WORKING THE BOARDWALK: TRUST IN A PUBLIC MARKETPLACE

SPQ SNAPS

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ABSTRACT This article argues that trust is a key mechanism through which vendors, artists, and performers that work in a public marketplace turn daily conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. Drawing on four years of ethnographic data, I illustrate a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. Following trust from the level of one-on-one interaction through to the level of a community, I expose the particular ways trust plays out for different people across different situations. In the end, the way a social psychological mechanism plays out over time has significant social and material consequences for people working under highly uncertain conditions.

KEYWORDS trust, ethnography, interpersonal relationships, informal work
How do people working under conditions of uncertainty manage to carve out a stable living? Ethnography has a history of documenting the lives of individuals working outside the confines of legal wage labor (for review, see Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy 2014). Studies recognize a host of barriers to formal employment, including criminal records, lack of education and credentials, immigration status, and mental health problems (Contreras 2012; Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). In addition, a paltry minimum wage, regimented schedules, lack of child care, strict authority structures, and an inability to locate “meaningful” employment both push and pull people into unregulated work (see Snyder 2004). Yet, as people choose to work outside of formal employment, they also relinquish the assurances and protections of routine state regulation, such as regular pay, sick leave, and social security benefits. As a result, many vulnerable and marginal social groups continuously confront the uncertainty of “‘working’ without being ‘employed’” (Lozano 1983:341).

In this article I draw on four years of ethnographic data to follow a group of vendors, artists, and performers who work in the public marketplace of Los Angeles’s famed Venice Beach Boardwalk. My findings expose the way people engage a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust to turn daily conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. This research therefore provides keen insight into the way a social psychological mechanism plays out in an everyday setting to maintain the everyday livelihood of people who are largely marginalized from formal employment.

THE STUDY

For decades, the western edge of the Venice Beach Boardwalk has been loosely regulated by a municipal ordinance designed to exempt free speech and expressive activities from the city-
wide ban on public vending. As a result, the space offers a rare opportunity for people to earn income outside the confines of formal employment. Today, there is no official registration, credential, or license required to sell goods. Nor is there any centralized method for reporting and monitoring transactions, so income generated remains largely unreported.

Participants in the marketplace are unable to officially reserve space from which to work. Each morning they must pull and push carts and wagons piled with tables, chairs, and merchandise to face the uncertainty that comes with “first-come, first-serve” access. And with only about 200 spaces from which to access more than 16 million visitors who pass through each year, interest often exceeds availability and competition is ongoing. In addition, conflict and contestation over the “appropriate” use of this space causes the sale of goods and services to fall in and out of permissibility. As a result, violations are unevenly punished and workers remain consistently wary of fines. Those who do “make it” onto the Boardwalk find themselves working among an extremely diverse set of participants, differing in national origin, race and ethnicity, education, skill set, routes to participation, and ideological attachments to the place (see Deener 2012). Furthermore, the same lack of licensing and permitting that offers a clean slate for individuals otherwise marginalized from formal employment because of immigration status, criminal records, dependency issues, and/or mental health problems, also infuses interactions with added perceptions of suspicion and unpredictability.

In spite of these conditions of uncertainty, those working along the Venice Beach Boardwalk are able to carve out a stable living. Many participants occupy the same spaces each day and maintain income across shifting parameters of permissible behavior and competition for access. By all indications, these workers have constructed both social and economic stability in a context primed for turnover and change. The public marketplace of the Venice Beach Boardwalk
therefore presents an ideal setting from which to explore an interesting empirical puzzle: How do workers confront and manage ongoing conditions of uncertainty to carve out a stable living?

