

**NEXUS WORK:
BROKERAGE ON CREATIVE PROJECTS**

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ABSTRACT

One body of research treats brokers as strategic arbitrageurs extracting advantage from their position, while another body of research paints brokers as relational experts connecting others to foster creativity and innovation. Because both conceptions are static, they fail to capture how brokerage evolves throughout the creative process. With an ethnographic study of music producers, we find that creative brokerage involves blending both approaches - depending on the creative phase. Producers drew from a repertoire of relational practices to integrate project contributors' ideas while maintaining project support. In doing so, they moved between these ideal conceptions of brokerage and broke from them - leveraging their position to foster a collective creative outcome.

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Theoretical conceptions of brokerage vacillate between two conceptions that vary in their understandings of the benefits of brokerage (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Wenpin, 2005) and thus their implications for creativity. From a structural perspective, brokers who bridge structural holes tend to have better ideas and to individually benefit from them (Brass, 1985; Burt, 2004). Because individuals within groups tend to have more homogenous ideas, brokers who bridge different groups gain exposure to a greater variance of ideas and obtain a “vision advantage” (Burt, 2004: 359). That is, people with contacts in many different areas are more like to “see” bridges between otherwise disparate fields (Burt, 2004: 350) and thus be able to contribute to creative and innovative outcomes (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997; Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Perry-Smith, 2006). The *tertius gaudens* (or third who benefits) approach to brokerage employs a strategy of disunion – where individuals reap benefits from preserving their unique ties to others and maintaining a separation among parties (Obstfeld, 2005; Burt, 2000). From Ibarra et al’s perspective (2005), this type of brokerage may enhance individual social capital but can be at odds with the creation of communal social capital.

An alternative conception of brokerage focuses on the benefits that accrue to the collective from positive relations (Kilduff and Tsai, 2003; Ibarra, et al., 2005). Brokerage in this sense focuses on connecting or joining previously unconnected parties in order to facilitate coordination, collaboration and pursuit of common goals - the *tertius iungens* orientation (Obstfeld, 2005). This type of broker acts as a nonpartisan “arbiter who balances...contradictory claims against one another and eliminates what is incompatible in them” (Simmel, 1950: 146-7). This conception of brokerage typically considers relational practices as well as a broker’s structural position. Hargadon and Sutton first broke ground in this direction by giving equal weight to structure and practice - showing how the design firm IDEO’s unique structural position *as well*

as their process of information access, storage, retrieval helped the firm transfer ideas from one industry to another and produce innovative outcomes (1997).

As both Obstfeld (2005) and Ibarra and colleagues (2005) point out, while the *tertius gaudens* may be successful in getting others to appreciate his or her good ideas (Burt, 2004), implementing those ideas is another story. In Burt's 2004 study, managers that were more structurally central were more likely to have good ideas than those who were less central, but those ideas were rarely implemented. Dense social networks may be well designed for mobilizing people in the pursuit of shared goals and ideas, but sparser networks face an "action problem" where it is more difficult to mobilize people across structural holes (e.g., Obstfeld, 2005; Fleming, Mingo, and Chen, 2007).

One explanation is that execution requires collaboration: the hard work is not in coming up with good ideas but in gaining the cooperation of others to synthesize and implement them. If creativity is a collective act (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006), then brokers in a collaborative context must not just *have* a good idea themselves, they must be able to elicit and synthesize the ideas of others. Because our theoretical frameworks have focused more on the generation of ideas than their integration and implementation – our understanding of this distinction has been limited. By focusing on a broader slice of the creative process, Fleming, Mingo and Chen (2007) discovered that ideas arising from cohesive, dense networks were less likely to be novel but more likely to be reused. Brokerage in the *tertius gaudens* tradition inhibited "mutual ownership and understanding of the new combination" and were less likely to be used in future collaborations (2007: 462).

This research suggests that integration work differs from idea generation in critical ways – field work is necessary to tease this apart with more depth. Our research does exactly that – departing from prior work on brokerage in three respects. First, extending the work of Hargadon and Sutton (1997) and Obstfeld (2005), we focus on the dynamic process of brokerage as opposed to the structural position – which recent research (Fleming et al, 2007) suggests is more critical than previously realized. Second, we examine a specific type of brokerage that involves not just the transfer of ideas or the generation of ideas, but the integration or creative synthesis of ideas, which is an entirely different challenge bound to trigger some loss. In this respect, we contribute to research on creativity, which tends to emphasize the generation of ideas as opposed to the synthesis necessary to put them in action. Third, we focus on brokers that depend upon a collective to achieve a creative outcome (e.g., Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). Brokers on creative projects cannot achieve benefits from their position on their own – they are pursuing collective goals that require the creative talents of others.

To develop a grounded theoretical understanding of this type of brokerage, we examined how brokers on creative projects integrate the ideas of others. Rather than rely upon existing conceptions of brokerage that connote the communication or transference of ideas, we use the term *nexus* to refer to brokerage requiring synthesis or integration. With an ethnographic investigation of 23 independent music producers in the Nashville Country music industry, we examined how producers in the creative brokerage role integrated contributions from others throughout the creative process. We discovered that ambiguity was an inherent part of the collective creative process and identified three types: 1) an ambiguous quality metric (What makes a hit or constitutes success?); 2) ambiguous occupational jurisdictions (Whose claim of

expertise entitles them to control the process? and 3) an ambiguous transformation process (How should the work be done?). We show when each type of ambiguity became acute in the creative process and how producers engaged in nexus work to bring the project to fruition.

Consistent with the *tertius iungens* orientation, producers often staged the linking of previously unconnected parties to further collective creative work. Consistent with the *tertius gaudens* orientation, producers often leveraged their brokerage position – keeping apart people within the project network to support the integration of ideas. Both actions were deliberate, strategic and undertaken to further collective creative outcomes. Our contributions to creative brokerage are threefold. First, in contrast with extant theories of *tertius gaudens* behavior, we show that practices associated with the *tertius gaudens* orientation can be used to achieve collective ends as opposed to individual gain. Second, we show how these previously distinct conceptions of brokerage are interwoven throughout the creative process. Third, we provide a process model that identifies when different types of ambiguity are likely to be encountered in the creative process and how those in the creative brokerage role respond.

BROKERAGE AND CREATIVE WORK

Producers in music, film, theatre, advertising, and special events industries perform a critical role – they are uniquely responsible for harnessing the talent and resources necessary to bring a creative project to fruition. In all these cases a few things are true: producers are structurally central to the project (not all parties may be connected to each other, but each is connected to the producer); not all of the parties are from the same organization; and every expert's contribution must be integrated or synthesized to produce a creative outcome. However, the role of producer is not just a Hollywood or a Nashville story—by examining how producers

engage in creative brokerage, we develop a broader theoretical conception of a specific type of brokerage relevant to many types of creative and project work. To ground this research, we draw from scholarship on brokerage, integration work and creative work.

1) *Brokerage*. Scholars examining knowledge and creative work often focus on those in brokering or boundary spanning roles (Fleming and Waguespack, 2007). The structural conception of brokerage emphasizes the unique informational benefits that can accrue to those that are structurally central (Burt, 1992). The greater the degree to which an individual can uniquely connect non-redundant sources of information and social contacts, the greater the potential information and control advantages that are likely to accrue to that individual (Burt, 1992); and the more social capital individuals can accrue (Burt, 2000); which can translate into real career benefits (Burt, 2004).

In contrast, a relational or practice conception of brokerage focuses on the work brokers engage in when connecting disparate people, knowledge or ideas (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997; Baker and Obstfeld, 1999; Obstfeld, 2005). Unlike structural conceptions of brokerage, from a practice perspective, brokers need not garner distrust from those they connect because brokers help “projects that represent combinations of people, ideas, and resources” (Obstfeld, 2005: 103) come to fruition. While the structural conception of brokerage focuses on the power and control advantages that can accrue from a broker’s unique access to information and social contacts, the practice perspective of brokerage emphasizes how that unique information can be put to creative use.

From a structural perspective, brokers are conduits for access to information and thus can directly obtain information, power and control benefits from their *individual* use of that information. From a practice perspective, brokers must integrate different ideas, innovations and contributions from others and synthesize them into a coherent whole in order to obtain *both* individual and mutual benefit. From our perspective, this is a critical and previously under appreciated difference – brokers on creative projects cannot benefit from their position on their own; integration work with others is required. Ibarra and colleagues suggest that to reconcile disparate conceptions of brokerage, researchers should examine how and when individual pursuit of network advantage detracts from or contributes to collective goods (2005: 367). We take on this challenge, motivated by the idea that the need to integrate creative ideas may trigger different types of brokerage.

2) *Integration Work*. Integration work involves the selection, rejection and synthesis of disparate ideas and contributions into a coherent whole. Simonton's (1999) model of creativity suggests that while variation contributes to an idea's novelty, the process of selection or synthesis contributes to an idea's usefulness or application. However, most research on creativity emphasizes the former over the latter. Brokers on creative projects do not just transfer, share or broker ideas, they must incorporate it into a creative product – regardless of whether it is a musical, opera, building, or recording. To move beyond generating creative ideas to refining and implementing them is an inherently relational act that requires the cooperation of many.

