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No funny business: Precarious work and emotional labour in stand-up comedy

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Abstract

Freelance creative work is a labour of love where opportunities for self-expression are combined with exploitative working conditions. This paper explores this dynamic by showing how a group of freelance creative labourers navigate employment whilst coping with the pressures associated with economic precarity. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we argue that full-time stand-up comedians engage in 'pecuniary' forms of emotion management in an occupational field where social networks and professional relationships play a prominent role. First, comedians project an image of positivity to demonstrate a willingness to work for little or no pay in order to curry favour with comedy club promoters. Second, comedians suppress feelings of anxiety and frustration that arise from financial insecurity in order to keep their relationships with promoters on an even keel – even when the rate of pay and promptness of remuneration fall below acceptable standards. Our study thus has implications for other creative sectors in which precarity is the norm, since it suggests that emotional labour is a resource not only for engaging with customers and clients but also for engaging with multiple employers, negotiating pay and dealing with conditions of insecurity in freelance settings – often with unintended, paradoxical, results.

Introduction

> If you're going to go into comedy, you should really love what you do…If you're going to pick a livelihood which is as precarious on all levels, not merely a financial level but in terms of the people that you have to deal with, in terms of the audiences that you have to face, all of these precarious elements – well, you're going to have to adore it. (Nigel)

Nigel, a stand-up comedian with more than 20 years' experience, articulates mixed feelings about his occupation: one must love it precisely because the job is so uncertain and insecure. His reference to 'precariousness' is perhaps not coincidental. The concept of precarity, referring to 'existential, financial and social insecurity' in the domain of work (de Peuter, 2011: 419), is a theoretical lens for studying forms of casual and irregular labour that have risen to prominence with the demise of employment safeguards and the roll-back of statutory entitlements (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). The creative industries – which include performing arts like stand-up comedy – are a privileged site of analysis around discussions of precarity to the extent that employment tends to be project-based, contracts are short-term, job protection is limited or non-existent, career trajectories are unpredictable, income is often low and unequally distributed, unionization is rare, and social insurance is patchy at best (de Peuter, 2014; Harney, 2010). This underscores Turrini and Chichi's (2013: 511) point that 'show business is paradigmatic of the reorganization of contemporary work'.

Since artistic work is a 'labour of love' (Hesmondhalgh, 2010), creative labourers like Nigel are more willing to tolerate low wages, periodic unemployment and uncertain career

prospects as part and parcel of their working lives (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). Indeed, creative labourers display an intense commitment to their work whereby long hours and exploitative arrangements are intermingled with imagination and self-expression. This points to a 'pleasure-pain axis' (McRobbie, 2004: 132) in which the intrinsic rewards of creative work serves to obscure – and, at times, justify – highly precarious conditions of employment, so emphasizing the (oftentimes ambiguous and contradictory) emotional dimensions of creative labour.

One of the key motivations for an empirical analysis of artistic work is therefore to engage in a conversation about how labour market structures influence subjective experiences of making a living as a creative labourer (Smith and McKinlay, 2009). By the same token, it is also important to examine how subjective experiences interact with the context of employment within the creative sector. Our study take its cue from this approach by analyzing how a highly individualized and unregulated sector of the creative industries – stand-up comedy in the UK – offers a site for intense fulfilment as well as profound unease for participants. We argue that comedians engage in 'pecuniary' forms of emotion management (Bolton and Boyd, 2003) to negotiate the pleasure-pain axis in an occupational field where social networks and professional relationships play a prominent role. Among these emotional stratagems, two are especially common. First, comedians project an image of positivity to demonstrate a willingness to work for little or no pay in order to curry favour with comedy club promoters. This results in the prevalence of free work not only as a means to enter the occupation but also as a bargaining device for future employment. Second, comedians suppress feelings of anxiety and frustration that arise from financial insecurity in order to keep their relationships with promoters on an even keel – even when the rate of pay and promptness of remuneration fall below acceptable standards. In this way, conditions of

precarity are perpetuated by attempts to diminish their effects via emotion management. Our study thus has implications for other creative sectors in which precarity is the norm, since it suggests that emotional labour is a resource not only for engaging with customers and clients (as it has traditionally been understood) but also for engaging with multiple employers, negotiating pay and dealing with conditions of insecurity in freelance settings – often with unintended, paradoxical, results.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on the creative industries, paying particular attention to the relation between social networks and professional relationships on the one hand and free work and low pay on the other. This, in turn, allows us to highlight the role of emotional labour in freelance creative settings. We then discuss our empirical site and method before presenting our findings. We conclude by discussing the implications of our study for understanding patterns of precarity in the creative industries and beyond.

The creative sector as a site of precarious work

The creative industries, which encompasses the performing arts as well as media work, design and other creative services (Flew and Cunningham, 2010), are characterized by individual strategies for finding work and coping with uncertain, often informal, labour markets (Kalleberg, 2009). For example, word-of-mouth – rather than formal application processes – tends to dominate the search for jobs in areas such as film and TV (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2009), video game design (Thompson et al., 2016) and live music (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). With this informality comes a reliance on industry insiders to secure employment in a creative context, which has led to the idea of 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001) – that is, an instrumental mode of building relationships with occupational actors on an

individualized, one-to-one basis. Networks are thus a defining feature of freelance work in the creative sector (Potts et al., 2008), both in terms of providing access to work and in terms of offering opportunities for mutual support in a precarious work setting (Menger, 1999; Shorthose and Strange, 2004).

