

# Leveraging Youth: Overcoming Intergenerational Tensions in Creative Production

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## Abstract

*The sociological literature on creativity would suggest that collaboration between newcomers and more experienced members of an art world results in the fruitful combination of novelty and usefulness, though not without some conflict. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews with workers from the popular recording industry (rock/pop) in New York City, this article extends the literature on creativity as collective action by showing how three types of intergenerational tensions (aesthetic, technological, and career) are embedded in the ways newcomers and experienced workers see themselves and each other as agents of change and stasis. I propose a new variable—leveraging age—a mechanism intergenerational collaborators use to resolve or override these tensions to ultimately maximize creativity in group contexts. Leveraging age, as a form of knowledge extraction, occurs in creative bureaucratic organizations and describes how newcomers and experienced workers dualistically draw on each other’s respective strengths (novelty and tradition). I primarily examine the bottom-up part of this process—how experienced workers draw on the insights of newcomers—by analyzing five leveraging-youth practices, which vary by level of formality and intentionality, but mostly limit the interactional challenges between the two groups.*

## Keywords

aging, collaboration, creative industries, sociology of creativity, youth

Since the early days of rock and roll, record company executives have typically boasted a flamboyant persona. One notable exception was Dick Asher, an executive who served various roles with CBS Records from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Walter Yetnikoff, a fellow CBS executive and notorious party animal, used to refer to Asher as “the most boring man in the world” (Dannen 1991:19–20). Lacking the flamboyance of fellow executives, Asher called himself “a moth among butterflies” and was quoted as saying,

“I’m not sure artists want to hang out with old guys like me. . . . If I wasn’t the head of a record company, maybe they wouldn’t want to talk to me on the street. No reason why they should” (Dannen 1991:19). The symbolic chasm between

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the older business executive and the hip, young artist begins to encapsulate the wildly age-diverse, extensive network of workers who produce and disseminate recorded music. Beyond executives and musical artists, major record companies also include a suite of midlevel employees who remain with the company for many years as well as “a continual stream of young staff” who “provide a hip face” but “may be with a competing company or working in a record shop in two years’ time” (Negus 1999:78). The steady influx of newcomers working with established employees creates opportunities while also posing challenges for creative production.

Research on teams, groups, and organizations concludes that diversity (in both age and experience) is a double-edged sword because it heightens the potential for creativity as well as conflict among collaborators (van Knippenberg and Schippers 2007; Williams and O’Reilly 1998). Newcomers, by virtue of not yet being fully socialized to the group, have the potential to bring fresh insights to older problems as well as contribute new skills and understandings. As such, collaboration between newcomers and experienced workers might result in optimally creative outcomes. However, particularly in artistic fields, newcomers who suggest novel insights and methods may seem to criticize the conventions of a field and therefore may draw the ire of experienced (possibly threatened) workers (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993). While newcomers’ contributions to both collaborative creativity and intergenerational artistic tensions are documented by prior research, the interpersonal processes whereby actors resolve or override these tensions to maximize creativity in group contexts remains unclear.

Drawing on evidence from interviews and participant observation in the popular record industry (rock/pop) in New

York City, this article addresses two main questions: What forms of intergenerational tensions arise between newcomers and experienced employees in bureaucratic environments? How do members of intergenerational groups find ways to leverage each other’s strengths? I briefly review the literature on the social psychology of creativity to situate the role of newcomers in collaborative creative production. By analyzing the lifeworld of record industry support personnel, this article extends the literature on creativity as collective action by showing how intergenerational tensions are embedded in the ways newcomers and experienced workers see themselves and each other, leading to interactional challenges in intergenerational creative collaboration. Furthermore, I identify a mechanism—*leveraging age*—through which these actors resolve or override these tensions. Leveraging age is a form of knowledge extraction that occurs in creative bureaucratic organizations and describes how newcomers and experienced workers (younger and older) dualistically draw on each other’s respective knowledge and strengths. In this article I primarily examine the bottom-up part of this process, which I call *leveraging youth*—that is, how experienced workers draw on the insights of newcomers through a variety of informal and formal means, mostly at little interactional cost to the experienced workers.

### CREATIVITY AS COLLECTIVE ACTION

Definitions of creativity pertaining to fields such as the arts, science, philosophy, politics, and social movements predominantly emphasize two characteristics: novelty and usefulness (Amabile 1996; Ochse 1990; Parker and Corte 2017; Sawyer 2007). For an idea or product to be considered creative, it must both be new and grounded in tradition

(Fine and Hallett 2014; Kuhn 1977) in such a way that members of a broader community consider appropriate or useful (Parker and Corte 2017; Sternberg and Lubart 1999). Despite romantic myths to the contrary, creativity is rarely the product of lone genius working in isolation but rather is spurred on by collaborations across generations, friendship groups, and other networks (Collins 1998; Corte 2013; Farrell 2001). Creativity is inherently social, deeply steeped in and shaped by tradition, and routinely involves solving puzzles laid out by predecessors (e.g., in science; Kuhn 1977) or minor drifts from tradition (e.g., in the arts; Becker 1982).

Creativity lies not in a particular product or creator per se but in “the interaction between the creator and the field’s gatekeepers who selectively retain or reject original products” (Kasof 1995:366; see also Burns, Machado, and Corte 2015). A highly novel creative idea or product may or may not “pass muster” with experts or gatekeepers in a field (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:27) or may suffer a penalty for fitting too ambiguously in prevailing classification systems (DiMaggio 1987; van Venrooij and Schmutz 2018), whereas highly conventional work with a pinch of novelty is unusually likely to be well received (Askin and Mauskapf 2017; Uzzi et al. 2013).

Howard Becker’s (1974, 1982, 2017) writings further elucidate creativity’s social character. According to Becker, art is created through the cooperative activity of networks of people within an art world—some of them in artistic roles; some in craft, business, or other “support personnel” roles—“all of whose work is essential to the final outcome” (Becker 1974:769). While the honorific title of “artist” is reserved for people who take on activities requiring a “special gift or sensibility” (Becker 1974:768), the creation of art is a form of collective action

where everyone involved (e.g., record company employees, music journalists, record store buyers) informs the final outcome. These actors’ collective action is facilitated by a set of conventions about the appropriate ways of doing things.

