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Agony and Ecstasy in the Gig Economy: Cultivating Holding Environments for Precarious and Personalized Work Identities

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Abstract

Building on an inductive, qualitative study of independent workers—people not affiliated with an organization or established profession—this paper develops a theory about the management of precarious and personalized work identities. We find that in the absence of organizational or professional membership, workers experience stark emotional tensions encompassing both the anxiety and fulfillment of working in precarious and personal conditions. Lacking the holding environment provided by an organization, the workers we studied endeavored to create one for themselves through cultivating connections to routines, places, people, and a broader purpose. These personal holding environments helped them manage the broad range of emotions stirred up by their precarious working lives and focus on producing work that let them define, express, and develop their selves. Thus holding environments transformed workers' precariousness into a tolerable and even generative predicament. By clarifying the process through which people manage emotions associated with precarious and personalized work identities, and thereby render their work identities viable and their selves vital, this paper advances theorizing on the emotional underpinnings of identity work and the systems psychodynamics of independent work.

Keywords: work identity, emotion management, holding environments, gig economy, independent workers, systems psychodynamics, individual agency

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What does it mean, and what does it take, to keep a work identity alive? Organizational scholars have become fascinated with these questions. Research on identity work—the efforts people make to attain, hold on to, repair, or give up identities (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003)—has burgeoned over the past few decades. Scholars have investigated identity work in organizational contexts characterized by strong cultures, tight communities, and strict display rules (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Reid, 2015), showing how people strive to fit into demanding roles without losing their individuality (Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006). Economic volatility and technological change, however, have led more people to work outside such strong contexts, as independent workers loosely connected to organizations or selling directly to the market (Ashford, George, and Blatt, 2007; Cappelli and Keller, 2013) in a fast-growing ''gig economy'' (McKinsey & Co., 2016).

Having long regarded organizations and roles within them as the main referents for and hosts of people's efforts to define themselves, scholars have noted that when someone lacks strong attachments to an organization, attaining and sustaining a stable work identity—and the security, self-esteem, and legitimacy that go with it—is problematic (Sennett, 1998; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Crafting work identities is especially problematic for independent workers operating outside of organizations and established professions, who lack the refence of codified roles. Independent work poses different challenges from those presented by the contexts in which identity work typically has been researched. It is a world of work in which ''workplace'' is no longer a synonym for the office building or factory floor (Barley, 2016). Independent workers lack the secure affiliations and predictable futures deemed necessary to construct a stable identity at work (Sennett, 1998; Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). For these workers, the availability of institutionalized frameworks to orient their identity work is, at best, elusive. There is no inclusion boundary past which their identity is granted (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and no collective endorsement (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; DeRue and Ashford, 2010) by a larger entity. These workers operate in weak situations (Mischel, 1973) with unclear expectations about appropriate behaviors. In such situations, Weick (1996: 44) argued, ''guides for action may lie elsewhere.'' The question is, where do guides for action reside in the absence of jobs designed by others (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), leaders who give meaningful direction (Barnard, 1938; Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Podolny, Khurana, and Hill-Popper, 2005), and collegial interactions (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe, 2003) that help workers make meaning of their selves, their identities, and the link between them (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003)? To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study of independent workers who were facing chronic uncertainty about securing social and financial recognition, as well as about the stability and meaning of their work identities.

THE SELF, IDENTITY, AND INDEPENDENT WORK

Self and Identity

There are as many conceptualizations of self, identity, and their relation as there are communities of scholars (for reviews, see Baumeister, 1998;

Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008; Alvesson, 2010; Swann and Bosson, 2010; Brown, 2015; Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). We espouse the view that whereas ''self'' might be ''a word that everyone uses but no one defines'' (Baumeister, 1998: 681), selves yearn for definitions (Hogg, 2007). We regard identities as such definitions: meanings associated with the self (Gecas, 1982) by virtue of personal attributes (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), relationships (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007), and group memberships (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Our focus is on the opportunities and constraints that identities afford to the self. Identities give the self cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social boundaries. They define the self as an ''X'' (e.g., introvert, brother, lawyer). They describe what being X means (and what it does not), justify what being an X feels like, and prescribe what Xs do—and with whom. As a result, identities make people's inner and social worlds intelligible and manageable (Swann and Bosson, 2010).

People appropriate, negotiate, or acquiesce to identities to fulfill fundamental needs for uncertainty reduction (Hogg and Terry, 2000), belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985). People also resist and, on occasion, seek to relinquish identities because of the restrictions they impose (Collinson, 2003), because of events that cast those identities in a negative light (Petriglieri, 2015), or in pursuit of states of flow, ecstasy, and bliss that require transcending the boundaries of the self (Baumeister, 1998). This dynamism means that identity can ''be thought of as an equilibrium resulting from making sense of attraction to and repulsion from one or more referents'' (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016: 120). Seen that way, identity is an interpretation or an expression of the desire to be or not to be (with) someone. And the self is often cast in the dilemma of desiring both (Bion, 1961; Brewer, 1991).

When the self becomes unmoored from valued identities, people experience social or existential anxiety—the emotion associated with foreboding future harm (Öhman, 2000). Social anxieties are related to potential harm to the social standing of the self, such as rejection (Baumeister and Tice, 1990) or status anxiety (Gill, 2015), while existential anxieties are related to potential harm to the coherence and continuity of the self (Tillich, 1952), such as freedom (Fromm, 1942; Schwartz, 2000) or death anxiety (Becker, 1973). The self-esteem, relationships, and worldviews that identities afford protect people from those anxieties (Baumeister, 1998), however illusory that protection might be (Knights and Willmott, 1999).

