Nexus Work: Brokerage on Creative Projects

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This study examined how brokers on creative projects integrate the ideas of others. We use the term "nexus work" to refer to brokerage requiring synthesis or integration, rather than just communication or transference of ideas. With an ethnographic investigation of 23 independent music producers in the Nashville country music industry, we examined how producers in the brokerage role fostered the integration of others' contributions throughout four phases of the creative process. We discovered that ambiguity was an inherent part of the collective creative process and identified three types: (1) an ambiguous quality metric (What makes a hit or constitutes success?); (2) ambiguous occupational jurisdictions (Whose claim of expertise entitles them to control the process?); and (3) an ambiguous transformation process (How should the work be done?). We show when each type of ambiguity became acute in the creative process and identify the practices producers used to leverage their brokerage role depending on the type of ambiguity confronted. In doing so, producers moved between two ideal conceptions of brokerage—as strategic actors extracting advantage from their position and as relational experts connecting others to foster creativity and innovation—to foster a collective creative outcome.●

Theoretical conceptions of brokerage vacillate between two conceptions that vary in their understandings of the benefits of brokerage (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005) and thus their implications for creativity. From a structural perspective, brokers who bridge structural holes tend to have better ideas and individually benefit from them (Brass, 1985; Burt, 2004). Because individuals within groups tend to have more homogenous ideas, brokers who bridge different groups gain exposure to a greater variance of ideas and obtain a "vision advantage" (Burt, 2004: 359). People with contacts in many different areas are more like to see bridges between otherwise disparate fields (Burt, 2004: 350) and thus are able to contribute to creative and innovative outcomes (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997; Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Perry-Smith, 2006). The *tertius gaudens* (or third who benefits) approach to brokerage employs a strategy of disunion whereby individuals reap benefits from preserving their unique ties to others and maintaining a separation among parties (Burt, 2000). From Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai's (2005) perspective, this type of brokerage may enhance individual social capital but can be at odds with the creation of communal social capital.

An alternative conception of brokerage focuses on the benefits that accrue to the collective from connections among parties (Kilduff and Tsai, 2003; Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005). Brokerage in this sense focuses on joining previously unconnected parties to facilitate coordination, collaboration, and pursuit of common goals—the *tertius iungens* orientation (Obstfeld, 2005). This type of broker is a nonpartisan "arbiter who balances . . . contradictory claims against one another and eliminates what is incompatible in them" (Simmel, 1950: 146–147). This conception of brokerage typically takes into account relational practices as well as a broker's structural position. Hargadon and Sutton (1997) first broke ground in

this direction by giving equal weight to structure and practice—showing how the design firm IDEO's unique structural position as well as its process of information access, storage, and retrieval helped the firm transfer ideas from one industry to another and produce innovative outcomes.

As both Obstfeld (2005) and Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai (2005) pointed out, while brokers may be successful in getting others to appreciate their good ideas (Burt, 2004), implementing those ideas is another story. In Burt's 2004 study, managers who were more structurally central were more likely to have good ideas than those who were less central, but those ideas were rarely implemented. Dense social networks may be well designed for mobilizing people in the pursuit of shared goals, but sparse networks marked by structural holes face an "action problem" in which it can be difficult to mobilize people toward common ends (e.g., Obstfeld, 2005; Fleming, Mingo, and Chen, 2007). Although brokers benefit from maintaining unique ties, achieving cooperation among those ties can be difficult.

Execution requires collaboration: the hard work is not coming up with good ideas but sustaining the cooperation of others to synthesize and implement them. If creativity is a collective act (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006), then brokers in a collaborative context must not just have a good idea themselves, they must be able to elicit and synthesize the ideas of others. Because our theoretical frameworks have focused more on the generation of ideas than on their integration and implementation, our understanding of this distinction has been limited. With a more comprehensive view of the creative process, Fleming, Mingo, and Chen (2007: 462) discovered that brokerage in the *tertius gaudens* tradition inhibited "mutual ownership and understanding of the new [idea] combination," and, though the idea was more novel, it was less likely to be reused than ideas arising from more cohesive networks. This research suggests that integration work differs from idea generation in critical ways. Yet little research has examined brokers' work practices with respect to integration work (see Hargadon and Sutton, 1997, for an exception). As a result, our conception of brokerage has rested on two ideal conceptions that do not reflect the realities of brokers who must not just transmit ideas but synthesize them. A more dynamic and situated understanding of the creative process is necessary to tease apart seemingly contradictory approaches to brokerage. Our research does exactly that, departing from prior work on brokerage in three respects.

First, extending the work of Hargadon and Sutton (1997) and Obstfeld (2005), in an ethnographic study of Nashville music producers, we focus on the dynamic practice of brokerage as opposed to the structural position, which recent research (Fleming, Mingo, and Chen, 2007) suggests is more critical than previously realized. Second, we examine a specific type of brokerage that involves not just the transfer or generation of ideas but the integration and creative synthesis of ideas, which is an entirely different challenge. In this respect, we contribute to research on creativity, which tends to emphasize idea generation as opposed to the synthesis necessary to

put those ideas in action. Third, we focus on brokers that depend on a collective to achieve a creative outcome (e.g., Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). In this context, brokers cannot achieve benefits from their unique position on their own; they are pursuing collective goals that require the creative talents of others.

BROKERAGE AND CREATIVE WORK

Producers in music, film, theatre, advertising, design, and special events industries perform a critical role. They are uniquely responsible for harnessing the talent and resources necessary to bring a creative project to fruition. In all these cases a few things are true: producers are structurally central to the project (not all parties may be connected to each other, but each is connected to the producer); not all of the parties are from the same organization, occupation, or discipline; and every expert's contribution must be integrated or synthesized to produce a creative outcome. Scholars of cultural production have noted the unique role that producers fill (Peterson and Berger, 1971; Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Faulkner, 1983; Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Baker and Faulkner, 1991), but this literature has not been previously linked to theories of brokerage. To further this link, we draw from scholarship on brokerage, integration work, and creative work.

Brokerage

Scholars examining knowledge and creative work often focus on those in brokering or boundary spanning roles (Fleming and Waguespack, 2007). The structural conception of brokerage emphasizes the unique informational benefits that can accrue to those who are structurally central (Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Burt, 1992; Fernandez and Gould, 1994). The greater the degree to which an individual can uniquely connect non-redundant sources of information and social contacts, the greater the potential information and control advantages that are likely to accrue to that individual (Burt, 1992) and the more social capital individuals can accrue (Burt, 2000), which can translate into real career benefits (Burt, 2004).

In contrast, a relational or practice conception of brokerage focuses on the work brokers engage in when connecting disparate people, knowledge, or ideas (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997; Baker and Obstfeld, 1999; Obstfeld, 2005). Unlike structural conceptions of brokerage, from a practice perspective, brokers need not garner distrust from those they connect, because brokers facilitate "projects that represent combinations of people, ideas, and resources" (Obstfeld, 2005: 103). While the structural conception of brokerage focuses on the advantages that can accrue from a broker's unique access to information and social contacts, the practice perspective of brokerage emphasizes how that unique information can be put to creative use.

From a structural perspective, brokers are conduits for access to information and thus can directly obtain information, power, and control benefits from their individual use of that information. From a practice perspective, brokers must integrate different ideas, innovations, and contributions from others and synthesize them into a coherent whole to obtain

both individual and mutual benefit. Although both approaches invoke the use of power, a critical distinction between them is that brokers on collaborative projects cannot benefit from their position on their own; integration work with others is required. To reconcile these disparate conceptions of brokerage, Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai (2005: 367) suggested that researchers examine when "the individual pursuit of network advantage detracts from or contributes to the emergence of public [collective] goods." Though individual and collective advantage can coalesce, little research has explored how this tension is managed (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005). We take on this challenge by examining how brokers manage integration work, when the cooperation of others is crucial.

Integration Work

Integration work involves the selection, rejection, and synthesis of disparate ideas and contributions into a coherent whole. Simonton's (1999) model of creativity suggests that while variation contributes to an idea's novelty, the process of selection or synthesis contributes to an idea's usefulness. Yet most research on creativity emphasizes the former over the latter. Brokers of collective outcomes do not just transfer, share, or broker ideas, they must incorporate them into a creative product, regardless of whether it is a musical, a building, or a recording. To move beyond generating creative ideas to refining and implementing them is an inherently relational act that requires the cooperation of many.

From a macro-theoretical perspective, integration is the final frontier of brokerage. Burt (2004: 355) identified four levels of brokerage: (1) making parties on either side of the structural hole aware of the other, (2) transferring knowledge from one group to another, (3) drawing analogies from one group to another, and (4) synthesizing ideas from multiple sources. The fourth level of brokerage is difficult to achieve for several reasons. First, field-based studies show that knowledge transfer is often more complex than is appreciated and that acts of translation are necessary to enable different specialists to understand, absorb, and put ideas from others into practice (Bechky, 2003a, 2003b; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). To transfer knowledge so that it can be integrated, individuals must be able to access expertise in order to build on the work of others (Murray and O'Mahony, 2007).

Furthermore, Carlile (2004) argued that while transferring knowledge is a simple information-processing act, and interpreting knowledge requires translation, the actual transformation of inputs is yet a more complex process because the actors involved may not share the same interests. True integration of ideas triggers their modification to achieve interdependence and synthesis (Carlile and Rebentisch, 2003). Thus another reason the final frontier of brokerage is difficult is because synthesis implies some degree of loss, which risks the disenfranchisement of those needed to bring a creative project to fruition. Achieving synthesis among competing ideas is difficult because not everyone's ideas will be accepted into the final product and yet the engagement of those needed to achieve the final product is necessary.

The task of integration is thus not just an information-processing task but a relational one that involves the negotiation of conflicting interests. Uzzi and Spiro (2005: 458) described the process of creating a Broadway musical as involving "full days of collaborative brainstorming, the sharing of ideas, joint problem-solving, difficult editing as well as flashpoints of celebration and commiseration." Empirical studies of creative projects suggest that the last frontier of brokerage (integration work), though difficult, is an important one that our extant theories of brokerage stop short of explaining. Thus we turn to theories of collective creative work to provide more insight.

