Status Decoupling: Commercial Success and Peer Recognition among Nashville Songwriters 1990-2012

By

Rachel Skaggs

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Sociology

December, 2014

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Daniel B. Cornfield, Ph.D.

C. André Christie-Mizell, Ph.D.

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A cultural producer's status comes from multiple sources. It is formed from a combination of peer, critic, and consumer approval and can come from commercial success as well as peer or industry recognition (Debenedetti 2006). When all types of status are high, they can be mutually reinforcing. Commercially successful work attracts more "good" jobs that are likely to become commercially successful (Menger 1999). Consumers reinforce the "success breeds success" model of status acquisition by purchasing things that they are familiar with; producers respond by falling back on trends and fads that have been successful in the past (Dowd 2004, Kasaras 2012). Despite the seemingly inseparable, reflexive nature of a producer's status, research has found that status acquisition is not fully aligned (Lena and Pachucki 2013, Pinheiro and Dowd 2009). Though we know that status hierarchies are somewhat independent, it is less clear how individual status hierarchies contribute to career longevity among workers in cultural industries.

The purpose of this paper to answer the questions of whether status among entrepreneurial, post-bureaucratic workers is decoupled into different status hierarchies built on commercial success and recognition among industry peers and whether achieving a high level of success in either status hierarchy leads to continued success over time. In order to achieve this purpose, the paper brings together the literatures on post-bureaucratic employment, a sub-discipline of the sociology of work and the literature on cultural production, specifically status among artists, from the sociology of culture.

Nashville, Tennessee was recently found to be the city with the greatest density of music professionals in the United States (Peoples 2013), and Nashville's music industry provides the setting for a highly active, dynamic labor market based on the production and distribution of songs. Using the case-in-point of Nashville songwriters, I compiled a data set

that spans 23 years and set out to test whether songwriters who are commercially successful are the same writers identified by peers as those who wrote the best songs. These data display songwriters' success commercially as measured by Billboard Magazine's top 10 country songs each year and success among peers as voted on by professional songwriter members of the organization Nashville Songwriters Association International. The longitudinal nature of the data allows for a look at career longevity and success over time after a songwriter first achieves success.

This research improves on the current understanding of status hierarchies impact on career longevity in two main ways. The theoretical framing of this piece incorporates Bourdieusian cultural fields theory with the literature on post-bureaucratic work and occupations. Many cultural producers' work arrangements place them outside of formal bureaucratic organizations. By integrating an understanding of post-bureaucratic work with cultural fields theory, it is apparent that the status hierarchies created within cultural fields have an impact on the career longevity of cultural producers within the field. Second, this research uses a measure of peer acclaim that is constant over 23 years and consists of a large voting body of songwriters verified to be professional songwriters on the basis of their employment status in the music industry. This measure improves upon previous studies that use proxy measures of peer recognition or acclaim as it is based on peers within one occupational group voting on which of their peers produced the best work of the year.

Status Decoupling

According to Bourdieu's (1983) theory of the field of cultural production, there are two legitimated paths that cultural producers may focus on to determine the appropriate market and audience for their art. The two pathways Bourdieu presents are the restricted field of production and the large-scale field of production. Members of the restricted field of cultural production value symbolic capital and produce art or cultural goods intended for consumption by other members of the field. The large-scale field of cultural production is made up of members who pursue economic capital through producing art or cultural goods intended for distribution through a commercial market. Art as a commodity creates a labor market in which artists can compete for commercial success based on the sales and distribution of their art. Just as the market serves art's commercial value, art's capacity to serve symbolic, non-commodity functions makes room for artists who specialize in producing art with higher symbolic value than market value.

Bourdieu submits that there is a negative correlation between symbolic and economic capital. Artists who produce work in a restricted field of cultural production will have high levels of symbolic capital and low levels of economic capital. On the other hand, artists who produce art for commercial consumption in a large-scale field of production generally have low levels of symbolic capital and high levels of economic capital. Bourdieu asserts that commercial art and symbolic art are both produced by "highly professionalized" artists who knowingly choose to orient themselves toward a field of production (1984: 20). Both types of art are legitimated within the artistic field to some extent, as both commercial and symbolic art must pass through a series of gatekeepers and critics to be available for public consumption.