Scholars are increasingly interested in how people secure self-definitions that fulfill the needs and stave off the anxieties described above. As institutions that once provided strong moorings for identities become more fluid (Bauman, 2000), rendering the crafting and maintenance of identities problematic (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sennett, 2006), people's efforts to craft, stabilize, and revise their identities, captured by the term ''identity work'' (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), have become a popular research topic (Brown, 2015). Seminal studies have focused on people's efforts to adapt to collective expectations—such as the demeanor required of partners in consulting firms (Ibarra, 1999; Reid, 2015), specialist physicians (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), or paratroopers (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009)—to achieve comfort and legitimacy within an establishment while retaining distinctiveness (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006). Studies focusing on personal engagement (Kahn, 1990), growth

(Sonenshein et al., 2013), and authenticity (Cable, Gino, and Staats, 2013) have also examined these phenomena in relation to organizations as permanent (Pratt, 2000) or temporary (Anteby and Wrzesniewski, 2014; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood, 2017) settings for people's efforts to define the self at work.

Scholars using the lens of social identity theory have highlighted people's pursuit of self-esteem and protection from social anxiety through identification with organizations (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). Those using a critical lens have focused on organizations' exploitation of members' existential anxiety to impose identities that promise to keep it at bay (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Some have described how organizations confer social identities but constrain the expression of personal ones (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). Others have portrayed organizations as providing the worldviews (Greil and Rudy, 1984) and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) that help people express their selves at work (Kahn, 1990) and craft desirable identities (Pratt, 2000; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). In short, organizations—and roles and relationships within them—provide the referent and host for identity work in most extant research.

Similarly, organizations are often regarded as the source for and container of people's emotional experiences of work. Scholars have seen emotions in part as byproducts of experiences (Pizer and Härtel, 2005) sparked by the context of work and interpreted through the lenses offered by the organization. Organizations stir up or dampen emotions, in these views, and shape their expression (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989). Gill (2015) has argued that because most organizations' norms inhibit the unguarded expression of emotions (Martin, Knopoff, and Beckman, 1998), scholars have had more access to, and emphasized more, cognitive and behavioral identity work. Without an organization, emotions attendant in independent work lack a tether and translation mechanism, thereby putting people in a position to experience, interpret, and use them in ways that scholars have yet to fully explore (Martin, Knopoff, and Beckman, 1998; Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999).

Scholars' prevalent focus on how people locate and articulate their selves within and in relation to organizations—in pursuit of positive affect (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008) and protection against anxiety (Jaques, 1955)—has led to calls for more research on circumstances in which ''the actor *interrogates* rather than *secures* or *glorifies* the self'' (Ybema et al., 2009: 314, italics in original). Such are the circumstances of people who cannot, or choose not to, compensate for the instability of organizations as providers of work and identities by doubling their efforts to secure some form of stability within one (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016)—that is, independent workers.

Independent Work

Globalization, technological change, and economic uncertainty have provoked a ''profound restructuring of workplace relations'' (Padavic, 2005: 113), affecting people's expectations for their careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and the structure of labor markets (Sweet and Meiksins, 2013). A growing segment of the workforce consists of people either loosely affiliated with an organization or selling directly to a market. Over one-fifth of U.S. workers labor outside of traditional employment—that is, outside of full-time positions that are assumed to

be long-term within an organization—and the fraction is higher in other countries (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; McKinsey & Co., 2016). Recent surveys suggest that ''all of the net employment growth in the U.S. economy from 2005 to 2015 appears to have occurred in alternative work arrangements'' (Katz and Krueger, 2016: 7). These changes point to the importance of studying the structuring of, and people's experiences in, a ''Brave new world of work'' (Beck, 2000) in which workers shoulder a high burden of risk (Beck, 1992) and have much choice over matters of personal meaning (Cote and Levine, 2002).

Sociologists, organization scholars, and psychologists have all remarked that research has focused on the structure and economics of new labor markets and neglected people's experiences in those markets. A decade after Barley and Kunda (2001: 82) noted that organization theory was stuck to ''petrified images of work'' tied to jobs in hierarchical organizations, Bechky (2011) lamented scholars' lack of focus on the meaning and practice of work. Ashford, George, and Blatt (2007) and Weiss and Rupp (2011) also lamented our lack of understanding of the lived experience of contemporary workers. Understanding contemporary workers' experiences is becoming more important with the decline of corporations as providers of reliable jobs (Davis, 2016) and the rise of the gig economy (McKinsey & Co., 2016). These changes, Kalleberg (2009) has argued, affect the economy, society, families, and people's lives. Studying them is imperative to build meaningful scholarship about the organization and experience of contemporary work (Davis, 2015; Barley, 2016).

Studies that have begun doing so, such as ethnographies of contractors in Silicon Valley (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002; Barley and Kunda, 2004), of temporary clerical workers (Henson, 1996), of New York City's Silicon Alley start-ups (Neff, 2012), and of freelance and creative workers (Ekman, 2014), have investigated workers still operating in organizations, if only at their fringes and for limited periods. These accounts—focusing on workers who struggle to remedy the loss of security and legitimacy they experienced as contractors or temps, who normalize the risk of working in volatile startups to the point of being blindsided by their demise, or who find avenues for opportunism amidst the ambiguity of precariousness—are a far cry from popular portraits celebrating ''free agents'' (Pink, 2001). Scholars have mostly been skeptical of the popular portraits, arguing that the benefits of autonomy accrue to only the most skilled and fortunate among independent workers, whereas uncertainty is a chronic experience for most and leads to anxiety, overwork, and frustrated wishes for secure employment (Henson, 1996; Jurik, 1998; Smith, 2002; Barley and Kunda, 2004; Padavic, 2005), as well as social unrest (Standing, 2011).

The rise of independent work, a social trend largely neglected by scholars so far, thus presents an opportunity to study a facet of identity work that remains fairly obscure, namely the work necessary to craft identities that neither benefit from nor require resisting collective definitions. Inductive, qualitative research methods are well suited to exploring such trends (Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Sonenshein, 2016) and to amplifying the voices of unheard populations and theorizing from their members' accounts (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010). Thus we chose those methods to study how independent workers make meaning of themselves and their work.