Creative Work

Creativity has been defined as the generation of novel and appropriate (or useful) ideas, processes, or solutions (Amabile, 1983; Shalley, 1991; Amabile et al., 1996; Oldham and Cummings, 1996). Increasingly, scholars recognize that creativity is not the provenance of the "creative few" producing absolute novelty but can include the introduction of something familiar from one area to new contexts (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997) and often requires collaboration (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; George, 2008). When implementing a creative idea requires the cooperation of others, it becomes a social process (King, 1990). On projects, creative ideas emerge through interactions and relational processes (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005). For example, Sutton and Hargadon (1996) showed that successful brainstorming depended on relational processes that provided a supportive climate for experimentation (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Amabile et al., 2005).

Scholars have shown that a host of contextual concerns can affect individual creativity, including psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), job design (Elsbach and Hargadon, 2006), affect (Amabile et al., 2005); organizational and supervisory encouragement (Amabile et al., 1996), leadership (Zhou and Shalley, 2003; Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham, 2004), and social networks (Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Perry-Smith, 2006). But few studies have examined the collective creative process in context (George, 2008). In their field study, Hargadon and Bechky (2006) identified four interactions that inspired collective creativity: help seeking, help giving, reflective reframing, and reinforcing. Yet an understanding of how such creative groups manage the paradox of generating new ideas while synthesizing and selecting among them—as well as manage the dissent that can emerge—is missing. Research on creative industries suggests that brokers can be critical to this process.

Research on cultural production industries such as music, film, television, and theatre (e.g., Hirsch, 1972; Becker, 1974, 1982; Faulkner, 1983; Jones, 1996; Peterson, 1997; Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie, 2000; Lampel, Shamsie, and Lant, 2006) suggests that brokers play an important role in bringing experts together through temporary projects or "latent organizations" to produce creative works (Peterson and Berger, 1971; Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie, 2000;

Starkey, Barnatt, and Tempest, 2000; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; Lampel, 2006). For these brokers, managing ambiguity is a central concern (Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie, 2000). Cultural goods face competing market and aesthetic perspectives (Becker, 1951; Faulkner, 1983) that can challenge their authenticity (Peterson, 1997; Glynn and Lounsbury, 2005; Jones, Anand, and Alvarez, 2005). Because cultural projects often face multiple interpretations as to what is "good," managing a cultural project requires engaging with "systems to support and market cultural products" while preventing those systems from suppressing individual inspiration and creativity (Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie, 2000: 263).

Unlike uncertainty, ambiguity is not resolved by more information, as it may not be clear what questions to ask or what problems to solve (Weick, 1995). "The problem in ambiguity is not that the real world is imperfectly understood and that more information will remedy that. The problem is that information may not resolve misunderstandings" (Weick, 1995: 92). Weick (1995: 91, 134) defined ambiguity as "an on-going stream that supports several different meanings at the same time," when "multiple . . . explanations are plausible." Although ambiguous situations can offer the opportunity for invention and improvisation, individuals facing such situations eventually need to narrow their options for action to coordinate their activities (Weick, 1995, 1998). To achieve synthesis, brokers on creative projects must help contributors manage ambiguity, but how this affects their brokerage approach remains an open question.

Situated field studies of work practices are likely to produce the most insightful grounded theories as to how brokerage on collaborative projects unfolds. A practice-oriented approach focuses on work activity (Orr, 1996) and, more specifically, the repertoire of actions that reflect people's understandings of "how to get things done" in complex settings (Orlikowski, 2002: 249). The practice approach is also uniquely suited for studying brokerage work because it emphasizes "the way a task, as it unfolds over time, looks to someone at work on it, while many of the options and dilemmas remain unresolved" (Brown and Duguid, 1991: 41).

George (2008: 464) suggested that researchers examine how individuals combine their "expertise and knowledge in new ways to creatively solve a problem or come up with a new idea for a product." To do so requires considering the "mechanisms by which organizations balance competing pressures for collective learning, predictability, and control with pressures for creative responses to new problems and opportunities" (George, 2008: 467). Brokers responsible for bringing creative projects to fruition face exactly this tension. The question is how they utilize their brokerage role to manage this tension. If producers pursue a *tertius gaudens* approach, how do they cultivate cooperation and shared interests across the structural hole they occupy? If producers pursue a *tertius iungens* approach, how do they retain their power and exert influence? By examining how brokers guide the integration of ideas on creative projects, we develop a process model of how both approaches are used and interwoven throughout the creative process.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Setting

The Nashville country music industry is well suited to studying creative brokerage. First, country music projects are typically managed by independent country music producers who are not only at the center of the organizing process but who also integrate contributions from many types of experts (songwriters, publishers, musicians, artists, engineers, and label personnel) to form a coherent creative effort. Second, projects regularly emerge in the country music industry, affording the opportunity to study the work practices of multiple producers working on a variety of projects within a short time. Third, because country music is primarily produced in Nashville, all parties to a project are co-located in a common locale, enabling ethnographic study.

Data Collection

From the spring of 2003 to the spring of 2006, the first author conducted an ethnographic field study of producers in the Nashville country music industry. Data collection included interviews with producers and other contributors to the production process, observations, and participant observation. All three data sources enabled triangulation of our understanding the work involved in brokering, which we refer to as nexus work.

Interviews. The first author conducted multiple interviews with 42 people, totaling 85 interviews overall. Interviews ranged from a single hour-long interview to as many as eight multiple-hour interviews over the period of study. Twenty-three people were independent country music producers. Independent producers work for themselves—their ability to acquire a record label's financial, marketing, and distribution support depends on their ability to pitch ideas and bring together all of the elements necessary to create a unique music project.

The remaining interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the music production process, including three performers/artists, six engineers, one label staff member, three musicians, an independent production assistant, an independent artist and repertoire (A&R) song screener, and four songwriters. By studying all the roles involved in music production, we developed an understanding of brokerage work informed by multiple perspectives. We used a semi-structured interview approach that employed both broad and general questions (Spradley, 1979) and more specific questions that probed how participants approached decisions and interactions with others involved in music production. We were not able to explore the contractual and financial elements of producers' deals with record labels, as it would have inhibited the access we were granted.

Observations. Observations helped illuminate the taken-for-granted and unintended aspects of nexus work that producers might not be able or willing to articulate in interviews. The first author conducted over 100 hours of observation, observing seven producers (identified from interviews) in a range of interactions with resource gatekeepers, such as song publishers and songwriters, and the myriad contributors in the recording studio, including artists, freelance musicians,

recording engineers, label personnel, and managers. Over lunch, breaks, and during late night sessions, the first author observed and listened to contributors discuss their work and their interactions with others germane to the project. After these observations, the first author debriefed producers to clarify the meaning of statements and interactions and ended each day by typing up her field notes.

Participant observation. The first author also co-produced a single song: working with a co-producer to write and select from a portfolio of songs to be recorded and co-managing the three-hour recording session with an engineer, drummer, lead guitarist, pianist, and bass guitar player. The first author gained firsthand experience in managing the challenges involved in nexus work, an experience made more complicated by an audience of five musicians waiting to record their own demo who offered their own suggestions on her creative effort. This experience was used to validate the internal validity of the process model developed and its fit with the real world (Adler and Adler, 1987).

Analytic Approach

Because research on how brokers manage the collective creative process is limited, an inductive approach to developing process theory was warranted (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Process theories concern how things evolve over time and why they evolve in a particular way, as opposed to variance theories, which try to explain how changes in antecedents affect consequences (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; Langley, 1999). Our analytic approach followed an iterative process of developing grounded themes and working hypotheses about nexus work and testing these themes and hypotheses in subsequent data collection and analysis. Data analysis included four phases: (1) mapping the activities of the music production process, (2) developing and analyzing nexus work practices used at different points in the process, (3) linking the practices used to specific types of ambiguity and coding the nature of brokerage employed, and (4) checking the validity of the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Phase 1. Mapping the music production process. Because we were interested in producers' accounts of what they did when managing a creative project, in the first phase of analysis, the first author wrote vignettes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) of each producer's case and producers' accounts of the practices used throughout their projects. From these vignettes, we developed a process map of music production—a list of activities involved in the creative process (e.g., Langley, 1999)—consolidated into four phases: (1) resource gathering, (2) defining project boundaries, (3) creative production, and (4) final synthesis. These phases were chosen because there was clear "continuity in the activities within each period and . . . certain discontinuities at [their] frontiers" (Langley and Truax, 1994: 703). For example, once a pool of songs had been gathered, the project could move to the boundary definition stage. Once the songs to be produced were selected, the project could move to the creative production stage, in which songs were recorded. The final synthesis phase, in which songs were edited, mixed, and selected for

commercial release, could only begin after songs were recorded. In each stage, we highlighted the important decision points and the contributors involved. This process map, which we reviewed with our informants, helped explain who was involved in music production and at what points in time, what each party had at stake, and how earlier decisions and actions affected subsequent decisions and interactions.

Phase 2: Identifying and comparing practices. In the second phase of analysis, we systematically identified, defined, and compared the work practices used by producers. We closely examined the vignettes, existing interview transcripts, and observation field notes to identify the practices used by producers in the course of their work. We then began an iterative process of refining the practices to a core group most commonly used by the producers in our sample. We developed definitions for each practice and coded all of the transcripts using the qualitative software, ATLAS.ti, going through the data to see if the practices were confirmed by further data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). By alternating between coding and validating our codes, our codes reached a level of stability at which they were mutually exclusive and comprehensive. For example, when producers deliberately kept a party out of a creative decision, we coded that practice as bracketing. When producers avoided making decisions that could lead to conflict, we coded that practice as deferring decisions.