Empirical studies underscore different types of professional relationships that creative workers need to establish in order to compensate for an endemic lack of job security. For example, film professionals form 'semi-permanent work groups' comprised of individuals with different specialisms who move together from one project to another (Blair, 2001). Similarly, repertory theatre actors cultivate relationships with directors and theatre managers who take staffing decisions and are therefore key to securing seasonal contracts (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006). Jazz musicians, meanwhile, rely on well-connected band leaders who have a relationship to booking agents who provide access to jobs (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). Here, personal connections – whether treating friendship instrumentally (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006) or defining relationships more collaboratively (Coulsen, 2012) – stand in for official routes for securing work. Social networks and professional relationships – with both fellow workers and potential employers – thus provide a degree of stability and continuity for creative workers within an employment context that is otherwise characterized by flux and unpredictability (Blair, 2003; Neff et al., 2005).

However, commentators have pointed out that the reliance on social networks exacerbates economic inequality in the creative sector (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Lee, 2016), notably the prevalence of low paid work and free labour (Terranova, 2000). This is captured by Ursell's (2000: 822) depiction of an 'economy of favours' among freelance creative workers. On this view, creative labourers make friends with key institutional actors by offering

goodwill gestures (which may involve working for free), which serves to regulate an occupational group and control access to work. This is especially the case in a field where financial rewards are subservient to other motivations, leading to forms of 'self-exploitation' (Ross, 2008) whereby workers willingly accept low or no pay for services rendered. For example, film professionals may lower their usual fee to secure creatively more challenging projects and enable skills development through 'stretchwork' (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006). Likewise, for jazz musicians, inadequate rates of pay can be justified by other opportunities a gig might offer, such as creative expression, skills acquisition or establishing a network (Umney, 2016). The lower end of the labour market is particularly susceptible to such conditions since this is where aspiring professionals cluster and try to accumulate contacts, reputation, skills and experience by any means necessary (Siebert and Wilson, 2012). Freelance creative settings are thus characterized by a widespread acceptance – albeit a grudging one – of extended periods of working without remuneration or at a discount rate, which is further compounded by low trade union membership and a lack of collective bargaining (Heery et al., 2004; Saundry et al., 2007).

Creative labourers therefore find themselves in paradoxical – or 'highly ambivalent' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010: 17) – situation. On the one hand, creative work offers an opportunity for individual autonomy and imaginative endeavours beyond the bounds of conventional, permanent, employment within an employing organization (Kalleberg, 2000). On the other hand, the intrinsic rewards provided by creative work obscures – and, at times, justifies – wider structural inequalities such as poor pay, uncertain career prospects, individual risk-taking, and a lack of social insurance (Ross, 2008). While some paint an idealistic portrait of the neo-bohemian 'creative class' in terms of both economic growth and personal fulfilment (Florida, 2002), others are more circumspect and point to what McRobbie (2011:

33) calls 'pathologies of precariousness'. For example, freelance film professionals experience vertiginous swings between exhilarating, all-consuming projects during periods of employment to emotional exhaustion and social isolation during periods of unemployment (Rowlands and Handy, 2012). Similarly, for creative workers in advertising and magazine publishing, glamorous events and hedonistic socializing are intermingled with heavy workloads, gruelling hours and stressful deadlines, resulting in professional lives characterized by deeply 'ambivalent pleasures' (Nixon and Crewe, 2004: 141). Such studies highlight the consequences for creative workers whose passionate commitment to their work is matched only by their ability to tolerate oftentimes dire working conditions (Bain and McLean, 2013; Gill, 2010; Kennedy, 2009).

As we have seen, creative labourers rely on social networks and professional relationships in order to secure paid employment and allay the most problematic aspects of freelance work (e.g. financial uncertainty, social isolation). But there is more to the story. As Rowlands and Handy (2012: 658) note, research tends to depict 'a fairly sharp dichotomy between the aversive extrinsic conditions of insecure, project-based labour and the intrinsic rewards of creative work'. To wit: the pleasure is said to lie on the side of creative work while the pain is said to lie on the side of the precarious employment context. But what tends to be neglected in these discussions is how creative labourers actively *manage* (rather than passively experience) the pleasure-pain axis. What is needed, therefore, are analyses that explore how creative labourers seek to cope with the most precarious aspects of their work (e.g. engaging with multiple employers, negotiating pay, dealing with financial insecurity) alongside the more gratifying components of such jobs. To this end, it is useful to turn now to the concept of 'emotional labour' and see how it can enrich our understanding of subjective experiences of work in freelance creative settings.

Emotional labour beyond service work

Coined by Hochschild (2003: 7) in her seminal study of flight attendants and debt collectors, the concept of emotional labour refers to the ability of workers to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'. Typically, the appropriate set of emotions is prescribed by management in service sector work. Of course, individuals also engage in emotion work in their private lives but when emotions are commercialized by organizations and subject to instrumental 'feeling rules', capitalist relations of exploitation extend into the most intimate spheres of life (Brook, 2009).

Commentators have extended Hochchild's insights by reflecting on the nuances of emotional labour (for an overview, see Ward and McMurray, 2016). In particular, Bolton and Boyd (2003) take issue with Hochschild's simplistic division between the private and the commercial use of emotion. In effect, Hochschild (2003: 19) argues that authentic emotion at home is 'transmutated' into alienated emotion at work, with deleterious consequences for individuals. But, as Bolton and Boyd (2003) suggest, employees enact a range of emotional performances in organizations – some of which, significantly, are outside of strictly commercial considerations. Revisiting the case of flight attendants, they identity four types of emotion management: presentational, philanthropic, prescriptive and pecuniary. Presentational emotion management refers to the way we are socialized to feel and behave – what Hochschild elsewhere calls 'conventions of feeling' (Hochschild, 1979). Philanthropic emotion management, meanwhile, describes feelings that are directed towards others selflessly, rather than for the sake of the organization. Both prescriptive and pecuniary emotion management, finally, refer to the explicit guidelines about the correct way for employees to think, feel and act in line with organizational objectives; while the former

outlines the norms of conduct within the company culture (professional feeling rules), the latter determines the appropriate way to deal with customers (commercial feeling rules). The range of emotional repertoires suggest that employees in fact have more leeway in their emotional displays than Hochschild imagines (Bolton, 2005).