METHODS

Sample and Data Collection

Because our goal was to build rather than test or elaborate theory, our sampling strategy followed a theoretical logic (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). We purposefully selected workers operating with high degrees of autonomy in the absence of membership in organizations or established professions.[1] We further narrowed our focus to people whose work necessitated some level of knowledge (Schultze, 2000) and creativity (Amabile et al., 2005). These workers have been described both as templates of success among the independent workforce (Sennett, 2006) and as facing the most freedom in defining success and crafting their identities (Alvesson, 2001).

We recruited participants through acquaintances, from networking events for independent workers, and with snowball sampling by asking, at the close of each interview, for suggestions of other potential interviewees.[2] We aimed for variation in occupations (Patton, 1990) and kept interviewing until data collection and analysis stopped generating new themes, signaling that we had approached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Our final sample consisted of 65 independent workers (30 men and 35 women) living in the U.S. who described their work as follows: 8 artists, 12 writers, 6 graphic designers, 17 consultants, 11 executive coaches, 6 IT workers, 3 film producers, an independent publisher, and a children's music program developer.[3] They ranged in age from 27 to 74 years old (mean of 46) and had differing amounts of experience. Eight people had worked independently for less than 2 years, 8 for 2–3 years, 10 for 4–5 years, 6 for 6–7 years, 3 for 8–9 years, 8 for 10–14 years, 5 for 15–19 years, and 17 for 20 years or more.

We collected our study data through semi-structured interviews. Thirty-eight interviews were conducted in person in a location chosen by the participant (usually their home/studio or a café), and 27 were conducted by phone. The interviews lasted from 90 to 130 minutes, were tape-recorded with permission, and were transcribed verbatim. The interview included questions about how participants defined themselves and about their work in general and on a daily basis, what challenges they encountered, and what made for a particularly good or bad day; see the Online Appendix (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0001839218759646) for the interview protocol. We asked broader questions throughout, while focusing on narrower areas of inquiry as data collection and analysis progressed in parallel (Spradley, 1979). For example, the interplay among productivity, identity, and emotions emerged as a significant topic early on, so we oriented our interview questions accordingly. Later, we focused on understanding how the connections that participants seemed to carefully cultivate helped them, and what happened when they lost those connections.

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[1] We excluded ''temps'' doing contract work within organizations directly or through a staffing agency. We also ruled out entrepreneurs because their work presents a host of considerations that extend beyond our interest, such as raising funds, hiring, and leading others.

[2] These recruitment strategies were necessary because of the nature of our theoretical sample. By definition, access to independent workers could not be gained, as is customary, through the human resources departments of organizations or through professional associations.

[3] We assigned each interviewee a number from 1 to 65 and identify them by that number in citations to interviews.

Data Analysis

Our analysis unfolded in repeated iterations between two stages. The first involved synthesizing in a descriptive yet comprehensive fashion the experiences that participants described. The second involved abstracting a theoretical articulation of the identity processes we set out to investigate (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In the first stage, we met after reading one or two interviews and articles on identity dynamics or independent work separately each day. We iterated between data and literature, rereading and coding each interview together line by line. Whenever possible we used in-vivo codes, drawn from participants' descriptions of their experiences (Locke, 2001). For example, we noticed that several described "struggle" in relation to "wasting time" or not "concentrating on work," and that "fulfillment" and "anxiety" were associated with "being productive" and "doing my work" as much as with the outcome of a project. Such in-vivo codes led us to consider preliminary axial codes (Locke, 2001) such as "intense emotions" and "self-defining activities." Alongside our evolving coding scheme, we recorded our interpretations of passages of text and our conversations in memos.

After around 30 hours of meetings focused on 10 interviews, we had a preliminary coding scheme that we used to separately code another 8 interviews. We met to compare codes for each interview, resolve discrepancies, and refine our scheme. Once we felt that our coding scheme reflected the data and our use of it was consistent, we coded the whole sample, continuing to discuss alterations to the scheme. We returned to this stage three times: after a first wave of data collection, after feedback from peer reviewers, and after a second wave of data collection. We revised the coding scheme each time and recoded the whole sample accordingly.

In the second stage of our analysis, we developed more abstract codes and theoretical categories and looked for relationships and patterns among them. During our first iteration through this stage, we were struck by accounts of intense and conflicting emotions apparently brought to the surface by the precariousness and personalization of participants' work and identities. Earlier versions of the analysis had focused on the strategies independent workers used to mend ruptures in their workflow, such as distractions, that hindered productivity. But the data called for a deeper look into what made ruptures of productivity such a recurrent preoccupation. Consider an executive coach's answer to the broad question of what made for a bad working day. Hardly taking a breath, he plunged into the following:

> A bad day is when there is so much to do that I'm disorganized. I can't get my act together. At the end of the day, the same e-mails I opened in the morning are still open. The documents I wanted to get done were not done. I got distracted. I feel like I wasted time. I wasted valuable time and energy. There are only eight hours in the day. I'm on my own. I have a lot to do. I can't waste time. I have this constant fear of time, time passing, time ticking. I have this massive fear of time, of losing time, of wasting time. When a day goes by and things don't get done, I feel very uncomfortable. That's been a driving force for me for years, this fear of wasting time. . . . It's the tyranny of time, always ticking at me, always scratching and saying, "You only have so many years left." The idea of dying and leaving the earth has always been present for me, and you've got to get as much done as possible in this life before it's too late. Work is a real way of staying alive. (#64)

The passage opens by suggesting that avoiding distraction and remaining productive are very important. But it soon moves on to fear about the passing of time and shifts from an account of a specific day to a holistic reflection about his relationship with time. And as it shifts, the fear morphs into an existential one, of time passing, of not making the most of life in the face of approaching death. It is this fear that distractions bring forth and working delivers him from, thus becoming a means not only of making a living but also of ''staying alive.'' The wish to understand and theorize about recurrent associations between working and living, distractions and anxiety, productivity and fulfillment led us to examine our data through the lens of a systems psychodynamic perspective (French and Vince, 1999; Gould, Stapley, and Stein, 2006).

