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NOT JUST ANY BODY:
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For my parents; thank you for teaching me to have *forza*.

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, sociologists of culture influenced by Bourdieu and by work in related fields like cognitive science and psychology have begun to pay more attention to the embodied aspects of social life, as well as to the body's role in processes of meaning making. The articles in this dissertation examine the effects of experience on meaning and perception vis-à-vis the encultured body by exploring the ways that body, context, and biography interact. This dissertation is structured as follows: in the Introduction, "Back to Now," I lay out the approach to experience, meaning, and the body that undergirds the subsequent studies. Chapter 1, "Three Chords and [Somebody's] Truth: Trajectories of Experience and Taste Among Hard Country Fans," examines the body's role in the cultivation of a later-in-life, class-discrepant music taste. Chapter 2, "He Heard, She Heard: Toward a Cultural Sociology of the Senses," continues to explore music experience. Using a novel in-depth interview technique designed to facilitate sensory description of music experience, I measure qualities of music experience and explore gender differences in the description and experience of a particular subtype of sonic experience: "sexual" sound. In Chapter 3, "Dying to Get In: Corporatization, Feminization, and the (New) Meaning of Funeral Work," I trace the transformation of a classic "dirty work" occupation: funeral work. I show how presently unfolding, large-scale changes in the industry created the opportunity structure for a new type of social actor to enter the occupational field. This new director's orientation to funeral work is rapidly changing the meaning and nature of funeral work today.

Introduction
Back to now

"Every individual is at once the beneficiary and the victim of the linguistic tradition into which he has been born—the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives him access to the accumulated records of other people's experience, the victim in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things."- Aldous Huxley[1]

Consider the following:

It is the middle of August in a small mountain town tucked deep in southern Italy. In August at midday, the summer heat reaches its peak. It hardly matters—other than a few kids tossing a soccer ball around the square and some old men sitting lethargically outside their front stoops, no one is outside. Everything looks a little beaten down and worse for wear, except for the sunflowers, which are in full, fleeting bloom. Shortly after noon, sounds begin spilling out of open windows. They are kitchen sounds: pots hitting stoves, dishes clattering, and women's voices announcing that the midday meal is ready. From the living room where you sit flipping through an old magazine, you can smell lunch: it will be a variation of pasta with whatever vegetables your neighbor dropped off in a plastic bag on his way home from his fields that morning, and probably chicken *cotollette* or, if there were extra greens in the bag, *frittata*.

You walk into the kitchen where others are waiting to eat. A hot breeze trickles through the open door at the end of the room, bringing the beads hanging in the doorway to life. The TV is turned on to the news, but the volume is too low to hear anything. A small fan has been set at the head of the table, trying futilely to bring some relief. The *pinguino*, or portable air conditioner, is a

[1] 1954: 23

luxury reserved for the master bedroom. You sit down at the table. Across from you sits an old man, who wipes his brow with his handkerchief. A woman in an apron serves him his plate. He nods and reaches for the decanter of wine. The wine is his own, and it is bright red and translucent. As the woman moves back to the stove to fill more plates, the old man says, *Porta un pó di ghiacchio a tavola*—bring some ice to the table. A younger man jumps up and fills a bowl with ice from the freezer. He brings it to the old man, who proceeds to pour wine into a juice glass. He drops in two ice cubes, swirls the glass, and takes a long drink. The others at the table do the same.

For some— if not most—people, the idea of putting ice in wine may seem absurd. Ice will dilute wine and distort the careful balance of qualities—acid, tannins, alcohol, and sweetness—that lend it its character. But for some people in some places, putting ice in wine is just what you do. This points to a fundamental difference in orientation to the same object: for the wine connoisseur, wine is like a work of art, and appreciation of the former hinges on the ability to *neutralize* the environment—to focus singly on the play of qualities on the palate. But for the old man above, wine is a beverage that offers respite from the August heat. Wine is refreshment at lunch, and a way to stave off thirst. Both the old man and the sommelier like wine, but they are oriented to it in fundamentally different ways: for the former, the meaning of wine is deeply embedded in the environment in which it is made and consumed; for the latter, wine is an object that requires *extricating* from the environment to be appreciated.

The vignette above highlights a point often either misunderstood, misconstrued by those working in the social constructionist tradition, or ignored entirely: the world *is* different to different people, and it is such in structured, rather than in idiosyncratic, ways. To say that the

world is different to different people is not the same as saying that reality is "not real." Quite the opposite, actually. There is a world which we inhabit and share with every other person on earth. Doubting this is different from my claim that the world is truly different to different people. To understand how it is possible for a world filled with very real, concrete, and shared objects to be different to different people, it is necessary to understand what experience is—what it consists of, how it is structured, and how it is generated. To understand why (for example) for the old man in the vignette, it is perfectly natural to put ice in table wine and why doing so is unthinkable for the wine connoisseur, it is necessary to take a step back from the present and "funnel back" in time, so to speak. The studies in this dissertation attempt to do precisely that. They suggest that understanding the present—grasping *why* an actor responds to things in the world, be they objects, people, or situations, in particular ways—requires looking beyond the present moment. More precisely, a long(er) view of the present is needed. Sociologists must go *back* to get to now.

The cone of experience

Imagine a cone. The vertex, or point, of the cone captures an actor's experience of, or response to, an object, person, or situation at a delineated moment in time. Sociologists often focus their attention on that point—on an actor's taste for a particular type of music, or their response to a given situation. Although such a focus offers some information about the actor in question, it says little about *why* they respond in a particular way, or how they are able to do so. In order to address this *why,* sociologists need to turn their attention to the *other* end of the cone, to the base and to the body between the base and the vertex. The base and body of the cone consists of all the past, formative experiences that go into and make possible an actor's present (vertex) experience. This "conic" model of experience that I propose, where present experience

is a product of, and is made possible by, past experience, is grounded in the work of American pragmatists, in particular that of Dewey (e.g., 2005/1934), James (e.g., 1950/1890) and Peirce (e.g., 1955/1940b). For these theorists, experience refers to a person's orientation to the world, itself built up by and in (past) experience. In this way, all experience is "funded" (Dewey 1958/1925) and an actor's "mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of [their] experience of the whole world up to that date" (James 1950/1890: 234; see also Lahire 2011).

In order to understand an actor's present, it is necessary to turn *away* from that present, and consider their biography, or their path to the present (Lahire 2011). Sociologists often assume that individuals fall under the purview of psychology, but "individual" is not a synonym for "idiosyncratic." Instead, an individual is the sum of their past experiences (James 1950/1980; Dewey 2005/1934), and their past experiences are not (usually or predominantly) random. Instead, experiences are "selected" from a circumscribed pool of opportunities related to the "kind" of actor one is. The goal in chronicling an individual's biography is to understand how they came to be oriented to the world in the particular way they are oriented to it. An actor's orientation consists of the embodied capacities they have for actualizing, or sensing, meaning in experience. These capacities make it possible for actors to have particular relations to objects in the world. Different relations yield different experiences, and meaning accounts for such differences in experience (Martin 2011). These capacities are products of formative (socialization) experiences, and they make it possible for things in the world to mean some but not other things to different people. To understand how this is the case—and why it is relevant to sociology— we first need to understand what experience is, what meaning consists of, and how meaning relates to experience.

The structures of experience

Both past and present experience are structured at multiple levels. The broadest level of structure is best captured by Bourdieu's (1984) work. For Bourdieu, some types of people are more likely than other types to engage in particular activities or to have particular tastes. For example, in his framework, the working class is opposed to the dominant class, and the former, he claims, has an affinity for "salty, substantial, clearly masculine foods," like meat, cheese, and, apparently, soup. On the other hand, those from the dominant class, like senior executives, have an affinity for sweet foods, like honey and jam (382).

Experience is also structured at the level of formative experience. By this I mean the following: experience is socially patterned, such that some individuals are more likely than others to have some types of formative experiences, on the basis of variables like, for example, gender, class, and race. Going back to the cone metaphor, this level of structure has to do with the stock of formative experiences that comprise the base and body of the cone. A child born to middle class parents, who grows up in the suburbs, and who attends Catholic elementary, middle, and high school is likely to have a particular set of formative experiences that are more like those of another person who similarly grew up in a middle class suburb and went to Catholic elementary, middle, and high school. Some experiences will, of course, differ—sometimes in deeply meaningful ways— but they will *generally* be more similar to each other than are the formative experiences of a trust fund kid who went to boarding school, or of a child who grew up in an immigrant community in the city.

These early experiences are important because they set individuals on paths that make some, but not other, experiences later in life more or less likely. They do so because experience shapes actors; through experience, they develop capacities, or facilities, for future experience.

That is not to say a person cannot end up in a class-discrepant situation—this is what Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis captures: individuals certainly can and do, and these moments are often opportunities for change (e.g., 1977, 1988; Strand and Lizardo 2016). Saying that experience is socially structured simply means, no more and no less, that in general, some people, due to class, gender, race, etc., are more likely than others to have some but not other kinds of formative experiences.

Finally, experience is structured at a third level, by qualities. In experience, actors sense qualities (literally, as in they grasp them with their senses; more on this below), and it is these sensed qualities that give things in the world their meaning (Dewey 2005/1934; Peirce 1955/1940b; Martin 2011). Objects, people, situations—all are grasped in experience as agglomerations or configurations of qualities. These qualities are relational: the particular assemblage of qualities sensed in experience depends on the capacities for perception actors arrive at objects with. As such, qualities are relational "potentials for experience" whose actualization depends on an actor's sensing capacities (Martin 2011:186). These capacities for perception and response—for essentially meaning-making—are cultivated in formative experiences. In this way, the meanings that actors sense in present experience are tethered to their past. Further, different present situations recruit different parts of one's past. For instance, wine may rely on one cumulative set of formative experiences for its meaning, while, say, a taste for a particular music genre may derive its meaning from a *different* set of past formative experiences. In short, every situation recruits a different aspect of the past to bear on the present (Lahire 2011).

The relationship between capacities for sensing qualities and present experience is a lot like licking a phenylthiourea (PTC) strip and tasting—or not tasting—a bitter quality. PTC strips

are small strips of paper coated with phenylthiourea, a chemical that will taste bitter to some people, and like absolutely nothing to other people. This is because PTC binds with a protein found on some people's tongues. If the protein is present, then one can expect to taste a very bitter quality. If the protein is not present, then one will taste nothing. The perception of qualities is like tasting phenylthiourea on PTC strips. A given quality can only be actualized, or experienced, if one has the right receptor, or the capacity to actualize that quality in response to a particular stimulus. And unlike opioid receptors, which are found in everyone's nervous system, the ability to have one experience—to sense a particular configuration of qualities— versus another in response to an object, person, or situation depends on the capacities an individual has. The capacities one has are, in turn, determined by one's stock of past formative experience. So, if one lacks the capacity to experience a particular song as, say *beautiful* or *harmonious,* the beauty and the harmony of that song are, quite literally, lost on them. Put another way, the meaning something *can have* for a person—the particular assembly of qualities one is able to sense in experience—depends entirely on the capacities they bring to the table. And these capacities develop cumulatively out of past experience. In this way, *(past) experience yields (present) experience*—in that past experiences produce facilities that, in turn, make other facilities possible— and *experience is always and at once meaningful.* It is such on account of the physical body.

Body matters

Since Bourdieu, sociologists have been interested in the body's role in social processes. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus has been particularly influential. The concept of habitus refers to an embodied and pre-reflective matrix of transposable embodied dispositions (or schemas) that shape and direct judgment, perception, and action. These dispositions are acquired

through primarily early, or primary, socialization experiences. But, as some scholars have pointed out, Bourdieu's notion of habitus betrays an understanding of the body as fundamentally cognitive; the schemas that comprise the habitus coordinate pre-conscious *judgments.* In this way, the body is portrayed as a classificatory system, more akin to what some might think of as "mind" (e.g., Lizardo 2004).

Nonetheless, Bourdieu's ideas have served as fruitful springboards for contemporary scholars who, often drawing on research from adjacent fields like cognitive science, have continued to explore and elaborate on the body's role in processes of meaning making (e.g., Ignatow 2007; Crossley 2001; Cerulo 2018; Lizardo 2017; Wacquant 2004). Taken together, this literature indicates that bodies are deeply encultured and "know things," albeit in nonlinguistic and non-propositional form. Embodied knowledge is typically implicit, procedural, built up over time and acquired in experience, non-reflexively deployed, and difficult to articulate (Lizardo 2017, 2022). And sometimes, propositional, reflective knowledge can even get in the way of embodied knowledge, like when overthinking compromises our ability to perform a typically habitual action, like clipping in and out of bicycle pedals, or walking on a previously broken but now healed limb.

While these insights on the body have been invaluable in moving sociological understandings of culture and action forward, I propose that sociologists must go even further in their conceptualization of how the body matters. Specifically, the body does much more than coordinate pre-conscious judgments and store knowledge: it also structures and generates experience. Specifically, the body structures experience at the level of the senses, and it is able to do so because the senses are always already socially structured, or encultured (Marx 1978; Simmel 1969/1921; Cerulo 2018). The senses mediate *all* experience, and give things in the

world their meaning. Sensory capacities—the capacity to actualize some but not other qualities in experience and for things in the world to have some but not other meanings— are themselves developed in experience, just as they yield experience. In this way, experience molds the senses, and this molding makes *other* experiences (which further mold the senses) possible. In short, the body's capacity to structure experience goes "deeper" than the non-reflective judgements that Bourdieu tends to focus on: the body structures experience at the sensory level, too.

The body generates experience in other ways as well. Most obviously, the body is one's interface with the world and as such, is necessary for having (most) experiences. And as noted above in reference to the classificatory aspects of habitus, people use others' bodies to make sense out of them (e.g., Bourdieu 1984). So, bodies generate experience not only for actors themselves, but for *other* actors, too. The body is a social object; how one walks, how one dresses, the expressions one knowingly and unknowingly makes—these are qualities *others* perceive and upon which they ground judgments of others. This matters for one's experience of oneself and the world: how others classify us impacts how we can regard ourselves, as well as the opportunities we have for experiences that can lead to change and development.

But there is yet another, third, way that bodies generate experience: bodies can change existing capacities for sensory engagement and in so doing, produce new knowledge and capacities for action. Understanding this dynamic was the original impetus for the third article of this dissertation. Specifically, I was interested in studying how interacting with other bodies alters one's relationship to and understanding of one's own body. Given the centrality of "body work" to funeral work, I chose to interview funeral directors and mortuary school students. But over the course of my interviews, a different insight surfaced and redirected my focus: somewhat unexpectedly, I realized that their line of work was a hard line for me. Observe a surgery? Sign

me up! Observe an embalming? No (fortunately for me, it turns out this would have been extremely illegal). Talking to students and directors made me realize that we had a very different social relation to the funeral corpse. For them, the corpse *is* a human being to be taken care of. For me, the funeral corpse *is* a dead body. What was more, I simply could not imagine a dead body generating that kind of meaning for me—i.e., being anything *other* than a dead body. And because of this fundamental difference in orientation, funeral work *can and does* mean something different to the directors and students I spoke to than it does to me.

In sum, the body is a cultural artefact through and through; continually re/shaped in experience, it creates (new) meaning, knowledge, and understanding both for others and for actors themselves.

Worlds of difference

Let's now return to the claim I opened with: the world *is* different to different people. By now, it should be clear that this is a claim about meaning. Actors are oriented to objects, people, and situations on the basis of meaning, and (some but not other) meanings are possible on the basis of sensory capacities developed in past, formative experience. Further, meaning is both qualitative and constitutive. By that I mean that actors sense an object's qualities in experience, and an object *is* that which it is experienced to be (Dewey 2005/1934; Peirce 1955/1940b). In this way, meaning lends things in the world their self-evident "is-ness" (or "suchness," in Peirce's [1955/1940b] terms). I do not think it a stretch to say that two people with different orientations to, say, a particular song, who accordingly have different experiences when hearing that song, confront different objects. That said, experience can create new capacities that, in turn, allow for different meanings and new understandings to develop. Some capacities also make

other capacities likelier to develop, like how a taste for, say, punk but not, say, opera may, for some, facilitate later developing a taste for country music.

But I wish to go still a step further. The claim that the world *is* different to different people is also a claim about the capacity for (cumulative) experience to *create worlds.* The experiences that construct one's orientation to things in the world are therefore formative in two respects: they develop actors and equip them with particular embodied capacities for perception and response *and* they structure the very worlds that actors, as individuals oriented to the world on the basis of past experience, inhabit. Returning to the cone of experience: the base consists of the earliest formative experiences that create facilities for having more experiences, and more experiences, and even more. These experiences concatenated over time comprise the body of the cone, and the present moment, its vertex. The present can be different to different people because the set of cumulative experiences that go into any given present response is different for different people. The conic nature of experience implies that *my* world, build out of experiences that created facilities for more experiences, is not *your* world (unless you and I had the *exact* same set of formative experiences). Within each of these worlds, meanings make sense and actions are consistent, i.e., they are derived from the past experiences that made them possible (Martin 2011). To those observing action from outside an actor's world, the logic—i.e., the meaning— of their actions can all too easily be lost, like—for example— when I struggled to understand how the funeral directors and mortuary school students I interviewed could find their work so fulfilling. Meaning and behavior—two sides of the same coin—make sense *in the context of the worlds that make them possible*.

The relevance for sociology

The pragmatist-informed conception of experience and the role of the body in meaning making that I put forth above matters a great deal for sociological understandings culture and behavior. Briefly, what sociologists mean by the term “culture” has become increasingly fuzzy (e.g., Martin 2010). To reverse this trend, I propose (re)turning to Simmel’s (1971/1908) conceptualization of culture. For Simmel, (subjective) culture refers to the process of becoming who you are. That process consists of the experiences you have (and those you don’t have) that create capacities for generating future experience. This echoes Dewey’s (2005/1934) own conception of experience as the process through which “things and events belonging to the world…are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it” (257). Culture is then, first and foremost, a process.

Admittedly, it is challenging to study what is essentially an individual-historical process, and scholars interested in culture typically use *outcomes* of this process as proxies for the process itself and call these outcomes “culture”—for example, how certain people dress or what they eat, or the way they navigate conflict or approach relationships. But there is great risk in treating as culture the product (e.g., a taste for punk) rather than the process (i.e., one’s entire aesthetic history). Tastes (for example) are outcomes of a structured process of becoming that makes it possible for, say, punk music to have one meaning versus another meaning. In reducing a process to an outcome, sociologists not only further lose conceptual grip on culture, but also risk missing the forest for the trees. More precisely, actions and responses—like tastes—make sense in the context of the systems that generate them. By systems, I refer to the different worlds that actors inhabit—worlds fashioned whole cloth by experience over time. By ignoring the generating

systems, scholars run the risk of missing the meanings behind actions. And as Bourdieu (2008) states, "Sociology would not be worth an hour of effort if its sole aim were to discover the strings that move the actors it observes, if it were to forget that it is dealing with people…in short, if it did not assign itself the task of restoring to those people the meaning of their actions" (95). In short, such a view of culture as a developmental process of shaping that makes further shaping possible is inseparable from sociology's "endgame," i.e., understanding why people do what they do. Meaning is the critical link in the stimulus-action chain, and sociologists need to take this very seriously. Crucially, meaning need not be linguistic. This is a very important point, and why I chose to open with Huxley's (1954) quote. To say that meaning may not, or not need, be linguistic is not to deny the need for language to communicate meaning and experience. It is however, to suggest that much of the meaning grasped in experience is not *primarily* reflective or propositional, but rather is sensory. This kind of "primary" experience is a quality of "feeling" that "consists in nothing else, and which is of itself all that it is" (Peirce 1955/1940a: 81; Dewey 1998/1905).

How should sociologists then approach the study of culture if, as I suggest, the term properly refers to a process? I propose a dual focus on the body and on meaning; indeed, the latter presupposes the former: the body is *the* site of enculturation, the place where meanings are made possible (or not), generated, and experienced. Further, sociologists should focus on understanding the meanings that things have for the people they study. Doing so requires not only assessing an actor's response to things in the world, but also tracing the biographical process that built up the orientation that makes that response possible. Doing so amounts to unraveling the generative experiential logics of actors' worlds.

Such an agenda poses not insignificant methodological challenges, but scholars (e.g., Cerulo 2018; Wacquant 2004) are utilizing new methods, like experimental interview techniques and carnal ethnography, to assess meaning in new ways. The studies in this dissertation follow in their footsteps. They take interviewees' phenomenological subjectivities (see Martin 2011) as the starting points of inquiry, and use a variety of qualitative methods—ethnography, life course history analysis, sensory description tasks— to get at the organization of experience. In so doing, these studies reflect the vision for a revised sociological approach to culture proposed here. This vision can be summed up as follows: an understanding of the present requires connecting present experience to past experience, and doing so requires attention to biography *and* to social structure—to the ways that organizations, social arrangements, and norms and regulations constrain and facilitate individuals and make some experiences more or less likely. Further, to truly grasp the meanings that things have to actors, scholars need to pay attention to phenomenology, i.e., to the qualitative meanings sensed in experience and upon which actors respond. And to do *that*, sociologists must seriously engage with the body as a cultural artefact, a nexus of meaning molded by its individual but never idiosyncratic path from the past to the present. In short, grasping the present involves investigating the path that made one into a particular type of social actor for whom the present has its own burningly self-evident meaning.

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Chapter 1
Three chords & [somebody's] truth: Trajectories of experience and taste among hard country fans

Abstract

To date, much social scientific work on taste has relied on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to account for changes in tastes across the life course. But little empirical work has explored the dynamics of taste formation implied but not explicitly theorized by the concept. Dewey enriches Bourdieu's work by providing a vocabulary to theorize processes of re-socialization. This paper demonstrates Dewey's utility for understanding taste development by considering a weekly country event where no taste-class homology exists. The analysis centers on taste trajectories, or paths to appreciation taken by patrons who acquired the ability to appreciate country later-in-life. Data point to three types of regulars (Listeners, Players, Dancers); trajectories produce structured variations in experience, indicating prior engagement shapes present experience of music. Taste and experience are shown to be tightly bound; experience shapes perception and makes individuals into persons capable of having particular tastes.

Introduction

One of the most theoretically exciting and generative issues in the contemporary sociology of culture regards the processes whereby tastes are formed. Most notably, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) posits that people develop capacities to appreciate some but not other aspects of culture via primary socialization in childhood. Specifically, tastes develop out of classed experiences so that those sharing similar social positions will have similar tastes. In addition to functioning as symbolic boundaries, tastes are expressions of capacities: the ability to recognize

a cultural good means being able to appreciate it. People thus enjoy things they can recognize, and competencies are shaped by context. This theory turns on the concept of habitus; generated by experience and a generator of experience, habitus is an embodied and pre-reflective matrix of dispositions. It informs action, judgment, and perception, and accounts for socially patterned differences in taste.

Many have followed Bourdieu (1984), quantitatively and qualitatively assessing the degree of homology between class position and taste (e.g., López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005; Alderson et al. 2007; Bellavance 2008; Atkinson 2011; Savage and Gayo-Cal 2011), and the stability of preferences and consumption trends over the life course and across generations (e.g., Mohr and DiMaggio 1995; Van Eijck 1999; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Friedman 2012; Rossman and Peterson 2015; Lizardo and Skiles 2015). Of course, the degree to which patterns outlined by Bourdieu characterize contemporary first-world societies is debated (e.g., DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Kern 1996; Bryson 1996; Coulangeon and Lemel 2007; Warde et al 2008; Prieur and Savage 2011; Gripsrud et al. 2011; Hanquinet et al. 2013). But these studies raise a second issue: whether the most general aspects of habitus acquired via primary socialization can account for taste development across the life course and if not, how secondary socialization leads to the acquisition of new tastes. Certainly, many preferences persist into adulthood. But as Bourdieu (1984) himself acknowledged, tastes are far from "locked in"; aesthetic development continues across the life course, sometimes steering people to tastes social position would not predict. But studying the process of taste development requires an approach different from that typically used to establish more general class differences in aesthetic appreciation. Specifically, this effort requires a shift from considering homology to the micro-dynamics, observable at the individual-level, via which tastes *form*.

Sociologists (e.g., Benzecry 2011; Friedman 2012) are beginning to do such work, and it is no accident that they do so by considering tastes acquired relatively *late* in life, rendering the taste formation process available for empirical exploration via interview and ethnography. But these studies draw attention to the potential *limits* of the tool most commonly used to account for taste—habitus— to studying the nature of secondary socialization, or re-habituation. In what follows, I propose that John Dewey's concept of "experience" can enrich the understanding of taste Bourdieu provides. I then demonstrate the utility of "experience" for studying re-socialization by considering a particularly clear-cut case of class discrepant, later-in-life acquired taste: Honky Tonk Night.

From habitus to experience: a Deweyan take on taste

The analytic limits of habitus

A key difficulty facing researchers using the notion of habitus to explain taste development is that habitus arrives "at the scene" as a conceptual totality; it is a perceptual-evaluative matrix that accounts for taste with reference to itself. So, people like the things they like because these are the things *they are able to like,* and their choices "correspond to the condition of which [habitus] is the product" (Bourdieu 1984:175). Because habitus is a "structuring structure" *and* a "structured structure" (170), it, *by definition,* already exists, embodied in actors, as a mirror of social conditions; it captures a state of synchrony with the environment and thus *presumes* "body/world isomorphism" (Engman and Crawford 2016:30). Hence, it is the result of a [re-]socialization process implied, but not explicitly theorized, by it.

This becomes problematic in light of Bourdieu's account of how tastes change: beyond primary socialization, moments of disjuncture— when actors' practices and knowledge fall out of sync with the environment— are critical for transforming habitus. In "crises" (Bourdieu

1977), habitus integrity is threatened as it "cease[s] to suffice as a basis for action" (Crossley 2013:151). Resolution in the form of re-habituation comes from the acquisition of new competencies acquired via secondary socialization and embodied in specific habitus. But Bourdieu was primarily interested in accounting for stability; in general, "practices are adjusted to the regularities inherent in a condition" (1984:175). The focus on reproduction makes it difficult to theorize actors' experiences when habits fail and *there is not yet* "spontaneity without consciousness or will" (1990:56)—the very situations his theory suggests precipitate re-socialization.

The concern I raise with using habitus to explain taste development later-in-life is *not* over whether researchers can account for primary habitus-discrepant tastes in adulthood with specific habitus (they can), but rather whether with it, researchers can grasp re-socialization dynamics. Habitus is not ideal for theorizing what happens between moments of disjuncture and re-habituation because it is, by definition, a structure attuned to the environment, embodied in actors, and already regulating action; it captures an *achieved state* of harmony, rather than the *process* of reorientation leading to it. Using habitus to grasp the dynamics of re-socialization may thus obscure the "enskillment" processes that precede perfect adjustment and render it possible (Lizardo 2014). These processes pertain not only to action—say, for example, a ballet dancer learning to swing dance—but also to appreciation. While Bourdieu's theoretical tools are powerful for capturing the *completed state* of internalization of external conditions as capacities for aesthetic response, they are less adept at dissecting re-socialization dynamics. This is unfortunate because, as John Dewey (2002/1922) suggests, "what happens" in "pre-practical" phases may be important for shaping some tastes: in his words, sometimes "Desire for flowers comes after actual enjoyment of flowers" (22).

Theorizing the gap with "experience"

Dewey's (2002/1922; 1958/1929; 2005/1934) work provides a means of theorizing moments "in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things" (2005/1934: 12) by providing a vocabulary that makes grasping dynamics of re-habituation easy. His writings on aesthetics and human growth more broadly center on "experience," defined as a transaction between humans and nature: "things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it" (Dewey 2005/193: 257). Experience cultivates habits. Like Bourdieu's "dispositions," these are achieved competencies that manifest as ways of perceiving and evaluating. Thus, tastes too are habits; they are ways of sensing and responding, cultivated in experience, which make particular aesthetic experiences possible (see, e.g., Dewey 2002/1922:31). Important for the study of taste formation, Dewey posits a reciprocal relation between habit and reflection, such that their interaction enables actors to overcome resistance, or instances when habits fall out of sync with the environment. Indeed, it is from their interaction that actors develop novel capacities for perception and response. Critically, reflection itself draws on and depends on habits; the latter are the "sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight and judgment" (Dewey 2002/1922: 176). This stands in contrast to Bourdieu, who emphasizes practical action arguably at the expense of reflective thought, thus making it more difficult to theorize what happens when practical action fails (Crossley 2013:151; see Atkinson 2010 for a similar critique).

Further, Dewey argues that although an aesthetic response is always a response to a stimulus' properties, the response is not entirely traceable to the stimulus itself. Rather, response it is a reaction to the meaning a stimulus has to an actor, itself evolved from experience. Linking

perception to experience does not relativize objects; objects possess qualities above and beyond their perception. But because perception is "mediate," actors can only respond to what their perceptual capacities render sensible (Dewey 1998/1905:170). This is because qualities are "*potentials* for experience." Although their "actualization" in perception hinges on actors' histories, they exist in objects even when not "actual" (Martin 2011:186; see also Dewey 1958/1929:336).

The critical takeaway is that all tastes—i.e., *habits of perception and judgment*—are "funded" by past experience; an object is what it is, to a particular actor, because of the previous experiences that have given it meaning and from which perception flows. Experience thus drives changes in tastes, and in a very literal way, experience makes objects *mean* one thing and not another, just as it makes people into particular kinds of people. Actors' histories thus matter for the kinds of experiences they can have, and those with different biographies have different experiences of cultural objects. They orient to different qualities and so, hear, see, or feel *different things*. Differences in experience are relevant not only to the polar extremes of preference; just because two people like the same song does not mean they have equivalent experiences of it. Rather, previous engagement with music shapes a song's present experience and makes it sound one way or another. The dynamic is ongoing: each new aesthetic experience changes the actor and enriches his/her response by making new qualities perceptible. So, just as all perception is acquired perception (James 1950/1890: 79), all taste is cultivated taste (Martin 2011).

