Boston College

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Department of Sociology

THE FIELD OF CONSUMPTION: CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS OF STATUS, CAPITAL, AND EXCHANGE

A Dissertation

by

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Abstract:
This dissertation analyzes the field of consumption to provide an analysis of Bourdieusian cultural capital. Bourdieu introduced cultural capital to express the summed effect of intergenerational and personal institutional credentials on economic structure (1986). The three articles of this dissertation – Imagining Class, Precariat Production, and New Cultures of Connection – take up the study of cultural capital in a contemporary, American context among Millennial consumers (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). These cases analyze producer and consumer experiences within the capital markets for durable goods, labor, and a barter market for services. The experiences under analysis include the design and purchase of luxury clothing, the selling of labor to temporary employers, and the barter of unlike services for a like medium of exchange. The analyses build upon Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital by tracing its role and evolution through producer and consumer exchanges in the “consumer field” (Bourdieu; 1984, 1986, 1993). The analysis of this dissertation relies on semi-structured interview, ethnographic, and survey data. In total, 96 semi-structured interviews were conducted during the data collection for the three articles. Interview data is supported by economic survey and ethnographic data for research participants.

*Imagining Class* melds postmodern and Veblenian consumer theory through informant narratives of the cynical and strategic production of conspicuous consumption enacted by both producers and consumers of the clothing brand Prep Outfitters (Featherstone 1991; Veblen 1899/1994). Upwardly mobile, young consumers believe that performing an elite lifestyle is a condition upon which financial services career success rests. The shared belief is correlated with income increases and results in an environment of aesthetic and lifestyle conformity on Wall Street.
*Precariat Production* analyzes the motivational aspects and economic benefits of collaborative production work within the online platforms of Airbnb, RelayRides, and Taskrabbit and provides insight into the nature of the new working precariat class (Standing 2009). Analysis shows that three central motivational categories drive participation: money, efficiency/environmental, and workplace flexibility. Possession of economic assets prior to beginning work as a collaborative producer is a key characteristic associated with high earning within the precarious, collaborative marketplace, yet cultural capital is not a significant correlate of high income relative to the labor market. Further, those who enjoy the most economic success within the collaborative marketplace as “high earners” are also most likely to express that a motivation of “efficiency/environmental” drives their production. The efficiency/environmental motivational finding lend a broader support for the claim of an evolution of high cultural capital expressions of ecohabitus (Bourdieu 1984; Schor et al. 2014).

*New Cultures of Connection* evaluates the exchanges made on an egalitarian barter market through the medium of a local currency, “time dollars.” The study uses Zelizer’s concept of a circuit of commerce (2005) to show that cultural capital limits potential trades available in the time bank and reveals that those with high cultural capital exit the market. Ecohabitus provides one exception to this finding as high cultural capital participants find nonmonetary value in authenticity, localism, environmentalism, holistic wellness and self-reliance. Yet, this new set of high cultural capital preferences does not pair with their exchanges as they demonstrate enduring inclination towards professionalized, market-like services. Disparities in cultural capital challenge the potential of barter networks like the “time bank” to alter the dependence of identities of market practice and success.
This dissertation is dedicated to the family of my choice, Nicole.
Acknowledgements

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I am thankful to the members of my dissertation committee: Paul Gray, Sarah Babb, and Brian Gareau. Each has supported the completion of my education by leading me in the refinement of this document and supporting my ability to articulate the contributions of the empirical research projects it contains. These efforts represent significant generosity of time and spirit.

The Connected Learning Research Network (“CLRN”) of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is responsible for funding two of the three research projects of this dissertation, “Precariat Production” and “New Cultures of Connection.” I am grateful to the Foundation’s generosity and to the leadership of Mimi Ito, the chairperson of the CLRN.
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INTRODUCTION
Introduction

This dissertation analyzes the field of consumption to provide empirical evidence and analysis of Bourdieusian cultural capital today (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). The three articles of this dissertation consider producer and consumer experiences within several consumer markets. The experiences under analysis are diverse. They range from purchasing luxury clothing and renting a home to trading childcare for help with finances in a barter market. In each of these contexts, the analyses feature Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to trace its role and evolution through consumer exchanges (Bourdieu; 1984, 1986, 1993). Each research project within this dissertation was conducted within what Bourdieu would call the “consumer field” (1993).

Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of fields in order to describe social worlds with distinctive logic and norms (Bourdieu 1993). The field of consumption deals with those norms and practices common to consumer behavior, namely producing and purchasing goods and services. The structure of social and economic power within the field of consumption determines which social attributes become associated with cultural capital and, thus, determine the form of cultural capital itself. The dual perspective of the analyses allows the three articles to comment upon the cultural attributes recognized as valuable by individuals with high volumes of cultural and economic capital in mainstream and countercultural consumer settings. The projects provide a typology of motivations and experiences for the individuals whose social and economic class positions enable them to draw such distinctions. Ultimately, the analysis of these cultural distinctions supports a theorization of the impact of these judgments for the contemporary field of American consumption. The research projects of this dissertation rely upon Pierre
Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital in the three forms he originally proposed it: the embodied, habits of the body and speech; objectified, cultural value that exists in tangible objects like paintings; and institutional, the cultural cache resulting from educational degrees (1986). The analysis is conducted in the context of his concept of the field of consumption (1984, 1986, 1993).

The three case studies of this dissertation show the dynamic nature of the modern field of consumption through the analyses of producer and consumer exchanges. Research participants define “legitimate culture” as they produce, sell, purchase and barter goods and services. Diverse power dynamics related to socioeconomic class influence as consumer decisions about exchange within each of the research settings. The first research project presents a field in which the historical importance of socioeconomic class is reified and upheld. The second project occurs within a field of peer-production constructed with egalitarian dynamics of exchange. Most research participants engage in novel forms of exchange between peers, yet prefer the cultural attributes of high cultural capital that control traditional fields. Finally, the third project occurs within a field in which participants consciously try to alter the unbalanced power dynamics of economic relations. The participants in the third study communicate their intention to develop new forms of egalitarian exchange while simultaneously acting in the transactional manner of the market. The work utilizes the following theoretical framework, methods, and data to give location to the empirical insights summarized above.
Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu’s theories of consumer practice have influenced the past three decades of research undertaken by economic sociologists (Sallaz and Zaviska, 2007). During this era of influence, structural perspectives have been adapted to explain components of cultural life through an economic lens (Beckert, 2010). In employing these theories as frames for their own analyses, some have criticized the hierarchical and rigid nature the consumer practices introduced by Bourdieu (Gartman 1991). This critique focuses on the lack of dynamism within Bourdieu’s fields. In his analyses, fields are arenas of cultural bargaining with universally accepted clear power dynamics: Those who possess the largest amounts of cultural and economic capital influence the dominant cultural attributes associated with the capital in their possession. There is little room for class mobility and few suggestions that subordinate capital could overtake dominant capital and redefine the binary poles of taste within a field. Schor (2014) notes the absence of analysis despite Bourdieu’s claim that the dynamics of fields may change. She writes that while “Bourdieu believes fields can be de-stabilized, the literature contains few studies of transformations in the underlying binaries of taste” (for an exception, see Carfagna et al. 2014). Bourdieu claims that social brokerages over taste or “shifting structures of evaluation” are universal in social life (2003, p. 71). The existence of cultural capital in any given society could be taken for granted, but “shifts that occur within it have to be demonstrated empirically, proceeding from a clear theoretical understating of what cultural capital is and how it operates (Prieur and Savage, 2011).

Bourdieu developed the concepts of cultural capital and fields of consumption within his overarching model of consumer practice (1984, 1986, 1993). Individual actors
negotiate the characterization of the cultural attributes of legitimate taste and become associated with cultural capital within fields of consumption. The decisions that social actors reach about what legitimate culture consists of follow the rules and power relationships of their social context (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu theorized about the influence exerted by social context upon decisions that actors make about the elements of cultural capital through his focus on social context as “field” (1984, p. 99). Fields differ by structure and dynamics and, as a result, distinct cultural products emerge from them. Cultural capital is only able to serve as a market of “legitimate culture” to the extent that members of one field agree upon its form. This agreement is reached through the negotiation the value or capital of any expression of culture. Therefore, “legitimate” culture recognized as such at one time may not hold the same cultural power at another time or within a different context. Cultural capital, therefore, can be reproduced across field or it may vary according to the social topography of any field.

The consensus of what equates to cultural capital can either change or persist over time. Cultural capital emerges not as a constant form, but rather as a malleable social market reliant upon the judgment and taste of historically situated individuals. Consumer choice, taste, and exchange provide an opportunity for insight into the process of cultural capital formation and revision in the contemporary American consumer field (Kingston 2001, p. 89). Claims that cultural capital is a commodity with market value in the struggle for privilege have appeared within research on the topic for the past decade. According to Laruea and Weininger it is a resource “that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next” (2003, p. 567).
This work’s ability to comment upon the nature of cultural capital relies upon several key concepts. I define them at length below and describe their operationalization within each research project and within the context of the project’s overall theoretical framework. The three articles of this dissertation respond to the concept of cultural capital specifically as it evolves through negotiation within fields of consumption (Bourdieu; 1984, 1986). The fields of consumption presented in these works, therefore, determine which social attributes become associated with cultural capital. These negotiations are analyzed through acts of consumer exchange. Bourdieu defined the embodied state or long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. Second, cultural capital may exist in the objectified state in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.). Third, cultural capital is also found in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification through which cultural capital is marked in the individual by educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986, p. 242). In the case studies of this dissertation, the field of consumption is the social context in which individuals act. Therefore, the cultural attributes associated with high or low cultural capital are categorized by the agreements social actors’ broker about taste within the field of consumption (Bourdieu 1984, 1993).

The first article of this dissertation shows how some individuals pay reverence to cultural capital status markers associated with cultural attributes – embodied and objectified cultural capital – of the French upper class in Bourdieu’s original analysis. In this case study, middle and upper middle class individuals purchase and display garments in the style of those worn by members of the Veblenian leisure class (1899). They knowingly and visibly align themselves with the economic power symbolized by these
cultural objects with the goal of being recognized and rewarded professionally by members of the true sociocultural upper class. The second study presents a sample of “collaborative producers,” – individuals who provide goods and services to other individuals within a peer-to-peer market. The participants provide access to their homes, their cars, or their skills for others to consume in exchange for money. This study reveals that cultural capital, which is measured in its institutionalized form, is not the key predictor of economic success within the collaborative marketplace. Rather, the possession of both economic and cultural assets prior to beginning work as a collaborative producer brings about a different motivation for beginning collaborative consumption work and higher earnings in that labor market. The third paper in this dissertation investigates the exchange of a local currency and the motivations of those who participate in the market. The local currency featured is the “time dollar” and it only circulates and holds value within a specific, voluntary community. I analyze attitudes towards time dollar exchange and the impact of those attitudes on trades brokered between members of a local barter market. The members of the time bank barter market possess high levels of institutionalized cultural capital. Yet, the work shows that those with high levels of institutionalized cultural capital have difficulty completing exchanges of satisfactory value. This difficulty is due to the unique nature of the time dollar, specifically to its lack of a uniformly recognized trading price that suggests its value. The worth of one unit of this currency is therefore subject to negotiation between actors in the time bank. The attitudes towards economic exchange present in the data represent anti-capitalist sentiment and charitable intention or, on the other hand, a calculating or transactional motive. The analysis in this final study supports the historical nature of
Bourdieu’s model and his claim that the contents of “legitimate culture” shifts over time through a constant process of negotiation (Bourdieu 1993).

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is explored within each project of this dissertation. The concept responds to a social reality defined by skewed, yet unchangeable power relations. Bourdieu’s proposed structure is reflected in the pages of this dissertation. In this project, the power dynamic between those who have and lack formal education or “institutionalized” cultural capital is one of considerable difficulty. Bourdieu argues that those in possession of more cultural capital are those whose practices are recognized as valuable by all within the field of consumption. For Bourdieu, the field is a network of relations among the objective positions within it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 p. 97). The field of consumption is like other fields in the social world in that it is a competitive arena in which actors rely upon their capital (economic, cultural, and social) in order to preserve and increase their capital stores in the future. Individuals do not subjectively choose the relationships and the characteristics of those relationships in which they participate within a field. They also do not select their positions within any one field. Rather, the structure and power dynamics of the field are predetermined by the socioeconomic hierarchy of each field, and the logic determined by that hierarchy makes each semiautonomous field distinctive (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1969). The field of consumption is no exception to these rules. The structure of Bourdieu’s field “undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of those positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position, and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favorably to heir own products (Bourdieu in Wacaquant 1989, pg. 80). In the field of consumption those with the largest volume of capital determine the
dominant culture. Bourdieu first constructed and defined the components of dominant
taste through correspondence analysis. He represented the results of that analysis in the
figure reproduced below, “Variants of dominant taste” in *A Social Critique of the
According to Bourdieu’s conceptualization, fields are not able to shift in their basic elements or structure. However, this dissertation challenges the fixed nature of the Bourdieusian field’s structure by providing evidence of a shift in the cultural attributes associated with “legitimate culture.” The empirical data from across the three projects of this thesis shows not only a change in content of those attributes associated with “legitimate culture,” but also a change in that individuals are able to define culture through consumption. These insights are gained by analyzing the shifts across the differing contexts provided by these research sites in the overall field of consumption. Thus, this work provides evidence for a reorientation of the way that cultural distinctions or dominant taste is defined. In some instances recorded in the data, especially those within the study on the time bank, the binaries of taste first described by Bourdieu and later presented by Holt (1997) and Schor (2014). A full discussion of the observed shifts in cultural capital and the ramifications of those changes for the fields of consumption will follow a summary of the methods used in the research projects.

**Methods**

The three articles of this dissertation rely upon semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observation, and survey analysis. In total, 96 semi-structured, in-person, phone, and Skype interviews were conducted during the data collection for the three articles. The interview lengths ranged from a minimum of 30 minutes to a maximum of two hours. The interview data collected for these three research projects is the primary form of data presented in each resulting article. The interview evidence presented within the first and third articles, “Imagining Class” and “New Cultures of Connection,” is combined with contextual ethnographic observations. The ethnographic observations that
appear in “Imagining Class” article occurred during a formal period of participant observation. I worked as a volunteer intern at the lifestyle clothing company “Prep Outfitters” for ten weeks during autumn of 2010. The interview data presented in the second article, “Citizen Producers,” is coupled with surveys that provide information about the participant’s economic situations. In addition to interview data, the third article “New Cultures of Connection” presents the records of participant trades with other members of the time bank barter network.

Formative and recent research that analyzes the field of consumption has relied most heavily upon a blend of survey and semi-structured interview data to provide insight into the motivations and behaviors present in this arena (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Holt 1997; Belk 2014). This collection of research follows in the format of other recent studies focused upon the consumer field and combines semi-structured interview and survey data describing the way people make sense of the consumer relationship that forms through exchange in the field of consumption. The semi-structured interview format allows for a deep exploration of consumer and producer experiences. In order to explore market actors’ meanings and actions, I also provide ethnographic context for the interview and survey data present within these studies. I focused on consumers and producers because their relationships to one another are brokered through exchange. The norms of those exchanges not only define the dominant form of cultural capital, but also impact the structure of economic and cultural power within the field of consumption (Schor 2007).

“Imagining Class,” the first of the three articles presented in this dissertation project, is based on a combination of interviews with designers, merchandisers, and consumers, and participant observation at the headquarters of clothing company Prep
Outfitters. I conducted formal interviews with a total of 10 people working on the production side of a lifestyle-clothing brand, talking at length with six designers and four merchandisers. I held formal interviews with 14 long time consumers of this brand mostly in and around New York City (Appendix A). These consumers were not only required to own items of clothing from Prep Outfitters, but also to identify with the affluent lifestyle that the brand promotes through its style. I found respondents through professional connections to a top-tier business school. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length with most lasting approximately 70 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded and analyzed.

Respondents’ current employment and class backgrounds differed across producer and consumer groups; however, each participant had a bachelor’s degree. The most significant differences in income and class background occur within the consumer respondent group; most respondents reported “upper middle class” backgrounds, and nine reported salaries between $125,000 and $210,000 annually. Most designers and merchandisers reported working- and middle-class backgrounds when asked about their family history. I was unable to collect annual income information from the producer groups, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a median annual income of $64,260 for fashion designers and $50,420 for merchandisers. Fifteen of the 24 respondents are men, all except two were born in the United States, and most are between ages 25 and 45 years old with a mean age of 28 (Appendix A).

I also report the results of informal observation during a period of participant observation at the Prep Outfitters headquarters for ten weeks (80 hours total) in September through November, 2010. I gained access to the site through a referral
provided by a merchandiser working at a design house that Prep Outfitters sometimes relies on for creation and production assistance. I interned at the corporation’s headquarters and completed a wide variety of tasks. I sorted, measured and fitted sample garment pieces that the design department received from overseas factories. Through this work I also was responsible for correcting sizing inconsistencies to “technical design packets,” blueprints that international fabric mills and factories follow to construct garments. Bethany, a senior merchandiser who has worked at Prep Outfitters for seven years, was my supervisor for this work. I spent considerable time completing many other administrative tasks as assigned by a rotating cast of designers, technical designers, merchandisers, marketers, and office administrators. I was able to build considerable rapport with several office employees as I spent afternoons delivering mail, filing fabric swatches, preparing meeting agendas, and working on three of the company’s viral marketing projects. Most office employees involved in creative design tasks were young - the majority less than 40 years old - while the merchandising staff had an approximate mean age of 48.

Prep Outfitters specializes in lifestyle clothing designed to reflect the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) aesthetic. Its products include a wide variety of categories, ranging from brightly colored polo shirts to boat shoes. Casual clothing ranges in price from approximately $75 to $150 per item, while the average price of more formal attire items is $275. The company produces button-down formal shirts and ties appropriate for work. These ties are notable because they display symmetrical patterns of cartoonish drawings of “the good life” as described by the brand. For example, these icons include martinis, yachts, or even bags of money. The style in which the icons are
arranged mimics those of luxury brands, specifically Ferragamo and Hermès. The company’s marketing analyses lacked systematic demographic information about the corporation’s clientele. An aspirational brand, Prep Outfitters relies on ad hoc, impressionistic data about the racial and socioeconomic composition of its consumers. This model of impressionistic marketing functions well as the brand hopes to create an affinity for its image of the ideal consumer, who is white, wealthy, and conservative, across the range of its actual consumers.

This paper first describes the various elements of class reproduction as I encountered them in the design and merchandising department of Prep Outfitters. Second, I look at how the work of reproducing normative class clothing styles is affected by its producers. Designers and merchandisers are influenced by preconceived notions of what their idealized consumer ‘should’ want to purchase and have the agency to shape those choices for the future. Finally, I use my sample of ‘idealized consumers’ to show the way the messages imbued in this clothing interact with old and new meanings of privilege, whiteness, and wealth. The two data sources reveal commonalities between the conspicuous producers and conspicuous consumers featured here. Both groups seek financial security in an era characterized by economic uncertainty by imagining elite lifestyle to embody and capitalize on it.

“Precariat Production” the second article of the three presented in this dissertation feature participants from who work as contractors through Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and Relay Rides. The companies are for-profit collaborative consumption initiatives that serve as the primary sites of this research. All of these platforms facilitate different types of collaborative production and consumption. Airbnb’s website hosts the exchange of
rented rooms, apartments, and homes between individual, non-commercial hosts and travelers. TaskRabbit connects those who need assistance to complete “tasks” with Rabbits looking for project-based employment. Tasks vary greatly in their nature. For example, the same Rabbit could complete a grocery delivery task on one day and a website translation task the next day. Relay Rides allows car owners to rent their vehicles to neighbors or visitors who need temporary access to a car. Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and Relay Rides provide opportunities for the individual producer to deploy access to different types of assets, both tangible and intangible, in order to generate income. These research sites were selected because of the diversity of opportunities presented through their online platforms. Each caters to a different type of producer and, therefore, was selected to illustrate the effectiveness of this marketplace as each grants access to different types of assets.

I evaluated the Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and Relay Rides participant profiles located in the greater Boston, Massachusetts area to determine if they appeared to fall within the 18 – 34 year old age range of this study. The age range of collaborative producers invited to participate in this study was capped at 34 years old. This limitation was placed on the age of potential participants because focuses on the adoption of collaborative production as a method to increase income among young people. The researchers have chosen to functionally define “young” producers as those aged 18 – 34 years of age. A list of potential participants who appeared to be in the proximate age based on their collaborative producer profiles were compiled. Then, I selected the first round of

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1 The Connected Learning Research Network of the MacArthur Foundation funded the research for this study, Connected Producers: Investigation of Peer Exchange (#13.221.01e). The research focus of the network is young people under 34 years of age. This uniform age cap also suits the topical area of interest in the case of collaborative produces as many young people within this age range seek out this type of online, flexible work.
individuals to contact by intervals of 5 from the compiled list. Participants were recruited online through the messaging systems within each of the collaborative websites. In addition to falling within the “youth” age range, participants were required to be “active” collaborative producers. Within this study, “active” is defined as having completed at least five exchanges as a collaborative producer. Interview participants met with the interviewers in person or over Skype for semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 30 minutes – 90 minutes. The interview topics followed a semi-structured interview guide; participants then completed a brief survey.

The data presented are from semi-structured interviews and surveys of forty-two producers within the collaborative marketplaces, Airbnb, Task Rabbit, and Relay Rides. Participants ranged from 21 years to 34 years of age. Twenty participants were female and twenty-two participants were male. Nineteen participants were married or had partners and twenty-three were single. Thirty-seven of the participants were white and thirty-eight had completed at least a bachelor’s degree. Detailed demographic information is available in Appendix A. Socio-demographic data was used to generate dichotomous measures of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). The first of these measures categorizes participants into either Low or High Cultural Capital (LCC/HCC) based upon the sum of years of tertiary education of participants and both of a participant’s parents. Figure 1 displays the results of this analysis by listing the platform on which participants act as producers, participants’ summed economic and cultural capital scores, the designation of either Low or High Cultural / Economic Capital (LCC/HCC or LEC/HEC), and each participant’s economic net worth for additional
context. Finally, the primary motivation for beginning and sustaining work as a collaborative producer is listed for each research participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Cultural Capital</th>
<th>Economic Capital</th>
<th>Total CC / EC</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Net Worth</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
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<td>HCC</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>38 RelayRides</td>
<td>Airbnb</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>HCC</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>36 Airbnb</td>
<td>Airbnb</td>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>HCC</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>34 TaskRabbit</td>
<td>Airbnb</td>
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<td>flexible work</td>
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<td>Airbnb</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
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<td>30 RelayRides</td>
<td>Airbnb</td>
<td>-$23,000</td>
<td>efficiency/environmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth</td>
<td>HCC</td>
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<td>Airbnb</td>
<td>$2,600</td>
<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Airbnb</td>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
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<tr>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
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<td>Anna</td>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
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<td>Valerie</td>
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<td>15 Airbnb</td>
<td>Airbnb</td>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
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<td>LEC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>LEC</td>
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<td>Airbnb</td>
<td>-$20,000</td>
<td>flexible work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristin</td>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>11 TaskRabbit</td>
<td>Airbnb</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>money</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The second measure of Figure 1 classifies participants as either Low or High Economic or Cultural Capital (LCC/HCC or LEC/HEC). Economic capital was measured using participants’ annual income and the total value of their assets. Figure 2 displays the descriptive figures of each category.
Descriptive Statistics for EC/CC categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LCC ($N = 19$)</th>
<th>HCC ($N = 22$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of years of total tertiary education between participants and parents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LEC ($N = 20$)</th>
<th>HEC ($N = 21$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average income (2012, US$)</td>
<td>$35,525</td>
<td>$97,283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income (2012, US$)</td>
<td>$37,500</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average net worth (2013, US$)</td>
<td>-$35,525</td>
<td>$113,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median net worth (2013, US$)</td>
<td>-$37,500</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2

Participants earned an average of $7,480 in total as a result of their collaborative production. Sixty-four percent of participants who held a bachelor’s degree estimated that they earned at least as much per hour in the collaborative marketplace as they did through the traditional labor market. In fact, fifty percent of those with a bachelor’s degree reported that they earned more through collaborative production than through any other work. Seven participants worked as collaborative producers on a full time basis.