Systems Psychodynamics

A systems psychodynamic perspective focuses on the interplay between the management of emotions and tasks (Hirschhorn, 1998; Pratt and Crosina, 2016), making it well-suited to interpret our research participants' accounts. While ''deeply probing people's experiences and situations during the discrete moments that make up [people's] work lives'' (Kahn, 1990: 693), this perspective embraces Mills' (1959) admonition to regard personal experiences as reflections of social issues. Because it proposes an embodied self that understands and realizes itself through relationships (Fitzsimons, 2012), it helps to theorize about processes that encompass intra- and interpersonal dynamics (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015).

In keeping with this interpretive lens, we complemented our inductive analysis with a clinical approach to examine participants' experiences—and our own—looking for associations and patterns in the data as sources of insight (Berg and Smith, 1985). We attended to participants' associations with different emotions, focusing on what they said sparked those emotions and how they dealt with them. We also paid attention to our own associations, going back and forth between experience in and of the text, discarding insights when the former did not support the latter, and delving further into insights reflected in participants' accounts. For example, two conversations during this stage led us back to the data. One was a parallel to Dante's journey, in the *Divine Comedy*, through hell, purgatory, and finally to heaven. Such a narrative of redemption and self-discovery appealed to our wish for a story of experience and resolution of anxiety, but it did not fit the data. Participants did not seem to have resolved their struggle even after decades of independent work. They instead saw that struggle as self-defining, a tortured bliss of sorts. This interpretation made the struggle a source of pride. We refined this insight, returning to the data, after another conversation in which we likened the experiences in our sample to the ''agony and ecstasy'' featured in the title of Irving Stone's (1961) novel on the life and work of Renaissance artist Michelangelo Buonarroti. We looked at patterns in the data, within and across participants, to discern both what was present and what was missing in their reported experiences (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). Doing so revealed, for example, that participants described missing the direction and support of an organization, which led them to experience anxiety but not to long for employment. They seemed to cultivate connections that helped them tolerate and reframe that anxiety

instead. Hence we began exploring how these connections helped them and what happened when they were not available.

Our iteration among encounters with research participants, conversations with each other, and the literature led us to use the holding environment (Winnicott, 1975a)—a psychodynamic construct that has been employed in conceptual work on management (Kahn, 2001) and identity work in organizations (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010)—as a ''sensitizing concept'' (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006). Defined as ''social contexts that reduce disturbing affect and facilitate sensemaking'' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 44), holding environments (Winnicott, 1975a) have been deemed necessary for crafting personal and work identities (Kegan, 1982; Petriglieri, Wood, and Petriglieri, 2011). Holding environments facilitate the containment and interpretation of emotion and activities (Shapiro and Carr, 1991). Containment refers to the opportunity to ''absorb, filter or manage difficult or threatening emotions or ideas—the contained—so that they can be worked with'' (French and Vince, 1999: 9; see also Bion, 1970). Interpretation refers to the provision of ''ideas that provide connections, meanings, or a way of comprehending previously unrelated experiential data'' (Shapiro and Carr, 1991: 5). Through these two functions, holding environments help ''cognitive and emotional turmoil give way to meaning'' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 49). Prior work has suggested that those with unstable or no organizational membership should be most in need of holding and yet have it least available (Kahn, 2001).

The concept of the holding environment came to guide and constrain our analysis, which in turn informed our refinement and extension of the concept. The final part of our analysis focused on how holding environments worked in participants' contexts. This stage culminated in refining a process model of the management of precarious and personalized work identities. Although the model emerged last from our analysis, for ease of reading we summarize it first, employing it as a structure for the findings described below. We interweave our interpretive narrative with participants' accounts (Van Maanen, 1979; Pratt, 2008), presenting additional evidence in data tables in the Online Appendix that also illustrate our coding scheme.

FINDINGS

Our model, depicted in figure 1, begins with the absence of an organizational holding environment, which rendered participants' work and work identities precarious while creating the opportunity to personalize both. As working, rather than belonging, became the main avenue for participants to define themselves, productivity became the foundation on which their identity rested. Being productive also became a lightning rod of sorts for emotional tensions. It was a target, and in the best of cases a conduit, for intense and often conflicting emotions. The independent workers we studied cultivated connections—to routines, places, people, and purpose—that helped them manage those tensions and sustain their productivity. These connections, we theorize, served as a personal holding environment that helped people stay ''at work'' and be ''into their work.'' When they succeeded in bolstering productivity and containing and reframing emotions, holding environments helped participants' work identities to remain viable and their selves to be vital. Viable identities, in turn, rendered precariousness tolerable. Vital selves rendered it generative.