Nevertheless, this theory has led to criticism on the basis of the seemingly absolute, separate hierarchies of cultural producers that come from Bourdieu's theory. Hesmondhalgh (2006) challenges Bourdieu's theory because it is not inclusive of commercial cultural fields where large-scale production is seen as a legitimate way to attain status and make a career. Another area where Bourdieu's theory may be critiqued is in its assertion that producers in the field of restricted production may not ever meet or interact with those in the field of large-scale production. He goes on to say that the artists in these two groups, "may, in extreme cases, have nothing in common except the fact of taking part in a struggle to impose the legitimate definition of literary or artistic production" (Bourdieu 1983:327). This claim does not hold true in collaborative reputational labor markets where it is essential for workers to be familiar with and friendly toward their peers. Gaining notoriety among one's peers is essential for workers in collaborative reputational labor markets. For example, when it comes to songwriters, the listening public does not necessarily know who writes popular songs. The demand for a songwriter's work comes from his or her peers rather than directly from the market. While the field of country music seems to be almost wholly a field of large-scale production, the members in the field have to follow an autonomous principle to some extent in order to structure access to the mass-market. Bourdieu clearly sees more value in art produced for peer consumption and seems to lament those "condemned to so-called 'popular' success" (1983:327). In the case of country music, songwriters jump at the opportunity to sell out, but it may be the case that they need a legitimate peer authority to allow them the opportunity.

Anheier et al. (1995) found support for Bourdieu's cultural fields theory in a sample of German writers where there were two distinct hierarchies, those who were high in economic capital and wrote for popular audiences and those who were high in symbolic capital and wrote for others in the field. Other researchers have shown the decoupling of other status orders in cultural fields such as artistic and economic status (Lena and Pachucki 2013), peer recognition and critical success (Lang and Lang 1988), and commercial success and peer recognition (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Zuckerman et al. 2003). Pinhiero and Dowd (2009) found that jazz musicians who are able to play in a wide range of genres attain higher levels of critical and economic success. They also found that musicians with high levels of social capital had higher levels of economic success. Janssen (1998) finds that among literary writers, having side jobs that are related to writing, like editing a critical journal, contributes to a writer's reputation among peers, which in turn, makes it more likely that the writer will receive critical attention. Craig and DuBois (2010) find that poets either write "for the page or for the stage" (448) and that these differing career trajectories reinforce hierarchal status orders between commercially successful and critically acclaimed poets. It is clear that status and hierarchies of status in cultural fields come from many sources and are used to differentiate labor markets where there are more aspirants than the market can support. What is less clear from these results is how individual status hierarchies contribute to career longevity among workers in cultural industries.

Post-Bureaucratic Occupations

According to Briscoe (2007), "bureaucracy involves formalization, or greater reliance on rules and procedures, often for the purpose of coordinating work across individuals and organizational units. This formalization tends to produce greater standardization of work activities, and is also typically accompanied by increasing hierarchical control" (Briscoe 2007:301). If bureaucratic work is rigid, standardized, and hierarchical then post-bureaucratic work is comparably flexible, generalized, and flat. It is flexible in that it allows some autonomy over scheduling and what projects to sign onto, generalized in that workers learn to do most every task related to the industry and general business skills, and flat in that there is little to no formal hierarchy of workers (Smith 1997). Many post-bureaucratic jobs are network-based and entrepreneurial (Maravelias 2003) and precarious given the lack of institutional protection afforded to workers outside the bureaucracy (Kalleberg 2011). Courpasson and Clegg (2006) propose that the formal bureaucratic workplace is giving way to alternative organizational models because of changes in customer bases and the inherent “structural inertia” of large corporate bureaucracies in dealing with changing market conditions. Today’s entrepreneurs have a range of possible career trajectories from the traditional path of starting one’s own business to contracting with a large bureaucratic organization as a free agent (Neff 2012; Osnowitz 2010; Smith 2001).

Outside of the bounds of formal organizations, freelancers, self-employed workers, and entrepreneurs have more control over their own work than do bureaucratic employees (Neff 2012; Osnowitz 2010). In these post-bureaucratic employment situations, workers strike out on their own and must essentially manage their own miniature bureaucracy.

People working for themselves outside of a formal bureaucratic workplace sell products or are commissioned to provide services for individuals and other businesses. They must also create a business plan, secure a place to work, finance any business expenses, file taxes based on business earnings and expenses, secure clients or customers, provide customer service, secure their own health and life insurance, and perform a number of other tasks that would have been done for them had they worked for someone else in a bureaucratic organization. Since post-bureaucratic jobs do not have prescribed career paths, built in deadlines, or a managerial figure supervising their work, workers must essentially construct their own careers.

In freelance, self-employment, and entrepreneurial work, many independent workers will collaborate on individual projects or on long-term ventures. According to Zuckerman et al. (2006), peer collaboration and participation add two types of value to workers' professional lives. Collaboration gives natural opportunities for learning and improving skills and motivates the collaborators, and peers who come together to work on a project can learn new skills or techniques relevant to their industry or learn of other job opportunities or resources that could be beneficial to their careers. Moreover, seeing a peer's success and work is motivating and allows collaborators to stay "in the know" about their industry.

