

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

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Drawing from a roughly 5-year participant-observation study of stand-up comedians in Los Angeles, CA, this article investigates the career development of artists within cultural production industries. This article 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, core challenges, interactional processes, relationship types, and rewards. While development involves an individual matriculating through layers, it also requires artists to maintain their participation in prior layers, because each layer 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. Furthermore, one's career progress depends on the formation of relationships, particularly tight mentorships and arm's length endorsements. This article ties the layered career model to cultural production industries wherein development typically involves informal institutions, decentralized organizations, the accumulation of tacit knowledge, and the cultivation of novel creative identities. This article emphasizes the applicability of the layered career model to the study of artistic careers. It also suggests this framework's wider implications for research into contingent and informal employment.

Editor's Comment

Patrick Reilly's paper on the careers of comedians in Los Angeles is a rare bird: A 5-year ethnography based primarily on participant observation with an emphasis on participation. The paper reveals an unusual career path in which people not only move forward through a series of statuses or layers, but at any point in time may move backward. Ironically, in this winner-take-all market, backward movement is not sign of failure but is rather a return to a more tightly knit occupational community or clique. This

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community supplies social support and the opportunity to develop new material, skills, and connections that may enable the incumbent to move forward again. In fact, in this career structure, forward and backwards lose some of their meaning. Reilly's work harkens back to the more general notion of a career as analytical construct that was championed by Everett C. Hughes, Anselm Strauss, and Erving Goffman. At first glance, Reilly's work helps us better understand career structures in the cultural industries. But I submit that it also allows an important comparison between comedians whose careers are precarious and the managers and other professionals who also find themselves, for one reason or another, on a precariously slippery slope. When comedians fall, they fall into the arms of a support group of other comedians. As Katherine Newman showed us in her wonderful book, *Falling from Grace*, when managers and other professionals become downwardly mobile, they enter limbo with no occupational or social community to offer understanding and support. Reilly's paper reminds us that social worlds not only help us construct our careers, but that they help or fail to help us make sense of and endure our misfortunes and ourselves.

Stephen R. Barley, Action Editor

Career paths in cultural production industries remain a source of curiosity for scholars because they exhibit a combination of complicated attributes. 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; 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 5-year participant-observation study of stand-up comedians in Los Angeles, CA. Through my research, I propose that comedians' development follows a model that I call a *layered career*. Wherein, 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, multitiered infrastructure rather than simply passing through discrete statuses or credits. Maintaining a career within stand-up comedy requires individuals to preserve their ties to prior layers, because these levels serve as the foundation for everyday practice as well as a haven during lags in employment.

As I discovered, there are many reasons why stand-up comedy and other segments of cultural production 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 important distinctions. One cannot achieve fluency with onstage craft and backstage processes through formal training. One gains these skills through continual practice and interaction 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 novices to cooperatively map and navigate an unfamiliar world. 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

Author's voice:

What was your initial motivation for this research?



Author's voice:

Why did you choose to actively participate in your fieldsite?



and prolonged ties with a protégé, a mentor can establish effective and individually tailored lines of communication to share and translate esoteric knowledge. Since stand-up comedy lacks formal career development systems and uniform credentials to initiate progress, a main component of advancement is *endorsements* from esteemed or socially central insiders. Endorsements bolster a comedian's credibility through visible association. Even at the highest echelons, career trajectories regularly fluctuate between boon periods and employment lags. Downward mobility is a persistent risk. Comedians are continually revisiting the earlier layers, where close cliques or peer audiences predominate, ensuring a relatively steady environment in which comedians can self-produce or join smaller projects, 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 unique challenges and rewards engendered in each. 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. I also 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 (Gaquin, 2008) and countless more aspirants and hobbyists. I conclude 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) or the Hollywood studio system (Caves, 2000; Scott, 2005: 118–119)—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 be responsible 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) presented 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) found 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 and Bechky (2006) observed 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, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittmann, 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 networking in order to secure potential references, exchange gossip, and gain information about 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). Finally, 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.