Figure 1. A process model of the management of precarious and personalized work identities.
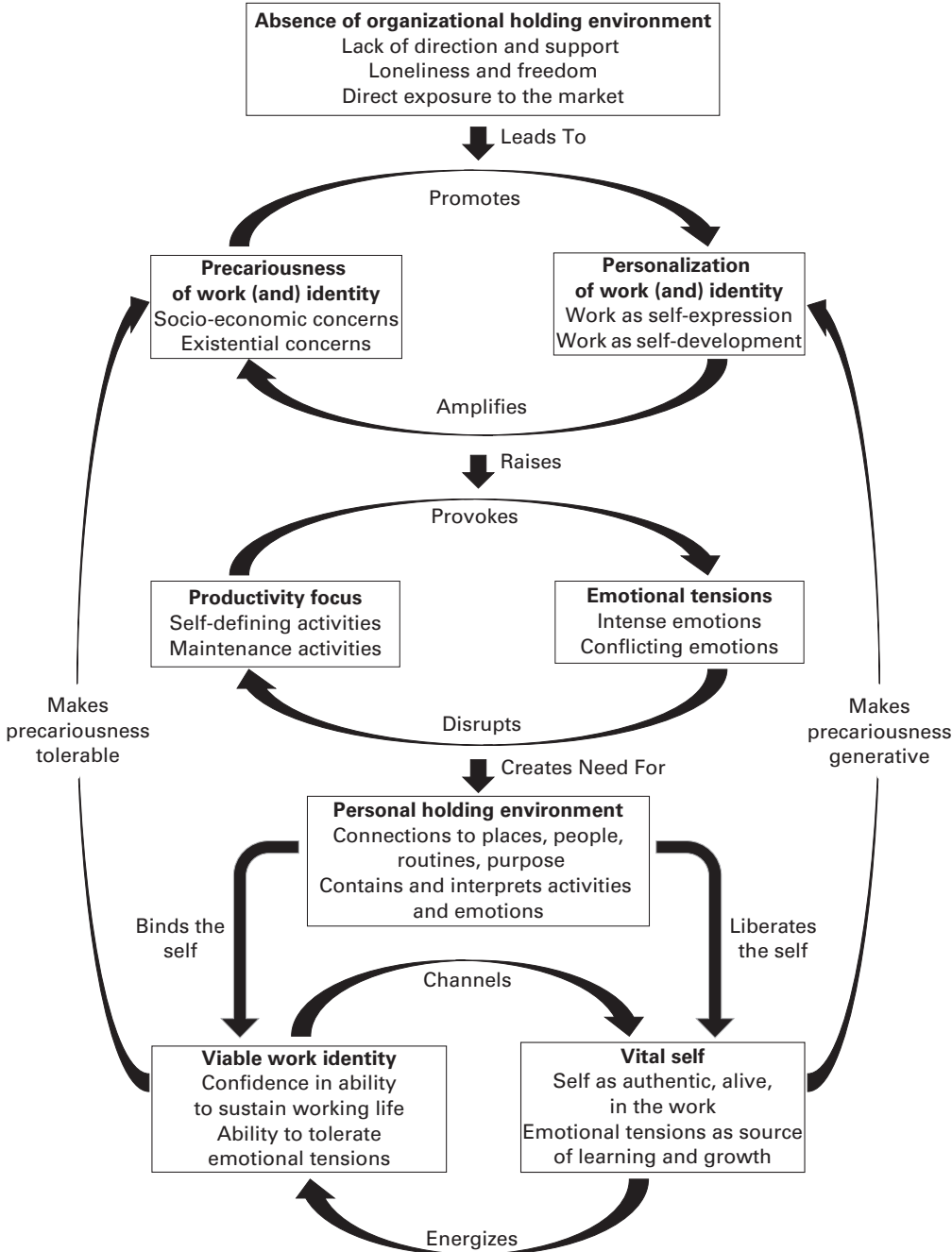
Absence of Organizational Holding Environment

The presence of an organization's absence, so to speak, loomed large in our participants' accounts of their working lives. Whereas many made reference to missing the benefits of organizational employment, the image of such employment that recurred in our data was an alienating one that stood in

stark contrast to independent work. In addition to the examples examined in this section, we provide more supporting data in table A1 in the Online Appendix.

Participants noted the lack of organizational direction and support in their current working conditions. One artist mentioned that he occasionally wished that he could work in a company "under somebody who would basically tell me what needed to be done. And the benefits would be a nice thing too" (#20). Reminiscing about his time in the newsroom of a media company, a freelance writer observed, "If I'm writing a piece that I know is going to get a lot of push-back, I'm not going to have anybody defending me on Twitter or Facebook. If you're at a publication you can write something unpopular, because the publication has your back" (#62).

Many participants acknowledged that organizations provide guidance, stability, and community, but only two reported seeking employment. The others denigrated organizational employment as demanding too high and too personal a price. "Being a cog at a huge organization is not a good fit for me," said one person. "Maybe I'll have to do it again someday, in which case I'll have to be heavily medicated" (#58). An alumna of a consulting firm described independent work as "detox" (#43). A software engineer described organizations as follows:

> One of the worst things about working in a corporation is the sense that they feel they own you. They would rather own something unproductive than have something productive but not under their control, and that's extremely depressing to me. I never wanted to feel my life was at the whim of my boss, and I always did. (#15)

Such portraits of organizations constraining productivity and stifling self-expression arose frequently and without prompting. And as the quotes above and below suggest, they had a caricatured quality. In the minds of most people we interviewed, organizations were places in which pay was secure, tasks clear, colleagues kind, and IT support efficient—while at the same time the structure was suffocating, bosses were controlling, and politics ran amok.

Participants often deployed these caricatures in contrast to the loneliness and freedom of independent work. One said, "Independent consulting can be at times a pretty lonely existence" (#53), using the word existence instead of job or occupation, in the way that the engineer above wanted to reclaim his life, not just his work, from his boss's control. One writer remarked:

> Working in an office you have a huge support system, even if it's just hanging around the Xerox machine. . . . You [don't] have this kind of loneliness and this idea that there's nobody out there, no safety net underneath you. You're gonna fall and fall, and nothing—no one—is gonna stop you. (#19)

An artist evoked the image of a cage to highlight his freedom by contrast. He also associated, in another peculiar turn of phrase that we encountered often, "to be" with "doing" his work:

> When I think of myself, I think of an animal that has been free his whole life and it could never be happy being put in a cage. I think of going to a regular job like being put in a cage. I feel free, I feel happy to be the way I'm doing it, and because I started

so young, that's the way I got used to. I could never see myself working for some-
body else. (#18)

One participant defined himself as a "refugee from the office" (#39). Several
offered variations of the statement "I'm not really your typical person" (#37).
Such claims seemed to convey that working independently was daring, uncon-
ventional, and freeing.