Reputational Labor Markets

A reputational labor market typically consists of a work arrangement in which scarce work opportunities and collaboration are distributed on the basis of an individual's reputation (Menger 1996). Reputational labor markets exist mainly outside of a formal bureaucracy and govern the matching of entrepreneurial individuals to freelance or project-based work situations in which they remain free agents rather than employees of a business or organization (Evans et al. 2004; Zafirau 2008). For individuals who participate in reputational labor markets, there is a significant overlap between work and life (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). In practice, workers in reputational labor markets must provide high quality goods or services as well as build a reputation among peers and potential customers. As a result of the importance placed on building a reputation, institutional credentials, most notably formal education, have less importance (Scott 2012).

An unintended consequence of the dynamics of reputational labor markets is that professional networks often become social networks. The hybrid social-professional networks that form become a main arena for finding jobs, collaborators, and potential clients. Neff (2005) says that becoming involved in social groups of professional peers is implicitly required of workers in reputational labor markets. Further, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) present the idea that work in cultural industries constitutes a lifestyle rather than a job and suggest that when one's professional networks and professional success depend on having a strong social network, "all hours become work hours" (15). Maravelias (2003) agrees that workers outside the bureaucracy may have more difficulty separating their time as workers from time outside of work. He says that a post-bureaucratic worker, "runs the risk of being 'always still at work'" (2003:561). This aspect of reputational labor

markets requires that a worker both do good work and be well liked by peers to be successful in his or her occupation.

Status

Weber (1998 [1948]) defines status as a social estimation of honor that allows for stratification based on numerous personal characteristics outside of a person's wealth or power. He distinguished status from class and party to show that individual characteristics have an impact, just as class does, on the social lives of individuals. In more recent scholarship, status is conceptualized as affording social advantages or levying disadvantages on the basis of personal characteristics (Webster and Hysom 1998). Further, it is important to note that assessments of status are not only made between groups, but also status distinctions are made within groups to distinguish the social worth of individuals who may be alike in terms of class, professional characteristics, or other social markers (Lena and Pachucki 2013).

Ultimately, the distinctions drawn from assessments of an individual's social worth in different areas create status orders which place individuals within hierarchies determined by status characteristics. Within reputational labor markets, assessments of individuals' status have an effect on an individual's success. Status is the main form of capital that workers mobilize to try to get jobs or find collaborators (Anand and Watson 2004; Scott 2012; Townley et al. 2009; Zafirau 2008). Workers must maintain high status in their occupational community or face difficulty in finding work.

Since status is based on assessments of many different social characteristics, there are multiple areas in which workers are assessed to determine their status in an

occupational community. While the quality of one's work is important, other status markers are used to determine a worker's occupational and social worth. When a scientist who is held in high regard among his or her peers collaborates with a scientist with little recognition in the scientific community, the established scientist's status rises while the unknown collaborator's contributions are more-or-less overshadowed by the status of the widely recognized collaborator (Merton 1968). More recently, researchers have found that the same principle applies to individuals, firms, and even places (Currid and Connoly 2008; Podolny 1993). These findings all support the idea that recognition (of a particular individual, firm, or place) among relevant peers leads to higher status for that entity and continued opportunities for collaboration in the case of individuals in a market. Similarly, Bielby and Bielby (1994) found that when a new television show is in the works and success cannot be predicted in advance, decision-makers look to the reputation of the people working on the project as the main criteria for whether to support a project or accept it for production. These results hold true even though a well-established producer's work is no more likely to be commercially successful than a producer who is less established. Townley et al. (2009) found that, "for creative ideas to function as capital their worth must be recognized, they must be capable of being traded (for economic or symbolic capital), otherwise they remain creative ideas" (946). Their findings suggest that to be successful in a commercial market, the product or service must have a recognized value. Valuation may be easy for products with an agreed upon use value or a service for which there already exists a market, but for creative workers in particular, it is more difficult to assign worth to ideas or art. The problem of assigning worth to artistic endeavors explains how famous painters and writers can sell few works in their life, yet gain canonical status

posthumously. Similarly, this is why an unknown musician on YouTube can produce great music that is available to any person with an internet connection and still never become famous commercially or recognized by peers.

Attaining high status and establishing one's worth in an occupational community is important for getting work or further collaboration opportunities, but building a good reputation and attaining high status can be difficult for aspirants in post-bureaucratic and artistic labor markets. Past research has found that even when artists get formal education (Abreu et al. 2012), gain experience through internships (Frenette 2013), or try to increase industry recognition by giving their work or services away for free (Scott 2012), there is no guarantee of successful entry into their career of choice.