From a macro theoretical lens, integration is the “final frontier” of brokerage. Burt identified four levels of brokerage: 1) making parties on either side of the structural hole aware of the other; 2) transferring knowledge from one group to another; 3) drawing analogies from one

group to another, and 4) synthesizing ideas from multiple sources (2004: 355). The fourth level of brokerage is difficult to achieve for several reasons. First, field based studies show that 'knowledge transfer' is often more complex than is appreciated and that acts of translation are necessary to truly enable different specialists to understand, absorb and put ideas from others into practice (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). In order to transfer knowledge in a way that can be integrated, individuals must be able to access expertise in order to build on the work of others (Murray and O'Mahony, 2007). For example, boundary objects enable parties with different bases of expertise to understand each other and contribute their own specialized domain of expertise (Bechky, 2003a; Bechky, 2003b).

Furthermore, Carlile argues that while transferring knowledge is a simple information processing act; and interpreting knowledge across boundaries requires translation; the actual transformation of inputs is yet a more complex process because the actors involved may not share all the same interests (Carlile, 2004). True integration of ideas triggers the modification of ideas from their original form in order to achieve interdependence and synthesis (Carlile and Reberich, 2003). Thus, another reason the "final frontier" of brokerage is difficult is because synthesis implies some degree of loss which risks the disenfranchisement of those needed to bring a creative project to fruition. We argue that achieving synthesis among competing ideas is difficult because not everyone's ideas will be accepted into the final product and yet the engagement of those needed to achieve the final product is necessary.

The task of integration is thus not just an information processing task, but a relational one that involves the negotiation of conflicting interests. Goodman and Goodman's study of the theatre suggests that "managers that work at the integrative level see the task as a whole as a set of

complicated exchanges between desirables and possibles" (Goodman and Goodman, 1976: 496). Uzzi and Spiro describe the process of creating a Broadway musical as involving "full days of collaborative brainstorming, the sharing of ideas, joint problem-solving, difficult editing as well as flashpoints of celebration and commiseration" (2005: 458). These empirical studies of creative projects suggest that the last frontier of brokerage, while difficult, is an important one that our extant theories of brokerage stop short of explaining.

3) *Creative Work*. Increasingly, scholars recognize that creativity is not the provenance of the "creative few" producing absolute novelty but can include the introduction of something familiar from one area to new contexts (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997) and often requires collaboration (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; George, 2008). Creativity has been defined as the generation of novel and appropriate (or useful) ideas, processes, or solutions (Amabile, 1983; Shalley, 1991; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, and Herron, 1996; Oldham and Cummings, 1996). Research on creative work has traditionally focused at the individual level (West and Farr, 1990; George, 2008) despite the fact that much creative work takes place within collaborative projects (Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006).

Bringing a creative product to fruition often requires more than one person with a good idea. On projects, creative ideas emerge through interactions and relational processes (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005). Because implementing a creative idea often requires the participation and cooperation of others, it is essentially a social process (King, 1990). For example, Sutton and Hargadon (1996) showed that successful brainstorming depended upon relational processes that provided a supportive climate for experimentation (see also Edmondson, 1999; Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, and Staw, 2005).

A host of contextual concerns can affect individual creativity such as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999); job design (Elsbach and Hargadon, 2006); affect (Amabile, et al., 2005); organizational and supervisory encouragement (Amabile, et al., 1996); leadership (Zhou and Shalley, 2003; Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham, 2004) and social networks (Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Perry-Smith, 2006). However, few examine the collective creative process in context (George, 2008). In their field study, Hargadon and Bechky identified four interactions that inspired moments of collective creativity: help seeking; help giving; reflective reframing; and reinforcing. When engaged in reflective reframing, participants are mindfully engaged in the interaction and “each respectfully attends to and builds upon the comments and actions of others” (2006: 489). Yet how such groups manage the paradox of generating new ideas while synthesizing among them – as well as the dissent that can emerge -- is missing.

The research that has been done on collective creativity in context has focused on cultural production industries (e.g., television, film, music and theatre) (Peterson and Berger, 1971; Hirsch, 1972; Faulkner, 1983; Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Jones, 1996; Peterson, 1997). This body of work suggests that brokers, or “intermediary actors [who] facilitate transactions between other actors lacking access to or trust in one other” (Marsden, 1982: 202), play an important role in bringing networks of experts together to form “latent organizations” and produce creative works (Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie, 2000; Starkey, Barnatt, and Tempest, 2000). Scholars in this tradition recognize that integrative and coordinating expertise is a strategic resource (Miller and Shamsie, 1996), as is the capability to transform resources into viable creative products (Lampel and Shamsie, 2003). However, research on creative projects in cultural industries has not informed theoretical conceptions of brokerage (Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Burt, 1992; Fernandez and Gould, 1994; Burt, 2004).

What research on cultural industries has shown is that managing ambiguity is a central concern for those attempting to bring a creative product to market (Lampel et al, 2000). Scholars have raised the specter of competing perspectives regarding the quality of creative products (Becker, 1951; Faulkner, 1983) and their authenticity (Peterson, 1997; Jones, Anand, and Alvarez, 2005). Lampel and colleagues suggest that managing a creative project in the cultural industries requires balancing the need to build “creative systems to support and market cultural products” without allowing such systems to suppress individual inspiration and creativity (2000: 263). Glynn and Lounsbury’s (2005) work on the Atlanta Symphony confirms this notion - showing how the orchestra navigated between aesthetic and market logics in their struggle to retain their authenticity in the face of declining resources.

Weick defined ambiguity as “an on-going stream that supports several different meanings at the same time” (1995: 91); Martin defined it as “a lack of clarity [where] multiple ... explanations are plausible” (Weick, 1995: 134). Unlike uncertainty, more information does not resolve ambiguity, as it may not be clear what questions to ask or what problems to solve (Weick, 1995). “The problem in ambiguity is not that the real world is imperfectly understood and that more information will remedy that. The problem is that information may not resolve misunderstandings” (Weick, 1995: 92). For example, more information does not help a producer figure out how to produce a hit record – well known stars consistently produce duds. While ambiguous situations can offer the opportunity for reflection, invention and improvisation, individuals facing such situations eventually need to narrow their options for action in order to coordinate their activities (Weick, 1995; Weick, 1998). Thus, in order to achieve synthesis, brokers on creative projects must help project contributors manage

ambiguity. While Weick outlines a number of types of ambiguity, he does not distinguish how people respond to them differently, nor the consequences for action or inaction.

What is needed is more process research at the project level that takes into account the relational nature of creative work (King, 1990; West and Farr, 1990; George, 2008). George suggests that researchers examine how individual interactions enable “them to combine aspects of their differential areas of expertise and knowledge in new ways to creatively solve a problem or come up with a new idea for a product” (2008: 464). To do so requires consideration of the “mechanisms by which organizations balance competing pressures for collective learning, predictability, and control with pressures for creative responses to new problems and opportunities...” (George, 2008: 467). Those who are responsible for bringing creative projects to fruition face this exact tension. The question is - what type of brokerage do they engage in? By focusing on how individuals in this role guide the integration of creative ideas on projects, our research provides a step in this direction.

RESEARCH METHODS

Barley and Kunda (2001) argue that situated field studies of work practices are likely to produce the most insightful theoretical lens as to how project forms of organizing take shape. A practice-oriented approach focuses on work activity (Orr, 1996; Orlikowski, 2002), and more specifically, the repertoire of actions that reflect people’s understandings of “how to get things done” within complex settings (Orlikowski, 2002: 249). The practice approach is also uniquely suited for studying nexus work since it emphasizes “the way a task, as it unfolds over time, looks to someone at work on it, while many of the options and dilemmas remain unresolved” (Brown and Duguid, 1991: 41).

Research Setting

As Barley and Kunda argued, “projects have increasingly become a primary locus of affiliation and decision making and hence, an appropriate focus of theorizing. A comprehensive understanding of organizing would then require greater attention to the logistical, technical, temporal, and managerial dynamics of project life” (2001: 79). Researchers examining creative projects have focused considerable attention on how individuals attempt to secure resources from talent and resource networks. For example, executives and freelancers strive to reduce the perceived uncertainty of their organizing efforts (Miller and Shamsie, 1999; Miller and Shamsie, 2001; Elsbach and Kramer, 2003), talent agents weave narratives to legitimate their decisions (Bielby and Bielby, 1994) and film directors leverage hybrid roles to lend legitimacy to their projects (Baker and Faulkner, 1991). Research has emphasized the importance of connecting individuals to projects (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Bielby and Bielby, 1999; Obstfeld, 2005; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005), but few have pursued a practice approach to understanding how producers manage integration work.

The Nashville country music industry is a particularly opportune setting in which to study the nexus role. First, country music projects are typically managed by independent country music producers who are not only at the center of the organizing process but who also integrate contributions from many types of experts (song writers, publishers, musicians, artists, engineers, and label personnel) to form a coherent creative effort. Second, projects regularly emerge in the country music industry, affording the opportunity to study the work practices of multiple producers working on a variety of projects within a short time frame. Third, because

country music is primarily produced in Nashville, all parties to the project were collocated and in a densely connected locale, enabling ethnographic field study.