In what follows I briefly review key literature addressing informal work, conditions of uncertainty, and trust development. I then present a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust in order to illustrate the everyday ways trust mitigates the uncertainty of making a living in a public marketplace. My findings first show how an initial form of trust allows people working here to manage the most pressing practical dilemmas of uncertainty in a public marketplace, including protection from theft, a need for cash reserves, and a need to capitalize on every available sale. Next, as workers maintain the positive expectations they form and exchanges become increasingly vague, trust works to informally construct various forms of job security. This includes access to food, public concrete, and long-term “sick leave.” Finally, I find that in protecting trust, individuals construct “insiders” and “outsiders” to limit the negative effects of law enforcement, restrict access for newcomers, and manage “threats” to stability—a process that both constructs a rather unlikely community and also sparks ongoing exclusion.

BACKGROUND

Scholars have documented a host of strategies used to reduce uncertainty and economic vulnerability in unregulated and informal work. Domestic workers form horizontal network ties to share information and form collectives (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Gourmet food-truck vendors develop trade associations to attain stable presence, create collective identity, and develop self-governance (Esparza, Walker, and Rossman 2014). Street vendors organize to enforce informal property rights (Peña 1999), develop standardization techniques, and provide
financial safety nets (Rosales 2013). Traders engage in mutual “help arrangements” to manage the vulnerabilities of public marketplaces (Lyons and Snoxell 2005).

Such conditions of uncertainty—where workers lack legal contracts, lengthy credentialing processes, and regulatory assurances—become fertile ground for the emergence and development of trust (Barbalet 2009; Cook 2005; Dunn 1990; Seligman 1998; Venkatesh 2006). In fact, greater amounts of trust are required the more interactions and exchanges occur without legal constraints and contracts (Barbalet 2009; Cook 2005; Seligman 1998). This is evidenced in experimental research on trust building, which suggests that uncertainty can work to foster more committed exchange relationships (Kollock 1994) and that the very process of risk taking plays a crucial role in the development of trust (Cook et al. 2005).

Yet trust still remains an empirically elusive mechanism and is often approached as one of a host of mechanisms leading to stability (see Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). We see this, for instance, in the concept of social capital—namely, Putnam’s (1993:197) “networks, norms, and trust”—where it becomes difficult to tease apart a number of different social phenomena and see the particular work that trust does to build stability (Cook 2005; Woolcock 1998). Trust therefore warrants greater attention to the way it builds and plays out over time to do the particular work of producing stability for people working in uncertain conditions.

In this article I draw on a conceptualization of trust offered by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995:712) as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.” This definition has the advantage of highlighting actors’ perceptions and enactments of trust as well as the way trust
may change over time. Utilizing ethnographic data of everyday interactions, I then present a dynamic process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. In each of these moments, I expose the particular work trust does to produce stability under conditions of uncertainty. As a result, this research puts trust in motion—moving from the level of the individual to the level of the community and doing different work for different people across various situations.

METHODS

My analysis draws on four years of ethnographic data collected between January 2010 and January 2014. In order to collect my data, I resided adjacent to the Venice Beach Boardwalk, assisted and worked alongside the vendors, artists, and performers who sell goods in the marketplace. My role in the marketplace shifted over time. During the first three years, I commonly observed and spoke with individual vendors and artists as they worked, sitting alongside them and assisting when necessary. From January to June in 2013, I began to work as a “business partner” to one vendor and then as a vendor and artist myself, a role that offered vital opportunity to understand daily practices and interactions as I personally navigated participation in the marketplace.

My attention during data collection centered on the way participants confronted the uncertainty of working each day without guarantees of place or pay, as well as how they navigated threats from potential competitors, opportunistic passersby, and inconsistent law enforcement. I paid explicit attention to the interactions through which workers confronted and managed this uncertainty, focusing on the social and material consequences of such interactions.

For data analysis, I utilized an “abductive” approach that builds on a “grounded theory” by moving back and forth between surprising empirical findings and existing sociological theories.
(Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I began to locate ways people addressed the challenges of work by making themselves vulnerable to one another, moments that facilitated their ability to continue making a living. As I sifted through the data, I focused attention to people at different stages of working on the Boardwalk, from initial entrance to long-time participation. What emerged was therefore a process of trust as it played out for different people across situations doing different but highly consequential work to construct stability.