Models that characterize careers in creative industries as a simple sequence of jobs or credits and human and social capital development as the catalysts for progress (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 such as 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 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, 1995; Mears, 2011; S. Rosen, 1981). Therefore, content producers must endeavor to mitigate downward shifts in their careers, which are usually inevitable. The rise of inexpensive and widely accessible technologies for self-production and mass distribution disentangles making art from employment relationships, especially among newcomers. These models miss the microprocesses 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 such 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 regarding the careers of stand-up comedians, I propose 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 upward mobility, because either they lack the aptitude and resources to do so or they choose against it. However, if an individual advances to the next layer, their move does not constitute a departure from the previous layer. 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 in order to sustain and progress within such fields or occupational types.

I 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 illustrate the three layers of careers in this world. I pay special attention to how the layers interact, highlighting how social relationships, mainly informal mentorships and endorsements, initiate career progression within stand-up comedy.

DATA AND METHODS

The foundation of this article is data that I accumulated from a participant-observation study of the stand-up comedy industry in Los Angeles, 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’

Author’s voice:

What was one of the most challenging aspects of your research?



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. Therefore, I adopted a multilocation 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 also moved across sites as I shadowed particular comedians or small groups of them. Given that participation in this labor market overtakes 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 and enmeshed myself in the stand-up comedy community by participating as a stand-up comedian.

As a novice without a previous inclination to perform stand-up comedy, I adopted this quasi-career as a component of my ethnographic methods for two central reasons. 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 show admissions are quite cheap), the social insularity of stand-up comedians and the marked isolation of audiences from the backstage necessitated my active participation. Second, I gained intimate knowledge about the technical, economic, and cultural practices within the field by subjecting myself to many of the front- and backstage processes experienced by stand-up comedians. Such immersion allows the ethnographer to experience and embody many of the latent processes, sensations, demands, and constraints that accompany active participation within a particular social world (Mears, 2012; Wacquant, 2011). As an "observant participant," I developed compatible lines of communication with my subjects. Nonetheless, such a strategy presents particular obstacles. My status as an outsider may have disqualified me from some potentially informative engagements and rituals. While most comedians I interacted with were aware that I was researcher, senior comedians regularly ignored me due to my status as a newcomer. However, these episodes of rejection helped form my understanding of the social dynamics of stand-up comedy. As

a researcher, I was unable to maintain the intense schedule of most aspirants, who typically go out to hustle for stage-time and network every night.

Outside of the brief time a comedian spends on stage, stand-up comedy does not involve structured tasks. This flexibility allowed for porous "role boundaries" (M. Rosen, 1991) between my stand-up comedy and research. However, some local norms limited my ability to collect data. As I discovered during the second month of my research, I could not actively take field jottings in my notebook within performance spaces. This gesture not only nearly got me banned from a certain club but also stirred suspicion among insiders that I was attempting to steal their material (fieldnotes, 3/28/2010). In response, I covertly took notes on my phone while in the bathroom or stationed outside the venue. I later expanded these jottings into fieldnotes.

I integrated data from 30 semistructured 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 such as 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 and analyzed the interviews in concert with my ethnographic fieldnotes. I outlined the backgrounds and characteristics of my interviewees in Appendix, Table A1.

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 refer to comedians from my fieldnotes and interview data with pseudonyms and employ discretion concerning identifiable information.¹

EMPIRICAL CASE: STAND-UP COMEDY IN LOS ANGELES

Stand-up comedy in Los Angeles was undergoing a shift in its fundamental organizational structure and model of talent development in the roughly 10 years leading up to the time window of my study. From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, three showcase

¹ In this article, the real names of star comedians are used who are not subjects of my observational research and whose actions are visible and widely publicized.

comedy clubs located in West Hollywood held oligopolistic control. These venues acted as the locus of performers and 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). In the late 1990s, an “alternative comedy” model of independently produced shows emerged in response to these clubs’ dominance. The alternative comedy model persists as a highly influential, yet decentralized counterpart to the 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 preestablished 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 involves roughly 70 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 weekly series that regularly draw a couple hundred attendees. Open-mics are opportunities for volunteers to perform typically 3–5 minutes of material often before an audience of peers. 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 of individuals within this field since the arts rarely constitute 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 were performed on advertised shows held between April 2011 and August 2013 in Los Angeles. 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 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. I did observe that comedians in Los Angeles are disproportionately male.