Data Collection

From the spring of 2003 to the spring of 2006, the first author lived in Nashville and conducted an ethnographic field study of producers in the Nashville country music industry. Data collection included interviews with producers; participant and non-participant observations; and interviews with other contributors to the production process. We used these three data sources to develop and triangulate our understanding of nexus work.

Interviews. The first author conducted multiple interviews with 42 people, totaling 85 interviews overall. Interviews ranged from a single hour-long interview, to as many as eight multiple-hour interviews over the course of the data collection. Twenty-three people were independent country music producers. The remaining interviews were conducted with individuals from a range of occupations involved in the music production process, including: performers/artists (3), engineers (6), label personnel (1), musicians (3), an independent production assistant (1), independent A&R [Artist and Repertoire] /song screeners (1) and songwriters (4). By studying the variety of roles involved in the country music industry, we were better able to understand and triangulate our understanding of nexus work. The first author used a semi-structured interview approach that employed both grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) and more specific questions that probed how participants approached decisions and interactions with others involved in music production.

Observations. Observations helped illuminate the taken-for-granted and unintended aspects of nexus work that producers might not be able or willing to articulate in interviews. The first author conducted over 100 hours of observation, observing 7 producers (identified from interviews) in a range of interactions with resource gatekeepers (such as song publishers and songwriters) and the myriad of contributors in the recording studio, including artists, freelance musicians, recording engineers, label personnel and managers. Over lunch, breaks, and during late night sessions, the first author observed and listened to contributors discuss their work, and their interactions with others germane to the project. After these observations, the first author debriefed producers to clarify the meaning of statements and interactions, and ended each day by typing up her field notes.

Participant observation. The first author also co-produced a single song. She worked with her co-producer to select the song to be recorded and co-managed the three hour recording session involving an engineer, drummer, lead guitarist, pianist, and bass guitar player. The first author gained first-hand experience in managing the challenges involved in nexus work—an experience made more complicated by an audience of five other musicians waiting to record their own demo who offered their own suggestions regarding her creative effort. This experience was used to test the internal validity of the process model developed and assess its fit with the real world.

Analytic Approach

Because research on how those engaged in the creative brokerage role manage the collective creative process, an inductive approach was warranted (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Our analytic approach followed an iterative process of developing grounded themes and working hypotheses regarding nexus work, and testing these themes and hypotheses in subsequent data collection and analysis. Data analysis included four phases: 1) mapping the activities of the production process; 2) developing and analyzing nexus work practices; 3) linking their relationship to specific types of ambiguity and the nature of brokerage employed; and 4) then checking the validity of the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Phase 1. Project activity mapping. Since we were interested in producers' accounts of what they did when managing a creative project, in the first phase of analysis, the first author wrote "vignettes" (Miles and Huberman, 1994) of each producer's case, their interpretations of what happened, and their accounts of the practices used throughout their projects. From these vignettes, we developed a list of activities involved in each phase of a project, highlighting the important decision points and contributors involved and reviewed this with our informants. This list helped us understand who was involved in the music production process at various points in time, what each party had at stake throughout, and how earlier decisions and actions affected subsequent decisions and interactions.

Phase 2: Identifying and comparing practices. In the second phase of analysis, we systematically identified, defined, and compared the work practices used by producers. We closely examined the vignettes, existing interview transcripts, and observation field notes to identify practices used by producers in the course of their work. We then began an iterative

process of honing and refining the set of practices to a core group common to the producers in our sample. To this end, we developed definitions for each practice and coded all of the transcripts using the qualitative software, *Atlasti*, iterating through the data several times to see if the practices were mutually exclusive and comprehensive (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Through this process of iterating through coding and testing during subsequent data collection and analysis, our work practice codes reached a level of stability, where they were mutually exclusive, comprehensive, and confirmed by further data collection.

In developing the set of nexus work practices, we considered how many of the 23 producers used each practice. While not every producer used every practice, every producer used at least one of the practices from the repertoire we identified to respond to a particular type of ambiguity. Definitions, details of frequency of use and strength of evidence for each practice are provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Phase 3: Ambiguity, brokerage and the nexus role. We next developed a practice matrix, which showed the prevalence of practices used across producers, and compared when producers used specific work practices during a project, for what purpose, and the nature of brokerage triggered. This matrix was condensed into the tables presented in this paper¹. First, we identified when in the creative process different types of ambiguity appeared. Then, we examined the specific practices that producers used to integrate ideas in light of the ambiguity present at that time. As a final step, we assessed whether these actions were more aligned with the *tertius iungens* or the *tertius gaudens* approach to brokerage.

¹ For example, we present the final tallies for all producers as a summary of the practice matrix.

If the practices used were consistent with the six factors associated with the *tertius iungens* orientation as identified by Obstfeld (2005), they were coded as such. For example, Obstfeld's six factor assessment of Simmel's initial theoretical conception (1950) included such measures as: "I introduce people to each other who might have a common strategic work interest"; "I will try to describe an issue in a way that will appeal to a diverse set of interests", and "I point out common ground shared by people who have different perspectives on an issue". If the practices used actively kept individuals apart or reinforced the unique structural position of the broker, they were coded as consistent with the *tertius gaudens* orientation. As a result of this micro-level coding, we were able to produce a grounded understanding of the creative process that provides a more dynamic conception of brokerage, pinpointing when producers were more likely to use one type of brokerage over another, and how the nature of brokerage was related to the ambiguity present at different points in time in the creative process.

Phase 4: Internal validity. To establish the internal validity of the theory, in the final phase of analysis, the first author submitted conclusions to three producers for their review. Producers agreed with the case depictions, including the nature of the ambiguities and challenges they faced, and expressed appreciation for having "labels" for their everyday activities and a framework for thinking about the dynamics of their work. We also revisited the first author's participant-observation experience to affirm the validity of the model.

FINDINGS: NEXUS WORK IN PRACTICE

Country music projects involved the production of a collection of songs, ranging from a three-song demo project to a ten-to-fifteen song album. The producer was at the nexus of the creative process, brokering relationships among a diverse set of industry experts— artists, record label

personnel, musicians, engineers and artist managers. Producers moved through four phases to bring a creative project to fruition: 1) resource gathering, 2) scoping the project interface, 3) creative production and 4) final synthesis (See Table 2). Throughout these activities, producers elicited ideas (have you thought about this song?), perspectives (I think this song can be a hit), and contributions (musical or technical contributions) from everyone involved; built generative possibilities; and selected and rejected options from the possibility set. The challenge was to navigate this dialectic in a manner that considered the diverging perspectives and ideas of participants - winnowing the creative options to be pursued while ensuring parties' continued engagement in the project.

---INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE---

In navigating this tension, we found that producers regularly encountered three types of ambiguity which we introduce according to the project phase in which they first become salient. The first type of ambiguity pertained to *what the creative process would produce* due to competing or ambiguous definitions of the quality of creative output. The second type of ambiguity pertained to *who would be involved in the creative process* stemming from unclear or overlapping occupational jurisdictions. The third type of ambiguity pertained to *how the creative work would be achieved* due to the non-routinizable nature of creative production (Amabile, 1996). Our three types of ambiguity map onto Weick's (1995) and McCaskey's (1982) broad characterization of ambiguous situations. However, neither scholar suggests how these sources of ambiguity might be managed nor if they should be managed differently. We found that, as the creative process unfolded, producers leveraged their brokerage position, responding to these ambiguities differently in order to move the project forward.

By examining the arc of the creative process over time, we were able to identify when in the creative process producers acted as *tertius iungens* - bringing certain people together to create - and when they acted as *tertius gaudens* - keeping certain people apart. In doing so, we learned that creative brokerage requires behaviors endemic to both *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* conceptions, depending on the stage of the process, the ambiguity present, and the parties involved. In this manner, producers addressed the action problem of creative brokerage in ways that suggest that the distinctions between *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* may be based on a limited view of the creative process. We found that producers blended both behaviors over time to integrate creative ideas. However, when the *tertius gaudens* approach was used, it was used to encourage collective creativity, not to achieve individual gain.

Phase 1: Resource Gathering

At project inception, the “project” existed primarily as a kernel of an idea and a relationship, albeit sometimes weak, between the producer, the artist, the artist’s manager and potentially the record label, if one was involved (See Table 2). Until songs were selected, it was hard to know what musicians and engineers to introduce to the project. In this phase, producers attempted to garner two primary resources: a unique portfolio of songs to record (from songwriters and song publishers); and funding, distribution and/or marketing support (from labels). As they attempted to garner songs and money for their projects, producers primarily focused on managing ambiguity around quality—or what would make a hit.

Since the criterion for selecting the repertoire emerged as songs were considered, in this phase, producers casted wide across the songwriting network for potential songs. Producers sought a repertoire of songs that were sufficiently consistent to support a coherent artist identity, while

differentiating the artist enough to create an engaging commercial product. Producers like Marty worked with artists to consider market implications: “[The artist] might be looking at it in terms of ... what song they like to sing the most, but I’m looking at it as more of a business proposition. What will the market bear? What will the label get the most excited about? If they already have three people on their roster who have these kinds of singles out right now, they aren’t going to be as interested. What they don’t have is someone who did a ballad like you just did.” Ideally, the song repertoire would highlight the artist’s unique performance strengths and have the potential to be released to radio as hit singles.