ANALYSIS

Building Trust: The Formation of Expectations

In this section, I show three interactions through which trust builds between individuals who have little to no preexisting relationship—leaving belongings unattended, making change for one another, ensuring ongoing profit. In each interaction we will see how vendors, artists, and performers address the most immediate practical dilemmas of working in an open and public marketplace, and how trust works to provide concrete results like short-term security, cash reserves, and ongoing profit.

Leaving merchandise unattended

I sit against the closed store fronts on the east side of the Boardwalk, waiting for the 9 a.m. set-up time when I can cross the pathway and set up along the western edge. I notice the block is particularly empty today, even for a weekday. A man walks around the corner, rolling a small cart nearby and placing it on the east side across the pathway from an “open” space. He is about 5’8 and has a happy-go-lucky attitude. I’ve never seen him working before, although I noticed him earlier yelling loudly with a woman in a long dress whom I also did not recognize. Eventually he walks over to tell me that the woman is “his ex.” After meeting in Miami they spent two years together working as vendors. For the past year, they had driven their van across the country and ended up here in Venice. But now, he tells me, they just broke up and “she’s got his stuff hostage.” At 9 a.m. Kevin and I both move our belongings to the west side, setting up a couple of spaces from one another. As I unpack he comes over to officially introduce himself. “Kevin,” he says, and I tell him mine. He shows me some stones he has recently cut to make into
pendants, all the while his “ex” walks by intermittently, yelling that he should return her stuff or she’ll throw his backpack in the dumpster. He tells me “she is all drama.” After she has been gone for a while he comes back over to my space and asks if I’ll watch his things while he goes to shave. I agree and Kevin walks away leaving all of his belongings sitting in his space. After about 20 minutes Kevin returns he flashes me a big smile, showing off his newly clean face.

This interaction demonstrates a practical dilemma that Kevin faces shortly after arriving to the Boardwalk; he must use the public restroom and leave his belongings unattended in an openly accessible space. By following Kevin’s behavior, it is clear that he assesses some risk of leaving his belongings in the open. Given the ongoing stream of unknown tourists, visitors, and individuals looking to resell stolen goods for quick cash (see Deener 2012), Kevin likely assesses a potential threat from passersby, which may also include the “ex” with whom he appears to be arguing. What emerges is a practical dilemma to leave the space, risk theft and consequently economic loss, or engage the help of others. To manage this practical dilemma, Kevin chooses to approach me as a nearby worker in order to safeguard against theft. This choice, however, is made without any preexisting relationship and despite having no prior knowledge of my own behavior, reputation, or shared interests. Having just arrived, he cannot claim knowledge of credible sanctions, nor does he have reason to believe that I perceive there to be any credible sanctions. Yet, as Kevin engages my assistance, he acts as if there were some assurance that I will not walk away or steal the goods he relies on for income.

The example of Kevin demonstrates that trust in its initial and emergent form is task specific. He sets the parameters for his expectation—“watch over my stuff”—and his time frame—“while I go shave.” This interaction is representative of one of the most common exchanges between vendors and one that arises only shortly after arrival to the Boardwalk marketplace. Here, trust emerges precisely in response to a practical problem of working in an open public space over
long stretches of time. In this case, trust emerges to facilitate an immediate exchange and leads only to short term benefits.

**Making change**

Ricardo, a Latino man in his thirties, stands at his table making a sale when he turns to see if I have a ten-dollar bill. I hold up my open palms to motion that “I’m out.” Umar, an Egyptian immigrant in his fifties, sees this and steps up, handing a ten-dollar bill across the table. After handing the customer change, Ricardo jogs from behind his table across the pathway to the nearby merchant. He quickly returns and walks over to Umar’s table, handing him a ten-dollar bill.

In this moment, Ricardo faces the practical need to complete each available sale and garner all potential profit, even if he lacks the spare cash from which to produce change for customers. This is common, since the high volume of tourists means many customers carry $50 or $100 bills to purchase $2 and $5 items, leaving workers in an ongoing struggle to keep cash on hand. Here Ricardo chooses to engage Umar in an exchange, one that also requires an investment from Umar and a communication that he has cash on hand.