The third article in this dissertation “New Cultures of Connection” features the participants in a time bank. Time banks are barter network that allow members to offer their services in exchange for a time currency that entitles them to the services of others. For example, a time banker lists her “offer” of statistical tutoring online, another time bank member selects that offer, and together they complete a trade. The statistics pupil then “pays” the tutor in a time currency based solely on how long the exchange lasted. The tutor can then draw upon the currency she has earned to obtain services from a different time bank member. A key feature of time banks is that regardless of the market
value of the service rendered, all services in the time bank are valued equally. One hour of legal advice is equal to one hour of babysitting is equal to one hour of dance instruction.

Though some time banks are housed within organizations, most, like the Greater Boston Time Trade Circle (TTC), are run as community-based nonprofit organizations with both online and offline components. In recent years, the Internet has helped expand time banks by facilitating and recording offline trades between members. Time banking’s digital presence is an important factor that allows strangers to swap services and that distinguishes it from kinship or place-based barter networks. Time banking has been able to move beyond a core of true believers into community-based organizations and mainstream social service groups in areas such as ex-offender reentry (National Homecomers Academy), aging in place (Reach CareBank of Vermont), and the integration of recent immigrants (Visiting Nurses Association of New York Community Connections Time Bank) (Collum 2012).

In the fall and winter of 2011–12 I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation among time bankers in the TTC, an eight-hundred-member volunteer-run time bank. The results of thirty interviews with male and female participants aged twenty-four to thirty-four are presented. Table3.1, at the end of this chapter, displays detailed demographic information. Respondents are predominately white and female (twenty-one of the thirty are women), a gender proportion that reflects the composition of the membership. All but one of our participants has a college degree, and 53 percent hold graduate degrees. Generally, our participants are professionally employed and identify with the middle class. Though our sample is for the most part not composed of people
who aim to maximize their incomes, many referenced their economic privilege relative to others during our interviews. Notably, our participants are from very well-educated families; graduate education among their parents was the norm. This also means they are quite high in cultural capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). That is, they have high-status tastes that have been cultivated through family upbringing, schooling, or both. While our population does not reflect the most elite groups who possess both high economic and cultural status, quite a few went to elite schools. More generally, they display an “ecological-habitus” (Carfagna et al., forthcoming), which we believe is an important emerging taste pattern among high-cultural-capital groups in the United States. They represent a segment of the elite that has more cultural than economic capital and that is leading a turn toward ecological lifestyles.

The methods used in this study are informed by those studies of time banks that exist within economic sociology. It must be noted first, however, that most articles about time banks are from the popular press, where coverage of time banks has increased significantly over time--from 10 articles in 1997 to 140 in 2014. There is also a literature that lies between the academic and the popular. Early accounts, especially writings by the time bank’s founder, Edgar Cahn, defined a moral imperative to time bank, described the possible organizational forms of time banks, and laid out plans for establishing local branches (Cahn and Rowe 1996; Cahn 2000). Later reports detailed the inner workings of time bank exchanges and hypothesized about the social benefits time banking could offer should the practice become mainstream (Aldridge et al. 2001; North 2003; Seyfang and Smith 2002). Some articles, especially those within gerontology, found that time banking yields positive physical and mental health impacts for adults, as measured by
improvements in self-efficacy and community engagement (Bailis and Chipperfield 2002; Collom 2008; Collom, Lasker, and Kyriacou 2012; Seyfang 2003). More recent academic studies on time banking have moved from descriptive to analytic accounts (Seyfang 2006). Carfagna et al. (2014) explore the emerging taste regimes of high-cultural-capital time bankers. Zelizer (2005) discusses time banking within her analysis of circuits of commerce to highlight both the potential benefits to members and possible pitfalls of participation. Seyfang (2006) and Fenton (2012) discuss the role of time banking in building social capital. This research mirrors the methods used in previous studies of time banks – interview, ethnography, and survey – to provide insight into the ideological motivations that lead people to join time banks, detailing the interplay between ideological motives and utilitarian approaches to trading and the complex class dynamics that characterize participation.
References


Chapter 2:

IMAGINGING CLASS:
PERFORMING ELITE LIFESTYLE THROUGH CLOTHING
Imagining class: performing elite lifestyle through clothing

Abstract
The study chronicles the consumption of elite class aesthetic and its production by Prep Outfitter’s, a luxury-clothing brand with a focus on the middle class market. It relies on interview and ethnographic data gathered among the “preppy” brand’s team of designers and a group of young, upwardly mobile consumers to reveal commonalities between the two groups. The similarity between research participants emerges as they state their intentions to attempt to either embody (young finance workers) or capitalize on (designers) elite lifestyle as a means of career advancement. In mimicking the ultra-affluent bankers of Wall Street by adopting their aesthetic script producers and consumers also hope to capitalize on the associated religious, racial, and political norms of the American leisure class. The work extends previous analyses of elite lifestyle that feature the impact luxury consumption can have on both producers and consumers (Sherman 2007; Khan 2011). The findings of this case meld postmodern and Veblenian consumer theory through informant narratives that reveal a cynical production of conspicuous consumption enacted by both producers and consumers of Prep Outfitters (Featherstone 1991; Veblen 1899/1994). This performance confirms an environment of aesthetic and lifestyle conformity on Wall Street because participants believe that performing an elite lifestyle is a condition upon which career success rests.

Keywords
Veblen, conspicuous consumption, postmodern, status, fashion

The 2008 financial crisis and resulting economic collapse ushered in a new surge of criticism against the consumerist excess of Wall Street’s high earning bankers. In the wake of the downturn, media outlets, government representatives, and concerned citizens censured affluent bankers for engaging in outsized luxury consumption, from private jets to bottle service, even as the financial institutions they led were rescued by funds from public coffers. It may seem that many of the Wall Street bankers who have faced these and similar critiques over the years are resistant to altering their behavior even when stories of their overindulgence draw resentment. This paper will help explain why even under the changed conditions of an anemic market, bankers pursue a lifestyle underwritten by conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899/1994). It will show that for
those individuals who aspire to be among the top 1% of wage earners on Wall Street, opting out of status games that are played through the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods does not feel possible. Instead, participants show that a certain amount of conformity to the perceived rules of those games is required.

This paper combines organizational ethnography among the designers of Prep Outfitters; a lifestyle focused clothing company, with in-depth interviews of the young, finance professionals who are part of the mostly male consumers targeted by the brand. It analyzes how both the producers and consumers of Prep Outfitters adopt “preppy” style clothing because they believe it signals the “old money” of the leisure class, and that expressing economic power through dress is essential to winning favor in the workplace and continuing on a track of upward mobility. Though the consumers featured in this study earn salaries in the top 5% of all American wage earners, they still spend considerable economic and emotional resources imagining upper class taste. They endeavor to adopt an elite lifestyle through the clothing whose style they imagine will grant them membership to the top 1% (Veblen 1899/1994; Illouz 2009; Khan 2011). Generally, this paper considers the lifestyle practices of a group of upwardly mobile young Wall Street finance employees to learn how they participate in the reproduction of social inequality through consumption. Specifically, it analyzes the production and consumption of mass-market luxury clothing among those who adopt the elite class aesthetic of lifestyle brand Prep Outfitters in order to produce class boundaries through

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2 Elements of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) aesthetic first emerged at the turn of the 20th century among American preparatory school students. Prep Outfitters and other contemporary commercial clothing brands reference and draw upon the known historical connocation between economic wealth, bodily management, and the style of clothing worn by students who attend preparatory school (Birnbach 1980; Schurnberger 1991).
creative displays of style. The data show that although the components of object based status signaling have transformed in the century since Veblen’s work on the role of apparel in status based consumption, the structure of the status games he laid out is still in use today.

**Literature**

While sociologists have traditionally focused on those disadvantaged by inequality, “studying up” is also of empirical and theoretical interest. The dramatic upward surge in wages among the highest earners has made ours an era of great wealth inequality (Kopczuk and Saez 2010; Wolff 2012). In the past decade, sociologists concerned about increases in inequality in income and wealth distributions have made a more systematic inquiry into the lives of wealth holders (Mills 2002; Sherwood 2010; Khan 2012). This analysis extends previous writing on elite lifestyles that feature the impact of luxury consumption on producers and consumers in the marketplace (Mills 1956; Beckert 2003; Williams 2006; Sherman 2007; Khan 2011). By studying the role of apparel consumption among those attempting to gain entry into the upper class, this work contributes to both empirical and theoretical understandings of both general consumption and the consumption of the wealthy specifically. The work also reinterprets the work of Thorstein Veblen on the leisure class to show that clothing stylistically associated with the upper class is now worn to signal the desire and ability to work hard. This approach yields contemporary insight from Thorstein Veblen’s historic *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1994).
His work originally explored the motivation behind the consumption practices of the advantaged. Veblen theorized that Americans used visible consumption of costly goods, which he termed conspicuous consumption, as a means of presenting economic strength and therefore displaying power. This practice served as a proxy for class differences, and often gave rise to invidious comparison: the intentional provocation of envy in response to productive displays of socioeconomic status (Veblen 1899/1994: 124). Such behavior resulted in positional status games, driven by both offensive displays of wealth and defensive efforts to remain in a given economic class.

Although conspicuous consumption remains prevalent in contemporary consumer society, particularly among elites, and including the subgroup of wealthy Wall Street bankers featured in this study, scholars writing on the sociology of consumption literature have largely rejected Veblen’s theory (Schor 2007). The literature considers conspicuous consumption to be an outmoded element of a theory that is overly rationalist and unidimensional. Beginning in the 1970s, scholars began to question the Veblenian assumption of a transparent universe of symbolic signs where status markers are intentionally displayed and readily received (Felson 1978). Blumberg (1974) argued that because the landscape of goods had become so complex and varied, what yields status in one arena may have a different meaning in the next. People are unable to effectively consume for status purposes alone when public receipt of their displays is unpredictable. The increased complexity of status codes hinders their public digestibility (Jameson 1984; Holt 2002). Veblen is also criticized for limiting his focus to one dimension of consumer motivation. This reductionist focus manufactures one primary meaning-making purpose (status) of consumption and omits consideration of many other possible
meanings (Campbell 1987; Miller 1995; McCracken 1998). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) emphasis on the contributing roles of cultural and social capital in the production of status highlights Veblen’s failure to consider them with similar weight. Anthony Giddens (1994) differs from the Veblenian approach on the grounds that in late modernity, class differences no longer structure consumption habits as they once did. Similarly, Douglas Holt (2002) and others note a cultural shift away from status-driven branding in consumption altogether, and towards a new consumer role of personal identity formation.

Further, theorists employing a postmodern framework to understand consumption believe that each consumer’s identity is fragmented and dynamic over time (Bauman 2000; Featherstone 1991; Slater 1997). This perspective makes the stable status goals of Veblen’s theory a poor tool to analyze modern consuming life (Baudrillard 1968, 1970; Williams 1980). Postmodern theorists also claim that individual style and consumption are often a bricolage, drawn from many sources (Jameson 1984). At any moment, one individual may display clothing or material goods that present one style, and that same individual may choose to present a completely different style at another time. A consumer may even present a combination of status goods that reflects a variety of styles simultaneously. Finally, postmodern theorists introduced the idea of consumption as performance (Butler 1990; Üstüner and Thompson 2011). This performance may take on an ironic or cynical tone, complicating Veblen’s straightforward presentational status theory.

While the turn against Veblen has dominated the literature, some sociologists of consumption have taken a different point of view. For example, Schor (2007) notes that the timing of the anti-Veblen critique is paradoxical, in view of the intensification of
conspicuous consumption that accompanied the post-1980s growth in inequality and rise of neo-liberal values (Schor 1998; Woodside 2012). The intensification of luxury consumption (Frank 1999) is hard to interpret as something other than a Veblenian process at work. Schor argues that critics are correct that status signs are both more difficult to read and more plentiful; however, the claim that they are sufficiently opaque as to be useless is much more extreme and harder to sustain (2007). The continued popularity of branded status goods even suggests it has become easier for individuals to transform the image they project through status goods, regardless of socioeconomic class (Holt 2002).

Furthermore, context matters for status dynamics, as Bourdieu’s work on fields makes clear (Bourdieu 1984). In some bounded contexts such as a workplace, or an exclusive group of social elite, one-dimensional identities may still be important. As I will argue below, the subjects in my study exhibit both Veblenian and postmodern styles of consumption, a kind of “post-modern Veblenian” dynamic. They engage in what superficially appears to be straightforward Veblenian practices, purchasing luxury brands with status value. However, the earnestness of the Veblenian consumer is absent. Instead, my subjects exhibit postmodern cynicism in their approach to conspicuous consumption even as they play a conventional status game through the purchase and display of consensual status symbols.

My data show people imagining the behavior of members of the upper class primarily through the garments of a lifestyle-clothing brand on both the designer and customer sides of its production and consumption. My subjects are similar to traditional Veblenian status consumers in form and function, yet very different in their self-reflexive
approach. The consumer who engaged in conspicuous consumption in the late 19th and early 20th century and the postmodern Veblenian of this study both hope that their activities will elevate their status. In Veblen’s time, clothing was used to elevate status by “showing that the wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it can also be shown in the same stroke that he or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood, the evidence of social worth is enhanced in a very considerable degree” (Veblen 1899, 114). This sample of contemporary Veblenian consumers differs from their historical predecessors in the complexity of their pecuniary displays. These consumers display the clothing in the style worn by the leisure class in order to signal that they are hard working employees worthy of promotion. They capitalize on the historical connotation with the leisure class as being one of good stock and breeding. However, in contrast to the claims of postmodern theories of consumption, these participant narratives display a strong bias towards a uniformity of style over time. Participants adhere to their performance of an idealized version of elite class clothing style even as they acknowledge its inauthenticity.

The producers of Prep Outfitters view the lifestyle performance as they design the brand’s clothing pieces as essential to career advancement. This perspective is similar to the Rachel Sherman reports on in her organizational ethnographies of the service workers in the luxury hotel and personal concierge industry service workers they employ (Sherman 2007, 2010). This analysis features the producers of Prep Outfitters in order to analyze the intent of the taste work of the designers. Sherman first introduced the term taste work in her analysis of lifestyle production. The taste work that her participants perform for pay “involves making consumption-related aesthetic choices with and for clients and … shape not only clients’ consumption decisions but also their class
performances and dispositions” (2010). Prep Outfitter producers also perform this type of
taste work and an analysis of these tasks is imperative to understanding the creation of
this aspirational brand.

My findings question how accurately two traditional theories of fashion can
describe consumers whose workplaces produce a status game from which they perceive
no escape. Georg Simmel (1904/1957) claims that the constantly changing landscape of
vogue fashion allows consumers to play the status games that fashion makes possible
only when they keep abreast of the most current trends. My findings also provide a
complementary analysis to theories that characterize fashion as an expression of
individual taste, personal creativity, and embodiment (Barnard 1996; Entwistle 2000). I
find that status projects actually flatten individuality by leveling class, race, and religious
differences. They are instead explicitly pursued as class-based identity projects, which
are seen by those who engage in them as required aesthetic performances that both signal
and maintain the historical elite advantage of wealth, whiteness, and Christianity.

Methods

This paper is based on a combination of interviews with designers, merchandisers,
and consumers, and participant observation at the headquarters of Prep Outfitters. I
conducted formal interviews with a total of 10 people working on the production side of a
lifestyle-clothing brand, talking at length with six designers and four merchandisers. I
held formal interviews with 14 long time consumers of this brand mostly in and around
New York City. These consumers were not only required to own items of clothing from
Prep Outfitters, but also to identify with the affluent lifestyle that the brand promotes
through its style. I found respondents through professional connections to a top-tier
business school. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length with most lasting approximately 70 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded and analyzed.

Respondents’ current employment and class backgrounds differed across producer and consumer groups; however, each participant had a bachelor’s degree. The most significant differences in income and class background occur within the consumer respondent group; most respondents reported “upper middle class” backgrounds, and nine reported salaries between $125,000 and $210,000 annually. Most designers and merchandisers reported working- and middle-class backgrounds when asked about their family history. I was unable to collect annual income information from the producer groups, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a median annual income of $64,260 for fashion designers and $50,420 for merchandisers. Fifteen of the 24 respondents are men, all except two were born in the United States, and most are between ages 25 and 45 years old with a mean age of 28.

I also report the results of observation during a period of participant observation at the Prep Outfitters headquarters for ten weeks (80 hours total) in September through November, 2010. I gained access to the site through a referral provided by a merchandiser working at a design house that Prep Outfitters sometimes relies on for creation and production assistance. I interned at the corporation’s headquarters and completed a wide variety of tasks. I sorted, measured and fitted sample garment pieces that the design department received from overseas factories. Through this work I also was responsible for correcting sizing inconsistencies to “technical design packets,” blueprints that international fabric mills and factories follow to construct garments. I was able to
build considerable rapport with several office employees as I spent afternoons delivering mail, filing fabric swatches, preparing meeting agendas, and working on three of the company’s viral marketing projects. Most office employees involved in creative design tasks were young - the majority less than 40 years old - while the merchandising staff had an approximate mean age of 48.

Prep Outfitters specializes in lifestyle clothing designed to reflect the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) aesthetic. Its products include a wide variety of categories, ranging from brightly colored polo shirts to boat shoes. Casual clothing ranges in price from approximately $75 to $150 per item, while the average price of more formal attire items is $275. The company produces button-down formal shirts and ties appropriate for work. These ties are notable because they display symmetrical patterns of cartoonish drawings of “the good life” as described by the brand. For example, these icons include martinis, yachts, or even bags of money. The style in which the icons are arranged mimics those of luxury brands, specifically Ferragamo and Hermès. The company’s marketing analyses lacked systematic demographic information about the corporation’s clientele. An aspirational brand, Prep Outfitters relies on ad hoc, impressionistic data about the racial and socioeconomic composition of its consumers. This model of impressionistic marketing functions well as the brand hopes to create an affinity for its image of the ideal consumer, who is white, wealthy, and conservative, across the range of its actual consumers.

This paper first describes the various elements of class reproduction as I encountered them in the design and merchandising department of Prep Outfitters. Second, I look at how the work of reproducing normative class clothing styles is affected
by its producers. Designers and merchandisers are influenced by preconceived notions of what their idealized consumer ‘should’ want to purchase and have the agency to shape those choices for the future. Finally, I use my sample of ‘idealized consumers’ to show the way the messages imbued in this clothing interact with old and new meanings of privilege, whiteness, and wealth. Participants in groups of clothing producers and consumers “imagine class” using distinct techniques and strategies. Imagining class is a cognitive act through which one imagines what life would be like in a socioeconomic class to which he or she does not belong. Yet, the act of “imagining class” is what unites the two groups and creates a relationship between all of the participants in this case study to those studied by Veblen in the 1890s. Individuals who engage in Veblenian status competitions today also engage in “imagining class” in order to pursue their identity projects effectively. Further, the two data sources reveal Veblenian commonalities as the conspicuous producers and conspicuous consumers featured each engage in their respective activities in a fashion similar to those featured by Veblen. Both groups seek financial security in an era characterized by economic uncertainty by imagining elite class lifestyle to embody (consume) and capitalize (produce) on it.

**Designing class**

**Producers**

Prep Outfitters’ main office is located in a tiny suburb of New York City in a repurposed garage burnished in black lacquer near the quaint town center. Ivy covers half of the structure’s front and is pruned symmetrically around each of the 40 rectangular windows, creating a mosaic of glass and green. The lobby is sleek and airy, with proto
samples (first drafts of new garments) hanging like color-coded molding from the high ceiling on one side and the fabric library lining the other.

It is not by accident that the Prep Outfitters headquarters is located in an affluent suburb. In fact, all of the organization’s employees with whom I spoke said that immersion in an environment of wealth was not only an intentional decision made by company leadership, but also imperative to the employees’ creative on-the-job tasks, including industry sector research. Chelsea, an accessories designer, described this type of work as “always looking around like a hawk all the time to see what's ‘being done’ by the real luxury brands.” Chelsea was challenged by dual-class consciousness because of the job’s other main requirement, class imagination work. The content of this imagination work is “class.: Though Prep Outfitters’ ideal consumer is conceptualized as affluent, the creative workers who design the lifestyle of this brand, on average, occupy a more modest socioeconomic position. Although I was asked not to inquire about the specific salaries of employees, anecdotal conversational evidence suggests that few live the kind of carefree luxury they are charged with creating. The kind of imagination work capable of successfully anticipating what styles the Prep Outfitter customer would purchase requires a deep cultural knowledge and ability to discern which goods could be recognized by clientele as “high” class (Sherman 2011). Yet, the majority of those working to create the look of luxury lifestyle are not themselves experiencing it. The majority identify as members of the “middle” class and, therefore, spend more energy and time imagining what life would be like within the upper class. One of the designers, Haley, defines her own style -- geometric, clay-colored tunics -- in opposition to the Easter-colored palette and conservative hemlines of the Prep Outfitters lifestyle.
Nevertheless, she expresses the influence of imagining class in through her work creating the image of affluence. Haley describes how she imagines what Prep Outfitters’ clients might like, highlighting how her imagination work has altered her tastes:

Before I worked here, I couldn't stand the idea of this kind of life. Everything being easy all the time ... all of the white fences and golden retrievers ... yuck. I started being more extreme [laughing] ... wearing the ties I designed to work even though I knew it was sort of a farce. But, well, sometimes I think now that since I spend so much time thinking about what they might like to wear, I think about how I could leverage those looks for myself, you know, like how I could translate them to my group.

As she discusses the relationship between her work and the consumers she imagines producing clothing for, Haley reveals a mixture of distain and affinity for the imaginged Prep Outfitters consumer. This mixture was often expressed by the creative workers I shadowed. Haley did not come from a privileged home and was raised by a single mother who worked as a bookkeeper for a Catholic elementary school in a rural Northeastern town. The comment above typifies the attitude towards the Prep Outfitters consumer she spends so much time envisioning. This is one of the key features of imagination work as it relates to class. There is often a conflict of opinion about the Prep Outfitter ideal consumer. The data suggest that is conflict appears because of the power dynamics of socioeconomic stratification. Creative workers imagine upper class aesthetics through easily recognizable stereotypes. The very fact that these stereotypes exist is due to the power held by those who occupy positions of socioeconomic elevation. Those individuals at the apex of economic and social life have historically set patterns in taste. Whatever
diversity exists within their decisions may be muted by the class distance from which Prep Outfitters designers and consumers view and mimic their choices.