However, in this competitive domain, members of the songwriting community were often reluctant to offer their best songs to an unproven artist. Because song publishers and writers maintained differing perceptions of an artist’s quality, it was often challenging to secure songs for any but “chart topping” acts. Ambiguity about quality affected not only what songs could be acquired but also whether the artist could secure record label support. In order for a music label to be interested in investing in an artist, they needed some assurance of the artist’s commercial viability. In response to these challenges, producers: 1) fostered a generative network, 2) built legitimacy, and 3) created slack.

1) Fostering a generative network. Since producers never knew which songs would ultimately make a great match with the label’s needs and the artist’s voice and translate into market success, they repeatedly drew from pools of songs over the course of their projects. As they evaluated the ideas submitted by others, producers strove to keep these supply networks generative so that they could return to them at a later point if need be. Producers went to great

lengths to foster a generative network with label personnel, songpublishers, songwriters and musicians to ensure an open pipeline of raw inputs to their projects.

If a producer decided not to use a particular song, he spent time contacting the author or owner to let them know exactly why that particular song had not made the cut. As Hank explained:

These are the songs I played for [the artist] the other day that she passed on. I have to call all these [song publishers] and let them know. These songs are ones that I kept out of many, many listening sessions. So I need to call these people back personally. Say, "I played it for her, but it didn't ring her bell. Keep them coming." I have to. It's the relationship.

Even if he turned a song down, Hank simultaneously maintained his network of song suppliers by following up with publishers and songwriters; stroking their egos and asking them to continue sending him songs. The flood of songs passing through any producer's office made this an overwhelming task (Hank had towering stacks of cds laying around his office).

Although fostering a generative network was time consuming, Hank could not afford not to do it, adding, "I have to go through thousands of junk. And I have to write nice things to people, when maybe I don't feel like it." Hank feared that if he did not do this, he could be cut off from the future supply of 'good' songs. By following up with songwriters and publishers, he accomplished a number of objectives: 1) allowed song writers to submit their songs elsewhere; 2) provided songwriters with more information about the producer and the artist's preferences; and 3) maintained cordial relations to foster an on-going pipeline of songs.

2) **Building legitimacy.** Producers strove to establish legitimacy for their artists in order to acquire the best resources possible for the project. This was especially the case for producers working with new artists who did not have a proven track record. Sarah, a producer who worked with artists who were often new to the Nashville market and were seeking label deals,

described how she helped build legitimacy for her artists so they could convince song publishers to give them their best material:

When I am looking for songs for an artist, I will call on my publishing friends and set up meetings to listen for songs. If I think a pub is not giving me exactly what I want that they have in their catalog, then I'll arrange a sit down meeting with the artist and the publisher and myself. If they can see the personality, get to know the artist as a person, they might be more inclined to give me their good songs...

Sarah orchestrated such meetings to generate credibility for her artist in order to convince song writers and publishers to give up their best material. When bringing previously unconnected actors together, producers like Sara carefully shaped others' perceptions of the artist's quality by manipulating how and when these introductions took place. In a similar manner, Sarah carefully orchestrated the initial presentation of artists to labels – but only after she was sure that her artists were ready to shine in that setting.

Once we have the songs—this girl didn't have a lot of performance experience—I took her to a performance coach. Because the second stage of negotiating with the label to get a deal is to have the artist come into the corporate board room at lunch time. They bring in all of their people to get to know her. If you can't pass that hurdle, you can't get a deal. So it's real important to have songs you can deliver live as well.

Producers went to great lengths to build legitimacy and reduce ambiguity over the artist's quality - hiring a coach was a small price to pay and Hank went to even great lengths to attract resources for his under-the-radar artist. To obtain a major label deal that later proved to be incredibly successful, Hank worked behind the scenes to strategically bring together several label heads at a showcase concert for his artist.

I got the showcase moved to a larger club. I got the head of the [X] record label and the head of A&R and another label to the showcase. And they [the band] were smart enough to bring a truckload of fans to plant in the crowd. So when they hit the stage the place went unglued. And the record label people are going what the hell is this? And I'm just chuckling to myself, "This is amazing." This guy...was head of A&R, he said to me, "Did they write that song?" And about

two songs later, “Did they write that one too?” Then he looked back at [another label head that was also present].

Changing the venue was only part of Hank’s plan. By inviting two label heads to the same concert, Hank not only reduced ambiguity about how others would react to this artist and thus the artist’s commercial potential, but he also set up a market for his artist’s talent which he then exploited to close the deal.

So then I went back and talked with them [record label Y] a bit. I could see they were digging it ...They [sic] said, “Who else knows about this?” Well I said “[other record label X] is here.” He said, “I want to sign them tonight.”

3) **Creating slack.** When garnering resources for a project, producers strove to create slack in their budgets (e.g. Cyert and March, 1956) to enable them to respond to any contingencies that might potentially undermine perceptions of the project’s quality – such as big name stars that took their time or new artists needing additional studio time. One major-label producer described how he padded his budget when working with a star artist known for wasting musician and studio time: “He’s gonna be two hours late... Then he’s gonna screw around for two or three hours when he gets there. Drinking and having fun and all that stuff. That throws your budget out the window ...there is gonna be six hours where everybody’s getting paid, but no one’s doing any work. You have to wait... ‘til he’s in the mood to sing.”

While budgets were institutionalized to some extent within the country music industry, a little slack enabled producers to accommodate other types of unanticipated problems, such as the vagaries of human performance, as described by one seasoned star producer:

You want to be in a situation where, “I over-budgeted this thing by a third. They’re a great artist, the [song] selecting went well, they got in and out of the studio in record time.” Those are the stories that we want to tell. Not that “We’re struggling with the vocals, we’ve had a cold, we’ve had to dump all the vocals we’ve got, we’re starting over and we’re flying to Key West next week to do vocals to dry this artist out since they’ve had a cold for six weeks.”

Producers padded their budgets to avoid having to go back to the label and ask for more money – which could potentially signal problems and invite additional label involvement or scrutiny from label personnel who might then seek more control over the project. Given the predominance of “bean counters” at the labels and their emphasis of “on-budget” projects as well as the quality of musical products, with slack in hand, producers could enhance their reputation if they came in under budget and become a “hero” to the label. Carey, a producer joked that “you get as many kudos for bringing in a record under budget as you do for bringing in a great record. So obviously you want to give yourself some padding so you can look like a hero. If someone says we can give you \$200,000 to do this record, you go back and ask for \$250. If you don’t spend it, you don’t spend it.”

In the garnering resource stage, producers focused on managing multiple conceptions of quality of the artist, of songs, and of the appropriate match between these two elements. In the spirit of *tertius iungens*, producers *fostered a generative network* that enabled them to cast widely for songs and ensure an on-going pipeline. They also leveraged their brokerage position by strategically bringing together previously unconnected parties at the appropriate points in time to reduce ambiguity over the quality of the artist and *establish legitimacy* in the eyes of music labels, song writers and publishers. In the spirit of *tertius gaudens*, producers leveraged their brokerage position to proactively *create slack* to preemptively insulate the project from unforeseen circumstances that could affect external perceptions of project quality and potentially reduce producers’ control over the project.

Phase II: Scoping the Project Interface

Whereas the creativity literature tends to assume that the resources necessary to pursue a project and the boundaries of a project (in terms of scope, purpose and participants) are given, we found that when producing a creative work, producers were actively engaged in scoping these boundaries. Whereas the first phase focused on accumulating resources, when scoping project boundaries, producers interacted with record label personnel, artists and their managers to select songs and musicians for the project. Selecting songs involved reviewing up to 2,000 to 3,000 songs to determine which were best suited for a particular artist and which songs had the potential to be successful “singles” or hits. During the scoping process, producers needed to narrow down the number of songs to be produced to a range of 15-30 songs before heading into the studio for production. Without clear criteria for determining what could make a hit, a second type of ambiguity arose during the scoping process: who had the right to make decisions as to what songs to produce. Producers faced multiple claims to expertise without clear guidance as to whose opinion should prevail or *ambiguous occupational jurisdictions*.

Choosing songs and musicians inevitably involved rejecting some experts’ choices or contributions – this was especially difficult when artists wrote their own songs or when label personnel tried to promote songs in which they had a financial interest. Without deftly integrating the perspectives of all parties to the project, producers could lose the support of the record labels or alienate artists, songwriters or song publishers, who may have specially chosen or written a song for the artist or project. To bound the project, while still maintaining the support and engagement of all parties, producers drew from a repertoire of practices including: 1) introducing analogies; 2) bracketing and checking in; and 3) deferring decisions.

1) Introducing analogies. To reduce ambiguity over the type of sound they were trying to achieve, producers deliberately introduced music samples and references to other songs, musicians, artists, or instruments to develop a shared quality aesthetic. In our context, a shared quality aesthetic was a loose agreement on the type of sound to be produced without necessarily specifying how to get there. Producers would sit for hours and listen to music with the artist, “I ask them what they want musically, what style they’re going for....we use reference CDs of other artists they like, and I always ask them what’s your musical history, what’s your background? Everything from what they listened to as a kid to what their favorite song is now.” Developing a shared quality aesthetic helped producers prevent competing claims to expertise from arising when it came to making decisions. Sarah went so far as to have her artists “listen to some bad songs too so they’ll know what a bad one sounded like.” By creating a shared quality aesthetic or an agreed upon determination of what constituted a “good” sound, producers aimed to preemptively avoid future potential conflict over the ambiguous nature of quality.