Making change thus forms part of building trust because it constructs an opportunity for workers to make themselves vulnerable to one another, regardless of how little they know of each other. As a result, they form initial expectations that others will not do them harm or take advantage of them. This practice moves trust further by requiring effort and resources, and demonstrates the way such practices begin to foster collective behavior.

Similar to leaving merchandise unattended, making change addresses a pressing practical need—the need to garner profit from each potential sale. Since each bill has defined monetary value, the parameters of exchange are well defined, allowing for mutual clarity on the terms of reciprocity. While change can be made immediately—as in the exchange of a $10 bill for two $5s—it may also require the vendor requesting cash to locate change in order to pay the lender.
As with leaving merchandise unattended, the gains made by making change are immediate and short term. Importantly, making change pushes the trust building process by requiring colleagues to invest money and forges collective action among otherwise autonomous workers.

*Ensuring ongoing profit*

I met Paul through another longtime vendor but we had yet to engage in a direct exchange. Paul had been working along the Boardwalk on and off for over five years and after only a few days of working next to Paul, he stood up and walked over to my table. “Come with me,” he said walking the couple of feet to his own table. I stood next to him as he began pointing, quickly rattling off prices. “These are four dollars, these ten, these twenty-five, these over here are seven, these ten. I’ll be right back.”

Paul confronts the practical need to leave his space in order to use the restroom and still capitalize on each potential sale. As he does, he sparks interactions to ensure continued profit in his absence. This interaction requires greater investment of time, effort, and resources while exposing individuals to greater vulnerability. Ensuring ongoing profit pushes the trust building process further, as those working here make themselves increasingly vulnerable to theft, opportunism, or mistakes by colleagues, who could pocket goods and profit or simply misquote prices. In addition, such a practice moves the trust-building process forward by requiring additional time, effort, and resources, thus fostering a greater sense of collective action and cohesion among autonomous workers.

One day Randy, an African American artist in his early forties, confronts an immediate need to secure long-term profit in his absence. For months, Randy worked with Tony, a lanky white man in his thirties who suffered from alcohol dependency. Tony, however, took things too far when he began to scream racial slurs at Randy. After breaking his ties from Tony, Randy had to make a quick decision, choosing to entrust Jorge, a 40-something Latino man who also admitted
to and engaged in frequent drinking, with the sale of his belongings while he was away. This is representative of the many ways in which conditions on the Boardwalk require quick decisions.

I talk with Jorge, who’s been working for Randy since Tony was “fired.” Jorge says he’s averaging $100 day with Randy’s stuff. “Randy was really between a rock and a hard place,” he tells me. “He had 12 hours to make a decision after Tony got drunk and started yelling the N-word.” Jorge recounts Randy’s decision. “He asked me if he could trust me and I said yes. You could ask anybody on the Boardwalk.” Jorge tells me the job was somewhat of a surprise, “Normally I’ve only hung out here,” saying “Randy didn’t really know me.”

Jorge discusses the way in which Randy’s decision emerged from a pressing practical need to secure ongoing profit. This interaction forms a part of a process of building trust specifically because it moves Randy and Jorge from having no expectations of one another into a relationship in which expectations become embedded. Though Jorge is paid a small commission for his effort, there is no contract, no credentialing, and no way to establish official knowledge of his identity or home address. In addition, Jorge also considers himself to be alcohol dependent and frequently drinks during the day and night. This particular form of uncertainty constructs their relationship as one based on trust rather than assurance, where Randy must choose to interact as if Jorge will not steal his goods, pocket profit, or make mistakes. Over the following months, this decision would prove positive, and Randy talked about the initial decision as a kind of “gift,” saying that after Tony, Randy needed “God” to send him a “clean employee,” and he “got Jorge.”