Others have added to this critique by pointing out that emotional labour in a commercial context is not necessarily alienating for service workers; indeed, employees may also gain considerable satisfaction from displaying organizationally-sanctioned feelings in customer interactions. For example, supermarket clerks alleviate the monotony of their work by engaging in cheerful conversations with customers (Tolich, 1993). Similarly, call centre workers experience both pleasure (e.g. displaying empathy) and pain (e.g. receiving abuse) when dealing with customers over the phone (Korczynski, 2003). For cabin crew, professional feeling rules provide them with a valuable sense of identity and source of pride; by the same token, they resent attempts by management to reduce the emotional component of their work (Curley and Royle, 2013). These examples point to the use of emotional labour not only as a mean of organizational control but also as a way for employees to assert autonomy over their own work.

The double-edged nature of emotional labour means has particular relevance for studying work and employment in the creative industries. After all, creative labourers experience a 'pleasure-pain axis' (McRobbie, 2004: 132) as part of their job. In other words, the discomfort and anxiety caused by low pay, job insecurity and career uncertainty may be mitigated – to a greater or lesser extent – by engaging in creatively fulfilling and intrinsically meaningful work. Studies have attempted to flesh out this pleasure-pain axis in a range of creative fields. For example, Lindgren, Packendorff and Sergi (2014) identify four groups of

emotions among workers in theatre and opera: thrill, anxiety, confidence and weariness. Each emotion, whether positive or negative, must be effectively managed by workers who are responsible for forging their own career path in an unpredictable employment context. Likewise, Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2008) study of an independent television production team reveals that collaborative work relationships in a highly competitive industry involve both camaraderie and fun as well as stress and worry. The pleasure-pain axis here is directly related to future job prospects since 'building one's reputation hinges upon the management of emotions' (2008: 113), such as the ability to care for distraught contestants on a TV talent show. The push-and-pull between precariousness and passion is therefore a key emotional dynamic that creative workers need to cope with in their occupational lives if their wish to thrive and progress.

While pecuniary forms of emotion management have been explored in relation to clients, customers and colleagues, few studies have examined how freelance creative labourers induce and suppress emotion in relation to multiple employers. Indeed, the literature tends to neglect the affective dimensions of establishing social networks and professional relationships in the pursuit of work. This is an oversight because we might legitimately expect pecuniary forms of emotion management to play a significant role in how freelance creative labourers vie for work in an intensely competitive field. Of course, the live performance of stand-up comedy is itself a form of emotion work: comedy club patrons expect the comedian to evoke in them a positive emotional response, indicated most obviously by laughter (Westwood, 2007). But the question the paper seeks to address concerns the conditions of employment on the live comedy circuit, namely: How do freelance creative labourers use emotional labour to secure work, negotiate pay and cope with the insecurities that arise from precarious employment contexts? Addressing this question will enhance our understanding of the way freelance

creative workers actively manage the pleasure-pain axis in relation to their work and, in turn, allows us to respond to Gibson and Kong's (2005: 554) call for further research on 'how workers in various occupations across the cultural economy respond to such [precarious] circumstances, mitigate risk and establish relationships with other players in their sectors'.

Stand-up comedy in context

The emergence of stand-up comedy in the UK is complex. Antecedents include Victorian music hall and early 20th-century variety theatre, as well as earlier European traditions of minstrels and jesters. But stand-up comedy as we know it today originated in the United States in the 1950s with the rise of the so-called 'sick comics' such as Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce (Double, 2014). These comedians delivered comic anecdotes, wry observation and quick-fire gags without the theatricality that characterized earlier traditions of comedy such as vaudeville (Nesteroff, 2015). It was this strain of stand-up comedy that influenced the British-based 'alternative comedy' boom of the late 1970s and 1980s, which emphasized edgy and original material rather than the formulaic and second-hand – not to mention racist, sexist and homophobic – jokes that circulated in working men's clubs at the time (Wilmut and Rosengard, 1989). Stand-up comedy continued to grow in the 1990s and 2000, flourishing 'from a tiny, largely metropolitan scene peopled by radicals, eccentrics and crazy amateurs, to the highly commercialized scene of today' (Double, 2012: 208). Large talent management agencies, especially Avalon and Off the Kerb, played an instrumental role in the popularization of stand-up comedy by branching out from live promotion into television production, thus exposing comedians to a wider audience. In part due to the success of prime-time Saturday night TV shows such as *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow* and *Live at the*

Apollo, live comedy has exploded in the UK over the last decade – both in its mainstream and more alternative 'DIY' varieties (Double, 2014).

As a sign of its rise to prominence, 'stand-up comedian' is now listed by industry body Creative Skillset (2018) as a formal job role in the performing arts. A standard definition of a stand-up comedian is '[a] single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh' (Double, 1997: 4), although it may also involve musical acts, double acts and sketch troupes. Obtaining accurate industry statistics is difficult, but in 2012 – when we began our research project – there were an estimated 1,370 full-time stand-up comedians working in the UK alone (Benedictus, 2012), derived from comedy listings website Chortle, although this number does not include the vast numbers of amateur and part-time comedians who perform around the country. In the UK, stand-up comedy takes place in venues that range from the function rooms of pubs to dedicated comedy clubs; taken together, these comprise the 'comedy circuit'. A typical comedy night involves multiple comedians who perform for varying lengths of time (usually between five to 30 minutes) and different rates of pay: a compere, an opener, an unpaid open spot for newer acts, a middle spot and a headliner. Beyond the circuit, stand-up comedy takes place in regional art centres, concert halls and even stadiums. Comedians may earn extra money from other types of work – for example, studio audience warm-up, corporate voice-overs, and appearing on radio and television shows – but live gigs are their primary source of income.