In developing the set of nexus work practices, we considered how many of the 23 producers used each practice and the salience of the practice to managing collective creativity. We did not focus on practices that were used infrequently or by a minority of our sample. Although not every producer used every practice, every producer used at least one of the practices from the repertoire we identified in a particular project phase. Definitions, strength of evidence, and the prevalence of use for each practice are provided in table 1. We introduce the practices in the table and text according to the phase in which they were predominantly used; no new practices were introduced in phase 4, final synthesis. Though we have very robust frequencies for the core set of practices reported, it is important to note that these data do not mean that practices were executed routinely. Producers varied in how they implemented these practices according to the situation.

Phase 3: Ambiguity, brokerage, and nexus work. We next developed a practice matrix, which showed the prevalence of practices used across producers and compared when producers used specific work practices during a project, for what purpose, and the nature of brokerage triggered. This matrix was then condensed into the tables presented in this paper. First, we identified three different types of ambiguity (ambiguity over quality, occupational jurisdiction, and the transformation process) and when each type emerged. Then we examined the specific practices that producers used in light of the particular type of ambiguity present at the time and evaluated how use of these practices affected the creative process. As a final step, we assessed whether these actions were aligned with the *tertius iungens* or the *tertius gaudens* approach to brokerage.

Table 1

Nexus Work Practices: Definitions and Strength of Evidence by Project Phase

Nexus work practice	Definition	Example*	Type of evidence[†]	% Using practice	% Using 1+ practice
		Phase 1: Resource gathering			
Fostering a generative network	Reinforce relations with resource gatekeepers to enhance access to raw material.	"I have to be open to people who don't know me at all, and I take a few meetings with those people . . . and get a sense of what they're about."	PI, OI, O	57%	91%
Building legitimacy for the project	Forge connections among unconnected actors to generate credibility for the artist/project.	"People forget. You want to be at the top of people's minds when new songs are brought in. We put out an all points call to writers, publishers to meet at my office. The [artist] spoke for a few minutes; she looked fabulous. Everyone got to see that. We played five or six songs that we liked. That's one way of reminding people what a great artist she is."	PI, OI, O	44%	
Creating slack	Create a resource buffer to draw from due to vagaries of creative process in case problems arise.	"I'll usually go high, since it's much easier than having to go back and ask for more money. You don't want to be in the position of saying, 'Wow, I really underestimated this.'"	PI, OI	70%	
		Phase 2: Defining project boundaries			
Bracketing and checking in	Temporarily exclude certain parties from decisions while keeping them apprised of progress.	"Most record company guys do not understand the recording process whatsoever. . . . So I try to keep them uninvolved and I'll play 'em stuff after I have it recorded."	PI, OI, O	70%	100%
Introducing analogies	Refer to other songs, musicians, or artists to convey desired aesthetic.	Producer: "It's a mixture of the Everly brothers, Roy Orbison, and Sade." Drummer: "Isn't that Chardonnay?" "Let's go with the Beatles lick in the intro."	PI, O, O	100%	
Deferring decisions	Defer decisions to a later point, without excluding others from the process.	"If an artist brings in a song that I don't love, I say, 'I like it, and I know why you like it. Let's leave it on the pile, but let's keep looking until we find something we both like.'"	PI, OI, O	70%	
		Phase 3: Creative production			
Setting the stage	Create positive energy and working environment.	"Your role as producer is to make everyone happy, so they're creative, so you can get things that you want. So when everyone's getting there, we're all hugs and kisses, and catching up."	PI, OI, O	91%	100%
Affirming direction	Publicly recognizing and affirming individual contributions.	"If they try and it sounded cool I'm like, 'Cool—now add this to it.' So I'm more of a positive person. I'm always about, 'Man, I love what you do. I'd like it even better if we could just tweak this.'"	PI, OI, O	74%	

(*continued*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Nexus Work Practices: Definitions and Strength of Evidence by Project Phase

Nexus work practice	Definition	Example*	Type of evidence[†]	% Using practice	% Using 1+ practice
		Phase 3: Creative production			
Crafting role boundaries	Define contributors' role in the creative process.	"The A&R guy wanted input on what the band was doing. I said, 'Why would we even want to mess this up? These guys have a crowd of people following them wherever they go. I think they're on to something. Let's not mess it up.'"	PI, OI, O	65%	
Absorbing challenges to expertise	Reframe or do not pass along one contributor's challenge to another's expertise.	"I said, 'Look it's the artist's ideas—let's protect our phony-baloney jobs!' He's like, 'OK.' And laughed and he realized, 'Yeah, he's right.' It was a way to defuse the moment."	PI, OI, O	52%	

*Quotations are from producers unless otherwise noted.
[†]PI = Producer interview; OI = Other interview; O = Observation.

If the practices used were consistent with the six factors associated with the *tertius iungens* orientation as identified by Obstfeld (2005), they were coded as such. For example, Obstfeld's six-factor assessment of Simmel's (1950) initial theoretical conception included such measures as "I introduce people to each other who might have a common strategic work interest"; "I will try to describe an issue in a way that will appeal to a diverse set of interests"; and "I point out common ground shared by people who have different perspectives on an issue." If the practices used actively kept individuals apart or reinforced the unique structural position of the broker (e.g., Burt, 1992), they were coded as consistent with the *tertius gaudens* approach. As a result of this micro-level coding, we produced a dynamic conception of brokerage, pinpointing when producers were more likely to use one type of brokerage over another and how this related to the type of ambiguity present in the creative process.

Phase 4: Internal validity. To establish the internal validity of the theory, in the final phase of analysis, the first author submitted conclusions to three producers for their review. Producers agreed with the case depictions, including the nature of the ambiguities and challenges they faced, and expressed appreciation for having "labels" for their everyday activities and a framework for thinking about the dynamics of their work. To test the validity of our process model, we also revisited the first author's participant observation and found that it fit with our findings.

FINDINGS: NEXUS WORK IN PRACTICE

Country music projects involved the production of a collection of songs, ranging from a three-song demo project to a ten-to-fifteen-song album. The producer was at the nexus of the creative process, brokering relationships among a diverse set of industry experts—artists, record label personnel, musicians, engineers, and artist managers. To bring a creative project to fruition, producers moved through four

phases: (1) resource gathering, (2) defining project boundaries, (3) creative production, and (4) final synthesis. We present these phases in linear sequential order, but if producers did not achieve the desired resources or sound, they might cycle through these phases more than once, for example, returning to the song-selection process if they were not happy with their studio recordings. Throughout these phases, producers strove to cultivate ideas from everyone involved to build generative possibilities and then select and reject options from the possibility set. The producer's challenge was to integrate the creative options to be pursued while ensuring parties' continued engagement in the project.

In navigating this tension, we found that producers regularly encountered three types of ambiguity, which we introduce according to the project phase in which they first became salient. The first type of ambiguity pertained to what the creative process would produce, given competing or ambiguous definitions of the quality of creative output. The second type of ambiguity pertained to who could legitimately control the creative process, given unclear or overlapping occupational jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003a). The third type of ambiguity pertained to how the creative work was to be achieved, given that creative production cannot be routinized (e.g., Amabile, 1996). As the creative process unfolded, producers exercised their brokerage power to respond to these ambiguities and move the project forward. Figure 1 graphs the participants and ambiguities in each phase of the project that must be managed.

By examining the creative process over time, we identified when producers acted as *tertius iungens*, bringing certain people together, and when they acted as *tertius gaudens*, keeping certain people apart. Producers navigated between *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches, depending on the stage of the process, the ambiguity present, and the parties involved. Both approaches drew on brokers' positional power but were employed to encourage collective creativity. Producers addressed the action problem of creative brokerage in ways that suggest that previous distinctions between the two conceptions of brokerage may be based on a limited view of the creative process. Table 2 summarizes the practices producers used to leverage their brokerage role depending on the ambiguity encountered.

Phase 1: Resource Gathering

As shown in figure 1, at its inception, the project existed primarily as a kernel of an idea and a relationship, albeit sometimes weak, between the producer and the artist, the artist's manager, and potentially the record label, if one was involved. In the resource gathering phase, producers attempted to garner two primary resources: (1) a unique portfolio of songs to record (from songwriters and song publishers) and (2) funding, distribution, and/or marketing support (from record labels). As they attempted to garner songs and money for their projects, producers primarily focused on managing ambiguity around quality, or what would make a hit for a particular artist.