In this section I have empirically illustrated the way in which trust emerges as those working along the Boardwalk manage the pressing practical needs of work in a setting with constant flow of strangers, possibility of theft, and a need to vacate one’s belongings without missing a sale. By choosing to place themselves vulnerable to other workers, with whom they have little to no prior relationship, trust becomes the safeguard against ongoing uncertainty. In these initial
interactions, trust plays out through direct one-on-one exchange, where the focus is less on the relationship itself than the task at hand. As a result, trust garners only immediate and practical results, but importantly, these are the ongoing exchanges that become the precedent for the formation of positive expectations among social ties.

**Maintaining Trust: Cultivating Expectations**

In this section, I show three interactions through which trust is cultivated and maintained—exchanging food, organizing the block, and providing a safety net. These interactions highlight the way workers construct routine interactions among a set of social ties to allow for ongoing exchange with increasingly vague parameters. These interactions effectively push expectations further into the future so that workers can gain more long-term results.

**Exchanging food**

I sat with Kahled one afternoon when he told me he was going to grab lunch. He returned with three cups of soup from a nearby store, taking one for himself and offering one to me and the other to Paul. He told me Paul had purchased a few lunches in a row, so it was important for him to get lunch today. As he leaned over his table, spooning out clam chowder, he smiled at me. “It’ll come back. I don’t know what it will be or when it will come, but you just watch.” Hours later I returned from a break to find him eating from a large pile of peanuts. He looked at me and said, “See. What did I tell you?”

Through the practice of exchanging food, trust moves beyond addressing a mere practical necessity, since vendors could conceivably bring or purchase their own meals. The unstated expectation of reciprocity works to push expectations further into the future. Kahled notes his own understanding of the expectations at hand, stating that it is “important” for him to purchase food since it has been provided for him multiple times without reciprocation. Yet, quite different from practices like making change, where the amount of the loan is clear and there is mutual clarity on reciprocity, the terms of exchange here become increasingly vague, as the value of
food is unclear and the time period for reciprocity is left unstated. Notably, the vendor states that the exchange is not about the type of food, the cost of the food, or even where it is coming from. He states, “I don’t know what it will be or when it will come,” demonstrating that the expectation itself is the significant aspect of this social interaction and indicating a belief in a general and ongoing flow of food at the group level. He speaks comfortably about the uncertain time frame in which this expectation will be met and nearly relishes in this uncertainty, thus pushing expectations into the future and presuming a greater degree of ongoing interaction. When his expectation is met, the vendor does not focus on value or time frame but rather his ability to count on the expectation itself. “See. What did I tell you?” he says.

This common and ongoing flow of food helps to build and cultivate expectations among social ties, weaving a web of increasingly connected trust relationships, and even cultivating a type of informal “lunch break.” The investment of time, money, and effort to purchase food for others also fosters cohesion and collective experience in an otherwise atomized and unstructured workplace.

Organizing “the Block”

It is 7:30 in the morning as I walk past a quiet coffee shop and turn onto the Boardwalk. The block is empty, but each “designated space” along the western edge is marked with a cardboard box. The space I have been setting up on recently is marked with a gray paint can. I drop my stool next to the can, placing it in the sand behind the space, and walk south to get the cart from storage. I run into Juan, who tells me that he and Ricardo “saved the spaces” last night. At 8:00 a.m. Paul comes around the corner pushing his cart, piled high with bins and canvasses, and places them in front of Mr. Park’s store. “Are you here?” he asks me, pointing to the paint can. I tell him I’ll go there, but I don’t really care which one I take. He agrees I should go there, pointing to the paint can and my stool. “I’ll go here,” he says, pointing to an adjacent space where Umar typically works, and “Ricardo will go there,” he says pointing just south of my space. Within about 30 minutes Ricardo arrives, wheeling his own cart to the eastern edge. “Is this me?” he says, pointing to the space where Paul has now placed some of his own plastic bins. “Yes,” he says, repeating the roster of people for the day. Soon afterwards Leia, a Latina woman who
works with her “husband” Manuel, walks onto the Boardwalk and sets a chair down against the store just north of us. She walks over to Paul and I to say hello and looks across to the west side, commenting that Paul gets to be next to her today since Umar is not coming. At 9 a.m. we walk west and begin sweeping up the sand on the concrete, setting up tables and chairs, and unpacking merchandise.

