

# Choosing Bad Jobs: The Use of Nonstandard Work as a Commitment Device

Work and Occupations

2021, Vol. 48(2) 207–242

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0730888420949596

[journals.sagepub.com/home/wox](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/wox)



Laura Adler<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

With nonstandard work on the rise, workers are increasingly forced into bad jobs—jobs that are low-paying, part-time, short-term, and dead-end. But some people, especially in cultural industries, embrace this kind of work. To understand why some might choose bad jobs when better options are available, this paper examines the job preferences of aspiring artists, who often rely on bad day jobs as they attempt to achieve economic success in the arts. Using interviews with 68 college-educated artists, I find that their preferences are informed not only by utility and identity considerations—two factors established in the literature—but also by the value of bad jobs as commitment devices, which reinforce dedication to career aspirations. The case offers new insights into the connection between jobs and careers and enriches the concept of the commitment device with a sociological perspective, showing that these devices are not one-time contracts but ongoing practices.

---

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Laura Adler, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

Email: [laurackadler@g.harvard.edu](mailto:laurackadler@g.harvard.edu)

**Keywords**

job preferences, commitment devices, bad jobs, artists

Nonstandard work is now a fixture of the American labor market. Researchers have documented the rise of “bad jobs”—jobs with low pay, no benefits, short-term or part-time contracts, and limited advancement potential (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011, 2018; Katz & Krueger, 2016)—with impacts on personal and family well-being (Presser, 2005; Pugh, 2015; Schneider & Harknett, 2019). This research typically focuses on people who take bad jobs out of necessity, often because discrimination excludes them from higher quality employment (Pager & Pedulla, 2015; Sugie, 2018). But while many lament the decline of job security, studies show that nonstandard work also has benefits, leading some to choose it voluntarily (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Petriglieri et al., 2019), even though such jobs are significantly more precarious (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018).

To understand the appeal of bad jobs, I examine the case of aspiring artists. Creative fields exemplify both nonstandard employment and personally fulfilling work (Banks, 2007; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Jones, 1996; McRobbie, 2002; Neff et al., 2005; Ross, 2009). Underlying stereotypes—the actor-slash-waiter, the barista-by-day and painter-by-night—are proven trends. More people aspire to creative careers than the market can sustain (Menger, 1999), and this oversupply, combined with unclear measures of quality (Velthuis, 2007), leads to winner-takes-all markets (Caves, 2000). With most opportunities concentrated among a small number of successful artists, the majority resorts to multiple jobholding, using day jobs to make ends meet (Alper & Wassall, 2000). I examine how they choose which day jobs to take.

To explain why aspiring artists often prefer jobs that are widely considered bad, even when better options are available, I draw on 68 interviews with college-educated artists. Based on an inductive analysis, I argue that bad jobs can be valuable to workers insofar as they act as commitment devices, reinforcing dedication to a desired career. I situate this finding in a framework for analyzing job preferences along three dimensions of value: utility, identity, and commitment. The first dimension, utility, indicates the benefits of a job measured in both extrinsic rewards, such as time and money, and intrinsic rewards, including creativity and fulfillment. The second dimension, identity, is the degree to which a job accords with a person’s self-concept. While these have been

analyzed in prior scholarship, I use the case of aspiring artists to develop the third dimension, commitment. I show that a preference for bad jobs often reflects respondents' strategic efforts to reinforce their own commitment to career aspirations and avoid the formation of new, alternative commitments.

This paper contributes to the rich literatures on bad jobs and working conditions in the cultural industries by demonstrating the role of jobs as commitment devices. The finding—that people actively shape their employment environments to reinforce their commitment to desired careers—contributes to the growing understanding of how artists sustain commitment even in the face of failures (Skaggs, 2019), uncertainty about future opportunities (De Laat, 2015), and the vicissitudes of precarious work (Umney and Kretsos, 2015). In developing the argument, I provide new insight into how artists make sense of their working lives and develop a new substantive explanation for why highly educated artists take bad jobs. Rather than accepting bad working conditions in exchange for creatively fulfilling jobs, as posited by cultural economists (Caves, 2000; Menger, 1999; Throsby & Zednik, 2011), I find that bad working conditions—both within and outside the arts—are themselves of value, insofar as they prevent the artist from developing alternative career aspirations.

The paper proceeds, first, with a review of the research on nonstandard work with a focus on the cultural industries. Second, I develop the framework for analyzing job preferences and present the theoretical context for the concept of commitment devices. Third, I describe the data and methods. I then turn to the analysis, where I show support for the utility and identity dimensions of job value and demonstrate the need for an explanation based on commitment. I conclude with a discussion of the findings and the implications for a sociological conception of commitment devices.

## **Nonstandard Work and Cultural Industries**

Nonstandard jobs are common and often costly to workers. In recent years, more than one-fifth of working Americans have been employed in arrangements other than standard, full-time work (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Nonstandard jobs are largely bad, offering lower pay, less reliable hours, and fewer advancement opportunities (Kalleberg, 2011). Even good nonstandard jobs—like stable part-time employment or highly skilled independent contracting—can reduce future employment prospects (Leung, 2014; Pedulla, 2016) and push responsibility for

financial security onto individuals (Gershon, 2017; Lane, 2011; Sharone, 2013). As a result, nonstandard work in the US is associated with subjective insecurity and a decline in personal well-being, as workers become responsible for managing the timing of jobs and the risk of unemployment (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Halpin & Smith, 2017; Lopez and Phillips, 2019; Lowe, 2018; Osnowitz, 2010; Smith, 2002).

Most research on nonstandard work focuses on how people cope with the undesirable circumstance of being excluded from better employment, but studies also show that some workers—often young people—voluntarily choose bad jobs (Monahan et al., 2018). Steffy (2017) found that, among the recent college graduates he interviewed, more than half were overqualified for their jobs by choice. Of particular interest has been demand for jobs in cultural industries including fashion and media (Neff et al., 2005), music (Frenette, 2013), and revived artisanal crafts (Ocejo, 2017), despite the fact that these jobs often feature low pay and no benefits, short-term contracts, unreliable schedules, and a lack of opportunity for advancement. In creative fields, nonstandard work is especially widespread: the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) found that more than one-third of arts graduates held more than one job simultaneously (Frenette & Tepper, 2016).

Research on work in the arts reveals a complicated relationship between nonstandard jobs and workers' preferences. As Lingo and Tepper (2013) describe, artists may favor nonstandard jobs as they "switch from seeking employment security to security in employability" (p. 345). Umney and Kretsos (2015) show that jazz musicians in London intentionally forego more reliable work to maintain their creative freedom. Similarly, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) find that workers in music, television, and magazines accept substandard pay, hours, and security to pursue career autonomy. These cases, in which largely college-educated workers choose nonstandard employment in the arts, reframe the issue of bad jobs and point to the need to understand how nonstandard jobs entail both costs and benefits. As Petriglieri et al. (2019) describe, nonstandard work in the gig economy is associated with anxiety but also with a sense of fulfillment that workers value. This approach also requires distinguishing between work precarity and general economic precarity (Castel, 2000; Lowe, 2018), as education and family resources often protect these workers and enable them to pursue riskier careers (O'Brien et al., 2016). Nonetheless, nonstandard employment reduces their individual economic prospects and has the potential to further normalize employment insecurity more broadly.

This research does much to explain the prevalence of nonstandard work, especially in creative industries. I build on past findings by showing how general career aspirations lead to specific job choices—and why the jobs chosen so often appear to be bad. Ocejo (2017) gestures to this in a chapter on “How Middle-Class Kids Want Working-Class Jobs”: “Getting one of these jobs is the result of a search for meaning in work, to get recognized...for what they do, and for an occupation to anchor their lives and provide them with purpose” (pp. 132–134). How does this “search for meaning” lead to specific job preferences?

## Dimensions of Job Preferences

Understanding the choice to pursue bad jobs requires a framework for analyzing the dimensions of value that shape workers’ job preferences. Scholars have theorized how people find work, highlighting the role of social networks or human and cultural capital, but job preferences are often taken as a given. There is, therefore, an opportunity to theorize the multiple dimensions along which workers themselves evaluate jobs. Two dimensions of value—utility and identity—have been established. My interviews uncovered a third, commitment. Together, I propose that they constitute a general framework that can be used to analyze workers’ own job preferences. Using the case of creative workers, in this section I first summarize existing insights into utility, based on economic theory, and identity, based on social psychology, and then propose commitment as a third dimension of value shaping job preferences.