Bree, a technical designer, mother of two small children, and recent immigrant from Romania, intervenes in the middle of the process of garment production. While conceptual designers debate the meaning behind clothing and draw on design theory specific to lifestyle brands, it is the technical designer who transforms these abstractions into reality. Most of the technical designer's days are spent editing "tech-packs," the blueprints for specific garments. Once Bree receives a sketch from the conceptual design team she begins her own imagination work:

I start usually by fiddling around on the internet [she flips through a number of bookmarked tumblr blogs, luxury hotel websites, and country club event calendars as she speaks] to sort of get in the mood of my consumer. This is important ... because sometimes the feeling of each fabrication and starter garment specification is hard for me because I am not from here. I need to almost lift myself into the body of my client. Even though my job is mainly explaining how the mills and factories in Asia should cut, sew, and dye the fabric, I still want to be thinking of what my customer is going to be doing in those clothes. She doesn't want to feel confined, she wants to feel at ease like she just had a massage and is in control. We wouldn't sell anything by making people feel fat and stuck.

Unlike Mary, Bree does not aspire to membership in the Prep Outfitter consumer world her color swatch and hemline choices reproduce. This tactic of online research that I have heard her refer to as “rich surfing” was pitched as an important part of her job during her
initial interviews and is most certainly related to imagining class. She reports that her boss was initially worried about hiring “someone who didn't have the Prep Outfitters kind of background and hadn't lived in the country that long ... he didn't think I would be able to pick 'it' out in the right way.” The “it” in her reflection refers to those goods recognized for their association with the upper class. Although Bree did not express embarrassment about her socioeconomic class and nationality stigmatization outright, she avoided eye contact and lowered her voice to a whisper during this part of our talk. During the time we worked together, Bree's behavior suggested that she experienced difficulty related to her class background ("my parents were plant workers") and current status as a new American on the job. This difficulty relates to her underdeveloped ability to imagine class as well as her relatively low socioeconomic status.

Dominique represents a different case, in which her lack of imaginative work endangered her reputation and, eventually, resulted in her termination. A veteran seamstress-turned-designer, Dominique's time at Prep Outfitters highlights the occupational hazards of exposing the gaps in cultural capital despite technical proficiency. Originally brought onto the staff to fill a gap in practical knowledge of textiles, Dominique saw no merit in incorporating and exemplifying the lauded looks of the [Prep Outfitters] society. Dominique had a wealth of experience in the industry but resisted participating in the brainstorming sessions common to creative meetings at Prep Outfitters and was several decades older than most of the creative workforce. Logan, a middle aged creative designer who grew up among the "yuppie jerks we make shirts for" in New York City, explained Dominique’s problem at work. He stated that "even if we all
can't stand the Prep ... we have to know how he works ... what he wants ... where and how he wants to be seen.”

Dominique resistance to “imagining class” that consumers emulated was problematic for her career. Dominique's painful silences and begrudging admittances that she "wasn't sure" when asked about the fabric weight of lawn tennis whites were unique in the office. Though she was seen as “a great seamstress” by the company management, her inability to manage the impression given off by her own image at tradeshows, in meetings with industry contacts, and through written communication was a serious liability to her employment. Emails chains mocking her flawed grammar and “white trash” outfits circulated regularly among coworkers. During my period of participant observation, I received emails from others that were just as riddled with typographical errors. However, Dominique's refusal to pretend herself into the Prep Outfitters lifestyle was atypical. Her refusal to “imagine class” legitimated her colleagues' suspicion and, ultimately, their censure.

There was an expectation of lifestyle “buy-in” among designers at Prep Outfitters. However, these producers also often joked about "tricking" or "robbing those guys [the consumers] blind." Dirk, who identified as “middle class,” works as a manager at Prep Outfitters and ascribes to the Prep Outfitters ideal image. Sitting around the break table during Friday happy hour at the office, Dirk once explained the corporation relationship to the consumer as "Main Street pretending to be Wall Street in order to overcharge Main Street also pretending to be Wall Street." This description reinforces the importance of the Prep Outfitter mandate to “imagine class.” This data shows that in imagining class the creative workers are establishing the next generation of status markers that class outsiders
consume to display their class aspirations. Both the producers and consumers complete this double process of “imagining class” and the joint activity may explain why the images produced and consumed by the two groups are laden with stereotypes. Both groups imagine the activity of another (the true upper class) from a distance. This distance flattens any diversity of aesthetic that may in fact be present in contemporary upper class preference. For example, Dirk explained that the successful Prep Outfitter designer has as little care for the actual identity of his end consumer as he does for those whose lives are devoted to producing the materiality of affluent American culture. To him, both are reduced to far-away fictions. The most senior team members, Deb and Dirk, both assert that one of the most important things about being a successful lifestyle producer is “believing in” your product. Deb's ability to understand and articulate what makes this kind of wealth signaling unique and attractive while, at the same time, distinguishing the idealized identity from her own was stated many times during my observation. Similarly, I spoke with Dirk about how he visualized the Prep Outfitter consumer:

It is more than the colors, of course. There's a sentiment of hard work that goes before the reward that this look also gets at it if you ask me. Of austerity and the generalized feeling that ‘Hey, we are going somewhere and it's going to take a lot of energy and smarts to get where we're going.’ I think it says something fantastic about hard work and about the American dream that you can come from nothing and end up everything. “Really?” I question. “That seems ... idealistic.” “That's the point,” he shakes his head at me. "We're selling the idea.”
This merchandiser's idea that preppy clothing signals hard work isn't unique to this interaction. Rather, it was repeated by designers and consumers alike. Many of these producers recognize that Prep Outfitters designs clothing to stand in for “old money” to consumers who hope to show that they have worked hard enough to be able to purchase leisure class status. The successful producer is, unavoidably, immersed in research to anticipate the lifestyle his consumer desires. This kind of “imagining class” often leads to an embodiment of that lifestyle as well to display his fluency in imagined elite tastes (Sherman 2009).

Deb is sensitive to the goals of upward class mobility held by Prep Outfitters consumers. Prep Outfitters consumers “curl up with [catalogues] at home and imagine the kind of life we paint for them,” she says. For cultural producers, “it's a thought process, it’s a state of mind, a way of life ... I don't care who my customers actually are, I care about who they want to pretend to be ... the image is way easier to understand and predict than the reality.” Deb and others reflected this focus on the imagination life of consumers rather than measuring or tracking whom the brand’s consumer actually was and what he experienced. The acknowledgment of aspirational “imagining class” is a hallmark of the postmodern Veblenian consumer/producer behavior. Clear status markers are coveted and deployed even as the work they do for the consumer is understood and acknowledged.

While Bree did online research to compensate for gaps in her cultural knowledge and "get in the mood of her consumer," Deb performs a similar exercise with some of the catalogs she receives at her home, dog-earing pages and ripping out things that "feel" like Prep Outfitters. She receives about "75 to 90 catalogs each month" at her house, and says that this type of research gives her vital information about how different apparel
companies are “positioning or placing garments in a setting.” Every one of the merchandisers I worked with at Prep Outfitters considers this omnivorous marketing consumption very important research. Many of the merchandisers echo the consistency with which they perform imaginative taste work. Like Deb, other producers on staff make a habit of carrying around a small camera so that "if you see someone with a particular look that I like while I'm out I can just snap up that look with a client in mind." Deb practices this type of afterhours taste work and often encourages junior staff members to do so repeatedly (Sherman 2011). Since these workers envision their job as the producers of a very particular type of habitus, it is also imperative that they understand the array of lifestyles being produced by other corporations so that theirs remains distinctive and attractive to consumers (Bourdieu 1984). I am reminded again and again that the prime commodity of this lifestyle brand "isn't about function,” but rather to be doing "well enough" to have leisure time. Because this brand markets explicitly to the young Wall Street crowd, it is keenly focused on which material markers of wealth are most recognizable and hold legitimacy for that population. The company focus reflects the perceived importance of conspicuous consumption for career advancement by Prep Outfitters consumers. Its internal method of evaluating personnel for their ability to “imagine class” emphasizes the importance of learned status signaling.

Consumers

Informants believe that their advancement is linked not only to strong job performance, but also to a performance of upper or leisure class lineage. As a result, Prep Outfitters consumers deploy the brand cynically to project an elite lifestyle based on the brand’s stylistic mimicry of well-known upper class style. They adopt this style to visibly
signal moneyed personas to workplace superiors. Participants do this by “wearing the uniform” required to “play” in the Wall Street game [Interviewee Claire]. Claire, a 28-year-old private equity employee acknowledged, “It’s a game but, hey, if you show up on game day without your uniform they won't let you play.”

Almost all of the consumers I spoke with aspired to a life as part of America’s elite class. This section contains accounts of are typical consumer motivation as found among consumers of the Prep Outfitters. I interviewed work in “client-facing” positions in the financial services industry in New York City. Whether employed as commodity traders, investment banking analysts, or private equity associates, it was clear that the young male buyers of Prep Outfitters wanted to give off the impression that they were all “on the make.”

One investment banker explained:

> How you dress, at least on Wall Street, is equated with professionalism. Also, last-second meetings pop up so being in a suit is essential if you want to participate (which is a good career move). I have three ties at my desk so I can put one on if this situation arises. People who dress like the intern below could have a hard time gaining respect from their co-workers.

Prep Outfitters has tapped into this desire and produces tools for upward class mobility, and with it, the desire to portray oneself as elite regardless of true socioeconomic standing. Another interviewee reflected on the illusion of socioeconomic class that participants believed Prep Outfitters facilitates:
I think people who might even be trying to enter a new class or trying to climb the social ladder or something would be attracted to this even though they're not quite part of it. They might start dressing that way as a way of trying to break in. It would make them fit in more with the crowd even if they’re like complete strangers. Someone's more likely to talk to you if you're dressed the same or whatever.

A 26-year-old hedge fund analyst who was white, male, and reported a middle class upbringing supported this assessment. He said that workplace success is related to performance of class. “I would say a ‘seeking to fit in’ or a propensity to fit into a certain lifestyle is also important. Very important - that's what they [customers] are paying for really.”

Many participants agreed with the assessment of Marc, a 23-year-old investment banker who explained, “‘Old boys’ network’ type firms still rule.” He argued that “the closer you can copy what you think they might want in an employee, the better. I don't view myself as alter egos between the two different people in and outside work. It’s more that I take certain responsibilities with certain attitudes.” George, who attends an elite business school in the South and formerly worked as a management consultant in Washington DC, remembers his first attraction to Prep Outfitters as part of his “self-improvement” project:

Well, I didn't grow up wearing this stuff. I didn't wear it in college, but I really was messing around then. I was just drinking and a mess. When I decided to man up and take myself seriously I started to wear it to buy into them. I loved their
story. I viewed myself as someone going into the financial world but had always fantasized about being a mariner. I was totally buying what they were selling.

The self-improvement project related by George reflects the self-conscious, learning that occurs when “imagines class.” Similar to producers who did not experience upper class life early on, George actively imagined the good life and began to dress for it in an effort to achieve it. Scott, an unassuming 24-year-old financial planning analyst at a major retail bank who told me he grew up “middle” class outside Syracuse, New York remembered that evaluation is directly linked to perception of class. Mark had been reprimanded for his dress during a college internship at the firm he would eventually join:

Three and a half years ago, I wore a v-neck sweater over a shirt and tie on a cold fall day. My boss told me that was not formal enough for the office. I’ve made a conscious effort to dress richer than him every day since. I think it has helped him change his attitude towards me. He respects me now.

The brand’s narrative combines the idea of being made “by and for” the Wall Street crowd with a sentiment that "doing finance" isn't the primary part of “the good life” but rather, what you have to do if you hope to achieve it. I spoke with analysts at two hedge funds, associates and vice presidents across Wall Street investment banks taking what they called "vacations" at Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, and Columbia Business Schools, and private equity associates. I spoke to analysts with freshly minted undergraduate degrees from MIT, Princeton, Harvard, Columbia, Brown, Cornell, and University of Virginia. Clearly, my almost entirely male sample was privileged. Ryan, a
young Ivy-League graduate, connects vocational fluency with cultural fluency and eventual financial gain on Wall Street:

I think how you appear is important in every aspect of your life and, in particular, at this kind of work. With experience come benefits and those benefits come in dollars. Whether you are learning how to "man up" and dress suitably for your place of work or you are learning the ins and outs to analyzing financial statements ... the quicker you learn, the more successful you will be.

Hard work and ability are necessary but not sufficient qualification for success on Wall Street. We have seen that informants believe that success in finance requires a performance of the leisure class style to show they are worthy of advancement. Another middle class private equity analyst pointed to the role of firms in supporting the emphasis on “pedigree.”

Did you go to Harvard vs. Cornell? Did you grow up poor? The people who run things … their dads are usually rich and they’re rich now. When you make 20 million dollars every few years it is easy to get delusional about your self-worth.

Although the interviewees differed in their initial motivation to adopt a “preppy style,” most viewed it as part of a self-improvement project aimed at projecting pedigree with the ultimate hope of a millionaire’s salary.

Customers echoed producers’ narratives when asked about the typical Prep Outfitters consumer. Deb, the designer, explained, “in all likelihood these [customers] are quite varied by region, by specific consumer, by types of items purchased. But, well, whatever.” The one image that Deb and the rest of the creative team spent most of their
time tracking and anticipating wasn’t actually who their consumers were, but rather who they wanted to imagine they were. Deb listed some adjectives that might describe the ideal whose essence other designers spend hours anticipating. Images of the ideal consumer - torn from countless magazines – lined cubicle walls of the design house. Deb gave me a list of essential characteristics in the following order: “white, Protestant, rich, happy, married, and successful.”

Regardless of their racial heritages, religious beliefs, or political leanings, participants believe that advancement on Wall Street requires them to conform to the behavior of elites they imagine as white, Christian, and conservative. Informants articulate the demographic connotations of the Prep Outfitters uniform – whiteness, religious, and political uniformity – throughout the interviews. They adopt the brand to stand in as a sign of uniformity across these dimensions. This performance creates a caricature of white culture, Christian religious beliefs, and Republican Party politics. Dean, a young analyst who often clocks more than 80 hours at work each week, elaborated on the importance of the style for advancement as he ordered a black eye (a coffee with two extra shots of espresso) while we spoke before returning to the office.

I think being a preppy is more than just the way one dresses; I think that it is more of an expression of a certain outlook on life. With that outlook come certain personality traits. Anyone can dress like a prep, but I have found that the term is most personified in the male WASP. The clothing is indicative of a certain lifestyle that the wearer either lives, or envisions himself living. As a result there is a level of arrogance that accompanies this look, that if demonstrated by any other would come across as a jerk. The guy in the white polo shirt and the pale
blue embroidered whale pants may be a jerk ... but that jerk could walk into any
country club... and ultimately that is what the prep wants.

Dean acknowledges that style stands in for similarity, whitewashing differences and
allowing the wearer to express a “life outlook.” The importance of the WASP aesthetic
Dean referenced came up in the majority of consumer interviews especially for its racial
and religious connotations. For example, a 27-year-old hedge fund analyst argued that a
Prep Outfitters consumer uses the brand to signal he is “young, wealthy, carefree ...
preppy so WASP-y so white too and not Jewish ... something Christian.” A private equity
associate agreed that the “style of dress goes hand in hand with conservatism, with
traditional patriarchal values.”

One particularly candid respondent explained that behavioral conformity was
important for racially different junior finance employees. A white man in his mid-
twenties himself, he explained:

Black finance guys can’t act ‘black’ – like if someone were loud, it would be
unsettling to our clients. It isn’t proper. It isn’t professional. You can’t be
viewed as something much different than most white people in this job act.

One respondent pointed out that “no matter what someone wears, it is a reflection on how
they perceive the brand and of what they perceive themselves. And what they want others
to think of themselves as and some sort of combination to all three.” In the case of Wall
Street, Prep Outfitters allows a group of elite class outsiders – upper middle class young
men – to mimic the style that they believed would make them recognizable to older men
of the upper class. In doing so, they flatten class, religious, political, and racial
differences. This lifestyle-clothing brand plays a key role in the projects of identity and upward mobility for young finance employees, all of whom believe that these projects are fundamental to success.

Informants’ beliefs about the performance requirements to succeed on Wall Street create a fertile ground for Veblenian pecuniary signaling. In the absence of wealth and assets, respondents perform the wealth by an exaggerated expression of its signifiers through their clothing. They use the style of the leisure class, those who inherited their wealth, to signal to superiors that they are worthy of working for their position in the elite class.

Participants understand the required conditions for success on Wall Street and cynically adopt the style of Wall Street elites. They also reinforce an environment of cultural and behavioral sameness where diversity is often suppressed. In combination, postmodern consumers take up alien styles in a tongue-in-cheek performance of affluence. They do so to exploit the rules of status games held in a modern environment that resembles the world of clear status markers that Veblen analyzed. Participants suggest that while individual merit may draft players into the farm leagues of Wall Street, being called up to the majors requires a performance of class privilege and cultural conformity.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Adopting Veblen’s original theory of status signaling is a well-established taboo in consumer studies. However, the tendency to fully discard Veblen’s contribution produces analyses prone to overstating the dynamism of consumption-based identity projects (Schor 2007). Scholars have largely ignored situations in which consumers imagine that their adherence to a subculture’s consumption norms is mandatory for career advancement (Illouz 2009). Instead, they have favored methods that track consumers as
they move across fields of subcultural consumption, and, thus, may overstate the flexibility of consumer identity projects. I have found more stability of lifestyle consumption as it is produced and consumed by those who believe that the performance of elite lifestyle is compulsory to career development and eventual membership in a wealthy group of Wall Street elites. Accounts from both groups as they attempt to either embody (young finance workers) or capitalize on (designers) elite lifestyles build on previous analyses of habitus acquisition (Sherman 2007; Khan 2011). Taken together, they suggest the existence of a postmodern Veblenian consumer base among whom the cynical production of conspicuous consumption leads to the reification of an imagined elite lifestyle (Baudrillard 2001; Sherman 2011). The “production” of consumption completed through both sides of the market participating in an aspiration exercise called “imagining class” within this work. Imagining class mutes many of the diverse components of existence in the upper class. Observations and “imaginings” at a distance instead lead to the obscuration of whatever real distinctions may exist. The proximate outsiders to the top 1% of wage earners imagine those at the apex of success. The distance from which they form these perceptions obscures the variance present within today’s leisure class. The data show that consumers replicate and affirm the stereotypes of “Old Boys Networks.” They do so through sharing their thoughts on the importance of “manning up” to masculine, heteronormative gender expectations and issuing warnings against “acting black” or “Jewish.” This data is a reminder that certain occupations bring with them lifestyle requirements. In this case, young employees obtain and display Veblen goods in an attempt to enhance their own position through the stable status markers of WASP style.
Further, my case finds a contrast to Simmel’s earlier work on the volatility of fashion trends among the upper class. The accounts of the Prep Outfitter consumers, who are within the top 10% of wage earners, show fashion is capable of enhancing status when it relies on a class-based point of reference. Thus, a relatively unchanging, classic style is required to communicate aspirational class motivation. Simmel writes “fashions differ for different classes – the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them” (1957, 543). Additional studies could provide evidence for a trend of increasingly favorable conditions for Veblenian type status consumption within status oriented occupational settings. Investigating these pockets of Veblenian postmodernism especially as they relate to a growing wealth inequality at the top of the labor market.

Differences in life experiences and the class distance that separates the taste workers of Prep Outfitters from the Wall Street elites result in the creation of consumer caricatures. Sometimes cynical and unconcerned by the consumer’s practical needs, lifestyle brand producers instead focus on ideal consumer types that can be leveraged to sell products. Instead of large-scale market research, Prep Outfitters’ taste workers engage in creative reconnaissance projects whereby they imagine the lifestyle desire of archetypical consumers. They are implicated in the status jockeying of the brand’s consumers, as their own embodiment of an imagined elite habitus becomes a metric by which the taste workers display competence in the workplace. Though wed to these performances, these producers of conspicuous consumption nevertheless acknowledge
that they are “Main Street pretending to be Wall Street in order to overcharge Main Street
also pretending to be Wall Street.”

Similarly, the differences in life experiences and the class distance that separates
the aspirational conspicuous consumers of Prep Outfitters from the wealthy elite of Wall
Street results in the flattening of individuality among consumers. The consumers
recognize the tools designed for them by Prep Outfitters, utilize them to participate in
workplace emulation of leisure lifestyles, and imagine that their own production of
conspicuous consumption will help peers and superiors identify them as elites. These
informants were class outsiders uncertain of their position within a competitive and
status-conscious occupation. None of the participants saw this performance as optional to
their advancement. The young bankers I spoke with told me that signaling their potential
to “get the job done” by projecting the right lifestyle in the office was supremely
important. They distanced themselves from behavior that would “cause questions” or
“ruffle any feathers” by adopting the style of those whose wealth and privilege was
largely inherited. Using the sporting metaphors suggested during many interviews, in
adopting the Prep Outfitters “uniform” they signaled their respect for imagined rules of
advancement on Wall Street.

Participants’ advancement within their careers occurred within two distinct fields
(Bourdieu). The two fields discussed within the data are workplaces, yet this analysis
considers the actors within those fields as both employees and as the consumers of
commodities (Bourdieu, 1984). This dual focus shows the impact that bounded social
fields such as workplaces or bounded social elite may have upon the consumer choices of
those with longstanding participation within each. In this case, the producer and
consumer subsamples imagine the aesthetic of the leisure class and express their concept of its taste through the design and display of clothing. Their concept of leisure class lifestyle is similar in the conformity of behavior, family life, and success they envision. The distance from which each group imagines and mimics the lifestyle of this class obscures the variation that occurs within it. Thus, as proximate outsiders imagining the taste of an exclusive group to which they do not hold membership they recreate the image of elite lifestyle as one based on whiteness, conservative values, and extreme lifestyle spending. In sum, the data show how lifestyles are constructed for and maintained by those who aspire to become the next generation of wealthy of Wall Street leaders.
References


Chapter 3:

PRECARIAT PRODUCTION: CAPITAL AND SUCCESS IN THE SHARING ECONOMY
Precariat Production: Capital and Success in the Sharing Economy

Abstract

This study analyzes the motivational aspects and economic benefits of collaborative production work within the online platforms of Airbnb, RelayRides, and Taskrabbit and provides insight into the nature of this new temporary employment format. Collaborative producers provide goods and services to others within a collaborative consumer market. In this case, producers provide access to their homes, their cars, or their skills for others to consume. The analysis presents interview and survey data of forty-one collaborative producers aged 20 – 35. It analyzes the effect of pre-existing economic resources, formal credentials, and a diverse set of motivations on economic return for individual producers. The experiences are presented through the three central motivational categories that drive participation: (1) money, (2) efficiency / environmental, and (3) workplace flexibility. The data show that the possession of economic assets prior to beginning work as a collaborative producer is a key characteristic associated with collaborative producers who achieve economic success by being high earners within the collaborative marketplace. Further, those who enjoy the most economic success within the collaborative marketplace as “high earners” are also most likely to express that a motivation of “efficiency / environmental” drives their production. The preferences and exchange practices reported by those who express the efficiency/environmental motivation mirror the preferences and practices of consumers with high economic and cultural capital who display *ecohabitus* (Bourdieu 1984; Schor et al. 2014).