Dewey's work is compatible with Bourdieu's (1984) view of tastes as capacities for response acquired through socialization experiences. But, it enriches it by allowing analytic purchase on dynamics of taste development assumed by Bourdieu, but only vaguely theorized.

Notably, pragmatism has been used by some scholars, most prominently by Hennion (e.g., 2001; 2005; 2007), to provide an alternative to Bourdieu's (or more generally, "critical sociology's") understanding of taste. I however, ground my position in the work of other scholars (e.g., Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Crossley 2013; Leschziner and Green 2013; Strand and Lizardo 2015) who have convincingly argued for their complementarity and demonstrated that pragmatism can speak to and be fruitfully leveraged to extend Bourdieu's work. In line with this, I see scale of analysis as the key differentiating factor in Bourdieu and Dewey's respective approaches to aesthetics: the former was interested in identifying and understanding macro-level patterns of taste distribution, whereas the latter was oriented to micro-level dynamics of aesthetic experience. I argue that this difference in scale of interest, while necessarily yielding apparently different characterizations of taste, does not make Bourdieu's basic model of [re-] habituation inherently incompatible with Dewey's work. It does however, open the possibility for the latter to be brought productively to bear on the former's account of habit formation— an account which Bourdieu's own set of research interests led him (Bourdieu) to merely sketch out (see especially Crossley 2013).

Dewey's work suggests a tactic to empirically explore tastes: to examine the entire set of past experiences that organize them. However, conducting a "womb-to-tomb" ethnography in order to observe the development of taste over the life course is obviously impractical. Moreover, the experiences organizing tastes acquired in primary socialization are likely beyond the recall of most people. But as some (e.g., Benzecry 2011; Friedman 2012) have demonstrated, tastes develop *beyond* primary socialization, and the processes via which this occurs are cognitively accessible. This indicates taste formation can be studied by considering tastes acquired later-in-life when relevant organizing experiences are more accessible to

memory. An ideal way to explore these processes is to consider cases of later-in-life-acquired class discrepant tastes. They make it possible to examine the experiences that undergird tastes without needing to consider enculturation experiences beyond informants' plausible recall.

Honky tonk night: a case of later-in-life, class discrepant taste

What is it?

Honky Tonk Night (henceforth, HTN) is a hard country[1] "happy hour" established in 2001 and held at a "punk rock dive," or small music venue that doubles as a bar, in a large mid-western city. HTN is an anomaly both in the otherwise "trendy" neighborhood where it takes place, and in the bar that hosts it, which typically showcases the music of up-and-coming "indie" artists. Further, HTN patrons are not representative of the bar's typical clientele in terms of age, occupation, and class (more on this below). The event's name comes from the setting it seeks to imitate: those of the dance clubs and drinking establishments that rose to popularity in the wake of the late 1920's Texas oil boom (Peterson 1997). A five-piece country band plays HTN and a significant portion of regulars dance (e.g., the Texas two-step, Western swing). Regulars have a taste for what Lena (2012) calls the "traditionalist genre": they are interested in preserving the country sound of the late 1920's, and in keeping it distinct not only from the "countrypolitan," or Nashville Sound that emerged in the 1950's, but also from contemporary "pop country."

About 150 people attend a typical HTN, roughly 40 of whom are regulars who attend every week and have been doing so for 4 to 15 years; more than half have been attending for 6 or

[1] Also called traditional or honky tonk country, hard country emerged in the late 1920's and was overtaken by the "Nashville sound" in the 1950's. It had a brief revival in the 1970's as "outlaw" country (Jensen 1998; Lena 2012); see Peterson (1997) for a more extensive overview of the ongoing generative tension between "hard" and "soft shell" country.

more years. Notably, regulars who began attending HTN as country fans are the exception; most found HTN "accidentally" (e.g., stumbled in looking for a beer or a place to dance; accompanied friends) and admit that prior to it, they did not deem country to be "for them." Most are in their 40's and 50's. Men and women are equally represented[2], but the event is racially homogenous; a handful of non-white patrons attend sporadically, but they tend to be friends of white regulars. With the exception of a small minority, regulars are self-identified "liberals" who are stably employed as teachers, professors, doctors, and journalists; many have advanced degrees and live in the city's more expensive neighborhoods and suburbs. About half are musicians (henceforth, Players), a quarter are dancers (henceforth, Dancers), and the last quarter are people who attend simply for love of the music (henceforth, Listeners).

Why HTN?

The late onset of regulars' appreciation, coupled with its class discrepant nature, makes HTN an excellent case with which to analyze processes of re-socialization. That HTN is a *country* music event is also significant: work on omnivorousness indicates some genres are especially hard to "get into," or to cultivate appreciation for. In the U.S., country is often employed by otherwise-omnivores for purposes of symbolic exclusion (e.g., Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996; Lena 2012; Lizardo and Skiles 2015). It is also associated with a specific segment of the population— the rural working class—and is assumed to speak to "their" issues. Finally, in the past decade, the genre has become linked with "intolerance, xenophobia, and localist jingoism," making its rejection especially appealing to liberal, "cosmopolitan" audiences who do not fit its presumed intended audience (Lizardo and Skiles 2015:20).

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[2] Musicians are a notable exception: nearly all are men; this is likely due to the genre.

And yet, the people *least* likely to have a taste for and *most* likely to reject country frequent HTN: the vast majority are upper-middle class urbanites that fit the description of the "elite" honky tonk lyrics compare "everyday people" favorably to (Jensen 1998). Further, most did not grow up with country but acquired the capacity to enjoy it later-in-life; in fact, many admit actively *disliking* it prior to HTN. This makes it possible to access re-socialization experiences, and to trace their paths to appreciation. In addition to regulars who acquired the taste for country late, I also studied some who grew up with country. Although I do not give these "country from the cradle" informants explicit attention, their histories were vital contrasts and helped in developing the theoretical claims I make here.

Method

Data were collected over the course of 15 months via a combination of participant observation, informal field interviews, and semi-structured in-depth aesthetic life history interviews (n=30; Listeners: n=7, female: 4, male: 3; Players[3]: n=12, male: 12; Dancers: n=11, female: 6; male: 5) ranging 80 to 100 minutes in length. These data come from the 30 regulars who agreed to an interview, but my findings take into consideration data collected from the remaining regulars who preferred informal field interviews. These data were supplemented with data gathered in non-HTN settings, such as other music and social events. These settings allowed me to observe how country operates in regulars' lives beyond HTN.

All aesthetic life history interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. Their goal was to gage regulars' relationship to music across the life course and to access how regulars got into country, or changed their minds about it (if it had been previously stigmatized).

[3] Players include both HTN band members and musicians who attend the event as audience members.

With slight variations, the interviews proceeded as follows: respondents were asked about their earliest musical memories, such as the first records they recall purchasing, and music they remember hearing or seeing around the house as children. Most Players began playing prior to entering middle school, so when relevant, they were asked about early experiences playing. The interview then shifted to focus on musical likes and dislikes across the life course. To this end, I broke down the life course of each respondent into 4-6 year chunks, concluding with his/her current age. For each chunk, respondents were asked the same basic set of questions regarding their musical involvement (e.g., "What artists did you like/avoid and why?"; "How many of your friends listened to the same music as you doing this period?"; "In what contexts would you listen to/play music?"). Drawing on previous qualitative work on taste that has demonstrated the utility of life histories for illuminating moments "when a certain taste or style is developed across the lifecourse" (Friedman 2012:477; see also, e.g., Lahire 2003; Atkinson 2011), I constructed aesthetic trajectories from the data. They organized data into an aesthetic timeline, chronicling each respondent's aesthetic development from his/her earliest music memory to his/her present engagement with music.

"Getting into" country: taste trajectories

Much work on taste has assumed that appreciation is a single dimension spanning rejection to acceptance (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Lizardo and Skiles 2015). Taste trajectories suggest appreciation is not one-dimensional, and that people can appreciate the same cultural goods in various qualitatively different ways. Importantly, variations in trajectory stem not solely from "*where* people are coming from" in Bourdieu's (1984) social space, but also from "what people are *doing*." Variations in cultural engagement produce a range of equally positive, but *qualitatively different,* experiences of country.

I found three types of regulars: Listeners, Players, and Dancers. Type overlap is rare: Players do not become Dancers, and Dancers do not become Players; Listeners generally do not become Dancers, and Dancers do not become Listeners; Players do not give up playing to become Listeners, though several *began* as Listeners. This suggests experience may not be exchangeable. Instead, trajectories cultivate particular relationships to sound that affect experiences of country. Types are distinguished by primary mode of engagement with music: Players and Dancers engage *kinesthetically* with country by playing it and dancing to it, respectively, whereas Listeners engage *aurally* with country music, by listening to it[4].

Traversing the "space of tastes" and cultivating appreciation through action

Some sociologists (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Bryson 1996; Mark 1998) have conceptualized tastes as located in social space. To acquire a taste is thus analogous to moving to a different location in the space. The notion of a "space of tastes[5]" is reflected in how regulars talk about "getting into" country[6]. Specifically, Listeners and Players got into country by—in their words— "working their way to" or "digging back" to it through other genres. Their language gestures to the experience of slowly progressing across the field, gradually acquiring the taste by

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[4] Some scholars (e.g., DeNora 2000) have argued for a conception of listening as embodied; while all listening inevitably engages the body to some extent, differences in Players'/Dancers' and Listeners' engagement are qualitatively distinct, such that they are not merely differences in degree, but differences in kind.

[5] The space of tastes captures regulars' sense of "how far" different genres are from each other. While many genres clustering in the space share aesthetic similarities (see Malone & Neal [2010] for a review of the relationship between country and other genres), the space exists in its particular form because respondents corroborate each other's narratives of the taste acquisition process. For instance, they agree that it is implausible to "go from," say, hip hop to country without "passing through" folk. This inter-respondent agreement about plausible versus anomalous routes to country suggests a latent idea of a space of tastes.

[6] In contrast, "country from the cradle" regulars who grew up with the genre were unable to describe their trajectories to country. Unsurprisingly, they spoke of country as something that has "always been there," suggesting little to no movement in the space of tastes.

exploring related genres “on the way.” In contrast, Dancers describe the process of “getting into” country as a “conversion.” These regulars thus “leapt” across the space of tastes, bypassing genres sharing similarities with country. The different ways of traversing the space of tastes, in conjunction with regulars’ mode of engagement with the genre (i.e., listening, playing, dancing) have important and non-obvious implications for their experience of country and for its impact in their lives more broadly.

Listeners and players: “working their way” to country

In their gradual movement to country through the space of tastes, Listeners and Players resemble each other. In particular, they describe the process of “getting into” country as “working their way” or “digging back” to it via other genres. But they engage differently with music: Listeners engage aurally, whereas Players engage kinesthetically by playing. Listeners’ mode of engagement is most straightforward: at HTN, they listen to country at the bar, and most drink while doing so. Typically, they remain seated for the event’s entirely, moving only to request a song, dart to the bathroom, or shake hands with band members during the set break. Most arrive before the show to claim choice seats and to, as one regular put it, “get liquored up.”

Of regulars, Listeners are those most likely to have cultural roots in the south and to have grown up with the genre. Still, the dominant path to country, even among Listeners, is through other genres. For example Molly (regular 10 years), a 55 year-old West Coast transplant, worked her way to country via folk music. A lifelong Bob Dylan fan, her first encounters with country as a child—seeing Conway Twitty in his “gaudy suits” on TV—turned her off to the genre and kept her uninterested for years. But, Dylan led to Joan Baez, who led to Gillian Welch, Nancy Griffith, and Lyle Lovett. Then, a friend introduced her to The Judds. This discovery coincided with that of Willie Nelson, and together, the artists forced her to *rethink*

country; she realized her *experience* of country contradicted her *cognitions* about the genre (i.e., that it was "hokey"). In this way, *experience subverted and re-organized cognition*; Molly's present taste for country is funded by experiences that, over time, altered her former habits of perception and made her into a person equipped with—in Dewey's (2005/1934:102) words—the "channels of response" requisite for appreciating country that she previously lacked. As with other Listeners, Molly's engagement consists of recorded and live aural exposures, supplemented by information picked up from album covers/liner notes and radio and television programs. Her mode of engagement is strictly aural, and stands in contrast to that of Players and Dancers, for whom the body plays a more central role in the experience of country.

In general, Players develop appreciation for country by learning to play it. Their narratives, like Listeners', relate the experience of crawling through the space of tastes. They also illustrate how particular experiences *playing* music can jumpstart and guide re-orientation, alter ideas about the genre, and lead to the acquisition of an unexpected taste. Mick (regular 15 years) is a 51 year-old guitar player, and his trajectory is typical of Players: growing up, he listened to the radio on morning drives to school. These drives exposed him to Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson. His father was also an avid Roger Miller and Johnny Horton fan: "There were a couple Horton songs I knew the words to and could sing along with when I was 8." But Mick did not care much for their "sound." Rather, his first musical passion was for classic rock: "I learned to play guitar playing rock and roll. I heard the high squealy guitar and right away I was like, I wanna make *that* sound." But then in high school, he made some older friends who redirected his trajectory: "The way I think about it is, I dug back. So it [was] like, I like rock and roll. So there's this guitar player, and he mentions in something you read that he learned how to

play cuz he listened to so and so. So I'd go, 'Oh— who's so and so?' And I'd dig back and listen to so and so. And so through rock and roll, I dug back into blues and then to country."

Players claim learning to "imitate" country songs cultivates appreciation. Thus, they learn to enjoy country by engaging with and eventually mastering the country lexicon. For example, Leo (regular 8 years) a lifelong electric guitar player and self-described "sound nut" in his late 50s, credits the shift from "occasionally putting on country records" to "listening to country all the time" to the decision to learn pedal steel. He explains that "aside from trying to imitate steel on a guitar, I didn't really play and listen actively to traditional country music." The country sounds he absorbed came from non-country sources: "The Pretenders threw a lot of country stuff into what they were doing— certain licks, musical phrases that are part of the lexicon. I picked them up from listening to rock guys, rather than going straight to the horse's mouth." After nearly 40 years of guitar, he wanted a change: "I decided to play steel, and since I started playing [4 years ago], I've been listening almost exclusively to country."

Playing made a difference for 35 year-old Sam (regular 12 years), a bass player and jazz aficionado, too: "It wasn't really until I was playing in bands that I got into country music. I came to it through an alt-country place, like Whiskeytown, Old 97's. We'd play a lot of originals, but we'd cover Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash. I mean, I'd *heard* honky tonk before, but being in bands and playing are what really got me interested. I would listen to more of that stuff and try to play more of those things. I got into it from there."

Pete (regular 10 years), a 40 year-old drummer who worked his way to country through punk and jazz after some at-home exposure to the genre as a child, believes playing cultivates appreciation because it alters listening: "Once you learn to play a thing, it changes. I think you're closer to it. It makes you listen to music differently when you have to figure out how to

play something."

Other Players echo Pete. For example, over the course of his 40-year career as a musician in punk, jazz-fusion, country, and "experimental" rock bands, James picked up "most instruments you'd run into—woodwind, drums, bass, keyboard, guitar, singing, all that stuff." In playing, "your ear starts listening to different stuff, especially moving around on instruments. With whatever you're learning, you listen to recordings for that instrument, to see what other people did with it. So [switching] from guitar to bass, it's a different way of listening. It's not about melody anymore." Playing does not just motivate Players to listen *for* specific parts of music. As Dewey (2002/1922) noted, the ability to "single out a definitive sensory element in any field is evidence of a high degree of previous training, that is, of well-formed habits" (31). Thus playing facilitates a different way of listening *to* music, allowing for real-time decomposition of a given song. Further, according to these regulars, learning to play alters one's knowledge of and relationship to a piece, making one "closer to it." Further, it enables them to hear a piece at a different "level" than non-Players. In Pete's words, learning to play makes you "start focusing on the minutiae of what you're picking apart." This modifies listening: "You can then get so deep into the listening, when you figure out how to do it yourself."

Part of the change in appreciation precipitated by playing is, of course, technical. Mick remarks that people often assume country is "simple." He shared this belief—until he joined a country band. His attitude quickly changed: "Three fucking chords? Well by all means, play them. Let me hear—go ahead." Learning to play country made Mick realize that while country may be *structurally* simple, effort and skill are involved in making three chords "pop."

But mastering the genre requires more than perfecting technique; Players talk about mastering "the feel" of country. Pete explains that "nailing down" a song requires "playing it the

way you hear it": "You have to learn how to recreate a feel, otherwise you're just learning the top layer, stopping at 'close enough.'" The goal is to "figure out how to make it feel the way that [the artist] made it feel. Technique is a whole other thing." For country, this amounts to, as one Player put it, "getting country into the notes."

In addition to linking appreciation to playing, Players acknowledge the importance of their instrument to their experience of country. Specifically, they talk about country as the outcome of an intense collaboration with their instrument, making their experience of country embodied *and* extended: they train their bodies, via repeated listenings and emulations, to produce sound, and collaborate with and invest energy (and themselves) into their instruments. For some, a *particular* instrument altered their relationship to country. For Mick, country didn't "stick" until he picked up a Telecaster, the "guitar associated with country":

> I was playing some country and doing recording sessions, but I was still playing my Gibson. Then it got ripped off, and I needed to buy a guitar because I had a gig coming up. I liked Teles and I liked country music, and I said, well Teles are pretty cool, let me buy one. So I bought one. And then I started really thinking about [country], trying to play more, paying attention, going, 'What're those chords, what's going on?'

Dancers: "converting" to country

While Dancers, like Players, came to country via physical engagement with sound, their experience is distinct from Listeners' and Players' because unlike the latter two, Dancers *leapt* from one zone of the space of tastes to another and "skipped over" genres in between. The "conversion" narrative employed by many gestures to this point, and explicitly links the process of learning to dance to country to "getting into" country. The link makes sense if one considers music as an object and dance as interaction with it: how one moves to music reflects one's perception of it, and knowing how to move to a song is analogous to being able to perceive its

relevant qualities.

Dancers' experiences suggest physical engagement with sound through dance can, like playing and repeated aural exposure, cultivate receptivity. Most regarded the genre ambivalently prior to learning to dance and use phrases like "it sounded dumb," "simple," or "not for me" to describe their pre-HTN feelings. Callie, a 30 year-old regular of 9 years who dabbled in ska, rockabilly, and swing prior to becoming a regular, explained how growing up in a small town in the southeastern U.S., "there were two kinds of music: rap or country. I can recall specifically *disliking* country. I thought it was lame—the concept of it. Like dumb, uneducated people listen to that." Now she attends country events several nights a week: "I used to say, 'I listen to ska.' I would never say country. But now I tell people, 'It's all ska and honky tonk.'" In this way, her *experience* of country modified her cognitions about the genre. Callie's trajectory illustrates the power of experience—even one as trivial as stopping into a bar to dance—for jumpstarting re-habituation: prior to HTN, she believed country was "not for her." But her experience at HTN reorganized her perception of the genre and led to a new taste. Put another way, for Callie, the experience of enjoying herself at a country music event came before—and critically, *made possible*—her appreciation of the genre (see Dewey 2002/1922:22).

Forty-nine year-old Lynn (regular 10 years) too admits never "having an appreciation for country" until discovering dance. She recalls how years ago, a friend invited her to a country bar after work. Initially, she refused because she "didn't like country." But, her friend insisted until she agreed to go. She was surprised: "The men would come up, ask you to dance. You'd say, I don't know how to, and they'd say, ok I'll show you. They'd take you around the floor for a dance, bring you back and leave. So we started going, having fun and learning how to dance. That's how I started liking country music."

For Dancers, dancing isn't just about "accompanying" music. In the words of Briana, a 6-year regular in her late 60s, dancing is about "interpreting" the music. Dancers' experience with country is thus deeply embodied and holistic: whereas accompaniment implies "going along with" something external to oneself, interpretation implies taking something *within* oneself and making it one's own. As for other Dancers, appreciation heralded changes in her physical appearance and wardrobe: "My appearance changed. I started wearing different kinds of clothes and let my hair grow and started cultivating a cowboy boot collection."

Greg (regular 4 years), a 39 year-old history teacher, also disliked country prior to HTN: "I thought it was hillbilly and I was predisposed not to like it because I thought it went against my politics. Like, how many liberal country artists and fans are there?" But when he stumbled in on the event and spotted dancing—something he always aspired to—he began reconsidering. Learning to dance took months and initially, he was unsuccessful: he could not "hear" the music well enough to time steps to it. But now, he is able to tell almost immediately what dance a particular song calls for. This ability coincided with the ability to enjoy honky tonk. In his view, dance lets him "participate in the music": "I'm not a musician, but I love the music. Getting out on the dance floor is a weird little way of making me feel like I'm inside the music. It's an enjoyable place to be, when you're hearing the music, and you're moving to it, and it's all working. It's like hitting the zone."

Dancers' "hitting the zone" has corollaries in Players'[7] experience of country, and

[7] The experience of flow is notably absent from Listeners' narratives. One possible explanation for this absence links back to the predominantly aural nature of their engagement with country: flow is facilitated by movement and activity and, relative to Players and Dancers, Listeners engage more "passively" with country. So while they may, say, tap their feet or sway on their barstools to the beat of a tune, Listeners' mode of engagement is not characterized by the same degree of "full-body" involvement that dancing and playing demand.

describes a state similar to what Csikszentmihalyi (e.g., 1990) calls "flow," or "the optimal state of inner experience" that occurs when "psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action" (6). For Dancers, "investment" is total and unreserved: "hitting the zone" denotes a shift from being outside to *inside* the music,[8] and is analogous to "feeling" the music. Callie articulates what "feeling" the music means: "A band puts crescendos in the music, or they'll pause for two beats on a note, and you can see in somebody who's dancing and knows these songs how the music and the moves go together, because they time their moves with things that go on in the song. Like, they'll be more expressive as the band gets louder. They *know* [what's] coming and they do that with their bodies." In other words, they commit themselves—bodily and emotionally—to the tune. Others agree: dancing is "as close to really being inside the music as people can get."

Structured differences in experience

These data reveal structured variations in how regulars hear country and experience HTN—differences which imply that prior engagement, detailed above, affects perception by making qualities differentially perceptible and by delimiting the kind of aesthetic experiences regulars can have. Because habit, acquired in experience, "filters all the material that reaches… perception and thought," regulars' experiences of country are *funded*, and their *tastes* are different (Dewey 2002/1922:32); while they all claim to enjoy the same genre, their tastes are not the same or even, phenomenologically speaking, for the same thing.

While perhaps unsurprising that Listeners talk about country as *music to listen and drink*

[8] There are many similarities between Dancers' claims that "feeling" the music entails passing from outside to inside music, and the "passings" of drug users and music amateurs detailed in Gomart and Hennion (1999) that allow their respective passions to emerge.

to, Players as *music to play*, and Dancers as *music to dance to* because that is what each *does* to country, the implications each mode of engagement has for regulars' experience of country are non-obvious. Differences in engagement affect the musical qualities regulars orient to, what they find appealing about country, and their beliefs of what makes a "bad" and "good" country song and HTN. This is because modes of engagement are acquired *ways of knowing* (Crossley 2015); they index particular relationships to sound and determine what actors recognize objects *as.* Because they cultivate particular sensitivities, differences in "body techniques" (478) lead to different tastes and to differences in the gestalts requisite for having a proper aesthetic response.

Qualities at the fore: tradition, sound, and beat

Perception develops out of experience, and the qualities regulars orient to when listening to country vary as a function of past engagements with the genre. Listeners pay attention to "markers" of tradition (of which lyrics are of utmost importance), Players to sound, and Dancers to beat. To elaborate, Listeners focus on "closeness" to tradition; when a song or an artist emulates tradition, Listeners are pleased. Notably, while a portion enjoys the band's original songs, most prefer covers. Or, if the band strays too far from an original rendition, they balk. For example, Glenn's 6 year passion for HTN turned lukewarm when the singer began to throw in originals and to make the classics "too much" his own: "He's good, don't get me wrong. But he's not doing what I know." Listeners take measures to ensure a good HTN by making requests for classics and "songs about drinking"; although Dancers and Players encourage the band to play originals and not "strictly traditional" songs (e.g., "Wagon Wheel," "Southbound Train"), a set with *too* many originals disappoints Listeners.

Furthermore, Listeners pay attention to the singer and expect him to fill the stereotypical honky tonk singer/songwriter "tortured soul" role, or to "live the life [he] sing[s] about"

(Peterson 1997:152-3). One way of conveying this is to act like a traditional honky tonk artist by for instance, interacting with and "riling" the audience during a set. Listeners actively look for such signs as confirmation that the band really *is* a honky tonk band.

Finally, Listeners are also those most likely to talk about lyrics as an appeal. Specifically, they appreciate their "relatability," and have a soft spot for "songs about drinking." This is unsurprising: most drink for HTN's entirety, and a large fraction arrive early—and stay after—to do so. In the words of one Listener, honky tonk songs *are* songs "about getting drunk and truck driving and that sort of thing." This understanding is shaped by *what* they do when they listen to country. Many also praise singers for being able to "honestly" articulate the "hard emotions" (e.g., loneliness, disappointment) they purport feeling. As Sean (regular 6 years) notes, when sung by a good singer, lyrics are "direct lines to the soul" with power to "crush."

Players on the other hand are self-described "sound people" who admit being drawn to country by its "intoxicating" sound. The most commonly cited initial draw is an inexplicable, almost magical "attraction" to the sound of pedal steel. Several trace their "sound obsession" to childhood. For example, Jake (regular 10 years), a 45 year-old drummer, recalls that as a child, his dad "had a reel-to-reel player that sat on a wall. He'd listen to musicals—'Fiddler on the Roof,' 'Finian's Rainbow,' a couple others. My parents didn't play much, but when they did, I was fascinated by the sounds coming out of the system." Leo too, explains that when he got his dad's stereo, he "started paying attention to the way things sounded—tones and harmonics and the quality of the reverb" and that they, "no pun intended, resonated." Mick gets right to the point: "The way some people liked baseball, I liked music. I just dug the sounds."

Attention to sound extends to vocals. Unlike Dancers who cite the self-deprecating humor of honky tonk lyrics as appealing (*if* they note them at all), or Listeners who enjoy their

"relatability," Players focus on their sound. Leo recalls the first time he "got" country: "On a road trip, I stopped at a truck stop and bought a cassette of George Jones. It was like an atom bomb going off. It was the soul-crushing sadness and joy that the sound of his voice encompasses." He stressed that it was the *quality* of Jones' voice that drew him in: "It was the sound. That's the thing: a *real* singer is all sound[9]."

Importantly, what Players experience as sound is not the same as what Listeners experience as sound. More specifically, both talk about how sounds make them feel. But, they *feel* differently: Players talk about *sensory* feeling, whereas Listeners talk about *emotional* feeling; Players do not experience feeling divorced from the body, but *in* the body. Of course, as Leo notes, a good sound will elicit both kinds of feeling: "I can tear up listening to the sound of an instrument or somebody's voice. I've gotten desensitized, but I'd be in a bar and someone would put [Jones] on the jukebox and I'd be like, ok I need a minute."

Moreover, Players talk about sound as if it is has tangible properties. They describe country songs as having good "bodies," "shapes," and "forms." This is unsurprising, as many refer to themselves as "craftsman"; one Player even equated playing to "working the clay," suggesting that he experiences music as a tangible product. The experience of sound having form is further reflected in how they talk about listening as a physical encounter with sound: "It's the feeling of being taken over by an entity. Sound comes at you, and there's no real room to get out of the way, like a machine coming at you and it's going to get you." Such moments are flooring: "It's strange for your body to go through. But they're the moments when I think music

[9] It is interesting to compare HTN's Players to Benzecry's (2011) opera fans: both share an orientation to the *sound* of a singer's *voice* (rather than to lyrical content), and regard it as a key source of aesthetic pleasure.

is the most powerful because you're not just hearing it— your body is absorbing it. Not just through your ears, but through your body." Leo concurs: "Sound is physical. It's visceral."

Finally, Dancers are "beat people." In Callie's words: "I need a beat. Some people listen to country for the lyrics or for pretty chords and melodies, but for me, the beat has to be there. That's my primary attraction to a song." The most obvious reason for their focus is beat's indispensability to dance. And for Dancers, country music *is* music to dance to: "Honky tonk is music for dancing. Bar none, that what the music's always been there for—people getting off work, pulling their heels on, boozing it up, and dancing." Dancers' experience of country as music to dance to is best illustrated by what they do at the start of a new song: almost without fail, they turn to each other and ask: "What is this?" The answer they seek differs from what Listeners and Players seek when they pose it: Listeners and Players want to know what a song is called and who wrote it; Dancers want to know what dance is appropriate to the tune. Hence, what country music *is* reflects how regulars have engaged with it in the past.

A clear, steady beat is indispensable for answering the question; it is the beat that signals the dance and gives a song its meaning, and it is in being able to listen to several bars and produce an answer that Dancers' ability to hear country reveals itself. In a very literal way, without a clear beat, they cannot "hear," or discern what the music "calls out" for them to do. Put another way, they *can't recognize it as country music*. Liam (regular 10 years), a 39 year-old Dancer, expresses frustration at bands that play "as if dancers weren't there": "It's frustrating when a band calls itself country, but you can't identify—like, is it a two-step or a waltz or a triple-two? The beat is the number one thing." HTN's band plays to the Dancers, and they regularly praise the band for "their shuffle," or "the beat that you can move easily to that you need to dance."

In addition to the practical issue of being able to discern the dance a tune requires, a good beat is indispensable for "getting into" the music. If Dancers cannot "get into" the music, they cannot "participate" in it and have the proper aesthetic response. This is demonstrated by their evaluations of other local country bands: the "good bands" are those that nod to dancers via choice of music. The "ok bands"—those they *appreciate less*— are those that play "as if the dancers weren't there."