2) Bracketing and checking in. During the scoping phase, producers also bracketed certain parties by temporarily excluding them from participating in creative decisions. For example, producers could bracket music labels from the song selection process so that decisions were not made that prematurely narrowed the options that could be generated in creative production. Whereas in the prior phase, producers strategically brought people together, in this phase, producers leveraged their position to keep certain parties out of creative decisions. However, bracketing without checking in at a later time with those bracketed, was a recipe for failure.

For example, Gant described how he checked in with A&R label personnel after bracketing them from earlier creative decisions. “It’s important to be very proactive in including them

[A&R] in the process. At least to the point of giving them information if not involving them in the actual creative process itself. At least keep them informed of the progress.” Checking in allowed him to maintain a positive narrative with the label to secure a steady flow of resources, while he guided the artists and musicians toward a shared quality aesthetic.

Hank was almost caught between bracketing and checking in when he bracketed label personnel from song selection in order to prevent the label from prematurely discarding a song:

There was one song that was very rockish. Just seemed a little outside the rest of the material. I felt like it could work, with a certain treatment, it could work well with the others. And [the label rep] actually walked in the day we were tracking it... And we got it on the second take, really up, jamming, and hard hitting. And he walked in while we were cutting it, “We didn’t agree about this, did we?” And I said, “We did, sort of.”

The label had been bracketed by Hank during the scoping process because he knew it would be difficult to convey how he intended to record the song. He planned to ‘check in’ and present it to the label later on in the creative process only when the song had been fully realized. The label’s surprise entrance into the recording studio disrupted this plan, but Hank recovered by referring to their agreement on basic principles. Ultimately, the song was a universal favorite of the entire project – but this opportunity was only realized due to the producer’s initial bracketing practice during the scoping process.

3) Deferring decisions. When producers had identified a smaller set of 30-50 songs that were top candidates for a project, producers brought together the artist, artist’s manager and label personnel to select the 15-20 songs that would be further developed in the studio. Because studio time was expensive, it was important to winnow the potential song list down to a manageable amount. When there were disagreements over songs that one party felt strongly about, rather than confront competing conceptions of quality directly, producers explicitly left

some creative decisions open until later in the creative process *by deferring decisions*. Deferring decisions allowed producers to avoid conflict, help parties save face, and maintain as many creative options as possible. When they were scoping the project, producers still wanted to leave some creative options open so that they would have more choices to draw from later in the process as what would happen in the studio was an unknown. Deferring was thus distinct from bracketing and used when producers brought parties together, but delayed decisions until a later time. When bracketing, producers excluded individuals from participating in decisions.

For example, Larry, a producer, the artist and the label had reached agreement on 6 songs to record but could not reach agreement on three particular songs that the artist felt strongly about. Larry stepped in and said, “Let’s keep these on the table and revisit it later.” Another producer who liked a song that an artist was hesitant to commit to advised her to “take it home and live with for two weeks and see what you think then.” Bill recalled a time when a song was in the “deferred pile” for a “long, long time. It was one of the artist’s least favorite but the A&R person and I loved it. Now that song is one of the artist’s favorites.” Deferring decisions could allow people time to get comfortable with an idea that was not initially attractive.

When observing how producers deferred decisions, it became clear that this was not passive “avoiding” of conflict (Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Murnighan and Conlon, 1991; Lewicki, Barry, Minton, and Saunders, 2002), but rather active management of the timing of specific decisions to foster collective creativity. Debriefing sessions with our informants revealed that producers deferred decisions with the logic that with more time and more ideas on the table, two things would happen: 1) more members to the creative decision would have a chance to become committed to the project and 2) the editorial decisions that would inevitably cause some ideas

to lose would not limit the potential for new ideas to build in unexpected ways. While there was a need to winnow the creative options available (for example from 50 songs to 20), producers were loath to prematurely discard songs whose potential could be more fully realized in the studio. Any disagreements in this phase could affect the artist's performance. Looking forward, producers wanted to build artists' confidence and create a "positive vibe" before going into the studio. As Carl noted, "It's a real personal thing that happens in the studio. Hopefully ...you can establish that intimacy so you can have that rapport...Everybody gets into the moment."

Producers actively worked to scope project boundaries and this required integrating the perspectives of the artist, label, and producer to decide which songs would be selected and which musicians would be cast for the studio. It was never clear which party had control over these decisions, nor which songs would make a "hit". Producers had to winnow creative options without losing the enthusiasm of all parties. Producers navigated this challenge by using strategies that combined *tertius gaudens* and *tertius iungens* orientations. In the spirit of *tertius iungens*, *introducing analogies* helped foster a shared quality aesthetic. In the spirit of *tertius gaudens*, producers leveraged their brokerage position by temporarily *bracketing* some parties to decisions and *checking in* with them later to preserve creative options. As a broker, producers brought people together, but had the power to *defer* decisions for the collective good - limiting tensions that might impair the creative process and maintaining some ambiguity as to the new sound that would be produced in creative production.

Phase III: Creative Production

During creative production, producers brought projects to their full realization, attempting to create the studio "magic" that would enable their projects to sell in the fickle country market.

Songs were chosen, and musicians and engineers selected. Once in the studio, musicians and engineers would be paid by the hour placing new demands on the creative process. How songs were ultimately recorded remained open to interpretation; every expert had a relevant and unique perspective to contribute. The producer's job was to surface creative ideas; encourage others to build on each other without overpowering each other; and then integrate performances to achieve coherence. As Sarah explained:

You don't want the players stepping on each other's toes playing. If I don't want the musicians getting in the way of the vocal here I have to bring them down in the right spot to let the vocalist shine. I need certain instrumentation in certain places so it creates the attitude needed for the song and doesn't destroy something else ... A lot of it is directing which instrumentation is going to happen where in the song and what impact it [a particular player's performance] is going to have.

Integrating across performances had to be done carefully. Because "misery sticks to tape", producers obsessed about creating and maintaining a positive "vibe" in the recording studio. Troy "tried to have a very relaxed studio experience. Get these guys thinking about the wrong thing or get them upset little bit and they don't give you what you need."

In the recording studio, there was typically one large room where musicians – drummers, bass guitar, lead guitars, mandolin, piano, and fiddler – could all see and hear each other's interactions. There was also a control room separated by glass where the engineer managed the recording technology. The artist was either in a separate vocal booth where their vocal performance could be isolated or in the control room with the engineer and producer. Despite the public space, producers could retain and leverage their brokerage position between artists and musicians by controlling who could hear each other through use of the "talk back"² button in the control room. Label executives were typically not invited to studio sessions, but

² A talk back button opens the microphone between the control booth and the recording studio.

producers continued to elicit and integrate their perspectives throughout the tracking sessions since securing the continued support of record labels was critical for distribution and promotion. However, even with producer's checking in on them, label executives could still show up and surprise the producer and often did (as detailed in the example with Hank). In this phase, the producer's challenge was to create a relaxed and generative atmosphere *while* managing a highly public editing process *while* working under time and financial pressure.

To guide the studio session, producers developed a rough template of the song "arrangement" or written "charts" of music notation. The degree of specificity in the arrangements could leave more or less room for musicians and artists to improvise. As Travis explained, musicians needed some guidance to encourage experimentation: "If you don't give them any direction they'll flip into autopilot and they'll just noodle and just play the accumulation of whatever they played on the last fifteen records. Trust me; there have been plenty of cases where they copped [copy] their own lick on somebody else's record."

In creative production, producers confronted not only differing perceptions of quality and competing claims to expertise and control, but also a third type of ambiguity: the non-routinizable nature of the creative process. A producer could bring together the best available resources and talent, but there was no formula for transforming raw talent to market success. One producer described this challenge, "Sometimes you get in the studio and for whatever reason the song's not the magic you thought it was going to be. The song can still be wonderful; the artist can still be wonderful, it's just not the magic you thought it could be. If there was a formula, we'd all be doing it more often. But there's another element to the room that you can't always control."

Ambiguity in the creative transformation process challenged producers in several ways. First, it was never clear whether songs would turn out as hoped, or whether musicians would be able to create a particular performance given the song selected. Second, with no formula for success, producers obsessed about creating the conditions for “magic” in the recording studio and carefully nurtured a positive vibe. Even so, the potential for conflict remained high as in the studio everyone’s performance could be evaluated by their peers. Everyone knew that the final product would be heard by others who could be sources of future work. This awareness motivated people to seek control over their contributions and inhibited some musicians from attempting performances out of their comfort zone to avoid risk of failure. To integrate performances in this phase, producers strove to create a positive working environment conducive to improvisation and experimentation by: 1) setting the stage; 2) crafting role boundaries; 3) affirming direction and 4) absorbing challenges to expertise.