Keywords

Sharing economy, collaborative consumption, labor market, precariat

Flexible labor markets populated by contract and temporary workers have expanded since the 1980s (Standing 2009). The growth of the flexible labor market has led to the development of novel working arrangements within it and, therefore, new conditions of work and worker experiences. Standing (2009) found that flexible labor conditions often lead to insecure and unstable conditions of employment. Standing characterized the global class of economically insecure temporary laborers as an emerging ‘precariat’ class (2009). Standing argues that the global ‘precariat’ consists of many millions of people without an anchor of stability or security (2009). Their labor experiences deserve consideration as they are a class-in-the-making and are developing
without the stabilizing influence of economic security. Standing argues that the early stage of the ‘precariat’ class development and the economic instability that characterizes the group leaves it vulnerable to the sway of political extremists.

This research provides insight into the extent to which the experiences and outcomes for online, temporary laborers provides evidence for an acceleration of the expansion of precariat class of workers. For example, recent changes to the Taskrabbit platform have resulted in damages to the public rating of a Taskrabbit who passes up assignments. The increase in reputation vulnerability increases the intensity of competition between Taskrabbits. Such changes suggest that the online, peer-based temporary labor may bring with it the opportunity for host sites to drastically alter the conditions of work. On the other hand, corporations that recruit workers for collaborative production promise “the empowerment of individuals through the technology … and an opportunity for people anywhere in the world to monetize their passions” (Wong 2012).

The research participants featured here are either contract or gig workers who find temporary assignments through online platforms. The online platforms that serve as research sites for this project allow individuals to pay for access to the services or assets of others. The workers who sell access to their skills and their assets through these online platforms are known as collaborative producers. Within this research project, a collaborative producer is a worker who sells, barters, shares, or gives his or her labor, skills, or tangible assets to others. This research draws samples from three populations of collaborative producers who sell access to their skills and assets. The project’s sample contains collaborative producers selected from three for-profit websites: Airbnb, Taskrabbit, and RelayRides. The analysis features the experiences of hosts from Airbnb
who grant others temporary access to their homes in exchange for a rental fee. It also highlights the “rabbits” of Taskrabbit who sell their services to peers on an hourly wage basis. And, finally, it presents the experiences of car owners from RelayRides who allow others to use their cars on a short-term basis in exchange for rental charges. This focus on low-skill online labor (Taskrabbit) as well as income generation from previously held assets (Airbnb and RelayRides) provides an insight into the interplay of socioeconomic class and consumption.

This study will analyze the experiences and economic benefit related to collaborative production through the reflections and income reports of research participants from Airbnb, RelayRides, and Taskrabbit. It is the first empirical project to consider these questions with data on the subjective experiences and economic return of online, peer-to-peer, and temporary labor. Further, the analysis considers the experiences and economic benefit in the context of the central motivations for producer participation: (1) money, (2) efficiency, and (3) workplace flexibility. Ultimately, the organization of this analysis facilitates an answer to one core question: To what extent does online and peer-to-peer contingent work provide evidence for the spread of precarious employment?

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3 Task “rabbit” underwent reorganization in 2014. The site no longer allows rabbits to bid against one another to obtain tasks. Rather, when a task poster describes a task that requires completion the site automatically generates a list of rabbits who have successfully completed related tasks in the past. The format of Task “rabbit” analyzed within this study, therefore, provides a snapshot of the collaborative marketplace during a phase of its development that featured rabbits bidding against one another to win a task. The wage flexibility displayed by the Task Rabbits in this sample, therefore, relates directly to the class of precarious workers under consideration.
Nature of the Labor Market

The current era of precarious employment came about as a result of the recession of the 1970s (Standing 2011). The everyday impacts of the 1970s recession brought with them a global shift in the thinking of individuals who experienced the challenges of this time. It was during this time that the practices and theory of neo-liberal globalization emerged. Neo-liberal globalization was fostered by changes that led to global price competition. Global economic integration led to an increase in global economic and price competition. A newly globalized economic competition altered the internal dynamics of companies and, in turn, employee relations (Gonos 1997). Corporate changes were reflected in domestic governmental politics of the Reagan 1980s. These were a set of policies that lessened restrictions on corporate growth and deregulated many industry sectors. This era of globalization and deregulation is characterized as the “neoliberal revolution” (Bernstein 2006)

In this era, there was not only a shift in the relationships between organizations and their employees, but work processes within organizations also changed. Work became knowledge intensive, took on an accelerated pace, and technological innovation increased, and service industries grew in dominance. These changes brought about the demand for flexible production models (Piore and Sabel 1984). It followed that the changes in work processes led employees to seek an increase in flexibility with workers and their relations to others. Thus, the development of a neoliberal ideal within society occurred in parallel with its development within the labor market because of the increasing importance of market forces within the labor market (Gonos 1997).
These replaced employment relationships that developed in the 1940 – 1970 era. In this phase, it was common for a worker to stay with one corporation and work his or her way up (Cappelli 1999). This eroded with the rise of global economic competition.

Under these conditions, management sought increasing flexibility. They sought out this flexibility through various types of restructuring. Restructuring led to an increase of precarious work conditions and a fundamental change in employer employee relations (Osterman 1999). Collaborative consumption is the subject of this research. Collaborative consumption pairs individuals through an online broker to meet one another’s consumer needs. It allows individuals to employ other individuals to run their errands, work as innkeepers and rental car dealers. The employment lasts for the length of the employers need. Collaborative production is a new strain of flexible work. Collaborative consumption is an extreme outgrowth of the institutionalization of precarious work. Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and RelayRides exist to broker trades between casual employer and casual employee. The three do not provide traditional employment benefits to those who work as contingent employees of their peers on the site. The broker companies do not provide compensation, healthcare, and a guarantee of safe working conditions. They do not dictate the pace of work or the regulation of who employs.

Sociologists have long focused on issues of working life in the United States. Those working conditions that threaten the wellbeing of many workers have particularly concerned them. Precarious work has been shown to be harmful to the individual and sociologists have carefully chronicled its development. Before the Great Depression most jobs were precarious on two levels. They were dangerous to personal safety and held very insecure trajectories (Jacoby 1985). During this time pensions and health insurance were
unheard of among working class jobs (Edwards 1979). Early experiments in social welfare were based upon worked docility as the rise of the market based economy brought about precarious conditions of work. This era of emerging capitalism was characterized The Great Transformation by Polanyi in his book of the same title (1944). The work described the organizing principles of the 19th and 20th century societies. Polanyi theorized about the societies undergoing a capitalist transformation. He claimed that the Transformation was possible only when supported by economic liberalism and laissez faire capitalism. Both were pursued with the goal of establishing flexible markets hospitable to capitalist growth. This trend was embraced alongside an opposing societal trend – one that validated the importance of social protections. Social protections established were established as a reaction and to mitigate the psychological, social and economic disruptions that unregulated markets impose on the people who live within them.

The New Deal and other social protections were established to rectify the domestic trouble caused by The Great Depression (Commons 1934, Jacoby 1985). The three decades following the Second World War were one of relative economic calm and was deemed the “Great Compression” (Golding and Margo 1992). The Great Compression was an era characterized by greater class equality, employment security and long-lasting employee/employer relationships. The impact of social protections enacted in the 1930s was first felt within this time period (Amenta 1998). The great failure of the American economy at the close of the 1920s reset the social contract between organizational capitalism and American society during the following decade. This shift caused the employment relationship to become more regulated over the decades
following the 1930s and throughout the Great Compression. Employment regulations were enhanced alongside the maturation of the Fordist production model and a period of American economic dominance globally. The combination of these factors ushered in an era of relative economic security domestically and one during which sustained economic growth was perceived as an inevitability (Whyte 1956). The Organization Man, written to describe employment patterns during The Great Compression, conveys the generational ideal of the individual devoted to a large firm within the core sector of the economy (Averitt 1968).

The contemporary period broke from the relative security of The Great Compression. The years after 1970 and especially 1974-1975 were those that hosted the macroeconomic conditions that gave rise to changed labor conditions and ultimately the new age of precarious work. Collaborative production is one form of today’s precarious work. Collaborative production is a system of flexible, on-demand labor by which individuals may employ other individuals to meet their consumer needs. The industry developed as the supply side of the demand that resulted from collaborative consumption. Collaborative consumption developed as an industry as a result of technological innovation facilitating the exchanges typical to the industry and a shift in consumer preference towards the local, authentic, and immediate (Botsman 2010). The rise of collaborative production as a form of precarious work has unpredictable workflow, work conditions and wages in payment for precarious labor. This work considers the experiences of three types of collaborative producers, those who rent their homes through the website Airbnb, those who rent their cars through the website RelayRides and those who sell their labor for wage in gig jobs organized through Task Rabbit. Each
corporation is a major player in the emergent collaborative consumption marketplace, gaining profits by taking a fee for each labor transaction. However, each corporation does little to ensure the work conditions, volume, and payment of its workforce.

Sociologists of work and occupations have focused on five main elements of precarious work in the contemporary period. Spatialization is a key theory used to describe contemporary precarious work (Peck 1996). Spatialization frees employers from conventional temporal and spatial constraints. Those technological advances brought about greater connectivity among people and the organizations that employ them (Wallace and Brady 2001). Spatialization factors into the employment of the collaborative producers featured in this study and the collaborative consumers who employ them temporarily. The individuals are able to broker collaborative exchanges because of the widespread spatialization of online connection. A second component of the modern precariat is the centrality of the service sector, the decrease of manufacturing and Fordist production. Rather, this era hosts the rise of high and low wage white-collar labor with increasing gaps in wage. The individuals featured here also reflect the influx of market activity coinciding with a service-based economy. Airbnb hosts, Task Rabbits and Relay Rides car owners provide rooms, favors, and rides to strangers in much the same way that they may have provided them to known others before the marketizations of these services.

Since early modern capitalism, employment has been contingent on labor conditions that support employment. As markets change layoffs have always occurred. However, since the recession of 2008, they have existed as a tactic of employment to improve short-term profit (Uchielle 2006). Now, short-term labor has become a market
unto itself. Temporary staffing agencies abound and organizations prioritize the flexibility of their employees, often preferring flexible and contingent labor to regular and long-lasting labor. Airbnb, TaskRabbit and Relay Rides serve as repositories of temporary labor.

The modern precariat is distinguishable from previous eras of employment insecurity by the relative lack of unified analysis of precarious work conditions of the contemporary period. The variety of analyses is partially a result of the diverse nature of modern precarity. Prior periods of precarious labor where characterized by great differences in upper and lower classes of employment. Often, during this time, the degree of precarity within each job defined the relative rank of each job in comparison to one another (Kalleberg & Sorene 1979). Contemporary emergence of precarious work conditions occurs across all ranks and types of employment. The diversity of job types and functions that may be precarious is far reaching and the impact on the overall economy is significant. The absolute number of Americans working under flexible, contingent and other precarious working conditions has increased since the 1970s (Kalleberg 2009). Yet, analyses of this trend have not produced a theoretical framework capable of characterizing those impacted by trend, typifying their experiences and able to direct analyses to areas of economic activity particularly supportive of its growth.

Sociologists emphasize four elements to characterize precarious work in the modern era. Capelli (2008) and Farber (2008) note a decrease in employee attachment to employers. This change in employee devotion to employers may have been driven by an uptick in long-term unemployment (Mischel et al. 2009). Widespread and long-term unemployment decreases employee confidence in the nature of their relationship to
employers. Third, analysts claim that there is also a widespread decrease in perceived job security for those who are employed (Fullerton and Wallace 2005). Finally, there has been a significant increase in contingent work arrangements (Kalleberg 2009).

This research focuses on collaborative production proposing it as a type of precarious employment. Collaborative producers are contingent, flexible and temporary by definition. They are contracted by their peers to provide goods and services on demand. Collaborative producers are “employed” by companies that provide no employment benefits – from wages to health insurance – to their employees. Rather, they leverage the data collection and organization capability of the internet in order to provide consumers with a repository of surplus laborers from which to choose (Marx 1867). How did such organizations come to be?

First, employers sought to easily change their workforce in response to supply and demand conditions by creating more non-standard work arrangements such as contract and temporary work. Workers in these nonstandard arrangements are often called “contingent” because their employment is contingent on the employers’ needs (Kallenberg 2000). Since the mid-1990s, more than 50% of employers purchase labor from sources outside of full time employees (Kalleberg and Marsden 2005). Lawyers, accountants, and even mercenary soldiers work on a contingent basis with the modern period of precarious labor. Contingent work spans a great variety of fields and many employers agree that all work functions can be outsourced or transformed into contingent roles. Breen (1997) and Mandel (1996) have chronicled this shift and analyzed the shifts the risk of employment from employer to employee that results from this arrangement. Employees enduring more of the risk of employment in comparison to those who employ
them is a central component of the modern precariat (Beck 2000, Jacoby 2001). Sociologists who trace shifts in employment risk absorption focus on the percentages of employee and employer contribution to health care and pension benefits (Mischel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2007).

Widespread contingent work is evidence for the maturity of the precariat especially as spatialization and risk displacement facilitate the rise of risky employment. The proceeding analysis will question the impact of collaborative production within the overall rise of contingent and otherwise precarious employment. The analysis considers the following questions: To what extent is contingent work as Airbnb hosts, Task Rabbits, and Relay Rides car owners precarious? Which workers are most likely to find their work as collaborative producers precarious? What are the main elements that create precarious conditions within the collaborative production? What type of labor do collaborative producers experience as precarious? What are the implications of these findings for those theories of the precariat workforce that focus on contingent labor?

**Methods**

*Research Sites*

Interview participants were selected from Airbnb, Taskrabbit, and RelayRides. The three are for-profit collaborative consumption initiatives that serve as the primary sites of this research. All of these platforms facilitate different types of collaborative production and consumption. Airbnb’s website hosts the exchange of rented rooms, apartments, and homes between individual, non-commercial hosts and travelers. Taskrabbit connects those who need assistance to complete “tasks” with “rabbits”
looking for project-based employment. Tasks vary greatly in their nature. For example, the same “rabbit” could complete a grocery delivery task on one day and a website translation task the next day. RelayRides allows car owners to rent their vehicles to neighbors or visitors who need temporary access to a car. Airbnb, Taskrabbit, and RelayRides provide opportunities for the individual producer to deploy access to different types of assets, both tangible and intangible, in order to generate income. These research sites were selected because of the diversity of opportunities presented through their online platforms. TaskRabbit, Airbnb, and RelayRides each attempts to recruit a different type of potential collaborative producer – from those who are unemployed and may serve as “rabbits” to those with luxurious homes that they could potentially rent to others. The diversity of sites was designed to provide a participant sample that reflects the diversity of those working as collaborative producers.

Sample

Airbnb, Taskrabbit, and RelayRides participant profiles located in the greater Boston, Massachusetts area were evaluated to determine if they appeared to fall within the 18 – 34 year old age range of this study. The age range of collaborative producers invited to participate in this study was capped at 34 years old. This limitation was placed on the age of potential participants because the study focuses on the adoption of collaborative production as a method to increase income among young people. The researchers have chosen to functionally define “young” producers as those aged 18 – 34 years of age. Potential participants who appeared to be of proximate age based on their

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4 The Connected Learning Research Network of the MacArthur Foundation funded the research for this study. The research focus of the network is young people under 34 years of age. This uniform age cap also suits the topical area of interest in the case of collaborative produces as many young people within this age range seek out this type of online, flexible work.
collaborative producer profiles were approached. Then, I selected the first round of individuals to contact by intervals of five from the compiled list. In additional to falling within the “youth” age range, participants were required to be “active” collaborative producers. Within this study, “active” is defined as having completed at least five exchanges as a collaborative producer. Participants were recruited online through the messaging systems within each of the collaborative websites. Interview participants met with the interviewers in person or over Skype for semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 30 minutes – 90 minutes. The interview topics followed a semi-structured interview guide. Participants then completed a brief survey.

The data presented are from semi-structured interviews and surveys of forty-two producers within the collaborative marketplaces of Airbnb, Taskrabbit, and RelayRides. Twenty participants were female and twenty-two participants were male. Nineteen participants were married or had partners and twenty-three were single. Thirty-seven of the participants were white and thirty-eight had completed at least a bachelor’s degree. Detailed demographic information is available in Appendix A. Socio-demographic data was used to generate dichotomous measures of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). The first of these measures categorizes participants into either Low or High Cultural Capital (LCC/HCC) based upon the sum of years of tertiary education of participants and both of a participant’s parents. Figure 1 displays the results of this analysis by listing the platform on which participants act as producers, participants’ summed economic and cultural capital scores, the designation of either Low or High Cultural / Economic Capital (LCC/HCC or LEC/HEC), and each participant’s economic net worth for additional context. Finally, the primary motivation for beginning and
sustaining work as a collaborative producer is listed for each research participant.

<table>
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<th>Cultural Capital</th>
<th>Economic Capital</th>
<th>Total CC / EC</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Net Worth</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
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The second measure of *Figure 1* classifies participants as either Low or High Economic or Cultural Capital (LCC/HCC or LEC/HEC). Economic capital was measured using participants’ annual income and the total value of their assets. *Figure 2* displays the descriptive figures of each category.
Descriptive Statistics for EC/CC categories

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<th>LCC ($N = 19$)</th>
<th>HCC ($N = 22$)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Average no. of years of total</td>
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<td>16.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tertiary education between</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants and parents</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LEC ($N = 20$)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Average income (2012, US$)</td>
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<td>Median income (2012, US$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median net worth (2013, US$)</td>
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</table>

Participants earned an average of $7,480 through their collaborative production. Sixty-four percent of participants who held a bachelor’s degree estimated that they earned at least as much per hour in the collaborative marketplace as they did through the traditional labor market. In fact, fifty percent of those with a bachelor’s degree reported that they earned more through collaborative production than through any other work. Seven participants worked as collaborative producers on a full time basis.

Data and Analysis

Motivations

Three distinct motivational themes that drove the collaborative producers surveyed to seek out and sustain work as collaborative producers surfaced throughout the interviews. The motivations cited were financial benefit, flexible work schedule, and efficient use of assets. Twenty-four percent of participants also expressed a secondary
motivation to work at least part time as collaborative producers within one of these categories. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of participant motivations.

![Motivations](image)

**Figure 2**

Financial Motivations

Fifty-four percent of people interviewed cited money as the primary motivator for their work as collaborative producers. Although participants expressed their financial motive in a variety of ways, the following statements are representative of participants who cited financial benefit as their only motivator. Robin, a 29-year-old white female who holds a bachelor’s degree in finance and works for a large corporation, expressed her motivation to join Airbnb:

I’m not that interested in the people. Like, they’re nice. What I like about it is that it has been very easy. We have a spare bedroom. It’s a seamless process that has thus far been just a good experience. It’s a great way to make money.
Jenny, a 24-year-old white female who holds a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and works full time in a laboratory research setting stated a specific financial goal when asked about her motivation to become a Taskrabbit.

And so I make a good amount of money at my job, but I have loans for my graduate program, so I wanted to have extra money to use that to pay off my loans. So that’s why I did it.

Jenny’s focus on a specific financial goal or project was shared among several of those who reported the sole motivation of earning money as producers. Aaron, a 25-year-old white male with a bachelor’s degree whose net worth was $335,000 at the time of the interview, reported a specific goal motivated by a change of life stage:

The decision to rent out our own home came from a little life event--we got engaged. And so we just started, like, you know, looking into wedding things, and just decided that, you know, this would be a really great way to make some extra money to put towards the wedding. He, at the time, and until recently, was a grad student, so he didn’t have a job.

Aaron explained that although he was “capable of funding the entire thing” he began using his apartment to generate extra income through Airbnb to “make the day-to-day a little bit easier and not so stressful, and still be able to do the wonderful wedding that [he] envisioned.” He reported that he and his fiancé break down the $15,640 they have made in the past year by elements of the wedding that they plan to purchase with the income: “we’re, like, ‘Oh, well, that’s our photographer, and that’s the cost of the DJ, and that’s our florist.’” Three others within the “money as sole motivator” category reported that they were attracted to work as collaborative producers because it allowed them to engage in the consumer marketplace in ways that their primary income did not. They use
collaborative producer income to (1) go on luxury vacations, (2) save for the expense of a baby on the way, (3) afford a car, and (4) buy nice items for their home. Lance, a 28-year-old self-employed consultant, explained that he joined RelayRides as an alternative to living without a car:

I was actually looking to get rid of my car and looking for alternative ways to get around with not losing as much mobility. So the T or the commuter rails and all that--those are really difficult to plan your day around. It’s turned into a way to offset the cost of my car because I earn somewhere around what it costs me to run the thing. So essentially it’s a free vehicle now.

Another money-motivated participant, a 31-year-old consultant named Brad, actually purchased a new car with the intention of using RelayRides to offset the cost of car ownership:

I wanted a vehicle that would be useful for very long trips; something that was fuel-efficient and that I didn’t feel bad putting a lot of miles on. But I don’t really take that many long trips, so the only way to make it economical is to buy one and share it with other people. I checked to see if anybody else had a Honda Insight in RelayRides in Boston, and nobody else did, so no place to get one. So I figured I’d just buy one myself and put it up.

There is also a small group of money-motivated participants who struggled to maintain full time employment and turned to work as collaborative producers because of the difficulty they experience in the traditional labor market. Elisabeth, a 30-year-old white woman with a bachelor’s degree, found that she could not obtain work in journalism a field in which she had been trained during college. She stated:

I really just needed a way to make money. I looked it up and it sounded like a good way to get out, meet people. I used to work from home doing some eBay
stuff, so it sounded like, you know, better than staying home by myself doing that sort of thing.

30% of those who cited money as a primary motivator also cited a secondary motivational element. Among those who listed money as their primary motivator and also expressed a secondary motivator, 50% cited the flexible work schedule of collaborative production and 50% cited a sense of efficiency as elements that positively affected their engagement as producers. The money/flexibility and money/efficiency motivated groups each represent 10% of all study participants. Fred, a 21-year-old college student who expressed financial gain as a primary motivator and flexible work as a supplementary driver stated his dual interest in work as a Taskrabbit:

Probably the main benefit is the extra cash, essentially, and the flexibility, because, you know, I’m not tied down to anything. Even if I accept a task, I can still cancel it. Yes, it’s good for the flexibility.

Several participants also expressed the desire to “use assets efficiently” alongside their focus on monetary gain as they described their motivation to work as collaborative producers. Courtney, a 32-year-old Airbnb host who works full time as a fundraiser for a non-profit expressed the dual interest:

First and foremost, money. It just makes sense, money-wise. But I think also just in terms of it aligns with my values. Like, I am anti-consumerism and so I think the more the... Like, I get all my books from the library, I value, like, shared resources, I think the bike share programs are awesome, like, I just love all those kind of sharing, anti-consumerism, not wasting resources things. Yes, so I guess that’s the other thing.
Courtney’s description of feeling compelled towards “not wasting resources” is echoed by the other “efficiency” motivated participants. Her focus on anti-consumerism is also reflected in the sentiments of those who are primarily motivated by a desire to use the assets they possess efficiently through collaboration with others.

The majority of participants cited financial gain as their primary motivation as they became collaborative consumers. Yet, 30% of those who expressed this motivation did so while acknowledging the impact of other driving factors. 96% of the financially motivated participants hold bachelor’s degrees and 46% hold graduate degrees. Participants in this category have earned a wide range of total income from their work as collaborative producers. The range of this income extends from $138 to $30,000. Financially motivated producers have a mean income of $6,571 for collaborative producers. The net worth of their assets and liabilities ranges widely from -$203,000 to $667,743. The mean net worth of financially motivated participants is $52,463. 42% of financially motivated participants provide cars to the RelayRides market, 37% work as Airbnb hosts, and 17% are Taskrabbits”. 38% stated that they earned less money through collaborative production than through full time employment. 15% reported that they earned “about the same” for their work in traditional labor market and for their work in the collaborative market, and 47% reported that they earned more as collaborative producers than through other income. 26 participants reported that they were primarily motivated by money. Six of these financially motivated participants are car owners on RelayRides, eleven are Airbnb hosts, and nine are Task”rabbits”.