### *Maximizing Utility*

All work involves two forms of utility, extrinsic and intrinsic, the former being value *derived in exchange* for labor, such as wages and leisure time, and the latter *arising within* the experience of work (Kalleberg, 2011). Extrinsic rewards are not limited to pay, but also include benefits like regular hours, jobs security, and opportunities to network (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). Intrinsic rewards derive from enjoyment of the work, for instance because it is interesting, creative, or meaningful (Gallie et al., 2012). Most research presumes that people try to maximize some combination of extrinsic and intrinsic utility, providing two explanations for why people may choose bad jobs.

The first is that people always select the best jobs available in terms of extrinsic rewards, but sometimes face a bad labor market. For

instance, creative labor markets are unusually skewed towards short-term, contract-based employment, where all but a few are poorly paid (Becker, 1984; Menger, 1999, 2014). The prevalence of such unreliable jobs has been documented among Hollywood composers (Faulkner & Anderson, 1987), screenwriters (Bielby & Bielby, 1999), and jazz musicians (Dowd & Pinheiro, 2013). This approach posits, either explicitly or implicitly, that people try to maximize their income, but may have limited options.

A second explanation is that some people place a higher value on the meaning of their work and therefore accept bad working conditions in exchange for greater personal fulfillment. This is a particularly prominent explanation for the prevalence of bad jobs in creative fields: economists suggest that artists have a preference for intrinsic value (Caves, 2000), deriving “psychic utility” from creativity (Menger, 1999), which compensates for low pay. Most research on artists therefore posits a tradeoff between intrinsic and extrinsic utility. For instance, Umney and Krestos (2015) argue that “‘passion’ . . . can legitimate precarity” (p. 317).

While these two approaches emphasize different types of rewards, both assume that job preferences reflect an effort to maximize some combination of extrinsic and intrinsic utility. This approach, and its tendency to oppose economic success and creative fulfillment, has been challenged, for instance by Gerber and Childress (2017), who argue—against the theory of art as the economic world reversed—that “artistic careers [are] constructed of diverse activities” (p. 1535). Nonetheless, it remains the dominant framework for understanding job preferences.

### *Expressing Identity*

In some cases, people act in ways that are not congruent with material self-interest or intrinsic enjoyment but are seen as appropriate to their identity. Identity has been conceptualized both as a durable sense of self that arises through the internalization of social positions and as a contingent response to external context (Owens et al., 2010). In both formulations, identity guides behavior as we act in ways that accord with a salient sense of self. Identity has temporal reach, encompassing past experiences and expectations about possible future selves. Aspirations for the future therefore shape choices in the present (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). For instance, Frye (2012) argued that Malawian students pursued education, despite little opportunity to

improve their social status, because they were expressing an identity organized around aspirations.

Occupations are among the characteristics that inform identity. Occupational identities are acquired through education, training, and work experience (Fine, 2017) and can be particularly strong in the arts, where they are sustained even in the absence of paid work (Leidner, 2016). This occupational identity helps artists “handle diversity, risk, and failure while sustaining their purpose and passion” (Lingo & Tepper, 2013, p. 352). The ability to handle failure, in particular, is an occupational skill gained through socialization and identification (Skaggs, 2019).

For an individual to know what kind of behavior will express a desired identity, there must be widely shared ideas about how particular types of people act. In Frye’s (2012) case, Malawi had a widely accepted cultural model linking aspirational identities to particular behaviors, like staying in school. Young people drew on these shared cultural ideas as they developed a course of action that expressed their identity. Artistic identities are associated with norms, which may, for instance, either condone or penalize the commercialization of creative skills (Fine, 2018) or encourage artists to emphasize the difficulty of creative labor (Childress, 2017). The identity dimension may lead aspiring artists to value jobs that are widely viewed as appropriate to artistic identity, even when those jobs offer few other rewards.

### ***Reinforcing Commitment***

Data from my interviews with aspiring artists point to a third, as yet underexplored dimension of jobs that may inform workers’ preferences: the degree to which a job reinforces or undermines commitment to career goals. Aspiring artists who hope to eventually make a living from art sales rely on day jobs that are often bad: low-paid, short-term, part-time, and lacking benefits and advancement opportunities. My research suggests that, in the context of uncertainty about future success—a defining attribute of creative fields (De Laat, 2015; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010)—these jobs may be desirable if they reinforce commitment to artistic goals and limit the chances that creative aspirations will be replaced by new commitments.

The need for commitment results from the fact that our preferences change over time. From an economic perspective, this is far from a trivial technicality. As Schelling (1984) explains, when someone attempts to control their future actions, the present self and the

future self may have different preferences, such that there is no way “to compare their utility increments and to determine which behavior maximizes their collective utility” (p. 8). There is no objectively preferable option.

The problem of time-varying preferences is not merely theoretical, as people actively try to manage the tension between present and future preferences, including through the use of commitment devices. Elster (1979) proposed that people use “self-binding” strategies to impose present preferences on their future selves: like Ulysses binding himself to the mast of his ship to avoid pursuing the sirens to his death, we can try to place external restraints on our future action. This idea has been formalized in the concept of commitment devices, external configurations that actors use to reinforce their commitment over time, as their preferences change (Bryan et al., 2010). A commitment device externalizes what Becker (1960) called “side bets”—the stakes that turn an aspiration into a commitment—so that there are not only psychological costs to deviating from the plan, but material losses. Researchers have explored the use of commitment devices empirically in the context of clearly defined goals such as saving money (Kast et al., 2012), quitting cigarettes (Giné et al., 2010), or engaging in preventative healthcare (Rogers et al., 2014).

I submit that job preferences can reflect the desire to guide future preferences and reinforce commitment to present-day career aspirations—jobs can be used as career commitment devices. Think of the recent graduate of an elite law school who hopes to make a career in environmental advocacy: burdened with student loan debt, it would be convenient to take a job at a corporate law firm for a few years, pay off the debt, and transition debt-free into the preferred, low-paid work. But law school graduates often reject this option, conscious of the fact that their time in a corporate law firm may lead to new preferences, as they grow accustomed to affluence. Daily participation in the corporate environment can alter the worker’s understanding of what is desirable, meaningful, or worth pursuing. In addition to extrinsic and intrinsic rewards and the affirmation of identity, people may consider whether a job will help them sustain their current priorities or, conversely, if the job will put them in a context that is likely to reshape their goals and values.

The risk that career goal will change is salient for aspiring artists, as good jobs engender commitment to other types of work through raises, promotions, and other material or social rewards. Many who start out in artistic careers ultimately leave, often because there are more



lucrative options outside the arts. One SNAAP survey found that 52 percent of professional artists who switched to a non-art field “did so because of better pay” available elsewhere (Lindemann & Tepper, 2012). Moreover, Frenette and Dowd (2018) show that people are more likely to abandon artistic careers if they have an alternative career available to them. The theory advanced here is that artists are aware of this risk and reject desirable paid work, using bad jobs as commitment devices aimed at sustaining creative aspirations. At the same time, the case of aspiring artist also illustrates how a sociological approach enriches the concept of commitment devices beyond what has been proposed by economists. Bad jobs are not a simple mechanism, to be implemented once, but rather a set of material and meaning-making practices through which artists sustain commitment.

This strategy is distinct from other approaches artists use to mitigate risk, such as developing hyphenate careers (Cornfield, 2015; Lindemann & Tepper, 2012; McRobbie, 2002). In contrast to hyphenate careers, which reduce the economic risks of creative work, the use of bad jobs as commitment devices entails *increasing* one’s economic risk, by minimizing the options for sustainable alternative income streams, but with the benefit of *decreasing* the risk of forsaking artistic aspirations altogether. Work as a commitment device is also distinct from the concept of work commitment, used in sociology and management to refer to the degree to which employees identify with their occupation, employer, job, and co-workers (Randall & Cote, 1991). Work commitment has significant implications for job satisfaction, performance, and turnover (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005). The artists studied here are unusual insofar as they are strongly committed to their artistic pursuits, but their paid jobs are often unrelated to their creative work.

I propose that aspiring artists, anxious to sustain their commitment to creative goals, prefer jobs that are objectively bad—with low pay, little intrinsic value, and little advancement opportunity—because those jobs act as career commitment devices. While I identify this in the context of creative industries, it applies in diverse situations. For instance, people may choose bad jobs not only to *reinforce* commitment to *desired* goals, but also to *avoid* the formation of *undesirable* commitments. Consider the young person who does not yet have a clear career goal: he might drive for Uber, keeping his options open, rather than take a dreary office job, which—he imagines—will lock him into a lifetime of predictable cubicles, spreadsheets, and water-cooler small-talk. The commitment dimension of job preferences thus follows in the sociological tradition of contextualizing jobs within longer careers, where

careers are both objective and subjective, consisting of both a succession of institutional roles and subjective experience of “becoming” (Barley, 1989). The use of jobs as commitment devices is an effort to assert control over that process of becoming.

