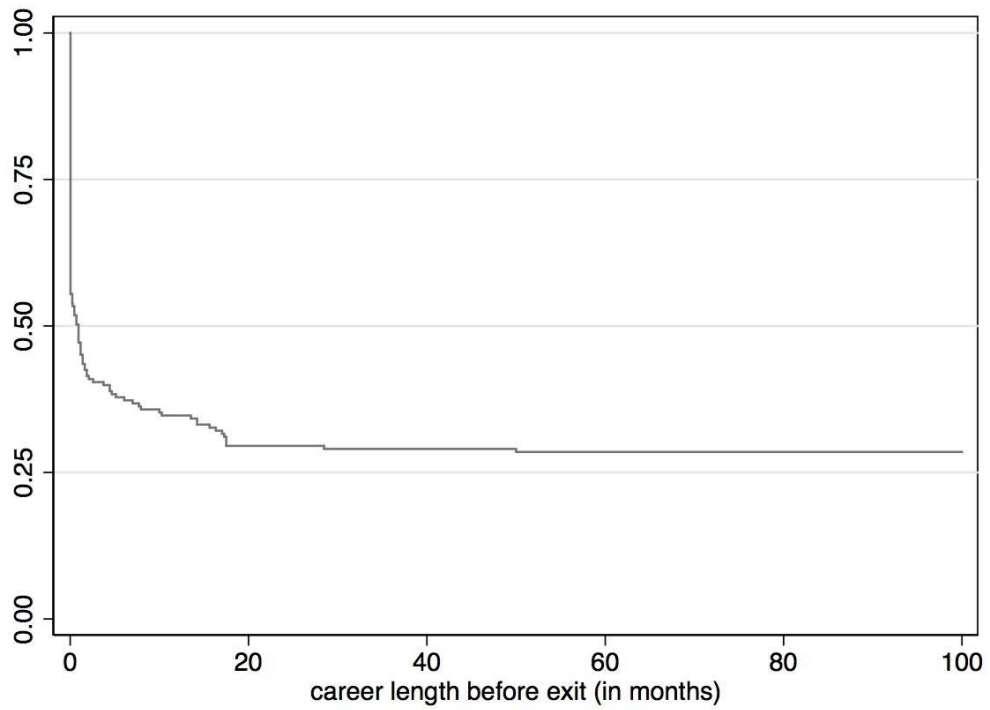
Exemplary cases concerning joke theft arranged by reputation for misappropriation and peer status.

FIGURE 3.1



An elementary diagram of the mechanisms underlying the commitment trap. The gradient represents the overlapping of the two mechanism at the intersection of stages 1 and 2.

FIGURE 3.2



This chart diagrams a Kaplan Meier estimate of labor market survival after a comic's first appearance at "The Open-Mic of Love." Survival at 100 months signifies that a comic is currently an active performer of stand-up comedy as of 2014.

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