1) Setting the stage. Because of their brokerage position, producers were well situated to set the stage for creative performances since they were the immediate point of contact for all contributors to the project who may not have worked with each other before. One producer “set the stage” by setting out a large buffet, decorating the studio—buying special rugs, mood lamps and thousands of candles—to create the emotional timbre he hoped to achieve. He explained that he did this to “get the best performance out of them. So they don’t act as puppets. You want their best performance, eliciting that effort and creativity. It’s all about setting the stage. Setting the lights, setting the mood.” He set the stage for collective creativity by providing the space for everyone to gather, tell stories and jokes to encourage the sharing of personal experiences and stories.

Producers went to great lengths to leverage their brokerage position to stage initial connections among previously unconnected parties. Jesse advised that there were real performance implications from how he initially introduced the parties to each other. “I would introduce the artist to the musician by saying how excited the artist was to have him on the project, enthusing, ‘The artist just loved you on Faith Hill’s album’.” Jesse continued, [you need to] “get it going so that when you start it’s not like, oh, hi! ...Here’s what we’re doing today. That’s starting off stiff, a cold start. You need to have everything warmed up.” The aim was not just to produce a positive atmosphere for its own sake, but, to ensure that people were willing to learn, experiment and push themselves in new directions (e.g. Edmondson, 1999).

2) Crafting role boundaries. With all three types of ambiguities in play, it became more critical for producers to address occupational jurisdictional ambiguity preemptively. To prevent project participants from challenging each other’s expertise in the studio, producers actively crafted role boundaries. For example, Sarah often found that newcomer artists (and in some cases, musicians) had a more expansive view of their role in production. Thus, she explained to her artists how the session would unfold, her expectations about the artists’ involvement in the session and their degree of interaction with musicians. Sarah leveraged her brokerage position to prevent overeager artists from undermining the flow of the session, particularly given time and budgetary constraints. As she described:

With the artist, I have to be clear with them [sic]. They have their time. When I’m working with them before hand, that’s their time, but when I’m in the studio, I tell them upfront. “You don’t say anything to the musicians. I’m going to be thinking about what you want, but it’s for your own good. When we’re in the tracking session, it’s not about you. I need to be able to focus on the players and what is going on. I have to be able to keep the energy up.” And they might have their idea of, “Well, I came down here and I have played in concerts so I’m just going to come down here and run the session. And my brother, he’s a guitarist and he said I should do this, so that’s what I want to tell the session player.” Oh no. That’s not going to happen.

Sarah proactively coached her artists on their role in the studio to reduce ambiguity over how they would interact with musicians and over the extent to which the artists controlled the recording session. Producers using this practice leveraged their brokerage position but did so not to achieve individual benefit, but to reduce ambiguity and further collective creativity.

Producers also crafted role boundaries by publicly recognizing the expertise of each project contributor to demonstrate respect for their individual talents in the presence of others.

Producers might explicitly give experts creative space to proffer their own improvisations and in so doing signal to others in the room to do the same. For example, the star producer Chad admitted, “Technically, I’m pretty dumb. I don’t claim to be an engineer...I pretty much stay out of his way and let him do his thing.” Another producer echoed this sentiment, “If I went in to the studio and tried to act like I was a great musician...I think people see through that.

Same way on the engineering side. I go in there confessing that I’m not up on the latest microphones or the latest technology. ‘Just take me under your wing and get me there.’ You just can’t go in and act like you know more than you know. You just can’t do that.”

3. Affirming direction. Producers publicly affirmed the contributions of each project contributor to demonstrate respect for individual talents and to guide contributors toward a shared aesthetic. When affirming direction, producers aimed to reinforce a particular musical direction through praise rather than criticism. To affirm direction, producers might ask for advice to acknowledge that all parties were masters of their own instruments or provide feedback without challenging the quality of their performances. Affirming direction was a public practice that allowed all who contributed to the project to see that their expertise was respected despite the fact that not all of their ideas might not be used.

Producers couched their feedback of performances with praise and positive evaluations in ways that enabled artists and musicians to adjust their performances, save face and remain open to new creative ideas. For example, Josh recalled how he learned from the legendary producer Chet Atkins how to provide feedback to his musicians and then later praise them and credit them for his ideas. Josh recalls how this technique was first used with him: “I played what he showed me and when I did that, he said over the speaker: “I love what you’re doing... That’s great”, as if I had come up with the idea myself.” Josh later applied this practice in his own work as a producer: “You want to make the musicians look good to each other. You have the best and most respected musicians in the world.” Affirming direction not only helped cultivate creative performances, but gently guided performances toward a quality aesthetic that everyone could understand and absorb. By doing so, producers avoided overt criticism, fearful that it might create a chilling effect on individuals’ willingness to experiment and work towards their individual limits.

4) Absorbing challenges to expertise. When proactive efforts to set the stage, craft boundaries and affirm direction did not prevent personal challenges, producers leveraged their brokerage role to absorb those challenges, prevent conflict and preserve an environment conducive to creativity. Absorbing work involved considerable emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and humor (Coser, 1959; Bechky, 2006). For example, producers often worked with artists who did not understand how to express differences in opinion without challenging the expertise of session players. An aspiring major-label producer explicitly used his brokerage position to prevent such events from becoming conflictual: “The last thing you want is the artist trying to tell the player well, it should sound like this...and the session starts getting bogged down. *I am the one* who can communicate with the musicians, not the artist”.

Producers often used their brokerage role to keep parties apart by absorbing potentially injurious comments and preventing them from being passed from one person to another. As Sam explained: “the main thing is no confrontations. If one musician gets an attitude it can be infectious among the other players.” Sarah explained how she made the most of digital technology and the structure of the recording studio to defuse potentially detrimental comments between artists and session players:

Well, I let the artist tell me things if they have to in the control booth, in between takes. And he might say, well the guitar player isn't doing this... and I'll say to him, well I'll go out and talk to him and then I go out and I don't say anything of the sort... I don't let the artist know if the musicians don't think something's great about the artist. Plus, when it comes right down to it, I've got the talk back button. I'm the only one who can use it. And if I do have something to say to a player, I always do it in a private conversation.

By claiming control of the talk back button, Sarah leveraged her brokerage position to prevent public challenges of others' expertise for the benefit of collective creativity. When absorbing challenges posed by one person and directed at another, producers acted as a “release” valve for tensions arising from all three types of ambiguity, limiting the negative affect that could undermine creative exchange, and affect the final product – a producer's worse nightmare.

When the project moved to the studio, all parties were brought together and the producer ceased to be uniquely tied to any one party (except for the song writer and label who were completely bracketed at this stage). In the studio, all three types of ambiguity were at play. Thus, producers continued to use many of the practices that began in earlier phases as shown in Table 2, rapidly iterating between practices rooted in *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* orientations. For example, *setting the stage* was a clear joining technique intended to further the project's creative capacity, while *crafting boundaries* was a clear *tertius gaudens* practice designed to keep people apart from each other. In the spirit of the *tertius iungens* approach,

producers *affirmed direction*, while they explicitly kept people apart when they *absorbed challenges to each other's expertise*. While ambiguity over quality and occupational jurisdictions could be reduced with some of the practices employed, ambiguity over the creative transformation process was not easily resolved. Instead, producers invoked a strategy that blended *tertius iugens* and *tertius gaudens* orientations to build creative capacity; gently managing differences in opinion over creative production; and preventing the other two types of ambiguity from impeding the creative process. When finished in the studio, producers were left with many possible performances that needed to be edited and integrated during the last phase of creative production, final synthesis.

Phase IV: Final Synthesis

In the final synthesis phase, producers guided the “mixing,” or editing of the large quantity of song “tracks” produced into a final song mix for use in a demo, pitch package, or album. Due to advances in digital technology, producers could cheaply record multiple takes of performances in the studio and decide which ones to use later in the mixing process. Mixing was often laborious and incredibly detail-oriented. A single song could easily take an entire 8 to 12-hour day to experiment with different post-production effects and arrive at the final mix. Musicians and song writers were typically bracketed from this phase. However, they were not the only ones. James bracketed just about everyone to work with his engineer:

During the mix I allow no one there. No one but me and the engineer. I do not allow guests of any kind including the artist because you end up spending all your time explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it and how come there is no guitar part there? Well, the guitar part is not there because it is not time to put it in and by the time I am finished explaining, I have spent 30 minutes explaining it.

Producers engaged in *tertius gaudens* behavior during final synthesis - protecting their engineers from distractions and crafting role boundaries for all other parties. Producers helped

guide engineers' aesthetic by using *tertius iungens* practices such as introducing analogies, referencing songs and providing descriptive metaphors to guide the engineers' interpretation of the songs. But for the most part, they gave engineers expansive discretion to work with mixing technology and develop the creative and technical flourishes that could transform a song into a hit. Producers bracketed other parties to the process, keeping label executives (and sometimes even artists) away until they felt confident that the quality of their product could stand on its own.

However, for producers with major label deals, it was critical to check in with the label frequently in order to ensure that the sound produced would be viable in the marketplace. Producers sought and valued this feedback as labels had the best knowledge of what would sell. The challenge was that the label's ability to assess the value of songs that were not fully realized was limited. "Most record company guys do not understand pre-production whatsoever. They understand the end result....they don't understand what something can be. They only understand what something is." Troy explained how he navigated this tension by checking in with the label only when the lead vocals were finished to avoid a premature negative evaluation.