Without the buffer of an organization, however, participants were directly
exposed to the market, which was as volatile, in their accounts, as organiza-
tions were steady. "Fifty years ago, if you got an account and you serviced it,
you kept it forever," lamented a designer perhaps romanticizing the past.
"Now you get an account, and it's your account for that moment. They want
something new and different next season" (#22). One executive coach mocked
the frivolous nature of his industry: "People are dribbling inanities on LinkedIn
all day, every day, just to be visible. It's intellectual mercantilism run amok. It's
a popularity contest" (#49). But he immediately remarked how he could not
ignore the pressure to stay visible in that very market: "If any one of us didn't
keep poking out into the marketplace, face-to-face, virtual, visual, e-mail,
phone, it just goes out. [You need to] have an appetite to keep showing up phy-
sically and virtually in the world, to keep a presence" (#49). The workers we
studied were not marginal, liminal, or in transition between organizations. They
were firmly outside. At the same time, they drew on a caricature of employ-
ment to define themselves. Their position as outsiders demarcated a void that
led them, as we report below, to think deeply and feel strongly about what
their work meant to and said about them.

Precariousness and Personalization of Work and Identities

Precariousness of work and identity. A pervasive uncertainty about partici-
pants' ability to secure a steady stream of work and the identity that went with
it emerged from our data. "My metaphor for existing this way is one of imper-
manence and fluidity," (#53) said one consultant. Reports of precariousness
encompassed socio-economic and existential concerns.

Almost everyone expressed socio-economic concerns. Even established par-
ticipants reported uncertainty about making a living. One author of several suc-
cessful books remarked:

> There are times when I feel very secure, because I got a lucrative book contract. I
> see my income lined up for the next two and a half years. But even then, you're like,
> "Well, what if this bombs, and then I never get this again?" It's almost like, "Don't
> look down." You feel that you're not part of anything where anyone really cares
> about you. You could fall off the map, and no one would notice you didn't show up to
> work the next day. (#59)

Economic and social concerns were intertwined, as most participants were
aware of having to maintain a network or audience to procure and sell work.
One software engineer explained:

> It's all interrelated. I have clients who hired me for a tiny project that became a 12-
> month project where every single conversation you have with someone could make

or break the possibility of extending the project. And likewise, the whole network of people who might get referred to you, or the opposite, they could badmouth you. . . . (#6)

Social and economic concerns were also intertwined in that getting paid for one's work enhanced one's claim to a work identity. A writer explained why getting paid mattered as follows:

I describe myself as a writer if I've been paid for writing within a few months. When you get paid for writing, then you're a writer. Was I a writer when I was 15? I had boxes of notebooks filled with long tortured accounts of everything. Obviously I was writing and I wanted to be a writer, but I don't think I would have said I'm a writer. Getting paid to write, someone saying, "I will buy your s**t," that makes you the thing. (#58)

A deeper form of precariousness took the form of existential concerns about the stability of one's self-definitions and the meaning of one's work. One graphic designer with independent financial security, for example, mused, "I wouldn't have to work if I didn't want to. But how would I then define my life?" (#23). Similarly, a consultant noted:

Working outside the boundaries [of an organization] throws people sort of out on their own reconnaissance a little more obviously. I'm conscious of being very interested in thinking about the reasons why I work at all and the meaning of my work. It seems to be an issue that I find very important to think about. (#32)

The metaphor of being "on their own reconnaissance," which evokes exploring uncharted territory that demands alertness to potential threats, hints at a predicament common to the people we interviewed. Beyond their earning potential and social recognition, their work identity depended on the discipline and opportunity to continue working. Hence it could never entirely be settled.

"I don't know what I do. I can tell you what I'm doing right now," one participant told us. "I wrote a book, I guess I consider myself a writer. I write nonfiction that has to do with public policy and the government's failure to regulate businesses" (#27). The tentativeness in claiming the identity of "writer," again, contrasted with the precise account of her writing, suggesting where certainty might rest. Another writer noted that, despite having had enough commercial and critical success to guarantee that anything he wrote would likely get published, he harbored "a great fear of unraveling." As he saw it, he could not rest on his past accomplishments: "Yesterday's thousand words were yesterday's thousand words. It means nothing for today" (#21). Idleness, distractions, and market fluctuations, in short, were potential harbingers of losing one's work and the identity grounded in it, a predicament made more disturbing by participants' personal investment in both.

Personalization of work and identity. Participants described working independently as a personal choice suited to their personal history and inclinations. They portrayed their ways of working and the products of their work as reflections of their histories and preferences. Taken together, these themes suggest that they regarded work as an avenue for self-expression. As one participant

put it, ''I can be the most I've ever been myself in any job'' (#35). A coach said that he had no brand, only his name: ''The name is saying, take me as I am. I am who I am, the good and the bad'' (#54). One consultant described his fitness for and experience of independent work by drawing on a tale of growing up keenly aware of being smaller than most of his peers:

> [When I was employed,] my identity was the organization. Now it's me. And then there's a personality trait of people my size. We generally are louder, stronger, more obnoxious than people your height. I had a friend who was six foot ten. He was a business associate and we used to fly around together a lot on projects. And we were talking one day about how he grew up. . . . His mom and dad, before he went out to play, said, ''Don't hurt anybody.'' My mom and dad said, ''Kill them.'' It's a whole different thing. (#16)

Even more expressive than participants' choice and ways of working independently was the content of their work. Without an organization that mandated or directed it, all work reflected one's abilities and experiences. ''My work becomes almost something I give birth to, and it becomes a companion,'' an artist said. ''[It] brings memory of a time or a theme that you went through'' (#65). A consultant noted that people like her ''come to embody the work. It becomes part of our identity. It's who I am in the world'' (#52). Once work became so personal, however, others' feedback and one's own judgments often became self-referential. One writer explained:

> You become your work very much. If you write a good book, you're a smart person or a creative person. If you write crappy books, you're not very successful at it, and it wears you out. . . . It's not like, you know, if I sweep a floor and it's half swept I don't feel that bad about myself. But if it's a half-baked book, I feel crappy, you know? When you achieve it, it's really great, and when you didn't achieve it, quite frankly, it's a failure. And you have to be able to accept that and also [be] able to realize that that failure might define who you are to yourself. (#21)

As the quote suggests, depicting a polarity of emotions to which we shall return, personalization was a double-edged sword. Self-expression went hand in hand with exposure. Once you ''become your work,'' then its success and failure define ''who you are to yourself,'' not just to others.