As shared understandings of how things have been done, conventions facilitate cooperation yet also constrain members of an art world. Becker (1982:297) notes how conventions continually change, gradually or dramatically, but a deviation from conventions (such as musicians whose songs deviate from the prevalent structure of popular music) may draw the ire of members of an art world: “Artists who give no evidence of knowing any of the right ways of doing things are thought by critics, audiences, and other artists to be bunglers and incompetents, even though they deviate from standard forms deliberately.” In such a way, becoming a member of an art world usually implies becoming well socialized to its conventions (Fine 2018; Gerber 2017).

### ***Youth, Newcomers, and Creativity***

Socializing newcomers to an art world’s conventions helps make collective action more efficient but also presents opportunities for the world’s established members. Creativity “builds up in intergenerational chains” (Collins 1998:6), and mentoring newcomers potentially furthers one’s artistic notoriety (Simonton 1984). Newcomers can bring “focused naïveté and focused ignorance” (Merton 1973:519) and as such may contribute fresh perspectives to help resolve older problems. Much as Merton (1973) and Zuckerman (1977) found that senior scientists act as informal talent scouts or “truffle dogs” for new talent, established creative workers may gain inspiration, insights, or skills from newcomers. Otherwise, instead of forming relationships

with “persons who have a fresh artistic view or are ‘with-it’” (Uzzi and Spiro 2005:464), closed off or overly cohesive groups of collaborators run the risk of sacrificing creativity in the interest of reciprocity. Therefore, an influx of newcomers within networks or organizations composed of individuals well versed in tradition offers generative opportunities for collaborative creativity.

Conversely, an influx of newcomers also poses challenges for established members of an art world. Newcomers may question taken-for-granted norms and practices, or aesthetic styles, which inherently come off as attacks on an art world’s system of stratification (Becker 1982). Most commonly, art worlds change gradually due to external forces (e.g., technological innovations) and as new artists and support personnel introduce different styles and standards of excellence. At its most extreme, Becker (1974, 1982) notes how disruptive changes to art worlds do occur, akin to political or scientific revolutions (Kuhn 2012). In his discussion of how new artists take over a world, Becker depicts intergenerational tensions between the older, displaced workers who feel as though “a bunch of incompetent savages” are taking what is theirs and the newcomers who feel as though “they are getting rid of some fuddy-duddies” whose presence thwarts artistic progress (Becker 1982:287). As conventions and standards solidify, the new members of the art world become integrated professionals practicing the equivalent of normal science (or “normal culture”; Peterson 1976) until they may eventually get displaced in the next realignment or revolution.

Similarly, Bourdieu (1993:53) describes a fundamental opposition within the field of cultural production between “artistic generations” with newcomers (often only a few years younger) continually struggling to make their names and gain

legitimacy over the consecrated, established figures. The opposition between old and young is apparent through the competition to define what is “outdated” and what is “new” (Nixon 2006). This struggle is a zero-sum game due to limited space for legitimated creative positions (Bourdieu 1993), analogous to the “law of small numbers” and limited “attention space” in fields such as science and philosophy (Parker and Corte 2017). Several studies highlight the oppositional structure of artistic labor markets in which a few core players receive disproportionate opportunities, networks, and resources compared to peripheral players, leaving the former great resources to control the standards for evaluating cultural products (i.e., the canon) as the latter attempt to voice their dissenting ideas (Cattani, Ferriari, and Allison 2014; Dowd and Pinheiro 2013; Faulkner 1983; Giuffre 1999).

### LEVERAGING AGE IN THE RECORD INDUSTRY

While prior sociological research on artistic work confirms creativity’s social character, these studies tend to focus on small groups of young artists who emerge at the periphery of dominant bureaucratic structures (e.g., Farrell 2001) or the collaborative efforts of workers across a wide variety of roles, art forms, and organizational contexts (e.g., Becker 1982). The current article extends this literature by analyzing intraoccupational collaboration within bureaucratic structures, specifically the newcomers and experienced employees who inhabit the filter-flow “industry system” in the record industry: workers in artists and repertoire (A&R) who scout, select, and develop new talent as well as those workers who disseminate recorded music by publicizing to press, promoting to radio, selling to stores, and otherwise marketing to

consumers (Hirsch 1972; Peterson 1976). These record industry workers, to varying extents, must remain abreast of constant changes in cultural tastes (what is in demand) and how music is consumed (including technologies of consumption and how people learn about new music). The segment of the record industry under study is primarily dedicated to creating “hits”—music in the “rock” and blurry “pop” (including non-rock crossover hits) genres that aim for top 40 radio airplay (Negus 1999; Rossman 2012).

*Newcomers* in this article refers to interns and entry-level employees (assistant level) in the record industry. These workers tend to range between 18 and 25 years old, though there are exceptions—for example, companies occasionally take on high-school student interns, and my internship advisor at a major record company, the assistant to a senior executive, was 37 years old with over a decade of experience (i.e., not a newcomer). While record companies and other creative industry employers willingly draw on the cultural competence of young aspirants, there is a consistently large oversupply of motivated college students and graduates enticed by the symbolic rewards of “cool” jobs (Menger 2014; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). This reservoir of talent provides an abundant source of cheap (or free) labor, often arranged through the intermediary of postsecondary institutions via internship programs. Interns have a relatively low status in the workplace and are presumed incompetent until proven otherwise; their socialization into the music industry is accomplished slowly, predominantly at their own expense, and may involve several years of unpaid labor before securing paid employment in their field of choice (Frenette 2013).