At the appropriate moment I'll invite them [the label] down to hear the progress, play them a rough mix that I think is representative of what the record's going to be...You can't leave it up to their imagination... if there are too many blanks to fill then it's premature to play them the music. I like to have the lead vocal finished. So you're not, "Well, this is just a rough vocal. It's gonna be good." They go away feeling, boy, I sure hope they sing better than what I just heard.

However, labels were impatient and often did not wait for "checkins." Throughout mixing, producers' cell phones rang persistently as they fielded calls from label personnel wanting updates on the project and wanting to hear mixes. Travis responded to them, "Everything is

going great. We'll have the final mixes to you on the 15th as promised. They'll be in on time. The artist is really loving what we've put together." Regardless of the reality, Travis handled all calls by giving everyone a purely positive, upbeat update, giving the label status information, but bracketing their involvement until a later point when the mixes were completed.

Finally, producers worked with artists, managers, and label executives to decide which songs would make it on the final projects, whether changes needed to be made to the final mixes, whether more songs had to be recorded, and which songs would be released as singles (to radio or iTunes). These decisions could ultimately be controlled by the record label, but producers and artists were deeply invested in these decisions and tried to influence the outcomes the best they could. The nightmare result for any producer was a final meeting where a label executive said, "There's nothing I can sell on this album, go do it again."

Nexus Work Outcomes

The skill with which a producer engaged in nexus work practices affected their ability to influence the creative product, the viability of the project, and the potential for repeat collaborations among all parties. A project had market viability if it had a reasonable chance of success in finding a market audience – based on the internal (production) resources provided as opposed to the external dynamics involved in bringing the product to market. In terms of outcomes, the importance of preserving project relationships cannot be underestimated. Since the producers in our study were located in Nashville, a city marked by dense, overlapping networks, bringing a project to fruition in a way that did not allow the possibility for the parties to work together again in the future was not an alternative.

Because the projects in our sample resulted in a broad range of creative outputs – pitch packages, songs and recorded material, and because our unit of analysis was on the producer as opposed to the producer’s output, comparable commercial outcomes are not available. We can say that many of the projects observed and debriefed as part of this research went on to become commercially successful - winning several CMA and Grammy awards—and others were heralded as triumphs by critics. Producers on these projects used nexus work practices to meet the challenges of both nurturing collective creativity and integrating diverse contributions into a marketable product.

Producers that made use of nexus work practices were better able to manage the creative process than those who did not. John, a producer who quit his producer role by the end of the study, by his own admittance did not use nexus practices such as fostering a generative network deftly. When he turned down a fellow songwriter’s song, he caused tensions in the relationship: “I had one writer, he was a good friend. He called and said, ‘Oh! I’ve got just the song for you.’ And then I’d have to tell him it didn’t work. And it killed me to say that. And he got real angry, and said, Oh, now you’re a big time producer...” Not fostering a generative network effectively was not solely responsible for undermining John’s success, but it did have negative implications for John’s access to song pipelines and led to a career change.

When producers did not use certain nexus practices at the appropriate time, they had a more difficult time managing the creative process and the project suffered. Failure to use certain practices, such as absorbing challenges to expertise or checking in, were associated with not only compromised careers and damaged relationships, but unsuccessful or aborted projects. For

example, one producer recounted how his bracketing of record label executives without checking in resulted in a failed project:

Ultimately we made the record without much input from the label. At least one of the dissenters was out of the way, and so it was just between me and the artist. But what ended up happening was that they [the label] were out of the way for the production, and she [the artist] got the songs she wanted, but they [the label] obviously won, because they didn't sell it.

He concluded that because the label was bracketed from too much of the production and final synthesis process, they did not develop a vested interest in marketing the album. "How could they sell this record if they didn't have any interest emotionally? How could they sell it if they didn't have any say in it, since they know what they can sell?" The *tertius gaudens* approach to keeping the label out of the loop backfired. Our research suggests that effective producers developed the capability to identify when particular nexus work practices should be used – learning to blend *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches of brokerage as the creative process progressed.

DISCUSSION

Organizational theorists have devoted much attention to the role of brokers (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997; Burt, 2004; Obstfeld, 2005) and boundary spanners (Tushman, 1977; Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Allen, 2000) and the ability of those in these roles to transfer information from one source to another. While these conceptions are slightly different (Fleming and Waguespack, 2007), neither conception has benefited from an understanding of the relational practices that underlie the role of brokers who are responsible not only for transferring information, but integrating disparate contributions into a creative, coherent whole. Tushman asked: "Do persons filling these [boundary spanning] roles simply transfer (or filter) information, or are they involved in a wider range of activities?" (1977: 602). Our research

answers this question with a theoretically grounded explanation of nexus work on creative projects, contributing to an increasingly fruitful theoretical exchange on creative brokerage.

Prior conceptions of brokerage have viewed relational approaches to brokerage that focus on connecting parties to achieve collaborative outcomes (*tertius iungens*) as very distinct from structural approaches of brokerage where brokers' ability to keep parties apart and cultivate information and power advantages is central (*tertius gaudens*) (Obstfeld, 2005; Burt, 2004). Recent research suggests that while the *tertius gaudens* approach may help foster the generation of creative ideas, this approach is less suitable for implementing creative ideas (Fleming et al, 2007; Fleming & Waguespack, 2007; Obstfeld, 2005; Ibarra et al, 2005).

Brokers bridging structural holes face an "action problem" as the parties surrounding a structural hole may maintain different interests and perspectives that inhibit coordination (2005: 101). Individuals striving to achieve maximum advantages from their network position may detract from the creation of collective goods (Ibarra, et al., 2005; Fleming and Waguespack, 2007) and in this sense, brokerage may inhibit the synthesis and application of ideas (Fleming et al, 2007). Thus, cohesive, dense networks may be better suited to mobilize actors around creative projects. However there are limits at which such projects can sustain their creativity (Uzzi and Spiro, 2005). As Fleming and colleagues (2007) suggest, one way to reconcile this debate is by taking a more comprehensive view of the creative process.

By studying how individuals navigate their brokerage role throughout the creative process, we enrich and add precision to this broadening debate. Our ethnographic research showed how independent Country music producers used practices that effectively blended both types of

brokerage as they moved through four different phases: 1) resource gathering; 2) scoping the project interface; 3) creative production; and 4) final synthesis. We show that one aspect of the “action problem” that brokers face is ambiguity. Without shared agreement about what makes a ‘hit song’; without agreement on the roles that each expert would play; and without agreement on how to transform individual creative contributions into a coherent whole, producers relied upon a distinct form of relational work we call nexus work. However, instead of wielding their brokerage position to accumulate individual advantage, nexus actors leveraged their position to transform individual expertise into a coherent creative whole.

More specifically, we found that in the resource gathering phase, producers pursued a *tertius iungens* approach to brokerage - fostering a generative network and building legitimacy for the project. But they also used their brokerage position in the *tertius gaudens* tradition to create slack for the project. When scoping the project interface, producers pursued a *tertius iungens* approach - introducing analogies and deferring decisions in order to bring parties together, keep creative options open, and create a shared quality aesthetic. However, to prevent the premature evaluation of ideas, producers bracketed some parties to the creative process in the *tertius gaudens* tradition. When the project moved to the creative production phase, producers brought people together by setting the stage and affirming direction. To prevent ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions from creating conflict, they crafted role boundaries and absorbed challenges to expertise in the *tertius gaudens* tradition. In the final synthesis stage, producers leveraged their position to bracket almost all parties to the creative process except for the engineer. With the engineer, producers engaged in *tertius iungens* behavior, encouraging the transformation of raw inputs into a product that could be appreciated as commercially viable by external evaluators. Thus, producers blended two approaches to

brokerage that have previously been conceptualized as very distinct - in every phase of the creative process.

When we assessed how this blended strategy affected the three different types of ambiguity that producers faced, we learned that the brokerage approach used varied with the type of ambiguity encountered. To reduce ambiguity over the quality of sound created, producers used a *tertius iungens* orientation to help create a shared quality aesthetic. To reduce ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions, producers used a *tertius gaudens* orientation to help people scope their role without impinging on the creative process. Most interestingly, producers did not try to reduce ambiguity over the transformation process, but instead employed a *tertius iungens* orientation to build creative capacity. This analysis helps explain why brokers used one approach over another at a particular point in time. Producers used their position to either bring people together, or keep them apart in service of collective creativity – and the nature of the ambiguity faced triggered one type of brokerage over another.

Contributions

Despite the fact that project work is common to creative industries such as film (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Lampel and Shamsie, 2003; Jones, 2006), theatre (Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005); art (Becker, 1982; DiMaggio, 1991), and music (Faulkner, 1983), we lack a deep appreciation of how individuals at the center of these projects manage creative brokerage. Project work is not unique to creative industries (Adler, 2001; Powell and Snellman, 2004), but is frequently used in technology (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Fleming and Waguespack, 2007; O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007); construction (Eccles, 1981) and production and manufacturing (Smith, 1997) industries. Yet, as Barley and Kunda (2001) argue, our

conceptions of organizing will not keep pace with this phenomenon without field studies of the work practices that underlie such forms.