The bad kind of country, and why

Although Listeners, Players, and Dancers orient to different qualities, they agree on what sounds "bad": "pop," "new," and/or "modern" country. But, reasons for objection differ by group. Listeners (and two Players who identify as songwriters) focus on pop country's failure to sound like—and thus *be*—honky tonk. Specifically, they lament the "pop" or "rock" beat, and the dearth of "drinking songs." In straying too far from "old country" and substituting "girls in tight shorts" for booze and life's trials and tribulations, pop country fails to *be* country. For example, one Listener notes modern country has "too much of a pop beat" that "doesn't sound anything like country." Another explained that the mood new country "creates" is different: "Where would you listen to that crap? Definitely not here, not in any bar I can think of." And for Listeners, country music *is* music to drink to at a bar. Pop country songs also aren't about "country" things: "Flag waving, how much you love your girlfriend, how great you look in jeans. They're not writing about killing and cheating anymore, that's the problem. That's what you gotta write about." In sum, the qualities Listeners perceive when listening to honky tonk are absent in pop country. Thus, pop country actually is a different object than honky tonk.

Players condemn pop country for its "over-complicated" and "over-produced" sound. Objections link back to what they consider appeals of country— its simple sound and structure,

and the improvisational freedom it affords. As James asserts: "early in country, you had guys playing simple riffs. Then they got a lot fancier. There are some pretty good pickers in modern country, but I can't listen to that stuff because it makes me nauseous."

Players like James take seriously the idea of country as "three chords and the truth"; traditional country artists like Buck Owens, George Jones, Jimmy Rogers, and Ray Price were masters at "tak[ing] three chords, or sometimes just two" and "captivating" an audience. But "today music gets bogged down in virtuosity and getting a bazillion chord changes in." Such "shows" of skill are "not necessary"; a good country artist makes "the most simple chord structures sound not simple and makes them pop." The same applies to production: "Just put a microphone on it and let the tape roll. Less is more—alive, raw, real-sounding."

In part, the desire for simplicity has to do with what Players think sounds good. But, it also has to do with the enjoyment of *making* music. In particular, songs that have "room built in" to improvise are ideal for "hitting the zone." Lenny (regular 12 years), a pedal steel player in his early 60's, explains that honky tonk songs "aren't songs you have to learn all the parts to. You're improvising an accompaniment, and if you've heard them before, you know how they go. You don't have to think too much and you can get really high, joke around, have fun." Sam agrees, noting that "traditional country guys" are skilled improvisers: "We know *generally* what we're going to play, and if somebody calls out a song that nobody knows—ah, we'll go for it."

This is due to the "nature" of honky tonk: "There's a body of tunes, so even if it's not an original, you can call it a Hank or a Cash tune, and anybody familiar with them can pick on it." Pop country makes on-the-spot improvisation hard: "it's formulaic; there's more rehearsing, more, 'Ok we're going to play it this many times and then go into the chorus, and you're going to solo and then the song's gonna end.'" Such music is not "fun to play": "There're parts you

have to play. So, if you played a modern country song three times, you'd play it exactly the same every time."

Finally, Dancers dislike pop country because it "isn't danceable." Callie expresses her frustration: "On the radio nowadays, the majority of what they're labeling as country music isn't even danceable. It's not two-step or swing or any of the dances I know. I don't know how you could dance to that pop stuff.   It's just not really country." The reason for its "non-danceability" is its lack of steady "shuffle" essential to identifying tunes. Without being able to identify the tune as calling for particular movements, Dancers cannot dance, "feel," or "get inside" the music.

Continuous and discontinuous taste trajectories

All regulars claim to have a taste for country. Yet their narratives reveal variations in experience that suggest more fundamental differences in tastes. Differences are patterned by trajectory, suggesting country *means* and *sounds* on the basis of past cultivation experiences. Dewey's work throws light on the significance of trajectory for taste. He posits that in experience actors encounter stimuli with particular habits that delineate sensible qualities. He also acknowledges the role of reflective thought— itself structured by habits acquired in past experience and used by actors to make sense of novel situations—in cultivating new capacities for perception: through the interplay of habit and reflection, actors' habits—as well as cognitions— are modified, producing new capacities for aesthetic response (see Dewey 2002/1922:176). So, Listeners, Players, and Dancers approached country with different habits of perception shaped by past music experience. But HTN modified old habits, created new capacities for aesthetic response, and altered their conceptions of country. In short, it made them into people able to appreciate country. Variations in sonic orientation and in understandings of

country stem from differences in the habits regulars came to HTN with, and in how they came to engage with the genre once there.

Given the contingency of taste, it is no surprise that a key difference in trajectory with implications for taste is *how* regulars traversed the space of tastes. Specifically, Listeners' and Players' trajectories are *continuous:* they gradually worked their way through the space of tastes and experience their enjoyment of country, as one regular put it, as a "logical progression," or development, of existing preferences. This is because previous experiences with related genres had already begun to shape them into people able to get into the genre. Put differently, there existed greater "fit" between existing habits and those needed to appreciate the genre. "Fit" is key, because actors employ *existing* habits to make sense of novel stimuli (Dewey 2002/1922: 176). Thus, similar genres—those closer together in the space of tastes— will require fewer and less drastic modifications of existing habits for appreciation; the actor will be closer to "knowing how" to hear.

This point is illustrated in respondents' narratives. Bennett (regular 5 years), a 38 year-old drummer, and Bill (regular 9 years), a 60 year-old songwriter and guitar player, are good examples. Both approached country from punk after brief exposure in childhood. An Elvis Costello record prompted Bennett's trek "back" to country: "There was a quality to it I *recognized*." He started "going back, filling in the blanks, looking over stuff I listened to as a kid, understanding 'okay, that's Loretta Lynn, that's Buck Owens, that's Webb Pierce.'" His taste thus has clear roots in early music experiences, and *evolved from* a taste for punk, a genre with structural similarities. Bill also recalls the transition from listening and playing punk to listening and playing country as "easy": "the same thread runs through them—they're of the same fiber." They provide the same sensory and emotional stimulation: "Someone told me music

should make you want to fuck, fight, dance, or cry. I get that from both."

Lenny similarly talks of "getting into" country as growth, and explains that he dug back to country from the Beatles, Allman Brothers, and the Grateful Dead. He recalls the first time he heard an Allman Brothers record: "When I heard the slide guitar, I got sucked in." In high school a friend loaned him some "quasi-country, 'Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys'-type stuff." The sound of pedal steel floored him: "I was crazy about that, and so I started to try to play it. I'd already been playing blues slide guitar, so it was just the next thing to do." Taken together, their narratives speak to the "cumulative continuity" of experience; via habits, past experience becomes "an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience" (Dewey 2005/1934:108); they enrich and lend meaning to the present, "translating" the "bare continuity of external time into the vital order and organization of experience" (24-5; see also 1958/1929:257).

It is notable that regulars with brief exposure to country early in life *and* those with no exposure employed the working or digging "back" trope to characterize their path to country. The "regressive" frame likely helped high-cultural capital actors make sense of their appreciation of a previously stigmatized taste. Moreover, the realization that artists they *already* enjoyed were influenced by classic country probably assured them of the genre's value and established it as "authentic" and "genuine" (rather than as "manufactured" and commercially-driven [Peterson 1997]), thus legitimizing their taste and rendering it "safe" to learn to enjoy.

Although Listeners and Players both experienced the taste cultivation process as a progression of preexisting tastes, differences in mode of engagement produced variations in their experience. Hence, what country *is* and *means* to Players and Listeners reflects—indeed, flows from—what each *does*. Players thus have a taste for country *as simple, sonic-physical structures*

that "feel"—at the bodily level—*"good,"* and Listeners have a taste for country as *honest and relatable drinking music.*

In contrast, Dancers' trajectories are not characterized by organic progression, but by a discontinuous jump from one position to another—a *conversion*. Unlike Listeners and Players whose past experiences had already begun to shape them into people able to enjoy country, Dancers experienced a poor fit between existing habits, and those needed to appreciate country. The discontinuity produces a different experience of the genre and of their taste. To elaborate, acquiring the taste results in changes that reverberate beyond HTN. For instance, prior to HTN Dancers generally have scattered and superficial aesthetic histories: a handful struggled to articulate favorite artists, and several admitted to never paying much attention to music in the past. In this way, Dancers had further to "travel" to become people able to enjoy country. Dancers' holistic involvement with country via dance yields a distinct re-socialization experience. For them, re-socialization was rapid, and had an all-consuming, transformative impact; figuratively speaking, Dancers "jumped into" their taste. As Callie noted, "The more I went, the more I loved it. I started going once a month, and then it became every week. It's addictive. It's amazing to think I went from not really knowing or giving a crap about country, to being obsessed, just like that. The more you listen to it and dance, the more you love it."

Their trajectory makes taste an "all or nothing" matter: they *must* unreservedly involve themselves in country because they jumped into it rather than gradually worked up to it. There is thus no "middle ground" for them to fall back on; put another way, they do not have tastes for nearby genres in the space of tastes. This may be because in the space, country is largely surrounded by traditionally non-dance music. While close-by genres like blues and folk are in some places deemed "dance-friendly," HTN's Dancers do not perceive such music *as* dance

music. This is problematic, as their primary mode of engagement with music is via dance. Related, for Dancers enjoying country means "being inside" the music; being outside or leaving a part of the body "outside" is analogous to dancing poorly—which, in turn, means lacking the ability to recognize and enjoy music.

Learning to enjoy country prompts global changes, and many talk about the personal transformations undergone with surprise, betraying an awareness of the taste's class discrepant nature. As one regular noted: "*This* isn't me—or *wasn't* me. I never thought I'd have four pairs of boots." Briana refers to her taste as a "life change": "After going [to HTN] awhile, it became a happy habit. I found myself wanting to build my weekend around it. Now I know lots of bands that I'm a regular fan of, places with cheap beer and no cover that I go to three nights a week, at least." It is worth noting what Briana claims it would take for her to stop attending HTN: an injury severe enough to *prevent dancing*.

The "all or nothing" nature of Dancers' taste is also reflected in their penchant for wearing country-western garb (e.g., western-style shirts, cowboy hats and boots); while nearly all "dress up" for HTN, a fraction also wear such garb in their "everyday" lives[10]. Gomart and Hennion (1999) provide a possible explanation. Conceptualizing taste as performance, they argue that actors use "techniques" to facilitate attachment. Clothing may play such a role, enabling Dancers' taste[11]. That they would need "props" to facilitate attachment is unsurprising; "techniques" cultivate tastes and tasting actors, and of regulars, Dancers have farthest to go in becoming people able to appreciate country.

The discontinuous nature of Dancers' trajectories also throws light on their desire to

[10] Dancers are not only more likely to adopt a country-western style of dress than are other regulars, but also to experiment with some "country-appropriate" lifestyle choices.
[11] Alcohol may play a similar attachment-enabling role for Listeners.

implement rules at HTN. For instance, they disapprove of patrons who break dance conventions, and several openly judge Dancers who "take up too much room." Patrons who threaten dancing—those who "clown" and "come out drunk"— are tagged as potential problems. Their "strictness" is warranted: understood in the context of their trajectories, disruptions *are* threatening; while Listeners and Players are able to experience the music *as* country and enjoy HTN with or without "clowns" and "drunks," the latter disrupt Dancers' experience of country because they inhibit dancing— their past, and only, mode of engagement with the genre. Dancers are thus in an ironic position: of all regulars, they are most holistically engaged with country. And yet, they also have the most *fragile* taste: previous engagements have cultivated a taste for country as *music to dance to* and made them sensitive to the qualities of country essential to dance (i.e., a steady beat and "shuffle"); absent those qualities, Dancers can neither recognize nor "feel" the music.

Conclusions

Although Bourdieu's theory of taste allows that tastes can change over the life course, the processes via which they do so have to date been left vaguely theorized (Crossley 2013; Lizardo 2014). Instead, Bourdieu-inspired work on tastes has tended to focus on the social distribution of tastes, and on the "products" of primary and secondary socialization, i.e., primary and specific habitus, respectively. However as recent qualitative research on taste employing life trajectories has shown (e.g., Friedman 2012), habitus may not always be attuned to its environment, and these moments may re-direct trajectories and jumpstart changes in tastes not predicted by primary socialization. But analysis of these moments is difficult for researchers using the concept of habitus, as the latter accounts for the state of synchrony *achieved* from a process of re-socialization presumed but left largely unaccounted for. This raises the question of how social

scientists can grasp the dynamics that underlie, make possible, and structure habits of perception and judgment.

This work moves the study of taste forward by addressing this question. I propose a means to access dynamics of re-socialization, and demonstrate the relevance of these dynamics to understanding taste. While important for a general grasp on how tastes develop, these dynamics are especially critical for grasping how class discrepant tastes form. To be clear, I do not suggest scholars cannot account for the existence of class discrepant tastes or for more general changes in taste beyond primary socialization with the notion of specific habitus. But I *do* suggest using specific habitus to understand taste development beyond primary socialization risks obscuring the processes that cultivate particular orientations to cultural goods. These processes are important, as they structure tastes. As I have argued, Dewey's work offers a means to specify processes of taste development in a way that furthers Bourdieu's conception of taste. Dewey's concept of "experience" captures the generative dynamic between actor and environment that creates possibilities for new tastes. Specifically, as actors go about their lives, they must regularly overcome disruptions between existing habits and the environment. To do so, actors adapt to new conditions by modifying old habits. The interplay of habit and reflection makes re-adaption possible. In the context of aesthetics, when actors encounter cultural goods, they do so with habits of perception and evaluation acquired in past experience. But experience changes actors: in trying to make sense of and adapt to new situations, habits of perception and evaluation change, leading to new capacities for aesthetic response. In this way, tastes are funded by experience.

In addition to clarifying how tastes develop over the life course, there is another reason for studying processes of re-habituation: it allows researchers to grasp how objects, through

experience, acquire meaning. Cultural objects thus have the particular meanings they have to actors on the basis of past experience. My findings thus indicate that when studying taste, it is not enough to consider *what* actors' tastes are without also examining *how* they have acquired their tastes. This is because the *things* actors have tastes for are intimately tied to *how* they have acquired their tastes for them. Unless social scientists grasp the set of experiences that fund tastes, they merely scratch their surface.

My findings also speak to work on taste in a number of other ways. Most basically, they confirm that tastes can change over time and that actors are subject to multiple "heterogeneous" [re-] socializations (Lahire 2008:174). They also address issues of distinction and illustrate how it plays out within class bounds and is shaped by field logics (see Bellavance 2008; Friedman and Kuipers 2013; Hanquinet et al 2013): regulars draw boundaries between themselves and other fans by distinguishing between new and old country. Interestingly, they do not regard new country as the "lower" or more "authentic" form; they see it as a *different* genre altogether. But nuances aside, the "old/new" distinction appears to do the same symbolic work the "low/high" distinction does, i.e., legitimize taste—something HTN regulars' high status may make especially necessary.

That said, my data suggest that although distinction operates *within* the field of hard country, taste may not always be an expression of distinction more broadly, or clearly linked to class and predicted by primary socialization[12]. Consider Friedman's (2012, but see also Van Eijck 1999; Coulangeon and Lemel 2007) excellent study of upwardly mobile comedy fans as a

[12] Interestingly, there are no notable differences in the experiences of regulars with some exposure to country during primary socialization, and those without. A possible explanation for this, consistent with Bourdieu (1984), is that given regulars share the same class position, they would not have been inclined to appreciate it even as children. Moreover, those with exposure characterize it as fleeting—likely too fleeting to make an impact— and often unpleasant.

foil: there, one can understand why the acquisition of a high status taste would be desirable to a lower cultural capital consumer. But HTN presents a case of *downward* "mobility": for regulars, there is little, if any, status-related benefit associated with "getting into" country. Recently, scholars (e.g., Wacquant 2004; Fleury 2011) have suggested explicable forces (e.g., field effects, cultural institutions) other than those of distinction and primary socialization that may impact tastes. In some cases, these logics (including those of distinction) may do *more* than reproduce tastes: they may create *new* ones (Friedman 2012). Certainly, distinction continues to be relevant, as shown in the recent Poetics Special Edition on new forms of distinction. But without denying its power or that of primary socialization, HTN demonstrates other forces, including banal events (e.g., walking into a bar for a beer and seeing dancers) unrelated to the acquisition of cultural capital, can redirect trajectories and launch aesthetic re-orientation. This is consistent with Dewey's account of habit formation, where actors are regularly adapting to changing conditions and acquiring new capacities for response via everyday experiences—experiences that may *precede* dispositions.

Consistent with Bourdieu (1984), these findings illustrate that differences in primary and secondary socialization, captured in taste trajectories, and key sources of individuation. They also support the view that "taste diversity…reflects the slope of…life trajectories" (Friedman 2012:477), but show that "slope" is not solely determined by shifts in cultural capital. They also echo work pointing out the relevance of *how* goods are consumed. This has recently become a point of interest for social scientists interested in distinction (e.g., Holt 1997; Jarness 2015). For example, Jarness' (2015) consideration of cross-class differences in styles of consumption unveils variations in *ways* people enjoy and evaluate the same goods, demonstrating that "liking the same things does *not* necessarily indicate similar tastes" (77). Scholars (e.g., DeNora 2000;

Hennion 2005) who stress the active and embodied nature of taste make similar observations when they note that *how* people engage with cultural goods shapes the nature of their attachments. The body thus plays a critical role in creating capacities for response, and different "body techniques" result in different tastes (Crossley 2015). Dewey clarifies why engagement matters: modes of engagement cultivate different relations with cultural goods. These relations make qualities differentially perceptible, afford different experiences of cultural objects, and manifest as different tastes. Practice should thus not be ignored in studies of taste, as doing so amounts to removing that which gives tastes their integrity. Its significance to taste also underscores the need to supplement genre-oriented quantitative work with qualitative work; relying solely on the former may obfuscate important differences in consumption practices that yield variations in taste (see Friedman et al. 2015 for further discussion). Relatedly, doing so may impede identification of forces beyond primary socialization responsible for generating tastes.

These findings are generalizable to the extent they point to general dynamics of re-socialization: they indicate past experience matters for the reception of cultural goods, and shapes the aesthetic responses one can have. They do not presume *all* dancers will hear country as HTN's Dancers do; they do however indicate past engagements will effect perception, and people with different histories will exhibit variations in aesthetic response. In short, they will have different *tastes. What* those differences will be, and their relationship to past experience, is an empirical question; here, I have identified some differences and linked them to two aspects of experience, i.e., mode of engagement and trajectory, in one group of people. Importantly, these dynamics are not limited to understanding music tastes, but extend to those for other cultural goods like film, art, and literature.

Of course there are limitations. Because data come from regulars, it is not possible to determine how people who did not become regulars differ in terms of trajectory. It would be valuable to examine differences in trajectories that distinguish regulars from people who dislike country, or more compellingly, from pop country fans. Further, it is difficult to say if regulars exhibit different patterns of orientation to non-country music—whether their respective modes of engagement carry over to influence their experience of *other* genres and lead to similarly structured differences in taste. These questions are difficult to address given this study's predominant focus on one setting, but future work integrating comparative cases—especially negatives cases of "failed" taste acquisition— would greatly further understandings of taste dynamics.

In sum, this study extends work on taste by offering a way to study processes of re-habituation hitherto assumed but generally not theorized. Dewey's work implies that tastes develop from concrete situations that shape subjectivities. In this way, actors' reactions to and feelings for things in the world are funded: they "implicitly sum up a history" (Dewey 1958/1929:257). A full understanding of tastes thus hinges on consideration of the experiences that organize them. Applying these insights to data on individuals' aesthetic trajectories, researchers can work backwards from expressed tastes to uncover the experiences from which they develop. Doing so can bring researchers closer to specifying how actors acquire their tastes *and* what their tastes are for.

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Chapter 2
He heard, she heard: Toward a cultural sociology of the senses

Abstract

When studying cultural goods, sociologists have tended to focus on the production of those goods, and on the social patterning of tastes. To date, little work has considered the organization of cultural experience. This reflects both a general historical devaluation of the embodied and experiential aspects of social life, and a tendency among scholars to view language and discourse as distinct from embodied and practical elements of culture. In this paper, I introduce an interview method designed to facilitate the description of music experience. My data reveal gender differences in descriptions of a particular subtype of sonic experience, which suggest potential variations in experience. These findings indicate that (1) experience and discourse are culturally structured, (2) a more generative (re)conceptualization of the language-experience relation emphasizes domain interdependence rather than independence, and (3) particular types of language can facilitate the expression of harder-to-articulate qualities of experience.

Introduction

When studying cultural goods, sociologists have tended to focus on the production of those goods, and on the social distribution of tastes. However, little work has examined the organization of cultural experience. Indeed, for much of the 20th century, sociologists largely ignored experience and emphasized culture's symbolic elements. Historically, this led to a focus on language and to a model of culture as a text, and went hand in hand with a more general

devaluation of the aesthetic[1] dimensions of social life. However, in recent years, scholars influenced by Bourdieu (e.g., 1984) and engaged with research in cognitive science and psychology, have begun taking seriously the body's role in processes of meaning making, and have made strides in theoretically and empirically bringing the body into studies of culture (e.g., Cerulo 2018; Ignatow 2007; Lizardo 2017; Pagis 2010; Wacquant 2004; Winchester 2016).

One unfortunate consequence of this historical focus on language in culture studies is the tendency to view the body and discourse as distinct and opposed cultural domains. More specifically, conceptual knowledge is often equated with linguistic, non-embodied knowledge, and embodied knowledge is, in turn, understood as non-linguistic in nature (Pagis 2010; Winchester 2016). This dichotomy ignores variations in language and its use; although symbolic in the Peircean sense (1955/1940b:112), not all language is equally abstract (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and some kinds are better suited for grasping qualities of experience than are others (Scruton 1998/1974).

Moreover, there has been recent interest among sociologists in the potential contribution of the senses to studies of culture: because social life is fundamentally embodied (Crossley 2001), scholars have turned to the senses to examine how meanings are constructed via the body, and how the body grasps social meanings (e.g., Bosman et al. 2019; Cerulo 2015, 2018; Pagis 2010). In addition to promising findings, the senses have a research advantage: they allow for the collection of data respondents can provide: barring sensory processing disorders, brain damage, or synaesthesia, humans have senses that operate roughly the same way. So, when presented with tasks that attune them to sensory experience, respondents should be able to report *what* they feel,

[1] By "aesthetic," I refer to the word's Greek root, *aisthetikos,* meaning "grasped by the senses" (see Guyer 2014).

see, taste, or hear—even if they don't know *why*. This is in contrast to asking about abstract meanings and theories, which are less grounded in concrete physical experience and more fluid and subject to situational characteristics (Martin 2011).

In this paper, I examine the social variability of cultural experience by facilitating descriptions of the experience of a particular cultural object: music. To do so, I draw on recent research on the senses as sources of cultural knowledge (Bosman et al 2019; Cerulo 2015, 2018; Hockey 2006; Maslen 2015). For example, Cerulo (2018) examines the meanings people extract from perfumes, and links differences in meaning-extraction to social location. Her work assumes—and demonstrates—that the senses are encultured: as Marx (1978) and Simmel (1969/1921) argued, the senses mediate experience, and actors develop sensory capacities via interactions in their social environments. In this way, "embodied experience carries cultural meaning" and "bodily sensations are in themselves a mode of interpretation" (Pagis 2010:473; see also Pagis 2009). This claim that the senses are culturally variable is ultimately one about enculturation, and is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of habitus development: for Bourdieu, sensory capacities, or dispositions, develop during (early) socialization experiences. Accordingly, because the senses mediate experience and the latter shapes the former, different trajectories through social space should produce different ways of experiencing the same cultural objects (e.g., Pitts-Taylor 2016). In this framework, experience is a kind of sensory education via which actors develop into persons for whom things in the world look, feel, and sound certain ways.

While previous work on the body and culture tends to draw primarily on Bourdieu, I rely on American pragmatists Dewey, Peirce, and James; many of Bourdieu's influential ideas are found in their earlier work, and the pragmatists offer a particularly clear vocabulary for

conceptualizing the body's role in meaning making. Accordingly, I define "experience" as do Dewey and James: an actor's phenomenal orientation to the world, built up over the life course through interactions with the cultural environment (Dewey 2005/1934:22). I focus on the description of non-classical, contemporary music for several reasons. First, it is often possible to get a sense of the quality of contemporary pop songs from short segments; they usually range from 3 to 5 minutes in length, and have a consistent quality graspable from an excerpt. This is often not the case for classical music, which tends to be longer and where the meaning of any portion is only comprehensible in light of the whole. Second, because of its prevalence in popular culture, contemporary music is an art form readily accessible to a broad audience.

I begin by providing the theoretical background that informs my approach to measuring cultural experience, and then present an interview protocol designed to facilitate the description of music experience. I focus on gender variations in description because gender is a variable with implications for enculturation. In this paper, I limit my analysis to descriptions of an attribute salient to my respondents, namely, the experience of sound as "sexual."

Sensing and making sense: Finding meaning in experience

Pragmatists like Dewey and James argued that the meaning of an object or event is equivalent to an actor's response to it; as James (1995/1907:41) put it, "grossness is what grossness does." This recalls Mead's (1967/1934:77) formulation, in which meaning is defined as what a thing "calls out" for an actor to do. In this framework, meaning is a quality of experience and differs from "significance," which refers to an emergent understanding, often the product of extended reflection. This distinction between meaning as a quality of experience and meaning as a product of reflection appears, under different labels, in the work of various theorists: "immediate experience" versus "symbolic reflection" (Mead 2002/1932); "qualitative"

versus “abstract” thought, and “primary” versus “secondary” experience (Dewey (1998/1905); the modalities of “firstness” and “thirdness” (Peirce 1955/1940a). For the case of music, Pratt (1961:84) differentiates between “embodied meaning, which is iconic with the sensory-perceptual material” and “designative meaning, which refers to something beyond the material given in perception.” Across the board, the salient distinction is between meaning that is immediate, prereflective, and bodily grasped, and meaning that is abstract, conceptual, and linguistically articulable.

In a pragmatist framework, meaning and response are fused in experience. So, things are always perceived as *some thing* (i.e., as meaningful): “I start and am flustered by a noise heard. Empirically, that noise is fearsome; it *really* is, not merely phenomenally or subjectively so. That is *what* it is experienced as being” (Dewey 1998/1905:116). This has been found to be literally true: Kay and Laurent (1999) demonstrated that rat olfactory bulb mitral cell response is modulated by previous experience with odors. Cell response is therefore not constant, but can be modified by altering the meanings odors have for rats. So, organisms do not respond to “raw” or “objective” stimuli, but immediately perceive them as meaningful (see Katz [1999:46, 316-7] on the “seamlessness” of perception and response in social interaction).

Further, meaning is qualitative: the units of experience are qualities, and any alteration in perceived quality amounts to a change in the experienced object: “the quality *is* what it means, namely, the object to which it belongs” (Dewey 2005/1934:270; see also Peirce 1955/1940a:77). Qualities are also “*potentials* for experience”; they exist in objects but are only “actualized,” or sensed, by actors in experience (Martin 2011:186). The qualities an actor senses depend on the dispositions s/he arrives to a stimulus with. This is the crux of Dewey’s (e.g., 1958/1925) claim that experience is funded: experience cultivates particular habits of perception and response, and

these habits make actors sensitive to some, but not other, qualities of experience. This accounts for the fact that two actors with different histories (and consequently, different dispositions) can look at the same, say, blue and grey streaks on canvas and experience them as "dreamy" and as "dreary," respectively. Because present experience is the cumulative product of past experience, people with different histories can experience the same things differently: an actor's "mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of [his/her] experience of the whole world up to that date" (James 1950/1890:234).

Finding the right words

The aforementioned suggest that the experience of cultural goods is likely to vary on the basis of variables relevant to enculturation. One way of investigating this is to examine variations in the qualities different kinds of social actors sense in the same cultural objects. However, the distinction between first order experience—which is fundamentally qualitative—and second order experience—which is discursive and linguistic in nature—creates a challenge: simply put, how can sociologists access qualities of experience when communication requires their translation into symbolic, second order form (i.e., language)? Peirce offers a vocabulary to conceptualize this puzzle, and his ideas have been leveraged fruitfully in the past by ethnomusicologists to study music experience (Turino 2014). For Peirce (1955/1940a), experience takes three forms, which he calls firstness, secondness, and thirdness. The first and the third are of particular relevance to this work. Firstness refers to the prereflective experience of a phenomenon's qualities, which are "revealed" to actors by their senses (77). Firstness is a quality of "feeling" that "consists in nothing else, and which is of itself all that it is" (81). It requires no thought or analysis; qualities in objects present themselves to actors, who sense those that the senses they "are furnished with are adapted to reveal" (77).

But somewhat ironically, it is impossible to actually grasp firstness: "But when he asks what is the content of the present instant, his question always comes too late. The present has gone by, and what remains of it is greatly metamorphosed" (Peirce 1955/1940a:83). What results is thirdness, or an experience that, although rooted in firstness, has become the object of thought and so, is abstract and symbolic: "It differs from immediate consciousness, as a melody does from one prolonged note" (96). Crucially, language is suited to capturing thirdness, not firstness. The challenge with measuring qualities of music experience is thus to "explore and explain the expressive and emotional potentials of music—which are reliant on iconic and indexical signs—through the carefully delineated use of" symbols (Turino 2014:201). In other words, the challenge is to capture a first with a third.