Case in Point: Nashville Songwriting

In Nashville, songwriting is a collaborative business; it is estimated that 90% of songs are co-written (Lee 1997). In a typical co-writing situation two to three writers will toss around ideas, "hooks", melodies, and lyrics until the song is complete. Some writers specialize in either lyrics or music, but more commonly each writer will contribute to both aspects of a song. After a song is complete, the writers typically split the copyright evenly without calculating how much each person actually contributed to the song (Lovelace 2002). Status and reputation are important when choosing a co-writer because songwriting is an industry with little formal regulation and few explicitly defined regulatory structures. Ultimately, songwriters are free to choose with whom they collaborate in writing songs. Songwriters often talk about "writing up" and are explicitly aware that they need to write with high-status writers to raise their own status and chance of success (Turner 2003).

Though songwriting as an occupation it is informally organized, aspirants as well as established writers must adhere to occupational norms in order to be accepted in the community as a songwriter. Anyone can call him or herself a songwriter, and there are no formal educational requirements or credentialing organizations that establish a person as a professional in this occupation.

Songwriters can either be self-employed or hold a staff writing position at a publishing house that gives some of the benefits of having an employer as well as some of the freedoms associated with self-employment. Unfortunately, the constriction of the music industry has changed the employment landscape such that while there were once about 4000 staff songwriting jobs in Nashville, today there are only a few hundred (Herbison 2014). Only songwriters who have already achieved some success are likely to get a staff-writing job. Compensation rates do not vary by a songwriter's employment status because the compensation structure of songwriting is highly regulated and is the one private-sector occupation in which the federal government sets compensation rates via copyright law governing mechanical royalty rates (Nashville Songwriters Association International 2013). Despite a lack available writing jobs and a system that does not require credentials, a person could adopt the occupational identity of songwriter indefinitely without ever having written a commercially successful song or making a profit from songwriting. The lack of formal industry structure in songwriting makes songwriters' career paths uncertain. While autonomy could be seen as empowering, there is no job security and ultimately no guarantee of a paycheck regardless of the time or effort invested in a songwriting career.

When it comes to the music industry as a whole, there is no formal oversight by a governing body. Individual recording acts and labels must follow the regulations set by

their employing agencies, but overall, it appears that the country music industry is more or less autonomous and self-governing (Lovelace 2002). Songwriters within this genre enjoy this freedom from some societal conventions and fully capitalize on it, writing songs that would be considered to be of little substance and high in impropriety by many scholarly communities. The autonomy and artistic freedom afforded to country songwriters has allowed them to pen racy songs and still be taken seriously in ballads focused on serious topics like religion and chaste monogamy. For example, Jim Collins co-wrote the innuendo-filled commercial hit “She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy” as well as co-writing the chart-topping, peer-recognized song “The Good Stuff” which proclaims that the “good stuff” in life includes marrying one’s high school sweetheart, growing old with her, and supporting her through her battle with cancer until you pass her on into God’s hands. The unregulated creative side of this occupation allows songwriters to be lyrical and topical generalists rather than specializing in writing only highbrow or lowbrow songs without losing status.

According to Billboard Magazine, Nashville provides 27,000 jobs in the music industry, which at 7.8 music professionals per 1,000 residents makes it the city with the highest concentration of music industry workers, far above the second place Los Angeles’ 2.8 music professionals per 1,000 (Peoples 2013). The concentration of people who create music and others who are active in this field of cultural production, such as record label staff, producers, and publishers makes Nashville a good case in point for examining the field of music production.

For songwriters, the music industry is competitive given the fact that there is an oversupply of labor and product. In fact, with thousands of aspiring songwriters willing to pitch their songs to artists and an even larger supply of high-quality songs stored in

publishers' back catalogues, it would be nearly impossible for songwriters to go on strike or leverage collective bargaining for changes in work conditions. In industries where freelancing, self-employment, and project-based work are common, high status and a good reputation are essential for a successful career (Kalleberg 2000; Smith 2001). Songwriters may have a staff songwriting job as an employee for a publishing company, but for the most part, songwriters are free agents. In most cases, aspiring songwriters have to figure out the unwritten industry rules on their own, as there are no educational requirements and few paths to a formal education in songwriting. Aspiring songwriters quickly figure out that building a good reputation and collaborating with others is the key to upward professional mobility (Menger 1999; Rossman 2010).