Despite its increasing cultural and economic importance, the academic literature on work and employment in stand-up comedy is surprisingly scant. Most studies tend to focus on the on-stage performance aspects of stand-up comedy, such as the rhetorics of humour or the relationship between performer and audience (Mintz, 1985; Brodie, 2008; Quirk, 2015;

Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009; Westwood, 2007). But stand-up comedy can also be examined from another, 'offstage', perspective: as a form of employment within the creative industries. On the one hand, stand-up comedy differs from work elsewhere in the creative industries – such as television, film and IT – in the sense that there is a multiplicity of employers (i.e. promoters who run comedy clubs) rather than a small group of powerful institutional actors who shape the dominant logics in the field (Christopherson, 2008). On the other hand, stand-up comedy bears similarities to other performing arts, most notably live music, insofar as it involves high levels of individualization, an unstructured institutional environment and extremely short-term – mostly informal and verbal – contracts (Morgan and Wood, 2014). A focus on stand-up comedians is therefore useful in providing insights into the kind of struggles, tensions, remunerations and coping mechanisms involved in forms of precarious employment in the creative industries.

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 64 UK-based full-time stand-up comedians (i.e. individuals who earn most or all of their income from comedy-related activities) between spring 2012 and summer 2014. 55 respondents are male and nine are female, which speaks to the gender imbalance within the comedy circuit where – at the time of our data collection – there were an estimated 1,130 full-time male acts compared to some 240 full-time female acts (Benedictus, 2012). Most interviews took place face-to-face, although ten were conducted over the telephone or on Skype. The longest interview was two hours and 15 minutes and the shortest was 40 minutes, with an average of one hour. Both authors were equally involved in data collection. All interviews were fully transcribed by a professional transcriber and subsequently checked by the authors. To guarantee anonymity, all names have been changed.

We contacted comedians in two main ways: 1) personal contacts and 2) comedians' websites. The first author has personal links with several comedians who, in the early stages of the project, provided us with the contact details of other comedians. However, this method of 'snowballing' proved to be less effective than we hoped. Subsequently, we contacted the majority of our respondents by email via their professional websites. This involved, first, compiling a list of potential respondents by searching the comedy listings site Chortle for comedians who were performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2012 (both authors were living in Edinburgh at this time) and, second, searching their professional websites for contact details. One drawback of this approach is that we did not have access to any 'superstar' comedians since they do not tend to list their contact details on their websites and their management agencies were unwilling to put us in contact with them. Another drawback is that we were unable to interview comedians who work on the live circuit in London but do not go to Edinburgh Comedy Festival each year. We therefore widened our net and, in 2013, compiled a list of potential respondents by searching Chortle for comedians who were headlining at well-established comedy clubs in key UK cities and then again searching their professional websites for contact details. As a result, our findings focus primarily on conditions of work among comedians on the live circuit.

Table 1 provides a summary of the respondents we quote directly in this paper. The table shows the range of age and experience among the comedians we interviewed, whilst also underlining geographical concentration and gender imbalance. In terms of professional experience, it is worth noting the disparity between total years as a stand-up comedian (which includes the years in which individuals work on the live circuit without pay or with minimal pay) and years as a full-time comedian (which includes only the years in which individuals

earn most or all of their income from comedy-related activities). This shows, at a glance, how comedians must endure potentially years of working for little or no pay until they are able to earn a regular income on the live circuit. Additionally, the transition from one stage of a comedian's career to another is often lengthy and indistinct, given the highly informal nature of employment contracts; as a result, these numbers are approximate. Finally, while it is certainly possible to have a long and sustainable career on the live circuit (Dino, for example, has been a regular on the circuit for 28 years), many make the leap to radio or television without returning to the live circuit. This means that, by definition, none of the comedians we interviewed are 'household names', yet each can claim to have forged a successful career on the live circuit to a greater or lesser degree.

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The interviews explored the 'work history' (Dex, 1991) of stand-up comedians. Our interview schedule was divided into five main sections: 'getting started', 'progressing', 'professional relationships, 'daily routines' and 'performing'. The second and third themes form the basis of this paper. Our procedure was to ask a general question (e.g. 'How did you get started in comedy?', 'How did you progress?', 'What professional relationships are important in your work?'), which invariably led to more detailed discussions about the interviewee's working life.

Immediately after an interview, we wrote up approximately half a page of notes about the experiences of the comedian, focusing on key moments in their work history as well as promising areas to explore further. This inductive process of data collection and analysis echoes Merriam's (2009) suggestion that gathering empirical material and reaching empirical findings often occur simultaneously, rather than one after another. For example, novel or

surprising insights gained in one interview would provide an opportunity to probe more deeply into this topic in subsequent interviews.

Each author independently read the transcript and then manually coded the interview in line with 'thematic analysis', an approach that seeks to discern patterns and regularities within a network of themes (Shank, 2006). Thematic analysis provides flexibility to make sense of qualitative data since it does not require researchers to start from a set of pre-given concepts with which to conduct their analysis; instead, it permits these themes – and ultimately theoretical constructs – to emerge from the data itself. Our thematic analysis proceeded in a number of (overlapping) stages. First, we discussed each interview transcript on a week-by-week basis. This, in turn, allowed us to develop and refine a set of codes together, starting with multiple themes that we subsequently narrowed down to fewer, more overarching themes. For example, the initial themes of 'agents', 'managers', 'promoters', 'trades union representatives', 'television producers' and 'radio producers' were reduced to the single theme 'relationships to industry actors'. Through this process, we arrived at five codes that allowed us to make sense of our data: 'relationships to industry actors', 'work and pay', 'career development', 'learning and skills' and 'managing emotions'. Finally, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985), we ceased gathering data once we were confident that 1) we had exhausted the possibility for new insights and reached a point of data saturation, and 2) we had gained a deep sense of the patterns and regularities that characterized the working lives of stand-up comedians.

