



“Hustling” in film school as socialization for early career work in media industries



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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study contributes to the literature on the sociology of work and socialization, and the literature on creative careers in cultural industries, by describing the various grounded theory categories of “hustling” by film students in the venue of film school. Based on 18 months of participant observation of two student films at a Los Angeles-based MFA film/TV production program, I show that students “hustle” to form connections, work continuously across multiple projects, compete for production classes, and in the process, build their individual and collective reputations. I argue that hustling is a social process that involves an array of socializations, and is experienced subjectively as anticipatory work towards careers in the film/TV industries. Students come to realize that their hustling towards curricular and pedagogical requirements is a synecdoche for the larger industrial careers they aspire to, careers that demand even more hustling and precariousness, but careers that they are better prepared for than they know. Film students leave school with certain agency. Future research should take into account how early career socialization prepares aspirants for later creative work.

1. Introduction

“You’re used to being busy for every waking minute every single day... The film industry is all what you make of it. You have to find [the work] yourself. Everybody knows it’s competitive. Do what you can to keep working. You call it *hustling*. It’s good to always be hustling, and try to make things happen for yourself.”

Empirical studies on film students and film schools are exceedingly rare in the field of sociology (Bechky, 2006; Henderson, 1995, 1990; Mukerji, 1977; Redvall, 2013). By contrast, there have been historical overviews by cinema studies scholars of the training provided by film schools, and there have been studies on art school, music school, and art school students (Petrie & Stoneman, 2014; Polan, 2007; Singerman 1999; Thornton, 2008).

Some of these have been inspired by Becker’s (1982) work on various players that make up “art worlds.” Others, however, particularly from the burgeoning field of production studies, express great concern about aspirants or relative outsiders’ careers in the media industries (Caldwell, 2008). Film students, they surmise, like many media industry workers, face a harsh, bleak industry and have little agency to realize their creative ambitions (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). In sociology, Hochschild has coined the term “emotional labor” – i.e., “inducing or suppressing one’s feelings in order to maintain an outward countenance” of professionalism – for how agents deal with exploitative work conditions (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7).

This article aims to converse with the sociological literature on precarious work and careers in the creative/cultural industries, and particularly, research on early careers, by highlighting how film students work – or “hustle,” as student cinematographer Mikhail

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terms it above – their way through film school, in anticipation of the media industries. Taking as a starting point Becker and Carper's (1956) emphasis on the “development of an identification with an occupation” as well as positing as crucial socialization that occurs in organizational contexts, this article presents “hustling” as a multi-faceted, “grounded” phenomenon that in the milieu of film school allows students to form connections, learn about the industry, consolidate their reputations, and, ultimately, make movies (Barley & Kunda, 2001).

In doing so, this ethnographic research contributes not just to the general field of the sociology of work and occupations but also joins a small handful of studies in highlighting the importance of attending to career socialization rituals as a type of structuration (Abbott, 1993; Giddens, 1984). In their hustling within and across the corridors, courtyards, sound stages, elevators, edit suites and classrooms of film school, film students partly emulate industry socialization processes, learn about the craft they believe they enjoy, and come to understand what “creativity” and “precariousness” mean for them as individuals and as cohorts that hope to carve careers in the film, TV and other media industries in the film school's backyard.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I first review the classical literature on the sociology of work and careers and on organizational socialization before turning to the recent literature on creative careers in the cultural industries. I motivate the need for a concept that covers the work involved in sociality and socialization by early career media industry aspirants. In this article, I proffer “hustling” as that concept. The empirical section that follows delineates four manifestations of hustling among film students. I conclude by theorizing hustling as a type of precarious creative work that facilitates qualified interpretations of agency in the otherwise vexed domain of media industries.

2. Literature review

2.1. Socialization as subjective work towards careers

The sociological literature on work and careers has not frequently connected with the literature on organizational socialization (notable exceptions include Fine, 1996 and Porcello, 2004). A key theoretical contribution this study makes is to argue that socialization, and in particular hustling, as an intricate set of interactions among film students, shapes understandings about career and the work it takes to proceed through careers. In this sub-section, I will provide a brief overview of the classical sociological understanding of careers, and using the general notion of subjectivity underlying careers, frame the literature's understanding of organizational socialization as a subject-driven career process.

Everett Hughes' Chicago School of sociology, including ethnographic work by Howard Becker and colleagues (e.g., Becker, 1977/2002), paved the way for a whole body of research on careers in sociology and organization and management studies in the 1980s (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989). One of the key moves made at this time was to connect the study of the individual and the institution using the concept of “work.” Thus, one handy early conception of career defines it as the “evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time” (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 11). This article contributes to career theory by providing an ethnographic description of one type of media work, using the general perspective and methodology of the Chicago sociologists.

Careers, it has been shown in early studies of graduate students and medical students, often begin with the development of identification with an occupation (Becker & Carper, 1956; Becker, 1977/2002). Researchers attend to how “situations present the person with experiences... out of which come stabilization of self conceptions into long lasting identities” (Becker & Carper, 1956, p. 289). Such transformations occur via mechanisms such as “internalization of motives,” which brings with it alignment with institutional positions; or by “acquisition of ideology,” which develops when actors raise questions about the worth of the activity they are engaged in (Becker & Carper, 1956, pp. 296–297). Thus, even in studies that focus on the individual's experience, subjectivity is shown to always be in interaction with institutional factors.

Yet, it can be said that careers begin with the *reasoning of subjects*. To this end, Barley offers a variety of definitions of careers, two of which I represent here: (i) According to Hughes, career is “objectively... a series of statuses and clearly defined offices... [and] subjectively..., a moving perspective in which a person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes [and] actions;” and (ii) Goffman claims that a career is “not a thing that can be brilliant or disappointing... [it] refer[s] to any social strand of any person's course through life” (Arthur et al., 1989, pp. 45–46). Notable in these definitions is the emphasis that *subjects* interpret what constitutes work and career. Barley further insists that “when sequences of jobs, formally organized contexts, and movement up and down a hierarchy are treated as incidentals,” career can properly be treated as a “Janus-like concept” that in addition to its objective emphasis on “institutional forms of participation” in some social world, is remarkable for its subjective aspect wherein “individuals shift their social footing and reconstru[e] their past and future in order to come to terms with the present” (ibid, p. 49). This dual perspective is consistent with careers being treated as “properties of collectives.” Even though individuals experience and reason about careers, they are “not solely of the individuals' making.... Careers... were pieced together from the string of alternatives and the set of interpretive resources offered [to] individuals at any point in time by the collectives to which they belonged” (ibid, p. 51).

This article argues that at minimum, *socialization* is a vital “interpretive resource” offered to individuals by the collectives in which they are ensconced *in order to* piece together their careers. Moreover, socialization is not merely an ancillary resource but an immanent aspect of everyday work itself. With this understanding of socialization as a concrete set of everyday practices, researchers are in a stronger position to make claims about individual agency.

I will end this sub-section with an overview of some classical definitions of “socialization.” One of the oldest is: “the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge – in short, the culture – current in the groups to which they are, or seek to become, a member” (Harvill, 1981, p. 431). Another goes: “Socialization has generally been seen

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