As stated above, most country songs are co-written, and forming a network of successful co-writers is an important first step for a new writer who wants to get his or her work heard by industry critics and gatekeepers. Once a writer's song is selected, "cut" (recorded by a music group or recording artist), and released, the song has two potential outcomes. It will either be commercially successful, leading to increased opportunities for the writer, or not commercially successful, which is not necessarily bad for the writer because his or her name will still be attached to a song that has achieved some degree of success. Having any cut is better than not having one, but simply getting a song recorded does not mean it will be released for commercial sale. Likewise, even if a song is cut and released for commercial sale, it may not be commercially successful.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

In order to test whether there is a decoupling of status acquired by Nashville songwriters, I formulated two research questions and matched hypotheses. Additionally, I added a third research question and hypothesis pertaining to status acquisition and the effect of decoupling on songwriters' continued success commercially and among peers over time.

> *Question 1: Are top commercially successful songs the same songs that garner peer recognition?*
>
> *Hypothesis 1: There will be a negative association between commercially successful songs and the songs that garner peer recognition.*

This question guides research that will determine whether the songs that attain commercial success are the same songs that are chosen by songwriters as the best songs. In a commercial market, it would not be surprising if the songs recognized as high quality songs by peers were also the most successful commercial hits, but Bourdieu's cultural fields theory suggests that there will be a distinction between songs that are commercially successful and those recognized by peers.

> *Question 2: Are the songwriters who write the top commercially successful songs the same writers whose songs garner peer recognition?*
>
> *Hypothesis 2: There will be a negative association between songwriters who write the top commercially successful songs and the songwriters whose songs garner peer recognition.*

The second question allows me to find out if the songwriters who write commercially successful songs are the same people who write the songs chosen as the best songs by other songwriters. The possible outcomes are as follows. The same set of songs could be high in both commercial and critical success. The songs that are high in commercial success could be different songs from critical successes, but the two groups could be written by the same set of writers. This outcome would suggest that successful writers divide their energies between producing songs for commercial audiences and songs for their peers. Lastly, the songs that are commercially successful could be a different set of songs than those that gain critical success, and the two sets of songs could be written by two sets of writers. This outcome would show that some songwriters essentially specialize in writing commercial songs while others write songs geared more towards their peers. Again, in line with Bourdieu's cultural fields theory, I hypothesize that there are some songwriters who write commercial songs and some who write songs that are recognized by peers.

> *Question 3: Does attaining high status, either through commercial success or peer recognition lead songwriters to future success, either commercially or among their peers?*
>
> *Hypothesis 3: Songwriters who have attained high status, either commercially or among their peers, will have higher levels of continued peer recognition than commercial success over time.*

Question 3 guides the present research related to the occupational consequences of decoupled status hierarchies. Studies show that peer recognition leads to continued peer recognition (Currid and Connoly 2008; Merton 1968; Podolny 1993), and Bielby and Bielby (1994) find that after one's peers recognize one as being of high status in an occupational

community through past commercial success, high status among peers continues even when one does not continue to achieve commercial success. These findings suggest that both commercial success and peer recognition lead to continued recognition by peers but not necessarily to continued commercial success, so I hypothesize that songwriters will have a higher percentage of recurring peer recognition over time and lower levels of continued commercial success over time.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to test my hypotheses, I collected publically available data tracing the commercial and critical success of country songs from 1990-2012[1]. The data source for commercial success is the Billboard Magazine Hot 100 Year End Country Songs List from which I collected the top 10 songs for each year from 1990-2012. Billboard's methodology for determining the commercial success of songs is currently based on audience impressions (measured by Nielsen BDS), sales (measured by Nielsen Sound Scan), and streaming activity (collected by Nielsen BDS). The organization has had to change its metrics to keep up with the way audiences consume music (Trust 2012). These changes over time mean that over the course of the 23 years of this study, multiple sources of data were considered by Billboard. Though the charts for each year are potentially made up of data collected from different sources, Billboard still released all of the charts under the title "Year End Hot 100." This choice indicates that despite the necessity to update data collection methods to keep up with audiences' consumptive patterns, this chart measures the same thing over time, the commercial success of songs in the country genre. Many

[1] This time period was chosen due to data availability as the NSAI list of Songs I Wish I had Written was first published in 1990.

scholars use Billboard data in their research and state that it is the least subjective published chart that covers music popularity in the United States (Dowd 2004; Lena and Pachucki 2013).

Lang and Lang (1988: 84) define recognition as "the esteem in which others in the same 'art world' hold the artist." The data source indicative of peer recognition for this research is the Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI) list of "Songs I Wish I had Written" as nominated and voted on by professional songwriter members of this organization. NSAI changed the number of songs awarded from 34 songs in 1990 to 20 songs per year from 1991-1999, and finally to about 10 songs per year from 2000-2012. The songs are listed in alphabetical order rather than rank-ordered, so I retained all of the NSAI songs. The effect of this choice actually strengthens my findings, as the number of songs that overlap on both the Billboard and NSAI list is not significantly different between the period of 1990-1999 and 2000-2012 (t= 1.05; p = .30). This statistic shows that even when the pool of critically successful songs was double or triple the size of the pool of commercially successful songs, the level of overlap between the two lists was not significantly different.