Although in a strict Peircean sense, language is symbolic and as such, a third (1955/1940b:112), not all language is equally abstract and propositional, and has been used successfully by scholars in the past to study experience (e.g., Bosman et al. 2019; Cerulo 2018; Maslen 2015). Scruton's (1998/1974) work on aesthetic description is particularly helpful in delineating how language can be used to communicate experience. He explains that common words can be applied to novel contexts—without undergoing a change of meaning (49). This kind of "extended" or "non-standard use" of words, in which words retain their typical meaning in an atypical context, is the crux of aesthetic description. The key point is that people can use words from their everyday lexicon—for example, "thick" or "curvy"—non-figuratively to communicate their *experience* of, say, a song. This is in contrast to using such language to describe the *song itself* (i.e., the *object* of art). The latter involves the notation of formal properties. Thus, when words like "prickly" and "rubbery" are applied to describe an *object* rather than one's *experience* of the object, their use becomes metaphorical (i.e., a song cannot

literally be "prickly," but one can communicate the experience of it by drawing on the ordinary meaning of "prickly")[2]. This extended and non-figurative use of language has an important advantage: researchers (e.g., Herbert 2009) who have used diary and interview data to explore music experience report that respondents often employ figures of speech to describe sound. These are problematic as they often hang together not because they reflect experience, but because of convention. Stock phrases (e.g., "George Clinton killed it"; "Taylor Swift fell flat") are convenient short hands for communicating broad types of experience (e.g., positive, negative), but fall short of capturing qualities of experience. Related, one might describe songs by AC/DC or The Grateful Dead as "hard" and "trippy" even if they sound "soft" and "folky," respectively. In both cases, attributes derive from classificatory conventions and associations, rather than from one's experience.

Part of the problem is that because people are rarely tasked with articulating sensory qualities, they lack a strong vocabulary to do so (Bosman et al 2019; Maslen 2015:59). Much easier to articulate are "significance" qualities (e.g., *bold*, *meaningful*) and formal properties of sound (e.g., high/low pitch). Accordingly, Bloch (1991:193) recommends protocols that discourage the use of "stylistic devices" and encourage descriptions "of the way things look, sound, feel, smell, taste and so on"—descriptions, in short, that draw "on the realm of bodily experience." This advice has proved fruitful: in recent work, Bosman et al (2019) found the use of "sensorial wordings" helped respondents describe their embodied and difficult-to-articulate

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[2] Because aesthetic descriptions communicate *experience*, they "need not have truth conditions in the strong sense" (Scruton 1998/1974:55). In other words, the terms used to describe experience need not literally map onto the objects they describe because they are not "used to describe some *de facto* relation with the central case" (50). In Scruton's words: "In aesthetics you have to see for yourself precisely because what you have to 'see' is not a property: your knowledge that an aesthetic feature is 'in' the object is given by the *same* criteria that show that you 'see' it" (54).

experience of sex. For the case of music, I argue that by scaffolding the use of adjectives not typically used to describe music that lack obvious mappings to formal properties of sound, sociologists can circumvent many issues associated with using language to capture qualities of experience.

Method

My approach to studying cultural experience is informed by pragmatist conceptions of meaning as a quality of experience, by Scruton's (1998/1974) insights on aesthetic description, and by Hevner's (1936) work on composition classification. In her research, respondents listened to classical music selections and chose adjectives from a list that matched the emotion (e.g., *melancholic*, *joyful*) conveyed. Building on this, I designed the following protocol:

First, interviewees were asked about their aesthetic biographies. Specifically, I asked whether they were musicians, what music they grew up listening to, and what their current likes/ dislikes are. Next, I presented them with 40 randomly distributed white index cards, each with an adjective, typed in black ink, on it (see Appendix, Table A for the list of adjectives). I offered adjectives to scaffold a discussion of harder-to-articulate experiential qualities. The terms gave respondents a means to communicate their music experience—a challenging and unfamiliar task—with words already a part of their everyday lexicon (see Scruton 1998/1974). The list developed with the research and is in no way exhaustive. I began by freely generating a list of commonly used and easily graspable terms and their opposites. I then continued to adjust the list in pretests, adding terms that (1) are commonly understood, used, and a part of an English-speaking adult's lexicon, (2) are not typically applied to music, (3) do not refer to emotion (*cheerful, morose*), evaluation (e.g., *funny, lame),* or technical properties of sound (e.g., "high" pitch), and (4) refer to a concrete experience. Accordingly, I included words referring to tactile,

visual, auditory, proprioceptive, and taste qualities. As I conducted pretest interviews, I eliminated terms that were never used, or that when used, did not have a concrete experiential referent. Respondents rarely reported a dimension of experience was not covered by the list, but even so, I allowed them to go beyond the terms in their descriptions. Because of this, there is no reason to think the terms restricted or channeled descriptions. Henceforth, when I refer to a term from the adjective list, I italicize it to distinguish it from terms respondents introduced in their descriptions.

After presenting the list, I played respondents 12 to 15 sound clips, each 12-25 seconds long (henceforth, stimuli or samples), from a sample of 25. To keep sound quality constant, I played all selections from a Macbook Pro. Stimuli were taken from contemporary, non-classical music. Because it was crucial respondents not recognize the songs or artists from which the stimuli were excerpted, a variety of non-mainstream music deemed interesting yet accessible by the author and a second sociologist with significant music knowledge were selected. The selection of stimuli for each respondent depended on interviewee characteristics, and I avoided presenting music from genres respondents reported having expertise in to reduce extra-musical association. Moreover, because pilot research indicated stimuli with lyrics encourage the selection of adjectives descriptive of lyrical content, no stimuli with discernable lyrics were used (see Appendix, Table B for a list of samples referred to here). For each sample, respondents were asked to select five adjectives that best described the sound and to explain why the terms applied. When necessary, I provided prompts to facilitate response, clarify ambiguous word use, and flesh out vague remarks (e.g., "Where does the [*curvy*]-ness come from?"; "What makes the sound [*rubbery*]?").

Data

Sixty-one interviews (M=34; F=27; age range: 22-68), ranging from 80 to 120 minutes in length, were conducted over 14 months.[3] All were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. Previous work connected me to members of various local music communities, and I sampled from these communities and relied on key informants for referrals beyond. Slightly over half of respondents are musicians, producers, radio DJs, or sound engineers. The rest do not have extensive music expertise, but consider themselves fans. The majority of my respondents live in a large midwestern city (but come from across the U.S.); 13 are originally from countries outside of the U.S., including India, Russia, Israel, and New Zealand. The majority are white, identify as heterosexual, and hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

During data collection, it became clear that although male and female respondents often agreed on which samples were *sexual,*[4] their descriptions varied in interesting ways. Notably, different adjectives and aural dynamics, for male and female respondents, correlate with *sexual*: male respondents hear as *sexual* sounds that are *lush, open,* and *fuzzy,* and focus overwhelmingly —and in complete contrast to female respondents— on the *relational dynamics* of stimuli.[5] In contrast, female respondents emphasize *movement,* are more likely to hear as *sexual* sounds that are *curvy, jagged,* and *masculine*, and to pay attention to space—specifically, whether it is filled or unfilled. Unlike male respondents, they experience "unpredictability" and "unscripted-ness" as *sexual.* Further, even when male and female respondents select the same adjectives (most

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[3] Of those, 14 involved a different protocol in which terms were sorted into groups from which respondents could select only one. Only adjective selection data from the ungrouped selection task are considered here. But, because all respondents regardless of selection protocol were asked in the description component of the interview to go beyond the terms provided, I consider description data from all 61 interviews.
[4] None of the stimuli used refer to sex in any way.
[5] See Heider and Simmel's (1944) classic study of shape perception.

commonly *curvy, lush,* and *open)* to describe *sexual* stimuli, they often use the same words to anchor different descriptions.

Accordingly, I conducted a more thorough investigation of all cases where respondents called stimuli *sexual*. To do this, I looked at the 82 instances across interviews where *sexual* was used to describe a sample. I considered the adjectives that co-occurred with *sexual* any time the term was selected, paying particular attention to the explanations respondents gave for why the attribute applied. The findings I present below come from an analysis of the adjective selection data from a subset of respondents (n=35; M=21, F=14; age range: 22-68), and music experience descriptions of all 45 (M= 26, F=19; age range: 22-68) respondents who selected *sexual* to describe a stimulus at least once. When analyzing these data, I also considered other potentially salient variables like music expertise and sexual orientation. But, descriptions did not vary notably or consistently by those variables, as they did by gender.

Do you hear what I hear? Gendered descriptions of *sexual* sound

For male and female respondents, respectively, descriptions of *sexual* sound fall along a continuum bounded by two poles. Although descriptions share some similarities, there are notable between-gender differences that suggest possible variations in music experience. My analysis focuses primarily on these variations, and I present my data in such a way so as to highlight these. For both genders, descriptions tend to conform to one of two main organizations, or experiential gestalts. What is more, when respondents offer descriptions, they appear to do so with an awareness of—and in reference to—a second kind of experience different from, yet complementary to, the one they describe. Each gestalt presented below summarizes regularities in my data and reflects common recurring themes. In their descriptions, male respondents emphasize *relationship dynamics*, such that one type of description is characterized by sonic

give-and-take, and another by an agentic dynamic. Female respondents anchor descriptions in types of *motion*: one kind of description features free, indeterminate movement, and the other regulated, controlled movement.

Male sexual *gestalt (a): Communal, give-and-take dynamic*

Communal interaction and growth are central to the first subtype of *sexual* sonic description. Male respondents apply the term to describe the experience of sounds "in relationship," and attribute *sexual*-ness to the interaction of sonic elements. For example, Aiden (42yrs; non-musician; C #3) links *sexual*-ness to the interaction of two voices: "They were playing off each other, moving in and out of each other in a living, *lush*, *sexual* way. The notes were slipping and sliding in and out of each other like the fibers of silk, filling each other's space in a vibrant way." The sense of "give and take" is important. For instance, Luke (29 yrs; musician; C#3) describes the same interplay highlighted by Aiden as "a give and take between two partners." This is associated with a kind of *sexual* experience that is, in Luke's words, "a balanced" or "equal type of *sexual*" distinct from a "forceful, almost not consensual, very male-driven" experience.

This communal relational core is articulated in various ways. Peter (42 yrs; non-musician; C#3) focuses on the "ritualistic" nature of the sound, which he says is neither *feminine* nor *masculine*: "The first thing I thought was tribal and communal, because the sounds felt like they were interacting in a ritualistic way. They're *round*, not as in shape, but as in how they interact. There's no lead sound, they're all equal and…facing inward towards each other." The sound is *warm,* with a "natural *lush*-ness. Like, the community is ready to harvest." Others echo the notion of "harvest" via references to fertility and reproduction: Andrew (52 yrs; musician; C#6) describes a stimulus as "fertile for breeding and full of possibilities." He attributes this to

the "percussion groove" and "melodic content," which is "spatial and full of promise." Together, these elements create the feeling that "it's going to be a good harvest, there are going to be twins." Such stimuli tend also to be described as "slow" and "heavy." In Andrew's words, the sound "[is] dipping down with the weight of the percussion." He likens it visually to the curves of a woman's hips and, conceptually, to foreplay.

In their descriptions, male respondents refer to stimuli as "living things" that are tactilely appealing, *lush, open, curvy,* and *hot*. Matt's (27 yrs; non-musician; C#4) description emphasizes the textural smoothness, *silky* movement, and *round*-ness of the sound, and exemplifies this subtype of experience: "There's a rolling quality to the chords…they have their own cycles, mini climaxes set against the voice, like what you'd see if you were watching wind go over an open field, grass bending and then coming back up. It's like an open moan, a very soft thing. Not high-pitched, not jagged." Others liken stimuli to fruits like mangos (for their shape and supple flesh) and plums (for their color and, when ripe, squishy wetness). Kenny (30yrs; non-musician; C#8) compares the sound to peaches that "are not too soft that they're going to squish in your hands, but not too firm that you don't want to bite into them." The sound, he concludes, "has just the right amount of give."

Such stimuli "draw" respondents "in"; they are "alluring," have emotional depth, and a unique *open/closed* dynamic. Specifically, male respondents describe as *sexual* both *open* and *closed* sounds. My data indicate that although *open* and *closed* can refer to spatial properties, it is in this case more appropriate to view the terms as denoting the ability or inability, respectively, to invite respondents in. Thus, a common distinction at the level of discourse—*open/closed*—does not here translate to an experiential binary: for the case of *sexual* sound, *closed*-ness creates the boundary that permits entry. The distinction between *open* and *closed* sound helps explain

why respondents find appealing stimuli described as "soaring" and that create expansive soundscapes, and those that convey the sense of small, enclosed space. In short, even sounds experienced as spatially *wide* can be experienced as *closed* as long as respondents feel they can "get into" or "latch onto" them. So, what seems central to *sexual*-ness for male respondents is the subjective sense of being able to "get into" a sound, regardless of its spatial dimensions[6]. This *open/closed* dynamic is also related to a sense of emotional intimacy: stimuli with this dynamic are "small and separate from the outside world" (Casey; 25 yrs; non-musician; C#3) and they make respondents feel like they are being "taken into something… pulled in slowly, eased in"[7] (Clark; 47 yrs; musician; C#12).

Male sexual *gestalt (b): Agentic, ego-oriented dynamic*

For male respondents, *sexual* sonic descriptions also take a second form, one that reflects a more agentic dynamic. Such descriptions are characterized by sonic *lean*-ness, one-dimensionality, and *cold*-ness. Stimuli that reflect this dynamic lack warmth and vibrancy, and they cut as they are cut off. They also tend to be perceived as devoid of all, but especially human, life. And yet, relationship continues to be central to these descriptions. But, whereas the first subtype is characterized by a developmental and communal experience, the second is more "primal," "soulless," and "focused on itself." Unsurprisingly, stimuli described as such are slightly more likely to be perceived as *masculine* than as *feminine.* Scott's (56; non-musician;

[6] Derek (42 yrs; non-musician; C#10) refers to *closed*-ness to explain his negative response: "[the sample] has no room for me to attach to it. There wasn't a lot of room to get into it, no entry into that sound, or hook to bring me in." This lack of what one respondent called "entry points" is often associated with a negative response.
[7] This is in contrast to female respondents, who talk about *sexual* sounds as "going into" or "coming at" them. It is interesting that although the experience of sound "coming at" one is not restricted to female respondents, only female respondents characterize *sexual* stimuli in those terms. Male respondents say some stimuli "come at" them—but never those they call *sexual.*

C#11) description exemplifies this subtype. Likening the sound to "carbon nanofibers," he notes how the combination of "primitive" rhythm, *narrow* frequency range, and mechanical repetition conveys a sense of "smuttiness" and "lasciviousness" that while "arousing," fails to "evolve." In his words, the sound "stayed within a *narrow* channel and wasn't offering new things; it didn't develop, but stayed focused on its own rhythmic-ness." Andrew (52; musician; C#11) concentrates on the "hard slapping bass," *flat* repetition, and "fast- and-steady in a forward way" motion. These characteristics prompt him to select *sterile* and *coarse*. The sound, he explains, is "exploitative" and "pornographic"; it "doesn't feel like it's building up to anything"; it "stay[s] the same and is completely void of emotion and life."

This second subtype features an egocentric relationship dynamic, or what Matt (42; musician; C#4) calls a "perfunctory" *sexual*-ness. Matt begins by identifying a *feminine* (the "cooing vocals") and a *masculine* ("the rhythmically insistent drums") component. He explains that independently, neither element is *sexual*—in fact, he refers to the sound's overall texture as "scratchy." But their interaction, on the other hand, is: "The vocals are *cold*— it's not a 'come hither' cooing. They're not sung from the diaphragm, but from the head. There's an affected distance, where they're detached from the rest of the music, which is just a straight 4/4, on-the-beat percussion, the basic rhythm of sex." Such sounds are "forceful," "single-minded," and *narrow.* Rick (47; musician; C#5) notes how the sample fails to "go far in any direction" and "stays incessantly on one, single-minded track." For Andrew (52 yrs; musician; C#2), the "slow and steady, unchanging beat" contributes to the *sexual* quality. But, the *sexual*-ness is "superficial"; "it's casual sexy, like a hook-up." The sound lacks "meaningfulness": "it sounds completely *sterile* and mechanical and inhuman; [it's] repetitious, not soulful, the opposite of fat and *lush*."

It is important to emphasize that despite the negative tenor of these descriptions, male respondents find these stimuli attractive. Indeed, the feeling of being drawn into a stimulus continues to be central to this gestalt, too. Further, although gender occasionally figures into explanations, its role is comparatively small in organizing descriptions. Rather, when describing *sexual* sound, male respondents focus on one of two sonic relational dynamics, each of which seems to roughly reflect a particular type of erotic encounter.

Female sexual *gestalt (a): Free, indeterminate movement*

For my male respondents, the most salient dimension of *sexual* sonic experience is a sound's relational dynamic: descriptions center on whether sounds interact communally or agentically, and the former tend to be described as *lush, curvy,* and *open,* and the latter as *narrow, sterile,* and *coarse*. In somewhat surprising contrast, female respondents never discuss "relationship" in descriptions of *sexual* sound. Although their descriptions also point to two subtypes of *sexual* sonic experience, they focus primarily on motion—on the way sounds move—rather than on relational dynamics. More precisely, they identify two types of movement: slow, indeterminate, self-generated movement with an emphasis on return, and fast, goal-oriented, other-generated movement with an emphasis on repetition. This is in contrast to male respondents, for whom *sexual* sounds can be fast or slow, regardless of subtype. Moreover, male respondents often hear *sterile* sounds as *sexual.* But, my female respondents never perceive *sterile* stimuli as *sexual*[8]. Likely related is the fact that they also do not pick terms like *cold* and

[8] The difference does not seem to stem from variations in word use; male and female respondents share understandings of what makes a sound *sterile*, and the latter frequently use *sterile* to describe non-*sexual* samples.

closed when describing *sexual* stimuli. For them, *sexual* stimuli are always *hot* and *open,* regardless of subtype.

Relaxed, freely cycling, and rolling motion characterizes the first kind of female *sexual* description. These stimuli take "their natural course" (Elise; 40yrs; musician; C#15), are heard as *curvy*, *warm,* and *spacious,* and progress in an unhindered, exploratory way. Kristin (33yrs; non-musician; C#9) emphasizes these qualities when she points out the sound's "relaxed and comfortable" gait, "soft repetition, intensifying slightly with each repeat," and gradual build up in speed and volume, all which convey a sense of cycling, forward motion. Indeed, female respondents use *curvy* to describe primarily movement: *curvy* sounds do not progress linearly, but rather swirl and spiral in a light and airy way. Take Karla's (39 yrs; musician; C#4) description: "Listening to this is like watching clouds move, how they turn in on each other. The voices fold in on each other, and then each *new* sound folds in on the others, like steam curling from a boiling teapot."[9] This progression is described as "free," and is tied to a sense of boundlessness and exploration: "the sensation is of opening up" (33yrs; non-musician; C#1). This is in contrast to male respondents, for whom bounded-ness is key to *sexual* sonic experience across subtypes. Maria (33yrs; musician; C#6) articulates this when she discusses the way that "the boundaries in the sound…constantly shrink and expand." Syncopation is important: rather than being "methodically timed out," the pace varies in a gently pitching and entraining way: "The rhythm isn't measured—it's not 1, 2, 3, 4, on the beat. It's stop…and go, stop…and go."

[9] Male respondents also hear *curvy* sounds as *sexual*, but typically use *lush* to describe the same qualities. One possible reason for this may be that female respondents emphasize movement, and so may orient more to sound's diachronic qualities. It is possible to imagine *lush*-ness as a synchronic variant of *curvy*-ness. It is also interesting that although *curvy*-ness is, for males, associated with *feminine sexual*-ness, female respondents link *curvy*-ness to *feminine*-ness in descriptions of *feminine* sound, but rarely select *curvy* with *sexual* and *feminine*.

Lara (27yrs; musician; C#5) too refers to freedom of movement when she distinguishes "this kind" of *sexual* sonic experience from one elicited by another stimulus earlier in her interview. She explains: "this one is a different type of *sexual*: it's more a free-and-happy, nature-hippy kind. I want to say natural and free, because of the freedom of the rhythm that comes from the unusual time signature." She refers to the experience as an "upper body-*sexual*" originating "from the rounder parts of the body, like the head and breasts." This contrasts with the "other type of *sexual*," or "lower body" type, which originates from the "upper thighs" (C# 11).

Space also figures prominently in descriptions. But unlike male respondents who focus on the *open/closed* dimension of space, female respondents focus on whether space is unfilled or filled. Unfilled space characterizes the first kind of *sexual* description. For example, Maria (33; musician; C#6) describes the stimulus as a "*round*, expanding sphere" that gives "a sense of room." Ava (31yrs; musician; C#6) echoes her, noting the sound's slow movement, which conveys a sense of "space coming at" her.

Finally, although female respondents occasionally mention the term "organic," it is not central to descriptions as it is for male respondents, who talk often about fruits and harvests. Stimuli identified as *sexual* are sometimes perceived as organic, but they are just as likely to be perceived as inorganic. For instance, Elise (40yrs; non-musician; C#13) talks about a stimulus' "gauzy, man-made fibers," and adds that even though "man-made," the sound is still natural: "It's slow and chilled out, with no pressure. It felt like it wasn't in a hurry to get to where it was going; it was languid and relaxed, how sex should be." Her last remark raises the possibility that female respondents may divide *sexual* experience according to a logic that differentiates between what feels natural to *them,* and the less-natural preferred progression of an (implied male) alter.

Female sexual *gestalt (b): Controlled, regulated movement*

The second subtype of female *sexual* sonic experience is characterized by heat, speed, and *jagged*-ness. These samples are stimulating, but sound "regulated" and "forced." Respondents frequently talk about aural and tactile roughness, and describe such sounds as heavy, dense, and *dirty*. They do not move naturally, but are "adrenalized"; they are "intentionally not clean, like black pepper: dark, with an earthiness and a *crisp* edge" (Samantha; 59yrs; musician; C#11). In contrast to male respondents for whom lack of sonic development is central to the second subtype, sonic progression characterizes all female respondents' *sexual* descriptions. Interestingly, female respondents say sounds that progress predictably or "one-dimensionally" (two prominent qualities in male respondents' descriptions) are too boring to be *sexual*. Some clarification is needed. Female respondents associate one-dimensional sounds with *masculine*-ness, but only male respondents associate one-dimensional sounds with *masculine sexual*-ness. This is noteworthy because some of the same stimuli the latter call *sexual, sterile*, and one-dimensional are identified as *sexual* by the former. But female respondents do not experience the stimuli like their male counterparts— they hear them as generative and evolving, albeit in a controlling and forced way. When female respondents identify a sample as one-dimensional, they call it *masculine* but never *sexual.*

In descriptions of this second subtype, female respondents are more likely to select *masculine* and to report feeling encroached upon by the sound.[10] Take Lyla's (24yrs; musician; C#5) account of a guitar line, which she experiences as stimulating: "It's almost teasing, the way the riff goes on, as if trying to create some sort of frisson. There's a back and forth with the

[10] Male respondents talk about the experience of stimuli "coming at" or "hitting" them, too—but only in non-*sexual* sonic contexts.

guitars, and even the pitch of the guitar—it's hitting the teasing spot." The sound is "mouth watering," like "biting into a honeycrisp apple," and the tone is "subtly aggressive." Samantha (59yrs; musician) also hears some progressions as *masculine* and *sexual*: "It has a rhythm associated with a kind of masculine thrusting movement—it's forward-leaning, not laid back" (C#11); "it's not *aggression*, more a forward-moving force" (C#5). In this way, movement—whether a sample is experienced as moving forward forcefully, or as cycling indeterminately—is a salient dimension structuring female respondents' descriptions of *sexual* sound.

The role of sonic aggression in descriptions is complex. Nearly all mention it, and indicate that some aggression is attractive. But, there is a limit on how much. Specifically, when describing aggressive sounds, female respondents emphasize that samples are "not exactly" or are "almost" aggressive. Consider Samantha's (59yrs; musician; C#5) choice of language: "It's *coarse*, a little *dirty*, and a little *jagged* and feels like hemp...You could touch it and it wouldn't hurt you, but it's still rough." Stimuli that jump the line between "almost aggressive" and "aggressive" lose their *sexual* quality and are experienced only as *masculine*. For example, when I asked Lindsay (26yrs; musician; C#11) why the stimulus she called "driving," "stripped down," and "aggressive"—all terms she previously used to describe a *sexual* stimulus— was not *sexual*, she replied that the sample was "too aggressive to be *sexual*. If it were a little more nuanced melodically it could be sexual, but it's so *straight* and driving that I'm turned off."

Sharp, intentional, forward motion often engenders the experience of being overwhelmed by sensation. Maria (33yrs; musician) articulates this when she describes "this kind" of *sexual* experience as a "go go go" one that "makes the blood rush to the head," (C#13; this is in contrast to what she previously referred to as a "stop and go" *sexual* experience [C#6]). Such sounds are *thick,* and *thick*-ness is associated with physical power and strength. In her words: "this is an

active and intense, almost athletic *sexual* experience with a lot of power." A minority draw on organic imagery in their descriptions: the sounds are so full of energy like "fruits that have reached maximum capacity." For others, the intensity is better captured with reference to machinery: Agatha (39yrs; non-musician; C#2) compares the sound's energy to the buzzing of an electric light bulb.

Finally, a handful experiences musical unpredictability as *sexual*. This unpredictability makes them uncomfortable and feel on edge—but in a sexually exciting way. For example, Caroline (25yrs; musician; C#10) notes how "The sound builds in volume and pitch, bringing the creepiness to a dissonant peak. It's sour and makes me want to cringe, like when you taste something sour, lemons or vinegar." Jill (28yrs; non-musician; C#7) relates a similar experience of trying to "hold onto" and predict the music, only to have it "slip away": "I was expecting something, but something else happened. It's scripted, but carelessly. It's an unstable, indeterminate, volatile *sexual*." For Sophia (36yrs; non-musician; C#10), the experience is akin to being out of control: "That was *jagged* because it was discordant; you don't know where it's going, it doesn't have a recognizable melody, so it's difficult and uncompromising…It had an attitude, like, this isn't going to be your redemption song or your love song. This is *our* song."

Robustness check: Descriptions of music experience, or associations with sex?

My sound description data suggest that when male and female respondents hear sounds as *sexual,* they may not be having identical experiences, even when they select similar terms. Several plausible interpretations exist, and I here address each in turn. First, it is possible respondents simply select random adjectives to describe the samples. But given the order in my data, this seems extremely unlikely. Second, it is possible respondents hear stimuli, some of which trigger a *sexual* response that they do not know how to articulate. In order to complete the

task, they just select four adjectives that they associate with *sexual*. In this scenario, gestalts do not reflect gendered differences in experience, but gendered differences in *sexual* associations.

To address this, I conducted a second set of interviews (n=18; M=9, F=9; age range 19-64) to measure associations with the term *sexual*. I presented respondents with the same adjective set used in the sound interview and asked them, first, to select four words they associate with *sexual* and, second, to select four words they would never associate with *sexual.* These data make a compelling case that the music description data presented above do indeed reflect experiences of sound rather than associations with the term *sexual*. To elaborate, in the association task, all respondents tend to associate the same adjectives with *sexual*, i.e., *wet, feminine,* and *hot*. To that, female respondents add *pregnant,* and male respondents add *dirty.* This pattern departs from that observed in the sound interviews, where the latter were most likely to call *sexual* sounds they heard as *fuzzy, lush,* and *open.* In the association task, male respondents never associate *fuzzy* or *lush* with *sexual,* and only one ever selected *open.* While *curvy* was often associated with *sexual* by both male and female respondents (always to refer to the female body), no female respondent ever associated *jagged* or *masculine* with *sexual*—qualities they often employed to describe *sexual* sound.

Moreover, the explanations offered in the association task differ from those that dominate *sexual* sound descriptions. That is, when asked to associate, respondents almost exclusively talk about sex, sexual attraction, and parts of the body during sex. As one male respondent put it: "all the words I picked [*hot, wet, sticky, viscous*] have to do with me being *sexual*, or observing *sexual* things" (64; non-musician). It is therefore unsurprising that most respondents spoke about sex or sex appeal when justifying selections: "I chose *feminine* because I'm a heterosexual male, and that's instinct, that's what I'm attracted to" (25yrs; non-musician). *Dirty* is often also

selected, and respondents make clear they intend it "not in the gross, grimy way" but rather "in the sense of, someone being *dirty* sexually, saying *dirty* things" (25 yrs; non-musician). This figurative use of *dirty*—a figurativeness also present in explanations of why *hot* is associated with *sexual* (e.g., "someone who is *hot* is sexually attractive")—is absent from the sound interviews, where *dirty* and *hot* refer to a lack of sonic cleanliness and temperature, respectively. Finally, some female respondents select *pregnant,* noting that it is "literally a possible outcome of sex."[11]

The more convincing case against the possibility that gestalts merely capture respondents' associations with *sexual* comes from the never-associate data. Male respondents are most likely to say *jagged, acidic, sterile,* and *dry* have no association with *sexual*. Female respondents agree: *jagged, acidic, cracked,* and *greasy* are "the opposite of what *sexual* means." Generally, these words are perceived as negative and hence, as incompatible with *sexual.* As Zach (27yrs; non-musician) notes, "*Greasy* and *viscous* seem like disgusting words, whereas *sexual* is the opposite of that. It's attractive." This is compelling, as these words feature prominently in descriptions of *sexual* sound. There thus is a mismatch between qualities that are salient organizers of *sexual* sonic description, and those that structure their more abstract understandings of what *sexual* does/not mean. In this way, what *sexual* means appears to depend on context, i.e., whether respondents think about the term in the abstract, or in the context of music experience.

Female respondents are slightly more likely to justify their never-associate selections with reference to movement: "*Acidic* and *jagged* don't mesh with things I associate with *sexual,*

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[11] Amusingly, a few male respondents select *pregnant* as a never-associate term, and note that that *pregnant* is the opposite of what they want to happen after sex.

[like] the *wet*-ness and *hot*-ness of sex. There's a flow with sex that's absent with *acidic*, and *jagged* is too abrupt" (22yrs; non-musician). On the other hand, male respondents are more likely to refer to unpleasant physical sensation when explaining why terms do not apply: "I associate *crisp* with *jagged,* and *jagged* is harsh. I think of *sexual* as enjoyable and soft and exciting and inviting, and I see *jagged* as the opposite. Like, you'd better be careful, you'd better be on edge, you'd better be protected" (64yrs; non-musician). *Sterile* and *cold* also provoke strong reactions. This is noteworthy, as these qualities regularly appear in descriptions of *sexual* sound. As Kurt put it: "*Sterile* is unsexy; it's the opposite of *sexual.* I associate it with *cold,* which I associate with hospitals, and there's nothing *sexual* about that. I have no interest in fucking on a mortician's table."