Working on the circuit

Like other types of creative work in the entertainment industry, stand-up comedy is distinct from more conventional modes of full-time employment. This is part of the intrinsic

appeal of stand-up comedy for many of our respondents. Gilbert is typical in this respect: 'I am getting paid to do something that I really love doing…I am getting paid for something which is not actually a proper job' (Gilbert). This underlines the fact that comedy lies outside a nine-to-five job, which is perceived as inherently dull and bureaucratic. Felix explains:

> A day job is where [you] have to go and fucking hate every minute of it and [you] go there for the free paper clips, to use the copier machine and to be online all day long. I don't think that stand-up is something that I use only to pay my bills...For me, it has a much more creative element.

Stand-up comedy thus offers a means for artistic expression as well as escape from the mundane realities of work. Like any 'labour of love' (Vernon), however, work in comedy is often very different from its free-wheeling bohemian image. As Tiffany explains: 'You really fall in love with it, and so then you make all sorts of sacrifices for it'. This points to a pleasure-pain axis at the heart of stand-up comedy. How comedians navigate and manage this tension on an emotional level – in terms of engaging with multiple employers, negotiating pay and dealing with conditions of financial precarity – is the focus of this empirical section.

Did you hear the one about the comedian and the promoter?

One of the most important aspects of comedians' work is their relationship with promoters (sometimes called 'booking agents'). Promoters play a prominent role in the live circuit because they book the gigs and run the clubs that provide comedians with paid employment. There are almost as many types of promoters as there are comedy clubs: managers of large dedicated clubs that cater primarily to office parties and stag-and-hen dos; promoters who book high-quality acts for a comedy-savvy clientele in boutique venues;

business people looking to make a quick profit from low quality gigs filled largely with open spots; and early-career comedians who run short-lived comedy nights to get stage-time as a compere. Comedians may contact promoters by phone or email, although promoters may also contact comedians directly or send out an online form where comedians can fill in their availability for work. In some cases, comedians hire live agents to book gigs on their behalf; less commonly, comedians may sign with an agent who is also a promoter and who then books them into the gigs they run.

The relationship between comedians and promoters is perhaps best expressed by a joke – albeit one that only comedians will find funny – told to us by a respondent:

> There are two comics in a car and one says, 'Oh, I did a gig last night and the whole place just stank of shit and the audience were drunk and I was horribly heckled, three people attacked me with knives during it, there was no light in the dressing room, there was a broken toilet, the promoter pocketed £50 of my wages and he only paid me half what he was meant to'. And the other [comic] goes, 'Right, who books that?'. (Norbert)

Norbert's joke pivots on the idea that comedians are so desperate for work that they are willing to tolerate a host of indignities in their dealings with promoters. The joke contains a grain of truth: comedians need to cultivate and maintain professional relationships with those who can provide them with work, even when the conditions and pay are less than ideal. As one respondent puts it: 'A promoter is your bread and butter…You should be friends with them even if you don't like them because they'll give you gigs' (Bailey). From the reverse

perspective, 'if [promoters] don't like you on a personal level, then they've got the power not to book you' (Brianna).

While comedians cultivate relationships with promoters at all levels, 'the people that run the big clubs…are the most important people' (Graham). These clubs – including respected chains such as The Comedy Store, The Glee and The Stand – are the gold standard in the profession in terms of pay and conditions. Corporate chains such as Jongleurs and Highlights also pay well but are more populist in outlook and audience, and comedians sometimes find them difficult to play due to heckling and rowdiness. Comedians reach the pinnacle of a career in stand-up comedy in terms of income and progression once they are headlining regularly at these clubs – although radio, television, festival and touring opportunities inevitably beckon beyond the live circuit. Rates of pay in most clubs are non-negotiable, typically tied to the spot on the bill and the prestige of the venue (anywhere from less than £100 to over £200 for a 20-minute club set). Getting paid, moving up the bill and performing at higher paying venues are some of the key areas that comics need to negotiate on a one-to-one basis with promoters. This is not always a straightforward process. As one respondent puts it, 'every different gig is like a different career battle…promoter by promoter' (Norbert). It is to these career battles that we now turn – specifically, the emotional stratagems deployed by comedians to negotiate the shift from unpaid to paid work as well as the demand for higher pay.

Negotiating work

Comedians begin their career by doing 'open spots', short unpaid performances of between five and 10 minutes. These take place either as part of an open mic night comprised entirely of other amateur acts or, less frequently, as part of a professional comedy night with

more established acts on the bill. The open mic circuit allows comedians to gain invaluable experience of performing stand-up in order to develop their act and hone their craft. Comedians thus view unpaid work as an 'investment' (Ismael) in their future as a professional act. For this reason, they are prepared to lose money at the early stages of their career in order to secure other – more lucrative – employment. Bailey, a comedian based in Northern England, made this clear:

> I've gone down to London and spent £90 on a train to get there and got paid £15. I've lost £75 but the experience and the effort that the promoter sees that I've gone to, to come to their gig, they can see that I'm serious [in] what I'm doing. If I'm willing to travel four hours, for no money, for five minutes – well, then the promoters like that because they go, 'Well, that's a person who's putting in effort', and I'm not complaining when I arrive.

Alongside gaining valuable experience of doing as many gigs as possible, Bailey makes his financial sacrifice visible to promoters whilst simultaneously displaying a positive attitude towards this forfeit of income. In this way, he projects a work ethic of fortitude and forbearance to his employers. This is echoed by Cole, who suggested that comedians must 'spend a little money to show you believe in yourself to make a little money back'.