*Experienced record industry workers* in this article refers primarily to midlevel employees (mostly peaking at “manager”

title at major record companies or at “director” title at smaller companies), usually in their later twenties or thirties. Senior-level executives (e.g., vice president) are certainly experienced, too, but their contact with newcomers is usually more limited, particularly at major record companies, so leveraging the insights of newcomers is primarily carried out by midlevel workers. Experienced record industry workers report various career anxieties about the future and often leave the industry “at a relatively early age, burnt out by the need to keep up to date with changing ideas of what is fashionable, relevant and innovative” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011:221). For record industry workers, careers are notoriously precarious due to long-standing difficulties in predicting the success of cultural products (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Caves 2000). Amid constantly changing tastes and technologies, experienced workers leverage youth to help manage this demand uncertainty, in essence attempting to understand what is in demand (what is novel) with an in-house focus group of newcomers and simultaneously drawing on their own experience and knowledge of conventions to bring these products to market.

Drawing on evidence from fieldwork at two music industry companies and semi-structured interviews with 54 current or previous employees and interns (ranging from an 18-year-old intern to a 54-year-old industry veteran), I analyze how members of distinct artistic generations collaborate in creative production, that is, how they combine novelty with a solid grasp of conventions. After describing data and methods, I outline three types of intergenerational tensions (aesthetic, technological, and career) that emerge between relative newcomers (with fresh perspectives and knowledge of novel music and consumer trends) and seasoned employees (with years of experience,

strong professional networks, and knowledge of conventions) in part due to the groups' often implicit competition. I then analyze how experienced record industry workers leverage youth in a variety of formal and informal ways, through planned and spontaneous efforts, which allows them to dualistically pair the contributions of both groups in the process of creativity as collective action. While leveraging youth in its various forms allows these record industry workers to sufficiently resolve or override intergenerational artistic tensions, albeit temporarily, in favor of creativity, due to status differences between experienced workers and relative newcomers, the former may nevertheless deny the latter's contributions, and both groups may brand each other as clueless altogether. In this way, at least from the perspective of experienced employees, leveraging youth allows "orderly face-to-face communication" (Goffman 1967:148) between members of both groups at limited interactional cost.

### DATA AND METHODS

To investigate the characteristics and challenges of intergenerational collaboration in creative production, I conducted participant observation and interviews. Since this article deals with attitudes and forms of interpersonal conflict (intergenerational tensions) not always discussed or visible in the workplace, I draw greatly from interview data. I counterbalance these accounts by relying on my observations of situated behavior, particularly since leveraging youth is often carried out tacitly, leading to (possibly inadvertent) discrepancies between employees' words and actions (Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

This article draws on approximately 350 hours of participant observation as an unpaid intern at two research sites in New York City: the sales and marketing

department of a major record company (between September and December 2008) and the digital sales department of an independent (or "indie") distribution company (between July and December 2008). As a PhD student intern and an overt participant observer, I would not claim that my experiences were representative of the typical record industry newcomer (usually an undergraduate student or recent graduate). Although I was older and more professionally experienced than typical interns, my responsibilities included various low-level administrative tasks, stocking refrigerators, printing and delivering reports, running errands, fielding phone calls, and checking e-mails, similar to the responsibilities of other interns I met. For the vast majority of my days at the field sites, which typically lasted over seven hours, my assignments were intermittent and therefore allowed me to closely observe my surroundings and develop rapport with workers varying greatly in seniority (intern to senior executive) and areas of expertise (including A&R, publicity, and sales). Being stationed at a cubicle at both sites allowed me to take notes from my desk as I overheard interactions or shortly after taking part in interactions with interns or employees across departments. I ended my days of fieldwork—which extended beyond the office to music venues, bars, coffee shops, and birthday parties—by writing more extensive field notes to identify tentative themes and gaps (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

As part of this research, I interacted with hundreds of music industry workers. Building on these various conversations and fieldwork, I conducted 75 semi-structured interviews with 54 music industry workers. I remained in contact with most of these participants throughout the study (primarily from 2008 to 2013, though with informal follow-up conversations ever since). I formally

interviewed 19 of the workers more than once as they transitioned in and out of music industry employment; seventy of these interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Interviews mostly lasted 90 minutes or more, though they ranged from 38 minutes to over three hours in duration. Interviewees ranged from 18 to 54 years old and skewed young (average age = 29 years old) per industry trends; 13 of the interviewees were recent or current interns who were still attempting to achieve career footholds, while 5 were “old-timers” (already out of the industry). Overall, interview questions uncovered participants’ demographic characteristics, career challenges, perceptions about the music industry, the role of education, and workplace culture—intergenerational themes emerged particularly from discussions about the varied contributions of interns, career challenges, and shifts in participants’ relationship to novel music trends over time. Recruitment of participants occurred in three ways: snowball sampling, contacts at fieldwork sites, and through e-mails sent to current students and alumni from two music industry-related programs in New York City. To protect the confidentiality of participants, all names are pseudonyms.

These data were collected as part of a larger study on how people attempt to start and sustain careers in the record industry, focusing especially on the role of internships as forms of socialization and gatekeeping. Intergenerational tensions and the concept of leveraging age/youth emerged through the process of “continuous dialogue with empirical data” (Becker 1998:109). The coding scheme began as loosely informed by sets of interview and research questions and expanded inductively based on line-by-line coding of interview data using ATLAS.ti software—for example, one respondent talked about getting an internship and eventually securing a job

because he demonstrated profound musical knowledge; this was coded as “Intern selection: passion for music” and “Credibility: demonstrate music knowledge” (category: subcategory). Throughout this research I wrote analytic memos (Saldaña 2013), primarily based on participant observation, to identify emerging themes and categories, such as the symbolic challenges of being younger and older, the “cool” self-expressive workplace, and the characteristic tasks of interns (or why companies host interns). While I began data collection interested in what can be seen as “top-down” forms of intergenerational leveraging—how newcomers extract knowledge and otherwise benefit from their contact with experienced workers—coding interviews and writing memos helped me realize that experienced employees also extract knowledge but barely acknowledged doing so in interviews. As leveraging youth emerged from the data, I used ATLAS.ti to conduct focused coding (Emerson et al. 1995) of interviews and analytic memos, paying particular attention to themes such as aging and youth, intergenerational tensions, and displays of cultural knowledge. In the process, I identified additional subthemes, noting variations of leveraging youth by levels of formality and spontaneity.