Comedians in Los Angeles rarely receive monetary compensation for their performances. Currently, paid gigs at the major showcase clubs yield 15–60 dollars per performance.² As the number of such gigs is limited, comedians tend to achieve this “paid regular” status only after years of gratis performances and socializing at a given club. Alternative comedy shows almost never pay comedians in cash, and the few that provide compensation, usually do so in gift certificates to the venue or via complementary bar tabs. One key reason for this is that such events either offer free admission or charge patrons just enough to cover costs. The main means for comedians to earn money through live performance is by touring and performing at private functions. Stardom does provide stand-up comedians the distinct privilege of making a living through their craft. 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 appearances. 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, however, can earn many orders of magnitude greater than star comedians.

Many comedians aspire to use stand-up comedy as a launching pad for work in related fields, such as screenwriting and acting. These related fields tend to pay better and are slightly more secure than stand-up comedy. 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. As 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. These fields are also 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 observed that careers in stand-up comedy consist of three overlapping layers. The first is the proximate layer, which is the

² 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 nothing in Los Angeles.

initial stage for newcomers when they begin performing in Los Angeles. Almost every comedian—regardless of status—operates within it to some degree. 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) and “scenes” (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Lena & Peterson, 2008). It mainly consists of fellow stand-up comedians. It also includes aficionados, local journalists, and showcase club or alternative comedy bookers. Within this level, comedians aspire for peer esteem. Finally, a select group of performers reaches 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. 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 must develop basic fluency in both the conventions of onstage performance and the social dynamics backstage. Almost all of the comedians in my study observed that stand-up comedy required uniquely esoteric skills and demands, for which training in other art forms—such as acting, scriptwriting, or public speaking—could not fully prepare them. The primary means for novices to grasp the nuances of proper stagecraft and develop

their routines is to perform as much as possible. After I vented about my own performance struggles outside of a comedy club, Terrance explained how novices should approach early development:

You have to understand, Pat, 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)

The learning process can be extremely frustrating for beginners. Devoted newcomers typically participate in 15–25 open-mic nights per week to develop their basic skills. At open-mic nights, however, established comedians frequently leave the room during beginners’ sets to socialize, use the restroom, or smoke a cigarette. Therefore, rookies often deliver their sets to decidedly smaller and more apathetic audiences than established comedians. Novices also receive less feedback about their material than established comedians. Understanding 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 performing during my research—described the confusion newcomers experience while 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,

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Career Layers in Cultural Production Industries

	Proximate Layer	Community Layer	Industrial Layer
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

and thinking, “What the fuck should I do?”
(fieldnotes, 11/24/2012)

Such uneasiness can be staggering. A substantial portion of stand-up comedy involves prolonged socializing—especially as performers are obligated to network or just “hang” with each other as a coping mechanism during the long waits before their sets. This can be especially difficult because incumbents tend to ostracize newcomers. Incumbents frequently assume that most of these wannabe comedians will quit within 6 months. Newcomers also frequently lack social tact to interact 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 [a nearby hamburger stand], and I followed them 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!” (interview, Tre)

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 learn 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. Cliques of comedy buddies also provide valuable material, creative and emotional support. Greg, a performer with 6 years of experience in Los Angeles at the time, reflected during a conversation with Professor Octopus—who was one of my comedy buddies—and me opined the difficulty of sustaining oneself 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. These peers constitute the original audience for both on- and backstage performances and serve as the conduit for early career development within stand-up comedy.

The close relationships cultivated between comedy buddies catalyze the process of creating and refining jokes and routines. While outsider and insider audiences place exceptional emphasis on an individual’s performance on stage, it is fundamentally collaborative like most forms of cultural production (Becker, 1982). A key way comedians develop jokes and long-form routines is through prolonged discussions with 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 7 years of experience at the time I befriended and shadowed him, engaged in such a session with me in his car after he spotted 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. It was probably completely over the top back then. ‘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)