## Data and Methods

This paper examines the job preferences of *aspiring artists* in fields where creative work is economically *independent*. The definition of artists is contentious and people who work in the arts have been found to disavow the title of professional artist (Lena & Lindemann, 2014). For the purposes of this study, I define an artist as anyone who considers their primary activity the production or performance of music, dance, theater, film, fine art, writing, design, and photography, therefore excluding hobbyists and teachers who do not also practice art outside the classroom.

I focus on fields where creative work is economically independent, insofar as the artist earns money by selling artworks, rather than being employed to produce it. This is not a categorical distinction but rather a spectrum. Nonetheless, one’s position on this spectrum shapes the configuration of utility, identity, and commitment in evaluating jobs. I focus on three types of artists that constitute an extreme case, insofar as they create the work and then try to find a paying customer: fine artists, film writer/directors, and creative writers. Having started with a focus on fine artists, I expanded to include filmmakers and writers to increase the number of potential respondents. I interviewed 40 fine artists, 15 filmmakers, and 13 writers (Table 1).

I further focus on *aspiring* artists: those who aspire to, but cannot yet, support themselves primarily through their independent creative work. As Umney and Kretsos (2015) note, this population is more likely to have bad jobs and to confront the choice between reliable income with little autonomy or an unpredictable career of creative fulfillment. Although data on aspiring artists are limited, it is clear that the vast majority of aspirants never achieve financial success in the arts (Abbing, 2008) and it is common to fail repeatedly before finding success (Skaggs, 2019). Given the research goals, I ensured that most of the respondents were aspiring (79%) and therefore needed day jobs. Of these, in addition to any income from selling their art, eleven supported themselves with teaching, twelve supported themselves through commercial art, and 31 relied on other day jobs. To validate emerging findings, I also interviewed nine respondents who had achieved financial

**Table 1.** Respondent Descriptive Statistics.

Characteristic	N	%
Field		
Film	15	22%
Fine arts	40	59%
Creative writing	13	19%
City		
Austin	9	13%
Los Angeles	39	57%
New York City	19	28%
San Francisco	1	1%
Age		
Mean	33	
Minimum	22	
Maximum	64	
Aspiring to art at time of interview		
Yes	63	93%
No	5	7%
Income of artists and aspiring artists		
Art alone	9	13%
Art and teaching	11	16%
Art and commercial art	12	18%
Art and other day jobs	31	46%

success as an artist, meaning that they supported themselves exclusively through art sales, and five people who had stopped aspiring to an art career.

Artists are hard to reach, as there are few professional organizations or networks of artists from which to sample. The lack of resources is rooted in inconsistent definitions of the population: “artist” can be interpreted as an occupation or as including participants in cultural industries (Lena & Lindemann, 2014). Moreover, to understand how people who *want to earn money by selling their art* choose jobs to support themselves, I had to find people who are rarely classified as “professional artists” (Butler, 2000; Frenette & Tepper, 2016). I therefore used a snowball sampling method, using referrals from personal contacts that worked in administrative positions at art institutions and asking respondents to refer others. This sampling strategy provides insights into the processes of interest here—the formation of job preferences in relation to career aspirations—but it means that the findings

cannot speak to the relative prevalence of particular attitudes, behaviors, or preferences among demographic subpopulations.

Personal referrals were also useful because day jobs are a surprisingly sensitive subject. Some artists feel the need to hide the fact that they rely on non-art income and cultivate an image as already economically successful. To protect their privacy, I use pseudonyms while identifying the respondent's artistic field, age, and city of residence at the time of the interview.

The sample includes groups across which variation is likely to affect the relationship between career goals and job preferences. Specifically, this relationship may vary based on location, education, economic resources, and age. First, preferences may reflect the availability of arts-related jobs in the local area. I therefore interviewed respondents from three locations with different creative labor markets. I focused on New York City and Los Angeles, which have the largest creative industries (Markusen, 2013), to understand whether artists prefer arts-related jobs when they are readily available. I then identified respondents from Austin, which has a smaller art industry. Of the respondents, 19 lived in New York City, 39 lived in Los Angeles, nine lived in Austin, and one was in San Francisco at the time of the interview. All of these cities are expensive places to live, meaning that the need for well-paying work is particularly acute.

Second, job preferences vary with education and the attendant opportunity. The study was limited to respondents who had completed a four-year degree. The respondents were especially highly educated, with one-third holding a Masters of Fine Arts or other postgraduate degree. The high level of education reflects snowball sampling, but the educational attainment of artists is higher than the general population: 65 percent professional artists hold bachelors degrees, double the rate of the national population (National Endowment for the Arts, 2014). Artists who have non-arts degrees are likely to have an easier time finding lucrative work outside the arts (Frenette & Dowd, 2018), which may pose greater challenges to their long-term commitment. Only about half of respondents had a degree, either bachelors or higher, from an art school, meaning that the chances of having outside options was relatively high.

Third, artistic aspirations are not equally realistic for people from low-income backgrounds, given the investment required to pursue art, such as education, and opportunity costs like the lost income from higher-paying jobs not taken. By focusing on artists who are college educated, the data skew towards respondents from middle and upper

class backgrounds, who, research shows, are less likely to feel distressed or dissatisfied in jobs for which they are overqualified (Steffy, 2017). The benefit of looking at this population is that it isolates those who choose bad jobs when better options are readily available, throwing into sharper relief the dimensions of job quality other than pay. Only five respondents came from working-class backgrounds. That they are such a small minority is consistent with the significant economic barriers to pursuing careers in creative fields (Frenette, 2013; Lindemann, 2013), and with research on the composition of cultural industries by social class, which shows that people from privileged backgrounds are represented in creative industries at twice or three times the rate of the general population (Oakley et al., 2017). Instead of explaining differences by class background, I focus on a privileged group to understand the preference for bad jobs when ostensibly better options are available.

Finally, people's economic priorities change over the life course. I focus on those who are still aspiring to successful careers as artists, so the majority of respondents were between ages 22 and 35 (82%). In focusing on aspiring artists in these early career years, I capture what might be a phase in their career development. As Johnson et al. (2020) show, many young adults experience an early career characterized by "flounder[ing]...working in a succession of unrelated job and experiencing periods of unemployment," which leads them to deeper reflection about their career goals. To explore how the commitment device strategy unfolds, I interviewed five respondents between ages 35 and 40 and seven over age 40. At the time of the interview, seven respondents—including two under age 35—had children. Although the effect of age on job preferences is pronounced, a full exploration of the relationship is beyond the scope of this paper.

Interviews began with the question, "What do you do?" allowing respondent to describe the relationship between art and paid work in an open-ended fashion. I then asked them to narrate their work history, prompting them to explain why they stayed in a job or quit. I asked about career aspirations and jobs that they might have in the future. Follow-up questions probed for individual evaluations ("Why did you consider that a good job?") and interpretations of field-level values ("Why do people think this is a good job?"). Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, with an average duration of 58 minutes.

Understanding job preferences requires analyzing both people and jobs. Thus, in addition to a sample of individuals, I coded the data to generate a list of jobs that respondents held or considered. Although I did not ask respondents to systematically list all jobs they had ever

considered or accepted, I did ask them to narrate their work histories. Using these narratives, I identified 226 jobs, for an average of 3.3 jobs per respondent. These jobs were coded in terms of subjective quality (desirable, neutral or mixed, undesirable), proximity to the art world (whether the job involved directly interacting with other members of the art world), perceived career potential of the job (whether the job is associated with a long-term career that would be desirable to the respondent), and part-time or short-term arrangements (Table 2). These jobs characteristics were widely distributed: most respondents (62%) had experience in both arts-related and non-arts-related jobs; more than three-quarters of respondents had held part-time or short-term jobs at some point and only six respondents had held neither part-time nor short-term jobs; and most (57%) had experience with both subjectively desirable and undesirable jobs.

I transcribed and coded the interviews, moving back and forth between the data and the literature to refine the codes as I inductively developed the job evaluation framework and the theory of jobs as commitment devices. To assess the emerging argument, I used alternative methods to evaluate observed trends, including correlations and figures charting the relationship between dimensions of quality (desirable or undesirable) and job characteristics, confirming the argument developed here.