### **INTERGENERATIONAL TENSIONS: AESTHETIC, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND CAREER**

In this section I outline three overlapping types of tensions (aesthetic, technological, and career) that cause interactional challenges in intergenerational creative collaboration. These intergenerational artistic tensions arise in part because newcomers’ attacks on conventions— aesthetic conventions or simply about the ways things are done (technologically or otherwise)—is tantamount to an attack on the current stratification system,

which favors experienced employees (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993). Underlying the complaints leveled by one artistic generation toward the other is the limited space for career advancement as perceived by members of both groups; newcomers want to ascend and the experienced workers, at the very least, want to sustain. While experienced employees and newcomers both contribute to record companies in respective ways, some of the tensions between the two groups manifest in their differing views (or defensiveness) regarding the relative value of experience compared to the value of understanding emerging trends (or being “with it”). In effect, through the competition to define what is outdated and what is new, what is valuable and what is unimportant, members of both groups accuse each other of cluelessness.

### ***Aesthetic Tensions***

Shortly after getting hired at a major record company in the late 1970s, Eddie recalled, he promptly became aware of aesthetic tensions between artistic generations: “I was there all of maybe five minutes when I was starting to bad-mouth these guys who were pushing 40. I was in my twenties.” Now 54 years old and no longer working in the industry, he situates his conflict at the time: “I’m listening to Earth Wind and Fire, and the Commodores, and Parliament, and these guys who are 40, they’re into [much less edgy stuff, like] Tyrone Davis and Gene Chandler.” Eddie quickly realized his career had a “shelf life” because A&R workers must especially keep track of music trends and interact with artists:

To be an A&R guy you’ve got to be so on top of what’s going on and that’s hard to do as you get older. . . . [So] you don’t see too many retiring A&R guys, they’re usually put out to

pasture before they get a chance to hang out and retire.

Part of the intergenerational artistic tension stems from the perceived inseparability of popular music and youth (Frith 1981:9). Eddie explained, “Music is so generational. People tend to lock into what was going on when they were of that record-buying age, that ‘18 to 30 [years old]’ or whatever. Once you get past that, you know what you know.” Particular artists, movements, or subcultures become inscribed with meaning by a particular artistic generation that relates to its sound, lyrics, and look (Bourdieu 1993; Marcus 1989; see also Mannheim 1970).

According to Eddie’s explanation, by the time newcomers who closely follow music trends and attend shows multiple times per week become well socialized into the record industry, they run the risk of becoming “out of touch” with the newest trends. While some seasoned employees vehemently deny any decline in cutting-edge knowledge, others express waning interest in keeping up with new musical trends—mostly due to changing interests or family responsibilities—while stressing the value of experience. For example, Isabel (in her mid-thirties) is a publicist at a major record company and told me she does not spend as much time researching and listening to music as her younger colleagues: “When I drive my car I listen to [National Public Radio].” Nevertheless, she stressed her status as a seasoned professional and offered a recent example of her experience at work:

A young female singer-songwriter known for her punky sound and visual aesthetic completely transformed her musical style. She released an album Isabel described as unusually fun, upbeat, and pop for this singer. While



Isabel could use her strong connections in the industry to convince music journalists to write about the album—the outgrowth of 16 years in the business—she also wanted to make sure the album received glowing reviews. Isabel describes how she brought a huge bag of candy to a prominent music magazine’s office and played the unreleased album for a group of writers and editors. She insisted that everyone eat candy, lots of candy, as they listened to the fun, sugary pop songs. Once the sugar high kicked in and those present began begging to know the name of this exciting new artist, Isabel then revealed the name of the well-known, but transformed singer. The album got a sensational write-up. (Field note)

Due to the record industry workers’ continual need to follow new trends in order to understand and contribute to what is novel, aesthetic tensions emerge as newcomers attempt to define older artistic generations as out of touch. Experienced employees try to remain up-to-date on current music trends (stay “with it”), or at the very least, they emphasize the value of their skills and networks.

### **Technological Tensions**

Intergenerational artistic tensions also arise regarding changes in technology and related music consumption habits. Interns and other junior workers at times decry the clueless, disconnected “dinosaurs” who sit in higher-level positions and block the record industry’s path for progress. Monique (20 years old) lamented, “A lot of people who hold the higher positions . . . made so much money on CDs and they’ve been through that whole phase of the industry and it’s hard [for them] to let it go. It’s hard to embrace change.” Even more bluntly, Nate (26 years old) told me many older

employees have been in place for too long and their technological ignorance is hurting the music industry: “All of these guys are just too old to handle this digital shit.” These criticisms of experienced employees encompass not only dated understandings of aesthetic trends but also clinging to a past technological landscape.

Relative newcomers who decry the technologically clueless can nevertheless appreciate other aspects of their colleagues’ experience:

On my welcome tour around the distribution company office, Abby introduces me (“the new intern”) to colleagues including a sales employee who appears to be in his 50s [Ralph, 51 years old]. He claims he might have been in the music industry longer than I’ve been alive (“since my college days”). He calls himself a “dinosaur,” especially compared to his younger colleague [Abby, 26 years old] who is walking me around the office. After a few awkward seconds, he specifies that he’s a dinosaur because he deals with physical sales, whereas my colleague works in the digital realm. As Abby and I resume the tour, we walk around the corner to meet Colleen (24 years old). . . . Abby and Colleen laugh, seemingly in agreement, about how Ralph referred to himself as a dinosaur. (Field note)

Four months into my fieldwork at the distribution company, during an interview, Colleen referred to Ralph as “a good value for the company” because he knows how the record business works, has a strong network (he quickly added a few sales accounts after his arrival), and therefore is savvy about finding ways to increase sales. However, she also described him as “not very Y2K compatible,” therefore as stuck in the twentieth century, adding, “He’s very, very technologically inept. I’ve

actually, a couple weeks ago, had to show him how to copy and paste.” While relative newcomers may lament some experienced colleagues’ technological cluelessness, seasoned employees level attacks against newcomers’ inexperience.