After financial benefit, participants most frequently reported that they were motivated by the flexibility of collaborative production work. 15% of all collaborative
producers cited a flexible, autonomous work schedule as the primary characteristic of collaborative production that drove them to join and sustain the marketplace. Jade, a 27-year-old full time Taskrabbit, explained the sentiment in terms of schedule control. She described the appeal of “making my own schedule, because I’ll work ten days straight and then want three days off. And I just like that I can do that--the ability to work when I want to work and how I want to work it.” Another full time Taskrabbit, Stephanie, switched careers because of the flexibility offered by collaborative production work:

I really needed some more flexibility in my schedule. And both teaching and catering you don’t get that. And so I started doing the tasks on the side, and, you know, ended up having it be very profitable, and leaving my full-time real job and making it into a business.

Stephanie previously worked as an elementary school teacher but recently switched to full time work as a Taskrabbit. She founded an online business that provides virtual administrative support to companies in need of computer based help. Stephanie, who is a 28-year-old married white female, reported that her decision to switch from teaching to an entrepreneurial Taskrabbit pursuit was motivated by the need for a more flexible work schedule to give her time to care for her ailing mother. 50% of those who reported favoring the flexible work schedule made possible by collaborative production expressed this preference through statements of dissatisfaction with the traditional job market.

David, a 26-year-old white male and full time Taskrabbit, explained:

I mean, for me, I never really, you know, looked forward to, you know, having a, you know, 9:00-5:00, you know, office gig or anything like that. So, you know, having so many different sites out there that I can connect me with, you know, with short-term gigs, or just, you know, really unique, interesting experiences has been, you know, has been a real positive thing for me. You know, it honestly
broke me out of, you know, several years of unemployment, because I was just, you know, trying to, you know, fit into the traditional economy, and I just could never, you know, wrap my mind around resumes and, you know, traditional job interviews. And, you know, having the chance to just interact with people in the peer-to-peer economy has been, you know, a total game-changer for me.

David reported his difficulty finding a fit within the “9-5” office environment and at the same time provided feedback about the alternative opportunities for contribution and connection that he has found within this collaborative alternative. Tyler, a 23-year-old white male graduate student studying music composition, provided a similar sentiment through his expression of preference for flexible work:

Well, for one, I’m the kind of person that I would go crazy in an office job. The routine is kind of, you know, it can be a little much sometimes. But you know, it’s always something different. You know, I’ve done tasks from picking up five-hundred dollars’ worth of coffee for some guy to--I showed up to this woman’s house for a cleaning task, quote unquote, and she handed me a sledgehammer and said “knock down this wall and bag it up for me.” So, I mean, there’s a lot of stuff in between. It’s really been interesting.

Tyler’s “flexible work” motivation provides perspective on the flexible schedule of Taskrabbit work. It also lends insight into how the flexible nature of the tasks that one accepts may add attractive variety to the working life of a collaborative producer.

67% of collaborative producers motivated by workplace flexibility hold bachelor’s degrees, 16.5% hold master’s degrees, and 16.5% have completed some college but not graduated. 100% of participants who reported a preference for a flexible work schedule participate as Task”rabbits”, and 16.5% of those participants also act as Airbnb hosts. Participants in this category have earned a moderate range of total income.
from their work as collaborative producers. The range of this income extends from $1,000 to $10,000. Notably, this is a more constrained range than reported by the financially motivated participants who earned as little as $138 to much as $30,000 in total income through their work as collaborative producers. Collaborative producers motivated by a flexible work schedule have a mean total income of $4,350. The net worth of their assets and liabilities ranges from -$95,000 to $50,000. The mean net worth of flexibility-motivated participants is -$25,500. This figure is a notable ($75,000) difference from the reported average net worth of financially motivated producers. 67% of flexibility-motivated producers report that they earn the same amount of money from this type of employment as they have in the traditional labor market in the past. 16.5% report that they earn more through this type of work, yet an additional 16.5% of this category of participants report that they earn less. 83% of these participants work as full time collaborative producers, marking an additional characteristic unique to this motivational category. Another difference emerges when the self-reported class status of flexibility-motivated producers is compared to that reported by financially motivated producers. 66.7% of flexibility-motivated participants report their socioeconomic class as “lower middle class” while only 15% of financially motivated producers report their socioeconomic class as “lower middle class.”

In addition to motivation by financial gain and flexible work schedule, 31% of collaborative producers reported being motivated by the desire to use assets efficiently. This primary motivation was expressed exclusively in 80% of these cases. In 20% of these cases, participants also reported being secondarily motivated by financial gain. Additionally, 16% of producers who reported a primary motivation of money also
expressed a secondary motivation of efficiency. Participants within this motivational category expressed their affinity for an economic system that uses existing assets efficiently in two main ways. First, participants reported the appeal of acting as producers to increase the use provided by their items. Car owners using RelayRides articulated this motivation. Daniel, a 30-year-old white male political consultant, stated:

Just because one person cannot afford a car doesn’t mean he should be left to use public transport. Hey, whatever’s available--get the car from your neighbor’s house if he’s willing to rent it out to you. Because he’s paid for it, he’s using it, but right now he’s not using it for one hour--why don’t the next door neighbor use it, right?

This sentiment of the appeal in sharing privately held resources, especially to avoid the inefficiency of public transportation, was shared among 44% of all those motivated by efficiency The second major subcategory expressed by efficiency-motivated participants combined an interest in using assets not only to benefit the greatest number of people, but also to slow the production of new goods. Alexis, a 26-year-old full time collaborative producer on Airbnb, Lyft, and Taskrabbit, explained her philosophy in this way:

You’re living in this world; you need to have minimal impact when you’re here, so your future generations have something to look forward to, right? So that’s been my daily goal--what can I do to reduce my impact? So Airbnb seems like a way that I can, I don’t know, reduce... I mean, we have a room available, electricity’s being used, why not have someone use it, right?

This efficiency motivation is driven by Alexis’ environmental consciousness. She conceptualizes her work as an Airbnb host as contributing to an economic system that extracts the most value from the resources that it currently uses. Alexis extends her
analysis of “efficiency” beyond the use of resources to describe another efficiency she perceives through collaborative production and consumption. She discussed the pros and cons of renting a hotel or another host’s home through Airbnb for her wedding reception:

Like, for example, if I took a hotel, say, Marriott in Texas, right? It’s fine. But Marriott has got a board of directors sitting somewhere in a million dollar house. But this lady is a photographer who owns this house. And as a photographer, maybe she’s not earning that much. I mean, it’ll help her house payment.

In these examples, Alexis draws upon two sentiments related to the motivational theme of efficiency. First, she cites the importance of maximizing the use of resources to slow the need for more resource production. Second, she connects the redistribution of wealth to her concept of efficient consumer behavior through the description of a wedding reception choice. Alexis reports her family class status as “upper middle class” and reports the same class status for her parents.

The efficient use of resources in order to slow down the production of consumer goods or to decelerate the extraction of resources was a motivation shared by 55% of efficiency-motivated producers. Carl, a 25-year-old white male management consultant, explained the efficient and, therefore, environmental motivation behind his participation in the sharing economy outside of work as a collaborative producer:

People all the time ask me why I don’t get a bike--“Why don’t you just get your bike?” Because I’m always looking at the SpotCycle app to see if the Hubways are available. And I tell him it’s not about whether I can afford a bike or want a bike, it’s about the fact that I’m able to share 1500 bikes with thousands of other people. And that I don’t have to take care of it. And there’s joy in pulling up to a Hubway station and you see someone waiting, and you give them that bike, and they can go on with their trip. There’s that, that’s hard to articulate. Oh, reduction of waste. I’m not purchasing a bicycle which invariably has product materials in it that are, you know, not easy to recycle. So there’s the sustainability aspect. The bike will have more usage.
The efficient and environmental motivation driving Carl’s consumer activity within the bike share mirrors the motivation of his participation as a collaborative producer. Carl reflected this sentiment through commenting on the connection between his collaborative production on Airbnb activities and preferences as a traveler and consumer:

I could be happy with just the amount that I’m making, but when I tell people that I’m doing it, it’s really not for the money, it’s really because I love sharing my Boston experience with others. Because when I go to a new city, I dislike staying in hotels--I prefer to be with friends/family or stay in an Airbnb, which I’ve done, or couch-surfing.

Carl’s preference for environmentally responsible, and therefore, efficient transportation is coupled with his partiality towards personally driven travel experiences led by other individuals within a community. Adam, another efficiency-motivated and environmentally minded collaborative producer, echoed the match between Carl’s producer and consumer preferences. Adam, a 25-year-old white male writing tutor and running coach, explained that he is motivated to work as an Airbnb host by:

The whole general concept of the sharing economy … making use of the spaces or, you know, items, property, services, whatever, that people have that otherwise wouldn’t really have a market. I just like the idea of, you know, sharing someone’s house, being a guest there, being able to kind of tap into either their local knowledge of the place that’s there or just use the same resources, natural resources, or energy, or whatever. [I] like things like tool libraries, or car sharing--you know, when you own a car it sits on the road, like, in front of your house not being used, for, like, ninety percent of its life. I think it’s a way for people to reduce their environmental footprint in a sense. I think some of these sort of platforms also facilitate the kind of interaction and collaboration that can build stronger communities and networks of people.
Adam’s conceptualization of environmentally responsible behavior is dependent upon a shared and thus efficient use of resources. He also believes that the sharing of resources, space, and local knowledge may develop or strengthen bonds between individuals.

There is a high concentration of graduate degree holders within this motivational category. Only 32% of the overall sample of participants holds graduate degrees. Yet, 78% of those motivated by the efficient use of assets held graduate degrees and 100% of efficiency-motivated participants hold bachelor’s degrees. 67% of participants reporting an efficiency-motivation participant’s work as collaborative producers through RelayRides and 33% act as Airbnb hosts. Participants in this category have earned a total of $300 - $34,000 through their collaborative production work. The mean total collaborative producer income within this group of efficiency-motivated participants is $5,577. The net worth of their assets and liabilities ranges from -$295,000 - $575,000. The mean net worth of efficiency-motivated producers is $48,920. This figure is an intermediate value between the mean net worth reported by those the financially motivated producers and the flexibility-motivated producers. The mean net worth of these groups is $75,000 and -$25,500 respectively. Notably, however, the efficiency-motivated producers had 61% more assets on average than those in the financial and flexibility motivated participants groups. Efficiency-motivated producers report mean household assets as $167,953 while the financially and flexibility motivated producers report a combined mean of $104,190 in household assets. 44% of efficiency-motivated producers report that they earn more through collaborative production than other forms of employment. Correspondingly, 56% of efficiency-motivated producers report that they earn less through collaborative production than through other forms of employment.
Efficiency-motivated collaborative producers earn an average income of $52,100 while financially and flexibility motivated producers earn an average annual income of $42,796 in addition to their income from collaborative production.

Five participants reported that an efficient use of assets motivated them primarily and an additional four participants cited this motivation as a dual motivation alongside financial motivation. 100% of efficiency-motivated producers held full time employment outside of their work as collaborative producers. Although 44% reported money as a motivating factor, the majority of this group felt solely compelled by a desire to use assets efficiently and reduce the environmental impact of certain consumer behaviors like car use and hotel travel. Another difference between the efficiency-motivated group and the financially and flexibility-motivated groups emerges through the mean payment reported for a single collaborative producer exchange. Efficiency-motivated producers earn an average of $63.49 for each exchange while financially and flexibility-motivated producers earn only $49.00 per exchange on average. The economic benefit of collaborative production varies most markedly among those who profess an efficient, environmental motivation when compared to the groups of those who articulate a financial motivation and a preference for the flexible work schedule of collaborative production.

*Capital, Motivation, and Experience*

The preceding sections have outlined the three primary motivations that drive collaborative producers to initiate and sustain work in the collaborative market. These sections have also presented the sociodemographic patterns that emerge when comparing
across motivational categories. Participants who expressed a variety of motivations each reported their financial earnings within the collaborative production market in comparison to their earnings in the traditional labor market. The baseline definition of economic “success” within this analysis is established through respondents’ affirmation that a higher value was placed upon their work in the collaborative labor market than in the traditional labor market. Thus, “successful” collaborative producers receive greater financial benefit from the time they invest into this marketplace than the time they invest in the traditional marketplace. Figure 3 displays the breakdown of participants who report that they earn more, less, or the same as collaborative producers (CP) than they do through traditional labor (TL). Figure 3 shows that a majority (57%) of Airbnb producers surveyed report that they earn more for their labor within the collaborative market than for similar labor within the traditional labor market. Considerably smaller percentages of RelayRides car owners (30%) and Taskrabbit’s “rabbits” (20%) report that they earn more as collaborative producers than through other employment.

Figure 3
This disparity is partially related to the greater average price of a single Airbnb exchange in comparison to the average price of collaborative exchanges on the other two platforms. Participants reported a range of “average” earnings for a single car rental and task. The mean participant income for a single car rental through RelayRides was $21 and $24 for completing a single task through Taskrabbit. In contrast, participants earned an average of $115 (approximately 5x the earning reported for the other platforms) for a single Airbnb rental. The size of the average Airbnb exchange figure is skewed by the income reported by several “high earners” within the overall sample of Airbnb producers.

The sample of those who report that they earn more as collaborative producers than they do from traditional employment for a similar expenditure of time are dubbed the “high earners” in this report. The group whose rate of collaborative production income exceeds their rate of traditional labor market income deserves further consideration in order to highlight the conditions under which this type of market success emerges. High earning collaborative producers report earning an average of $2034 for an Airbnb rental, $200 for a Taskrabbit task, and $115 for a car rental. The overall level of capital held by those who are able to earn more within the collaborative marketplace is notably higher than those who earn as much or less than they do within the traditional labor market. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of economic and cultural capital is correlated with differences in the earning ability of certain collaborative producers. The average composite capital score for those who earn more within the collaborative marketplace is 54. The average for those who reported that they earn as much or less within the collaborative marketplace was 44. The composite capital number is a measure of the economic situation of participants as well as of participants (and their parents) years of university education. In general, those
who have more financial assets and whose families have more years of university education are also able to earn more in exchange for their assets and labor within the collaborative marketplace.

Bourdieu describes these differences in financial situation and educational attainment through his concepts of economic and cultural capital. The participants in this study were categorized according to their annual income, net worth, and years of tertiary education. The characteristics allowed for an organization of participants into four groups, high economic capital, low economic capital, high cultural capital, and low cultural capital (Figure 2 describes the averages financial and educational information for those in each category.) Those able to earn more for their efforts within the collaborative market not only had more substantial economic and educational assets, but they also were less likely to pursue collaborative consumption as full time employment because they held other full time jobs. Figure 4 displays the full time occupations and capital categorizations of those who reported that they earned more within the collaborative marketplace.

High Earners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full time occupation</th>
<th>HEC/LEC</th>
<th>HCC/LCC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>HEC</td>
<td>HCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development director</td>
<td>HEC</td>
<td>HCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biochemist</td>
<td>HEC</td>
<td>LCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>HEC</td>
<td>HCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political consultant</td>
<td>HEC</td>
<td>HCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare researcher</td>
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<td>LCC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speech pathologist</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>HCC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>LCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owner</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>LCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail services</td>
<td>LEC</td>
<td>HCC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4*

In this sample, participants who are high earners in the collaborative market hold high paying, white-collar jobs in the traditional labor market. This insight calls into question collaborative business owners’ claims that their platforms disrupt the traditional sorting of professions and earnings (Botsman 2010). Intergenerational transfers of economic and cultural capital and other pre-existing capital advantages factor into collaborative market success just as they influence the chances of the economic success of those participating in the traditional full time and offline temporary labor markets.

The motivations expressed by participants differed by the total capital composite score held by each. Those with different types of advantages and disadvantages tended to present dissimilar sentiments of why they participate in collaborative consumption.

*Figure 5* displays the economic and cultural capital of those who expressed the three central motivations analyzed within this project: (1) environmental efficiency, (2) flexible work, and (3) financial. viii
Participants who expressed an efficiency / environmental motivation had consistently higher economic and cultural capital scores. 63% of those who expressed this motivation had high levels of cultural and economic capital. 100% of efficiency / environmentally motivated participants had high capital across at least one of the measure categories. Carfagna et al. (2014) found that there is an emerging *eco-habitus* among consumers with high cultural capital. These consumers differed from those Pierre Bourdieu and Douglas Holt studied in the mid-1970s and 1990s respectively. The differences emerged along three dimensions beginning with the consumer “focus on the physicality of goods and their connection to the earth, the desire to consume locally through a cosmopolitan lens, and the expressions of reverence for manual labor” (p. 175). In this study, participants were questioned about their roles in “producing” or creating the consumer experiences of their peers through online and offline exchanges. Those collaborative producers who had the highest levels of cultural and economic capital expressed a motivation to sustain and protect the environment more than other groups within this sample. The disproportionate interest in the environment may suggest an emergence of *ecohabitus* by those who occupy the producer role in the collaborative producer-consumer exchange.

Those who enjoyed the greatest advantages in wealth and education within this sample expressed an affinity towards acting as producers who use assets efficiently and, thus, preserve the natural environment. This sentiment connects the act of production to its impact upon the natural world in much the same way that the participants queried by Carfagna et al. connected consumer choice to environmental impact. Alexis, a 26-year-old southeast Asian HEC/HCC woman, explained her emphasis on the environment:
So I think one of my whole goal in life is to reduce my environmental impact in whatever way I can. And one-way is to eat local, as you know—don’t eat internationally sourced foods. Then, you know, recycle your stuff. Just things we know already. Even towards that end, I rent out my car.

Other participants also expressed the appeal of exchanges that allowed them to circulate resources within the local community through local production and consumption. Daniel, a HEC/HCC white male, identifies the value within the resources of the local community in:

The resources in the community. But if you’re keeping it with you, it’s not being used. The value is more when it’s being used for others. If two people are using the bike, versus zero people, it’s better to have two people use than none at all. I mean, you can be selfish and say, “No, it’s my own thing.” … I think society has limited resources. And everyone should be able to use the resources that [are] available.

Alexis’ and Daniel’s statements are representative of others who report environmental motivation and also hold high levels of either cultural or economic capital. The presence of this motivational category as well as its connection between reports from those participants who constitute it and two of the three *ecohabitus* dimensions identified by Carfagna et al. extend the analyses of consumer *ecohabitus* into producer *ecohabitus*. Although a preference for manual labor was not found within these participants, they did express awareness of the connections between the physicality present within the places, goods, and services they produced. The producers surveyed here also expressed a similar cosmopolitan localism to that expressed by the consumer participants of Carfagna’s analysis (2014).
**Discussion**

Neoliberal policies and a globalized demand for flexible labor have led to the development of a diverse, international class of precarious workers who are united by the insecurity they experience within the labor market (Standing 2009). Standing estimates that one-quarter of the developed world’s adult workforce belong to the precariat class of workers (2009). Global capitalism’s focus on profit leads organizations to seek out methods of cost cutting. This search has driven demand for non-regular jobs, casual and temporary labor, part-time work, and spawned the development of employment agencies to fulfill organization’s low-cost labor needs. In Standing’s analysis, job insecurity and wage flexibility, which is sometimes achieved through the outsourcing of jobs to areas where labor costs are lower, are key characteristics of work experienced by the precariat class. The creation of the online platform for temporary work featured in this research represents a new format for low-skill casual labor within the overall labor market environment of temporary employment.

Airbnb, Taskrabbit, and RelayRides are three hallmark collaborative production organizations. They retain more and more collaborative producers each year, yet research has not yet answered how well those temporary laborers are being served by this online form of casual employment. This project posed three specific questions about temporary work as a collaborative producer. What drives the producers of collaborative consumption to begin and sustain this type of work? What is the economic benefit of collaborative production? Are there observable differences in resources and motivations between those who gain the most substantial economic rewards in this marketplace and those who struggle to make ends meet within it?
Motivations

There are several key differences between the limited access provided by the renting and sharing activities of collaborative consumption and the purchasing and owning activities of private consumption. Both activities are driven by multiple distinct consumer motivations. For example, one individual wishing to gain temporary access to a car may be able to afford their own car, but only need the transportation provided by that access for a limited amount of time. Another consumer may prefer temporary access to a car owned by another because she cannot meet the financial responsibility of car ownership. In these cases, temporary access to a car is motivated by different factors.

Belk (2007) provides a typology of the motivations that appear to drive collaborative ownership in comparison to those associated with private ownership. His work “Why Not Share Rather Than Own?” discusses the many motivations behind sharing behaviors historically and in the contemporary moment. This study provides an extension to Belk’s typology through its presentation of self-reported motivations of collaborative producers. As more temporary laborers engage in work as collaborative producers, insight into their motivations is key to assessing the conditions of this work and understanding those who do it.

Others have analyzed the motivations that drive consumers and producers to act collaboratively through case studies of popular non-profit initiatives that feature collaborative consumer exchange. For example, Nelson and Rademacher (2009) contributed to the analysis through their case study of Freecycle.org, a peer-to-peer gift economy. Their work revealed generalized reciprocity as a motivator for the acts of gifting that occur within the Freecycle network. Nelson and Rademacher showed that
there was no expectation that the gift of personal goods through Freecycle would result in an immediate return on that investment. However, the analysis revealed that the peer producers of the Freecycle network believed that by supplying goods to the network they were ensuring its existence as a resource capable of providing them with needed items at a later point. Ozanne and Ozanne (2011) present the self-reported motivation of parents who use a community toy library. This work is similar to the 2009 Nelson and Rademacher piece. It also highlights the importance of participants’ belief that collaborative resources should exist as a source of help to those people in communities for whom the price of participation in the traditional market for goods and services is too high. Engagement with collaborative production and consumption is motivated by participants’ belief in the importance of alternative marketplaces in both examples. This case study features an analysis of individuals not primarily motivated by their belief in the importance of alternative marketplaces for the sake of greater economic justice. Instead, it presents a group of key motivations for collaborative production and consumption to give greater diversity to the known range of incentives.

*Inequalities of Collaborative Consumption*

It is important to consider the motivations and experiences of this set of temporary workers. Yet it is equally vital to consider the socioeconomic standing of these workers in comparison to one another, in the context of the platforms they access for work, and in relation to their likelihood for economic returns within the collaborative market. Guy Standing advances the view that class relations have been obscured by the class fragmentation caused by temporary work arrangements. He suggests that this fragmentation makes individuals increasingly vulnerable and, therefore, focusing the
The precarious nature of global temporary labor is imperative (Atkinson, 2010). Insecure economic situations have human and social costs like “anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation” (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). Yet, many have promoted collaborative production as a more profitable alternative to the temporary employment available offline (Botsman 2010). However, these claims have not yet been evaluated with respect to the overall level of capital possessed by each producer within the collaborative market. This paper reports upon the way in which the economic and cultural assets possessed by the individual workers impact their likelihood for economic success within the marketplace. This paper’s analytic focus on socioeconomic class, as well as the inequalities presented by the stratifications of class, is facilitated by Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu proposed that there were three types of capital – economic, cultural, and social (1984). He also claimed that wealth or poverty within any form of capital impact the ability of their holder to set the definition of “highbrow” or hegemonic taste culture. Further, he posited that cultural capital can be converted into economic capital. This study considers two of Bourdieu’s three forms of capital – economic and cultural.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three forms. First, Bourdieu defines the embodied state, which describes long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. Second, cultural capital may exist in the objectified state in the form of cultural goods (i.e. pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, or machines). Third, cultural capital is also found in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification through which cultural values are transmitted and reproduced.