Independent work afforded and demanded more than self-expression. Our analysis suggests that participants regarded work as an avenue for self-development, in the sense that it allowed them to overcome past challenges or limitations and to pursue their aspirations. Working was a way to become as well as to be oneself. An executive coach shared that she was dedicated ''to find out more facets of who I am, and who I want to be, and how I need to make that happen'' (#44). A consultant drew on his upbringing to cast the choice of independent work as one that pushed him to move beyond life lessons from his past:

> I grew up where not having work was a disaster. And yet I chose to put myself in a situation where occasionally work doesn't flow. I put myself at risk of experiencing the very disaster that my family feared. It is interesting that I got into independent work only after my father died. I had to make it mean something other than I was

inadequate or I failed when work didn't flow to me. And to do that, I had to break away from lessons that I had been taught at an early age. (#32)

That work could shape the self was also a double-edged sword. One could command one's working life and also be consumed by it. Speaking about how work had changed him, a writer compared the solitude of independent work with the solitary confinement of a prisoner of war:

I feel that [writing] made me a more serious person. Some people are probably con-stitutionally well-suited to a solitary life. I draw energy from people. So the solitari-ness is extra hard for me, and it has changed me. I've been thinking about it. When you hear about people who have been in, say, solitary confinement, like [U.S. Senator John] McCain, who is a much more extreme example, it changes them. Sixteen years of spending so much time by myself has changed me in ways that are good and bad. (#59)

The contrast between the heroic perseverance implied in this quote and the meaningless suffering associated with organizational employment captures a common sentiment in our sample. Despite all the exposure and demands it came with, participants stood by what they saw as a life choice. One photogra-pher said, ''[I had] decided that I'm going to be who I am and share myself in my work. We'll just see what happens that way'' (#33). What seemed to hap-pen, as we report in the next section, is that keeping one's work going became imperative—and emotional.

Producing Work and Identity amidst Conflicting Emotions

Our analysis suggests that the precariousness and personalization of partici-pants' work meant that all work was, in one way or another, identity work. Without an organization to provide direction and support—and given the free-dom to define why, how, where, and when to work—doing enough work, and the right kind of work, was associated with both anxiety and fulfillment, which were sometimes experienced separately and sometimes together. In addition to the examples we offer in this section, we provide more supporting data in table A2 in the Online Appendix.

   Productivity focus.   Staying productive was a constant preoccupation for participants. ''You have to be making stuff. The more productive you are the better you are'' (#42), said an artist. Some work activities, however, were more tied to the self than others. When we analyzed participants' accounts, a distinc-tion emerged between self-defining and maintenance activities. Self-defining activities were those in which participants expressed or developed themselves, usually appropriated as ''my work'' (e.g., coding, writing, drawing, helping cli-ents). ''You're not a writer unless you're writing,'' said one, ''whereas it's eas-ier to feel like you are a lawyer while you're walking to the courtroom or answering the phone'' (#41). Maintenance activities, often described with the more distant term ''admin'' (e.g., promoting one's services, doing background research, or billing), were those that helped support, advance, and capitalize on self-defining ones. ''It's really two different things,'' a photographer explained, elaborating:

What I do is photography while running a business at photography. Making a living off it is a lot different than going out and taking some pictures. . . . [Taking pictures] is where I feel that I come alive. I can be feeling tired, run down, but my client comes in, and it's like, I'm on. (#44)

Both kinds of activities were necessary to hold on to one's work and identity. Neither was sufficient. Success as an independent worker rested on engaging regularly in both. Asked about what success meant, participants often described a sense of ''working well'' before, and as more important than, the recognition of their products or services. One said:

The basic definition of success for me is, am I writing with vigor? Am I writing every day or almost every day? Am I writing to the best of my ability? Am I doing all I can to express this urge I have to explain the world in words? That's a basic definition that is separate from the question of publishing, making money, being qualified to teach and mentor younger writers. All those things mean a great deal to me too, but they would all be irrelevant if this first one were not taken care of. (#41)

At the core of being successful, the quote suggests, was a felt experience of the productive self—vigorously, regularly, and competently expressing an urge. Without this core, the financial and social recognition of one's work and abilities would lose their ''great deal'' of meaning.

The importance of being productive was a recurrent theme. It meant ensuring that one would ''come alive'' and also make a living, in the words of the photographer above. Being productive was a means to project and protect the self in one's work—to be *in* the work and be *at* work—or as one painter put it, ''to make this real and make it work'' (#25). Given such significance, productivity became a conduit for intense and conflicting emotions. Like a lightning rod of sorts, productivity attracted emotions brought to the surface by participants' circumstances, and it channeled them toward their work and identities in ways that could enrich or disrupt both.

Emotional tensions. Participants reported intense emotions ranging from anxiety to fulfillment brought to the surface by the precariousness and personalization of their work and identities. A writer described himself as ''one of those people who couples great love of the work that I do, with great anxiety about getting things done'' (#50). A software engineer put it this way:

It's really dramatic working alone, you know? It's really, really emotional work in a lot of ways. It's emotional because you own it, because you own your future. Every single day, you own your future. . . . You are so directly accountable for every single thing that you do that it's remarkably rewarding, and also very stressful. (#6)

A consultant claimed that the intensity and frequency of emotional oscillations were greater than those he had ever experienced as an employee, and he reflected on how they affected his work: ''[I was] in the corporate world for a long time, 13 years, and the range emotionally that I would experience is really nothing compared to my world since then. I can oscillate between optimism and futility in a day and frequently do'' (#55).