Being a hip, young go-getter is not enough to be a good record industry worker; part of the reason why newcomers do internships and work entry-level jobs is to learn how to act in an office environment, that is, to become socialized into occupational and organizational cultures. Reflecting newcomers’ steep (or nonexistent) learning curve, experienced employees recount stories of interns who literally could not change a light bulb as well as less extreme yet still discrediting stories reflecting a lack of workplace and life experiences. Newcomers are sometimes painfully aware of these difficulties, such as an intern who told me she found “no-brainer type stuff” challenging at her recent internship, like navigating the FedEx website: “I can’t even understand that website. [She laughs] I would send things, products to foreign countries, and bill [recipients] instead of billing us.” The intern claimed she mostly produced high-quality work during her internship and expressed frustration that she was not eventually offered a paid position by the company, though she did not seem aware that her inability to complete “no-brainer” tasks might have worked against her favor.

### **Career Tensions**

While bashing experienced workers’ perceived lack of aesthetic and technological savviness is highly common among relative newcomers, some newcomers either resist this urge or consider their experienced colleagues as exceptionally competent. Nevertheless, this does not prevent newcomers from feeling frustrated that seasoned superiors block their paths to

advancement. Greg undertook four unpaid internships, worked as an assistant at a major record company for two years, and shortly after getting a promotion (from “assistant” to “coordinator”), he left the music business. At 25 years old, and despite being offered an even better job at the company, Greg explained why he decided to leave the music industry altogether, saying he looked at his bosses and said to himself,

I don’t know if I could ever be my bosses. It took them 15 to 20 years to get to vice president/senior vice president, they’re not going anywhere. They’re really talented. They know what they’re doing. Even though they’re older, they’re still with it, they know all about the digital stuff.

With major record companies continually cutting costs and jobs, Greg wondered, “So those jobs there’ll be less and less of them and more experienced people to do them, so how will somebody young like me ever end up in a position like that?” The specter of the impossibly competitive labor market goes both ways, however, as Larry (46 years old) told me:

Larry explains how it’s very tough, once you get laid off in the music industry, and pretty much everyone gets laid off. “You know, regime change,” he adds as if these were changes in seasons. “So, it’s really hard to get back into the industry when you’ve been out for a long time. You get laid off, you need to work . . .” When you’re his age, you can’t wait a year or two for your next music job. He goes on: “Many of the jobs that are being created and made available are for young people—why would they hire a guy like me? I don’t live in the same reality as the young people who use [these technologies] all the time.” (Field note)

The relative precariousness of both groups of workers provides reasons to collaborate as well as drive conflict—experienced workers may hesitate to train their potential replacements but could also gain from newcomers' insights; newcomers may resent offering insights that advance their “clueless” superiors' careers while they struggle to establish their own career footholds, but contributing to creative production may help newcomers break into the industry.

### **OVERCOMING INTERGENERATIONAL TENSIONS: FORMS OF LEVERAGING YOUTH**

In a field with constantly shifting conventions and precarious employment conditions across the life course, collaboration between record industry newcomers bringing novel understandings of cultural trends and experienced employees with a strong grasp of industry practices should result in optimally creative outcomes. However, due to intergenerational artistic tensions, collaboration between members of these two groups is not a foregone conclusion. In this section I analyze how workers involved in creative production use various methods to overcome or temporarily bracket intergenerational tensions by leveraging age; that is, the experienced workers draw on the influx of information, enthusiasm, and savviness provided by their newcomer peers, who in turn learn about the conventions of the field from their seasoned colleagues. Specifically, I detail how experienced workers learn from newcomers by leveraging youth; these practices vary by level of formality (formal and informal) and intentionality (planned and spontaneous).

Despite the prevalence of leveraging-youth practices, some employees flatly deny the cultural contributions of their junior colleagues, in particular those of

interns. After all, interns are generally the youngest members in the office, relatively low in status, and far less experienced in navigating office environments, and music industry employees primarily see interns as a source of cheap labor (Frenette 2013; Oakley and O'Brien 2016). Consequently, much like there is a wide range of ways employees learn from interns, there is also variation in the extent to which experienced workers offer interns deference as experts. Importantly, leveraging youth is a mechanism for overcoming or circumventing intergenerational artistic tensions because these practices mostly allow experienced employees to learn from newcomers without showing deference. Leveraging youth enables collaborative activity—facilitating the combination of novelty and usefulness—while limiting the interactional challenges between the two groups.

#### ***Informal Knowledge Extraction***

Experienced employees informally leverage youth in two overlapping ways: by observing newcomers' contributions to the workplace culture (through expressive forms of dress and other displays of consumptive identity) and by soliciting insights, often through seemingly casual conversation.

Of the two informal types, experienced employees leverage youth most prevalently by observing newcomers' contributions to workplace culture. In stark comparison to traditional white-collar offices, record companies are highly informal workplaces that encourage, or even demand, the self-expressiveness of workers in “no-collar” forms of dress and adornment (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Negus 1999). Beyond the informal dress code, record companies as workplaces encourage displays of consumptive identity by allowing workers to loudly play music from their computers or stereo

systems and by cultivating a loose culture where music employees routinely carry on conversations about cultural consumption throughout the workday. Newcomers are socialized into understanding and respecting this informal workplace culture. Recalling one of his early days on the job, a junior employee from a major record company described the record industry as “very laid back,” where employees rarely wear traditional business attire, yet he also illustrated a strict, informally enforced code of conduct: “I literally came in here one time in khakis, a dress shirt, and shoes . . . and I was made fun of the whole day.” Record industry workers portray a planned, informally policed workplace culture, which emphasizes self-expression in contrast to “normal” jobs outside of the creative industries (Frenette 2016).