Because the criterion for selecting "good" songs was ambiguous, producers cast widely across the songwriting network
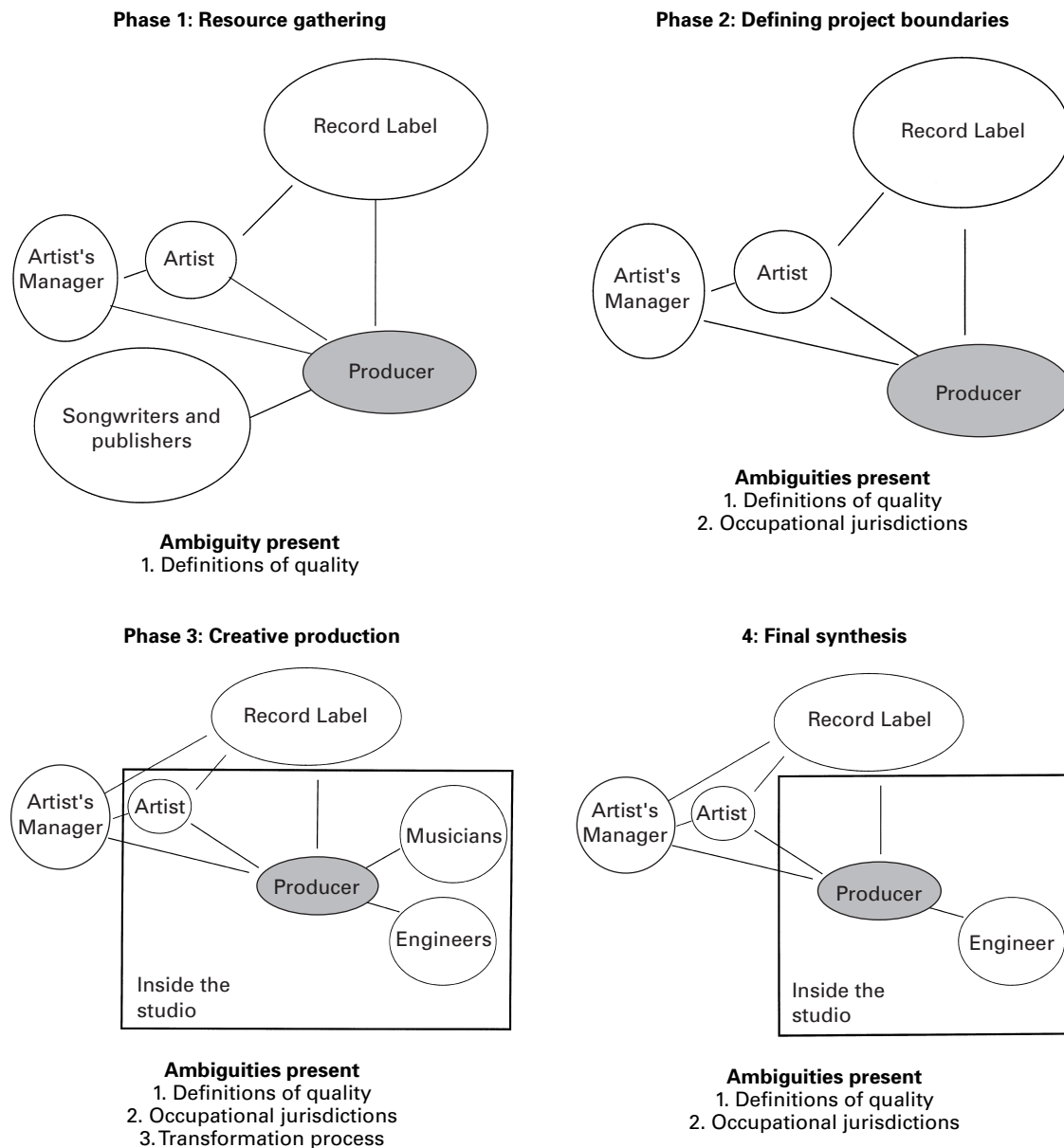
Table 2

Creative Brokerage and Nexus Work by Project Phase*

	Phase 1: Resource gathering	Phase 2: Defining project boundaries	Phase 3: Creative production	Phase 4: Final synthesis
Key challenge in phase	Assembling a set of songs and building the perception that the artist will be commercially successful.	Winnowing down set of songs to be recorded without disenfranchising parties needed for project.	Creating an environment where individuals can make extraordinary contributions while representing all interests under time and budget constraints.	Synthesizing, developing and harvesting creative contributions into coherent final product with commercial potential.
Result that triggers next phase	Song portfolio and label backing	Loose agreement on set of songs that are worth recording	Set of recorded tracks	Label and artist approval
Types of ambiguity present				
	1. Definitions of quality	1. Definitions of quality 2. Occupational jurisdictions	1. Definitions of quality 2. Occupational jurisdictions 3. Transformation process	1. Definitions of quality 2. Occupational jurisdictions
Nexus work practices				
	Fostering a generative network (TI) **Building legitimacy (TI)** Creating slack (TG)	Creating slack (TG) **Bracketing & checking in (TG)** **Introducing analogies (TI)** **Deferring decisions (TI)**	Creating slack (TG) Bracketing & checking in (TG) Introducing analogies (TI) Deferring decisions (TI) **Setting the stage (TI)** **Affirming direction (TI)** **Crafting role boundaries (TG)** **Absorbing challenges (TG)**	Bracketing & checking in (TG) Crafting role boundaries (TG) Introducing analogies (TI)
Effect on ambiguity				
Definition of quality	TI practices reduce ambiguity around commercial viability of the artist.	TI practices build shared understanding of desired project sound and maintain creative options.	TI practices build shared understanding of desired project sound and maintain creative options.	TI practices build shared understanding of desired project sound.
Occupational jurisdiction		TG practices reduce ambiguity in occupational jurisdictions.	TG practices reduce ambiguity in occupational jurisdictions.	TG practices reduce ambiguity in occupational jurisdictions.
Transformation process	TG practice of creating slack is used proactively to build creative capacity for the creative production phase.		Ambiguity in the transformation process cannot be reduced; TI&TG practices build creative capacity.	

* Practices that are newly introduced in that phase are in bold. TI = nexus work practices used consistent with the *tertius iungens* approach, and TG = nexus work practices used consistent with the *tertius gaudens* approach.

for potential songs. Producers sought a large repertoire of songs that were sufficiently consistent to support a coherent artist identity, while differentiating the artist enough to create an engaging commercial product. Producers like Sarah worked with artists to consider market implications:

[The artist] might be looking at it in terms of . . . what song they like to sing the most, but I'm looking at it as more of a business

Figure 1. Participants and ambiguities by project phase.

Phase 1: Resource gathering

Record Label

Artist's Manager

Artist

Producer

Songwriters and publishers

Ambiguity present
1. Definitions of quality

Phase 2: Defining project boundaries

Record Label

Artist's Manager

Artist

Producer

Ambiguities present
1. Definitions of quality
2. Occupational jurisdictions

Phase 3: Creative production

Record Label

Artist's Manager

Artist

Musicians

Producer

Engineers

Inside the studio

Ambiguities present
1. Definitions of quality
2. Occupational jurisdictions
3. Transformation process

4: Final synthesis

Record Label

Artist's Manager

Artist

Producer

Engineer

Inside the studio

Ambiguities present
1. Definitions of quality
2. Occupational jurisdictions

proposition. What will the market bear? What will the label get the most excited about? If the label already has three people on their roster who have these kinds of singles out right now, they aren't going to be as interested. What they don't have is someone who did a ballad like you just did.

Producers explicitly considered how all parties to the process would react to creative decisions, in this case introducing the record label's market criteria to the artist. Ideally, the song repertoire would not only highlight the artist's unique performance strengths but also have the potential to be released as hit singles.

In this competitive domain, members of the songwriting community were often reluctant to offer what they perceived

to be their best songs to unproven artists. Because song publishers and writers maintained differing perceptions of an artist's quality, it was often challenging to secure songs for any but "chart topping" acts. Ambiguity about quality pertained not only to what songs could be acquired but also to whether the artist could secure record label support. In order for a music label to be interested in investing in an artist, it needed some assurance of the artist's commercial viability. In response to these challenges, producers (1) fostered a generative network, (2) built legitimacy, and (3) created slack, striving to reduce ambiguity about the project's quality and gather the resources needed to move forward.

Fostering a generative network. Because producers never knew which songs would ultimately make a great match with the label's needs and the artist's voice and translate into market success, they repeatedly drew from pools of songs over the course of their projects. As they evaluated the ideas submitted by others, producers strove to keep these supply networks generative so that they could return to them at a later point if need be. Producers went to great lengths to foster a generative network with label personnel, song publishers, songwriters, and musicians to ensure an open pipeline of raw inputs to their projects. For example, if producers decided not to use a particular song, they contacted the writer to let him or her know exactly why the producer, label, or the artist did not choose that song for the project. As Hank explained, "So I need to call the [songwriters and publishers] back personally. Say, 'I played it for her [the artist], but it didn't ring her bell. Keep them coming.' I have to. It's the relationship." Even if he turned a song down, Hank maintained his network of song suppliers, stroking their egos and asking them to continue sending him new songs. The flood of songs passing through any producer's office made this an overwhelming task—Hank had towering stacks of compact discs laying around his office. Although fostering a generative network was time consuming, Hank could not afford not to do it, adding, "I have to go through thousands of junk. And I have to write nice things to people, when maybe I don't feel like it." Hank feared that if he did not do this, he could be cut off from the future supply of "good" songs. Because producers faced multiple interpretations of a song's quality and its fit with a particular artist or project, they were never sure what songs they might need. By following up with songwriters and publishers, Hank (1) demonstrated respect for songwriters and publishers, allowing them to submit their songs elsewhere, (2) provided songwriters with more information about the producer and the artist's preferences, and (3) maintained cordial relations to foster an on-going pipeline of songs. All three factors helped producers maintain a generative network of songs throughout the project.

Building legitimacy. Producers strove to establish legitimacy for their artists in the eyes of publishers, songwriters, and labels in order to acquire the best possible resources for the project. Producers took very specific actions in the *tertius iungens* tradition to bring parties together under conditions heavily orchestrated to be favorable to their project. This was especially the case for producers working with artists who did not have a proven track record. Sarah, a producer who

worked with artists who were new to Nashville and seeking label deals, described how she helped build legitimacy for her artists so they could convince song publishers to give her their best material:

When I am looking for songs for an artist, I will call on my publishing friends and set up meetings to listen for songs. If I think a pub is not giving me exactly what I want that they have in their catalog, then I'll arrange a sit down meeting with the artist and the publisher and my-self. If they can see the personality, get to know the artist as a person, they might be more inclined to give me their good songs. . . .

Sarah orchestrated such meetings to generate credibility for her artist and convince songwriters and publishers to give up their best material. When bringing previously unconnected actors together, producers like Sarah carefully shaped others' perceptions of the artist's quality by manipulating how and when these introductions took place.

Hank went to even greater lengths to attract resources for his under-the-radar artist. To obtain a major-label deal that later proved to be a great commercial success, Hank worked behind the scenes to strategically bring together several label heads at a showcase concert for his artist. He used his power as a broker to close the structural hole between the artist and two labels.

I got the showcase moved to a larger club. I got the head of the [Century] record label and the head of A&R and another label [Fan-tasy Records] to the showcase. And they [the band] were smart enough to bring a truckload of fans to plant in the crowd. So when they hit the stage the place went unglued. And the [Century] record label people are going, "What the hell is this?" And I'm just chuck-ling to myself, "This is amazing." The head of A&R, he said to me, "Did they write that song?" And about two songs later, "Did they write that one too?" Then he looked back at [Fantasy label head who was also present].