These data also suggest that respondents see some adjectives as, by definition, non-*sexual*. It is not so much that these words are the opposite of *sexual*—like *sterile, cold, jagged,* and *acidic*—but rather, *crisp, buoyant, greasy, viscous, sinewy* and to some extent, *rubbery* "belong to a different realm" of experience. Put another way, these qualities do not organize their ideas of what *sexual* means. As Jonathon (28yrs; musician) notes: "I think of *viscous* as being a technical descriptor, like a *viscous* fluid. I just can't think of anything *viscous* that would share qualities of sexuality. Anything that's *viscous*, if you think of touching it, is gross and not great." *Crisp, sinewy,* and b*uoyant* pose problems for respondents, too. And yet, respondents often employ these terms in descriptions of *sexual* sonic experience. Considered together, these data suggest sound descriptions may capture experience, rather than just gendered associations with, or differences in how male and female respondents talk about, the term *sexual.* Indeed, across-gender similarities in the association task indicate that respondents actually share many associations with the term, and talk about it similarly.

Discussion

In this work, I investigate cultural experience via description of music experience. My data point to several dimensions of cultural experience, and support a multimodal view of culture (Lizardo 2017). First, my respondents' descriptions of *sexual* sound differ by gender and tend to take one of two forms. For male respondents, the most salient organizer of *sexual* sonic experience is a sample's relational dynamic. One experiential gestalt captures a more communal and organic encounter, and the second reflects a more egocentric and self-directed encounter. On the other hand, for female respondents, the most salient feature is movement: *sexual* stimuli move cyclically at their own pace, or forward in an "almost aggressive" fashion. Although the organization of sensory experience into opposing gestalts is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) view of taste as structured by binaries, my data present an interpretive challenge: the same stimuli can elicit different descriptions in the same gender. That is, two same-gendered respondents may agree that a particular stimulus is *sexual,* but describe it differently (i.e., one hears it as communal, and another as agentic[12]). One plausible explanation for this finding consistent with Bourdieu's general framework is that another variable not examined here plays a role in shaping respondents' experiences of the stimuli. So, same-gendered respondents who hear a stimulus as *sexual* but describe it differently may differ in terms of other factors relevant to (secondary) socialization. One variable that demands future examination is sexual orientation, specifically same-sex desire.

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[12] Kurt (32yrs; musician) hears a sample (C#12) as *lush* and *silky:* "the guitar and the drums and the accents on the cymbals and the toms roll," creating a sense of "*silky* smoothness." The "extravagant excess of playing"— "a generous use of notes"—contributes to the *lush*-ness: "It's definitely organic. I could have used *ripe* to describe it." But Marshall (25yrs; musician) says the same sample is *sterile.* Kurt describes the chords as "rolling," but Marshall hears them as "failing to move." The tones are *fuzzy* and "melancholic": "There's a sense of longing, the music wants to go somewhere but doesn't."

My findings raise important questions, not all of which can be answered with these data. First, what drives meaning making in the sound description interviews— the samples themselves, gendered discourse conventions and associations with *sexual*, or respondents' experiences of stimuli? My data do not suggest samples organize descriptions: respondents perceive a wide array of stimuli as *sexual,* and individual samples do not overwhelmingly elicit one type of description over another. As noted above, it is not uncommon for a stimulus to be perceived by, say, one male respondent as organic and communal, by a second as *flat* and one-dimensional, and by a third as *masculine* and not *sexual* at all.

What about gendered discourse conventions? Do, in other words, male and female respondents just have different ways of talking about what *sexual* means? In a similar vein, do they simply hold different linguistic associations with the term? It is difficult to completely eliminate this possibility, but the association data speak to this point. Most basically, there are key differences in the words respondents pick when asked to select their associations with *sexual,* versus when asked to select words to describe music. The consistency across respondents and their reliance on cultural expressions ("girls are *hot"*; "she's *wet*"; "*dirty* talk") in the association task suggest that they may be drawing on declarative forms of public culture—specifically, on dominant ideas of sex—to make selections (Lizardo 2017). This also helps explain why they reject descriptors culturally associated with unpleasantness (e.g., *jagged, cold)* even if, in some cases (e.g., *viscous)*, it is hard to deny their relevance to sex. This across-gender similarity in association task selections implies my respondents associate generally the same terms with *sexual,* and tend to articulate their ideas about what the term means similarly.

These points lead me to favor the account that patterns in sound description data stem from my respondents' experiences of *sexual* sound. If this is the case, then descriptions do not

reflect differences in gendered discourse conventions or their respective associations with the term, but instead, reflect differences in somatic experience. In this scenario, variations more likely reflect a different sort of culture, one more idiosyncratic, embodied, and tethered to individual (gendered) experience. There are two main arguments in support of this theory. First, it is unlikely that respondents contemplated at length what *sexual* means in relation to music prior to the interview. Because the adjectives I provided lack clear mappings to sound, it is doubtful they were able to draw from public culture when making selections. Second, respondents often picked terms with negative cultural connotations to describe *sexual* sound—terms they outright rejected as associated with *sexual,* a term they conceive of as pleasant, in the association task. If we accept that differences in term selection are not shaped (at least primarily) by discursive associations with *sexual* or by gender differences in the vocabularies used to discuss the term, then the next likely possibility is that they reflect differences in music experience that stem from dispositional variations between respondents.

This raises still another question: if we accept variations in description stem from dispositional differences between respondents, then where, more fundamentally, do these differences come from? Put another way, what do the gestalts reflect? Do they reflect, for instance, gendered notions of sexuality, such that male respondents' communal descriptions and female respondents' descriptions of cyclical movement reflect a more culturally feminine sort of intimacy—"woman sex," for lack of a better term? This is possible, but my data permit a second plausible account. A straightforward interpretation of gestalts as gendered notions of sexuality does not neatly fit the data. First, gestalts and gendered attributes, i.e., *masculine, feminine*, do not consistently map onto each other, and the terms, despite availability, are relatively

infrequently chosen.[13] Second, in many sociological theories of gender (e.g., Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999), women are characterized as relationship-focused and emotional, and men as pleasure-oriented and agentic. There is no doubt my respondents are aware of these cultural tropes. But their descriptions highlight *opposite* dynamics than those these theories predict (i.e., female respondents stress movement, and male respondents stress relationship). Whether female respondents have in mind a committed relationship when they talk about cyclical movement and a hook up when they describe almost-aggressive forward motion is an open question; explicit talk of relationship is markedly absent from their descriptions. Third, if gestalts merely capture gendered notions of sexuality, we might expect more across-gender description congruence (as in the association task) than there is.

These findings lead me to propose an alternative account: gestalts reflect gendered, embodied takes on the gendering of sexual experience. From this perspective, gestalts are connected to gendered notions of sexuality—but they do not capture notions that respondents hold as *thinkers,* but rather those they hold as *hearers,* or as individuals with particular bodily orientations to things in the world built up in past experience. To elaborate, for all my respondents, *sexual* sonic experience consists of two reciprocal forms. That is, their understanding of *sexual* in the sonic context is polar in nature. This is evidenced by the fact that they do not interpret *sexual* sound in just one way, and even those who do not articulate both gestalts over the course of their interview construct descriptions with reference to another "kind" of sexual experience. One gestalt reflects a respondent's embodied understanding of sex as a

[13] Female respondents use *feminine* twice (n=2) and *masculine* once (n=1) to characterize the free-flowing, unregulated *sexual* gestalt, and *feminine* once (n=1) and *masculine* four times (n=3) to characterize the controlled-motion counterpart. Male respondents use *feminine* 7 times (n=6) and *masculine* 3 times (n=3) to describe the communal gestalt, and *feminine* twice (n=2) and *masculine* five times (n=4) to describe the egocentric gestalt.

particularly gendered person (*sexual* gestalts [b] and [a] for male and for female respondents, respectively).[14] The second gestalt reflects a respondent's gendered take on the *opposite* gender's experience of sex—based on his or her own experiences of intimacy as a particularly gendered person (*sexual* gestalts [a] and [b] for male and for female respondents, respectively). So, both gestalts are informed by experiences of intimacy and, unavoidably, by cultural ideas of the other gender. If this is true, then gestalts reflect embodied takes on the gendering of sexual experience.

My data do not allow me to definitively adjudicate between interpretations, and a more robust sample of same-sex desire respondents is needed to test this hypothesis, as data from the handful of same-sex desire respondents in my sample do not deviate from that of opposite-sex desire respondents. But several key data points speak to this account. First, the absence of "relationship" in female respondents' accounts is puzzling from the perspective of sociological theories of gender—but *is* consonant with feminist accounts of female pleasure. Specifically, the latter state that male pleasure—not female pleasure—is inherently relational. In contrast to the male pleasure principle, which assumes arousal as the starting point and orgasm as the end point of sex, female pleasure is unbounded and autoerotic: "Without endangering her partner's ultimate 'success'… Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, [a woman] can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning…of the 'conventional' heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that" (Winnett 1990: 507). Indeed, it is the *male* pleasure scheme that "fantasizes a scene of coupling" and "privileges a simultaneity of sensation … appropriate to one partner only" (509).

[14] This account draws on a specific model of heterosexual intimacy articulated by my respondents, but does not preclude the possibility that other models might emerge in a more diverse sample.

My data reflect these pleasure asymmetries in interesting ways: the communal pole for male respondents (*sexual* gestalt [a]) involves an equal partner and is organic and reproductive in nature. The cultural associations with femininity are difficult to ignore: women, it is said, want committed partnerships, and women, it is said, are earthy and maternal by nature. In this framework, this gestalt reflects male respondents' embodied ideas about how intimacy is experienced by women—based on *their* experiences of intimacy as heterosexual *men*. This conception is embodied: even as they project themselves into their oppositely gendered alter, their *own* way of experiencing sex as fundamentally relational shapes descriptions, and their language continues to be informed by sexual dynamics relevant to their own-gendered experience: samples "envelope," "draw," and "invite" them in. This is a very different sort of experience than that described by my female respondents (*sexual* gestalt [a]). *Their* descriptions follow a different, notably partner-less logic that does not emphasize nature, motherhood, or relationship at all. Rather, the experience they describe cycles, is self-directed and exploratory, lacks clear start and end points, and follows its own course: it is sex "how sex should be" (Elise; 40yrs; non-musician; C#13), the kind that leads with the "upper body" and not the "thighs" (Lara; 27 yrs; musician; C#5).

Similarly, the descriptions of linear, regulated motion female respondents offer (*sexual* gestalt [b]) may reflect embodied conceptions of how intimacy is experienced by men, based on *their* experiences of intimacy as heterosexual *women*. This type of experience, they say, is goal-directed ("go, go, go"), with demarcated start (arousal) and end (orgasm) points. In other words, it adheres to the male pleasure scheme. What is more, female respondents frequently compare the pace and implied motion of such stimuli to traditionally male sexual movements. But crucially, rather than talk about being in control—what, for male respondents, the egocentric

encounter (*sexual* gestalt [b]) is all about—they talk about being *out* of control. Sounds, they say, “come at” and “go into” them; they feel forced to interact with an “almost-aggressive” alter who determines the encounter’s progression. In this way, their experiences of intimacy as women inform their embodied notion of how intimacy is experienced by men. From this perspective, descriptions differ by gender because my respondents’ embodied and gendered experiences of intimacy cut across and inform *both* gestalts. Similarities in description stem, on the other hand, from the shared nature of the encounter (e.g., seeing how oppositely gendered individuals act and respond in sexual situations) and by participation in the broader cultural environment (e.g., learning cultural tropes about gendered pleasure and sex roles). In other words, past experiences with intimacy and more general engagements with cultural ideas about gender and sexuality shape my respondents’ understandings of what *sexual* in the sonic context means.

Conclusion

This work contributes to the growing body of research in the sociology of culture that takes seriously the senses as sources of cultural knowledge. I employ a novel interview method designed to facilitate the description of music experience, and highlight the organization of one particular subtype of sonic experience: the experience of sound as *sexual.* This work suggests that methods that attune respondents to qualities of experience can bring researchers closer to understanding the social logic and distribution of cultural experience. Of course, the organizations of music experience I identify should not be generalized to non-music realms or even beyond the stimuli I provide respondents with. Future research should scale up this design to include a larger and more diverse sample of respondents and stimuli, and to explore cultural experience in other modalities. My findings indicate that the traditional model of culture as text conflates discursive and experiential dimensions of culture, but also highlights issues associated

with pitting language *against* the body in culture studies. Specifically, this tendency ignores important relations between cultural domains. Here, I focus on the embodiment of meaning and its communication via language—on how the body grasps and shapes the meaning of cultural objects via the senses, and how language can communicate that meaning. Further, I show that these cultural meanings are neither singular nor fixed, but instead vary based on what actors do—in this case, whether they relay a particular kind of experience via language, or contemplate meanings in the abstract—and the kinds of bodies (and past experiences) they have. In this way, meaning is tethered to experience, both in the general sense that experience makes actors sensitive to some, but not other social meanings, and in the specific sense that what actors *do* at any given moment informs and conditions the cultural meanings they can grasp and relate to others (e.g., Bosman et al 2019; Cerulo 2018).

In the past, scholars have asked whether observed gender differences are artefacts of discourse conventions (Gordon and Heath 1998; Pennebaker et al 2003), or reflect actual differences in experience (Chodorow 1999/1978; Gilligan 2003/1982; Ortner and Whitehead 2010/1981). Ultimately, this is a question about how "deep" culture goes: does the social environment influence actors primarily at the level of discourse, or does it, as the pragmatists, and later, Bourdieu, suggest, engender differences in experience? This work supports the latter contention without denying the former, and demonstrates that leveraging cultural domain interdependencies can bring scholars closer to capturing qualities of experience with language.

Appendix

Table A: Adjective set

Wet	Sexual	Flat	Open
Cracked	Sinewy	Crisp	Dry
Sticky	Wide	Dirty	Prickly
Fuzzy	Feminine	Hot	Greasy
Silky	Lush	Lean	Viscous
Thick	Rubbery	Juicy	Slippery
Cold	Velvety	Masculine	Jagged
Narrow	Round	Sterile	Coarse
Ripe	Pregnant	Buoyant	Acidic
Straight	Curvy	Closed	Pointy

Table B: Sound stimuli

Clip	Song	Artist	Length
1	Bachelorette	Björk	:21
2	Breaker	Low	:22
3	Christine Bonilla	Joy Zipper	:24
4	Come In Alone	My Bloody Valentine	:21
5	Dude Incredible	Shellac	:21
6	Electric Fence	Califone	:22
7	La Schiena	Paolo Benvegnù	:24
8	Lost River	Murder By Death	:22
9	Lover's Spit	Broken Social Scene	:25
10	Mandy	Pere Ubu	:18
11	Pigeon Kill	Big Black	:12
12	Ringing Hand	Nels Cline	:24
13	When I Go Deaf	Low	:25

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Chapter 3
Dying to get in: Corporatization, feminization, and the (new) meaning of funeral work

Abstract

Sociological research on work has examined how large-scale processes like industrialization and globalization impact workers' lives and change the nature of work, often in surprising and unpredictable ways. More recently, some scholars have focused attention on the unexpected transformation of some traditionally "bad" jobs to "good" jobs (and vice versa), and identified work meaning as a new dimension upon which such jobs are evaluated. In this paper, I trace the recent transformation of a classic dirty work occupation: funeral work. I argue that large scale changes—in particular, corporatization— created the opportunity structure for a new kind of social actor to enter the funeral industry. This actor differs from previous generations of funeral directors in critical ways. In particular, they are orientated to funeral work as a form of care work rather than dirty work. As this new director makes inroads into a dying industry, they breathe new life into, and change the nature of, funeral work.

Introduction

A great deal of sociological work has focused on how large-scale processes like industrialization and globalization disrupt workers' lives and alter the nature of work. While often lumped together under the umbrella term "modernization," these processes do not happen in lockstep, but rather unfold at different times in different places, and often in ways that confound expectations (e.g., Lachmann 1990; Weber 1946a). Such processes may also invert our understandings of what constitutes a good versus a bad job. For example, Leidner (1993) shows how attempts to introduce standardization into service work, while "intended as an antidote…to

the perceived impersonality of mass-produced services," *increased* the impersonality of service encounters, created opportunities for workers to be exploited in new ways, and altered the nature of some service jobs (178). Others have pointed out how neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility—itself a product of sweeping deregulation and globalization—encourages workers to make career decisions on the basis of non-financial factors, like passion (e.g., Cech 2021; Ocejo 2017). But while the "passion principle" is rooted in meritocratic beliefs, letting passion guide career decisions may produce unrealistic work expectations, disadvantage particular types of social actors, and reproduce inequality and occupational segregation (Cech 2021:12, 14).

Other research on the changing nature of work in the U.S. has looked at the ways work standardization impacts worker well-being (e.g., Hochschild 2021/1983; Leidner 1993), the effects of changing policy—in particular deregulation, privatization, and the rise of free market capitalism— on labor relations (e.g., Kalleberg 2009, 2011; Sweet and Meiksins 2017; Vicelli 2016), and the (changing) factors that define so-called "good" and "bad" jobs, like work/life balance, benefits, compensation, and work autonomy (e.g., Kalleberg 2009, 2011; Schieman et al 2009). Scholarship points to a potentially new dimension upon which work is evaluated—one related to but distinct from passion: work meaningfulness (Grant et al. 2009; Sallez 2019). Unlike some other factors, meaningfulness focuses the spotlight on workers, "bring[ing] the worker back in" (Kalleberg 1989, but see 2009:14). Such a move is critical, as workers do not always respond to structural changes in ways one might predict (Vallas 2006; Sallez 2019). And how they respond can impact the shape a particular occupation takes over time.

In what follows, I trace the transformation of a classic case of "dirty work" (Hughes 1962): funeral work. I argue that over the past two decades, changes in work context made possible by large-scale corporate buyouts of family-owned funeral homes, working in tandem

with labor force changes and shifting cultural expectations, dramatically altered the nature of funeral work. As the traditional model of funeral work—the "mom and pop shop"—came into crisis, it created the opportunity structure for a new type of social actor—one previously left out of the funeral industry— to enter the industry and transform it.

The changing workscape

In *The Bachelor's Ball,* Bourdieu (2008) documents the effects of increasing mobility, brought about by industrialization and technological change, on work and family life in 20th century France. Under patrimony, work and family life are fused: marriage decisions are a family matter, inseparable from the functioning of the farm and designed to preserve a family's status and lineage, one's personal life is synonymous with family life (see also Thomas and Znaniecki 1920: 40), and choice is extremely restricted (Bourdieu 2008: 36). But this system of "succession and inheritance" favors eldest sons, and contains its own demise (14). Specifically, as mobility between towns and cities increased, patrimony encouraged younger sons to move to urban centers, where they might be more advantaged in marrying. And it encouraged women to do the same. Soon, a new opposition emerged: that between the "peasant" and the "urbanite." Whereas for peasants, status was intimately tied to family lineage, for urbanites, status was linked to an individual's own accomplishments and personal characteristics as *distinct from* their family's. In this way, large-scale structural changes created the opportunity structure for a new basis of value and status to emerge. These changes left behind a pool of unmarriable bachelors tied to the family property—usually, eldest sons who themselves would eventually lose interest in tending the land, given the low status afforded to such work—which undermined the patrimonial system of succession (Bourdieu 2008: 92-3).

A similar dynamic is unfolding in the context of Germany's vocational education and training system (VET) today. Historically, VET, which consists of three sectors (dual system, school-based system, transition system), has been an integral part of the German economy, distinct from higher education and legally requiring no educational certificates for enrollment (Baethge and Wolter 2015; Haasler 2020). VET was originally implemented to produce skilled craft workers through an apprenticeship model of instruction that fused theoretical instruction with work-based experience (Haasler 2020:63). However, education reforms in the 1960s made it possible for more people—not just those from the middle class—to enroll. This, coupled with globalization, digitalization, and a more general shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based service economy which places a premium on higher education, transformed the system into a socially segmented one stratified by education (Baethge and Wolter 2015: 101). Specifically, as firms come to favor entrants with greater levels of education, VET becomes increasingly competitive, thus pushing a particular segment of the population—school dropouts, individuals with only secondary school qualifications, immigrants, and refugees—into either the transition system, which consists of pre-vocational programs, or into lower-skilled, lower-paying crafts like agriculture, construction, or hairdressing. In general, such jobs feature poorer working conditions and are more precarious (Haasler 2020: 66, 68). In short, as VET attempts to adjust to changing labor market demands, certain segments of the population are pushed into trades with fewer educational requisites. In the process, once well-respected trades lose status and come to be perceived as "low-skilled."

In line with this, sociologists have examined the staggered impact of modernization trends on the nature of work. Briefly, since the 1970s, globalization and technological change, paired with sweeping deregulation, the privatization of many resources previously provided by

the government, and corporate restructuring within companies led to a general shift of power away from workers and toward employers. As employer-employee relations deteriorated, so too did employee loyalty. The combination of reduced work tenure along with fewer worker protections, the decline of unions, and a growing and increasingly diverse labor force contributed to what Kalleberg calls "precarious" work, or work that is "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker" (2009:2, 2011; Sweet and Meiksins 2017).

As the economy shifted away from manufacture and toward information, the nature of work also changed. Specifically, traditionally blue collar jobs declined, and the service sector expanded and segmented: today, "elite" service sector jobs are considered "good" jobs—they come with a good salary, benefits, social status, and allow workers autonomy over their labor—while "lower tier" service sector jobs—those with poor salaries and benefits, and that are lower in social status and afford workers little autonomy over work tasks—are considered "bad" jobs. And education often determines who can have a "good" job and who must take a "bad" job (Ocejo 2017:17).

But recent work suggests that factors other than financial stability and job security play a role in workers' evaluations of good and bad jobs. In particular, work meaningfulness and the perception of choice are increasingly relevant to evaluations of good and bad work, across service sector tiers (Cech 2021; Ocejo 2017). This suggests that even as instability continues to characterize work, workers nonetheless look to work as a realm for self-fulfillment and meaning.

Worker attention to meaningfulness, in conjunction with the changing nature of labor relations, has had an important and unexpected consequence: some previously "good" jobs have become "bad" (e.g., Vicelli 2016), and some previously "bad" jobs are now becoming "good" (e.g., Ocejo 2017). For example, Ocejo (2017) finds that the butchers, bartenders, barbers, and

distillers he studied love their jobs and find meaning in them—despite the fact that they require manual and emotional labor and are neither particularly lucrative, secure, nor stable. This same transition from good to bad job, I argue, can be observed in the recent transformation of funeral work. Specifically, I argue that as the traditional model of funeral service declined due to a series of large-scale changes I will discuss below, a new type of social actor previously excluded was able to make inroads in the industry. This new director is oriented to funeral work in a fundamentally different way than were directors from previous generations. They also come to the job with different sets of skills, and find their work to be intrinsically meaningful. As these workers gain footholds in the industry, they transform funeral work from dirty work—a kind of low status means-to-an-end job— to care work—work they are proud to do and which they find deeply satisfying.

A brief history of the funeral industry

Prior to the 19th century, families typically cared for their own dead, with some exceptions: in larger U.S. cities, "laying out of the dead" became a specialized occupation, listed along with "doctors, midwives, and bleeders and leachers" (Habenstein and Lamers 1981:147; Aries 1981). Given how the industry would develop over the next century, it is important to emphasize that these early death care services were provided by *women,* not by men (Rundblad 1995; Donley and Baird 2017; Mitford 2000/1963). This began to change when (male) furniture makers—the "apparent occupational ancestors" of today's funeral workers— saw an untapped business opportunity in funeral equipment and added coffins and hearses to their list of manufacture and sale items (Smith 1996: 267; Cahill 1995:119-20).

Arguably the most significant event for the rise of the modern funeral industry was the Civil War, as it facilitated the acceptance of embalming as the U.S. standard of disposition;

prior to the 1880s, there was significant public resistance to embalming, which was seen as crude and as a form of mutilation. However, the Civil War created the need to preserve bodies of dead soldiers so that they could be transported home for burial. This, along with Abraham Lincoln's own embalming, altered the public's stance (Cahill 1995; Laderman 2003).

Over time, funeral workers began organizing and positioning themselves as *the* experts responsible for caring for the dead, and in 1882, the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) was founded (Habenstein and Lamers 1981). Embalming was the lynchpin of their professionalization efforts: they used embalming—which, they claimed, required specialized scientific knowledge and technical expertise—to argue for the necessity of their occupation and for their status as professionals[1]. And because it was a science, they argued, women were not well-suited to the job (Laderman 2003; Donley and Baird 2017).

While early undertakers justified embalming by drawing on public health rhetoric (Habenstein and Lamers 1955), there was significant public demand to see the deceased looking at peace "one final time," too.[2] Accordingly, expertise was evaluated on a director's ability to restore the deceased to a peaceful, life-like appearance (Foreman 1973:224). The public's desire to be shielded from the reality of death contributed to an enduring division in funeral work: aspects of work deemed too unsightly for the public to see (i.e., body preparation) were relegated to the figurative[3] "back stage," while on the "front stage," directors offered the public a sanitized

[1] Further aiding occupational specialization, surgeons at this time also relinquished embalming to funeral directors (Cahill 1995:124).
[2] Take, for example, this 1905 note in *Embalmer's Monthly*: "No person can conceive of a loved one becoming an inanimate object which requires preservation from decay. They do, however, consider beautification, and demand a natural, restful, life-like appearance be created" (Foreman 1973:224).
[3] And literal: typically, the preparatory, or "prep," room is located in the basement of a funeral home.

view of death (see Goffman 1959). This division had consequences for women: "handling the dead," it was argued, "is too heavy a work for a lady" who "ha[sn't] got the constitution" to "stand the strain on the nerves and the abnormal nature of the work" (Rundblad 1995: 183; Donley and Baird 2017: 99, 108). Accordingly, women were pushed out of their "laying out of the dead" roles, and excluded from the nascent industry. In rare instances when women *did* care for the dead, their activities were typically restricted to what were at the time seen as more "decorative" and lower status front room tasks, like arranging and bookkeeping (Donley and Baird 2017).

In addition to the Civil War, the growth of industrial capitalism at the beginning of the 20th century led to changes that promoted the development of the modern funeral industry. As mobility increased, more and more people moved into urban centers. Life expectancy also rose at this time, and hospitals proliferated. Hospitals reduced the number of home deaths and facilitated the transition of death care out of the home and community and into the hands of experts. Changing tastes and the spatial demands of urban living— both which altered home layouts— made it less likely that homes had dedicated spaces where the dead could be tended to, thus creating a need for funeral homes and parlors in which funeral directors could offer their services. The term "home" was intentional: funeral homes were *family* businesses, and the family usually lived on premise. Parlors were designed to "domesticate" death—to try and recreate what was lost in the shift from community to professional death care (Laderman 2003).

The rising role of hospitals and medical professionals in end of life care altered the relationship between the living and dead by erecting a literal and figurative barrier between death and everyday life (Laderman 2003). The medicalization of death transformed its meaning: "the beautiful death" of the 19th century gave way to the "ugly and vulgar" death of the 20th century;

death came to be seen as "the final ravage of disease" rather than "the final event of a biography" (Cahill 1995: 125; Aries 1981; Laderman 2003). This had enduring implications for funeral directors and the funeral industry more broadly: directors' intimate relationship to the dead, as well as their financial dependence on death, "polluted" them and created a stigma around funeral work, rendering it an exemplar of Hughes' (1962) "dirty work," or work that is physically, morally, or socially "tainted" (see also Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, Thompson 1991).

By the 1950s, funeral directing was firmly entrenched as an occupation. Occupational licensing regimes, put into effect by state legislatures, "created the modern funeral services market" by placing exclusively in the hands of funeral directors tasks once performed by families (Marsh 2018). But despite its rapid growth, the industry was not—and is not— without critics. Critiques betray a deep mistrust of funeral professionals, and directors were—and continue to be—accused of commercializing death and making (too much) money off of people's grief (e.g., Mitford 2000/1963). Given the role tensions inherent in the job—to comfort and provide care during what is for many the worst time in their lives in a business context—this mistrust is hardly surprising (Parsons 2003).

A sociological take: dirty work par excellence

It is these darker aspects of funeral work that sociologists have examined most. But relative to the attention the medical field has received, the funeral industry has gone largely unexamined. When funeral work *has* made its way into sociological work, it has tended to be examined through Hughes' dirty work lens, or from a Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective, with a focus on the division of front stage and back stage labor in the funeral home[4]. Most of this

[4] Sanders (2010) is an exception: he examines the funeral industry through a critical culture industry lens, focusing on how consumerism and consumption drive and shape funeral practices.

literature relies on ethnographic research and takes as its starting point a view of funeral work as stigmatized labor.

Such work documents workplace values of impersonal professionalism and service, as well as the ways directors symbolically redefine their work by, for example, using sanitized language (e.g., referring to themselves as "funeral directors" rather than as "undertakers" or "morticians," or calling corpses "remains"; Thompson 1991). Role distance is an especially important destigmatizing technique, and involves emotional detachment from the body work aspects of the job (414). This requires routinizing embalming and treating body work procedures like purely technical, scientific tasks (e.g., Charmaz 1980). Habenstein (1962) claims that the "addiction to the term funeral director over mortician" reflects the fact that "today's" funeral director "does not glorify his body-handling, and the pathological details of preparation are certainly not part of the stock of terms used in verbal intercourse with the clientele" (243). And when directors interact with the public, they deemphasize the "mortuary" aspects of the job, and play up the "dramatic, ritualizing, and directing functions" in order "to escape, partially at least, the onus of a functionary merely dealing with the dead" (243). In sum, body work is portrayed as a back stage activity—something necessary to funeral work, but too unseemly for the public to know details about. The way to get through body work is to adopt an impersonal and detached stance.