Just as newcomers observe and learn about the workplace and industry culture through their co-presence with experienced employees, so do experienced employees learn by observing or casually interacting with newcomers. When I point out the ubiquity of interns and young employees at the major record company where I interned, an A&R executive (Jerry, late thirties) with the company described this observational type of leveraging youth (planned/informal): “You want youth here. You want that young energy. You want that sense of ‘What are they wearing? What are they listening to? How are they commuting to work? What magazines do they read?’ All of that sort of stuff.” Contrary to Jerry, who must continually remain well informed regarding cultural trends as he decides which artists the company should sign, Hilary (mid-thirties) works in the legal department at a major record company and portrayed the presence of “fresh and young” people similarly: “They might be listening to different things than you are, or they’re in a different scene than

you are, they might give you knowledge of [musical] stuff you don’t know about.” Another employee told me, “I didn’t realize kids spend *that* much time on [social media]” until noticing the daily habits of interns. Experienced employees, when prompted, reported observing and learning from newcomers, particularly interns, even though such practice is typically implicit or unspoken.

A related, often spontaneous type of leveraging youth involves soliciting insights from newcomers. There is considerable variation regarding the ways experienced employees solicit insights. During seemingly casual conversation, workers test out ideas—for example, an intern told me her supervisor held up a T-shirt and asked, “Would you enter a contest to win this T-shirt?”; experienced employees solicit subcultural knowledge—for example, seemingly due to my interest in obscure music, an employee asked me about an indie-oriented music festival; and others ask newcomers for suggestions or feedback on promotional strategies—for example, an employee asked interns where he should promote a new release online. Referred to by some employees as an informal focus group, this practice consists of directly asking questions and therefore, in some cases, places experienced employees in a deferential position, albeit representing a highly circumscribed form of deference similar to “capacity-esteem,” which occurs when “an individual defers to another’s technical advice” (Goffman 1967:59). Some employees, like Bela (29 years old), seemingly feel very comfortable soliciting insights. Reminiscing about her time as an intern a decade ago, Bela claimed she appreciates intern insights now that she is a well-established employee: “[As an intern, employees] would ask me questions all the time. . . . They wanted to take advantage of, ‘What’s new with the kids these days?’ Which I kind of get too

now that I'm older. I want to talk to college kids." Conversely, some newcomers reported mixed or negative experiences. Danielle (21 years old) felt her supervisor treated her "like a partner" when she recently interned for a small music public relations firm but said employees at another internship (at a larger company) completely ignored her insights.

Because interns have such lower status in the workplace compared to paid employees, at times the latter mask questions to the former with humor or find other ways to assert their authority. For example, Hank is a 37-year-old employee and was my supervisor at the major record company where I interned. The following is an excerpt from an informal interaction between Hank and Brian, a new, 20-year-old intern (with another department) who sits nearby:

[Hank walks over to Brian, who is wearing a red Los Angeles Angels baseball cap, a red jacket, and red shoes. The hat has several stickers on the top flap, primarily a golden sticker with the manufacturer's logo. Hank later explains that he's seen rappers wear caps with stickers in music videos lately but does not understand this practice.]

Hank: Can I ask you a question, Ryan?

Brian: Brian. Yes . . .

Hank: That too. Why do you have those stickers [on your cap]? Is that some type of style or something? I was just curious.

Brian: I haven't really thought about it.

[Brian is sitting at a computer workstation, seemingly trying to do work. Hank gets very close to Brian, who flinches slightly.]

Hank: I'm not going to touch it, that's your hat. I don't touch people's properties. That's your hat. If you want the stickers on that, that's where you leave the stickers on then.

[Hank steps away slightly. Brian explains that the hat came with a golden sticker on top to testify to its authenticity. Dissatisfied, Hank repeats his question.]

Brian: I want it there. Me, personally. And after a while there's no purpose in taking it off because . . . [Hank talks over him: "It leaves, it leaves"] a clean spot where the sticker is.

Hank: Exactly. So, what if the hat gets wet and it starts to fade on those stickers . . .

[Brian sheepishly says he would stop wearing the hat.]

Hank: Wow. So, you let a sticker fade the hat, now the hat is ruined because of a sticker.

[Brian looks at his computer screen as he tells Hank he needs to work.]

Hank: How old are you, 18, 19, 20 years old? You can't multitask? You're only talking. You mean to tell me that you can't talk and you can't take care of some clicking? And yet I'm keeping you away from your work?

Brian: No, I can get it done.

[Hank turns toward me.]

Hank: I remember the day when I was his age many, many, many, many, many, many years ago—that's *Police Academy*, many, many, many years ago. [Addressing Brian] You ever watch *Police Academy*? You've heard of *Police Academy*?

Brian: Yeah.

Hank: I mean you're maybe a little young for *Police Academy*.

Brian: Is that the one with the, like, this black guy that's beat boxing?

Hank: [With excitement] Yes, that's right . . . How old are you again?

Brian: I'm 20.

By being insistent, by violating his personal space, by questioning his ability to multitask, and by referring to a movie that came out before he was born (thereby questioning his breadth of cultural knowledge), Hank successfully extracts

information from Brian about youth consumption without showing deference or giving up any authority. Although Hank's antics are somewhat extreme, these types of interactions, within the confines of an asymmetrical "joking relationship" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940), provide an opportunity for workers to derive cultural knowledge at little or no personal cost.

### **Formal Knowledge Extraction**

Record industry workers also leverage youth in several formal, often carefully planned ways. These forms of knowledge extraction are embedded in company policies or are otherwise officially supported by management, therefore sparing experienced employees from the need to defer to newcomers—after all, employees are simply carrying out official orders or following standard industry protocol. Formal, organizationally reinforced processes for leveraging youth include holding focus groups, as many (mostly larger) record companies typically do, which allow employees to learn about interns' music consumption patterns and taste preferences; certain departments organize simulated or low-stakes activities in which interns suggest solutions to problems defined by experienced employees; and leveraging youth is embedded within recruitment practices that maximize newcomers' cutting-edge cultural knowledge, especially for departments whose employees must stay particularly attuned to novel trends.