Even at a more advanced stage in their career, comedians still work for low or no pay to bargain for better paid employment. George told us how he had started a professional relationship with a promoter who worked for a powerful comedy management agency. The promoter contacted George to ask if he wanted to do six hours of compering at a top club for less than half the normal rate:

I, in a moment of inspiration, said, 'I'll tell you what – keep the £85 and I'll do it [for free], but I'll do it in return for your guys booking me for a weekend at [a top club run by the agency]'. And he went, 'A whole weekend?'. And I went, 'Yes'. And then he went, 'Tell you what, mate, you can have both'. And I thought, 'Aha! I have won the respect of [the promoter]' [laughs].

In this case, it was not fortitude and forbearance that George employed as strategy of negotiation; rather, it was boldness and audacity – although the willingness to forgo pay for the exchange of labour is strikingly similar. Notably, George was most pleased with 'winning the respect' of the promoter, which may lead to future income opportunities beyond the compering work and the weekend gig. For George, professional relationships matter in the long-run over and above the immediate cash-in-hand benefits. Comedians must therefore learn to 'manipulate the situation to [their] advantage' (Bailey) when engaging with promoters, which involves managing the emotions of oneself and others complex ways: for example, projecting positivity whilst losing money or displaying confidence in oneself by offering to work for free. By the same token, comedians may inadvertently devalue their labour in their dealings with promoters:

I did a club early on and I did 10 minutes and it got a flat reaction, and I immediately apologized to the promoter…And then I saw a big-name act going up there and he got a flat reaction too, and he just stood by the promoter and waited, and within about 20 seconds the promoter said, 'Oh, I'm sorry about the audience, they're awful tonight'. So if you don't watch out, you can end up running yourself down. (Benton)

Benton learned the hard way that managing the emotions of oneself (in this case, suppressing regret and feigning indifference about a poor performance) and managing the emotions of others (in this case, causing the promoter to express contrition about a lukewarm audience) is central to securing work and progressing one's career on the live circuit. The risk, here, is that comedians will fail to deploy the appropriate emotional stratagem in a professional context and so erode the promoter's faith in their abilities.

What is at stake here is the complex negotiation between comedian and promoter in terms of the value of labour, which takes place on an emotional register. On the one hand, the comedian must be willing to accept low or no pay for an extended period of time to edge their way up the career ladder. On the other hand, the promoter may have an interest in keeping the comedian at the level of an unpaid open spot or a low paid act. While some promoters are 'very good and very fair' (Bailey), others 'just keep going as long as they can without paying you' (Norbert). Freddy concurred: 'There [is] a difficult point where you have to start putting your foot down. If you don't, there are a lot of clubs that will use you for free forever'. This is seen as a delicate situation that requires the comedian to assess the emotions of the promoters and act accordingly. Zac explained: 'Because you're self-employed, if you make a big fuss [with promoters] you're always worried that you're going to cut off your nose to spite your face'. In other words, there is a risk that demanding paid work will aggravate promoters and result in reduced job opportunities rather than career advancement. Due to the informal employment arrangements on the live circuit, comedians need to be attentive to the perils of projecting not only *too little* but also *too much* confidence in their own abilities. They therefore find themselves constantly fine-tuning the value of their labour with every promoter they encounter, as George described:

The situation isn't that you start to get paid. There is no comedy industry, there is a…constellation of satellites [that] are all self-interested organizations and individuals and through that the young comedian navigates, going: 'This guy thinks I'm worth twenty quid for ten minutes. This guy doesn't think I'm worth anything. This guy over here thinks I'm worth fifty quid for ten minutes'. So you don't suddenly start getting paid, the process of starting to be paid happens over time.

While comedians have little choice but to accept this state of affairs, some reflected ruefully on the prevalence of free work in stand-up comedy – after all, 'you'd never get an orchestra doing a freebie' (Gretchen). Indeed, even the Comedians' Network within Equity, the trades unions for performing artists, acknowledges that 'working for free as a professional comedian is an established and accepted practice within the comedy industry' (Equity, 2017). Vernon suggested that promoters may intentionally take advantage of the precarious situation comedians find themselves in: 'People are always cashing in on your vulnerability…There is a lot of exploitation going on'. What emotional strategems, then, do comedians deploy to manage the insecurity that arise from this context of employment?

Managing insecurity

Although stand-up comedy is (for the most part) rewarding due to its creative dimensions, it is also a 'pressurizing job because you're freelance' and therefore 'not very secure' (Graham). This has to do with employment arrangements that involve negotiating with a range of temporary employers: 'you've got 300 bosses…Every person who runs a club, they're your manager for that evening' (Flynn). The absence of permanency means that comedians must adapt to a future that is financially uncertain: 'It can be very nerve-wracking not knowing from one day to the next what you're earning' (Graham) or 'where the next

year's pay is coming from' (Jonathan). Dino, a veteran circuit comedian with over 25 year's experience, lamented: 'I'm fed up with the pressure, I'm fed up with being miserable…you just get fed up of being self-employed and you just want someone to pay your wages every week and not have to worry about it from the moment that you get up'. This points to some of the emotional costs of precarity in a freelance occupational setting such as stand-up comedy.

Others, however, admitted to suppressing feelings of worry, which suggests that comedians may manage their emotions to mitigate the effects of insecurity. Gretchen reflected on her emotional stratagem for dealing with this situation:

> It's very difficult to make long-term decisions when you're doing stuff that you know is losing you money…I'm going to sound like a self-help manual now, but letting go of that anxiety…result[s] in kind of reaping greater rewards.