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5 Social capital is not considered within this analysis as participants did not provide information about the strength of their social ties or about how those ties may have changed as a result of their work as collaborative producers.
capital is marked in the individual by educational qualifications. Institutionalized capital confers “entirely original” properties on cultural capital, which it is presumed to guarantee (Bourdieu 1986). This work assigns categories and a rating of the level of institutionalized cultural capital for each participant. Cultural capital ratings are measured in sum years of tertiary education held by participants and their parents. The procedure of this ranking and the ranking of economic capital also present within the later analysis are discussed in the methods section. The ranking of cultural capital provides an additional dimension to the analysis of motivations among the collaborative producer participants. It allows these motivations to stand alongside any attributable to intergenerational education levels as well as economic resources.

Conclusion

This work builds upon that of Bourdieu, Holt and Carfagna et al. by interrogating the experiences of the other high cultural capital individuals within a market that allows non-professional individuals to step into a producer role. Those who enjoy the intergenerational advantages brought by reserves of economic capital and a tradition of cultural capital attainment through education display one of the ways in which producer and consumer taste expressions guided by habitus alter over time and context. Participants endowed with the highest levels of economic and cultural capital are also those most likely to fetch the highest price for their effort in the peer production marketplace for consumer services. They are also most likely to report that their drive to work as producers originated from the desire to protect the environment through efficient use of assets (Carfagna et al 2014, Laidley 2013). Thus, the key factor for economic “success” as a producer in the collaborative marketplace relies most fundamentally upon
the possession of economic and cultural assets before joining this workforce as citizen producer.

Those individuals pursuing collaborative consumption who are employed full time in the traditional labor market are also those more likely to obtain higher economic return in exchange for their effort within this marketplace. They are those most likely to act as producers within the asset sharing platforms, especially through Airbnb. This higher return for effort within the collaborative market may be due to the greater selectivity of those who act as producers for ideological reasons. The freedom from the economic necessity of earning through collaborative production experienced by ideologically focused producers may lead them to elect to complete only those exchanges with advantageous effort to capital exchange rates. The analysis shows that collaborative production is a more profitable alternative to offline, temporary labor when the overall level of capital (both cultural and economic) that an individual possesses is high. In many cases, the capital volume of producers can be attributed to success in the traditional labor market enjoyed by either themselves or by family members from whom they have benefitted. Each producer’s freedom from the burden of economic need when deciding between exchanges in the collaborative market is beholden to previous advantage in the traditional market. This finding contradicts the discourse of equal opportunity for all put forth by the corporations managing these peer production platforms.

The most significant differences in resources appear between Airbnb producers and Taskrabbit producers. Taskrabbit producers possess the lowest combined levels of cultural and economic capital (TC = 32) within this sample while Airbnb producers possess the greatest total capital (TC = 48).ix Among the three groups, Airbnb participants
are most likely to be motivated by an efficient use of assets, a desire to share resources locally, and a concern for the physical environment. Therefore, this group is also most likely to express the elements of *ecohabitus* and describe environmental, local, and cosmopolitan practices associated with this perceptive. Of the sociodemographic categories surveyed, the characteristic most likely to be related to higher earnings within the collaborative market was the participant’s net worth prior to acting as an economic producer. In this way, the collaborative labor market mirrors the traditional labor market. The data fail to support the claim that this online marketplace for temporary labor breaks from the historic advantages enjoyed by those who are free from economic necessity and, thus, are able to obtain high levels of institutionalized cultural capital.
References


Chapter 4:

NEW CULTURES OF CONNECTION IN A BOSTON TIMEBANK
New Cultures of Connection in a Boston Time Bank

Abstract:
New Cultures of Connection evaluates the exchanges made on an egalitarian barter market through the medium of a local currency, “time dollars.” The study uses Zelizer’s concept of a circuit of commerce (2005) to show that cultural capital limits potential trades available in the time bank and reveals that those with high cultural capital exit the market. Ecohabitus provides one exception to this finding as high cultural capital participants find nonmonetary value in authenticity, localism, environmentalism, holistic wellness and self-reliance. Yet, this new set of high cultural capital preferences does not pair with their exchanges as they demonstrate enduring inclination towards professionalized, market-like services. Disparities in cultural capital challenge the potential of barter networks like the “time bank” to alter the dependence of identities of market practice and success.

If the watchword of global capitalism is greed, as declared by Wall Street’s Gordon Gecko, the mantra of the plenitude economy is share—as in sharing one’s car, one’s home, one’s food, and one’s time. These practices, once unthinkable in a middle class America obsessed with privacy, acquisition and protection of property, create what Forbes Magazine called “an economic revolution” as millions of people are learning new ways to access goods and services, as well as deploy the assets and skills they already possess. The sharing economy is growing at an estimated 25% annually and is predicted to exceed $3.5 billion in 2013. It’s an opportunity for changing how people spend, earn and live that should enable the expansion of plenitude lifestyles.

The sharing economy is conventionally defined as including a wide range of initiatives, from those that represent marginal twists on Business-As-Usual offerings to radical alternatives. Zipcar, an early example of car sharing, has evolved into a conventional car rental that offers services by the hour rather than the day. It’s owned by Avis now, and is not a true example of sharing. By contrast, another early initiative, Couchsurfing, is a network of couch lenders and travelers who stay with them (without payment) that has remained close to its origins.

Couchsurfing is one example of what anthropologists call a gift economy—there’s no price or

formal market involved. People offer their homes to strangers, i.e., they share them, mostly for the purposes of meeting them and doing them a good turn. It’s a stark alternative to a conventional market exchange.

The sharing economy includes traditional cases in which assets or goods are literally shared among peers, such as landsharing (which matches land owners with prospective gardeners), or neighborhood sharing in which people lend a proverbial “cup of sugar,” or equipment they own such as lawn mowers or photographic equipment. It also refers to shared ownership of goods, a less common but expanding practice, which usually involves peer-to-peer relationships. The internet has been the key to the rise of peer-to-peer economies because it simplifies the logistics of sharing goods and ownership and provides mechanisms such as ratings systems that help build trust and reputation among strangers. Craigslist and eBay are early examples of online peer-to-peer initiatives that specialize in the re-sale of used goods.

Couchsurfing uses a peer-to-peer structure, as do AirBnB (a for-profit lodging service), Relay Rides (people rent out their own cars), and Sidecar (people offer rides in their cars, donations suggested). The sharing economy also emphasizes re-use of goods rather than buying new and it is remaking modes of service delivery. The options range from low-cost concierge-style services such as Zaarly and TaskRabbit that facilitate errands or other services done by non-professionals (i.e., peers) to time banks, which are service exchange communities that operate without money according to principles of equal time exchange. Members trade equal hours of work deployed for different tasks in time banks.

We use the term connected consumption to describe many of the initiatives in the sharing economy from the consumer’s side. Connectedness refers to both the digital and the social aspects of these practices. For consumers, these practices make it possible to access a wide range of quality goods and services much more cheaply than in the BAU economy. They also facilitate local, face-to-face, i.e., connected relationships. From the provider’s side these innovations open
up a variety of ways to earn cash income or access to goods or services through barter. People are renting out their cars, homes, and other assets to make ends meet. They are selling and trading their time for cash and services. They are swapping food and used goods. They are saving money by not having to buy things. Together this new set of initiatives and practices is enabling people to work less by choice, to take a chance on a new career, small business or a start-up, or to live a life of lighter ecological impact.

The sharing economy and the connected consumption portion of that larger entity attract participants via three main motivations. The first, just noted, is economic. Peer-to-peer economic activity shifts value away from middlemen toward consumers and producers, and makes alternative lifestyles possible. As Plenitude (2010) predicted, underemployment and falling or stagnant incomes have affected growing numbers of people. For them, sharing is a way to live well on less money or to earn money with assets they already own. A second motive is ecological. Nearly all these initiatives reduce carbon-footprints, through sharing transport, reducing waste, increasing the utilization of existing assets (which reduces the demand for building new), and through re-use of goods. Third, many participants are interested in meeting people, creating social connections, and deepening their ties to social networks (Belk 2010). Nostalgia about an earlier era when people knew their neighbors and could rely on them permeates the sharing economy. Some sharing initiatives, such as the time bank, as discussed in this paper, explicitly attempt to re-create those informal social ties. The sharing economy is by no means confined to young people, they have been its innovators and early participants. They’re more digitally connected, and more open to strangers and lifestyle experimentation. Many have not yet constructed normative middle class lifestyles and they are among those most affected by precarious economic times. In our time bank case, the focus is on members who are under 35 years old to understand how they experience and participate in the sharing economy.
Despite the discourse of innovation that surrounds the sharing economy, mutual aid and asset sharing are longstanding activities, especially in low-income communities (Stack 1974). In this sense the sharing economy is a remix of already existing practices, rather than a recent invention. What is different is that the digital environment allows strangers to establish these kinds of relations. Its popularity among highly educated, higher income groups is also new.

In this chapter I present findings from a case study of one sharing institution—a large, volunteer-run time bank—that embodies a mix of these old and new dimensions. As I explain in more detail below, time banks are membership organizations in which people trade services with each other. Started in the 1980s, they predate the internet and the start-up culture of the sharing economy, but they reflect many of its characteristics. No money exchanges hands, but there is a currency of hours earned by providing services and spent by receiving them. Unlike many of the start-ups in the sharing economy, time banking has an explicitly egalitarian structure that assigns equal value to each person’s time and skills, situating it at what Vivianna Zelizer, in her discussion of local monies, has called the “ideological extreme.” (Zelizer 2011:325). While this requirement may be “extreme,” it is an important part of what draws people to the bank, a related finding to that of Gowan and Slocum (this volume), who identify adherence to the anti-capitalist ideology of 1968 as one of the factors that has led to the success and longevity of the alternative economy in the Aude. Because the time bank has an explicitly critical ideology, and has been so devoted to a transformative and anti-market discourse, it is an interesting U.S. case for examining the opportunities and obstacles faced by plenitude-style institutions that attempt to undermine the foundations of neo-liberal capitalism. If time banks result in robust trading economies, their members can opt out of or minimize market-based provisioning of services. They can also reduce their income requirements, build social capital and help members acquire new skills. Therefore, a key question is in this paper is whether the trading economy of our bank is robust and whether it conforms to the ideological principles on which it is based. Robustness
will be hard to achieve because there is an immense chasm between the egalitarian trading ratio of the time bank and standard market valuations for many of the services being offered.

The time bankers studied express a high degree of ideological support for the stated goals of the time bank. They like that every member’s time is valued equally and that the market does not determine the “worth” of someone in the community. Members are passionate about creating local alternatives to impersonal global markets where knowing the people who provide goods and services is the norm. They are resistant to the trend of outsourcing, or professionalization of services. Yet, participants come to the time bank with highly variable levels of cultural, social and economic capital and different levels of engagement with the market economy. They have different expectations about the quality of the services they expect to receive and varied levels of comfort with the idea of non-professionals providing services. These standards are sometimes eroded in actual trading situations. The transformational aspects of time banking were inhibited when members used conventional market criteria to dictate with whom and how often they trade. Furthermore, the volume of trades in the time bank is not always robust. The divergence between the economy of the time bank and that of the market can erode members’ interest in trading, their satisfaction with the trades they make, and the extent to which trading breaks down class and other inequalities. There is a trading economy, but in various ways it fails members’ expectations and actual capacity in terms of the volume and variety of trades. On the other hand, an ideology of social and economic transformation set the tone for most exchanges. and any market mentality that remained was residual.

Thinking about markets

Time bank members have well-articulated views about both market and non-market and provisioning of services. Many see the market as cold and impersonal and counter-pose it to the intimate relations of family, neighborhood and community. This separate spheres reasoning is a
common trope within popular discourses of capitalism. Zelizer (2005) argues that it is also the dominant formulation among scholars and terms it the hostile worlds approach: the market is the realm of cold, greedy calculation while the family and community are ruled by altruism and friendly feeling. Arlie Hochschild’s ethnographic work (2003) also investigates this boundary, looking at incursions of commercial spirit into family affairs and gendered relations, and most recently (2012), the outsourcing of tasks that have previously been done within the family. The hostile worlds perspective argues that the trend of employing market labor and logic in the domestic sphere undermines authentic social relations and degrades human connections. In the clash between what can be simplistically define as economics versus culture, the hostile worlds view cautions that economics eclipses culture, and will remake private life in the image of the market. The opposite view, represented by the Chicago School within economics, denies the existence of culture, understanding all spheres of social life as what Zelizer calls “nothing but” economies. There can be no hostility between the spheres, because in both only rational economic men (Becker 1978). This view can be understood as a case of the imperialism of economics in which economists miss the complex mix of self-interest and altruism present in all sites of social life (Folbre 1982) and cling to a discredited model of über-rationality. Zelizer herself rejects these poles in favor of a “connected lives” perspective that highlights complex negotiation of legal and social responsibilities when monetary exchange occurs in the context of intimate relations.

Institutions such as the time bank aim to go beyond the “hostile worlds” or “nothing but” approaches to construct transformational alternatives. They create what Zelizer calls a circuit of commerce (2011: 302-353). Circuits of commerce are not standard markets, nor household economies or even social networks. They are special types of economic relations that bridge markets and the household. She defines them as “distinctive social relations among specific individuals” which consist of “shared economic activities carried on by means of those social relations” which have “common accounting systems…shared understandings about the meanings
of transactions within the circuit” and “a boundary separating members from non-members.” (Zelizer 2011:304). The time bank is a circuit in construction. It has a number of features of a circuit of commerce, such as clear boundaries and distinctive social relations among its members. However, members do not all have shared understandings of how trades should function, and some struggle with the accounting system (i.e., how to value labor time). Many are actively developing those shared meanings in an attempt to locate their time bank relations between the market and friendship or family provision. They aim for egalitarian exchange practices with fair social relationships that have the feel of those they have experienced outside the market. More broadly, this project of remaking economic relations in the image of intimate relations is also being undertaken in other initiatives of the new economy. The relations developed at farmers’ markets, CSAs, fair trade stores and local businesses frequented by our respondents also mimic the tone of time bank exchanges (Brown 2013; Willis and Schor 2012). Creating those shared meanings and accounting values may be the key to ensuring that the time bank is a robust, alternative institution capable of assuming a major place in members’ lives.

**Researching the time bank**

Time banks are barter network that allows members to offer their services in exchange for a time currency that entitles them to the services of others. For example, a time banker lists her “offer” of statistical tutoring online, another time bank member selects that offer, and together they complete a trade. The statistics pupil then “pays” the tutor in a time currency based solely on how long the exchange lasted. The tutor can then draw upon the currency she has earned to obtain services from a different time bank member. A key feature of time banks is that regardless of the market value of the service rendered, all services in the time bank are valued equally. One hour of legal advice is equal to one hour of babysitting is equal to one hour of dance instruction.
Though some time banks are housed within organizations, most, like the Greater Boston Time Trade Circle (TTC), are run as community-based non-profit organizations with both online and offline components. In recent years, the internet has helped expand time banks by facilitating and recording offline trades between members. Time banking’s digital presence is an important factor that allows strangers to swap services and which distinguishes it from kinship or place-based barter networks.

In the fall and winter of 2011-2012 we conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation among time bankers in the TTC, an 800-member volunteer-run time bank. In this chapter we discuss the results of 30 in-depth interviews with male and female participants aged 24-34. (The Appendix table displays detailed demographic information.) Respondents are predominately white and female (23 of the 30 are women), a gender proportion that reflects the composition of the membership. All but one of our participants has a college degree and 53% hold graduate degrees. Generally, our participants are professionally employed and identify with the middle class. Though our sample is mostly not comprised of people who aim to maximize their incomes, many referenced their economic privilege relative to others during our interviews. Notably our participants are from very well educated families; graduate education among their parents was the norm, not the exception. This also means they are quite high in cultural capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). That is, they have high status tastes that have been cultivated either through family upbringing or schooling. While our population does not reflect the most elite groups who possess both high economic and cultural status, quite a few went to elite schools. More generally, they display what we have elsewhere called an “ecological-habitus” (Carfagna et al 2012), which we believe is an important emerging
taste pattern among high cultural capital groups in the United States. They represent a segment of the elite that has more cultural than economic capital and which is leading a turn towards ecological lifestyles.

There is some literature on time banking, but it is not large. Most articles are from the popular press, where coverage of time banks has increased significantly over time—from 10 articles in 1997 to 140 in 2012. There is also a literature that lies between the academic and the popular. Early accounts, especially writings by its founder, Edgar Cahn, defined a moral imperative to time bank, described the possible organizational forms of time banks, and laid out plans for establishing local branches (Cahn 1996, 2000). Later reports detailed the inner workings of time bank exchanges and hypothesized about the social benefits time banking could offer should the practice become mainstream (Aldridge 2001; North 2003; Seyfang 2002). Some articles, especially those within gerontology, found that time banking yields positive physical and mental health impacts for adults, as measured by improvements in self-efficacy and community engagement (Bailis 2002; Collom 2008; Collom 2012b; Seyfang 2003a). More recent academic studies on time banking have moved from descriptive to analytic accounts (Seyfang 2006). Carfagna et al (2012) explore the emerging taste regimes of high cultural capital time bankers. Zelizer (2005) discusses time banking within her analysis of circuits of commerce to highlight both the potential benefits to members and possible pitfalls of participation. Seyfang (2006) and Fenton (2012) discuss the role of time banking in building social capital. This chapter provides insight into the ideological motivations that lead people to join time banks, detailing the interplay between ideological motives and
utilitarian approaches to trading and the complex class dynamics that characterize participation.

*Why barter when you could buy?: the motives of time bankers*

Time bank members are drawn to the indirect barter of time banking because they find its egalitarian values and ideological commitments appealing. In that sense all the research participants are “ideological” time bankers—they believe in the equal value principle, they embrace its promise of enhanced community and they are hopeful that it can provide economic value for unemployed or cash constrained members. Virtually all of our informants discussed time banking’s appeal in these or related value, moral, or ideological terms. Even time bankers who adopt a transactional approach, by which we mean that they aim to extract as much value as possible when they trade and who expect efficiency and professionalism, report that their membership was motivated by the egalitarian ethos of the time bank.

At the same time, the meanings of time banking are polysemic, that is, members understand what the practice symbolizes in a variety of ways. Most like that it is an alternative to “business-as-usual” economic arrangements in which a conventional market calculus governs social relations, although their view range from full-blown critiques of capitalism at one end of the spectrum, to a few who treat the time bank more as a way of “giving back” to mitigate the worst outcomes of the market. Some are unhappy with the long commodity chains of global capitalism, preferring a smaller-scale, face-to-face economy in which they know where, from whom, and the conditions under which products originate. Many tie the BAU economy to ecological degradation,
discussing how suburban living, excessive consumerism, or other factors are destroying
the environment. For these members, the local boundaries of the time bank are an
antidote to a resource intensive lifestyle. The equal trading ratio is also a strong
ideological draw. It matches the everyday humanistic values that many time bankers
articulate and represents a stark alternative to the hegemonic valuation of people
according to what their labor can command on the market. Some believe time banking
can be a solution to personal financial distress. Others consider themselves relatively
privileged, and gravitated to the time bank out of a sense of empathy and ethical
responsibility toward others, as well as the belief that it is part of an institutional
alternative to a destructive economic system.

One of the most commonly expressed sentiments was the disintegration of social
connection and a lack of place-based social networks. Time bankers often talked about
getting back to the way America “used to be.” As Sonia, a freelance copy-editor
explained: “I actually really miss that sort of southern way of treating your neighbors and
things ... I'm used to knowing my neighbors and helping them. And you should help your
neighbor. It's kind of a religious idea.” Others echoed Sonia's sentiment, calling time
banking a “holistic approach of taking care of life and communities” or drawing a
connection between that holistic approach and the “self sufficiency ... trend going on
where people want to be off-the-grid [and] more into local community.” Respondents
began their explanations of time banking by pausing to articulate a community
orientation that almost without notice had slipped out of their lives. For a few, this
sentiment led them to relate to the time bank largely as a volunteer activity or community
commitment, becoming the kinds of members who often don't redeem the hours they've earned, favoring giving back over cashing in.

Our respondents fall into two broad groups in their ideological orientations to the time bank. A large number exhibit what we term “market fatigue.” A smaller subset expressed more coherent anti-capitalist politics either rhetorically or in terms of their actual lifestyle practices. They see the time bank as part of an emerging alternative economy that they can participate in and thereby reduce their exposure to the BAU market. There are also a number of members who are drawn to the time bank for economic reasons: it allows them to have a higher real standard of living than they could manage through cash purchases alone.

The market and its discontents

The creep of marketized services was something that two-thirds of our time bankers resisted, in part because they are critical of paying for services that there are other ways of accessing. Many expressed a weariness with the market and were put off by the requirement to earn never-ending flows of cash to “live life” in an outsourced world (Melissa). They complained about the rising trend of paying for “professionals” to provide the same services that might have been exchanged between family members or neighbors in previous generations. These time bankers represent a backlash phenomenon to what sociologist Arlie Hochschild described in her 2012 book The Outsourced Self, which reported on the commercialization of everyday practices of social life such as courtship, marriage, parenthood, and elder care. Hochschild’s research finds that a carousel of attractively packaged services assembled by paid providers is replacing the home-crafted, unpredictable and flawed service relationships of the past. Her respondents expressed a mix of attitudes toward the marketization of services—most were relatively
comfortable with well-established forms of market provision such as child care, but regarded the frontiers of outsourcing (eg, paying for nursing home visitors to loved ones, paying to have someone scatter the ashes of a dead relative, renting of wombs for surrogate pregnancies) with ambivalence. However, Hochschild’s informants are participating in these new markets, unlike time bankers, who actively reject them. Our respondents prefer “in-sourcing,” through exchanges that are casual and personal. Their desire for professionalized services is weak and their preference for local provisioning is strong. A Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic guides their desire to contribute to a robust, local economy, in which non-professionals come together to make and do for each other in relationships of reciprocity and connection. Consider Mandy, a 28-year-old Asian-American time banker, who grew up in a small Southwestern town. The daughter of a chemist, Mandy majored in neuroscience in college, first worked as a genetics researcher, then shifted career tracks to pursue a degree in social work. Now a coordinator at a non-profit that pairs foster children with mentors, Mandy touched upon several of the dimensions of market fatigue we observed. Mandy considers the functionality of goods over their form, prefers meaning and personal connection to the status value and professional quality of service exchanges, and is guided by an ethic of egalitarian relations. Her experience in the time bank helped her appreciate the value of “two-way” exchange that “seems to be a much more balanced and healthy relationship where both parties feel important and valued.” In Mandy’s view, this “bi-directional” nature of time bank exchange creates “a lot of mutual respect for everyone and it's not as hierarchical as the economy system …of regular financial markets.”
Her preferences became clear as she discussed planning of an intimate yet typically outsourced event – her wedding. She explained that for her and her fiancé, “ultimately what's important … is that it's meaningful.” Of course the rhetoric of meaning swirls around most outsourced weddings as well, but Mandy’s case is unusual in its allegiance to the DIY ethos. She and her future husband have “really foregone a lot of the formalities.” She explained, “we're not having wedding parties … we don't have a color scheme … we're not doing centerpieces … the dress code is ‘be comfortable’ … [and] it will be a backyard wedding at a personal family friend’s.” Unable to find a wedding dress that was both personal and which she could be assured was ethically produced, she turned to local talent to “time bank her wedding dress.” Mandy and her fiancé both “like the time bank concept anyway of the dress” because of the relationship she has developed with the dressmaker, her assurance of its fair production, and because it “felt like” her. Unlike a dress plucked off of a rack at Kleinfeld’s (an upscale Manhattan wedding dress shop), Mandy’s dress will be valuable because it will be a product of local hands and of the contributions to the community she has made earning the hours to have it sewn. Mandy preferred a “simple linen dress” and reasoned that it would not “make our wedding feel more meaningful if I have another layer to this dress, or some fancy embroidery.” Unsurprisingly, Mandy appears genuinely puzzled by the appeal of “brand name” labels and feels thankful that the time bank decelerates exchange and, in doing so, allows her to spend time developing relationships of gratitude and respect as she pursues a life that “feels good.”