During my fieldwork at a major record company, I was invited to participate in a focus group with fellow interns—over lunch, with the promise of free pizza, we would be asked what we thought of certain unreleased songs by a celebrated artist making a "comeback" (after about five years of inactivity). I later realized that major record labels routinely hold focus groups with interns on a wide range of

topics, including how they acquire or listen to music (e.g., "What music apps do you use?"). Experienced employees particularly use newcomers' focus group insights to inform marketing strategy—newcomers offer a fresh sense of how members of their age group perceive particular musical acts and current trends.

These focus groups, much like the other formal processes for leveraging youth, tend to be carefully planned but sometimes take spontaneous, unexpected turns. Recalling a memorable focus group from the early days of the iPod (early 2000s), Hilary (mid-thirties) explained how a major record company brought together a group of interns to listen to and offer their feedback on the company's upcoming releases: "[The interns] get called in because they're sort of 'street,' you know, they're 18 years old, [cool], and blah blah blah." At the end of the focus group, she continued, "the label [offers the interns] CDs of their new releases and no one takes any of them." The baffled record company employees interrupted the interns as they made their way out of the room to ask why they did not want the compact discs. The interns answered, "We could go put it on our iPod . . . I don't want to carry a CD around.' And, of course, everyone in the room went, 'Ooh, hadn't really thought about that.'" The story circulated around the office, Hilary added, "as a way to communicate, 'We need to be paying better attention'" to what interns are saying. The experienced workers had not anticipated just how deeply the rise of digital technologies would impact music consumption trends, though the focus group's conclusion signaled that the conventional ways of selling and consuming music were quickly changing. More broadly, Hilary's account shows how planned/formal leveraging-youth practices occasionally take a spontaneous turn, leading to fortuitous insights.

In addition to focus groups, other employees describe simulated or low-stakes activities at internship programs as methods to extract knowledge. Depending on the company or the department in question, examples of leveraging youth in this way include tasking a small group of interns with devising a “test” marketing plan for an upcoming release, suggesting lesser-known venues to promote an artist, or having interns propose (or “pitch”) new, unsigned artists for the record company’s consideration. Interns then receive feedback about their (usually unpolished) work, therefore learning about industry standards, while nevertheless conveying their cultural knowledge to experienced employees. The activities, due to their clear educational purpose, allow the experienced employees to retain their status as experts while also deriving insights from newcomers.

For example, Nancy (29 years old) is in charge of an internship program in the A&R department of a major record company. Nancy told me how she counts on Ben’s (19 years old) musical insights and keen supervision of interns to locate new talent for the label. Ben graduated from being an intern at the company to being an entry-level employee who scouts new musical talent and helps run the internship program from day to day. Although culling charts and web content are the interns’ basic responsibilities, akin to the low-status administrative duties of interns in other departments, Ben and Nancy also run weekly “mock A&R meetings” in which interns learn how to pitch artists for the department’s consideration. Ben explains that interns initially do not know how to pitch an artist: “You go from the first week when they’re like, ‘Uh, this is a band . . . uh . . . here it is.’” As the semester goes on, however, the interns eventually learn how to craft an A&R pitch: “By the end [of the semester] they’re like, ‘This is a band called

*this* . . . and *this* blog’s been writing them up nonstop, and they’re touring with *these* people.” Nancy informed me that the record company recently signed several artists based on its ability to draw heavily on the hard work and sub-cultural savvy of interns, including a local rock band that went on to win a Grammy Award. Therefore, these types of educational activities offer low-stakes opportunities for newcomers to contribute novel insights and to collaborate with experienced workers in creative production.

Experienced employees may deny or lessen the novel contributions of newcomers not only by stressing the educational component of simulated or low-stakes activities but also by emphasizing how newcomers’ insights fit within larger company practices. A junior A&R employee (mid-twenties) at a major record company described eventually understanding how individual decisions whether to sign an artist are part of his employer’s multitiered vetting process: “You kind of learn in A&R that there’s a funnel system. It starts here and it goes to these people, who send it to these people, who send it to my boss [i.e., the head of A&R].” To minimize risk related to demand uncertainty, A&R departments rely on multiple sources of data to determine whether to sign an artist, including analytics related to social media, sales, and live performances. A&R workers also rely on the reputation of artists and the opinions of trusted individuals within and outside of the company (Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972). A midlevel A&R employee (early thirties) described his slow ascent within the funnel system: as his reputation and credibility grew, senior employees came to trust and act upon his input. Speaking of an intern who takes credit for signing an artist to the label, the employee denied leveraging youth by explaining that while the intern introduced the artist to the

A&R department, the artist was likely signed because a high-profile supporter (rapper Kanye West) championed him and escorted him into a meeting with the company: “If Kanye West walks you in [the room], I don’t know if *the intern* can really take credit.” In the process of offering insights on current trends, newcomers also become socialized to understand their limited role in creative production as collaborative activity.

Finally, experienced employees leverage youth through recruitment practices carefully aimed at attracting a pipeline of trendsetters. These practices vary widely by company and even by department; some employees told me they simply aim to hire administratively skilled, responsible, punctual, and hardworking interns and junior personnel. However, employees in A&R departments, some marketing departments, and smaller specialized record companies, which require more cutting-edge cultural knowledge, particularly report leveraging youth in this way. For example, when Ben explains how he selects interns for the A&R department, he describes passion for music as central to his intern selection process: “I don’t care about your grades. I don’t care what you’re majoring in. Are you a music fan?” Ben added, “I want interns who are trendsetters and who are, you know, just totally on top of their stuff. And, who are the people who other people look up to.” His senior colleague Nancy also stressed the importance of selecting interns who are passionate about finding new music, in essence describing “cool kids”: “It’s the whole obsession with music discovery online and feeling a sense of ownership and it’s *cool* to know about things before anyone else. So we’re looking for those kids.” In their effort to find interns with a keen sense of current and imminent music trends, Ben and Nancy advertise the company’s internship program on specialized

music blogs. Ben explained, “I want people who are going to and reading those sites.” Moreover, he asked me rhetorically, “Where’s that kid who’s going to find me the next *awesome* band?” Employees also told me they reach out to local college radio stations and industry colleagues to find passionate and knowledgeable interns. While less visible than other leveraging processes, recruitment practices enable experienced workers to attract the most knowledgeable and culturally savvy newcomers possible, thereby impacting the capacity for—and payoffs from—leveraging youth altogether.