Changing the venue was only part of Hank's plan. Inviting two label heads to the same concert created competition. Hank not only reduced ambiguity as to how others would react to this artist and thus established the artist's commercial potential, he also set up a market for his artist's talent that he then exploited to close the deal. As he explained, "So then I went back and talked with them [Fantasy] a bit. I could see they were digging it. . . . They said, 'Who else knows about this?' 'Well,' I said '[Century] is here.' He [Fantasy Records] said, 'I want to sign them tonight.' "

Creating slack. When garnering resources for a project, producers also created slack (e.g., Cyert and March, 1956) in their budgets and in their song repertoire to enable them to respond to any contingencies that might undermine a label's perception of a project's quality. Because only producers alone had intimate knowledge of the array of resources they would draw from, they were able to create slack when estimating project costs. Additional resources enabled producers to build creative capacity, manage the unexpected, and preserve their ability to maintain a positive narrative about the project regardless of the circumstances. For example, producers were often faced with big-name stars that took

their time to "get in the mood" or new artists needing additional studio time. Bart described how he padded his budget when working with a star artist known for wasting musicians' and studio time: "He's gonna be two hours late. Then he's gonna screw around for two or three hours when he gets there. That throws your budget out the window . . . there is gonna be six hours where everybody's getting paid, but no one's doing any work. You have to wait . . . 'til he's in the mood to sing."

A little slack enabled producers to accommodate the vagaries of human performance (by artists, musicians, and engineers), as described by a seasoned star producer:

You want to be in a situation where, "I over-budgeted this thing by a third. They're a great artist, the [song] selecting went well, they got in and out of the studio in record time." Those are the stories that we want to tell. Not that "We're struggling with the vocals, we've had a cold, we've had to dump all the vocals we've got, we're starting over and we're flying to Key West next week to do vocals to dry this artist out since they've had a cold for six weeks."

Producers padded their budgets to avoid having to go back to the label and ask for more money, which could invite additional scrutiny from label personnel who might then seek more control over the project. By proactively creating slack while garnering resources, producers forged the opportunity to exercise their brokerage role during later phases of the creative process.

As summarized in table 2, in the resource gathering stage, producers focused on acquiring resources to support the project in the face of multiple conceptions of the artist's quality, of songs, and of the appropriate match between these two elements. In the spirit of *tertius iungens*, producers fostered a generative network that enabled them to cast widely for songs, ensure an on-going pipeline, and reduce ambiguity as to what their projects were trying to achieve. They leveraged their brokerage position by strategically bringing together previously unconnected parties to reduce ambiguity over the quality of the artist and establish legitimacy in the eyes of music labels, songwriters, and publishers. At the same time, producers used their brokerage position in the *tertius gaudens* tradition to create slack for the project, anticipating potential challenges that could arise during subsequent phases without necessarily making all parties privy to that information. Once financial backing for the project was secured and a pool of songs was available to select from, the project moved to the next phase, defining the project's boundary, where producers winnowed among the songs available to decide what type of sound would be produced and selected the musicians and engineers who would contribute to the project.

Phase 2: Defining Project Boundaries

Whereas the creativity literature tends to assume that the resources necessary to pursue a project and the boundaries of a project (in terms of scope, purpose, and participants) are a given, we found that when producing a creative work, producers were actively engaged in defining these boundaries.

While the first phase focused on accumulating resources, in the second phase, producers interacted with record label personnel, artists, and their managers to select songs and musicians for the project. Producers reviewed up to 2,000 to 3,000 songs to determine which were best suited for a particular artist and had the potential to be successful singles or hits. During the boundary definition process, producers needed to reduce the number of songs to be produced to a range of 15–30 songs before heading into the studio and the creative production phase. Because studio time was expensive, it was important to winnow the song list to a manageable number.

As shown in figure 1, during the boundary definition phase, producers encountered two forms of ambiguity. They not only lacked clear criteria for determining what could make a hit, they also faced ambiguity over who had the right to make decisions about which songs to produce. Producers faced ambiguous occupational jurisdictions, in the form of multiple claims to expertise from the artist, the artist manger, the label, and even songwriters. Whose opinion should prevail? Frank detailed the tensions arising from this ambiguity:

The label wanted one thing; the artist another. . . . So I found myself acting as the referee. . . . It's tricky, if I butt heads with the artist, I get fired. If I don't butt heads with the artist, the label fires me. I was up a creek. I also have allegiance to me, where I don't believe this is a good song for [the artist] to play. That's the hardest part, as producer, you're hired to have a strong musical opinion and with three points of view, none of them lining up . . . I didn't know what to do.

Producers could not be perceived as overidentifying with any one party, yet they had to make sure all interests were considered in decision making. With no clear-cut criteria to ascertain quality and no one with the predetermined right, knowledge, or acumen to select songs, defining the project's boundaries required deft integration of multiple perspectives.

Choosing songs and musicians inevitably involved rejecting some experts' choices. This was especially difficult when artists wrote their own songs or label personnel tried to promote songs in which they had a financial interest. As Travis described it, "[The artist] wanted two songs out of five. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in my life. . . . They'll say, 'Every song I wrote is better than [that other] song.' That's because you wrote it." As a songwriter, the artist had a financial stake in these decisions—songwriters received "mechanical" royalties for songs included on the album and "performance" royalties for songs played on the radio, in bars, in movies, and online. In the face of competing claims to songwriting expertise, producers strove to integrate divergent perspectives, but there was no one way in which song selection happened. As Garrett said, "Even this last record, there was a song the label head wanted [the artist] to cut, and nobody liked it. Nobody, except the label head. . . . It was like, what was he thinking? Plus he's not a music guy; he's a marketing guy. . . . In that case, [the producer] just said, 'I'm not recording this. The artist hates it. Nobody likes it but you.' " In the end, this particular song was not recorded but the producer went back to the record label and allowed

them to include another song on the album in order to retain their support for the project.

If they failed to integrate the perspectives of all parties to the project, producers could lose the support of the record label or alienate artists, songwriters, or song publishers, who may have specially chosen or written a song for a project. To winnow the creative options while maintaining the engagement of all parties, producers drew from a repertoire of brokerage practices including (1) introducing analogies, (2) bracketing and checking in, and (3) deferring decisions.

Bracketing and checking in. Managing competing claims to expertise over the song selection process was a key concern for producers during the project definition phase. Producers exercised their unique brokerage position to reduce this ambiguity by limiting or bracketing other parties' participation in creative decisions at specific times. When bracketing, producers temporarily excluded parties from participating in decisions to avoid the premature narrowing of creative options. Gant described how he checked in with A&R label personnel after bracketing them from earlier creative decisions: "It's important to be very proactive in including them [A&R] in the process. At least to the point of giving them information if not involving them in the actual creative process itself. At least keep them informed of the progress." Checking in allowed Gant to maintain a positive narrative with the label to secure a steady flow of resources, while he guided the artists and musicians toward a shared quality aesthetic. Bracketing without checking in at a later time with those excluded, however, was a recipe for failure. Hank bracketed label personnel because he knew it would be difficult to convey how he intended to record a song. He planned to check in and present the song to the label later in the creative process after the song had been fully realized. But in this case, Hank was caught in the act by the label representative before he had a chance to check in:

There was one song that was very rockish. Just seemed a little outside the rest of the material. I felt like it could work, with a certain treatment, it could work well with the others. And [the label rep] actually walked in the day we were tracking it. . . . And we got it on the second take, really up, jamming, and hard hitting. And he walked in while we were cutting it, "We didn't agree about this, did we?" And I said, "We did, sort of."

The label's surprise entrance into the recording studio disrupted Hank's plan, but he recovered by referring to their loose agreement on a shared quality aesthetic. Bracketing helped Hank reduce ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions by limiting the number of parties present for a creative decision at a specific time and thus the number of interpretations in play. Ultimately, Hank's song was a universal favorite, but this opportunity was only realized because he initially bracketed the label.

Introducing analogies. Whereas producers bracketed to control the timing of parties' involvement in creative decisions, producers also exercised their brokerage position to reduce ambiguity over the type of sound they were trying to

achieve. Producers introduced music samples and references to other songs, musicians, artists, or instruments to develop a shared quality aesthetic: a loose agreement on the type of sound to be produced without necessarily specifying how to get there. Producers would sit for hours and listen to music with the artist: "I ask them what they want musically, what style they're going for. . . . we use reference CDs of other artists they like, and I always ask them what's your musical history, what's your background? Everything from what they listened to as a kid to what their favorite song is now." Sarah went so far as to have her artists "listen to some bad songs too so they'll know what a bad one sounded like."

By creating a shared sense of what constituted a good or a bad sound across multiple parties in this phase, producers aimed to preemptively avoid conflicting interpretations of quality later in the process. We observed producers using analogies and reference materials to reduce ambiguity over the type of song quality the project should pursue and thereby narrow individual options available for action. As Travis explained, "It is important to be able to articulate what exactly you want. Or else they [the label or the artist] get frustrated." Because producers were always drawing from diverse source material, it was not easy to articulate what contributed to a novel sound. Analogies and references helped reduce ambiguity and the potential for conflict, enabling contributors to experiment within shared bounds.

Deferring decisions. Once producers identified a set of 30–50 songs that were candidates for a project, producers ultimately brought together the artist, artist's manager, and label personnel to select the 15–20 songs that would be further developed in the studio. When there were disagreements over songs that one party felt strongly about, rather than confront competing conceptions of quality directly, producers explicitly left some creative decisions open until later in the creative process by deferring decisions. Deferring decisions allowed producers to avoid conflict, help parties save face, and maintain as many creative options as possible until the creative production phase allowed ideas to be realized. Deferring was distinct from bracketing and was used when producers brought parties together but delayed decisions until a later time. For example, a producer, Larry, the artist, and the label had agreed on six songs to record but could not reach agreement on three particular songs the artist felt strongly about. Larry stepped in and said, "Let's keep these on the table and revisit it later." Henry, who liked a song that an artist was hesitant to commit to, advised her to "take it home and live with it for two weeks and see what you think then." Hank recalled a time when a song was in the "deferred pile" for a "long, long time. It was one of the artist's least favorite but the A&R person and I loved it. Now that song is one of the artist's favorites." Deferring decisions allowed people time to get comfortable with an idea that was not initially attractive.