This kind of emotional detachment is well-documented in studies of funeral work. Howarth (1996) studied "undertakers" in the UK and chronicled the use of "dehumanization" as "a rationalizing and coping strategy" (74) implemented by the undertakers "to handle the disagreeable nature of the job" (73). Dehumanization refers to "view[ing] the body as nothing but the discarded shell—all that is left once the spirit has flown" (74). The resistance to viewing

the body as a human being is reflected in the fact that when undertakers discuss the body among themselves—on Goffman's back stage— they shift from referring to it as they do in front of the bereaved—as "'Mr., 'Mrs.,' 'Mum,' or 'Dad,'"—to "the 'bod,' 'case,' or 'thing'" (75).

Pine (1975) details similar practices among the directors he studied in two U.S. funeral homes. He writes that workers use the word "body" "to help impersonalize each dead person and to make that person less a human and more a thing which requires attention as part of a mechanical aspect of the funeral director's job" (40). He reports that funeral workers often "double up" when embalming, as doing so offers "an opportunity to withdraw from their work…and helps protect them from becoming too deeply involved with the deceased as an individual" (114). While Pine does acknowledge that directors engage in a "strange kind of one-way communication" with the bodies that "operates to make the dead body a team member," he presents this communication as primarily in the service of staging a successful funeral: although the director "feels a responsibility" toward the body, this responsibility stems not from an awareness of the deceased as a human being entrusted in their care, but rather from the body's symbolic function in the funeral ritual (134). In this way, the relationship between director and deceased is instrumental: directors use the body to display technical mastery and expertise, and they use its state to infer information about the bereaved (e.g., Are they poor? Do they have money?), which they then use to guide interaction.

The literature suggests that learning to see a dead body as an instrument requiring technical manipulation—as opposed to, for example, gentle care—is inculcated in mortuary school. In his study of mortuary school students, Cahill (1999) observes how students learn "to adopt an occupational rhetoric and esoteric language that communicate professional authority and a calm composure toward matters that most of the public find emotionally upsetting" (106).

Drawing a comparison to medical education, he argues that learning mortuary rhetoric facilitates "students' 'analytic transformation' of their potentially unsettling contact with human bodies" (106; see also Cahill 1995). Mortuary education thus transforms the human body into a scientific object—a person into a case (107): "The corpse is no longer a dead person but an interconnected system of arteries and veins with numerous convenient points of entry and exit for injecting chemicals and draining blood" (106). The similarities to medical education are hard to ignore: medical education, too, emphasizes the importance of emotional detachment, as empathy is seen as impeding problem solving (Haque and Waytz 2012; Coulehan and Williams 2001); patients are often mechanized, or thought of as "mechanical systems made up of interacting parts" (Haque and Waytz 2012: 178); in medical school, students acquire a particular rhetoric with which to discuss cases (*not* patients with names; Anspach 1988); doctors treat diseases, not individuals. The effect is the same across contexts: this specialized rhetoric dehumanizes patients and bodies, reducing them to objects to be worked upon (Anspach 1988; Hacque and Waytz 2012), and reflects a norm of approaching patients and bodies with an attitude of "detached concern" (Becker et al 1961).

This attitude of detachment is not limited to bodies, but also characterizes interactions with the bereaved. Howarth (1996) claims the public wants and expects "an emotionally neutral professional" (59). Accordingly, any kind of "emotional breakdown" by a funeral director is "embarrassing for all parties" (135). Affective neutrality is not only critical to staying in one's occupational role, but is also indispensable to one's emotional well-being; dealing with grieving individuals "can be a highly distressing affair which threatens the workers' emotional stability" (77). These considerations motivate directors to put up and maintain clear boundaries between themselves and the bereaved. This boundary reinforces the fact that *they*, as funeral workers, are

experts with “specialist” knowledge (116). This power imbalance, maintained and highlighted by “professional” attire and the formal nature and setting of the arrangement interview, purportedly helps directors “steer” and handle exchanges with the bereaved (117).

One way Howarth’s (1996) respondents protect themselves against “over involvement” is by distancing themselves from the bereaved. This requires emotion management and “dramaturgical discipline” (Pine 1975: 102). According to Pine, becoming a funeral director entails learning “how to appear to be appropriately solemn and yet not somber or depressing to the bereaved. [The funeral director’s] facial expression must be managed so as to give the impression of care, interest, and understand, not dismay, fear, or panic” (103). Viewing the bereaved as an “audience” also “tends somewhat to dehumanize them and allows the funeral directors to deal with them on an impersonal emotional basis” (102). Parsons (2003) goes so far as to portray the funeral director’s relationship to the bereaved as adversarial and riddled with opportunities for conflict. In no case is intimacy or emotional involvement mentioned. Instead, distance and negotiation are emphasized as the keys to successful interaction.

The funeral industry today

Although sociological findings reinforce each other and support a view of the funeral industry as deeply private (if not outright secretive), impersonal, and stigmatized, there is good reason to suspect that many of the conclusions drawn by past work no longer hold today. This is because the funeral industry has experienced rapid growth and dramatic change over the past two decades. Most significantly, the traditional “mom-and-pop” funeral home model of the 20th century has come into crisis (Marsh 2018). This is the case for several reasons. First, consumers want different things today than they did a century ago: rather than a traditional, full-service funeral spanning three days, consumers are electing for less, more and more (Marsh 2018; Beard

and Burger 2020). Moreover, the cremation rate is rising: in 2019, the cremation rate in North America was 54.6%. In 2020, this number rose to 56.1%. The Cremation Association of North America (CANA; n.d.) estimates that by 2030, the cremation rate will exceed 70%. Cremation is significantly cheaper than burial, and although cremation does not preclude services like embalming and visitation, embalming is not required for cremation, and many consumers are forgoing the procedure entirely to cut costs. This impacts the ability of smaller firms—especially those in more rural locations—to keep their doors open (Marsh 2018).

Second, sons and grandsons of funeral home owners are increasingly reluctant to take on the family business. Today, many have career options *other* than owning and operating the family business and are choosing to go to college to pursue their own interests as well as more lucrative and higher status careers (Smith 1997; Sanders 2010). The demands of owning a funeral home—in particular, the long and often unpredictable work hours—can make family formation (and maintenance) challenging, while the stresses of the job, like dealing with death and grieving families daily, can contribute to adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Cegelka et al. 2020). Whereas in the past, inheriting the family business was a source of pride and a privilege, it has now become, for many, a pain.

This disrupted "order of succession" (Bourdieu 1988:182) renders mom-and-pop funeral firms especially vulnerable to corporate takeovers—the third major change in the funeral industry. Consistent with broader privatization trends, death care is following the path of healthcare and corporatizing (Kalleberg 2011; Scott et al 2000; Marsh 2018; Smith 1997). When a family/single-proprietor firm is bought out by a deathcare corporation, owners may be retained as managers. Although the firm may keep its name, work and hiring practices are often bureaucratically restructured. Corporate buyouts become increasingly likely as owners, on the

verge of retirement, fail to develop and enact family succession plans. According to the 2020 Funeral Business Planning Survey, "nearly three out of four respondents (73%) do not currently have an exit strategy or succession plan, in spite of the fact that more than one-third plan to retire within the next five years" (Foundation Partners Group, 2020). The financial burdens of ownership, changes in consumer demand and funeral trends, and weakened cultural expectations that children follow in their parents' occupational footsteps means that those who, in decades past, would have entered the industry are no longer doing so. This has opened a gap in the industry and created a new demand for funeral workers. And this gap is being filled—by people with no family ties to the industry: first generation men and, overwhelmingly, young women. The change has been rapid and dramatic: Siner (2019) reports that in 2018, 83% of mortuary school graduates were first generation funeral directors with no family ties to the industry.

In what follows, I argue that the changes that have unfolded in the funeral industry over the past 15-20 years have created space for a new type of social actor—one with a radically different orientation to funeral work—to enter the industry. While sociologists tend to assume that corporatization, privatization, and the bureaucratic restructuring that these changes often entail overall promote depersonalization (both generally [e.g., Scott et al 2000; see also du Gay 2005] and specifically for the case of funeral work [Habenstein 1962; Pine 1975]— I argue that the result of corporatization in the funeral industry may actually lean in the opposite direction—toward *greater* personalization. Specifically, the new social actor that corporatization makes room for has no family ties to funeral work, has interests and dispositions that diverge from those possessed by older directors, and describes their work as a calling. For this new director, funeral work means something fundamentally different than it meant for earlier generations of typically male funeral workers: while the latter approached funeral work primarily as a business and

understood funeral work to be stigmatized labor, the former see funeral work as a form of care work akin to, say, nursing. This new orientation, I argue, is introducing new forms of expertise to the industry and transforming funeral work from a dirty work to a care occupation.

In what follows, I first present my research methods and data. Then, I detail how changes to the funeral profession have made room for a new kind of social actor to enter the occupational field. I describe how this new actor differs from previous generations of directors before demonstrating how these directors are transforming funeral work—namely, by disrupting the front/back stage distinction so critical to the dirty work model of funeral work and by redefining the skill set needed to be a funeral director. I argue that for this new actor, funeral work has the capacity to *mean* something different than it did for directors who inherited the occupation in the past, and they get out of their work what I term "emotional wages," or intrinsic, non-financial reimbursement that makes funeral work a good job worth doing.

Methods and data

Over the course of 16 months (April 2019- August 2020), I conducted 67 semi-structured in-depth, in-person interviews with licensed funeral directors and mortuary school students (n= 47). Of those, 25 (female=12, male=13; age range: 24-79) work in corporate or family/single-proprietor funeral homes in a large Midwestern city and its neighboring suburbs. All directors are dual-licensed (i.e., they are licensed to arrange/direct and embalm), as per state regulations. Eighteen respondents were first generation directors with no family ties to the funeral industry, and 7 come from what I will henceforth call "funeral families," i.e., they grew up in the industry. In addition, I also interviewed 22 students currently enrolled in a year-long mortuary school program in the Midwest (female= 14, male= 8; age range: 19-60). Fifteen are first generation,

and 7 come from funeral families. For most of my respondents (n=36), funeral work is a first career.

Given the stigmatized nature of funeral work and the negative stereotypes associated with funeral directors, the funeral director community is notoriously insular and distrustful of outsiders. However, through a personal connection, I was able to gain access to several individuals within the community who were willing to speak to me about their work. Each then reached out to their networks on my behalf, and I followed up with those who expressed a desire to be interviewed. I spoke to directors who are at different stages of their careers and in varying work arrangements, like employees at family and corporate firms, owners of family and non-family firms, and trade workers. Trade workers are licensed directors who work for hire, instead of for a specific funeral home. It is not uncommon for directors who work at a funeral home to also do trade work "on the side." Directors can also operate full businesses by "curbstoning," provided they can find funeral homes willing to rent to them. According to one of my respondents, in the past, one did not rent to another funeral director unless he too, had a funeral home. But for many smaller firms today, renting has become the way to make enough revenue to keep their doors open[5].

The goals of the interviews with licensed directors were to understand individuals' paths into the industry, their experiences at various career stages, and their understanding of what it means to be a funeral director. The interviews covered a broad range of topics, like early exposure to the industry, career trajectories (i.e., whether they work for corporate or private firms, whether they have been employed by the same firm for a long time, or "hop around"

[5] "In this market in this world and in this economy, people are renting the curbstoners because they're whores for the cash, they'll just take the money" (Jeff, first generation, director, 59 yrs).

firms), day-to-day struggles, impactful work cases, and their perceptions of how the industry is (or is not) changing. Interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed by the author.

Mortuary school student interviewees were selected, with the mortuary college's assistance, from three different cohorts. The school provided me with a group of students, diverse in terms of age, race, gender, and previous career experience, selected to reflect the student body composition. Interviews were divided into multiple waves. Cohort 1 students were interviewed once, at the end of their one-year program, and in-person; Cohort 2 students were interviewed twice, once at the start of the program and once midway through the program just as they began their embalming clinicals[6], and in-person; Cohort 3 students were interviewed three times, once at the start, once in the middle, and once at the end of the program. For Cohort 3, the first round of interviews was completed in person, and waves 2 and 3 were completed via Zoom. Due to the pandemic, not all students in Cohort 3 completed all three interviews. In total, I conducted 42 student interviews. They ranged from 30-60 minutes in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. My goal in early interviews was to understand how students—particularly those *without* family ties to the industry—came to enroll in mortuary school. In later interviews, we discussed surprises and challenges pertaining to school work and embalming, as well as changes in orientation to funeral work.

"The pendulum is swinging": Corporatization, feminization, and the end of patrimony?

Traditionally, inheritance was *the* path into the funeral industry. But this model has become unstable as sons of owners increasingly eschew the financial and cultural challenges of

[6] Embalming clinicals, or labs, are a required part of training designed to give students hands-on experience embalming corpses at the local county morgue.

funeral home ownership. As Gene (first generation, director, 60 yrs) noted, "you start getting into issues with the third generation." Nancy is a particularly illustrative case of (third) generational decline: a director in her 50s with a failed marriage and a substance abuse problem under her belt, Nancy quite literally ran her family's firm to the ground. While she had no desire to embalm or direct, she still felt it her duty to hold onto the property[7]. Moreover, owning a funeral home was once seen as a path to a stable, respectable, and even lucrative career. But today, older directors express concern that as cremation rates rise, the funeral industry is heading "into the toilet." As a result, many owners are liquidating or selling the family firm to a deathcare corporation.

Although most funeral homes are still privately owned[8], funeral workers (and the public) have an overwhelmingly negative view of corporations, and approach this new model of funeral work with skepticism. Concerns are both financial and ethical. Financially, in 2017, the leading U.S. death care corporation owned 5.6% of funeral homes in North America—and based on industry revenue, nearly 16% of the funeral and cemetery market share (Marsh 2018:12)[9]. By utilizing economies of scale, funeral homes owned by this company are able to, on average, generate a gross annual profit that is five times greater than that of other firms. Ethical concerns can be traced back to early work on the industry. Habenstein (1963), for instance, details two competing models of funeral work—the "mass mortuary" and the "local funeral home." In the

[7] Cf. Bourdieu (2008: 93): the bachelors left behind ultimately destroyed the family land because they did not care enough to farm it.
[8] Approximately 89.2% of funeral homes in the U.S. are privately owned. The remaining 10.8% are owned by four publicly traded deathcare corporations (National Funeral Directors Association n.d.).
[9] By Marsh's (2018:12) calculations, the annual revenue per funeral home owned by the leading deathcare corporation is 1.17 million. This stands in sharp contrast to the estimated annual revenue per funeral home *not* owned by this company: $534,467.

mass mortuary, "different skills and special knowledge, not the boss's son, stand in the way" of mobility, and "the employee works *in* such an establishment, he is not *of* it" (129). The deceased and the bereaved are conceived of as "units" and "customers," respectively, and employees are motivated by the "economic potential" of those respective interactions. In contrast, at the local funeral home, the focus is on the family, and the funeral director is in a "personal service profession," rather than a "big business" (129-130). Pine (1975), too, sees a close relationship between organization and behavior, arguing that "the kind of organization in which one participates is the most important determinant of one's behavior" (130). For this reason, he is ambivalent about the "cosmopolitan" funeral home: he claims that workers at cosmopolitan firms, unlike those at "community" firms, behave "as bureaucrats"; their work "generally is anonymous and impersonal and is often subject to criticism from the public" (140-1)[10].

This view has not changed much: many directors today "take special care to differentiate themselves, their business practices, and their work ethic from corporate models of death care, and use these differences to bolster claims of vocational devotion to tending the dead, and consumer satisfaction with their production of ritual order when death occurs" (Laderman 2003: 189). Across the board, the perception of corporate "moral threat" (190) is predicated on the assumption that bureaucracy will transform work for the worse by demanding the displacement of the metaphorical souls of workers and stripping work of its meaningful elements. As Scott et al (2000) put it for the case of healthcare, the shift from "professional service norms and models to more commercial and market-oriented approaches signals an important change in the *meanings* associated with the given activities within the field and in the *institutional logics* that

[10] Cf. Weber (1946a), for whom a key distinction of modern (bureaucratic) organizations is the separation of the public office from workers' private life and property.

direct, motivate, and legitimate the behavior of social actors" (61-2). However, as other scholars point out, bureaucracy's "blindness" to "inherited differences in status and prestige" can have, in some cases, "democratic, equalizing effect[s]" (du Gay 2005: 52). This impersonality may also provide the structure for ethically-charged work orientations, or vocations, to develop (du Gay 2005:51; see also Weber 1946a,b,c; McDonnell 2017).

Shifting ownership models in the funeral industry have done just that by creating opportunities for first generation directors, in particular young women and gay men (Tilcsik et al 2015), to enter the industry. This leads to the second major change in the industry: in addition to increased corporate presence in death care, the funeral industry is rapidly feminizing. In 2014, approximately 56% of funeral service graduates were women, and 85% had no prior family ties to the industry (American Board of Funeral Service Education, 2014). By 2016, the number of women enrolled in the U.S.'s 59 accredited mortuary school programs rose to 61% (National Funeral Directors Association, n.d.). In 2017, nearly 65% of graduates were women (American Board of Funeral Service Education, 2017)[11]. Moreover, although many workers become directors as a second career, "the industry is increasingly becoming a first choice for young women" (Wylie 2016). According to the NFDA (n.d.), "more than 60% of mortuary science students in the United States are women." This is because (they claim) women "have discovered and are attracted to the skills and traits needed as a funeral director, including communication skills, compassion, and a desire to comfort those coping with a death, as well as organizational and event-planning skills"[12].

[11] But according to 2016 U.S. Census Bureau data, although the majority of graduates are women, 74% of directors are still men (Shaffrey 2018)
[12] Recently, the NFDA (2021) published a blog post on hiring more female managers, and on changing workplace cultures by hiring more women and non-binary funeral directors.

The feminization of funeral work is linked to the decline of the family succession model and corporatization in several ways. First, as would-be directors and owners from funeral families increasingly opt out of the family business, these firms must look beyond family for new hires (regardless of whether they sell to a corporation). Second, the benefits of corporations and bureaucratic organizational practices for women have been well-documented (e.g., Dobbin et al. 2015; Billing 2005). According to Wylie (2016), "Corporate-owned funeral homes offer more job opportunities than the small operations, meaning more openings for women." Leading U.S. death care corporations also express explicit commitment to diversity and inclusion—a clear departure from the family model of succession, where family comes first. For example, one leading death care corporation offers leadership programs geared toward women, LBGTQ+, and people of color, respectively. Such environments may also be more appealing to women because they have resources to provide health care benefits and maternity leave. In this way, the shift from the family model to the corporate model may help women—and first generation men—find and retain jobs more easily.

Without exception, my respondents agree that one of—if not *the*— most significant change in the industry over the past two decades has been the influx of women into funeral service. Carl (second generation, director, 79) recalls that when he attended mortuary school, "we had two women in the class, and that was almost something to talk about."[13] But as previously noted, women outnumber men in mortuary school today: at the mortuary college my student interviewees attended, 38 students enrolled for the 2020-2021 academic year were male and 133 were female. Generally, feminization is seen as positive, and my respondents draw

[13] During data collection, I had the opportunity to speak to a mortuary school classroom at a second mortuary college (not where I interviewed students). In a class of roughly 20 students, only two were men.

heavily on essentialist notions of gender to stake their claims that women make *better* funeral directors than men (see Donley and Baird; Pruitt 2018). Women, my respondents claim, are *by nature* more empathetic and attuned to their emotions than are men. Others suggest that men are to blame for the industry's stigma, and that young women have the capacity to change the industry's reputation for the better. My respondents—in particular, first generation women—feel it their responsibility to de-stigmatize the industry by offering the public what earlier generations of male directors withheld: information. Many talk about how they refuse to "sanitize" funeral procedures with families, particularly those related to embalming: "If you want to know, I'm going to tell you. You should know when you go to a funeral home what I'm going to do to your loved one" (Torrey, first generation, director, 34 yrs).

Women, my respondents argue, are also more open-minded: while the funeral director of the "old days" adhered to tradition no matter what, women, they claim, have fewer qualms breaking convention. Because of this, they are better suited to offering "personalized" service. Natasha (student, first generation, 28 yrs) explained: "You think of a funeral director in this big, black suit, [but] he died. Let's put him [away], over there. We're more compassionate and we're bringing to the industry compassion and open-mindedness and [the capacity] to be like, 'I understand. Let's do the service the way *you* want to do it. Let's celebrate this person's life instead of being so dreary and dead about it.'" Across the board, my respondents see women as the future face of the industry. Kristen's (first generation, student, 32 yrs) graduating class is overwhelmingly female, and she is convinced that this influx of women is "going to help bring diversity to an industry that's really been monopolized by a select few." She relishes defying

people's expectations of what a funeral director "looks like": "When people look at me, they're like—*you?* And I'm like, awesome, let's challenge this."[14]

That said, the path into the industry for women is anything but clear. While women outnumber men in mortuary school, they are still underrepresented as directors. This is due to a combination of training and licensing requirements, difficulties finding jobs as first generation applicants, and gender stereotypes (Cathles et al. 2010; Marsh 2018). For example, when Morgan (first generation, director, 41 yrs) searched for jobs, she was told she was "too little" or "too weak to pick up bodies": "[employers] are scared that you're not going to be able to do the removals…it's something a lot of women have to go up against to almost prove themselves, where a man wouldn't have to at all. You could be the skinniest, wimpiest guy, and they'd still give you more benefit of the doubt than they do women." This difficulty is compounded by first generation status, and made even worse if one is hoping for a job in a family firm. Susanne (first generation, director, 38 yrs) recounts wanting to be a funeral director from a young age, but because she came from a family of policemen and teachers, she felt funeral directing was "not for her": "a lot of times in this business, you're born into it. I wasn't." She ultimately enrolled in mortuary school, but only after several unfulfilling years working as a teacher.[15] Heath (third generation, director, 66 yrs) exemplifies the traditional take on women in funeral work: "I think [women] make better directors. They can be good embalmers, but there is a certain amount of

[14] Many of my female respondents share stories of the incredulous reactions they get when they tell people they are funeral directors. As Lee (first generation, director, 53 yrs) remarked: "All my life people have said, 'well you don't look like a funeral director.' If I had a dollar for everybody that's ever said that to me, I'd be a millionaire."
[15] This experience is not necessarily restricted to women or first generation respondents: Heath (third generation, director, 66 yrs) recalls how hard it was to find a job at a family firm once *his* father sold *their* family firm: the mentality of the day was: "you gotta take care of family first."

lifting involved." And what is more, "Women [can] get pregnant. If I was pregnant and a woman, the last place I would go is the prep room…I doubt there are any regulations, but I would think they should self-regulate themselves." In short, women's contribution to the industry lies squarely in the *front room*, rather than in the back room. But as Pat (first generation, director, 29 yrs) asserts, "the pendulum is swinging": "it's going to be a force change when [older directors] realize the industry is going to be run mostly by women, eventually" (Morgan, first generation, director, 41 yrs).

Family firms tend also to be smaller and to have fewer financial resources. So, they may be wary of hiring women of child-bearing age, who they see as potentially needing to take time off: "A lot of people will ask you, 'Do you have kids, do you plan on having kids?' Technically, they know they can't, but [if] you're trying to get a job and they ask you that, you're probably not going to say, 'You can't ask me that'" (Morgan, first generation, director, 41 yrs; see also Donley and Baird 2017). Firms below a certain size are also not legally required to offer employees retirement or health benefits. Katie (first generation, director, 24 yrs) explained how the owner—a woman—at a firm where she used to work claimed that women directors "have husbands who can provide them with benefits." While for some, paying for benefits is feasible, for many other women like Katie, doing so is not. Katie ultimately quit her job and returned to school.

While many claim to prefer the "feel" of a smaller, family-owned firm, respondents acknowledge that working conditions are often better at corporate firms. Not only do they have fixed schedules, but rules and policies ensure that no one is taken advantage of. Lee (first generation, director, 53 yrs) explained: "Unfortunately, there are a lot of owners that will take advantage…oh, we're not busy today, [so] go out and pull the weeds out of the parking lot

cracks…in a small town community, that's what you gotta do…But then you get into more urban areas, you have larger funeral homes, they're busier, they have more staff, they hire people to do that." In addition, corporate firms allow for work specialization in a way smaller forms typically do not. To elaborate, the majority of states require dual (embalming and directing) licenses to practice, and when a director is hired at a family firm, they are expected to both direct funerals and embalm (Cathles et al. 2010). However, some corporate firms divide labor into task-specific teams or centers, such that some workers exclusively embalm and others exclusively arrange and direct, based on an individual's strengths and preferences. While many of my respondents note that traditionally, one had to be "good at both" to be "worth your salt," corporatization gives people who may previously have been deterred by, say, embalming the opportunity to become directors, too[16]. Moreover, while it was previously not unusual for directors to work at the same firm for most of, if not their entire, careers, most of my first generation respondents have experience working at *both* corporate and private firms. In short, although a common critique of corporate firms is that they are "more expensive than the family-owned down the street" (Morgan, first generation, director, 41 yrs), the experiences of many directors I spoke to suggest that the corporate model opens opportunities for people to enter the industry who were previously left out. These individuals come to funeral work with different interests, skill sets, and dispositions and, crucially, chose rather than inherited the career.

[16] It is not quite so straightforward: Cathles et al. (2010) compare states with and without "ready-to-embalm" laws, which require funeral directors to be embalmers, and conclude that such laws reduce the proportion of female directors by 24%. They argue that this may be because women may be more likely to want to direct and arrange, and that requiring them to embalm raises the literal and figurate cost of entry.

New directions for funeral directing: the changing face of funeral work

My sample reflects the aforementioned changes in the industry: most do not come from what I call "funeral families," but rather are first generation students and directors who chose rather than inherited their career. Moreover, rather than describe it as a kind of stigmatized labor, they understand funeral work to be a type of intrinsically meaningful care work not that distinct from nursing or being a doctor. And they identify deeply with their work, which they describe as a calling. This new orientation to funeral work is pervasive among first generation respondents, but is shared by only some from funeral families. What is more, the more compatible funeral family respondents are with this new orientation, the more likely they are to report fulfillment and a desire to persist in the industry. In what follows, I detail the main ways my respondents differ from previous generations of funeral directors.

A matter of choice

Perhaps the most significant variable differentiating older generations of funeral directors from today's is choice: all first generation students and directors I spoke to report choosing a career in funeral work, rather than inheriting it. Choice has important consequences for their orientation to and experience of funeral work. As many studies have shown, there is a robust link between perceived volition and work meaningfulness (e.g., Allan et al 2014). This is reflected in my sample: respondents who chose a career in funeral work are more likely to be interested in— and claim to want to *be* and *stay* in— funeral work than are those who report having felt pressured to go into the industry because of family connections. Katie (first generation, director, 24 yrs) explicitly links first generation status to interest: "I graduated in a class of 24, and only two people in my class had family in it. A lot of these people went into it because they were interested in it." In contrast, directors who were "forced into it" are more likely to experience

burned out, to stop caring, and to perform poorly at work: “A lot of people who go into it now do it because they care about it, whereas a lot of people before went into it because they were forced to, because they had family in it. And I feel like those people, they don’t care.”

Given that the family succession model favored men, choice has a gendered dimension not lost on my respondents. Jill (first generation, student, 25 yrs) speaks to this when she notes that “A lot of the men in the business are intergenerational, and a lot of the women are first generation, and I think the men who are intergenerational have this sense of family legacy and responsibility and they feel they can’t get out even if they want to.” Megan’s (first generation, director, 24 yrs) experiences mirror Katie’s, and she too highlights the gender dynamics at play. She explains that when she first began working, she “wasn’t prepared for how almost every funeral director I worked with didn’t really want to be a funeral director anymore.” But: “I did meet some women funeral directors, and they’re some of the best I’ve worked with, and they still really love their job. You see a really deep contrast between the type of funeral director that felt like they were forced into it, and then doesn’t want to be in it anymore, versus the people like me, who *really want* to be doing this.”

Science meets service

With few notable exceptions, most of my respondents report gravitating to funeral work because of interests in the life sciences and other care or service professions, rather than because of a desire to be business owners. A very small minority—those who come from funeral families—discuss owning a business as draws to the career. Take, for instance, Thomas (second generation, school, 21 yrs). Although he emphasizes the importance of providing quality service to grieving families, he cites as draws to the work radically different aspects of the job than do first generation students and directors in my sample. He states: “I think it’s a lucrative career,

especially for me. I just like the lifestyle—more so owning the business, than being a funeral director." He plans, he says, to buy the funeral home off his dad when his dad retires.

This contrasts sharply with the draws reported by most of my first generation respondents. For them, funeral work speaks to interests in anatomy and chemistry— without the financial (and time) costs associated with medical school. It also allows them to practice a form of care work in a significantly lower stakes and stress environment. Many admit originally wanting to go to medical school, but lacking the confidence to apply. Lee (first generation, director, 53 yrs) is a good example. Coming from a family of police officers, her dream as a teenager was to be a medical examiner. But being a medical examiner requires going to medical school and becoming a physician first. Lacking a support structure to encourage and affirm her academic abilities, she went into funeral directing, which she saw as the next best option: "I look back and I go, I could have done that, you know? But I didn't think I was smart enough…I just didn't have the confidence."