Comedians often seek feedback from their comedy buddies after they attempt new routines. Comedy buddies may propose improvements on things such as pacing or “tags” (i.e., smaller quips that accompany a punchline) voluntarily. Comedians 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 than their buddies. 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. Comedians also may invite their buddies to participate in high-profile projects. For example, Malcolm, who moved to Los Angeles in 2008 to pursue stand-up comedy, quickly formed a clique of newcomers, which eventually included Anthony. Malcolm reflected during our interview on his friends’ 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].” Shortly into his career, Malcolm experienced a meteoric rise. By his sixth year in stand-up comedy, he landed an hour-long HBO comedy special and 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 as many of the series’ premises and plotlines had developed through repeated riffing sessions with his fellow clique members during their early stages. As clique members, they shared the necessary rapport to create and communicate concepts for scripts and to develop characters. 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). 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 have occasionally become large-scale television series (e.g., *Broad City*, *Workaholics*, and *Those Who Can’t*). Through membership in cliques, comedy buddies can progress on their career paths as a formal or informal team, especially as they consult each other in the development of new projects. Ultimately, the residual organizational forms of the proximate layer remain especially suited for undertaking the creative process.

Not only do these cliques provide crucial career opportunities, they also constitute an enduring source of emotional support for comedians. For example, a group of comedians who began their careers at a certain open-mic two decades ago—which included a mix of dropouts, hobbyists, and superstars like Zack Galifinakis and Maria Bamford—would maintain regular correspondence and hold occasional reunions (fieldnotes, 7/23/2013). Early-stage comedy buddies develop fictive kin relationships. 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,” including one who enthusiastically asked 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. 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 acceptance from peers through producing small alternative shows. By organizing events, newcomers gain access to established and star performers through the booking process. Alternative shows also offer the organizer’s comedy buddies an opportunity to perform before peers and network 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 such inclusion's importance of entering into incumbents' social world:

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 . . . (interview, Joshua)

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 offstage 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 stage of career development.

Community Layer

Once comedians develop their basic social and practical skills and gain acceptance into the social world of stand-up comedy, many opt to advance into the community layer of their careers. The majority of performers in this stage aspire to earn an occupation as a comedian by accumulating the esteem of peers and insiders. Much like an artistic "scene" (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Lena & Peterson, 2008), 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., noncomedian) fans. While comedians in this layer 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 standards associated with the "comic" identity and lifestyle. The experiences of aspirants at this level tend to become uniform, as they perform at particular shows or clubs, doggedly pursue bookings and side projects, and encounter failure. As participation becomes more dependent upon achieving on- 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. Although the community layer involves finer skill development and identity formation oriented toward one becoming distinctive and novel, aspirants must also establish their membership in the wider "fraternity" 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 a noteworthy level of commitment, and respecting fellow community members, 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 a 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 7 years of experience in Los Angeles, discussed this topic one night as we waited for his first set at a popular weekly open-mic held in a comic book store. Federico remarked:

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 gain exposure and build contacts. Many beginner comedians produce and feverishly promote independent shows where they book established and star comedians in order to draw audiences of peers and interested civilians. Through providing stage-time, individuals often seek reciprocated favors from their featured acts. 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 develop their individuality in the community layer. They achieve this through finding and cultivating their "voice." In my research, comedians generally and

loosely define voice as one's distinctive point-of-view, which serves as the foundation that unites their routines and onstage persona. When I asked Tom what voice entailed, he observed from his vantage of 14 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. (interview, Tom)

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 onstage performance, but also involves discovering which medium to pursue. Comedians partake in this experimentation through self-production and the use of 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. (interview, John)

Through negotiating all of these platforms in the community layer, comedians hope to determine which one will lead to a feasible occupation and constitute the basis of a "focused identity" that leads to 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 "10-year rule," which suggests that a comedian develop a voice and only realizes his or her potential after 10 years of

continuous, regimented performance. Over this period, an aspirant must cultivate his or her own distinctive aptitudes and identity. As comedians build 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 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 at 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 an 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 in best stand-up comedy. I think that they want to be accepted. (interview, Joshua)

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 instant 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. Exemplary sets may encourage community members' respect and generate localized buzz or endorsements from insiders. For relative newcomers, this might serve as means to gain early community respect or visibility. This is

a consistently revisited routine throughout one's career, even among stars who are preparing new projects and specials. It is quite common to see superstars—such as Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and Louis CK—making free, unannounced appearances at showcase clubs or independently produced shows for this purpose. Comedians might also self-produce projects geared toward insider audiences to generate local excitement or to test new material before pursuing mass distribution deals. Taken together, these factors suggest a basic sequence for the creative process, where ideas come from close networks and become refined from community ties. Career development involves coordinating these two layers.