## **The Value of Bad Jobs**

Most aspiring independent artists are not paid to make art, so they rely on day jobs. The need for day jobs often continues after the artist has achieved some success. One fine artist introduced himself: “I’m an artist...I’ve been doing that for maybe 12 years. I got some recognition...I’m represented by a gallery in LA...but I’m still not making any money from it” (Noah, fine artist, 32, LA). The jobs that are available to these respondents, all with college degrees and valuable creative skills, range from professional work to menial gigs. How do they evaluate their job options? In the following sections, I discuss the utility, identity, and commitment dimensions of jobs that inform their preferences. I find that all three dimensions are salient, but utility and identity alone cannot explain the preference for bad jobs, and especially the tendency to avoid, refuse, or quit well-paying, satisfying, and potentially engrossing paid work. To illustrate the need for a new, commitment-based explanation, I begin by addressing the evidence in

**Table 2.** Job Descriptive Statistics.

Characteristic	Definition	Job		Person	
		N	%	N	%
Quality: Respondent's subjective perception of the job's quality					
Desirable	Matches respondent's preferences	115	51%	64	94%
Neutral or mixed	No clear preference for or against	41	18%	30	44%
Undesirable	Does not match respondent's preferences	70	31%	42	62%
Relationship to art world: Analyst's assessment of whether the job is arts-related					
No connection	Does not involve interacting with the art world	118	52%	55	81%
Connected to art	Involves interacting with members of the art world	94	42%	55	81%
Teaching art	Teaching elementary, high school, or university art	14	6%	12	18%
Job characteristics: Objective and subjective characteristics of the job					
Part-time	Does not offer or require full-time hours	107	47%	52	76%
Short-term	Of limited duration	101	45%	53	78%
Career potential	Advancement potential of interest to respondent	64	28%	45	66%
Jobs per person					
Mean	3.3				
Minimum	1				
Maximum	6				

favor of utility and identity factors, while highlighting where they fall short of explaining the observed job preferences.

### *Utility: Rejecting Both Extrinsic and Intrinsic Rewards*

One aspect of work that informs job preferences is the job's rewards, including extrinsic rewards, like money and time, and intrinsic rewards, like creativity and fulfillment. Among respondents, extrinsic factors were salient but job preferences did not typically reflect an effort to maximize either income or free time. More surprisingly, respondents rejected intrinsically meaningful work, contradicting the dominant explanation for why artists end up poor: that they trade money and stability for the opportunity to be creative at work (Menger, 1999, 2014). Instead, respondents consistently described *avoiding* creative paid jobs in the effort to conserve creative energy for personal work. In this section, I describe how aspiring artists evaluate job rewards and show that they do not take low-paying jobs because the jobs were especially interesting—attracting an oversupply of applicants and keeping wages low—but rather because those jobs were easy and therefore associated with negative characteristics like low pay.

Money was a pervasive concern. Many respondents felt that an economic emergency could arise at any moment. The threat remained, albeit more remote, for artists who had achieved some success. Following graduate school, one respondent explained, “I was adjunct teaching and it freaked me out that I lived semester by semester for a year. I was like, ‘I don’t know, how am I going to make rent in six months?’” (Scarlet, fine artist, 38, LA). Established artists with consistent sales described having enough money for the next few months, but not beyond that: “I never made enough money that I could live for a whole year. I can always live for the next three or four months . . . but I wonder when things will stop coming” (Fiona, fine artist, 34, NYC).

The salience of money meant that pay was a factor when choosing a job, but most indicated that they made less money than they could. The majority (63%) of respondents brought up money in describing how they evaluated jobs. As one respondent explained, she preferred working in the art department on commercials, in part, because it offered a “pretty good day rate” compared to other short-term gigs (Erica, fine artist, 28, LA). But most asserted that they did not maximize their income. As William put it: “I could be getting paid a lot more for the skills that I have in the work that I do” but working in a more highly-



paid corporate environment was “not worth it” (William, fine artist, 30, Austin).

Instead, respondents described looking for jobs that provided enough money to get by and continue making art. One described his first years after graduating from a prestigious MFA program:

I actually was working all these weird jobs...I worked at Dodger Stadium, as a ticket taker...And bartending and doing weird catering jobs outside of that as well. None of it paid well...I didn't feel at all ashamed that I was doing that stuff. But...[it] didn't have long-term scope to have income to do your art (Maxwell, fine artist, 33, LA).

Similarly, when asked to explain his economic goals, Jonah emphasized that the aim was to “continue making my work and have stability and just the amount of money I have [now] and not having to scramble quite as much” (Jonah, fine artist, 30, NYC). Rather than maximizing pay, many focused on minimizing living expenses. Ivy described adjusting her lifestyle to accommodate her creative projects, after quitting a career as a commercial film director:

I quickly started paring down and saying, “Ok, what do I really need to live. How can I save money on groceries?” and for the first time got really obsessive about being resourceful, living in houses not on my own but communally... It's really just because it's important to me to be able to invest time into the [art] work (Ivy, filmmaker, 34, LA).

At the extremes, several respondents mentioned a stint of sleeping in the car or the art studio to afford studio space and materials.

More common than maximizing money was ensuring time for art. Of respondents aspiring to art careers, 75 percent talked about making time for personal work. As one explained, “Time is the most critical commodity for me now, 'cause I need time to be in the studio...I would rather have less money and more time” (Mark, fine artist, 24, LA). Respondents emphasized either having regular time off, preferring part-time jobs, or having long periods off, preferring short-term jobs. Brandon explained that his current job, as a nonprofit administrator, was a good fit “because it occupies such a small amount of my week, it's 14 hours,” despite the fact that it “it also doesn't really pay enough—[my wife's income] supports my art studio” (Brandon, fine artist, 34, SF). Others preferred long periods of time off. Mark explained that, “if I can line up 60 hours of [paid] work in a row, I'll just grind every day

and then for a week I'll just work in my studio. So I kind of pinball back and forth" (Mark, fine artist, 24, LA), noting that this was a common strategy among artists he knew. Both part-time work and short-term contracts were common: nearly half of jobs mentioned were part-time, 41 percent were short-term, and one-quarter were both part-time and short-term. These nonstandard jobs were not simply more accessible. Part-time and short-term jobs were more likely to be viewed as desirable and less likely to be viewed as undesirable than full-time and long-term jobs.

Respondents also actively avoided creative jobs, concerned about wasting the limited creative resources required for their personal work. Regina rejected creative jobs "because that takes creative energy and I only have so much creative impulse per day" (Regina, fine artist, 38, LA). Piper similarly refused jobs that would use her writing skills: "It's a pretty decent way to make money and it's a good deal if you write fast, which I do. But . . . mentally, there's only so much energy for [writing] there," so she took a full-time job as a non-profit administrator (Piper, writer, 29, LA). Piper had an Ivy League degree and was well-connected, living in her home town, but Melody—who was far from home, came from a working class background, and had a degree from middle-tier college—said something similar: "I thought about working as a staff writer at BuzzFeed but that also seems exhausting, I wouldn't have time to work on what I want to be doing . . . [Instead] I've thought about desk jobs, maybe temping. Stuff like that where I wouldn't be creatively exhausted" (Melody, writer, 26, LA). For filmmakers, editing is an interesting and lucrative option. But respondents describe being "creatively drained" by editing for pay (Angelo, filmmaker, 27, LA) or having "a [limited] capacity of what my brain can handle in terms of [editing], so I don't want to tax that time on somebody else's project" (Gordon, filmmaker, 30, LA). By contrast, easy jobs were compatible with creative pursuits. Rose described the benefits of being a nanny, rather than a writer for hire: "I'd come home [and] I might be tired from being with the kids all day but I wasn't tired from writing all day and using my writing muscles," making it easier to spend time on independent work (Rose, writer, 31, NYC).

While eschewing creative day jobs, many artists talked about seeking proximity to the art world, pursuing jobs—such as assisting other artists—that provided a front-row view of how the art world works. These jobs were often boring and unglamorous, but they provided

information about the practical details of being an artist. Henry highlighted factors similar to those reported by twelve others respondents:

I worked for this artist and I really didn't like him but it was the first time I heard someone really talk about the day-to-day apparatus of being an artist, what it meant. Just seeing, how often do you come into your studio? What kind of equipment do you have? . . . He was not interested in explaining anything to me. It was all just through osmosis (Henry, fine artist, 38, LA).

Others echoed that working as an artist's assistant was not enjoyable but informative, learning "how to make models out of crappy cardboard" (Fiona, fine artist, 34, NYC); observing what the employer "did all day, which was basically talk on the phone, and how he'd talk on the phone" (Jackson, fine artist, 25, NYC); and picking up "little stuff, like how people pack their work" for shipment (Lily, fine artist, 27, LA). Filmmakers and writers also valued jobs that provided exposure to the mechanics of the industry. For instance, freelance work as an editor helped James learn "what editors want—I know what sort of freelancers are easiest to work with so I know how to supply [that]" (James, 33, writer, LA).