When observing how producers deferred decisions, it became clear that this was not passive avoiding of conflict (Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Murnighan and Conlon, 1991; Lewicki et al., 2002) but active management of the timing of specific

decisions to foster collective creativity. Debriefing sessions with our informants revealed that producers deferred decisions with the logic that with more time and more ideas on the table, the editorial decisions that would inevitably cause some ideas to lose would not limit the potential for new ideas to build on each other in unexpected ways. By deferring decisions, producers exerted gentle power over the creative process to keep creative options open while a project's boundaries were still being defined. Producers needed to winnow the creative options available, but they were loath to prematurely discard songs whose potential could be more fully realized in the studio. Deferring decisions did not necessarily reduce ambiguity over quality or occupational jurisdictions, but it enabled producers to avoid conflict that could affect the artist's performance in the next phase. Looking forward, producers wanted to build all parties' confidence and create a "positive vibe" before going into the studio. As Gant noted, "It's a real personal thing that happens in the studio. Hopefully . . . you can establish that intimacy so you can have that rapport. . . . [Where] everybody gets into the moment."

As they defined project boundaries, producers faced different conceptions of the project's sound as well as a growing pool of vested parties vying for decision-making rights. It was never clear which party had control over these decisions, and all parties were motivated to seek control over the project. Thus producers had to winnow creative options without losing the enthusiasm or trust of project contributors. As summarized in table 2, producers navigated this challenge by using strategies that combined *tertius gaudens* and *tertius iungens* approaches. To reduce ambiguity over who controlled creative decisions, producers leveraged their brokerage position in the spirit of *tertius gaudens* to temporarily bracket some parties from decisions and then check in with them later. In response to competing perceptions of quality, producers engaged in practices in the spirit of *tertius iungens.* Producers introduced analogies to help foster a shared quality aesthetic among the parties and, as they brought people together, used their power to defer decisions to prevent premature decisions, limit tensions that might impair the creative process, and maintain some ambiguity as to the new sound that would be produced in creative production.

Phase 3: Creative Production

During creative production, producers attempted to create the studio "magic" that would enable their projects to sell in the fickle country music market. The creative production phase commenced when a loose agreement was reached on a set of songs worth recording, and it concluded when a set of recorded tracks was produced. In this phase, the project moved from coffee shops and offices to the recording studio. Once in the studio, contract musicians and engineers would be paid by the hour, placing new demands on the creative process. How songs were ultimately recorded remained open to interpretation; every expert had a relevant and unique perspective to contribute. The producer's job was to bring up creative ideas, encourage others to build on each other

without overpowering each other, and integrate performances to achieve coherence. As Sarah explained:

You don't want the players stepping on each other's toes playing. If I don't want the musicians getting in the way of the vocal here I have to bring them down in the right spot to let the vocalist shine. I need certain instrumentation in certain places so it creates the attitude needed for the song and doesn't destroy something else. . . . A lot of it is directing which instrumentation is going to happen where in the song and what impact it [a particular player's performance] is going to have.

Integrating performances had to be done carefully, because creative conflict could spoil the final recorded product. Although producers now use digital recording technology, our informants often used an expression that harkened back to older technologies, "misery sticks to tape," and obsessed about creating and maintaining a positive "vibe" in the recording studio. Troy tried to have a very relaxed studio experience. "Get these guys thinking about the wrong thing or get them upset a little bit and they don't give you what you need."

As depicted in figure 1, in the recording studio, there was typically one large room in which musicians—drummer, bass guitar, lead guitars, mandolin, piano, background vocalists, and fiddlers—could all see and hear each other's interactions and contributions. There was also a control room separated by glass in which the engineer managed the recording technology. Artists were often either in a separate vocal booth, where their vocal performance could be sonically isolated, or in the control room with the engineer and producer. Despite the space being public, producers could retain and leverage their brokerage position between artists and musicians by controlling who could hear each other through use of the talk-back button in the control room, which opened or closed the microphone between the control booth and the recording studio. Label executives were typically not invited to studio sessions, but producers continued to elicit and integrate their perspectives throughout the tracking sessions because their continued support was critical for distribution and promotion. Even with producers checking in with them, however, label executives could still show up and surprise the producer, as detailed in the earlier example with Hank. In this phase, the producer's challenge was to create a relaxed and generative atmosphere while managing a highly public process and working under time and financial pressure.

In creative production, producers confronted ongoing ambiguity about definitions of quality: how do we build a shared understanding of the desired project sound while maintaining creative options? Producers also faced ongoing ambiguity about occupational jurisdictions, but with a greater number of experts in a highly public space: who is allowed to guide the creative process? In the third phase, a third type of ambiguity arose: the non-routinizable nature of creative production. A producer could bring together the best available resources and talent, but there was no formula for transforming raw talent into market success. One producer described this challenge: "Sometimes you get in the studio and for whatever reason the song's not the magic you thought it was

going to be. The song can still be wonderful; the artist can still be wonderful, it's just not the magic you thought it could be. If there was a formula, we'd all be doing it more often. But there's another element to the room that you can't always control."

Ambiguity in the creative transformation process challenged producers in several ways. First, it was never clear whether songs would turn out as hoped or whether musicians would be able to create a particular performance given the song selected. Second, with no formula for success, producers obsessed about creating the conditions for "magic" in the recording studio. Even so, the potential for conflict remained high, because everyone's performance could be evaluated by his or her peers. Everyone knew that the final product would be heard by others, both in and out of the studio, who could be sources of future work—this was particularly salient given the short-term, contractual nature of work in the country music industry. This awareness inhibited some musicians and artists from attempting performances out of their comfort zone to avoid the risk of failure. The challenge in this phase of the creative process was not only to reduce the remaining ambiguities over what the project would produce but also to encourage project contributors who had not been involved with the project before this time to make extraordinary contributions and go beyond their comfort zone. Thus producers strove to limit the potential for conflict and create a working environment conducive to improvisation and experimentation by (1) setting the stage, (2) affirming direction, (3) crafting role boundaries, and (4) absorbing challenges to expertise.

Setting the stage. From the moment they entered the studio, producers focused on managing ambiguity in the transformation process. Because of their brokerage position, producers were well situated to set the stage for creative performances: they were the point of contact for all contributors to the project who may not have worked with each other before. Thus producers went to great lengths to stage initial connections among previously unconnected parties. Jesse believed that there were real performance implications from how he initially introduced the parties to each other: "I would introduce the artist to the musician by saying how excited the artist was to have him on the project, enthusing, 'The artist just loved you on Faith Hill's album.'" Jesse continued, "[you need to] get it going so that when you start it's not like, 'Oh, hi! . . . Here's what we're doing today.' That's starting off stiff, a cold start. You need to have everything warmed up." Producers also set the stage by setting out buffets, decorating the studio—buying rugs, mood lamps, and candles—to create the emotional timbre they hoped to achieve. Hank explained that he did this to "get the best performance out of them. So they don't act as puppets. You want their best performance, eliciting that effort and creativity. It's all about setting the stage." He set the stage for collective creativity by providing the space for everyone to gather and encourage the sharing of personal experiences and stories. The aim was not just to produce a positive atmosphere for its own sake but to encourage people to learn, experiment, and push themselves

in new directions (e.g., Edmondson, 1999). Thus producers set the stage to enhance creative capacity, as ambiguity over creative production was difficult to reduce.

Affirming direction. Producers needed to provide feedback on performances in ways that enabled artists and musicians to adjust their performances, save face, and remain open to new creative ideas. Producers publicly affirmed each individual's contribution to set a tone of respect for participants' expertise and to guide everyone toward a shared aesthetic. When affirming direction, producers reinforced a particular musical direction through public praise rather than criticism in front of other parties. To affirm direction, producers asked for advice or provided feedback without directly challenging the quality of an individual's performance. For example, Josh learned from the legendary producer Chet Atkins how to provide feedback to his musicians, later publicly praising and crediting them for those same ideas. Josh recalled how this technique was first used with him: "I played what he showed me and when I did that, he said over the speaker, 'I love what you're doing. . . . That's great'—as if I had come up with the idea myself." Josh later applied this practice in his own work as a producer: "You want to make the musicians look good to each other. You have the best and most respected musicians in the world." Producers had the means to give this feedback privately, but they often chose to do so publicly for the benefit of all participants. Affirming direction helped cultivate creative performances and gently guided performances toward a quality aesthetic that everyone could understand. By doing so, producers reduced ambiguity over quality while avoiding overt criticism, fearful that it might create a chilling effect on individuals' willingness to experiment and work toward their individual limits.

Crafting role boundaries. With all three types of ambiguities in play, it became more critical for producers to address ambiguity in occupational jurisdictions preemptively. To prevent a project's participants from challenging each other's expertise in the studio, producers actively crafted role boundaries. For example, Sarah often found that newcomers had an expansive view of their role in creative production. Thus she explained to her artists how the session would unfold, her expectations of their involvement in the session, and their degree of interaction with musicians. Sarah explicitly leveraged her brokerage position in the *tertius gaudens* tradition to prevent overeager artists from undermining the flow of the session. As she described:

With the artist, I have to be clear with them. They have their time. When I'm working with them beforehand, that's their time. But when I'm in the studio, I tell them upfront, "You don't say anything to the musicians. I'm going to be thinking about what you want, but it's for your own good. When we're in the tracking session, it's not about you. I need to be able to focus on the players and what is going on. I have to be able to keep the energy up." And they might have their idea of, "Well, I came down here and I have played in concerts so I'm just going to come down here and run the session. And my brother, he's a guitarist and he said I should do this, so that's what I want to tell the session player." Oh no. That's not going to happen.