Industrial Layer

The select few performers that access the industrial layer count comedy as their main occupation and source of monetary income. This is the point where this art world finally involves regular paid employment. Performers aim to secure renown 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 10 years, an aspirant might enter into this level through performing on late-night variety shows, earning a 30-minute solo television special, or securing a visible acting role or position on a television writing staff. Alternately, they might tour extensively, as they try to cultivate a name as a “road dog.” These comedians aim to generate renown, which entails celebrity and acknowledgment from audiences beyond the art world's insiders (Lang & Lang, 1988). Through accumulating renown, individuals may attempt to progress to superstar status or maintain a comfortable standard of living from stand-up comedy exclusively.

The accumulation of credits is a main objective of performers at this level. Credits can serve as relatively clear signals of a performer's reputation and quality to casual audiences. Bookers, particularly outside of Los Angeles, gravitate toward such track records, because they assure larger audiences. 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:

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.

Patrick: 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. (interview, Rahul)

The returns on credits are ambiguous and, in most cases, rather slight. They can spark bookings for paid gigs and temporarily enhance a comedian's visibility or “heat.” However, the experiences of those in my research suggest that such credits alone rarely yield lasting progress. For example, I heard a 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 assume 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 fit with a particular trend in the cycle of audience or industry demands. Performers must wait for the moment when they are compatible with what television, film, or radio producers are seeking. This can be an incredibly long and frustrating process. For example, Wayne is a respected “comic's comic” who is a touring headliner. He has also 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 30-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 and establishing momentum are unpredictable ventures, as their fortunes are tethered to the prerogatives of television networks and film studios.

Since credits alone provide fleeting and indecisive benefits, performers devote great attention to maintaining the impression of a coherent career. To sustain their exposure and “heat,” comedians frequently 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. (interview, Jonathan)

To project the impression that they are productive and relevant, comedians regularly self-produce projects—such as podcasts, sketch videos, or themed alternative comedy shows—oriented toward community or insider audiences. Star and superstar comedians routinely perform unannounced and in low-status

venues to practice their new material and to remain visible to local audiences of civilians, peers, or industry. Such gestures generate peer respect. To continue his previous point, Jonathan referenced a series of sets by superstar Whitney Cummings in a 50-seat annex of a suburban Los Angeles comedy club:

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 and that she became receptive to the [Side Room]. And I was like, yes! That is the answer! (interview, Jonathan)

Comedians generally regard stars and superstars who 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 earn an array of paying jobs and credits through invitations from fellow performers or other participants. When comedians return to the community layer, it allows them to experiment, which 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 certain esoteric skills, it is arguably more dependent upon social relationships than more specialized positions. There are two general 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. These bonds involve transferring esoteric or tacit resources and 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.

Researchers find that informal mentorships are a crucial component of career development in cultural

Author’s voice:
Have there been any important developments in the field?



Author’s voice:
What benefits did you not expect from your research program?



Author’s voice:
How did you use management theory to build an unconventional fieldsite?



production industries like film (Jones, 1996; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). It proves additionally necessary within a comparatively unstructured and loosely scripted career track like stand-up comedy. Through mentorships, peripheral performers can benefit from a star's preexisting social ties and from direct, personalized feedback based on the mentor's experiential knowledge. These resources are extremely valuable and sharing them is a time-intensive exercise. Mentors do prefer potential protégés who currently or potentially could possess strong skill sets and those who exhibit a strong work ethic. They also favor friends or close acquaintances because of these arrangements' substantial demands. For a mentor to translate tacit knowledge in a way that the protégé can understand and apply necessitates rapport, clear lines of communication, and prolonged interaction. Therefore, social affinity is also an important prerequisite.

For example, Danny, who progressed from being an open-mic comedian to being featured on Comedy Central and as 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 Leon's coaching, Leon brought him on tours in Texas as a supporting act. This lent Danny practical experiences like performing in front of crowds outside Los Angeles, managing the demands of the road, and interacting with club bookers. 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 Leon would deliberately introduce his protégé to all of the senior comedians congregating around the grill (fieldnotes, 9/16/2010). Danny eventually developed his act, established bonds with other stars, and gained 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 Danny successfully developed as a performer. Their friendship also established the proper rapport for Leon's lessons to resonate.