Respondents thus rejected creative jobs but sought jobs in proximity to the art world. They did so even when the arts-related jobs were not creatively fulfilling. In choosing jobs that were close to the art world but not intrinsically meaningful, these cases demonstrate that intrinsic utility alone does not explain the preference—these jobs were only valuable insofar as the respondent remained committed to pursuing success as an independent artist. The intrinsic and extrinsic values associated with jobs are salient, but the common explanation for why artists have bad jobs—that they maximize income in bad labor markets or trade income for creative fulfillment—do not hold. To understand these patterns, we must consider other dimensions of job quality.

### *Identity: Favoring Appropriate Jobs*

Respondents described evaluating jobs in terms of the alignment of job and identity. In this section, I show that there is a common understanding about which jobs are appropriate and that aspiring artists evaluate their options in light of appropriateness to an artistic identity. However, I also show that appropriate jobs are sometimes rejected if they threaten commitment.

There is widespread agreement about which jobs are appropriate to the identity of the aspiring artist. Jackson explained that artists are “exclusionary about what they think is acceptable” in terms of paid work (Jackson, fine artist, 25, NYC). When I asked Scarlet to explain how she evaluated options after her MFA, she described intense normative pressure:

*Interviewer:* Was there a sense [in graduate school] of which jobs would be good jobs to have and which jobs would not be?

*Scarlet:* I mean, definitely not a lab tech job, which is what I had for six years [after my MFA]. Everyone looked down on that job. It was more like artist assisting and adjunct teaching. Definitely not commercial work.

*Interviewer:* What was wrong with commercial work?

*Scarlet:* It wasn't making art. And so people look down on that.

*Interviewer:* But teaching is also not making art.

*Scarlet:* I know, I know it's so weird! . . . It's just like, it's so funny, there's these social rules of what you can and cannot do. And I don't really care. You [should] just make your money the way you want, that's like the easiest and not this taxing. [*Pause.*] It was more adjunct teaching.

*Interviewer:* And why was that considered a good way of making money?

*Scarlet:* Probably because our professors said so. Probably because, like, someone told us (Scarlet, fine artist, 38, LA).

Respondents felt pressure to conform to these shared ideas about appropriate jobs, even though the acceptable options—such as assisting other artists and adjunct teaching—were known to be low paying and arduous.

Artists often learn about which jobs are appropriate from role models, including personal contacts and historical figures. Simon described his job choices with reference to “the role models that I grew up with—the narrative I had of my parents was that they had shit jobs until they could survive as artists” (Simon, writer, 24, LA). Oliver justified working in real estate by noting that “of course Brice Marden made all of his money from real estate. A lot of artists have invested in real estate and that has become the foundation of

their . . . financial stability” (Oliver, fine artist, 32, NYC). Jackson illustrated the power of well-known narratives by describing the extraordinary lengths a friend took to conform to one script:

There are the acceptable things to do [for work]. Working at MoMA [the Museum of Modern Art], you know, Jeff Koons did it. So that was an acceptable narrative. [My friend] could have done a lot of things—he could have taught, he had [a college degree] from a really good school. He could have made more money for sure. Instead he was living with his parents in Queens to work at MoMA for \$12 an hour to have a tiny studio in Bushwick and travel all around the city because that was the narrative that he thought would be acceptable (Jackson, fine artist, 25, NYC).

Artists embrace jobs that are sanctioned by common narratives, even when those jobs are associated with lower rewards in terms of time, income, and fulfillment.

When artists take jobs that are not sanctioned by the broader art world, such as commercial work, many describe using strategies to distance themselves from their jobs, either by keeping them secret or by creating conceptual distinctions. Although the “bifurcation between the commercial and the noncommercial . . . is increasingly breaking down” (Lingo and Tepper, 2013, p. 342), respondents largely described commercial work as incompatible with their artistic identities. Henry explained the decision to leave his well-paid job as a photography editor at a prestigious magazine “because I had this very deep relationship with photography . . . and I would tap into that for my research but in the end we’d run these kind of dumb, illustrative photographs” and he found it demoralizing (Henry, fine artist, 38, LA). James actually enjoyed his occasional work as an editor for a commercial magazine, but explained “I just keep it on the down-low” to avoid stigma, describing other stints as a corporate copywriter as “weird secret money jobs” (James, writer, 33, LA). Rather than hiding her work, Audrey used conceptual distinctions:

With commercial work there’s always a client. I’ve made it okay for myself with a couple years of experience to understand, “Ok, this isn’t art that I’m making, this is for a client, and therefore I might be a whore but this isn’t who I am, this is who they are” (Audrey, filmmaker, 32, LA).

Respondents thus preferred paid work that was either consistent with their creative identity or far enough from their creative work to be easily differentiated or hidden.

Jobs related to the art world were more visible, meaning that, even if the job was appropriate, it might overshadow the artist's preferred identity. Madison described giving up her job as an art critic, despite finding it personally enjoyable and compatible with her artistic pursuits, because others in the field would focus on her writing rather than her art:

I stopped [writing art criticism] because when people would introduce me at art events, they would introduce me as [Madison] the art critic and not [Madison] the artist and I was like "Whoa, whoa, whoa, I'm just doing this for the money." And that really deeply bothered me so I realized I had to have my studio practice be very full time and what I did for money had to be completely unrelated (Madison, fine artist, 30, Austin).

Madison instead became a nanny. Similarly, both Brandon and Maxwell walked away from successful carpentry businesses that threatened to overshadow their artistic identities. Brandon's experience ran parallel to Madison's, as he described his decision to quit his business, which he had started with a friend, as "identity-based":

I would meet people—[who] I knew were influential in the art world—while I was designing furniture. And I would say, "I have this furniture business, I design furniture." It felt like that was my responsibility as a business partner to put the business, which supported the art, first—rather than the art first. So, you know, there were clients that were art collectors who thought of me as a woodworker (Brandon, fine artist, 34, SF).

By contrast, working for someone else's carpentry business—a job that pays hourly and offers little opportunity for promotion—was seen as compatible with artistic goals: of the nine jobs mentioned in carpentry, including furniture making, art handling, construction, and set design, respondents described seven as desirable, two as neutral, and none as undesirable. Identity risks therefore led to polarization in the perceived quality of arts-related jobs. In analyzing the variation across jobs, I found that arts-related jobs were less likely to be seen as neutral and more likely to be undesirable. In other words, when a job was connected to the art world, the salience of the match between job and identity meant that it was either experienced as good or bad.

The importance of a job's proximity to the art world becomes even clearer when accounting for the possibility that the job offers a desirable alternative career. Jobs that lacked career potential, dead-end jobs, were viewed as desirable more often than jobs with the possibility of leading

to interesting careers. When a job had career potential unrelated to art—conventional jobs in fields like advertising, software development, and graphic design—respondents were ambivalent. But jobs that were related to the art world *and* had career potential—jobs like gallery administrator, curator, film producer, or magazine editor—were mostly rejected. In other words, the jobs that we might assume to be the best, based exclusively on identity and utility characteristics, were disproportionately described as particularly undesirable.

This interplay between proximity to the art world and career potential illustrates a core tension in artists' working lives: the more interesting the job is and the more desirable the opportunities it presents for growth, the greater the threat it poses to one's commitment to making art. In acknowledging this tension, respondents describe their job choices in terms of efforts to guide the evolution of their own commitments.

### *Commitment: Embracing Bad Jobs, Rejecting Good Ones*

People sometimes choose their commitments, but sometimes commitments emerge from the environment. Becker (1960) described how people become committed unintentionally, by virtue of social context. Respondents acknowledged that commitment sometimes *happened to them*: “That’s when I realized I had gone a separate way . . . I thought of [my friends] as creative but they had just gotten jobs . . . That’s when I was like, ‘I have chosen a path without really realizing’” (Lucy, fine artist, 34, LA). Artists are aware that a job can, over time, engender commitment, becoming a career that supplants creative ambitions. In this section, I show that artists avoid, reject, or quit jobs that threaten to divert commitment—jobs that should be considered good by the metrics of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards and may even be appropriate to artistic identity. By contrast, they value jobs that are bad, insofar as those jobs preclude the formation of alternative commitments.