When we spoke with Victoria, another participant who is pursuing alternative ways to obtain services, she articulated her desire to be a productive member of a local
service economy. A recent college graduate whose speech was as lucid as it was impassioned; Victoria contrasted her views to those of her parents, explaining that her *modus operandi* was unique in a family that preferred outsourcing. She highlighted her dual motives, to obtain services and goods from local sources and to contribute to the production of local value. She explained a disappointing exchange she had recently had while getting her car repaired by a commercial mechanic:

I didn’t even have to talk to him after he fixed my car. So there was so little interaction there, and there was something very important that happened. I put a lot of money into him fixing my car, and there was nothing really there afterwards. That's a lot of trust, like I had no real relationship. It's crazy but it's actually really normal.

Victoria was bothered by the lack of personal connection to her mechanic and the logic underlying the disjointed exchange. As a result, she reported that she hoped to go the *DIY* route for future repair projects. Victoria also described a related shift in how she has begun to take a stand against market-based criteria that focus on the rarity, complexity, or professionalism of a good or service. Like Mandy, her preferences relied on criteria that captured creative intent and connections between producers and consumers. She spoke about learning to whittle as a way “to really create something and put time into something.” Though she admitted that “the things [she] has carved to this point are not beautiful at all” she also claimed that their social location imbued them with an alternative value: “They are meaningful, and I think that if you give something to someone…it's like, oh, you put all this effort into it, and maybe there are other ways to judge something.” In these and other cases, we found that time banking provided a way
for members to either self-provision, to access non-professional skills, or to participate in a local economy that “felt right” (Mandy). Mandy and Victoria measure value in large part by the relationship between producer and consumer. In their world, the value of a service increases as physical and emotional distance decreases.

More generally, we found that the practice of time banking exists somewhere between the warm, casual connection of an intimate friendship and the reserved, formal connection of market exchange. If time bankers are able to remain flexible in their expectations for professional quality, they can get services they need while building person-to-person connections. Alex, a researcher and data specialist, described the exchanges this way:

> Partially [it's] about particular people, but partially it's about the context in which it [the exchange] happens. You don't have an expectation that there's a level of service that should be fulfilled, that I would when I walked into a store. So it's a sort of emotional gain I get from interacting with a person that I really like.

Alex explained that while time banking doesn’t provide “the best deal,” peer exchanges often leave both parties “high-fiving and smiling.” Rebecca articulated the dual benefits of the time bank—it “helps people live” and fills in the gaps for members hoping to build relationships with others in their community while trying to wrangle the logistics of their lives. It’s there for “those little other things that it's, like, expensive to pay for … like taking a cab to the airport; it's nicer to have someone drive you, and it's less expensive.” Rebecca’s appreciation of the realities that tug at busy, workaday lives and the barriers to socialization is a sentiment common to many of the members.

Leslie also expressed dissatisfaction with market options, which in her case was focused on tailoring: “I am quite short, so I have to get every pair of pants I buy hemmed, and I don't have
a sewing machine. I don't know how to do it, and pay $10 every time I get a pair of pants hemmed...If I found a friend to do it, I wouldn't feel that comfortable asking them to hem all my pants.” Like Rebecca, Leslie places time trading somewhere between market and personal relations. She mused about the reciprocal nature of her imagined pants hemming trade: “Then there's something like I can bake bread and somebody else might not be able to do that.” She also highlighted the way the practice helps individuals recognize their skills as valuable and distinct from those of others. She concluded that, to her, it feels “so much more efficient and friendly to be doing trades like that as opposed to paying a stranger to do it for you.” A national past of informal trading among kin, neighbors and friends looms large in our respondents’ imaginations. These young urbanites long to reconnect to those traditions, while obtaining services from a network larger than their friends and family.

We found that the requirement to decide which services they should list on the time bank helped our participants think through their existing skills and recognize areas of personal competence. As they worked on their offers they began to imagine ways that they could help which were not the services they provided as professionals. Over time, their experiences providing and accepting less than professional quality services helped our participants envision a wider range of exchanges outside the cash market and allowed them to break from the naturalized logic of market exchange.

Bartering, sharing, or swapping skills are market arrangements foreign to most Americans’ conceptualizations of economic relations in a world where cash trading is taken for granted. Sonia explained that “people normally think of money, the economy … you get a service and you pay for it.” Sighing, she concluded that most “people don’t even think another world is possible.” But our respondents do, while identifying their trouble with market ideology. For example, they expressed a strong preference for face-to-face contact with the producers of goods and services they obtained in the market.
Aaron, a business developer at a technological company, notes: [It’s] about knowing where your goods are produced, that they're not produced in some black box and you pay money for it and you get it, and you have no idea what happens in between. I've gone a couple times and visited my CSA farmer's farm. … I think knowing the person who is producing a big amount of your food brings up that level of trust between you and them. It's not going through the extra step like the supermarket.” The concept underlying “the extra step” Aaron mentioned in his interview is key to an ethos of connection which is increasingly characterizing segments of consumers, especially those with high cultural capital and ecological consciousness. As Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2007) found in their study of CSAs, and we found in Carfagna et al (2012), the embrace of local and face-to-face economic relations is part of a larger shift toward a more material, earthy, and connected sensibility, which characterizes not only time bankers, but participants in the sustainable local economies which have emerged in recent years.

Alternatives to anonymous and professionalized exchanges were very attractive to the people we interviewed. As Jace explains: “I love the idea of investing in a farm before the season, so they have the security of that, and you don't get that in a farmers' market, definitely.” For Jennifer, a full time nanny, “economic transactions … that involve giving and taking that don't involve money and that don't involve paying really close attention to time” are preferable. Some of the other alternatives to the cash market she has pursued have grown out of her time bank membership, “since starting Time Trade Circle … I have been doing some barter with friends directly that I wasn't doing before.” The experience of face-to-face trading and weighting people more heavily than price has helped her understand that she “really values local economy.” Connected
consumption’s emphasis on tangible, local, and offline connection facilitated through extra-geographic, online logistical platforms helps explain its rising popularity. To get these qualities, time traders are willing to tolerate variable quality in the services they receive, the joint responsibility of the exchange, and place-based scarcity (or abundance) of specific services or goods.

Time bankers also favor artisanal and craft practices. (Carfagna et al 2012) The modern desire for distance from manual labor, and memories of their grandparents’ lives as yeoman farmers with arduous lives plays no role in our time bankers’ imaginations. Rather, they embrace old-fashioned skills and practices. One middle school librarian jokingly lamented the popularity of manual labor within the time bank by describing her weakening monopoly over expertise in canning: “The thing that I’ve gotten the most successful trades with is canning … at the time that I started offering it, no one was doing that, because I’ve been doing that a long time [but] it’s gotten kind of hip, so there are more people out there and I have more competition now.”

Others want to be connected to the goods they consume on a corporeal level. Victoria articulated her discomfort at being physically disconnected from the process of obtaining food, especially with respect to the environmental impact of large-scale agro-business. She said she had learned about some “meat that is supervised in a particular way and also slaughtered in a certain way.” Taking significant personal responsibility for the act of consuming meat, she explained that she “really want[ed] to learn how to slaughter chickens in this particular way.” Rebecca, a middle school science teacher, articulated three traits that make up this eco-habitus during her interview: the value of face-to-face trades, the importance of localism, and the idea that consuming is about
more than money. She justifies paying a higher price by citing the value of interpersonal connection: “I guess when you go to a farmers’ market and you get some cheese and you meet the farmer who made it, versus just going to Trader Joe’s and picking up whatever is cheapest. I definitely know I’ll pay more at a farmers’ market … even if it's going to taste similar -- because of, like, the experience and the sense of where your money's going versus, like, it's way cheaper to go to a grocery store and buy something there.”

Some respondents have idealized historic forms of community and networks of reciprocity. As Sam explains, “I'm really into hunter-gatherer societies, to be honest … for me, that's, like, real community, where you just – you're always in touch with people, and the community meets your needs, and you help the community through work, through feeding people, through – you know, if anything comes up.” To this group, global supply chains denote ecological irresponsibility and a dangerous obfuscation of the conditions under which goods are produced. Therefore, they view the professionalization of the service sector and its reliance on cash as an outgrowth of the fast consumption fueled by global supply chains. In and out of the time bank, they strongly prefer face-to-face interactions through which they can set the pace and tone of their exchanges. The rising tide of “insourcing” and an emerging taste regime that displays an affinity for local, artisanal, and slow produced goods both offer hope for time banking’s viability as a market alternative.

*Anti-capitalist sentiment*

Thirty years ago global capitalism, especially the nasty corporate-dominated variety, seemed unassailable. Margaret Thatcher famously declared that “there is no alternative,” Francis Fukuyama heralded “the end of history,” and free-market ideology
reigned triumphant (Frank 2000). Things look very different today, after the crash of 2008. The internet boom, soaring housing equity, tight labor markets and the hyper-consumption of the 2000s are distant memories. Critiques of capitalism articulated by social movements such as Occupy have been widely legitimated.

This ideological shift, which is undergirded by concern about economic inequality, social disconnection, materialist values, and expanding carbon-footprints, has propelled migration towards connected consumption (Schor 2010). Half of our respondents articulated an explicit anti-capitalist sentiment in their interviews. In some ways this is not surprising given that time banking positions itself explicitly as an alternative to the BAU economy and is one of the most ideologically motivated forms of connected consumption. In some cases we found that time bankers’ critiques are being driven by the fragility of their own economic situations, or those around them. Often the waters of their economic futures are murky, clouded by student loan debt and destabilized by career trajectories that resemble a skipping stone rather than the single arc of the organization man’s work life. But others have highly valued skills and stable full-time jobs and are engaged in alternatives out of ideological commitment. Micah fits squarely into the latter category.

A 25-year old software developer, Micah spoke to us from the cooperative home where he lives with “11 other roommates.” Though he articulated little explicit anti-capitalist rhetoric, Micah’s lifestyle implicitly rejects capitalism. His room in a “3-story apartment [with] 12 bedrooms of people, chickens in the backyard and … a local CSA [membership]” comes with responsibility delinked from monetary exchange. Micah makes “very few purchases” and “meets [many needs] through cooperative-ish things.” This means that he and his housemates spend time completing chores and cooking, participating “in a lot of other food co-ops that produce food and
buy a lot of food in bulk, and we also insist on buying local, organic stuff.” They run an “informal time bank” within their house, and it was through his housemates that Micah first learned of the Boston Time Trade Circle.

Micah is exemplary in his dedication to exchange that is face-to-face, informal, and outside the well-worn tracks of the cash economy. He considers himself to be “already in a pretty de-monetized state.” Each week he spends eight hours providing his web development skills free of charge and another morning he works as a volunteer language teacher at a local community center. He reported that he doesn’t “feel a strong desire to earn every single penny I can get for doing my work, so that's why I already do spend a lot of time doing volunteer, totally pro bono consulting.” Micah also challenged the typical arrangements for paid labor, wondering, “So if I'm a teacher, and I want to provide students with something that I like to teach, should I be charging them, or should they be charging me? Or if I really enjoy teaching it, like, what basis do I have to charge money on?” He has few things “that are currently monetized” and has to pause to think when asked about the last time he spent money. Already immersed in an extra-market existence, Micah was easily drawn to the indirect barter structure of time banking. While Micah acknowledges that it was his “relative privilege” that allowed him to push against the norms of paid employment, he still couldn’t help but express hope for an economy centered on people instead of profit:

I think that the mainstream conception is that time is money, and so you invest your time in certain places in order to get enough money to spend your free time other places. So it is a very money-driven thing. But I guess it'd be really cool if the alternative was a person-based thing.

Micah believes that although time banking is focused on skills, rather than people, it is a step in the right direction. He rejects “capital calculating to make ends meet” in favor of making “sure he could still survive and eat food” through “a series of relationships that I was building with people
… whether it be mentoring or skills or sharing.” Time banking fits into his plan because it is focused on sharing skills to create strong, long-lasting relationships.

Other members also try to avoid the cash nexus. Jennifer, the daughter of a Marxian economist, articulated sophisticated critiques of capitalism and belief in the view that human value stems from productive labor. Jennifer “was living for a year bartering work for housing and food, and like really not interacting with money at all except for health insurance.” Similarly, Elaina maligned capitalism and the consumer society it breeds. “I think it just destroyed a lot of culture. I don't feel like it really makes us happy and fulfills us in any way.” Rachel explained she prefers to support “people [who] are putting an effort to making something, and I'm paying them for that effort, versus, like, paying for some evil corporation far away who's never even cared about this product.”

Care and intention are two core concepts that surfaced again and again throughout our conversations. Our respondents’ experiences of exchanges helped them think through new ways of assigning economic value.

Many time bankers reasoned that capitalism was not capable of solving the problems that humanity—and the planet—would be facing in coming years. Kristy, a community organizer and young mother, predicted:

I think we're going to have to be producing more of our own needs, here locally, so we're going to have to be working collaboratively, because no one person can really do that.

We need collaborative food growing, and we need to set up other ways to provide for our needs, outside of the current economy.

Throughout her interview, Kristy linked constraints on natural resources to the faltering of an economic model based on continual growth. She cautioned that “we're running out of resources and … it's creating massive inequalities that are destabilizing our society and our democracy.”
Participating in and supporting local, collective production helped solidify her place in the economy and set her family on a path that was achievable, understandable, and ascendant.

Rose represents a different kind of anti-capitalist time banker, motivated not by a 1960s style of opposition to the system, but a 21st century sensibility, which developed as her own career path took an unexpected turn. Raised in a wealthy, conservative family, Rose’s break from allegiance to capitalism could hardly be predicted, and is largely pragmatic, rather than ideological. She attended an elite college and initially went to work in corporate finance. But she left formal employment, explaining that she prefers to “patchwork [her] career” with several part-time jobs, including a home organization business. Perhaps because of her unconventional work situation, she relied on time banking to meet many more of her needs than most members and was able to incorporate at least a weekly trade into her life. Rose's parents, especially her father, at first had difficulty understanding her decision to leave what they perceived as the security of one, full-time traditional job for several transitory, highly variable income streams. Rose described the generational differences in this way:

I know that when my parents give me career advice they're coming from an entirely different view … I know it used to be that whenever you would get fired or leave a job you could always switch to another company. Of if you had to switch to another career or industry, but you took it for granted that somebody else was going to take care of you, that kind of company care towards its employees. That's so not true anymore.

Many of the young adults we interviewed expressed similar skepticism about whether big corporations would “take care” of them in return for loyal service. Despite an almost
universal desire to push back against corporatization, the need to generate cash flow and access health care constrained participants’ abilities to transition out of full-time work. Rose noted the importance of her partner's traditional, full time job, which comes with partner health insurance and a competitive salary. “I know a lot of people could never do what I do because it's been very risky and very scary. And I probably couldn't have done this if it weren't for my partner.”

Within the time bank, Rose most often sought out pet boarding. She reflected on her experience with ambivalence. She hasn't found a time banker who she felt cared for her dog well and though she worried about the potential risk she was exposing her dog to each time she tried out someone new, she continued her search because to her the promise of “huge savings” outweighed her concerns. Interviewees with steady employment and secure finances were less likely to repeatedly expose themselves to this type of risk. She mused about her generation’s attitude to their employers and its recalculation of risk: “A lot of adults think that they're really the babies and the institutions have to take care of them, the big finance, the big banks, the government … I feel that tug of war going now where people need to take more ownership of their own lives.” For Rose, the system of organizational allegiance necessitated by capitalism is broken. Though few other time bankers spoke in such sweeping terms, many echoed her cynicism about large institutions. The face-to-face consumption preferences of time bankers also hint at the appeal of peer-to-peer arrangements and the desire to sidestep the middleman. Localism and non-cash exchanges succeed at dismantling some of the barriers to connection that young urbanites experience.

Though few in our sample are currently unemployed, the time bankers who began trading during a period of unemployment were more adventurous in the face of disappointing or “risky” trades. Those who were affected by the market’s downturn via unemployment, heavy debt burdens, or the rising costs of fuel and food were engaged in a process of reimagining economic
possibilities. Pen, an office manager who had an active online life as an artist, described the ways he is transforming his lifestyle:

- I have a farm share with [a local farm]. I’m a member of co-op [grocer]. I’m a member of the library. I think there’s a renewed interest in farming because of -- people feel that food is no longer just going to be there because the environment is in such bad shape.

For our respondents, keeping up with “The Joneses” has become a crass endeavor made undesirable by media portrayals of wealthy Americans and a belief that the “American Dream” dream has drifted into the category of unattainable. There was a general resignation to the sense that, globally, “it seems like corporations are running the world more and more and they have more and more power.” Yet resignation does not mean acceptance. Distrust of large organizations and responsibility to the people they employ loomed large for the time bankers whose market fatigue had turned into a fully articulated anti-capitalist sentiment. They are critical of globalized production, and corporate impacts on the environment. However, time bankers are generally optimistic, as they describe how their lives of connected consuming are supplanting the crumbling edifice of global capitalism.

*The advantages of high cultural capital and the contradictions of time banking*

The state of our participants’ finances varied, but regardless of their personal situations they were united by the belief that opportunities for economic stability should be ample and equal for all. However, our findings suggest that there are subtle and not so subtle ways that class reproduces itself in the actual workings of the time bank. Some members with high cultural capital prefer trading with others in that social stratum. Social class homophily (or love of same) is common throughout society, but the ideology of the
time bank explicitly rejects this attitude. In light of their ideological commitment to the values of time banking, it was surprising to also find evidence of time traders devaluing the skills of members who are not well-educated, or who lack professional credentials in the areas they are offering trades, or who exhibit poor grammar or rudimentary technological expertise. These sentiments and practices were articulated at least once by almost half (47%) of people we interviewed.

Kelly, a self-employed body worker specializing in energy healing, saw time banking's possibility to provide “help in different ways that don’t involve money ... expand[ing] what people have access to, and also expand[ing] the kinds of things that people feel like they can contribute to the community, outside of traditional jobs.” Repeating the promise of time banking put forth by its founders almost verbatim, Kelly's ideology is among the strongest of all participants we interviewed. However, her actual transactions contradicted her egalitarian stance. Kelly offered hands-on energy healing services when she began time banking, but quickly realized that “the exchange ratio felt off.” In the market, Kelly charges one hundred dollars per hour for her services but came to feel that it wasn’t “equal to a time bank hour of value, somehow for me to exchange for that.” Kelly felt uncomfortable offering the full range of her services, given her level of expertise, refined through four years of energy healing training, and her desire to be respected as a serious practitioner. She became frustrated when time bankers seemed to be “testing out” energy healing through her services, although this was also one of the potential benefits she raised earlier in the interview when she mused about time banking’s potential to be economically transformative. Kelly came to think more highly of “the value of [her] time in regards to the hands-on work, because [she] didn’t want to
be giving it away for free, or just for an hour of somebody else’s time.” While Kelly's stated values adhere to the egalitarian principle of equally valuable time, her transactions within the time bank tell a different, more contradictory story.

Through experimentation, Kelly discovered one limitation of time banking’s egalitarian structure. For her, trading increased the imagined difference between the value of her time and that of others in terms of what both are able to yield on the market. As a compromise, in exchange for time bank hours she offers introductory attendance to some of her classes and workshops for which paying clients are charged $15-$20 per hour. Although Kelly may lose revenue by offering spaces in her class, she reasons that the value the time bank members add through their presence increases the quality of her classes enough to make up for this potential loss.

Melissa, a suicide prevention counselor, also adheres to egalitarian rhetoric but simultaneously exhibits market-driven valuations. Although she acknowledged that she saw the time bank’s potential to help people transition into new careers and even offer services they are not formally trained to give, she reported that she avoids this type of service by vetting the credentials of the members she trades with. When she wanted to “test out” meeting with a career counselor she didn't want to receive services from a practitioner who was also testing out his skills. Melissa remarked “I found someone who was career counseling for 20 years, and he had this certificate or this degree, so he looked pretty legit.” She continued, “I’m probably more likely to do something if it’s what they do for a living, even though it doesn’t have to be like that. …But for something like counseling or massage, acupuncture, you want them to have a degree or something like
that.” Melissa does not trade with un-credentialed service providers for “high risk” trades but she does believe in the benefit of others doing so.

Even if they avoided receiving certain services from providers without credentials, almost all of the interviewees maintained that time bank participation gave them a more multi-dimensional sense of value. Though some of the white-collar workers in the time bank shy away from receiving un-credentialed help, they are happy to offer it themselves. Karen, a software developer, explained that time bank membership allowed to her to diversify her skill set through the tasks she performed. She often offered manual labor but not programming help. “I program all day. I don't want to program more. Changing thermostats makes people happy. It's kind of doing something physical, which I really value.” Karen’s focus on “making people happy” by performing manual tasks implies that software development could not make people equally happy. The services offered in the time bank then, are subject not just to market negotiations such as Kelly’s, but also to the choices of traders who withhold their credentialed skills based on their beliefs about the needs of other time bankers.

Most of the participants who enjoyed the variety of tasks membership allowed them to practice also highlighted physical activity. Others also reflected on offering services that were not those for which they earn money. Corie, a full time lawyer and social worker, said time banking gave her a reminder of the diversity of her skills. After posting her first offers she was relieved that the structure of the time bank gave her the opportunity to think of the areas of her life in which she has considerable, but not professional-level skill. She explained, “it reminds you about all the areas of your life that you’ve actually learned things in, like gardening or home repair stuff. Things you never
think of as skills because they’re not on your resume.” In this way, time banking can expand an individual’s sense of personal value beyond the labor he or she is able to offer in the marketplace.

Most of our participants have professional expertise, backed by the appropriate credentials. Their upbringings were enriched by cultural capital, which slotted them into certain educational opportunities, which, in turn, resulted in their current positions in the labor market. One might assume that their current positions in the labor market wouldn’t matter in the time bank, especially when they are offering non-professional services. However, highly credentialed time bankers enjoyed a number of advantages, which operated in subtle and extra-institutional ways. We found that trading is partially segregated by cultural capital, and that there is higher demand for those with formal credentials and more extensive schooling. Because there is not always robust demand for offers, these advantages translated into more opportunities to trade.