For Gretchen, it was not the conditions of precarity that are to blame for her reduced wages, but rather her propensity to fret about losing money that – paradoxically – prevents her from increasing her income. Consequently, she is determined to 'let go' of her anxiety in order to turn free work into paid work. Another comedian took a similar approach by drawing on a sports metaphor: 'I used to play basketball, you know, and there's lots of mantras and motivational shite, [like] "never let them see your bleed"…I just sort of try to apply that to comedy' (Flynn). It is telling here that the metaphor Flynn chose concerns the capacity to hide discomfort or pain from potential employers, which is invariably caused by being 'crippled…financially' (Flynn).

It is not only the availability of work and the rate of pay that is a concern for comics; the punctuality of payments by comedy clubs is also a major issue. Our interviews are replete with stories of promoters delaying payments by several months. Gilbert is a typical example:

I have had a couple of months this year where it's been pretty much hand to mouth because of waiting for money that's been owed to me. The most depressing thing about it is when you're phoning up and asking for your money that you're owed…Sometimes you're made to feel like you're begging for it or that they're doing you a favour by agreeing to pay you, and you're just thinking, 'This is fucking out of order, that's my money!'.

Seymour reported a similar problem. Although he conceded that, for the most part, 'the money is good', the problem is with the punctuality of payment:

Clubs say, 'We'll pay you by cheque to follow or by Bacs [Bankers' Automated Clearing Services]', and then you'll travel all the way there, spend all your money on petrol and food, and then travel all the way back, and then they'll not pay you for three months. I've waited a year for a cheque before, and this is from a very big company that could easily have paid it on the day.

While some promoters are 'lovely people', comedians must also deal with 'selfish promoters who…will piss you about all over the place' (Seymour). Like Gilbert, however, Seymour is reluctant to demand prompt payment due to the importance of maintaining genial relations with potential employers. Indeed, 'there's no point in being horrible to them' (Seymour) since it may result in jeopardizing future employment opportunities. As Lenny also acknowledged,

there is little incentive for comedians to complain about late payment, especially at the larger clubs, because '[promoters] are just going to go, "Oh, he's an arsehole, we're not going to book him again"', and you're fucked'.

Due to the atomized nature of careers in comedy, comics are reluctant to risk forfeiting the prospect of paid work by demanding higher wages, improved working conditions or more punctual payment. As Norbert put it, 'relationships with promoters are very important, you need to get on well with them and be able to ask for gigs in a way that doesn't sound needy or aggressive'. Comedians thus engage in a series of emotional stratagems not only to project a positive image of amenability and affability to promoters, but also to quell their own feelings of anxiety about job prospects, earning power and financial insecurity. The need for such emotional stratagems arises precisely from the reliance on social networks – especially one-to-one relationships with promoters – in an informal work environment, as Bailey evocatively noted: 'There are no rules, there is no HR…there's no management that you can go and complain to in a meeting room, there's no office, there's no code of conduct – it's just personal relationships'. In the next section, we will further reflect on this mode of emotional labour for understanding conditions of precarity in the creative industries.

Concluding discussion: Precarity with a smile

As we have seen, work in stand-up comedy – like other creative sectors – is dependent on social networks and professional relationships. Unlike musicians, theatre actors or freelance media workers, however, comedians do not rely on well-connected peers for providing them with access to work; instead, they cultivate a professional relationship directly with each employer they wish to work for. This is because work is highly individualized rather than taking place in informal collectives such as jazz bands, theatre troupes, or media

projects. As a result, networking is not used as a mechanism of mutual support within an otherwise uncertain work environment, as we find elsewhere in the creative industries (e.g. Menger, 1999; Shorthose and Strange, 2004). On the contrary, building professional relationships is one of the key factors that *reproduces* (rather than mitigates) conditions of precarity on the live comedy circuit. This is certainly consonant with other studies that demonstrate how a reliance on social networks increase the prevalence of low paid work and free labour in the creative sector, such as the non-monetary incentives for creative workers (e.g. gaining skills and experience) (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006; Umney, 2016). However, the live comedy circuit is less characterized by informal 'economy of favours' (Ursell, 2000) than it is by an emotional economy of bartering. In effect, comedians willingly accept gigs that are poorly remunerated as a way of managing their relationship with promoters on an affective level. This calls for a subtler appreciation of the 'pecuniary' form of emotion management outlined by Bolton and Boyd (2003).

Comedians manage emotion in relation to employers in two main ways. First, they project an image of positivity as a way of ingratiating themselves with comedy club promoters. This can involve both inducing and suppressing emotion in themselves, for example: resisting the urge to complain about working for free in order to appear 'serious' about pursuing a career in comedy; stimulating self-belief in their earning potential by viewing the loss of income as an 'investment' in future opportunities; or affecting nonchalance about a substandard performance in front of a promoter. It should be pointed out that such forms of emotion management are aimed primarily at inducing or suppressing emotions in employers, for example: seeking to generate recognition for 'putting in effort' to travel to low-paid gigs at their own expense; attempting to win 'respect' by volunteering to work for no pay or at a reduced fee; and trying to inspire confidence in their abilities by remaining silent about bad

gigs. This shows that managing the emotions in oneself are tightly interwoven with managing the emotions of others; in effect, the former is an attempt to achieve the latter. Emotion management among comedians is thus dedicated to the pursuit of work in the absence of formal mechanisms of entry and progression. Ultimately, the negotiation over wages – essentially a question about the spot on the bill at a live gig – is an emotionally loaded process that the comedian must skilfully navigate, taking care neither to undersell nor oversell themselves. What matters, for comedians, is establishing professional relationships with promoters without appearing to be 'needy or aggressive', which would put them at risk of forfeiting future paid work.

But this emotional stratagem to secure future employment comes at a price. By projecting an image of positivity, comedians inadvertently reinforce the prevalence of free labour on the live circuit. The uncomplaining acceptance of free labour is used not only as a means to enter the occupation (e.g. unpaid open spots) but also as a bargaining device for future employment in later stages of a comedians' career (e.g. offering to work for free in order in the hope of receiving other paid work). As a result, comedians may find themselves prolonging forms of 'self-exploitation' (Ross, 2008) beyond the point at which they are able to gain additional skills or experience through challenging 'stretchwork' (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006). As a result, comedians find themselves accepting gigs without proper remuneration well into their careers.