Respondents frequently acknowledged that good day jobs created problematic temptations—to divert time away from art and towards paid work—where good day jobs are those that are linked to occupations that offer some chance of success and fulfillment. Upon graduating from her MFA program, Cassie asked for advice from a curator “about trying to have a job and be an artist” at the same time: “His thinking was, if you can get a shitty job at the front of the house at an art center or movie house, you’re more likely to keep making your art than if you do something that you kind of enjoy” (Cassie, fine artist, 30,

Austin). In jobs with intrinsic interest and career potential, many resisted their own success. Over more than ten years since graduating from college, Nicki struggled to stay in a job because she felt that success at work threatened her commitment to writing:

I kept quitting . . . Not because I wasn't good at it. I was promoted in a lot of jobs. But I was like "I cannot succeed in this [education job] because then I will not succeed at my goal" . . . I was gonna be promoted to a director position at [one] school and that's when I was like "I can't do it because, I mean, I have to be a writer" (Nicki, 33, writer, LA).

For these artists, something "you kind of enjoy" might draw you away from your creative goals, so jobs that offer interesting alternative pathways are avoided or abandoned.

To avoid being tempted into a different career, 27 respondents—or nearly 40 percent—explicitly quit or turned down jobs that offered interesting advancement opportunities, while another 33 percent never reported having or being offered such jobs. Faith identified her most rewarding work experience as a job in post-production, where she was paid well and received consistent work. But in post-production, she explained, "you start from the bottom and move up . . . but because I wanted to be a director I knew I didn't want to move up in the direction of any of those jobs," so she quit (Faith, filmmaker, 34, LA). Similarly, Camille considered taking a gallery job—which was interesting and well-paid—but turned it down because it would have put her on a path towards increasing professionalization:

I was offered . . . a real serious job with a real serious gallery back in January . . . and it was a really good salary and stuff and I declined because . . . if you work for certain galleries it's by definition like a *career* thing, it's like you climb the chain and you make more and more money and it's definitely like a career-type job. It's not like a summer gig (Camille, fine artist, 27, NYC).

By contrast, she was willing to take a job at a gallery that required minimal commitment: "Right now I work at a gallery a few Saturdays a month but I'm not involved in the gallery process and it's very clear that I'm just sitting here. It's like a gig."

Concerns about getting stuck in a non-artistic career were salient even to people who did not have appealing alternatives. Despite his college education and middle-class background, Colin had little social



capital when he arrived in Los Angeles and frequently travelled out of the state to work for a family member's small welding business to make ends meet. Despite embracing diverse nonstandard jobs, Colin decided to stop working as an extra on movie sets—which was well-paid and enjoyable—because “people get stuck doing it . . . I saw that and was like, ‘I need to get out of here’” (Colin, fine artist, 30, LA). He gave up the reliable pay for more erratic income, “picking up random work, handyman things, [and] a lot of low-end graphic design” for several months, before finding a relatively reliable job as assistant to a porn star, “doing paperwork and scheduling.” Jobs without a clear end-point threatened to become the primary focus and divert attention from creative pursuits.

Respondents thus feared that a good job might lead them to “get complacent or just content working for other people” and “stop producing [art] work” (Rose, writer, 31, NYC). Eddie realized the risks of a good day job by observing his colleagues at a film production company, where he was shocked to realize how common it is for artistic aspirations to lose their urgency:

There were so many people I ran into there who were senior to me, who had risen up the ladder but who had all had aspirations of making a short film, or finishing some sculpture collection, or making their own personal art and, you know . . . they've been working on it since *Return of the Jedi* or *Empire Strikes Back*. And it's just sort of sad in a way because clearly they had artistic aspirations at one point in time but they either didn't have the psychological wherewithal, will power, or luck and chance to see it through amidst working in the nine-to-six, nine-to-seven environment where they were creatively being asked to give their all to this other person's project. So I really freaked out by hearing that, like, “Dude you're *never* gonna finish your film” (Eddie, fine artist, 34, NYC).

So he quit. The problem was not simply a lack of time. According to Eddie, the very fact that the job was good—creatively engaging, culturally relevant, well paid—made it a threat.

These concerns lead many artists to prefer work that requires minimal commitment, neither allowing nor expecting employees to advance over time. Jonah, who had a degree from a prestigious art school and was well connected in the art world, explained that he always limited his paid work to art handling and construction: in the eight years since graduating, “I've never had a job that isn't just labor, that isn't easily replaceable by some other person . . . I've never had a job that's not just

a *job*” (Jonah, fine artist, 30, NYC). After assisting artists for a couple of years, Jackson decided that he preferred restaurant work for similar reasons:

The benefit of working at a restaurant is I leave and I don’t think about it at all... So there’s that element of total noninvestment, which I love because it’s not my career... It’s a completely different sphere than the one that I consider my career, my *real* career, which is making my art (Jackson, 25, fine artist, NYC).

Jobs that expect little of their workers—and offer them little in return—help to reinforce artistic aspirations by not competing for the artist’s limited capacity for commitment.

In addition to precluding the formation of alternative commitments, some jobs—those that are especially bad—can actively motivate the artist by creating a sense of urgency in the creative pursuit. For Melody, working at a grocery store helped her focus on her writing: “The good thing about working in that situation for me was that I knew I didn’t want to stay there and the only way to not stay there was to keep writing” (Melody, writer, 26, LA). For Rose, quitting a job in publishing to work as a nanny was crucial step in becoming serious about her writing:

Putting all of my chips in the writing basket and being a nanny as opposed to having a more, you know, *professional* money job was a decision I’d made to be like, “I am *just* going to be a writer and not [something else].” Because when I first moved to New York I worked at an agency [representing writers] and I had like a salary and benefits. So I guess [the moment when I left that job to be a nanny was] when I decided... that *all* I was going to do career-wise was be a writer... because I obviously wasn’t going to be a career hostess or career nanny (Rose, writer, 31, NYC).

When the artist perceives the job as a dead-end, it generates additional motivation by framing creative success as the only means of advancing. The specific jobs that are perceived as dead-end may vary based on social context, but the belief that the job does not offer advancement opportunities *of value to the artist* is instrumental rather than detrimental, encouraging the artist to continue pursuing artistic aspirations.

Those who embraced interesting jobs with career potential tended to abandon their creative aspirations. The five respondents who were no

longer pursuing art—each of whom started out with creative ambitions—gradually became committed to their paid work instead. These respondents described trajectories in which they struggled to imagine how they would support themselves while pursuing creative work, just as the other respondents struggled with anxiety about money and uncertainty about future artistic success. But in these cases, they made a decision to embrace a non-art job with career potential and became committed to that as a professional identity. As Ava explained, as some point she realized that “it takes more energy to resist [the day job, and say] ‘I don’t really care about this.’ I’ve had to stop doing other creative work in order to get to that place [of acceptance] with this job. [Resisting the idea that this is my real job] will make me resent the work . . . It just made the job harder” (Ava, fine artist, 30, LA). The choice to stop pursuing art is thus not explained exclusively by characteristics of the *person*. For instance, Eli (writer, 30, LA) had an Ivy League education and Ryan (fine artist, 30, NYC) had substantial family resources that could have supplemented low income as an artist. Rather, the characteristics of the day job also shape the worker’s aspirations for the future.

## Discussion

This article helps to initiate the exploration of a promising concept for sociological inquiry: the commitment device. With this conceptual tool, researchers can shed light on new dimensions of romantic relationships (Cigno, 2012; Matouschek & Rasul, 2008), educational decisions (Thum & Uebelmesser, 2003), and patterns of consumption (Kast et al., 2012). Sociologists can advance on the existing empirical work by enriching the concept as economists have developed it. A sociological approach highlights the fact that commitment devices are not simple technologies that enforce an actor’s freely chosen commitments. They are, rather, embedded in everyday activities, institutional arrangements, and social relations. Instead of conceptualizing commitment as a *device*, we might consider it a *practice*: an ongoing relationship between social structures, behaviors, beliefs, and relations through which people use their environment—including their jobs—to support commitment to long-term goals.

The concept of career commitment devices speaks to the tension between agency and constraint in nonstandard work. Diverse studies show that workers increasingly take on the burden of “attracting” employment or selling their services to employers (Gershon, 2017;

Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2002; Ursell, 2000). The commitment device concept highlights the multiple ways that workers participate in shifting the risk of employment towards themselves. These aspiring artists actively embraced non-art jobs that might otherwise be labeled exploitative. The bad conditions of these jobs were, in fact, valuable to them, deterring them from further investment in paid work. These findings thus confirm that the new world of work is a double-edged sword: the proliferation of nonstandard jobs allows people to pursue their passions, while simultaneously cutting them off from future employment that might provide stability.