Sarah fearlessly used her brokerage position to convey to artists their role in the studio and to reduce ambiguity over the extent to which artists would control the recording session. "The last thing you want is the artist trying to tell the player 'Well, it should sound like this'. . . and the session starts getting bogged down. *I am the one* who can communicate with the musicians, not the artist." When we observed producers using this practice, the targeted parties made fewer attempts to control the creative process, indicating that producers had reduced ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions.

Absorbing challenges to expertise. When proactive efforts to set the stage, affirm direction, and craft boundaries did not prevent personal challenges from arising, producers used their brokerage role to absorb those challenges, prevent conflict, and preserve an environment conducive to creativity. Absorbing challenges targeted at others involved considerable emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and humor (e.g., Coser, 1959; Bechky, 2006). For example, producers often used their brokerage role to keep parties from hearing potentially injurious comments, absorbing those comments themselves to prevent them from being passed to another. As Sam explained, "The main thing is no confrontations. If one musician gets an attitude it can be infectious among the other players." Sarah explained how she made the most of digital technology and the structure of the recording studio to defuse potentially detrimental comments between artists and session players:

Well, I let the artist tell me things if they have to in the control booth, in between takes. And he might say, well the guitar player isn't doing this . . . and I'll say to him, well I'll go out and talk to him and then I go out and I don't say anything of the sort. . . . I don't let the artist know if the musicians don't think something's great about the artist. Plus, when it comes right down to it, *I've got the talk-back button. I'm the only one who can use it*. And if I do have something to say to a player, I always do it in a private conversation.

By claiming control of the talk-back button, Sarah prevented public challenges of others' expertise for the benefit of collective creativity. When absorbing challenges posed by one person and directed at another, producers acted as a release valve for tensions arising from the combination of ambiguous definitions of quality and competing claims to expertise, limiting the negative affect that could undermine creative exchange and result in an uninspired final product.

During creative production, the producer ceased to be uniquely tied to any one party, and new contributors were introduced to the creative process. Further, all three types of ambiguity were at play. As summarized in table 2, producers used the widest array of nexus work practices, including many that began in earlier phases, and rapidly iterated between practices rooted in *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches. To develop a shared understanding of the emergent aesthetic, producers leveraged their brokerage role in the spirit of *tertius iungens*—introducing analogies and affirming direction. Producers responded to ambiguity about occupational jurisdictions by exercising their brokerage role in the spirit of *tertius gaudens*—controlling the talk-back button,

delivering either public or private feedback, crafting boundaries, bracketing, and absorbing challenges to keep people apart from each other during the creative process, especially when individuals challenged each other's expertise. Although ambiguity over quality and occupational jurisdictions could be reduced with some of the practices employed, ambiguity over the creative transformation process was not easily resolved. Instead, producers used their positional power to set the stage and create slack in order to build creative capacity. At the end of this phase, producers were left with many possible performances that needed to be edited and integrated in the last phase, final synthesis.

Phase 4: Final Synthesis

In the final synthesis phase, producers guided the final mixing, or editing of the large quantity of recorded song tracks into a final mix for use in a demo, pitch package, or album. The trigger for the final synthesis phase was a mass of raw vocal and musical recordings awaiting editing and mixing; the phase concluded when the artist and label accepted the final product. During creative production, producers took advantage of digital technology, recording multiple takes of performances in the studio. This technical advance gave producers the ability to decide which tracks to use in the mixing process when studio musicians would no longer be present.

Mixing was often laborious and incredibly detail-oriented. A single song could take eight to twelve hours to experiment with different post-production effects and arrive at the final mix and sonic treatment. Producers avoided expensive studio time and were able to control access to the final product by moving to their "home" studios with their engineer to create the final product, as depicted in figure 1. With engineers, producers used a *tertius iungens* approach, introducing analogies by referencing songs and providing descriptive metaphors to guide the engineers' interpretation of the songs. For the most part, producers gave engineers expansive discretion to work with mixing technology and develop the technical flourishes that could transform a song into a hit.

As summarized in table 2, producers also utilized a *tertius gaudens* approach, protecting their engineers from distractions and crafting role boundaries for all other parties. Producers like James bracketed just about everyone to work solely with his engineer:

During the mix I allow no one there. No one but me and the engineer. I do not allow guests of any kind including the artist because you end up spending all your time explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it and how come there is no guitar part there? Well, the guitar part is not there because it is not time to put it in and by the time I am finished explaining, I have spent 30 minutes explaining it.

Producers bracketed other parties from the process to avoid premature judgment of the creative product, keeping label executives and sometimes even artists away until they felt confident that the quality of their product could stand on its own. For producers with major-label deals, it was critical to check in with the label frequently to ensure that the sound

produced would be viable in the marketplace. Producers sought and valued this feedback, as labels were integral to promoting the projects once they were completed.

The challenge was that the label's ability to assess the value of songs that were not fully realized was limited. "Most record company guys do not understand production whatsoever. They understand the end result . . . they don't understand what something can be. They only understand what something is." Troy explained how he navigated this tension by checking in with the label only when the lead vocals were finished, to avoid a premature negative evaluation:

At the appropriate moment I'll invite them [the label] down to hear the progress, play them a rough mix that I think is representative of what the record's going to be. . . . You can't leave it up to their imagination . . . if there are too many blanks to fill then it's premature to play them the music. I like to have the lead vocal finished. So you're not, "Well, this is just a rough vocal. It's gonna be good." They go away feeling, boy, I sure hope they sing better than what I just heard.

But labels often did not wait for check-ins. Throughout mixing, producers' cell phones rang persistently as they fielded calls from label personnel wanting to hear mixes. Travis responded to them, "Everything is going great. We'll have the final mixes to you on the 15th as promised. They'll be in on time. The artist is really loving what we've put together." Regardless of the reality, Travis gave everyone a purely upbeat update, giving the label status information, but bracketing their involvement until the mixes were completed.

Finally, producers worked with artists, managers, and label executives to decide which songs would make it on the final project, whether changes needed to be made to the final mixes, whether more songs had to be recorded, and which songs would be released as singles to radio or iTunes. These decisions could ultimately be controlled by the record label, but producers and artists were deeply invested in these decisions and tried to influence the outcomes as best they could. The nightmare result for any producer was a final meeting in which a label executive said, "There's nothing I can sell on this album, go do it again."

Producers who made use of nexus work practices were better able to manage the integration work involved in the collective creative process than those who did not. Because the projects in our sample resulted in a broad range of creative outputs—single songs, pitch packages, and full albums—and because our unit of analysis was the producer as opposed to the producer's output, comparable commercial outcomes are not available. Yet producers who deftly drew from the portfolio of nexus work practices we identified went on to become commercially successful and won Country Music Association and Grammy awards.

When producers did not use certain nexus practices at the appropriate time, they had a more difficult time managing challenges to expertise, negotiating competing conceptions of quality, and maintaining a positive vibe in the studio. Failure to use certain practices, such as absorbing challenges to

expertise or checking in, were associated not only with compromised careers and damaged relationships, but with unsuccessful or aborted projects. For example, Gary recounted how bracketing record label executives without checking in resulted in a failed project:

Ultimately we made the record without much input from the label. At least one of the dissenters was out of the way, and so it was just between me and the artist. But what ended up happening was that they [the label] were out of the way for the production, and she [the artist] got the songs she wanted, but they [the label] obviously won, because they didn't sell it.

Gary concluded that because the label was bracketed from production and final synthesis, it did not develop a vested interest in marketing the album. "How could they sell this record if they didn't have any interest emotionally? How could they sell it if they didn't have any say in it, since they know what they can sell?" In this case, the *tertius gaudens* approach to keeping the label out of the loop backfired. Our research suggests that effective producers developed the capability to identify when particular nexus work practices should be used—and deftly learned to blend *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches of brokerage as the creative process unfolded.

DISCUSSION

Creative brokerage and the process of integrating multiple, often-competing perspectives into a creative whole are common to entrepreneurial ventures (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001), the evolution of social movements and institutions (Lounsbury, 2001; O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008; Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey, 2008), and projects arising in creative industries such as film (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Lampel and Shamsie, 2003; Jones, 2006), theatre (Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005), art (Becker, 1982; DiMaggio, 1991), and music (Faulkner, 1983). Despite the prevalence of creative brokerage across organizational contexts, theoretical conceptions have not kept pace with this phenomenon.

By examining brokers on creative projects in situ, we enrich and add precision to both the brokerage and creativity literatures. Our ethnographic research showed how independent country music producers effectively blended two potentially competing approaches to brokerage to integrate disparate contributions into a creative, coherent whole throughout four different project phases: (1) resource gathering, (2) defining project boundaries, (3) creative production, and (4) final synthesis. We found that ambiguity was an inherent part of the action problem brokers face in the collective creative process. Without shared agreement about what makes a hit song, without agreement on whose claim to expertise entitles them to control the process, and without agreement on how to transform individual creative contributions into a coherent whole, producers relied on a distinct form of relational integration work we call nexus work. Nexus work draws from both the *tertius iungens* and the *tertius gaudens* approaches to brokerage to achieve collective creative outcomes in the face

of ambiguity. Our process model shows when each type of ambiguity became acute in the creative process and specifies the conditions likely to trigger different approaches to brokerage.

Contributions

In unpacking these findings, we make three contributions to organizational theory. First, we provide a process model that identifies when different types of ambiguity are encountered in the creative process and which types of ambiguity can and cannot be reduced through strategic action. Second, we show how two previously distinct conceptions of brokerage are interwoven throughout the creative process and the conditions under which one approach is likely to be used over the other. Third, in contrast to extant theories of *tertius gaudens* behavior, we show that practices associated with the *tertius gaudens* approach can be used to achieve collective ends in addition to individual ones. Collectively, these contributions offer a deeper understanding of the specific "tactics real socially skilled actors use to induce cooperation" (Fligstein, 2001: 113) on projects that unite contributors from various fields, disciplines, and organizations.