As illustrated in the prior example, such relationships tend to emerge from preexisting friendships or strong ties. Since mentoring takes time, mentors prefer aspirants with whom they can interact with repeatedly and intensely. Affinity encourages them to volunteer to help. For example, Henry, an emerging comedian with 5 years of experience, formed a mentoring relationship with his "comedy son" Kei after they had a lengthy conversation about obscure punk music and horror movies before the weekly open-mic Henry hosts. It was Kei's first time at this venue and prior to one of his first ever sets. Henry initiated the discussion when he saw his heavy metal attire and realized, "I have to go talk to this guy!" (fieldnotes, 12/4/2015). Although Kei was a novice, Henry introduced him to his circle of comedy buddies. Their mentorship grew as they attended the same open-mics. Henry provided Kei steady feedback about his sets, involved Kei in his self-produced projects, and invited Kei to parties. Such rapport is especially necessary for mentors who take opening acts on the road. Indeed, they want to bring performers who can successfully "warm up" the room to ensure the best environment for their performance. However, touring jointly requires spending prolonged time together in transit, which necessitates choosing a protégé whom one feels comfortable spending countless hours with.

Endorsements are also valuable in catalyzing career progression. Unlike mentorships, they usually emerge from either close friends or weaker relationships. 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. Alternatively, a more established comedian could express esteem for an aspirant's onstage prowess and commitment to improvement, despite an arm's length familiarity. However, endorsements can be costly, because they require comedians to leverage their reputation through making references. I frequently observed (and a few times personally experienced) new comedians earn endorsements to bookers from their more experienced counterparts, which led to bookings, showcases, or opportunities for stage-time. There are, however, 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, endorsements are powerful resources. They can facilitate comedians' signals reaching target gatekeepers and distinguish individuals from a large and anonymous pool of competitors. While comedians can develop their careers through 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 layered career. This model 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. Finally, the industrial layer resembles a typical external labor market, where comedians earn a living from their jobs. It requires performers to accumulate credits and situate them in a coherent matter. However, within this model, one's career progression involves more than moving from one level to another. Instead, aspirants must maintain their participation within prior stages and coordinate them to address the demands of developing ideas, producing projects, generating exposure, and gaining support. This approach inspires an alternate viewpoint upon the concept 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. Careers also require the coordination of multiple layers of engagement, practice, and relationships.

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, such trajectories are typically suited for careers in certain forms of content production. Layered careers emerge as newcomers develop their competencies while occupying a peripheral position within the field. In

the case of stand-up, comedians 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. 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 a source of emotional support and other 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 tastes. Cultural producers frequently return to their occupational communities to experiment 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 bolsters peer esteem. Observers generally respect such performances on smaller stages and do not perceive them as discreditable.

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 experience or skill. Beyond the bonds within cliques, cultural producers develop their careers through mentoring and endorsements from more established practitioners. Mentoring relationships prove especially vital for stand-up comedians, 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. Because of the heightened competition within this field and the ambiguity surrounding one's qualities, endorsements act as an avenue to distinguish oneself. An endorsement might emerge through 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 and impressions 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

Although 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 appear 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. In the early 2010s Matthew McConaughey shed his image as a romantic comedy lead by participating in a series of obscure low-budget independent films that highlighted his versatility as an actor. Successful television comedy writer Dan Harmon started his popular *Harmontown* live show and podcast in 2011 in a Los Angeles comic book shop, which became his main project after being fired from NBC's *Community*. *Harmontown's* popularity ensured him a stable way to maintain his exposure. 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 creative careers. Field-level analysis of career trajectories (e.g., 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 the cast's hiring and aided the creation of the show's iconic skits, many of which came from Second City sketches. Databases such as 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, researchers 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, and could thus prevent complete macro-level coverage. Nonetheless, integrating such early-stage data could contribute to better 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 findings 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 allows industry actors to minimize inequality in hiring and make contingent work more secure and worker-friendly.

The layered career model also provides a 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. Instead, 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. 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 proposed 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. I illustrated that these fields are not simply a labor market, but they are strongly integrated with their constituent communities and the microlevel of close networks.

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APPENDIX
INTERVIEW SAMPLE

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

TABLE A1
Characteristics of Interviews and Subjects

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