As people organize the block they not only build positive expectations of one another but also come to interpret and anticipate one another’s expectations and future cooperation, thus allowing trust to construct long-term economic stability. Paul states, “Ricardo will go there,” as he surveys available space, illustrating his own expectation of Ricardo’s future cooperation. Ricardo’s behavior illustrates his own set of expectations since he arrives to verify with Paul, “Is this me?” Ricardo appears happy to oblige and further allows block organization to emerge as a communal act.

The consequences of such interactions become both interpersonally and materially significant, since a practice like organizing the block allows interaction to become routine in a workplace that is premised on potential turnover. This process provides opportunity for workers to invest in reproducing expectations among not just any social ties but social ties that remain nearby and thus accessible on a daily basis. Organizing the block forms part of the process to maintain trust, and it works to garner long-term results. As workers predict and interpret one another’s expectations, this collective act turns a “first-come, first-served” policy into a “first-come, many-served” policy.

*Providing a safety net*

I noticed Umar has not been at work in a few days. Leia had mentioned he would not be working the past weekend, but come Tuesday he had still not returned. As I watched Leia unpacking her own merchandise I saw her set up Umar’s artwork as well, using two-thirds of the table for his goods and one-third to display her own. I asked Leia what was happening and she told me Umar was quite sick, but at least this way he could continue to make some money.
Here we can see how Leia and Umar push expectations further into the long term, requiring even greater investment of time, effort, and resources. They make themselves vulnerable to one another and allow trust to do the work of garnering increasingly significant benefits of durable social and economic stability. Due to Leia’s assistance, Umar—who supports his family—was able to not only recuperate, but to also maintain a basic flow of income and return to work as before. Together, Leia and Umar’s actions grant Umar a type of informal “sick leave.” By working together to enhance one another’s long-term profit, such interactions also cultivate collective interests and behavior.

The practices that maintain trust move beyond interactions to address the most pressing practical dilemmas workers face on the Boardwalk and instead cultivate a set of connected social ties as trust relationships. This allows for increasingly long-term benefits of social and economic stability. As individuals invest more resources, time, and effort they also increase their own vulnerability to opportunism. Yet trust in the context of this uncertainty garners even more significant results. By exchanging food, workers invest in one another without clear terms of exchange or reciprocity, and even create a communal lunch break. They construct block communities to allow for routine interaction, moving from merely building expectations to interpreting and predicting expectations. They invest in one another’s long-term security by establishing a type of sick leave to ensure durable economic stability. Moving beyond the mere one-on-one interaction that is task specific and immediate, here trust spills over into a broader web of connected social ties to generate job stability.
Protecting Trust: Constructing “Insiders” and “Outsiders”

Building and maintaining trust become key social processes to produce familiarity and bring durability to material benefits, economic security, and a sense of collective experience. How then will these economic actors protect the social and economic stability they have forged? Here I show how participants construct boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders” to protect trust on the Boardwalk, and subsequently create a sense of collective belonging to a cohesive community.

Buffering from the LAPD

Paul turned and tells me “the cops” were walking up the Boardwalk with video cameras to ask questions. Sure enough, a few police officers approach Paul’s table and begin to ask his name, questioning the jewelry he claimed to merely “display” and reminding him that such items were no longer permissible to sell. After they passed by my own table I heard Paul speaking on the phone, saying “the cops are making their way up,” and warning to get rid of some items. Afterwards I asked Paul if he had called Michelle, an African immigrant who works about four blocks north and often includes jewelry in her display. “Yes,” he said, “I just called her.”