Other respondents transitioned to funeral work after unsuccessful stints in the medical field. Celeste (first generation, student, 22 yrs), for instance, aspired to be a doctor. But once she started working as a care aide at a nursing home, she began to have doubts: "I found myself very nervous and not confident in my ability. I don't like to hurt people, I didn't want to hurt anyone, and I just didn't feel like I had enough *guts* to make decisions. I would always need second opinions, and when you have to think fast, you can't wait for people to tell you what to do, you just have to do it." Celeste's mother suggested an internship at a local funeral home instead. As she gained experience there, she realized a career in funeral work would allow her to engage with aspects of medicine she liked—anatomy, chemistry, biology—in a lower stakes environment: "There's no pressure because they're dead! But you still get to make them look

good. You get to show your expertise in a different way." Katie (first generation, director, 24 yrs) too, saw in funeral directing an opportunity to "take care of someone in a weird, special, interesting kind of way": "You take care of them, but you also take care of the family… you have the artistic side and the science side with prepping the body, but also you take care of people." Funeral work allows her to be in a medicine-adjacent field, while "directly speaking" to the "nurturing aspects" of her personality. Similarly, after dealing with "complicated" patients in health care for five years, Tammy (first generation, student, 27 yrs), a self-described "people pleaser," reached her limit. As a joke, she thought to herself, "I should go into funeral work…the live people are where problems come from." But after learning more about funeral work, she realized this career path would allow her to actualize the caring capacities she employed in her years working at a wound center—in an alternate context.

Finally, a handful of respondents turned to funeral work after years in customer service jobs. These respondents draw explicit comparisons between the demands of funeral work and those of their previous job. Gene (first generation, director, 60 yrs), a bartender at an elite social club by night and a trade embalmer by day, argues that, at core, his two jobs are not that different. He likens funeral directing to wedding planning, with one key difference: a wedding planner "gets one year to do what I have to do in one day." Marianne (first generation, director, 50 yrs) previously worked at a department store where "you were taught to do whatever you can for the client." She took "customer service—to do whatever you have to do in order to make somebody happy"—into her mortuary career: "Whatever they ask for, you just go beyond to try and give it to them."

In sum, my respondents describe funeral directing as, at core, about service. And service, they claim, cannot be taught: "The thing that makes a great funeral director, or even *a* funeral

director, to me— and it's something that you cannot teach—is service. And if you don't have service *in* you—because I think it's a genetic thing that's implanted in you— then you're not going to make a good funeral director" (Christina, first generation, director, 52 yrs).

Feeling what others feel

My respondents see themselves as particularly socially intelligent—more so than the average person. They describe themselves as empathetic and claim their capacity to feel what others feel makes them especially suited to funeral work. Indeed, they argue that the ability to empathize is a necessary, not optional, trait for the job: a good funeral director *must* be able to empathize with the bereaved, even if such stereotypically feminine socioemotional skills are not those most valued by society (e.g., Craciun 2018; Pruitt 2018). Owen (second generation, student, 21 yrs) contrasts the approach of earlier generations of funeral directors—which he encountered growing up in his family's firm— with his own: "Some people feel you're supposed to have yourself closed off from [your emotions]. But I think that having empathy mixed in with sympathy is really good because that shows families that you really care, and that you care about what they're going through." He strives to be the "kind" of director who cares, rather than "a stone-cold person who's like, 'Oh well. Here's a six year old baby, it's just another day.'"

Indeed, many respondents cite their "extreme" capacity to feel what others feel as a reason why they chose a mortuary career. For example, Lee's (first generation, director, 53 yrs) nursing aspirations were dashed after she realized she could not handle being around people in physical pain. But her capacity to feel what others feel made funeral directing a perfect fit: "That's probably partially makes me good at what I do, because I feel for your suffering… the emotional pain that other people are feeling, I just take it on, so much."

Experiencing loss in one's personal life, some of my respondents argue, can help hone these socoioemotional skills and make one an even better director. Torrey (first generation, director, 34 yrs) explains: "I feel we all need to have a big loss in our lives to appreciate this job." When she goes on a removal, she feels "that twinge in the heart": "I know that pain they're feeling because I've *been* there…You're not just looking at it, you understand somebody's grief." Danny (first generation, student, 23 yrs) lost his father just as he entered mortuary school. This made navigating coursework and his job at a funeral home challenging, but the experience makes him, he believes, a better director: "That's invaluable experience. You can't learn that in a book. You can't learn that at the morgue…That's your own personal life experience coming into play." When Elissa (first generation, director, 58 yrs) lost her mother, she changed her approach to families at work: "There's no such thing as 'you get over it,' or 'it gets better.' It's a whole new way of living you have to learn." Having gone through the process "made [her] more sensitive to people," which, in her view, makes her a better director.

Work as a calling

While the majority of respondents describe funeral work as service or care work, many go even further and describe what they do using terms like "vocation," "calling," and "ministry." As Jeff (first generation, director, 59 yrs) put it, "It's really more of a vocation than it is a job, per se, because what we do is so intimate. We're almost clergy-like. If you're good at it, and if you're really 'the person' that's supposed to be doing this job, it's in your heart." Marianne (first generation, director, 50 yrs) too, explains that being a funeral director is "like being a nun or a priest because of the personal time you give up. And it brings you joy." Funeral work is, in short, more than a job. Embalming a body and arranging a funeral require more than technical expertise: to be done properly, one's whole self must be in the work.

My respondents draw on terms like “calling” and “vocation” to communicate their experience of work as intrinsically meaningful and personally fulfilling, and the sense that they have a duty—a professional and ethical responsibility— to serve others through funeral work. For example, Kristen (first generation, student, 32 yrs) was initially concerned funeral work might not be “emotionally for [her].” But after experiencing her first embalming, she realized she could, in fact, do it: “it solidified that this is something I am capable of doing—not everyone is. So it almost felt like, this really important duty. Like, this is important, this is something I need to do.”

Often this kind of dedication results in the obviation of the work/personal life boundary, and leads respondents to identify with their funeral director role *beyond* the workplace. Susanne (first generation, director, 38 yrs) explains that even on her days off, she is constantly thinking about her cases. If someone a director personally knows dies, or if their services are requested by a family, my respondents feel compelled to go into work, even if it is their day off and their firm does not require them to do so. In this way, funeral work is “not a job, it’s a lifestyle”: “everybody else shuts off at five, banks close at five, stores close at eight and that’s it—you come back tomorrow. We don’t have that. It is all day, every day, all night” (Don, first generation, director, 54 yrs).” Because of this, funeral work takes a “special kind of individual with a certain kind of aptitude for it” (Shane, first generation, director, 38 yrs). Not only does it take a person with strong socioemotional skills, but it also takes a person willing to make personal sacrifices for the job: directors—especially those at smaller, family-owned firms, or those who own their own firms— can expect to be on-call 24/7, to miss family gatherings and holidays, and to have significantly less time for hobbies, vacations, dating, and socializing. In addition, they must manage daily public mistrust and the negative cultural stereotypes associated

with being a director. As Tom (first generation, director, 40 yrs) put it, "It's definitely a job you have to love enough, because you're going to have to make a lot of sacrifices…I think the best way I've heard it described [is], you have your wife, and you have your family, and the funeral business is your mistress." Jeff (first generation, director, 59 yrs) explicitly uses the language of marriage to talk about his commitment to the families he works with: "You get married to [each case]…I'm actually married to that *whole case* until the lid is on at the cemetery."

In school, students are socialized to understand funeral work as requiring personal sacrifice, too. Gemma's (first generation, student, 24 yrs) instructor, for instance, described funeral work as a "sacrificing career": "Granted, if you get in at a good place, you get certain benefits, but you are making a sacrifice in terms of time, personal life." Mark (first generation, student, 25 yrs) acknowledges that many directors he knows are not married, or have been divorced… multiple times. He does not think he will get married because of the sacrifices he anticipates needing to make; he does not want his children or wife to ever wonder, "Does he love me or the business more?"

Talk of personal sacrifice often goes hand-in-hand with discussions of professional responsibility. As *professionals,* my respondents assert, they have a primary *responsibility* to the families they serve, and they must fulfill those responsibilities even at personal cost. For example, Shane (first generation, director, 38 yrs), the co-owner of a small funeral service operation, acknowledges that he "isn't the best businessman": "My thing is, let's get the work *done,* let's get the people taken care of. That's the priority. We are charged with that responsibility. Our professional licenses make that our responsibility, in the same way a doctor has a responsibility to his patients, not to his checkbook." My respondents fiercely condemn directors from previous generations who, they claim, were "in it" for the wrong reasons (i.e., for

the financial side of things). In contrast, they see themselves as in it for "the right" reasons. Jason (third generation, director, 31 yrs) shares that initially, he had reservations about going into the family business, as his experiences growing up in a funeral home led him to conclude that funeral work is "a lot about money." This did not sit well with him: "How am I supposed to make money off the worst day of somebody's life?" He went to college to pursue his own interests, but eventually, decided to follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps: "I went back and forth…there are bad funeral directors out there that say 'No, you don't want this casket, you want *this* one,' and point to the expensive one. As long as I'm not *that* person, I am able to justify being in this."

In describing their work as a calling and emphasizing the care over the business aspects of funeral work, I do not mean to suggest my respondents do not care about financial compensation. On the contrary, many lament that their paychecks barely cover basic living expenses. Megan (first generation, director, 24 yrs) explains that while the public often accuses directors of being "in it" for money, "this really isn't a field you make a lot of money in." Given the mismatch between job demands and financial reimbursement, "you have to be in this for the right reasons" to last (Susanne, first generation, licensed director, 38 yrs).

While most of my respondents share these sentiments, there are some exceptions. In my sample, those *least* likely to refer to their job as a calling tend to come from funeral families. For example, James (first generation, director, 66 yrs) explains that he got into the industry entirely by chance: "I never thought it was a big calling. It was just a job. I could have just as easily been a sign hanger." For James, funeral work was appealing because it came with a reliable paycheck. This is similar to Heath's (third generation, director, 66 yrs) experience. Heath got into the industry in high school because, quite simply, the money was good: "I hooked up with these

trade [removal] guys…We used to do, 7, 8, 9 [removals] a day, that's how busy it was back then. I got 5 bucks a call…making 45 dollars a day was pretty good money…pretty much [all] cash." Eventually, he began helping his father, who owned several funeral homes, embalm: "So then I just kind of never really thought about doing anything else. I tried carpenter labor one summer, and *that* was like, work. This never felt like work to me…I just stayed with it, and you eventually get hooked in it. What else am I gonna do, you know? I don't have any experience doing anything else." A similar disconnect between one's sense of self and the funeral director role emerged in my interview with Steve (fourth generation, director, 40 yrs). Steve notes that he prefers not to socialize with other directors; funeral directors are, he stated "weird." He also does not embalm, but rather hires trade workers for "certain procedures." The implication is that Steve does not like to get his hands dirty, so to speak, and prefers to restrict his interactions with bodies to dressing and casketing.

On the whole, my data indicate that, with some exceptions, the meaning my respondents derive from their work is intrinsic rather than extrinsic to it. Their work is meaningful because by doing it, they make "the worst day of someone's life a little less awful" (Gene, first generation, director, 60 yrs). Mark (first generation, student, 25 yrs) recounts overhearing a child ask her mom what a funeral home was at a visitation he worked. Her mother explained that a funeral home "is where they help people." This left an impression: "it's a reminder on those difficult days when I feel like I'm burnt out...That's the motivation, that first of all, this is what we're here to do, to help people. It's not about fancy Cadillac's or fancy Lincolns or big buildings." Danny (first generation, student, 23 yrs) agrees: "A lot of people think people get into this for money, or [because] they're morbid, or have some weird fetish for this type of thing…but seeing a family that's broken through one of the hardest experiences of their life, being able to help

them through that and hopefully let them go back to their lives better than they were when we took them into our care—that's what I do it for."

Dirty work to care work: Breaking down the stage one relationship at a time

Above, I described how my respondents came to their careers in funeral work and how they differ from previous generations of directors in terms of interests, skills, and work orientation. Largely first generation students and directors, my respondents chose funeral work, rather than inherited it, have longstanding interests in the life sciences, and previous experience working in adjacent health care and service industries. They view themselves as socially intelligent, and describe their work as a calling that requires sacrifice to execute well. My data indicate that this orientation to funeral work has implications for how they approach and do their work.

First and foremost, in their interviews, my respondents did not act like individuals employed in a dirty work occupation, nor did their descriptions of funeral work align with traditional conceptions of dirty work outlined in the literature reviewed above. By that I mean the following: first, in their interviews, my respondents rarely engaged in the stigma neutralization and role distancing techniques documented by Thompson (1991), or in any of the rhetorical reframing and justificatory work observed by scholars studying the workplace (sub)cultures of dirty work occupations (e.g., Cahill 1995; Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Rather than distance themselves from their work, my respondents intensely identify with it (Becker and Carper 1956). Further, the funeral director role is not one they transition out of when they leave the workplace. Instead of perceiving their work as "tainting" or imparting stigma, they express deep commitment to it, and describe their occupation as important, meaningful, and relevant to their lives and identities *beyond* the firms where they work. That is not to say they are unaware of the

negative stereotypes associated with their occupation. In fact, they are acutely aware—and deeply resentful—of them. Yet, they are a far cry from the "insecure occupational lot" that Cahill (1995:115) documented more than 20 years ago. This leads me to argue that what it means to be a funeral director is radically different for my respondents than it was for previous generations of funeral workers.

Second, a key feature of dirty work is the distinction between workers' front stage and back stage behavior. Previous literature on funeral work documents this distinction. For instance, Howarth (1996) describes how directors refer to bodies as (for example) "mum" in front of the bereaved, but as "cases" when working out of the family's sight. Historically, the front/back stage task segregation also kept women from participating in the body work aspects of the job. But, my data indicate that for most of my respondents, this front/back stage distinction does not exist. Rather, they behave with the bereaved in much the same way as they behave with the deceased, and they go to great lengths to bring to light aspects of funeral work that earlier generations of directors kept shrouded in mystery. I argue that in eliminating this distinction between front/back stage work, my respondents are transforming funeral work from a dirty work to a care work occupation.

This dissolution of the front/back stage distinction is evidenced by how my respondents approach traditionally front room work (i.e., any work that entails interaction with the bereaved) and back, or prep, room work (i.e., work involving preparing the deceased). My data point to clear cohort differences: young and middle-aged respondents—predominantly first generation—describe funeral work as care work, and speak disparagingly about the practices of older directors they know, who they encountered in their previous (or present) jobs. Older respondents—generally those over the age of 60—as well as some younger respondents who

come from funeral families, tend not to share this new orientation to funeral work, and instead describe their work in ways consistent with the dirty work literature presented earlier.

While my data suggest the biggest changes regard back room practices, they also point to some changes in front room behavior. In regards to the latter, my data point to high levels of emotional engagement between bereaved and funeral directors—a departure from the impersonal and detached dynamics highlighted by earlier scholars. In regards to the former, my respondents do not attempt to direct attention away from body work, and instead embrace it as a deeply meaningful part of the job. In fact, for a subset, body work is *the* most meaningful part of the job. In what follows, I briefly highlight changes in front room behavior, before moving onto a lengthier discussion of changes in traditionally back room behavior.

Emotional [over]involvement in the front room

Previous work on the funeral industry highlights the value of impersonality and emotional distance in director-bereaved interactions. Impersonality is interpreted as a marker of competence—a sign that a director is a *professional* who can be trusted (Laderman 2003). A very small minority of my respondents' experiences reflect these earlier findings. These respondents tend to be older and male, or to come from funeral families. Carl (second generation, director, 79 yrs), for example, explains that the emotional aspects of funeral work— specifically, dealing with grieving families and tragic deaths— "never really phased" him. Rather, what contributed to his bouts of depression over the years was the "business side of things"—whether or not he got enough calls each year to keep his family firm's doors open. James (first generation, director, 66 yrs) echoes Carl's sentiment when he admits that "From the outside it looks like you—I hate to say it, but it looks like you *care.* Which you do, but you can't care too much, or you'd be miserable every day"; "I never thought, I'm doing a great thing for these people. I was getting

paid to do it, and I hate to say it, but I wasn't that concerned." He calls "guys in the industry who cry at every wake" "weird," For him, the industry is less about connecting interpersonally with others, and more about running a profitable busines. James remarks: "We're mostly drunks. I've gotten so much business out of bars in my life, because it's a perfect place to go. Guys drink themselves to death, and then you became friends with them because you sat in a bar with them until they drank themselves to death, and then you buried them. That's how the business goes."

Some younger respondents who express wanting to keep emotional distance from the bereaved come from funeral families. Jason (third generation, director, 31 yrs) admits to "hiding" his emotions to cope with job stress. He does this because he feels it is inappropriate to cry with families. And this, he claims, has taken a toll on his emotional life: "I haven't cried in ten years about anything because I've seen so many people with sadness. When anything happens to me, it's like, well, I didn't lose my father, I didn't lose my mother…I think I'm in control of [my emotions], but that's what everybody that's *not* in control but thinks they are says." Overall, my data suggest that respondents who did not choose the job but went into the industry because of family expectation are those *least* equipped with the socioemotional skills that make dealing with the challenges inherent to funeral work easier.

These exceptions aside, most respondents report a different approach to families than that detailed above. They stress the importance of "having the empathy to understand" and of "feel[ing] what others feel." That is not to say they find dealing with families pleasant or easy. Quite the contrary: interacting with people during such an emotionally charged time requires a high degree of sensitivity and emotional intelligence—being able to, for example, enter a room and within seconds, read body language to determine "if someone wants to be comforted, or if they want you to stay away" (Laz, third generation, student, 22 yrs). Katie (first generation,

director, 24 yrs) explains that because people react to loss differently, directors need to be "very versatile." And given the "delicate" nature of the situation, the ability to gage what a family needs from their dress or posture is invaluable.

My respondents also report investing personally in the families they work with. They take their relationships with the families they serve very seriously—regardless of whether their "name is on the door." Susanne (first generation, director, 38 yrs) explains that despite being off work on the day of our interview, she still called in earlier that morning to make sure the deceased she was caring for "looked good" after sitting overnight: "I had to make sure she was ok." The fact that she works at a corporate firm makes no difference to the kind of care she gives: "It's not my name on the door, but the families still instill their trust to *me*. They don't give a shit who owns it—they care who they talk to. They put that trust in me, and that's a trust I take very seriously."

Although my respondents acknowledge the importance of being "strong," they distinguish between being "strong" and "disconnecting" from families. Many view the latter as bad practice. Brenda (first generation, director, 24 yrs) explains that although important to be a person a family can "lean on," directors should not ignore their own emotions: "It's okay to feel the emotions. I don't think it's right to totally disconnect and be distant. I *have* worked around people like that, and their service to the family is kind of off-putting. Honestly, if you want to be a good director, you should at least be able to empathize with your families." Jeff (first generation, director, 59 yrs) agrees: "Sometimes my eyes will well up in tears, my voice might break. But it also brings a degree of humanity to it all. It makes the families realize that this guy's real, and that I'm not that far removed from it."

Several directors also mention they particularly enjoy working with families and burying people they have a personal (pre-existing) relationship with. This is because, as Shane (first

generation director, 38 yrs) put it, "you can become emotionally involved in it." He elaborates: "You want everything to be perfect for them. I want them to have moments of grace, to see the beauty of life and how death is part of it." Tom (first generation, director, 40 yrs), a self-described "sympathetic soul," recalls being asked to prepare his friend's younger brother for disposition. The experience was both "gut-wrenching" and an "honor": "I would have been devastated if they went somewhere else, because of course I will take care of everything, that's what I was called to do in life."

While respondents stress the importance of empathizing and working closely with families, they acknowledge that doing so can be stressful. Directors must inevitably deal with unpleasant people. Don (first generation, director, 54 yrs) explains how the most difficult part of the job is helping "a large group of people" make one decision: "Seven personalities, perspectives—that's a challenge. There are times people *want* something they can't logically have, like a church may have rules and won't allow this…and that sets people into a bad mood and they may start taking their frustration out on you and questioning, criticizing everything you do." Other times, something happening in the director's personal life—e.g., the birth of a child—can make dealing with a case difficult. Jill (first generation, student, 25 yrs) sums up the challenge in the following way: "What draws you to it is what can ultimately drive you out. It's having what I call a bleeding heart, where every single person you see, you get drawn into that story and you experience other people's heartbreak."

But Jill's (first generation, student, 25 yrs) solution is not to "disconnect" or empathize less. Rather, younger directors—students in particular—discuss seeking out healthy coping and stress management techniques. Ignoring and refusing to deal with job stress, they argue, will only lead a director down a path characterized by burnout and unhealthy coping strategies. Many

contrast their own approach to dealing with stress to that taken by older directors they know who struggle with substance abuse, or who have been through various divorces. Students and directors alike attribute these outcomes to a refusal to talk about feelings—to "bottle things up and reach for the bottle" (Danny, first generation, student, 23 yrs). Danny explains, "The older folks I talked to, they were like, 'You don't talk about it. It's part of the job, you grin and bear it and move on.' And it's not healthy for their family, it's not healthy for the business…they'll be combative or defensive or claim that there's nothing wrong and everything's fine, but deep down they're getting eaten away on the inside." Owen (second generation, student, 21 yrs) agrees, noting that many older directors he knows are "super moody": "they're upset about something and feel like they can't talk about it." This kind of director is, Owen states, "something I really don't want to become." Torrey (first generation, director, 34 yrs) hints that the tendency to turn to alcohol and drugs may be linked to work conditions at private firms, in particular the lack of fixed schedule and unpredictable hours (the very reasons why Torrey, who has a family, left her job at a private firm for one at a corporate firm): "Where I'm at now, working with this company, we have a set schedule, so I don't know if there's as much [drug use and alcoholism] here, but in the private world…it's fucking rampant because they work 18-hour days."

Torrey (first generation, director, 34 yrs) also believes there exists an unspoken standard among funeral directors that they "shouldn't be affected": "I feel we're a little cold to one another [at work]. Like, what do you mean, *get emotional*? Don't be a pussy…It's odd, because even though we see it everyday, we should—we still *are*— affected." She links this "unspoken standard" to problem behaviors: "I don't think a lot of people know how to deal. It's like, we're not *allowed* to feel. So I think that's why there's a lot of getting high, drinking. You get lost in it because if I can't talk to my coworkers about it and I can't talk about it at home…" Torrey

herself rejects this standard, and my data suggest that younger and first generation directors are deeply invested in changing it. Kristen (first generation, student, 32 yrs) explains: “You look at previous generations that were not given strong coping mechanisms and tools and help and were not told, ‘talk about your feelings, talk about what you’re going through.’ That wasn’t an option.” But, “That generation is now meeting our generation, and we’re like, ‘*No.* We’re going to talk about this’.” In addition to seeking out healthy outlets like therapy, biking, fishing, and socializing with friends, several students I interviewed reported forming informal groups to vent and discuss difficult experiences.

Dealing with the dead

In addition to changes in director-bereaved interactions, my data also indicate changes in how students and funeral directors approach body work. The existing literature portrays body work as highly stigmatized labor. But my respondents take great pride in their body work skills, and make no efforts to distance themselves from the body work aspects of the job. For many, body work has a particular meaning that may not be obvious to those outside of the industry: body work is about caring for *human beings,* not corpses. Instead of perceiving bodies as dead matter to manipulate in the service of a successful funeral, my respondents go to great lengths to humanize the bodies they work with. They do so by cultivating social relationships with them. As they see it, their job is to care for human beings, and they frame body work as a professional duty and service that they—and only they—can provide the deceased.

However, not all my respondents seek to create such relationships, and these exceptions speak to a change in orientation by cohort. In my sample, those most likely to view embalming as an unpleasant, purely technical task are also those least likely to speak about the deceased as human beings; they tend to be older male directors, or directors and students from funeral

families. Steve (fourth generation, director, 40 yrs) engaged in role distancing techniques during our interview, admitting that when he meets new people, he is reluctant to reveal his job, instead preferring to use vague euphemisms like, “I’m in cold storage.” Like Steve, Jason (third generation, director, 31 yrs) keeps his distance from the prep room. He explains that he never wanted to embalm— not because he is squeamish, but because “I just don’t like doing that to somebody, dead or alive.” He elaborates: “Even when I was younger, I was never really like, ‘Oh, what’s in the back, what’s downstairs behind that door?’ It never interested me. I didn’t want to cut people open.” One student from a funeral family discusses bodies in ways that would make new directors cringe. He recounts his first failed attempt at drawing lips on a deceased: “It just looked *so* bad, and everybody in the funeral home laughed at me…One of the guys took a picture of it, it was really bad.” When I asked James (first generation, director, 66 yrs) about his approach to body work, he stated: “That’s basically just being a craftsman. I mean, everybody dies, some people’s bodies are more screwed up than others. Some people’s bodies are *way* screwed up, or are dead for months. But you just do what you’ve learned to do.” For him, embalming is basic science—a “primitive blood transfusion,” as one respondent called it— and although the procedure is “sometimes unpleasant,” “when you’ve done it for years, nothing’s unpleasant anymore.” Although James always “wanted to do the job right,” he also “didn’t live or die by what happened”: “Like I say, you really can’t get too caught up in what you’re doing.”

Respondents with a care work orientation approach body work differently. For Katie (first generation, director, 24 yrs), the difference between her approach and the approach of some older directors she knows comes down to care: “People talk about how when you’re in the back room, it’s really *sacred.* When you’re taking care of someone, it’s very *sacred.* But the thing is, these people, they’ve been in it so long, that they don’t care…there are a few funeral directors

that I think of when I think of this, and they just don't care anymore." For her—and for others in my sample—the way one treats the deceased in the back room should reflect the way one treats the deceased in front of the bereaved: with utmost dignity and respect. But older directors like Heath (third generation, director, 66 yrs) poke fun at the way younger directors approach embalming. He sees them as taking too many unnecessary precautions (e.g., wearing PPE and ventilators), and recalls watching his own dad, years ago, eating a sandwich at the table he was embalming on (nb: his dad got sepsis). Morgan (first generation, director, 41 yrs), too, remembers watching her apprenticeship mentor smoking a cigarette while embalming.

For many respondents, body work is a point of pride, and they report going to great lengths to make sure others know they work with bodies. Stephanie (first generation, director, 30 yrs) explains that when she began her mortuary career, "I would tell people I was a funeral director because, in my head, that means all aspects of it." But, people would ask her if she "did anything with the bodies." Her response would be to say, "Absolutely I do." These interactions motivated her to switch from referring to herself as a "funeral director" to referring to herself as a "mortician": "I didn't like [it] at first because it's really old school…but I feel it cuts most of the crap out. It's probably a little bit of a pride thing, I want people to know that I do both, that I'm not just in my suit, meeting with families, going on funerals, not doing any of the heavy lifting or work that goes into it."[17] Megan (first generation, director, 24 yrs) similarly identifies strongly with the body work aspects of her job: "Doing the hair and makeup, dressing the bodies, casketing them, making sure they look the best they can look before they go out to the public—I take a lot of pride in that. I feel it's something that comes very naturally to me, working with the

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[17] Cf. Habenstein (1962), cited above, who reports that the shift from using "mortician" to "funeral director" reflects the fact that directors from previous generations did not glorify body work, and desired to disassociate from those aspects of the job.

dead bodies and caring for them." She finds the work personally fulfilling: "It's very calming, and I know *that's* where I can provide the best work, and [give] back—by taking care of these people. I still can do the other parts of my job and I like them, but definitely being in the back room is my favorite part of the job."

Giving the deceased "the level of care they deserve" requires creating a social relationship. The importance of cultivating a relationship and of perceiving bodies as human beings is learned early on, even before directors learn how to embalm. Many recall a period in mortuary school during which they struggled to fulfill two, at first contradictory, imperatives: embalm the bodies thoroughly—which requires physical force—*and* treat the bodies as you would living human beings. Both students and experienced directors alike discuss having to "get over" the "invasive" nature of embalming. Quite simply, some parts of embalming, like breaking rigor mortis, aspirating, and suturing the mouth shut, are by nature *rough* procedures that require using an amount of force one typically would not use on a human being. The fact that the bodies are *both* human beings *and* incapable of feeling is, as one respondent put it, "a huge psychological factor" to "get over."

Megan (first generation, director, 24 yrs) recounts how difficult it was for her to get over her fear of hurting the bodies: "the natural instinct is to be gentle because you don't want to hurt this person. Your teachers tell you, you need to get over that a little bit, because they won't feel it, they're ok. You have to be a little bit more assertive to get the job done. If you're not using enough force, you might not be able to close the mouth correctly, or find an artery correctly." The feeling, she explains, is "pretty unnatural." Torrey (first generation, director, 34 yrs) explains that it takes practice— and repeatedly telling yourself "they can't feel it"—to get used to embalming: "It's not something that comes to you, it's something that's learned…it's a human

being, so you still want to treat it with that care and softness, but embalming is kind of rough…that takes a long time, psychologically."

Directors detail a series of techniques and strategies they employ to forge and maintain relationships with the deceased. It is worth emphasizing that these relationships are distinct from those they have with the bereaved. Importantly, they are framed as ends in themselves. By that I mean that while respondents certainly do see body preparation as an indispensable part of the service they offer the *bereaved* (providing a "last view"), they also see themselves as offering the *deceased* a separate service. The most common way my respondents create a relationship with the deceased is by referring to them by name—not only in front of and in conversations with the bereaved, but also when *talking directly to the deceased as they work*. Allona (first generation, student, 45 yrs) explains that she begins every embalming at the county morgue by looking for a nametag and then assuring the deceased that she will take care of them: "Ok, what's his name? Herman? 'Hi Herman. Ok, we're going to take care of you'."

Referring to the deceased by name brings them, in a sense, to life. This is reflected in back room comportment. For example, if a director accidentally "bumps" the deceased, they will apologize: "If I'm moving somebody from a table to another table, and I bang their head a little bit, I apologize to them even though it's a dead body, because that is a person, and I think it's really hard to forget about that" (Megan, first generation, director, 24 yrs). Megan acknowledges that not every embalmer does this. And in her view, this is a problem: "There are some embalmers I've met who really *do* treat it like it's not a person, but I can't. I love massaging people's hands, just feeling like I'm holding their hands. I get to wash their hair. It's really just taking care of that person fully."

"Taking care of that person fully" means keeping at the forefront of one's mind that the deceased is as a person who had a life. Marta (second generation, student, 21 yrs) explains that the bodies she embalmed during her clinicals at the county morgue "came with" personal artifacts, like whatever they had on them when they died and, in one case, the noose the individual had used to hang themselves with. Keeping in mind that the bodies they work on are people and that embalming is "a service for them" helps her get through the most difficult cases. For Marta, every body that comes into her care is "somebody's loved one."