## CONCLUSION

Creativity as a form of collective action involves the coordinated efforts of networks of people aiming to produce something novel and useful. Guided by conventions about how this work should be carried out, disparate actors build on and respond to each other’s efforts. Using the record industry as its case study, this article examines the intergenerational challenges to collaboration between newcomers and experienced workers and identifies a mechanism (leveraging age) to overcome tensions between the two groups. Findings confirm and extend existing theories on the role of newcomers in creative production—because newcomers are not yet well socialized to the field, they can offer fresh views (a form of “focused naiveté”) that are both challenging and useful to existing members of a collaborative network. Simultaneously, I find that established workers may see, sometimes quite accurately, newcomers’ calls for change, putting down old styles, and technological updates as attacks from newer artistic generations (perhaps only a few years younger) aiming to leave their imprint on the field.

This article specifies three overlapping types of intergenerational artistic



tensions in creative collaboration: aesthetic, technological, and career. Experienced workers are reluctant to defer to newcomers as experts due to these tensions, but I show how the former use five leveraging-youth practices to override these tensions as they extract knowledge from the latter. These practices vary by level of formality and intentionality and are carried out while mostly maintaining orderly social interactions.

By scrutinizing the challenging and generative facets of newcomer socialization in bureaucratic settings, this article provides a framework for future research on creativity and interpersonal dynamics across industries. Leveraging youth in bureaucratic settings is predicated on the influx of newcomers in temporary positions, such as internships, or in low-paid jobs with consistent turnover, conditions found in a variety of creative fields. Similar to the record industry, creative fields, such as publishing, film, television, and advertising, are also marked by an oversupply of aspirants and must contend with demand uncertainty (Menger 2014; Nixon 2006). These conditions of oversupply, churn, and transfer of expertise apply to many academic environments, as well. Hackett's (2005) work on scientific research groups as "filter feeders" suggests some parallels: a lab, much like a record company, is relatively stable in membership yet continually changing with the influx (and departure) of newcomers. In this way, scientific labs also contend with the essential tension inherent in creative production within hierarchical, bureaucratic settings, which involves negotiating the continual need for novelty amid conditions of relative stasis in leadership (Hackett 2005; Kuhn 1977).

Record companies and scientific groups routinely welcome newcomers—graduate students and postdoctoral scientists or interns and assistants, respectively—

though selection and socialization are not always smooth processes (Van Maanen 1978; Zuckerman 1977). In both types of settings, newcomers gain skills and experience during their passage through the group while also contributing cutting-edge insights and techniques. Similar to experienced employees in the record industry, as scientific group leaders' mastery of technical abilities wane, their authority risks becoming undermined (Hackett and Parker 2012). Future research should identify variation in the ways intergenerational tensions manifest in different creative fields (e.g., Parker and Corte [2017] suggest that age and tradition matter more in science than in the arts) and the industry-specific mechanisms that allow workers to translate age-diverse and experience-diverse group composition into optimally creative outcomes.

The relatively fleeting relationships between newcomers and experienced workers portrayed in this article suggest the uneasy, if not unlikely, development of strong mentor-protégé relationships in bureaucratic settings, but this is not always the case. Intergenerational artistic tensions do not necessarily result in the displacement of the old guard or the short tenure of newcomers (though those things happen, too). Under some circumstances, socialization leads newcomers to upward career mobility, especially with the help of a mentor. Farrell (2001) suggests that newcomers who form relationships with mentors tend to be more comfortable with authority and are more likely to reaffirm their mentor's vision than to offer transformative breakthroughs. Conversely, relatively marginalized aspirants are more likely to form rebellious collaborative circles with like-minded (and similarly positioned) young peers. The data presented in this article are insufficient to resolve long-standing debates about whether creativity is more likely to emerge at the core or the

periphery, but the process of leveraging youth suggests the incorporation of the two, albeit temporarily. By leveraging youth, peripheral actors (newcomers) come into closer proximity to the center of creative production, which makes possible what McLaughlin (2001:273) calls optimal marginality; that is, newcomers “transfer ideas from the creative margins to the center of intellectual and cultural institutions and traditions” and therefore exert pressure for change.

The process of leveraging youth implies a challenging context for impression management on the part of newcomers and experienced workers alike. Record industry newcomers attempt to prove their competence and convert their knowledge of novel music, technology, and consumption trends into career advancement, but their main day-to-day tasks frequently involve administrative, low-level work often unrelated to these creative contributions (also see Frenette 2013). Experienced employees, as they potentially lose touch with cutting-edge cultural trends, may struggle to still come off as aesthetically and technologically competent (or “with it”) in the eyes of newcomers and higher management. Future research should further analyze the roles or identities workers claim through impression management to maintain or elevate their status. For example, some experienced employees appear to stress their skills and acknowledge (sometimes self-deprecatingly) their diminishing cultural knowledge, in essence adopting the role of “wise dinosaur.” In their study of Hollywood pitch meetings between screenwriters (“pitchers”) and producers or studio executives (“catchers”) in film or television, Elsbach and Kramer (2003) suggest seven roles or prototypes adopted or enacted by these creative workers, including the young, creative, but unpolished “neophyte” and the older, less creative, but technically

sound “journeyman.” Future research should analyze whether and how individuals involved in creative work strategically use impression management and rely on occupational rhetorics (Fine 1996) to claim or resist such creative identities and how these efforts inform leveraging practices. Better understanding impression management between intergenerational collaborators would contribute to the literature on creative careers while also further clarifying how individuals with disparate, possibly contradictory outlooks find common ground in collaborative creative relationships (Hargadon and Bechky 2006; Lingo and O’Mahony 2010; Skaggs 2019).

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