After collecting the top songs for both commercial and critical success, I looked up the writers of the songs using databases of songs and their writers hosted on ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC's (the three songwriting performance rights organizations) websites. All of the songs' writers were listed, so there were no missing data. This complete data set creates a population study of all of the highest-achieving songs and their writers in the country genre from 1990 – 2012.

After compiling the lists of songs and writers in Excel, I created a graph listing the Billboard commercial hits and color-coded it to show which songs on the list were also on the NSAI list of "Songs I Wish I had Written". I compared the difference in the number of commercially successful songs that were recognized by peers and the number of commercially successful songs that were not recognized by the songwriter's peers over the course of 23 years. Then I compared the number of peer recognized songs that were commercially successful was significantly different from the number of peer recognized songs that were not commercially successful. These comparisons were used to adjudicate Hypothesis 1.

Next, I created a graph that lists all of the songwriters who wrote only commercially successful songs, all of the songwriters who wrote only songs recognized by their peers, and all of the songwriters who wrote both commercially successful and peer-recognized songs. This graph was used to test Hypothesis 2 by using a count variable to compare the percentage of songwriters who wrote songs that were commercially successful and songs that were recognized by their peers from 1990-2012. Lastly, I calculated the percentage of songwriters who appeared on each the Billboard and NSAI lists more than once to determine the likelihood of gaining a high level of success only once. This measure was calculated to test Hypothesis 3.

Given my choice to limit the definition of success commercially and among peers to only the most successful songs, this research will provide a conservative estimate of the amount of crossover between commercial and peer status. It is a necessary condition for a song to be at least somewhat commercially popular for peer songwriters to be aware of it, so it follows that all songs that are given attention by a group of writers must be available

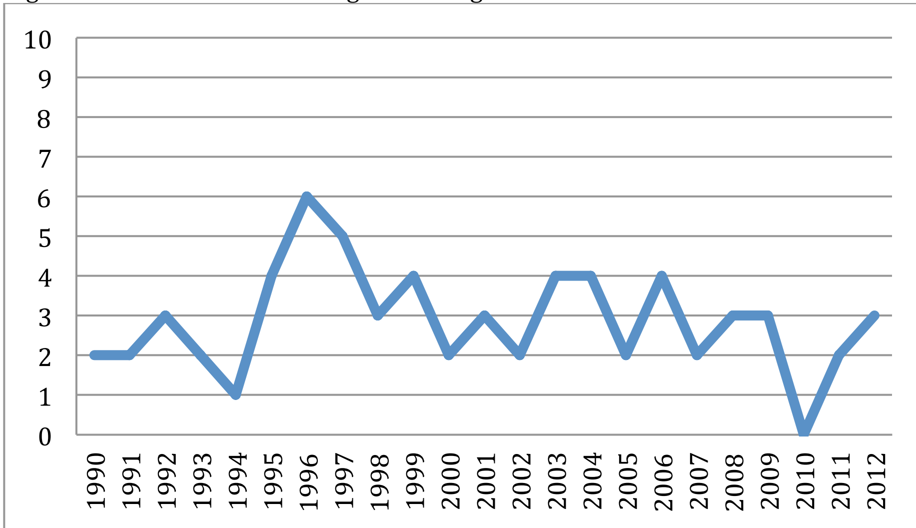
for public consumption at some level. Additionally, the results for a songwriter's sustained level of success will also be conservative. Though NSAI's list of Songs I Wish I had Written only acknowledges a handful of songs annually, Billboard Magazine's metrics and song charts are produced and distributed weekly and can recognize up to 100 songs. Due to the nature of Billboard data, it would be possible to track every top 100 song on a weekly basis and capture virtually all variability in commercially successful songs over the period of study. While this elaborated information on commercial success would be valuable information, the current research is focused on variation among writers who achieve a high level of success either commercially or among his or her peers. Hence, the research questions call for data limited to high-achieving songwriters, and the structure of both the NSAI list of Songs I Wish I had Written as well as the top-charting songs of the Billboard Year End Hot 100 fit the research question without overstating potential findings as it would be difficult to argue that these peer-voted and top-charting songs are not indicative of a high level of success.