In a way, directors go about embalming as if they expect the deceased to ask them to account for their actions. Charlie (second generation, director, 56 yrs) explains that when he embalms, he tells the deceased "what I'm doing as I do it": "When I care for deceased in the back, I talk to them. I feel really bad. Like, when you're embalming somebody, you have to take all jewelry off and everything. And when I struggle to take a wedding ring off of somebody, I'm inclined to say, 'I'm sorry I'm doing this, I'm going to put it right back on you, I'm going to set it over here, I'm not taking it from you.' And then I make sure I follow through with that." When I asked Charlie if he engages with all his cases to this degree, he replied, "I *have* to."

Mark (first generation, student, 25 yrs) feels connected to the bodies entrusted in his care: "I believe that our loved ones are with us, especially with the embalming procedure: *I* feel their spirits, I do, 100%, and I believe that they're watching…the embalming [room] is very sacred. That is where someone's loved one is, and I believe in [having] utmost respect in that room…I think the spirit is not always with the body, but they're watching." He speaks critically of older directors he knows for whom embalming has become routine: "It becomes routine just like any other job, right? But then you have to step back a second. What we do is very special, and I think there's a very large spiritual component to it."

In addition to naming, part of what facilitates keeping the "whole person" in mind is technical: embalming requires directors to focus on the whole body at once, rather than, as doctors and surgeons are more able to do, a specific organ or body part. As Katie (first generation, director, 24 yrs) states: "I can't just focus on one kidney, and so I still think of them as a person. They're a person, I'm doing this favor for them." Megan (first generation, director, 24 yrs) echoes this sentiment: "One thing about embalming is that you *have* to be aware of *every* aspect. If you're massaging someone's leg during injection, you can't only be focusing on the leg, because what if something in their face starts swelling? You have to take the whole body into account, because the family will be seeing the *whole* body, or at least a good portion of it."

Respondents describe having a professional duty to protect the deceased. Katrina (first generation, student, 38 yrs) recounts a particularly grim case she worked on during her clinicals. The deceased was in poor condition, with mold growing on parts of their upper body, including their head: "I just felt so bad that they had deteriorated to that point, and I really wanted to focus on getting their head back together. Like, massaging it, using different things to get all the stuff up." She describes her approach as "compassionate": "Knowing that they're unclaimed bodies, I want to give [them] the best care possible. I don't want them to be treated like they're just discarded or uncared for. I couldn't imagine myself in that state…At least I feel I can give them love and compassion, this last time. Like, you are cared for, you know?" Charlie (second generation, director, 56 yrs) believes he is responsible for accompanying the deceased on one leg of their afterlife journey. He only works with crematories that permit him to "escort the deceased in and assist in placing them in the machine." He feels this is his duty: "When I leave, I can call the family and say that it's taking place. I'm not *guessing* that it will take place—I witnessed it, it's happening right now. That's important to me. It's somebody's mom, dad, husband, wife,

child. The least *I* can do is see that they're cared for while they're in my possession." The same applies to burials: "I stay until the dirt is down. Why? Then I know. It's important."

Caretaking involves assuming a protective stance toward the deceased. Stephanie (first generation, director, 30 yrs) recounts an instance during her mortuary school clinicals when a child who had been crushed by a TV was brought in for preparation. A morgue attendant asked whether the students wanted "to see it," which angered her: "A few people went back there, I didn't. A student who was a year younger than me was like, 'Well, we're going to be dealing with that shit all the time.' And I was like, 'Go fuck yourself. That kid is not there for us to gawk at. What do we learn from that? We're not helping put the kid back together. It's not an anatomy lesson.'"

Others talk about how they adjust their behavior in the presence of the deceased to maintain their dignity. For some, this means refraining from making jokes about the bodies; for others, this means not cursing in front of them. Stacey (first generation, student, 22 yrs) elaborates: "I always try to be respectful because even though they are deceased, I'm…honoring them as being a person." She recounts trying to explain embalming to her mother, who was surprised to learn students are taught to cover the body as much as possible during the process. Stacey was shocked by her mother's surprise: "They *are* a human being," she explained. And as such, they must be treated "with dignity." This echoes Christina's (first generation, director, 52 yrs) instructions to her interns: "I treat people. And I tell [my interns], these people cannot talk for themselves, they cannot wash themselves, they cannot eat anymore—these are still people…I just treat them with respect because they are people."

Lastly, respondents talk about ways they personalize—sometimes intentionally—their cases. By personalization, I refer to the tendency shared my some of my respondents to make

personal links between their own lives and those of the deceased. Personalization is a double-edged sword: while it facilitates humanization and the creation and maintenance of a social relationship, it can also trigger intense emotions. However, drawing such connections is generally seen as an unavoidable part of the job. Indeed, it is the directors who are *unable* to connect on a personal level with their cases—those who "put up a wall"— who are perceived as ill-suited to the work.

The creation of personal connections is in part facilitated by the intimate nature of body work. As noted above, bodies often "come with" personal possessions, and directors must remove medical devices that provide clues as to how individuals died. These intimate bits of knowledge bring the bodies to life, making it harder for directors to maintain a clear boundary between themselves and the deceased. Jill (first generation, student, 25 yrs) recounts: "The first time I saw this teenage boy who was autopsied, I really had to step away for a minute…you find connections to people that you love. This boy died in a motorcycle accident, and my brother loves motorcycles, and one of the items they buried with him in the casket [was] this little toy that was just like one my brother had, and there were all these connections I was drawing to my own family." To overcome this, she reminded herself that "People want empathy, but they need strength." She explains that "knowing her responsibility" helps her "push through those feelings": "*They* need to have the space to grieve, not me. That's ultimately what gets me though it, a sense of duty." For some, personalizing helps them be *better* caretakers. Kristen (first generation, student, 32 yrs) explains that for her, "Every person that walks in the home, *that* is my grandmother, *that* is my grandfather, *that* is my mother. I literally look at this person and it's like, this is my job. It is my duty to take care of you in the most respectful way possible." She

explains that the act of thinking "*that* is my grandmother" elicits a "physical shift, and you carry yourself in a different way."

Others deal with the sometimes personally challenging connections they make by committing to caring for the deceased fully—but only for a finite period of time. Charlie (second generation, director, 56 yrs) explains that there was a period in his career when caring for the deceased was "draining": "When we get really busy around here and I'd have a couple weeks where there were a lot of people, there were times I'd be driving home and I'd feel like they were all sitting in the car with me." Ultimately, he realized that "I didn't cause them to be here. That was between them and God, and I'm just here to help them on *this* part of their journey, and once they move to the next stage, I have to let them go…otherwise you can't do your job." His job, he says, is to "give them my all for that period of time, and then I have to move on to the next one."

However, not all embalmings are equally conducive to creating and maintaining a social relationship with the deceased. The power of the care work orientation in shaping the meaning and experience of body work was made clear when the COVID-19 pandemic led to a major change in students' embalming clinicals. Their response to this change suggests that the care orientation to funeral work goes deeper than language: it infuses their work with meaning and, in a very literal way, makes it possible. To elaborate, in response to the pandemic, embalming labs— which typically take place at the local county morgue— were moved to a facility where bodies donated to science are prepared for use by medical schools. Importantly, bodies donated to science are treated differently than are bodies prepared for final disposition. The main difference is that the former need to last a very long time. To make this possible, bodies donated to science are pumped full of significantly more embalming fluid. And, since they are embalmed for instructional purposes, their faces are not prepared for viewing.

Purely in terms of technique, the overall preservation process is the same in both contexts, but the students I interviewed experienced considerable difficulty embalming the donated bodies. Leon (first generation, student, 29 yrs) recounts how the extra fluid distorted the bodies and stripped away their human-ness: "Your normal funeral corpse is going to receive about 2-3 gallons of fluid through the arteries. At this place, they pumped them with *fourteen* gallons. By the end, everyone looks like the humans in Wally, where they just float around on those chairs. Their arms are so full of fluid that they look like Frankenstein. They can't even rest them down on their sides. And because you're putting so much fluid in, everyone gets extremely corpulent and loses all facial features and just looks like a squirrel squirreling away nuts."

As mentioned above, students are taught to preserve the dignity of the deceased during the embalming process by covering breasts and genitals as much as possible. This was seen as unnecessary in the body donation context: "You're *maybe* covering up their genitals, but for the most part, there's little to no reverence toward the deceased." My respondents were particularly unsettled by the practice of shaving all body hair from the bodies. Stacey (first generation, student, 22 yrs) explained, "colleges and medical centers won't take cadavers with eyebrows or hair, because it humanizes them, and they don't want that for medical students." According to Leon (first generation, student, 29 yrs), hair is "just one more thing to get in the way when the medical students are doing their thing. They don't need to necessarily perceive it as a human, a person— just a cadaver they need to work on." This is in implicit contrast to the work they, as funeral directors, need to do; unlike medical students, funeral directors need to perceive the bodies as people.

Students' objections to embalming in this context imply that the perception of bodies as human beings is a precondition for engaging in body work. When this perception is blocked or

made difficult to sustain, body work is transformed into a different—and sometimes distasteful— task. Tammy (first generation, student, 27 yrs) notes the following: “There were valuable skills to learn, but I was uneasy about being there. They have chosen to donate their bodies to science and I understand that. It’s just not the realm I would want to work in. I think some people forget that they are/were a human being, and that there still needs to be dignity involved.” The perceived absence of dignity ultimately led Tammy and several classmates to stop attending clinicals altogether. The experience instilled in her “even more respect” for the deceased: “It’s the human body, we need to pick up their arms and lay them out in a nice… delicate manner….in a fluid movement, instead of like, as if transferring a duffel bag.” In short, the change in context made it difficult for my respondents to maintain a view of the deceased as human beings. It appears that for my respondents, the shift in context decoupled body work from its care function. The inability to create a social relationship with the deceased—to engage with them as human beings and objects of care—transformed embalming into a purely technical, unpleasant, and “dirty” task that many opted out of.

The new meaning of funeral work

Grant et al. (2016) argue that even in highly rationalized settings, it is individual workers with particular orientations, cultivated in past experience, who ultimately create new meanings and shape workplace cultures. They find that hospital workers who closely identify with their work roles and value them for their “social usefulness” rather than solely for economic gain “perceive more opportunities to engage in more tangible practices to dignify patients, because in affirming other selves, they affirm understandings of themselves and their work” (181). If workers perceive themselves as, in their case, “socially attuned care providers,” then they are more likely to engage in behaviors consistent with, and that reinforce, that conception. This

implies that *who* fills a particular occupational role matters—a lot. Workers are not interchangeable automatons, despite the rationalized nature of many modern work environments.

Vallas' (2006) work also emphasizes the importance of actors in shaping workplace outcomes. He finds managerial initiatives are not the only factors at play when it comes to workplace change: "the normative orientations which workers"—in his case, manufacturing plant workers—"themselves brought to bear on the process of workplace change" were key to understanding outcomes (1709). Workers he interviewed "supplied thick cultural ensembles of their own making that variously predisposed them to respond to workplace change in particular ways" (1709). Similarly, Sallez (2019) argues that understanding low turnover rates in Philippine call centers requires understanding what call center work means to workers, and how it fits into their lives—lives embedded in historical and cultural contexts that make some, but not other, meanings possible. Taken together, these studies suggest that scholars should be wary of using abstract concepts—like privatization, corporatization, or modernization— to predict work outcomes without first understanding those who fill particular occupational roles; the worker-workplace relationship is not fixed, but rather is mediated by actors who arrive to the workplace with particular orientations, acquired in past experience, that shape the meaning their work has—and *can* have—for them.

The assumption that privatization and bureaucratic procedures will negatively impact the nature of work is pervasive in the funeral industry. But my own data suggest that what matters most is not whose "name is on the door," or whether a funeral home is corporate or privately owned. Instead, *who* fills work roles matters. Certainly some organizational arrangements may be more or less conducive to care (Grant et al., 2016), but arrangements matter little without workers. Take, for instance, Elissa (first generation, director, 58 yrs). Elissa works at a corporate

firm. Although she admits embalming is “not her forte,” she nonetheless supervises all of her embalmings—something she is not required to do: “The preparation of the body is equally important, so I do keep my hand in it. Meaning, I go and check my bodies, even though, because of the size of our corporation, we have men and women who are straight embalmers. They’ll embalm them and if I get a call that they’ll embalm tonight, tomorrow I’ll check it, because I still want hands-on what’s going on.”

I do not mean to suggest that ownership does not matter. It does— but in a different way than is often assumed in the literature. In the funeral industry, shifting ownership models made possible changes in *who* occupies funeral service roles. The social actor that corporatization has opened opportunities for has no family ties to the industry, brings with them a distinct orientation to funeral work (a conception of funeral work as *care work*), and sees themselves as socially intelligent, emotionally attuned, and in possession of dispositions that render them uniquely suited to this work. While cognizant of the industry’s stigma, they do not view funeral work as dirty work. From their standpoint, funeral work is a type of care work not dissimilar to the work surgeons, nurses, and hospice workers do. In this way, my respondents are like Sallez’s (2019) call center agents, breathing new meanings into traditionally “bad” jobs. Crucially, they are people for whom these new meanings are *possible*. And by importing new meanings into the workplace, this new generation of funeral directors is transforming the industry.

In what follows, I expand on the meaning funeral work has for my respondents. Crucially, they perceive funeral work to be a natural fit for who they are as particular people with particular formative experiences, “innate” capacities for compassion and empathy, and a more general service orientation. Because of this perceived fit, they are able to find their work

meaningful and rewarding. The meaning they derive from their work provides them with what I call emotional wages.

Emotional labor to emotional wages

More and more, work is a context where people seek meaning (Ocejo 2017; Cech 2021; Steger and Dik 2009; Martela and Pessi 2018; Scroggins 2008). While work has undeniable extrinsic benefits—i.e., one's salary—"the starting point for many discussions of *meaningful* work is that in order to be meaningful, something deeper, 'more important' than money must be present" (Sparks and Schenk 2001: 858; see also Martela and Pessi 2018: 8). In short, "significance is…about whether work is valuable and worth doing for reasons other than its extrinsic benefits" (8). Work meaningfulness has two dimensions: the evaluation that one's work contributes to some greater, prosocial good, and self-realization, which centers around the idea that one can express oneself at work (Martela and Pessi 2018). Important to this latter point is the notion of work-role fit, or the extent to which a person feels who they are is consistent with their job. Perceived consistency between one's self-concept and one's job predicts evaluations of work as meaningful (Scroggins 2008; Kira and Balkin 2014; Chalofsky and Cavallaro 2013), and work meaningfulness is linked to a host of positive outcomes like occupational identification (Schnell et al. 2013; Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Martela and Pessi 2018; Becker and Carper 1956), work motivation, job retention (Scroggins 2008), and general job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997; Schnell et al 2013), as well as negative outcomes like burnout and stress.

My respondents experience their work to be intrinsically meaningful and deeply fulfilling. Across the board, they cite families thanking them as the best part of their jobs—

the reason why they do it. As Liam (first generation, director, 30 yrs) notes: "To have a family write you a thank you letter you weren't expecting, to get one in the mail saying, 'It was so hard for me when my mom passed away, but I felt comfortable with you, you comforted us, you made it so much easier during this difficult time'—there's no feeling like that." In addition to displays of gratitude, my respondents describe the relationships they cultivate with the bereaved and deceased as rewarding; they *get something out of* caring and investing in their cases above and beyond their salaries. I call these non-financial intrinsic benefits emotional wages.

Given the centrality of face-to-face interaction in funeral work, one may reasonably assume funeral directing to be another case of emotional labor[18]. Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as the process by which workers manage their feelings to align with employer-defined rules. Such expectations perpetuate social inequalities and can lead to negative individual-level outcomes like "emotive dissonance," a concept which draws on Marx's idea of alienation. Following Hochschild (1983), scholars have examined emotional labor in a variety of white collar and service occupations (e.g., Leidner 1993; Godwyn 2006; Smith and Kleinman 1989; Cahill 1999). With notable exceptions, the focus has been on negative outcomes of emotional labor for the individual and organization (Wharton 2009). But, as Wharton points out, "even in jobs in which workers' involvement in caregiving is an expectation, providing care may be experienced as emotionally satisfying and intrinsically rewarding" (154). In his work on nursing home nurses, Lopez (2006) suggests emotional labor may better be viewed as one "way" to care along a continuum, and proposes the notion of "organized emotional care." While emotional labor is premised on the idea that *management* imposes expectations regarding the

[18] In fact, Hochschild (1979) uses "funeral parlor owner" as an example of a yet-unstudied case where workers "apply a sense of 'should' to the situated feeling that emerge in the course of a week" (572).

feelings employees should feel and display, organized emotional care refers to situations where management creates workplace routines that encourage emotional care (151, 156). Moreover, as Ocejo (2017) points out, emotional labor may be present in an occupation—without it "best explain[ing] the nature of the interactions…workers have with consumers" (18).

My data indicate that my respondents do not experience their work as emotional labor. At the most basic level, they are not coerced into cultivating relationships with families and especially, with the deceased, by management. If anything, the opposite is encouraged by some managers. For instance, respondents who have worked at, or who currently work at, corporate firms discuss how management's orientation departs from their own. Marianne (first generation, director, 50 yrs) states that the goal of the corporate firm where she previously worked was to "sell packages." She did not adopt this goal, and expressed aversion to what she sees as profiting from another's grief: "When I was with corporate, I didn't sell the packages. I was ok with that, because the incentive was a bonus. And I was ok without the bonus." Jeff (first generation, director, 59 yrs) similarly admits that while corporate firms are good places to work because of the set hours and benefits, they are, financially speaking, "the whores of the industry." His firm's orientation however, does not impinge upon his own, which he describes as a calling to minister to others.

What is more, other, less relationship-focused ways of being a funeral directly exist, as evidenced by some of my older respondents, as well as some from funeral families. What is more, directors are not required to identify with their role— to do so is a choice my respondents make. Funerals are also highly ritualized events structured by paperwork and convention; any competent individual can learn to give an arrangement interview, prep a body, and lead a service

without personally investing in every case. But my respondents understand these investments and personal connections as *essential* to being a funeral director.

Further, my respondents do not frame the emotion-involving work they do negatively (which is not to say they do not find it challenging or difficult). Rather, they view each case as an opportunity to actualize aspects of themselves, and they find the relationships they form with both bereaved and deceased to be, for the most part, meaningful and fulfilling. Simply labeling funeral work as emotional labor ignores how directors experience their own work. As Goldenhar et al (2001) found in their research on psychosocial stress among female funeral workers, potential stressors only exert a negative effect on mental health *if* factors are perceived as negative. And although Smith et al (2009) start from several problematic assumptions, they find that directors "who experience the appropriate work-related emotions and are able to express them in their interactions with customers" are those "least likely to experience emotional exhaustion" (37). In sum, feeling and expressing emotions on the job are related to better mental health outcomes. In a similar vein, others have found that "workers who report regularly having to display emotions that conflict with their own feelings are more likely than others to experience emotional exhaustion" (Wharton 2009: 159). On the other hand, those "who engage in deep acting or who genuinely experience the emotions they are expected to display on the job seem better able to resist the kinds of negative consequences studied by researchers" (Wharton 2009: 160; Grandley 2003).

Overall, the notion of emotional wages captures my data better than does emotional labor. Stephanie (first generation, director, 30 yrs) speaks to the idea that respondents get something (non-financial) out of their work when she talks about working with families. Initially, she was excited to work with the deceased, but over time she realized her strength lies

in working with families: "Emotionally, I get more out of that." Tina (first generation, student, 19 yrs) gets deep satisfaction from being a source of strength for others. She recounts a particularly difficult case she was involved in: "I was bawling my eyes out, but at the end of the day, I'm very happy because I'm able to give someone their last beautiful memory of their loved one. They depend on me, and I like that." Jill (first generation, student, 25 yrs) put it particularly evocatively when discussing her clinical experiences: "The people we embalm are indigent cases—homeless people, people nobody's claimed, people no one was there to take care of. You see a lot of evidence of hardship and pain in these bodies…what's gratifying about embalming in those cases [is] that you take someone who obviously no one has taken care of for years, they come in covered in their own bodily fluids and they're dirty and they don't have possessions and before they go, and you can make them look beautiful, do their hair, clean them and restore them to a certain standard of dignity. I find that very fulfilling."

Respondents overwhelmingly describe finding in funeral work something that feels "meant" for them. In their interviews, they draw heavily on the language of chance to communicate the experience of work-job fit: they report "falling into," "stumbling upon," or "finding themselves" in funeral work, often against their own expectations and plans. Lee (first generation, director, 53 yrs), for example, claims she never wanted a career in funeral work. But an opportunity at a local funeral home "presented itself" and "it just felt like the right fit for me, right away. I felt like I found what I was looking for when I didn't know what I was looking for."

The fit respondents perceive between their work and who they are contributes to the experience of work as meaningful and makes it possible for them to derive emotional wages from their work. And it is precisely this "fit" that patrimony made difficult to achieve in the past, and that choice today facilities. As the industry shifts from a family succession model to a

corporate ownership model, perceived choice becomes an increasingly relevant variable in determining who enrolls in mortuary school. My data suggest that more and more, individuals with an orientation to funeral work as a form of care work are electing to become directors, and that this orientation is changing the nature of funeral work. The fit my respondents perceive is related to how they see themselves as people. By that I mean that my respondents believe they are particularly suited to this work because of what they see as "innate" personal characteristics—i.e., their capacities for empathy and more generally, their high levels of emotional intelligence—and because of particular formative life experiences. Celeste (first generation, student, 22 yrs), for example, sees herself as a "meticulous" hard worker who "feel[s] a lot with people": "it brings me joy to help people, so I think that's a good thing when you're in this business, to feel happy doing something like this." Others claim they are especially suited to funeral work because of personal losses they endured—losses which gave them particular sensitivity to others' grief. Tammy (first generation, student, 27 yrs) is a good example. She asserts that after 16 years in health care, she felt she was no longer "making a difference": "I thought, I really gotta think about what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life. Funeral directing had been in the back of my mind. I'm good with families and dealing with grief. My father passed away when I was 16, and ever since the age of 6, I've been to multiple funerals. So it was something I could closely identify with, and I knew I had the compassion—it's something you *have,* not necessarily a skill you can cultivate."

Corporatization and "naturalized" expertise

My data indicate that as perceived choice becomes an increasingly relevant variable shaping who pursues a career in the funeral industry, the skills and knowledge needed to be a funeral worker are also changing. Specifically, in the past, markers of a competent funeral

professional were solid business sense, technical expertise in the back room, and impersonality in client-director interactions in the front room. But now, socioemotional skills like empathy and emotional sensitivity, along with technical expertise, are seen as essential markers of a funeral professional across work arenas.

This shift in requisite expertise cannot be understood without taking into account the changing context of funeral work—specifically, the increasingly corporatized workplaces in which work unfolds. Previous research has linked changing work contexts to changes in expertise. For example, Antby and Holm (2021) show how "audience reorderings" occasioned by the shift from stage to screen puppetry result in a change in what it means to be an expert. Similarly, in his work on the autism epidemic, Eyal (2013) demonstrates how deinstitutionalization "provided the ecology within which an alternative network of expertise could be assembled" (868). He shows how as parents of children with autism supplanted child psychiatrists as "key actors," an entirely new network of expertise developed. Importantly, this actor shift would not have been possible without deinstitutionalization. I argue that in the case of the funeral industry, increasing corporatization provided the context for a new form of socioemotional expertise to emerge. Specifically, as the family model of succession came into crisis, choice replaced inheritance as the primary logic driving mortuary school enrollment; this means that *who* goes to mortuary school and ultimately becomes a funeral director changes. This new type of funeral worker is oriented to funeral work as a form of care work; they have different stocks of past, enculturating experiences, and possess different skills, which they bring to bear on their work.

Crucially, these skills have to do with who they are as people. Because of this, they are a kind of "naturalized" expertise. By naturalized, I am not suggesting my respondents possess

innate capacities that make them "destined" for this sort of work (even if *they* may use such language to describe their suitedness to the industry). Rather, I use the term to gesture toward the enculturating effects of previous experience that created in them particular dispositions that brought them to their careers in funeral work. The socioemotional skills they bring to the workplace reflect the sorts of people they are— people shaped by similar socialization experiences (e.g., shared class experiences, early losses, experiences in medical training or service work) that have given them particular meaning making capacities and that orient them to funeral work not as a business enterprise, but as a care work occupation.

It is precisely because these skills are inextricable from who they are as people that my respondents find funeral work intrinsically meaningful and are, in turn, able to derive emotional wages from their work: funeral work allows them to actualize aspects of themselves—to live "authentically," in the Heideggerian sense. In short, the care work model of funeral work, unlike the dirty work model, does not distinguish between job demands and who directors are as people. On the other hand, the dirty work model stressed technical skills, and cordoned off workers' emotional cores from their work. But as is evidenced by respondents' experiences with older directors and by some older respondents and those from funeral families, keeping one's self *out* of the work often leads to greater emotional and mental turmoil. In contrast, in the care work model, the emotional core of the actor is intertwined with their work: if one is the "right kind" of person for funeral work and is in it for the right reasons, then one has a sort of expertise that derives from the sort of person one is. In short, to be a good funeral director is to be what you are.

Meaning, a double-edged sword?

A final point: as researchers have pointed out, the sense of calling, or passion for one's work, can be a "double-edged sword": when individuals identify with their work and view it as a calling, they are more likely to sacrifice time and money, making them "vulnerable to exploitation" (Bunderson and Thompson 2009: 52; see also Blair-Loy and Check 2017; Cech 2021; DePalma 2021). Existing research on work passion tends to focus on white collar professionals, the assumption being that professionals are particularly likely to "internalize the work devotion schema," or the "cultural understanding of intensive work as emotionally meaningful and morally worthy" (Blair-Loy and Cech 2017: 6; Schieman et al 2009: 871; Cech 2021). Blair-Loy and Cech (2016) find that this schema, along with the perception of one's work as "energizing," tend to diminish feelings of work overload. The flip side of this is that in internalizing such a schema, workers inadvertently strengthen "organizational expectations of overload"—expectations that are heavily gendered (23).

DePalma (2021) documents the prevalence of the "passion paradigm" among professionals. She too argues that passion can make individuals more vulnerable to exploitation: "Not only can organizations leverage work passion to squeeze more hours out of their employers, when employees perceive that a solution to poor working conditions is to rely on one's passion, organizations are further absolved from structural critique and structural change" (151). So, while work passion can "empower" workers, it may also maintain the status quo of the organization and reproduce inequality (156). Further, perceived choice can obscure inequality (Cech 2021:28). And as Gascoigne et al (2015) point out, choice is itself socially and culturally shaped. For example, it is not by mere chance that some occupations are gendered; gender stereotypes make some jobs seem "better" for men or for women. Nor is it by mere chance that

when occupations feminize, they tend to lose social status and experience salary reductions (e.g., Lincoln 2010).

My data suggest that at least at this moment and for my sample, work passion and work-identification do not appear to be contributing especially to exploitation (this is distinct from directors' desire to make more money). But if and when the substitution of emotional for financial wages comes with burnout and negative mental and physical health outcomes, these emotional wages become undesirable. While this does not seem immediately to be the case for my sample, the impact of the care work orientation on the mental and physical well-being of funeral workers remains to be seen as the industry continues to change in the coming years.

Conclusions

Sociological research has examined the at times surprising effects of large-scale changes on the nature of work. In particular, scholars have considered the transformation of previously good jobs to bad jobs (and bad jobs to good jobs) in response to factors like globalization, deregulation, and (changing) cultural tastes. Here, I document the conversion of a traditionally dirty work occupation—funeral work—into a care work occupation. This transformation, I argue, was catalyzed by several factors, namely corporatization, privatization, labor force changes, the increasing importance of higher education for career prospects, and decreasing social norms around following in one's family's occupational footsteps. Together, these "forces" weakened the traditional family succession model of funeral work. As corporations emerged as key players in the funeral industry, they also created opportunities for a new type of social actor—one excluded by the traditional model—to enter the industry. These new directors who chose rather than inherited funeral work come to their jobs with different sets of past experiences that allow funeral work to mean something different than it meant for previous generations of

directors. They are oriented to funeral work as a form of care work rather than dirty work, and this orientation shapes the way they approach, experience, and perform their work. In particular, the dirty work model hinges on the separation of front and back stage work tasks. But more and more, directors today are eliminating this distinction by acting the same way with the deceased as they do with the bereaved—with care. Ocejo (2017) suggests that it is precisely the *public* nature of the jobs he studied that allowed them to become meaningful "good" jobs today. A similar dynamic seems to be at play in my case: my directors are, in a way, making public what was once private (in particular, what goes on in the back room). This secrecy was critical to the dirty work model, and its elimination is transforming the nature of funeral work.

Moreover, these new directors possess particular socioemotional skills, which they see as requisite—along with technical expertise—to being a good director. This new form of "naturalized" expertise stems from who they are as people. They also get something out of the job, distinct from their salaries—what I call emotional wages. These wages render the job worth doing—challenges and all—and in a very real way, transform funeral work for many of my respondents from a mere job, something needed to pay the bills, to a deeply fulfilling career.

Of course, there are limitations of this study. First, the industry is currently in transition, which means that my findings will need to be re-evaluated as changes continue to unfold. Second, my interviewees all come from the same area of the Midwest. There are, however, substantial regional differences in funeral practices (this, along with the publication year, may explain some of the differences between my and Donley and Baird's [2017] findings), and so a more diverse sample would offer a clearer picture of change in the industry as a whole. Limitations aside, this study contributes to the sociological literature on the changing nature of work. I demonstrate how in some cases, changes like corporatization can serve as catalysts for

unexpected transitions. In this case, the emergence of deathcare corporations created the opportunity structure for a new type of social actor to enter the industry. But organizational change alone is insufficient for occupational transformation: in the end, it is people—themselves shaped by their trajectories through social space— who breathe meaning into structure.

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