Our research narrows this gap by focusing on the work practices those in the creative brokerage, or nexus role, use to bring a creative product to fruition. With a work practice approach (Barley and Kunda, 2001; Brown and Duguid, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002), we learned how nexus actors integrate contributions to foster collective creativity and found that managing ambiguity was a central task. In unpacking these findings, we make three contributions to organizational theory. First, in contrast with extant theories of *tertius gaudens* behavior, we show that practices associated with the *tertius gaudens* orientation can be used to achieve collective ends as opposed to individual gain. Second, we show how two previously distinct conceptions of brokerage are interwoven throughout the creative process. Third, we provide a process model that identifies when different types of ambiguity are encountered in the creative process and how brokers respond. Collectively, these contributions offer a deeper understanding of the conditions likely to trigger one type of brokerage over another.

Deepening our understanding of the tertius gaudens approach to brokerage. While network theorists have long argued that roles emerge from the patterns of ties that people hold (Burt, 1992), little research has examined the work practices used by those who hold structurally central roles (Ibarra, et al., 2005) and are engaged in integration work. Thus, our conception of brokerage has rested on two ideal conceptions of brokerage that do not reflect the realities of brokers who must not just transmit ideas but synthesize them. The *tertius gaudens* approach to brokerage, as currently depicted, focuses on maintaining unique contacts and sources of information (Burt, 2004; Obstfeld, 2005; Ibarra et al, 2005; Fleming and

Waguespack, 2007). As Obstfeld argues, the language of structural holes is “often language of competition, control, relative advantage, and manipulation” (2005: 120). Thus, the assumption that the benefits that flow from such a unique position may also uniquely flow back to the broker in question is a natural one.

Our research brings this assumption into question and deepens our understanding of *tertius gaudens* behavior. We find that when ideas must be implemented; when integration work is required, brokers cannot extract advantages from their structural position on their own, but must use relational skill to transform raw inputs for both individual and mutual benefit. When we found producers leveraging their unique structural position, such as using the ‘talk back’ button to reinforce their position as the ‘third in between’; bracketing parties to the creative process; or absorbing comments to prevent their transmittal from one party to another, these actions were taken to help individuals master their performances, save face, inhibit conflict, or create an environment conducive to creativity. They did not leverage their structural position to accumulate power but to buffer competing visions of the project from impeding the flow of creative ideas. We did not find producers in our study using their unique structural position to achieve individual information or social capital advantages³. Thus, we show how *tertius gaudens* behavior can be used for collective good and we would expect brokers to do so, when they are engaged in integration tasks.

Nexus work—managing integration in creative work: the blended approach. Despite the fact that Simonton’s model (1999) of creativity requires *both* variation and selection (or

³ We were not able to explore the contractual elements of producers’ deals with labels and thus the financial advantages gained from their brokerage work, which could be significant. The level of access we were able to achieve would not have been possible if that had been a goal of this research. We expect that future research at a more macro scale may be better suited to gaining insight into this aspect of production work.

synthesis) to develop creative ideas that are useful, scholars of creativity have focused almost exclusively on the generation of ideas to the detriment of synthesis work. Thus, we have a deep understanding of how creative ideas are generated but not how they are put into practice. A separate literature on brokerage (Obstfeld, 2005; Ibarra et al, 2005; Fleming et al, 2007; Fleming and Waguespack, 2007) has come to the conclusion that a broker's unique structural position is important to generating creative ideas, but has acknowledged that the *tertius gaudens* approach - which focuses on maintaining unique contacts is not well suited for reusing, integrating or implementing ideas - Burt's final frontier of brokerage (2004).

Instead, we find the *tertius iungens* approach to brokerage critical to resolving the "action problem" of putting creative ideas into practice (Obstfeld, 2005). As Obstfeld states: "the action of the *tertius iungens* is not that of cultivating the preexisting competition of structurally equivalent alters but of facilitating, locating and even forging coordination action between disparate network members" (Obstfeld, 2005: 121). To reconcile this debate, Fleming and colleagues (2007) broke new ground by examining both the generation and reuse of ideas in the same study and suggest that a more dynamic understanding of the creative process is necessary to tease apart these contradictory effects. We suspect that an incomplete view of the creative process has led to two idealized conceptions of brokerage. The question then is – how does brokerage work unfold throughout the creative process given the challenges at hand?

By examining the entire creative process, we found brokers using both *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches at different times and with different parties to enhance collective creativity. The producers in our study did not use one type of brokerage earlier in the process and another type later in the process. By tracing the specific work practices used, we found that both

approaches to brokerage were blended throughout the creative process. The producers in our study pursued a dialectic approach to help manage the dualities of both generating creative options and choosing among them. Producers strove to maintain creative options to prevent the premature elimination of potentially fruitful paths of exploration; create an environment conducive to collective creativity; and prevent the disenfranchisement of those needed to support the project in the final stages of creative production.

We suspect that one reason why our results are contrary to Obstfeld (2005), is that Obstfeld's study was focused on coordinating actors "involved" with innovations as opposed to the lower level tasks of integrating ideas. Individuals in his study were trying to get the same people in the room and identify common ground⁴. Obstfeld posits that: "the activity of the tertius iungens is most challenging when the nature and prospects for projects are uncertain and the relevant actors to engage are not apparent. In these cases, identifying the different actors to engage and the appeals that will resonate with those actors are the subject of considerable skills, quite discrete from the structure of the social network itself" (2005: 122). Given, this observation, perhaps it is not a surprise that we find both brokerage approaches actively in play – however it is ambiguity and not uncertainty that trigger different approaches to brokerage.

Ambiguity and creative brokerage. Research on creative projects in cultural industries has focused on demand uncertainty (Hirsch, 1972) and risk adverse gatekeepers (Baker and Faulkner, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 2003). In contrast, our theory emphasizes ambiguity

⁴ Our findings suggest an interesting methodological observation – Obstfeld (2005) surveyed people to measure the degree to which their behavior aligned with the tertius iungens orientation to brokerage and then predicted their involvement in innovation. This tool did not measure tertius gaudens behavior. We did not survey people but had an open research question as to how producers managed to integrate ideas and then later coded the behavior we discovered. In comparing our open coding scheme to the literature, we discovered Obstfeld's six factor scale for tertius iungens behavior and applied it retrospectively – discovering behavior that was both consistent with this scale and behavior that was consistent with extant definitions of tertius gaudens behavior.

rather than uncertainty, focusing on the lack of clarity over what, how and who is involved on a creative project. Our theoretical framework of how individuals in the nexus role manage ambiguity complements practice-based work examining coordination in temporary projects (Bechky, 2006); gatekeepers' evaluations of pitch packages (Elsbach and Kramer, 2003); and the challenges of music composers (Faulkner, 1983). Scholars of creative work typically recognize that some degree of ambiguity is inherent, because neither the process nor the outcome can be specified a priori (Amabile, 1996). When individuals confront ambiguity that can impair a project's progress, the "confusion created by multiple meanings call[s] for social construction and invention" (Weick, 1995: 95). How this ambiguity is addressed is less clear. By showing specifically how producers in the nexus role responded to this call for invention, we explain how different types of ambiguity can trigger different types of creative brokerage.

Producers used a *tertius gaudens* approach to reduce ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions to avoid task conflict transitioning into personal conflict (e.g., Jehn, 1997) and impair the creative flow of ideas. When competing values were at stake, the conflation of task and emotional conflict can become all too easy (Edmondson and Smith, 2006). However, when trying to reduce ambiguity over quality, producers used a *tertius iungens* approach: staging introductions when the timing was right to garner resources for the project; introducing analogies and setting the stage for creativity. What will interest scholars of creativity is that nexus workers did not strive to reduce all forms of ambiguity. Producers maintained some strategic ambiguity to help generate creative ideas, preserve relationships, and create the conditions likely to foster creative work (e.g., Amabile, et al., 1996). Instead of trying to reduce ambiguity over the transformation process, producers built creative capacity – in terms of written songs, recorded material, emotional vibe, backup singers and musicians, studio time,

and budget—setting stage and creating slack. This suggests that individuals pursuing creative work might want to manage ambiguity differently – directing their attention to building creative capacity where ambiguity cannot be reduced.

Although nexus work may be more prevalent than our theories suggest, our research focused on one industry. Because the producers in our study were embedded in dense networks local to Nashville, this likely exacerbated the need to engage in relational practices that permitted potential repeat collaborations (e.g. Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti, 1997). It is an open question whether the same relational practices would be present in industries with sparse networks. Future research would benefit from testing these ideas across industries. Our specification of the nexus role, the phases of creative production, and the three types of ambiguity provide a useful framework as a basis of comparison.

We found that by reducing ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions with a *tertius gaudens* approach; creating a shared quality aesthetic with a *tertius iungens* approach; and building creative capacity, producers were able to bring a creative project to fruition. As knowledge becomes more important to our economy, more work is likely to take place in projects – particularly in ones that cross organizational boundaries (e.g. Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Jones, 1996; Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr, 1996; Powell and Snellman, 2004). Our research suggests that the architects of such projects will have significant integration responsibilities and thus will need to stay attuned to the triggers of nexus work – drawing from both *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches as appropriate to cultivate, maintain, and protect collective creativity.

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