The second and related way that comedians manage their emotions in relation to employers is by suppressing feelings of anxiety and frustration that arise from such financial insecurity. This form of emotion also involves notable drawbacks for comedians. Some respondents express the same kind of 'emotive dissonance' that Hochschild (1983: 90) identifies among

flight attendants who are compelled to maintain a gulf between the external display of emotion and the internal experience of emotion. In the case of comedians, however, there are no organizationally-sanctioned 'feeling rules' that must be followed, but instead they employ a more complex and individualized form of emotion management that is directed towards maintaining an interpersonal equilibrium with employers despite feelings of annoyance or frustration. This is evinced by the emotions that Gilbert experiences, yet suppresses, when he is asking – or 'begging' – for money from one employer when his payment is overdue (i.e. 'You're just thinking, "That's fucking out of order, that's my money!"'). Others, meanwhile, actively try to reduce the gap between 'feeling and feigning' (Hochschild, 1983: 90) by, in the case of Gretchen, 'letting go' of worry about the future or, in the case of Flynn, reframing financial hardship as a subjective obstacle to be overcome via 'mantras and motivational shite'. Even though some comedians admit to feeling 'miserable' and 'fed up' with the vicissitudes of freelance labour, few seem willing to confront promoters about inadequate wages or late payment. This situation is compounded by the widespread lack of unionization among comedians and the perceived weakness of Equity, the trades union for creative performers. Indeed, comedians feel compelled to remain 'friends' with promoters in spite of often emotionally distressing employment conditions.

These examples point to a paradox that lies at the heart of pecuniary form of emotion management among comedians. On the one hand, emotion management allows comedians to establish and maintain a professional network of valuable contacts that will provide them with work. On the other hand, emotion management – insofar as it is directed towards maintaining congenial relations with employers – inadvertently serves to legitimize and exacerbate the prevalence of free labour and other exploitative employment practices on the live circuit such as delayed payment. In effect, the pecuniary forms of emotion management among comedians

that are aimed to alleviate conditions of precarity (e.g. career insecurity, financial uncertainty) may unintentionally serve to reinforce these very conditions.

This adds nuance to the idea of pecuniary emotion management. Whereas Bolton and Boyd (2003: 293) criticize Hochschild for drawing an overly sharp distinction between authentic emotion work in our private lives and alienated emotional labour in the workplace, we may level a similar charge at Bolton and Boyd: namely, they fail to consider that pecuniary emotional management takes place not only in an organizational context where 'commercial feeling rules' predominate, but also in freelance settings where there is likely to be more emphasis on 'social feeling rules'. In other words, the case of comedians demonstrates that freelance workers engage in emotion management for commercial purposes yet are not subject to 'externally imposed rules of conduct' (2003: 296). On the contrary, the pecuniary type of emotion management undertaken by comedians is internally regulated. What's more, it is difficult to draw a clear division between pecuniary emotion management and philanthropic emotion management – that is, freely giving emotional 'gifts' to others (2003: 295) – since comedians' efforts to build relationships with promoters may involve sincere displays of friendship as much as instrumental means-ends calculation. This highlights the fact that comedians actively manage, rather than passively experience, the pleasure-pain axis – and that they do so in complex, ambiguous and often contradictory ways.

Such findings tell us that the concept of emotional labour takes on a different hue in freelance settings as opposed to organizational contexts. Indeed, on the live comedy circuit, individuals are not limited by corporate scripts for appropriate emotional conduct. Instead, they must rely on their own abilities to develop a sophisticated repertoire of emotional stratagems to secure work, negotiate pay, and cope with ubiquitous insecurity. Our study thus contributes to

existing debates by highlighting how emotional labour serves as an important resource not only for dealing with customers and clients but also for engaging with employers – not least because the way labour is valued involves an interpersonal (yet lopsided) negotiation. Researchers therefore have much to gain by widening their empirical scope from permanent employees to freelance or project-based workers if they wish to comprehensively map out the 'economy of feelings' (Vincent, 2011) in contemporary working life. This task becomes all the more necessary since precarious employment conditions in the creative industries are becoming increasingly paradigmatic of work beyond the performing arts, such as casual labour in the fledgling 'gig economy' and other occupational fields where informality is the norm (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013). Further research is therefore needed to show how freelance workers in non-creative fields engage forms of emotion management – especially those that blur pecuniary motives with philanthropic gestures – in order to establish relationships with multiple employers, and to describe what happens when workers feel compelled to endure precarity with a smile.

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Table 1. Selected respondents

Name	Age	Gender	Location	Years as a comedian (total)	Years as a comedian (full-time)
Bailey	30s	M	Manchester	4	2
Benton	50s	M	London	20	18
Brianna	40s	F	London	17	11
Cole	40s	M	London	14	12
Dino	60s	M	London	28	26
Felix	50s	M	London/US	20	19
Flynn	20s	M	London	6	4
Freddy	50s	M	London	14	8
George	30s	M	London	8	4
Gilbert	40s	M	Manchester	16	10
Graham	30s	M	London	7	4
Gretchen	30s	F	London	5	3
Ismael	20s	M	London	6	4
Jonathan	20s	M	London	4	2
Lenny	30s	M	London	4	2
Nigel	40s	M	London	21	19
Norbert	40s	M	London	21	18
Seymour	30s	M	London	9	7
Tiffany	20s	F	London	8	1
Vernon	30s	M	London	11	7
Zac	40s	M	London	15	13

Note: To guarantee anonymity, all names have been changed.

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