By exploring the diverse world of artists' paid work, this research speaks to recent debates over who counts as an artist. It takes part in a shift away from the "object-centered view" of artistic careers, towards a perspective that emphasizes the artist's many art, art-related, and non-art-related activities, and how these fit together (Gerber and Childress, 2017), and expands on recent work exploring particular types of artists' jobs, such as teaching (Umney & Kretsos, 2015). The findings provide insight into the underlying patterns that have led to difficulty defining artistic occupations. Scholars have found puzzling patterns of self-identification: many who work in the arts do not identify as artists, while other who identify as artists are not employed in the arts (Lena & Lindemann, 2014). With the exception of five respondents who stopped pursuing art, all respondents in this study identified as artists, but they did so on the basis of their personal practice, rather than their source of income. For most of them, artistic work did not provide the majority of their income and many earned no money from their art. Moreover, the majority of jobs (52%) were not related to the art world and the vast majority of respondents (81%) had held at least one job unrelated to the art world, at some point. As a result, the study confirms findings elsewhere: that artists may be best defined not by how they earn their money but by a personal sense of identity or by the use of their time (Gerber, 2017).

The findings also engage with research on the distinction between job precarity and labor market insecurity in cultural industries (Lowe, 2018). These bad jobs, while insecure, were easy to come by, creating the appearance of broader labor market security. But this is an illusion. Insofar as these artists forego the cultivation of stable alternative careers, they are at risk. In the face of economic crisis, labor market security evaporates at precisely the moment when job insecurity makes good on its promise. The case therefore contradicts research that takes an optimistic view of portfolio careers. For instance, Gerber and

Childress (2017) argued that “artists can maintain artistic autonomy, while at the same time finding financial security through a wide-range of residencies, fellowships, and teaching positions in the arts” (p. 1548). By contrast, I find that the jobs that allow artists to maintain their artistic autonomy specifically undermine their ability to secure financial stability. To have a chance of success as an artist, they must “burn their boats,” like Cortés on the shores of the Americas, precluding stable back-up careers.

While building directly on research about artists and creative work, this paper takes an unconventional approach to understanding bad jobs, by focusing on privileged group that voluntarily chooses precarious work. These respondents are not representative of the arts as a whole, as many aspiring artists do not have a college degree because educational credentials are not required in creative labor markets. For instance, only 60 percent of workers in performing and visual arts in the UK have a college degree, compared to 71 percent of people in publishing and 76 percent of museum, gallery, and library workers (O’Brien et al., 2016). Artists without a college degree may choose bad jobs for other reasons, either because better opportunities are not accessible or because extrinsic rewards are more salient. The workers in this study are unusual, insofar as they are less harmed than the many low-wage workers, including less-educated artists, who are excluded from better opportunities by society rather than by choice.

What is the benefit of looking at this privileged group? First, to the extent that the erosion of workers’ rights is a cultural phenomenon—facilitated by a growing acceptance of insecurity—the prevalence of bad jobs among elite segments of the workforce moves the goalposts on what normal employment looks like, potentially making it harder for more disadvantaged workers to claim greater protections. Second, studying this privileged population provides unique analytical leverage for questioning the widespread assumption that people always choose the best job available to them in terms of extrinsic rewards. Although sociologists have long rejected *homo economicus* as a standard for predicting behavior, the idea that people will always choose the job that maximizes their utility is stubbornly persistent. Building on cultural sociology, which asserts that people across social groups share a desire for a good life but their cultural tools for understanding how to achieve it vary (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Swidler, 1986), the case demonstrates that people may choose jobs that are not the best available in terms of pay and stability. They may do so not because they are

shortsighted, youthful idealists, but because doing so is strategic in their pursuit of other aspirations.

## **Conclusion**

This article explores the dimensions of jobs that shape workers' preferences, using the case of aspiring artists to demonstrate that jobs are evaluated, in part, in terms of how they either reinforce or undermine the worker's commitment to a desired career goal. The theory developed here, that jobs act as commitment devices, helps to explain the counterintuitive preference for bad jobs among some workers who have better options. Examining the well-known pattern in which highly educated artists are disproportionately concentrated in short-term, part-time, low-wage jobs without advancement potential, I show that, to understand why people prefer certain jobs, we should consider not only how the job provides extrinsic value and intrinsic fulfillment, and not only the degree to which the job accords with the person's identity, but also how the job will either reinforce a commitment to a career aspiration or engender new commitments.

The cases explored here only hint at interesting sources of variation, such as by creative field, geographic location, economic resources, age, and education. For instance, filmmakers are much more likely than fine artists to pursue commercial jobs, using commercial work—which is typically short-term—to develop new skills. There were also particularities by region: in Austin, the small size of the art world meant that artists felt their day jobs were more highly visible, leading to stronger boundaries against career-like work, such as Madison's experience as an art critic. Predictably, people who have money from other sources, such as parents and spouses, made fewer compromises and took fewer unappealing jobs. Age had a particularly strong effect on the willingness to reject good jobs: many respondents noted their status as unmarried and childless as a caveat to their willingness to accept low-paying jobs; older respondents talked about how changing priorities motivated them to pursue more stable work. Finally, artists who have a non-arts degree may have more options for lucrative employment, which can increase their economic stability but decrease their chances of remaining committed to art. Future research can use survey data to systematically evaluate the effect of these factors on the choice to pursue, and remain committed to, artistic goals.

## Acknowledgments

For their helpful feedback, I would like to thank Bart Bonikowski, Frank Dobbin, Nina Eliasoph, Carly Knight, Michèle Lamont, Kristin Perkins, Mario Small, and the *Work and Occupations* reviewers. In addition, I thank the members of the Harvard Cultural and Social Analysis Workshop and the Politics, Organizations, Ethnography, and Theory seminar for their comments.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Laura Adler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4506-1590>

## References

- Abbing, H. (2008). *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Alper, N. O., & Wassall, G. H. (2000). *More than once in a blue moon: Multiple jobholdings by American artists* (National Endowment for the Arts). Seven Locks Press.
- Arthur, M. B., & Rousseau, D. M. (2001). *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*. Oxford University Press.
- Banks, M. (2007). *The politics of cultural work*. Springer.
- Barley, S. R. (1989). Careers, identities, and institutions: The legacy of the Chicago school of sociology. *Handbook of Career Theory*, 41, 65.
- Barley, S. R., & Gideon, K. (2006). *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Becker, H. S. (1960). Notes on the concept of commitment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 66(1), 32–40.
- Becker, H. S. (1984). *Art worlds*. University of California Press.
- Bielby, W. T., & Bielby, D. D. (1999). Organizational mediation of project-based labor markets: Talent agencies and the careers of screenwriters. *American sociological review*, 64(1), 64–85. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657278>
- Bryan, G., Karlan, D., & Nelson, S. (2010). Commitment devices. *Annual Review of Economics*, 2(1), 671–698.
- Butler, D. (2000). *Studies of artists: An annotated directory* (Working Paper). Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies.

- Cappelli, P., & Keller, J. R. (2013). Classifying work in the new economy. *Academy of Management Review*, 38(4), 575–596.
- Castel, R. (2000). The roads to disaffiliation: Insecure work and vulnerable relationships. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24(3), 519–535.
- Caves, R. E. (2000). *Creative industries: Contracts between art and commerce*. Harvard University Press.
- Childress, C. (2017). *Under the cover: The creation, production, and reception of a novel*. Princeton University Press.
- Cigno, A. (2012). Marriage as a commitment device. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 10(2), 193–213.
- Cooper-Hakim, A., & Viswesvaran, C. (2005). The construct of work commitment: Testing an integrative framework. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(2), 241–259.
- Cornfield, D. B. (2015). *Beyond the beat: Musicians building community in Nashville*. Princeton University Press.
- De Laat, K. (2015). “Write a word, get a third”: Managing conflict and rewards in professional songwriting teams. *Work and Occupations*, 42(2), 225–256.
- Dowd, T. J., & D, L. P. (2013). The Ties Among the Notes: The Social Capital of Jazz Musicians in Three Metro Areas. *Work and Occupations*, 4(4): 431–64.
- Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2005). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. University of California Press.
- Elster, J. (1979). *Ulysses and the sirens: Studies in rationality and irrationality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Faulkner, R. R., & Anderson, A. B. (1987). Short-term projects and emergent careers: Evidence from Hollywood. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(4), 879–909.
- Fine, G. A. (2017). A matter of degree: Negotiating art and commerce in MFA education. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 61(12), 1463–1486.
- Fine, G. A. (2018). *Talking art: The culture of practice and the practice of culture in MFA education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Frenette, A. (2013). Making the intern economy: Role and career challenges of the music industry intern. *Work and Occupations*, 40(4), 364–397.
- Frenette, A., & Dowd, T. J. (2018). *Who stays and who leaves? Arts education and the career trajectories of arts alumni in the United States* (Working Paper). National Endowment for the Arts.
- Frenette, A., & Tepper, S. J. (2016). What difference does it make? Assessing the effects of Arts-Based training on career pathways. *Higher Education and the Creative Economy*, 115–133.
- Frye, M. (2012). Bright futures in Malawi’s new dawn: Educational aspirations as assertions of identity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(6), 1565–1624.
- Gallie, D., Felstead, A., & Green, F. (2012). Job preferences and the intrinsic quality of work: The changing attitudes of British employees 1992–2006. *Work, Employment and Society*, 26(5), 806–821.