One advantage is that some high cultural capital participants became confident that not only could they offer professionalized services (if they wanted to), but that they could be successful offering services that they didn’t go to school for or have much practice at. The trading potential of these members was based on their advertisements. Advertisement, we learned, was the primary medium that allowed members to communicate their legitimacy and credentials. This, we believe, leads to the relative advantage of those high in cultural capital within the time bank.

The Time Trade Circle has explicitly rejected a formal rating system of the type that is now standard on many peer-to-peer sites. In the absence of such a system, members have come up with creative ways to select and exclude potential trading
partners. The vetting process our respondents described sometimes advantaged high cultural capital time bankers. We found that people looked for key signifiers of professionalism – personal websites, good grammar, complete sentences, external references and even testimonials from other members about the superior service being provided. The administrators of the time bank do not object to members advertising these items on their profiles and encourage people to get in touch before a trade and ask for references or credentials. The people who can best signal their professionalism are those who have had access to professionalized lifestyles. For example, one of the participants explained her method of evaluating offers in terms of “people who, like, didn't have basic grammatical skills.” Stating that she is “turned … off [by] people [who] don't write in complete sentences.” She reflected that maybe she was “being a snob” but did feel “like you could write [an offer well]” and avoid “a lot of typos or writ[ing] poorly.” Our high cultural capital members, who have worked and gone to college and come from families of people who work and have gone to college, are adept at this type of signaling. So while 1 = 1, one high cultural capital hour has the potential to be a lot more attractive than an ordinary hour.

We found that the ideological breakdown of equally valued time was expressed in covert ways, such as the valuing of well-advertised, professional, and credentialed services. To the surprise of many of our participants, it was also challenged in more overt ways. In our interviews, about three-quarters of those who had previously made lengthy ideological statements about the power of such an egalitarian system then unwittingly negated those statements by saying that their time was worth more than one hour of someone else’s time. Jill caught herself in this contradiction when she explained why she
doesn’t offer to trade the skills from her day job: “Actually, no I’m realizing the reason I don’t offer that is because I think it’s worth more, that I could get more money. That didn’t occur to me.” Of course many of those whose professionals put in years of training and heavy capital investments, and felt like they had more to give than what was already offered in the bank. Among all of our interviewees, Jill best situated her understandings of inequality within a structural framework:

I guess I think it would be complicated to figure out how to weight more valued things. I think that would probably result in a lot of I guess discord. That lawyer maybe had better opportunities when they were young and a better education or maybe more money so they can be a lawyer. And it's not people's fault if they didn't have those opportunities and now aren't a lawyer.

While almost all of our participants were quick to praise time banking as a way to recognize people who were being undervalued in the market, they also couldn’t hide the residue of market preferences as it operated in taken-for-granted ways when they invalidated members who lacked professional legitimacy and credentials. Most of our participants talked about time banking as way for unemployed people to feel like they have value and something to contribute. However, the ideal of reciprocity did not always work out in practice, as more privileged members sometimes seemed to believe they had more to offer than others. While egalitarian ideology led many to time banking, participants could not always sustain that ideology when they actually got down to the business of trading.

In all cases, we found that the nature of a participant’s contribution was structured by his or her relationship to the cash economy. Some members who were tired of
outsourcing their lives to professionals had a more flexible rubric for the quality of services they would accept. For non-essential services, especially while learning new skills, peer-to-peer help was sometimes even preferred. However, there were limits on the quality of services time bankers tolerated. For example, the level of risk and variability of quality members were willing to incur depended on whether they had experience with unemployment or financial insecurity. Some experimented with time banking when they were wholly or partly without work. During those periods they were able to invest extra time into figuring out the service quality of the time bank alternative to the cash service marketplace, and these respondents now tend to take more risks when they trade. They are willing to trade essential services and expose themselves to the variable quality of some services offered. Rose, with her unsteady income, is willing to try out new, potentially risky dog sitters because of the savings the time bank affords.

On the other hand, interviewees with steady employment and secure finances were less likely to expose themselves to this type of risk. Jill has significant personal savings and was in the process of buying her first home when we met over tea in a local deli. She snapped her cell phone closed, apologized for repeatedly checking for her realtor's messages, and explained “if it's a more detailed service that could be screwed up I do feel more of a concern that I don't know if I would be able to fully surrender to that. [If] I knew they were licensed and working as a licensed plumber that would make a difference.” Jill's contextualized her expectations of professionalism by placing herself within a specific socioeconomic context. During our talk, she admitted that she had never directly experienced unemployment or financial insecurity. She said she would be happy to receive amateur help “learning how to garden” but that she preferred a
guarantee of quality to a low price in the case of “electrical work, plumbing work, home repair, car repair.”

Although they believed in the principles underlying time banking the majority of our participants echoed a similar sentiment to Trish: “If I’m looking for a very professional job, if it’s something that I wouldn’t ask my friends to do...I don’t bring it to Time Trade.” Others agreed with this line of logic and grouped their time banking hours together with their other volunteer hours. Many members lamented that the TTC lacked a formal review process like many other connected consumption initiatives. A few years ago the TTC leadership circulated a question to the time bank: Would you approve of a ratings system for TTC trades? Many of the younger people did want a rating system while many of the senior members did not. Online reputation metrics are found on many websites where quality control is important and young adults expect that ratings systems will be attached to peer-to-peer websites. Some respondents were like the majority of members who turned down the innovation, saying that a ratings system was “unteime banky.” They were afraid of the implications if hierarchical valuations were introduced. Karen feared that the spirit of time banking would fall apart if a rating scheme were implemented. She’d had a negative experience with a time bank member who said he could do something that he actually couldn’t, but graciously described this experience and seemed to not be concerned in the least that she spent hours on something that didn’t work out for her, Karen, however, is highly motivated by connection and is one of the participants who views time banking like a volunteer activity. Others weren’t so generous in their discussions of failed trades, with one of our participants sounding a bit scarred by a failed and “creepy” massage experience. Thus, there is a structural barrier to ensuring service quality within the time bank because there is no formal way to evaluate the services provided within an exchange. This leaves many young time bankers looking for clues written into offers. Though some time bankers are in favor of a formal rating
system, the majority in this time bank sides with the ideals put forth by time banking’s founders: the fundamental product of a time bank is increased connections not services exchanged.

Interviewees’ high levels of cultural capital influence their views of other time bankers, their own modes of participation, and their ideals about who should be involved in time banking. While these are understandable and sometimes automatic modes of evaluation, class position set limits on the extent to which time banking can break down inequalities. High cultural capital time bankers who profess allegiance to building alternative market relations that do not follow the value judgments of the cash market sometimes falter as they work to build new valuation schemes.

Overall, we find that cultural capital is functioning as a limit on the potential trades available in the time bank. Our respondents have particularly high levels of cultural capital and many come from backgrounds of relative privilege. On the one hand, their habitus is a spur to participation in the bank. They value authenticity, localism, environmentalism, holistic wellness and self-reliance. They reminisce about being able to rely on a placed-based local community, while keeping a global, and class-conscious outlook on life. (Carfagna et al 2012) However, in practice they sometimes prefer the professionalized services they would expect in the market. For example, market-based thinking was taken for granted by most of our participants. At the same time, they believe in time banking, especially as a way for unemployed people to feel valuable in a culture that defines work as a dominant dimension of identity. However, our findings that are most closely linked to disparities in cultural capital challenge the potential of time banking to alter the dependence of identities of market practice and success. Our participants say they believe that it can, but their accounts were sometimes contradictory. While they expected professionalized and credentialed services from others, many did not offer their own professionalized and credentialed services because they believed that their work was worth more than one hour of someone else's time. This is one example of a larger phenomenon: we
discovered that time banking can actually enhance differences in cultural capital, as participants use it as a low-cost way to learn new skills and gain experiences that are at the cutting-edge of high status cultural capital markets. In its most pessimistic interpretation, these authenticating practices and projects are themselves important sources of status, and the time bank comes to serve as a means of cultural reproduction.

Conclusion: Can the time bank transform market relations?

Capitalism constructs and normalizes unbalanced economic relations in which those with more access to capital most often control the nature of exchanges. The time bankers featured in this chapter often bristle at these distorted power relations. Discontent or sometimes even hostility to market exchanges whose terms and conditions are set by standard practices have led many to connected market alternatives. In this case study, ideological motives drove economically secure and highly educated participants to try time banking. Participants prefer Do-It-Yourself exchanges to those set by commercial interests. They seek out connection with others through trades and come together to create a web of connections designed to support local people. The equal valuation of time within the bank sets the conditions for some innovative exchanges to occur. Sometimes, they express altered standards of professionalism and taste within these informal exchanges. Often, they refer nostalgically to a time in America's history when they believe relations of reciprocity between neighbors and kin were the norm. Though the founders of time banking maintain that the 1:1 ratio is common sense, its potential implications for dismantling the benefits of socioeconomic class, institutional credentials, and professional wage are radical. But like the constant mental work of learning to speak a new language, participants had to remain mindful of the syntax of informal exchange relations. In many cases, they subconsciously reverted to capitalist logic and evaluated potential trades using the metric of market value. However, the institutional conditions set by time banking overcame the naturalized logic of capitalist exchange when participants actively recalled their initial motivations and
ultimate goals. Although the transformational potential of time banking was inhibited when participants reverted to internalized habits of capitalist exchange, the presence of innovative exchange logics suggests the emergence of new economic relations in which interpersonal connection is central.
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Appendix

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Chapter 5:

CONCLUSION
Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The first study, “Imagining Class: Performing Elite Lifestyle through Clothing,” chronicles the consumption of the elite class aesthetic and its production by Prep Outfitter’s, a mass-market luxury-clothing brand. It relies on interview and ethnographic data gathered among the “preppy” brand’s team of designers and a group of young, upwardly mobile consumers to reveal commonalities between the two groups. These commonalities between the participants emerge as they attempt to either embody (young finance workers) or capitalize on (designers) elite lifestyle as a means of career advancement. They mimic the ultra-affluent bankers of Wall Street by relying on aesthetic scripts that they surmise will be read for the religious, racial, and political norms of its elite class. The work extends previous analyses of elite lifestyle that feature the impact luxury consumption can have on both producers and consumers (Sherman 2007; Khan 2011). The findings of this case meld postmodern and Veblenian consumer theory through informant narratives that reveal a cynical, or consciously calculating, enactment of conspicuous consumption by both producers and consumers of Prep Outfitters (Featherstone 1991; Veblen 1899/1994). This performance confirms an environment of aesthetic and lifestyle conformity on Wall Street because participants believe that performing an elite lifestyle is a condition upon which career success rests.

Most participants in this study have not had access to the cultural capital markers of the American upper class as the majority hail from middle and upper middle class backgrounds. They expend considerable economic capital in an effort to mimic the
aesthetic that they believe will cause others to evaluate them as individuals with high levels of a dominant or mainstream cultural capital. Participants in the first research project view brand name, “prep” clothing aesthetic as part of “legitimate culture” while participants in the third research project participate in a local barter network and value the exchange of homemade and recycled clothing as the apex of avant garde taste. This dissertation considers several of the ways in which the attributes associated with cultural capital are being reconfigured as the modern field of consumption shift internally. The three papers of this dissertation do so by presenting a range of consumer behaviors present in today’s consumer society. The power struggle over whose consumer taste defines legitimate culture plays out within the three empirical projects of this dissertation.

The second study of this dissertation, “Citizen Production: Impact of Capital on the Success of Peer Producers” analyzes the experiences of individuals who sell access to their assets and their labor to others in exchange for cash. The analysis of the “citizen producer” experience shows differences in motivations, skills, and exchange experiences among those with differing levels of institutionalized cultural capital and economic capital. The citizen producers’ efforts to increase their income are presented in order to provide field-specific data that challenge Bourdieu’s claim about the convertibility of capital (1986, p. 241). The data show that the key predictor of economic success within the collaborative marketplace is the possession of economic assets prior to beginning work as a collaborative producer.

The first research project presents a field in which the historical importance of socioeconomic class is reified and upheld. The second project occurs within a field of peer-production constructed with egalitarian dynamics of exchange. Most research
participants engage in novel forms of exchange between peers, yet prefer some of the cultural attributes of high cultural capital found in traditional fields. Finally, the third project occurs within a field in which participants consciously try to alter the traditional, sometimes exploitative, power dynamics of economic relations. The participants in the third study communicate their intention to develop new forms of egalitarian exchange even as their actions are guided by the transactional logic found in the market. The work utilizes the following theoretical framework, methods, and data to provide the insights summarized above.

**Theoretical Implications**

This work builds upon that of Bourdieu, Holt and Carfagna *et al.* by interrogating the experiences of the high cultural capital individuals within a market that allows non-professional individuals to step into a producer role (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1997, Carfagna *et al.* 2014). Those who enjoy the intergenerational advantages brought by reserves of economic capital and a tradition of cultural capital attainment through education display one of the ways in which producer and consumer taste expressions guided by *habitus* alter over time and context. Participants endowed with the highest levels of economic and cultural capital are also those most likely to fetch the highest price for their effort in the peer production marketplace for consumer services. They are also most likely to report that their drive to work as producers originated from the desire to protect the cultural environment through efficient use of assets (Carfagna *et al.* 2014, Laidley 2013). Thus, the key factor for economic “success” as a producer in the collaborative marketplace relies most fundamentally upon the possession of economic and cultural assets before joining this workforce as citizen producer.
Those individuals pursuing collaborative consumption who are employed full
time in the traditional labor market are also those more likely to obtain higher economic
return in exchange for their effort within this marketplace. They are those most likely to
act as producers within the asset sharing platforms, especially through Airbnb – a
company that facilitates peer-to-peer home rentals. This higher return for effort within the
collaborative market may be due to the greater selectivity of those who act as producers
for ideological reasons. The freedom from the economic necessity of earning through
collaborative production experienced by ideologically focused producers may lead them
to complete only exchanges that represent a “good value” for their efforts. This means that
those producers who are not in need of additional income more carefully select between
trades and only accept those that require relatively little work. The analysis shows that
the likelihood that collaborative production will be a more profitable alternative to
offline, temporary labor is dependent upon the level of capital people bring to the
marketplace. In many cases, the capital volume of producers can be attributed to success in
the traditional labor market enjoyed by either themselves or by family members from
whom they have benefitted. Each producer’s freedom from the burden of economic need
when deciding between exchanges in the collaborative market is reliant upon to previous
advantage in the traditional market. This finding contradicts the discourse of equal
opportunity for all put forth by the corporations managing these peer production
platforms.

The most significant differences in resources appear between Airbnb producers
and Task Rabbit producers. Task Rabbit producers possess the lowest combined levels of
cultural and economic capital (Total Capital (“TC”) = 32) within this sample while
Airbnb producers possess the greatest total capital (TC = 48). Among the three groups, Airbnb participants are most likely to be motivated by an efficient use of assets, a desire to share resources locally, and a concern for the physical environment. Therefore, this group is also most likely to express the elements of *ecohabitus* and describe environmental, local, and cosmopolitan practices associated with this perceptive. Of the sociodemographic categories surveyed, the characteristic most likely to be related to higher earnings within the collaborative market was the participant’s net worth prior to acting as an economic producer. In this way, the collaborative labor market mirrors the traditional labor market. The data fail to support the claim that this online marketplace for temporary labor breaks from the historic advantages enjoyed by those who are free from economic necessity and, thus, are able to obtain high levels of institutionalized cultural capital.

Cultural capita also plays a pivotal role in the findings of the third article of this dissertation. The paper reports that cultural capital is functioning as a limit on the potential trades available in the time bank. Our respondents have particularly high levels of cultural capital and many come from backgrounds of relative privilege. On the one hand, their habitus is a spur to participation in the bank. They value authenticity, localism, environmentalism, holistic wellness, and self-reliance. They reminisce about being able to rely on a place-based local community while keeping a global and class-conscious outlook on life (Carfagna *et al*., 2014). However, in practice they sometimes prefer the professionalized services they would expect in the market. For example, market-based thinking was taken for granted by most of our participants. At the same time, they believe in time banking, especially as a way for unemployed people to feel
valuable in a culture that defines work as a dominant dimension of identity. However, our findings that are most closely linked to disparities in cultural capital challenge the potential of time banking to alter the dependence of identities on market practice and success. Participants say they believe in this transformative power, but their accounts were sometimes contradictory. While they expected professionalized and credentialed services from others, many did not offer their own professionalized and credentialed services because they believed that their work was worth more than one hour of someone else’s time. This is one example of a larger phenomenon we discovered: time banking can actually enhance differences in cultural capital, as participants use it as a low-cost way to learn new skills and gain experiences that are at the cutting-edge of high-status cultural capital markets. In the most pessimistic interpretation, these authenticating practices and projects are themselves important sources of status, and the time bank comes to serve as a means of cultural reproduction.

**Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Taken together, this collection of articles shows that cultural capital yields social power in many forms across diverse contexts. The methodology selected for each article has both strong points and those that would benefit from revision or the inclusion of additional approaches. The first article, “Imagining Class,” relies upon small scale qualitative data sources. The ethnographic data and interview responses presented within this work are apt to provide a deep understanding of the underlying motivations and experiences of clothing producers and consumers. The findings of this work could be validated through the results of a large survey of clothing designers and the consumers of the Prep Outfitter brand. A future analysis that reaches more than the group sampled in
the first article could validate or refine the claims made in the study. The second study, “Precarious Production,” features survey responses and the results of qualitative interviews among the collaborative producers who work for three of many collaborative consumer companies. Data that is representative of a wider array of collaborative consumer companies and their workers would prevent the overstatement of the unique characteristics of the three companies presented here. This approach would also provide a safeguard about changes to the structure of any one specific company. For example, the worker payment structure of Task Rabbit changed slightly after the data collection for Precarious Producers was complete. A sample that draws from more organizations would be capable of identifying trends in producer experience even with the presence of changes working conditions in any one company. The third study, “New Cultures,” is subject to similar scrutiny. It too relies upon a moderately sized sample drawn from one geographic area. The motivational findings of this study could be strengthened if placed in contrast to the trading behavior of those who bartered within the same time bank or against both types of data.
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*Appendix A*
A significant portion of economic and cultural capital occurred through the designation of points based upon the respondent’s annual income and total assets (LEC/HEC) and total years of tertiary education between the participants and their parents (LCC/HCC). This scale assumes that “some college” represents 1 year of study, AA represents 2 years, BA 4 years, MA/MBAs 6 years, JDs 7, PhD/MD 8. Respondents were assigned to the HCC category if the sum of the years of tertiary education within the family was greater than 12. The point scheme for LCC/HCC denotation was adopted from Holt’s 1998 study of cultural capital and consumer behavior across socioeconomic class in America. Annual income and net worth (both in US dollars) were used to categorize participants as either LEC or HEC. As in Laidley 2013 “income intervals were given the following points (the points are not allocated in linear fashion, to further distinguish higher income earners): $0-14999= +2; 15000 – 29000= +4; 30000 – 44999= +6; 45000 – 59999= +9; 60000 – 74999= +12; 75000 – 89999= +15; 90000-104999= +18; 105 – 119999= +21; 120000+ = +24.” As of the 2010 Census, the median net worth for an individual under the age of 35 years old was $6676. Participants were allocated points in connection to the range within which their total reported net worth fell: $0-6675= +2; 6676 – 12075 = +6; 12076 - 22675 = +10; 22676 - 32675 = +14; 32676 – 42675 = +18; 42676 - 52675 = +21; 52675 = +24. Respondents were assigned to the HEC category if the sum of the points associated with their annual income and net worth was greater than 27.

This scale and corresponding point delineation within each are adopted from the home, mortgage, and car ownership scale established in Laidley’s study of attitudes on cultural capital and climate change across socioeconomic class.

All values in Figure 3, Descriptive statistics for EC/CC categories, are calculated from self-reported provided by participants through a survey administered online after completion of the interview.

The operationalization of economic and cultural capital occurred through the designation of points based upon the respondent’s annual income and total assets (LEC/HEC) and total years of tertiary education between the participants and their parents (LCC/HCC). This scale assumes that “some college” represents 1 year of study, AA represents 2 years, BA 4 years, MA/MBAs 6 years, JDs 7, PhD/MD 8. Respondents were assigned to the HCC category if the sum of the years of tertiary education within the family was greater than 12. The point scheme for LCC/HCC denotation was adopted from Holt’s 1998 study of cultural capital and consumer behavior across socioeconomic class in America. Annual income and net worth (both in US dollars) were used to categorize participants as either LEC or HEC. As in Laidley 2013 “income intervals were given the following points (the points are not allocated in linear fashion, to further distinguish higher income earners): $0-14999= +2; 15000 – 29000= +4; 30000 – 44999= +6; 45000 – 59999= +9; 60000 – 74999= +12; 75000 – 89999= +15; 90000-104999= +18; 105 – 119999= +21; 120000+ = +24.” As of the 2010 Census, the median net worth for an individual under the age of 35 years old was $6676. Participants were allocated points in connection to the range within which their total reported net worth fell: $0-6675= +2; 6676 – 12075 = +6; 12076 - 22675 = +10; 22676 - 32675 = +14; 32676 – 42675 = +18; 42676 - 52675 = +21; 52675 = +24. Respondents were assigned to the HEC category if the sum of the points associated with their annual income and net worth was greater than 27.

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All values in Figure 3, Descriptive statistics for EC/CC categories, are calculated from self-reported provided by participants through a survey administered online after completion of the interview.

None of the participants who earned more for their time on the collaborative marketplace were employed as full-time producers. 33% of those who reported that they earned less or as much on the collaborative market worked as full time collaborative producers.
**Figure 5** displays four quadrants: (1) Low Economic Capital /High Cultural Capital; (2) High Economic Capital /High Cultural Capital; (3) High Economic Capital /Low Cultural Capital; (4) Low Economic Capital /Low Cultural Capital. The x / y-axes of this graph were established through the high / low capital cut points used within the categorical sorting of participants (Holt 1998; Laidley 2013). Thus, the x-axis is located at Cultural Capital = 12 and the y-axis is located at Economic Capital = 18. Participants’ capital scores were converted into deviations that indicated how far they deviated from these established cut points and plotted on the four-quadrant graph. For example, a participant with the scores EC = 16 and CC = 20 would appear at location (-2, 8) on this graph. These calculations are designed to communicate a relative sense of capital held by participants and any possible relationship between total capital and motivational expression.

The median composite capital score for Task Rabbits is 32 and the median composite capital score for Airbnb hosts is 48.

Net worth and total earning as collaborative producer is ($r = .41$) indicating a moderate, positive relationship between previously held economic assets and the likelihood of generating additional economic assets.

The sharing economy also goes by the term collaborative consumption. (Botsman and Rogers 2010), a designation which emphasizes exchanges or collaborations that do not flow through a middleman, or business entity such as a hotel, car rental service, or re-sale shop, and focuses on the consumer, rather than the producer side of the market.

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Time banking has been able to move beyond a core of true believers into community-based organizations and mainstream social service groups in areas such as ex-offender re-entry (National Homecomers Academy), aging in place (Reach CareBank of Vermont), and the integration of recent immigrants (Visiting Nurses Association of New York Community Connections Time bank) (Collum 2012)

The MacArthur Foundation funded this research. The research team consisted of Juliet Schor, Emilie Dubois, and Lindsey Carfagna. I collected 26 of the 30 interviews while Lindsey conducted 4.

These numbers were generated by a LexisNexis popular media search detailing the annual English language press coverage on time banking from 1997-2012.

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