LAPD emerges as a major predator for those working on the Boardwalk, particularly because restrictions on permissible behavior are frequently shifting and vague, and hefty citations are often given for minor offenses like oversized umbrellas and cigarette smoking. Warnings of police presence therefore become common practices to maintain the community. Here, Paul draws on the linearity of the Boardwalk as a tool to push trust beyond the confines of “the block” and protect Michelle from the economic shock of hefty fines. Paul thus invests in the ongoing development of collective goals and positive expectations at the community level, from which he will also benefit. Workers engage in a process of protecting trust as they provide unsolicited and proactive assistance, which also demonstrates and fosters collective goals.
I sat next to Paul after a shift in a local ordinance that newly banned the sale of “jewelry” in the marketplace. Paul walked away to use the bathroom and upon noting heavy police presence he had stayed away from his table. In a flash I saw Manuel run over to Paul’s table and gather up piles of necklaces, rings, and bracelets, sweeping them off into piles and putting them in one of Paul’s bins. “What’s going on?” I asked, sensing urgency. “The cops,” he said, “get rid of the jewelry.”

Manuel’s willingness to invest his own time and effort in saving Paul from a fine cannot merely be explained in terms of expected reciprocity. As an artist, Manual belongs to a group of workers regularly constructed in city regulation as the “ideal” participant. As a result, he will likely never be as vulnerable to potential fines as Paul. Yet, while public debate often pits artists against vendors (see also Deener 2012), in everyday practice, workers on the Boardwalk often join forces. The development of expectations that those working here will protect insiders from predators constructs a sense of collective experience and goals, even when artists and vendors do not share the same type of vulnerability. Thus, the willingness to invest effort and time to provide job security and economic stability for insiders pushes trust toward the level of a broader, and rather unlikely, community.

Constructing outsiders on the block

At 7 a.m. I walked up to the store front, pulling my cart of merchandise and supplies. Manuel and Leia said hello as I placed my cart against the east side store fronts. They told me I would be working in “that spot” and Manuel pointed to one of the spaces across the Boardwalk, all of which were marked with empty cardboard boxes. They recounted an interaction with a man they had met earlier that morning. “We came at 5 a.m.,” they told me, “and had to fight that guy off.” They continued, “He said he’d been working here all week, we told him it was full!”

I later discover the man they “fought off” was Kevin, who I had met the week prior (see first vignette). Kevin had set up successfully on the block from Monday through Friday, during a particularly slow week in which more than a few spaces were available for him to work. While he interacted through face-to-face contact, setting terms for immediate exchanges and favors, his
initial process of building trust was cut short when Manuel and Leia, who have long engaged in ongoing processes of maintaining trust, enact their own strategy to protect that trust.

Since the city designated the Boardwalk a Free Speech Zone, it has purported open access as a desirable feature of the space, and the city often laments any attempts at informal ownership or monopolization of spaces. Yet, the city’s desire for openness contradicts the desire for stability among those working, and we see how workers informally protect their own access. A clear tension emerges between the newcomer’s and long-time participant’s reading of the first-come, first-served policy, and this interaction demonstrates the way in which social organization on the Boardwalk reproduces and shapes the type of change that is possible. By drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders, we see how Manuel and Leia protect the trust they have formed between the insiders on their block, a practice that leads to the exclusion of Kevin and any other potential newcomer.

*Constructing outsiders beyond the block*

In addition, a desire to protect trust relationships by maintaining familiarity can emerge as a collective goal beyond the block to the larger community of workers. For instance, Benson is a trusted African American odd-job worker who is most often responsible for removing and returning merchandise to a small storage space at the start and end of the workday.