RESULTS

My first procedure tested Question 1, "Are the top commercially successful songs the same songs that garner peer recognition?" To test this question, I examined the degree of overlap between songs that gained commercial success and songs that attained peer recognition from 1990-2012. The year with the largest degree of overlap was 1996 when 6 songs overlapped, and the year with the lowest degree of overlap was 2010 when 0 songs overlapped. Figures 1 and 2 show the degree of overlap over time for commercial success and peer recognition. I found that of the 230 commercially successful songs in the sample,

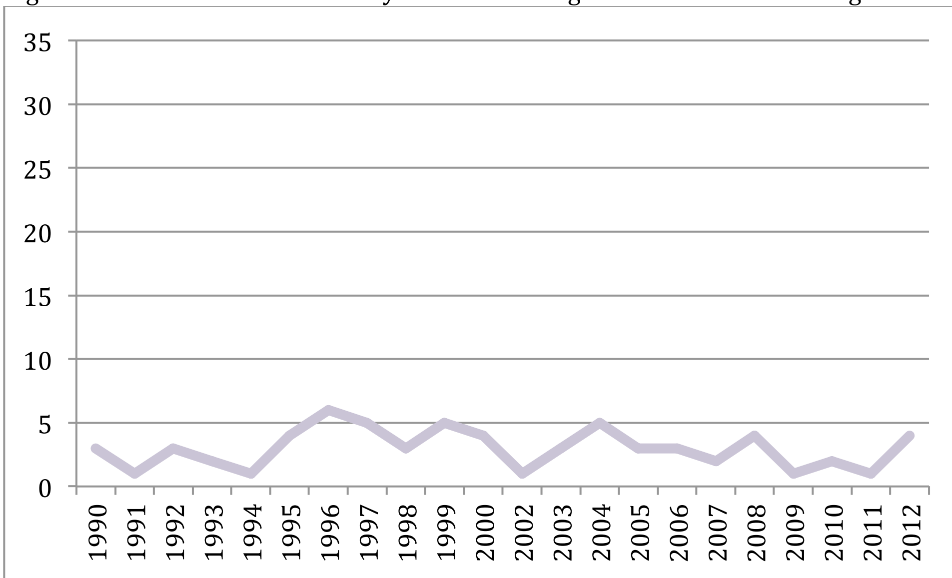
66 were also peer-recognized (28.6%). What is more, of the 341 songs that garnered peer recognition, 66 songs achieved both peer recognition and commercial success (19.3%). Overall, the average number of songs per year that appeared on both lists is 2.87. The results of these tests support Hypothesis 1, that the top commercially successful songs are a different set of songs than those that garner recognition by peer songwriters since in both cases less than 1/3 of the songs were both commercially successful and recognized by peers.

Figure1: Number of Peer Recognized Songs that Gained Commercial Success 1990-2012*



* Y-axis represents the total number of commercially successful songs, 10 per year, drawn from the Billboard Year End Hot 100 chart.

Figure 2: Number of Commercially Successful Songs that Gained Peer Recognition 1990-2012*



*Y-axis represents total number of songs selected for the NSAI "Songs I Wish I had Written" list. The total number of songs on this list varies from 34 in 1990, 20 from 1991-1999, and about 10 from 2000-2012.

My second procedure examined Question 2, "Are the songwriters who write the top commercially successful songs the same writers whose songs garner peer recognition?" To empirically test this question, I examined the degree of overlap of songwriters who write successful commercial songs and peer-recognized songs from 1990-2012. The degree of overlap was used to determine if there was one group of successful writers acquiring both types of status or if there were two separate status hierarchies, one for commercial success and one for peer recognition, which reify a different set of songwriters. As described in Table 1, I found that there was a 33% overlap in the two status hierarchies. This means that only 33% of songwriters during this period were acknowledged both commercially and among their peers. The other 67% of songwriters in this study only achieved either a high level of commercial success or a high level of peer recognition. These results support Hypothesis 2, that the songwriters who write the top commercially successful songs are a different set of writers than those songwriters whose songs garner peer recognition.

Table 1: Combined Attainment of Commercial Status and Peer Acclaim among Nashville Songwriters 1990 – 2012

	Total Writers	Writers who Appear on Both Lists	Percentage of Writers who Appear on Both Lists
Combined Chart	553	184	33%

To examine Question 3, "Does attaining high status, either through commercial success or peer recognition lead songwriters to future success, either commercially or among their peers," I calculated the percentage of songwriters who attained a high level of commercial success more than once and completed the same procedure to determine the percentage of songwriters who attained a high level of peer recognition more than once from 1990 – 2012. The findings for this question are displayed in Table 2. I found that among commercially successful songwriters, 35% attained a high level of commercial success more than once over the 23 years of the study. I also found that among songwriters who were ascribed high status among their peers, 39% were peer-recognized more than once in this period of time. These results lend partial support to Hypothesis 3, that songwriters who have attained high status, either commercially or among their peers, have higher levels of continued peer recognition than commercial success over time.