- Gerber, A. (2017). *The work of art: Value in creative careers*. Stanford University Press.
- Gerber, A., & Childress, C. (2017). The economic world obverse: Freedom through markets after arts education. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 61(12), 1532–1554.
- Gershon, I. (2017). *Down and out in the new economy: How people find (or don't find) work today*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7-8), 1–30.
- Giné, X., Dean, K., & Jonathan, Z. (2010). Put Your Money Where Your Butt Is: A Commitment Contract for Smoking Cessation. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 2(4): 213–35.
- Halpin, B. W., & Smith, V. (2017). Employment management work: A case study and theoretical framework. *Work and Occupations*, 44(4), 339–375.
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2010). A very complicated version of freedom: Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. *Poetics*, 38(1), 4–20.
- Johnson, M. K., Mortimer, J. T., & Heckhausen, J. (2020). Work value transmission from parents to children: Early socialization and delayed activation. *Work and Occupations*, 47(1), 83–119.
- Jones, C. (1996). Careers in project networks: The case of the film industry. In M. B. Arthur & D. M. Rousseau (Eds.), *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era* (pp. 58–75). Oxford University Press.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 1–22.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2011). *Good jobs, bad jobs: The rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States 1970s to 2000s*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2018). *Precarious lives: Job insecurity and well-being in rich democracies*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Kalleberg, A. L., & Vallas, S. P. (2018). Probing precarious work: Theory, research, and politics. *Research in the Sociology of Work*, 31(1), 1–30.
- Kast, F., Meier, S., & Pomeranz, D. (2012). *Under-savers anonymous: Evidence on self-help groups and peer pressure as a savings commitment device* (Working Paper 18417). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Katz, L. F., & Krueger, A. B. (2016). *The rise and nature of alternative work arrangements in the United States, 1995–2015* (Working Paper 22667). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Lane, C. M. (2011). *A company of one: Insecurity, independence, and the new world of White-Collar unemployment*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Leidner, R. (2016). Work identity without steady work: Lessons from stage actors. *Research in the Sociology of Work*, 29, 3–35.
- Lena, J. C., & Lindemann, D. J. (2014). Who is an artist? New data for an old question. *Poetics*, 43, 70–85.

- Leung, M. D. (2014). Dilettante or renaissance person? How the order of job experiences affects hiring in an external labor market. *American Sociological Review*, 79(1), 136–158.
- Lindemann, D. J. (2013). What happens to artistic aspirants who do not “succeed”? A research note from the strategic national arts alumni project. *Work and Occupations*, 40(4), 465–480.
- Lindemann, D. J., & Tepper, S. J. (2012). *Painting with broader strokes: Reassessing the value of an arts degree—based on the results of the 2010 Strategic National Arts Alumni Project*.
- Lingo, E. L., & Tepper, S. J. (2013). Looking back, looking forward: Arts-Based careers and creative work. *Work and Occupations*, 40(4), 337–363.
- Lopez, S. H., & Phillips, L. A. (2019). Unemployed: White-collar job searching after the great recession. *Work and Occupations*, 46(4), 470–510.
- Lowe, T. S. (2018). Perceived job and labor market insecurity in the United States: An assessment of workers’ attitudes from 2002 to 2014. *Work and Occupations*, 45(3), 313–345.
- Markusen, A. (2013). Artists work everywhere. *Work and Occupations*, 40(4), 481–495.
- Matouschek, N., & Rasul, I. (2008). The economics of the marriage contract: Theories and evidence. *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 51(1), 59–110.
- McRobbie, A. (2002). Clubs to companies: Notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds. *Cultural Studies*, 16(4), 516–531.
- Menger, P.-M. (1999). Artistic labor markets and careers. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25(1), 541–574.
- Menger, P.-M. (2014). *The economics of creativity* (S. Rendall, A. Jacobs, A. Dorval, L. Eskinazi, E. Saada, & J. Karaganis, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Monahan, K., Schartz, J., & Schleeter, T. (2018). *Millennials in the gig economy*. Deloitte.
- National Endowment for the Arts. (2014). Keeping My Day Job: Identifying U. S. Workers Who Have Dual Careers as Artists, 3. Arts Data Profile.
- Neff, G., Wissinger, E., & Zukin, S. (2005). Entrepreneurial labor among cultural producers: ‘cool’ jobs in ‘hot’ industries. *Social Semiotics*, 15(3), 307–334.
- O’Brien, D., Laurison, D., Miles, A., & Friedman, S. (2016). Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey. *Cultural Trends*, 25(2), 116–131.
- Oakley, K., Laurison, D., O’Brien, D., & Friedman, S. (2017). Cultural Capital: Arts graduates, spatial inequality, and London’s impact on cultural labor markets. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 61(12), 1510–1531.
- Ocejo, R. E. (2017). *Masters of craft: Old jobs in the new urban economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Osnowitz, D. (2010). *Freelancing expertise: Contract professionals in the new economy*. Cornell University Press.

- Owens, T. J., Robinson, D. T., & Smith-Lovin, L. (2010). Three faces of identity. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36(1), 477–499.
- Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. R. (1990). Possible selves and delinquency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(1), 112–125.
- Pager, D., & Pedulla, D. S. (2015). Race, self-selection, and the job search process. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(4), 1005–1054.
- Pedulla, D. S. (2016). Penalized or protected? Gender and the consequences of nonstandard and mismatched employment histories. *American Sociological Review*, 81(2), 262–289.
- Petriglieri, G., Ashford, S. J., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2019). Agony and ecstasy in the gig economy: Cultivating holding environments for precarious and personalized work identities. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 64(1), 124–170.
- Presser, H. B. (2005). *Working in a 24/7 economy: Challenges for American families*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Pugh, A. J. (2015). *The tumbleweed society: Working and caring in an age of insecurity*. Oxford University Press.
- Randall, D. M., & Cote, J. A. (1991). Interrelationships of work commitment constructs. *Work and Occupations*, 18(2), 194–211.
- Rogers, T., Katherine, L. M., & Kevin, G. V. (2014). Commitment Devices: Using Initiatives to Change Behavior. *JAMA*, 311(20): 2065–66.
- Ross, A. (2009). *Nice work if you can get it: Life and labor in precarious times*. NYU Press.
- Schneider, D., & Harknett, K. (2019). Consequences of routine work-schedule instability for worker health and well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 82–114.
- Schelling, T. C. (1984). Self-Command in Practice, in Policy, and in a Theory of Rational Choice. *The American Economic Review*, 74(2): 1–11.
- Sharone, O. (2013). *Flawed system/flawed self: Job searching and unemployment experiences*. University of Chicago Press.
- Skaggs, R. (2019). Socializing rejection and failure in artistic occupational communities. *Work and Occupations*, 46(2), 149–175.
- Smith, V. (2002). *Crossing the great divide: Worker risk and opportunity in the new economy*. Cornell University Press.
- Steffy, K. (2017). Willful versus woeful underemployment: Perceived volition and social class background among overqualified college graduates. *Work and Occupations*, 44(4), 467–511.
- Sugie, N. F. (2018). Work as foraging: A smartphone study of job search and employment after prison. *American Journal of Sociology*, 123(5), 1453–1491.
- Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review*, 51(2), 273–286.
- Throsby, D., & Zednik, A. (2011). Multiple job-holding and artistic careers: Some empirical evidence. *Cultural Trends*, 20(1), 9–24.
- Thum, C., & Uebelmesser, S. (2003). Mobility and the role of education as a commitment device. *International Tax and Public Finance*, 10(5), 549–564.

- Umney, C., & Kretsos, L. (2015). That's the experience': Passion, work precarity, and life transitions among London jazz musicians. *Work and Occupations*, 42(3), 313–334.
- Ursell, G. (2000). Television production: Issues of exploitation, commodification and subjectivity in UK television labour markets. *Media, Culture & Society*, 22(6), 805–825.
- Velthuis, O. (2007). *Talking prices – Symbolic meanings of prices on the market for contemporary art*. Princeton University Press.

### **Author Biography**

**Laura Adler** is a PhD candidate in sociology at Harvard University and an American Association of University Women Fellow. Her research examines issues at the intersection of economic sociology, organizations, gender, and culture.