I pack up the cart and begin to secure it with a blue tarp and bungee cord. As I am making the final adjustments a man approaches me. He is White, probably in his late thirties, though his skin has taken on a red leather quality from repeated exposure to the sun. His brown hair is short and messy and he has a nervous energy. “Can I help you move your cart?” he says, making a clear effort to concentrate as he speaks. “No, I’m ok,” I respond. “You don’t need help?” he asks again. At that moment Ricardo, who is working nearby, stands and walks over. “Benson moves this cart,” he says matter-of-factly. Frustrated by the lack of available work, the man says, “Oh, Benson moves every cart. He has this whole Boardwalk.” Ricardo seems to want to end any back-and-forth, saying quite aggressively, “Well, Benson moves this cart.” The man walks away.
Given the prevalence of drug and alcohol use among groups of tourists, transients, and a large homeless population, there is a constant flow of willing odd-job workers desiring quick cash. Yet, rather than accept services from the lowest bidder, Ricardo’s decision to interject and aggressively decline this man’s offer indicates the importance of protecting already established workers with dependable reputations. Securing such jobs, therefore, is not always as easy as offering one’s services for a cheap fee. Here, Ricardo ensures the ongoing presence of a man who maintains trust with others working here, which further constructs a web of connected social ties as insiders.

Constructing outsiders through daily interaction thus informally shifts control over access into the hands of those already working here, limiting availability of spaces for new arrivals. As people erect added boundaries for newcomers, they construct a collective threat, further building a communal experience to limit turnover and change. The process of constructing outsiders protects trust and ensures the continuation of the routine interactions that allows for long-term benefits. As these interactions protect insiders, however, they simultaneously contribute to exclusion and further marginalization of people who may already be economically vulnerable. Here, we begin to see the dark side of trust.

Protecting trust can be characterized by interactions that work to define insiders and outsiders—limiting threats from encroaching law enforcement officials, newcomers on the block, and strangers seeking quick cash for odd jobs. Through these practices, workers create the opportunity for routine and familiar interactions that continuously reinforce social and economic stability. Protecting trust along the Boardwalk thus draws the contours of an unlikely community.
CONCLUSION

In this article, I reveal trust as a key mechanism through which individuals confront and manage the uncertainty of working in a public marketplace to carve out a stable living. Drawn from four years of ethnographic observation of people working along the Venice Beach Boardwalk, I present a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. This approach exposes the particular interactions through which trust turns conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. We therefore gain keen insight into the way a social psychological mechanism builds and plays out with significant social and material consequences for a diverse group of people largely marginalized from formal employment.

My findings show that in its initial and emergent form, trust allows participants to manage the most pressing practical dilemmas of uncertainty in a public marketplace, including protection from theft, a need for cash reserves, and a need to capitalize on every available sale. Next, as workers maintain the positive expectations they form of one another, their exchanges become increasingly vague. Here, trust constructs added security, including ongoing access to food, access to public concrete from which to work, and long-term sick leave. Finally, I find that as people protect trust they manage both internal and external threats to stability. Participants are therefore able to keep law enforcement at bay and restrict access of encroaching newcomers. In the end, this process works to define a rather unlikely community and also allow for change.

The findings presented build on prior scholarship of trust as an ingredient in social capital (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993) by disaggregating mechanisms to pay particular attention to the particular work trust does to manage uncertainty. This article also offers a complement to experimental findings that link trust-building processes to risk (Cook et al. 2005) and ongoing
exchange in conditions of uncertainty (Kollock 1994). The interactional data presented confirm
the role of initial and ongoing risk taking as well as the important ways that ongoing exchange
can cultivate more robust trust relationships over time. By following a group of vendors, artists,
and performers working in an everyday setting over time, my findings reveal the significant
social and material consequences of trust for day-to-day economic survival.

In addition, the ethnographic approach allows for the collection of situated interactional data
from different people across varying situations, adding empirical illustration of the dynamic
nature of trust as it builds, dissolves, and has differing effects for different people. We see that
while trust acts to produce stability for some, it may simultaneously emerge as a mechanism for
instability and further marginalization for others. So although the Boardwalk is purportedly
“open to all,” “getting on the Boardwalk” remains a challenge and newcomers face an array of
informal obstacles. Trust—in the end—may be the key interactional mechanism by which these
workers confront and manage conditions of ongoing uncertainty, but it also has a dark side.

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