Table 2: Total Rates for Attainment of Commercial Success and Peer Recognition among Nashville Songwriters 1990 - 2012

	Total Writers	Unique Writers	Percent of Writers who Appear More than Once
Commercial Success	511	331	35%
Peer Recognition	665	407	39%

DISCUSSION

It is clear from past research that many status hierarchies influence the career success of workers in collaborative reputational labor markets. While much of this scholarship focuses on symbolic capital or critical success as a main variable decoupled from economic capital or commercial success (Anheier et al. 1995; Bourdieu 1983; Craig and DuBois 2010; Pinhiero and Dowd 2009), my research shows that peer recognition is also decoupled from commercial success.

The results of the tests examining Hypothesis 1 showed that over time the songs that attain the highest level of commercial success are, for the most part, a different set of songs than those which are recognized by professional songwriters as the best songs of the year. Less than one third of the songs on each list appeared on both lists. Though peer recognition is not the same thing as critical success, this finding is in line with Bourdieu's (1983) cultural fields theory, which would predict that the songs that performed well in the large-scale field of production would be different than those evaluated by critics. In this case, the status order made up of peer assessments of best songs is decoupled from status determined by success in commercial markets.

Hypothesis 2 was supported, and showed that the songwriters who wrote commercially successful songs were a different set of writers than those who wrote songs that were recognized by their peers. The results of this inquiry showed that there is again only about a one third overlap between these two types of writers. That leaves two thirds of writers who only achieved a high degree of success in one of the two status orders that I researched. This finding is also in line with Bourdieu's theory since most of the writers who

are reified in each status order have essentially "specialized" in either commercial success or peer recognition in this time period.

Given that Bourdieu's theory is critiqued for not taking seriously commercial cultural fields, it is somewhat surprising how well the example of country music songwriting fits into the theory. Songs recognized by enough peers to be voted one of the top "Songs I Wish I had Written" have to be at least somewhat commercially successful to be known by other songwriters. Though songwriters in Nashville attend their peers' showcases and writers' nights, it is reasonable to assume that most consume other songwriters' work through the radio and other commercial arenas. There is not enough of an "art for art's sake" mentality for a strong field of restricted production to exist among Nashville songwriters. Despite the lack of a true field of restricted production, songwriters distinguish a different hierarchy of songs than does the commercial consumptive audience.

Lastly, I am interested in the career outcomes that are determined, at least in part, by the status hierarchies created around songwriters and their songs. Post-bureaucratic occupations, like songwriting and other work in cultural production, rely so heavily on reputation as a determinant of who gets work and access to high-quality collaborators that status ascribed by commercial markets and peer recognition may have lasting impacts on workers' career trajectories. The test that examined Hypothesis 3 attempted to begin determining songwriters' career outcomes by examining the percentage of songwriters who attained a high degree of status more than once, either through the commercial market or through recognition by peer songwriters. The percentage of songwriters who had more than one commercially successful song is in line with past research, as it is well established that it is difficult for cultural producers to attain commercial success even if

they have achieved success in the past (Anheier et al. 1995; Menger 1999; Zuckerman 2003). The percentage of songwriters who had more than one instance of peer recognition was higher than the percentage that achieved commercial success more than once. Future research is needed to understand the nuances of this finding as this research does not conclusively support Hypothesis 3.

CONCLUSION

Among Nashville songwriters, the decoupling of commercial success and peer recognition follows the pattern one would expect of commercial success and critical success in other cultural labor markets based on past research. This finding, along with the fact that songwriting is a collaborative, reputational labor market, leads to the conclusion that the status associated with peer recognition in this type of labor market functions much as status based on critical success in labor markets where cultural goods are typically produced by a single person.

Songwriters, as well as workers in other post-bureaucratic employment arrangements, must work their way up through a poorly defined, mostly informal career ladder. The oversupply of aspirants in these types of industries makes it even more difficult for workers to acquire status and continue to be successful. Research in this area is needed to understand how workers who create their own "DIY" careers can make career choices based on the realities of the labor markets within which they work. A logical next step would be to conduct research that contributes to understanding the mechanisms that transpose a worker's status into future career opportunities and successes over time. There is a saying among Nashville songwriters: "You're only as good as your next hit."

Workers understand that past success is not necessarily predictive of continued positive career outcomes, but by demystifying the process through which status is acquired, workers may be more likely to achieve greater occupational success.

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