A process model of collective creativity: Ambiguity and strategic action. Research on creative projects in cultural industries has focused on demand uncertainty (Hirsch, 1972) and risk-adverse gatekeepers (Baker and Faulkner, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 2003). In contrast, our theory of nexus work emphasizes ambiguity as the primary factor complicating collective creative projects. In the resource gathering phase, producers encountered ambiguity about the quality of the artist, of songs, and of the appropriate match between these two elements. The producers' key challenge was to assemble a set of songs and build the perception that the artist they were working with would be commercially successful. To do so, they primarily pursued a *tertius iungens* approach to brokerage—fostering a generative network and building legitimacy for the project to reduce ambiguity over quality. When defining project boundaries, producers' key challenge was to winnow among their numerous options to select a set of songs to be recorded without disenfranchising contributors to the project. Ambiguity over claims to expertise and control became more acute during this phase, as all contributors maintained competing perceptions as to which songs had "hit" potential. Thus, in addition to the *tertius iungens* approach, producers also used a *tertius gaudens* approach to reduce ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions and prevent conflict.

During creative production, more experts that were heretofore disconnected began contributing to the project, and a third type of ambiguity emerged—how to transform individual contributions into a coherent whole. Because all three ambiguities were present in this phase, producers drew from a broad set of nexus work practices, carrying forward practices used earlier and introducing new ones to reduce ambiguity over the quality of individual and collective performances and claims to expertise and control. What will interest scholars of creativity is that producers did not try to reduce ambiguity over the transformation process. Instead, they built creative

capacity—in terms of written songs, recorded material, emotional vibe, backup singers and musicians, studio time, and budget. This enabled them to generate creative ideas, preserve relationships, and create the conditions likely to foster experimentation, risk taking, and creative work (e.g., Amabile et al., 1996). During the final synthesis stage, producers moved out of the studio to work primarily with one party—the engineer—to bring the project to full realization. Thus the set of practices used narrowed as fewer project participants and fewer types of ambiguity were present.

Although theorists have noted that collaborators often take strategic action to reduce ambiguity to coordinate their efforts (Weick, 1995; Fligstein, 2001), little attention has been paid to how different types of ambiguity might engender different types of strategic action. Scholars of creative work typically recognize that some degree of ambiguity is inherent, because neither the process nor the outcome can be specified a priori (Amabile, 1996). When individuals confront ambiguity that can impair a project's progress, the "confusion created by multiple meanings call[s] for social construction and invention" (Weick, 1995: 95). How this ambiguity is addressed has been less clear. Our research shows how brokers on creative projects varied their brokerage approach depending on the nature of the ambiguity encountered—drawing on a *tertius iungens* approach to respond to ambiguity over quality and a *tertius gaudens* approach to respond to ambiguity over occupational jurisdictions. Yet brokers had a different response for ambiguity over the transformation process, directing their attention instead to building creative capacity. The implication is that individuals pursuing creative work might want to consider building creative capacity when ambiguity cannot be reduced.

Nexus work: A dialectic approach to creative brokerage. Despite the fact that Simonton's model (1999) of creativity requires *both* variation and selection (or synthesis) to develop creative ideas that are useful, scholars of creativity have focused almost exclusively on the generation of ideas to the detriment of synthesis work. Thus we have a deep understanding of how creative ideas are generated but not how they are put into practice (George, 2008). At the same time, the brokerage literature has concluded that a broker's unique structural position aids in the generation of creative ideas but is not well suited for integrating or implementing ideas (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005; Obstfeld, 2005; Fleming, Mingo, and Chen, 2007; Fleming and Waguespack, 2007) when the cooperation of others is needed (e.g., Fligstein, 2001).

Existing theories of brokerage rest on two ideal conceptions, the *tertius iungens* and the *tertius gaudens*, that do not reflect the realities of brokers who must not just transmit ideas but synthesize them. By examining nexus work throughout the entire creative process, we tease apart these seemingly contradictory conceptions to show how brokers on creative projects draw on both approaches to integrate creative ideas. The producers in our study did not use one type of brokerage earlier in the process and another type later in the process. Instead, producers interwove *tertius gaudens* and *tertius iungens* approaches throughout the creative process, pursuing

a dialectic approach to managing the dualities of generating creative options and synthesizing them into a cohesive whole.

As producers exercised their positional power as a *tertius iungens*—connecting others to build trust, foster legitimacy, and create an environment that elicits creative contributions—these same actions could lead to conflict. If everyone was in the same room when attempting to winnow ideas as well as generate them, differences of opinion could prematurely narrow creative options or inhibit experimentation. Thus producers also exercised their brokerage role as a *tertius gaudens*—keeping people apart and controlling when and how parties engaged with the creative process. Used alone, *tertius gaudens* practices could weaken producers' ability to effectively represent all interests, undermine trust in the producer, and inhibit integration work. But without these practices, the creative process could become "bogged down" and chaotic, with too many disparate voices contributing to the project. To address these competing needs, producers pursued a dual approach to creative brokerage.

Our findings differ from Obstfeld (2005) in that we discovered both *tertius gaudens* and *tertius iungens* approaches used to achieve collective creative outcomes, whereas he discovered only a *tertius iungens* orientation. There may be several reasons for this disparity. First, Obstfeld studied coordinating actors "involved" with innovations as opposed to the lower-level tasks of integrating ideas. Second, Obstfeld surveyed people to measure the *tertius iungens* orientation to broker-age and then predicted individual involvement in innovation. This tool did not measure *tertius gaudens* behavior and thus did not find it. We had an open research question as to how producers integrated ideas and applied Obstfeld's six-factor scale for *tertius iungens* behavior retrospectively, discovering behavior that was consistent with this scale and also behavior consistent with *tertius gaudens* behavior. Obstfeld (2005: 122) posited that "the activity of the *tertius iungens* is most challenging when the nature and prospects for projects are uncertain and the relevant actors to engage are not apparent. In these cases, identifying the different actors to engage and the appeals that will resonate with those actors are the subject of considerable skill, quite discrete from the structure of the social network itself." Given this observation, it is not a surprise that we found both brokerage approaches actively in play when brokers took on integration work in creative projects.

The ability to engage in a dialectic approach to brokerage, or what we call nexus work, could be considered a type of social skill. As Fligstein himself (2001: 114) noted, however, what is needed to make the concept of social skill more operationaliz-able is explication of the "repertoire of tactics skilled actors use to structure interactions . . . within and across groups." Our grounded theory of nexus work does exactly that: (1) identifying the repertoire of practices brokers use when integrating ideas on a creative project, (2) specifying the conditions likely to trigger different types of brokerage, and (3) explaining how and why this dialectic can persist. Such a theoretical approach "celebrates the heterogeneity of actors, multiple logics and practice variation, . . . a crucial ontological

starting point for a new wave and generation of institutional scholars" (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008: 667–668). It also furthers a more recent debate on the relationship between brokers and collectives.

The *tertius gaudens* approach to brokerage and its relationship to the collective. Recently, theorists have expressed concern that if the *tertius gaudens* form of brokerage is the dominant approach to strategic action, it could be at odds with the creation of collective outcomes (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005). As Obstfeld (2005: 120) argued, the language of structural holes is one "of competition, control, relative advantage, and manipulation." The assumption that the benefits that flow from a broker's unique position only flow back to the broker is a natural one, but the implications are concerning. For if we do not fully understand the relationship between brokers and collectives, we risk a theory of brokerage that does not benefit organizations but individuals. Our research shows that *tertius gaudens* behavior can be used to benefit the collective. When we found producers leveraging their unique structural position, such as using the talk-back button to reinforce their position as the "third in between," bracketing parties to the creative process, or absorbing comments to prevent their transmittal from one party to another, these actions helped other individuals master their performances, save face, inhibit conflict, or experiment outside their comfort zone. As brokers, producers had power and were comfortable using this power to buffer competing visions of the project from impeding the flow of creative ideas. This type of strategic brokerage may be necessary to gain the full cooperation of disparate experts in many contexts. "To be brokers, skilled actors have to convince others that they are not narrowly self-interested and that others will gain personally from finding a negotiated solution" (Fligstein, 2001: 114). Thus we propose that when creative ideas must be implemented, and when integration work is required, brokers will leverage their position in the *tertius gaudens* tradition, not to extract just individual advantage but in service of collective creativity.

Directions for Future Research

Although nexus work may be more prevalent than extant theories suggest, our research focused on one industry. Because the producers in our study were embedded in dense networks local to the country music industry, this likely exacerbated the need to engage in relational practices that permitted potential repeat collaborations (e.g., Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti, 1997). It is an open question whether the same relational practices would be found in industries with different characteristics. Our specification of nexus work practices, the challenges inherent in different phases of the collective creative process, and the types of ambiguity provide a useful framework for comparison. Future research could examine nexus work across different industries to explore how brokers use their brokerage position to accomplish integration work.

Furthermore, if synthesizing inputs and managing ambiguity and collective creativity are key skills in today's economy, our

research has implications for how scholars examine creative brokerage. Rather than examine how leaders choose among different options that already exist, we need to examine how processes of creative brokerage lead to the generation of new options. If society is to make progress on intractable problems in areas such as energy, the environment, and healthcare, scholars need to examine how managers attempt to transform existing situations into preferred ones and give rise to new possibilities as opposed to how managers "make decisions." The producers we studied offer a good model, for as knowledge and creativity become more important to our economy and as global problems demand multidisciplinary solutions, more work is likely to take place in projects like the ones we studied. Our research suggests that the architects and designers of such projects will have significant integration responsibilities and will need to stay attuned to the conditions that trigger nexus work—drawing from both *tertius iungens* and *tertius gaudens* approaches as appropriate to cultivate, maintain, and protect collective creativity.

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