Accounts of hope, fulfillment, and ''losing oneself'' in doing one's work appeared repeatedly, as did anxious ones about ''losing it''—losing one's work and one's self—couched, on occasion, in the metaphor of death. One artist claimed that the most joyful, fulfilling moments in her work occurred neither before nor after she had produced a piece of work, but when she knew that she was being productive:

> The best time [is] when you're almost done with something, and you know it's good, and you're still in the process of making it. It's not the beginning, when you don't know. It's not the end, when it's over and you don't know if you'll ever make anything again. It's when you're almost at the end, it's good, and you feel good about yourself. (#42)

Being distracted and unproductive, conversely, was often associated with anxiety, self-blame, and the specters of failure and loss. One writer gave the following example of such anxiety:

> When I'm having those difficulties day after day and I'm avoiding working, and I'm wasting time, I say to myself, ''I just spent a whole week, and what did I do? Nothing.'' It's not just that I didn't do anything. It's that I lacked the discipline to make myself work through the problem. That is really depressing. And then I think, maybe I'm losing it as a writer. Maybe, maybe this is it. Maybe I'm—I can't do it anymore. That's a horrible feeling. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it, and I can't go back to sleep, and I have insomnia. (#19)

Note how this person, like others in our sample, intermingles ''not being'' and ''not doing it.'' We interpret those verbal associations as revealing the close bond between doing one's work and holding on to one's self. In a similar vein, one software engineer poignantly associated retirement with ''nothing''—and with death: ''[Retirement] means nothing to me; I kind of want to die in harness. I want to keep doing what I'm doing forever'' (#15). We interpret the locution ''to keep doing'' rather than ''to do'' as an expression of the ongoing nature of participants' identity work. In these workers' predicament, one never ''does'' and ''is'' once and for all. One must ''keep doing forever,'' which makes it hard to stop. As a writer put it, ''When I don't work for a week I get really nervous. It makes me feel better to work on something'' (#27).

If to stop being productive entailed feeling anxious about losing the work that defined the self, however, to work long and hard did not necessarily entail feeling fulfilled. Participants reported conflicting emotions when staying productive involved doing work that pitted their socio-economic needs against their existential needs. One coach described it as an ''internal war between my ego and my values'' (#58). A film director recalled the moment when one of his documentaries premiered after 12 years in the making:

> I remember standing in front of the hall of about 1,000 people, they're standing on their feet and they're applauding like crazy when the film is finished. You cannot stop them from applauding. The film is about a moving subject. It's not about me. So they didn't applaud me. They applauded the film. And I'm standing there and they applaud and I want to cry because I'm not sure I'm gonna pay my mortgage in a few days. I pay a high price for wanting to do what I want. (#37)

The existential fulfillment of producing work worth losing oneself in lived side by side with economic anxiety in this poignant moment. And in the last sentence, once again, the price was associated not with the work but with one's personal choices. Participants also expressed conflicting emotions in relation to the loneliness and freedom of their work. One consultant said:

> There's both constantly, excitement and anxiety. I'm doing a workshop for a high profile client in two weeks, and I'm very excited because I could have never imagined being able to do that two years ago, and at the same time I'm nervous about it. It's really both. I'm wondering how it's going to go, should I be doing it, and boy do I wish that I was doing it with someone else, if only I had my team at [employer] with me, but I'm glad that I'm on my own. It's everything together, even contradictory things that I'm feeling. (#43)

Personalization, in short, meant that losing oneself in the work was a way of fulfilling rather than of surrendering one's self. Precariousness meant that the same work could be lost, and so would the opportunities to express the self in it. And being productive, with all the emotion associated with it, was the means to make space for the former and escape the void of the latter.

Cultivating a Personal Holding Environment

Participants reported putting much effort into cultivating the conditions that would help them keep doing the work on which their identity rested. One consultant put it this way:

> The kind of community that's created for people with policies and procedures in the organization; that is the container I have to create for myself. I have to decide: what is the requisite structure that will keep me comfortable and buoyant and satisfied in my work, and neither create too much nor too little. That's one of the advantages of being external. I can decide that if I only need so much structure, I'll only create so much structure. (#32)

Lacking the guidance and support of an organization, the independent workers we studied cultivated a variety of connections that served as ''containers'' for their working selves and that configured, in our theoretical parlance, personal holding environments.

Participants cultivated four types of connections—to personal routines, to physical places, to significant people, and to the purpose of their work—that helped them stay productive and manage the emotions attendant in their work. Several described the aim of cultivating these connections with the metaphor of ''making space.'' In this they referred as much to a psychological and social space as to a physical enclosure for their work. One writer noted:

> Many creative people fail first of all because they don't create a space and time to do whatever it is they need to do. You absolutely have to be ruthless with your space. You have to create a space where you can work, where you will not be interrupted, and where you will be in the right mental frame to do whatever you need to do. (#19)

This quote illustrates a recurrent theme, that of creating rather than finding a space to work. ''I like structure,'' said a consultant, ''but it has to be my own

structure, my own discipline. I don't do well adapting to somebody else's''
(#61). We use the verb "cultivating" because participants' holding environ-
ments, our analysis suggests, were neither stable nor lasting. The connections
required tending and could be lost. Below we illustrate how each connection
"held" participants as they produced the work on which their identities rested,
and table A3 in the Online Appendix provides supporting data.

Connections to personal routines. Numerous participants described stick-
ing to daily or weekly routines to remain productive. Routines constrained and
focused participants' working selves. When they lost their routines, people
reported being distracted and distressed.

Routines constrained participants' working selves by demarcating the
boundaries of working time and bolstering their discipline. One writer described
routines as "the wardens of accomplishment" (#21). A consultant said:

> I keep the same routine [even] when I'm on the road: exercise, prayer, and then I do
> work in the morning when I'm at my best. The quality of my thinking is better and I'm
> more hopeful in the morning. It's simple things, like I always get dressed for the office.
> I don't sit around in my jammies or my exercise gear. . . . In summer I wear shorts
> when I'm not on the road but I still shower and shave as if I were going to a work place
> separate from home. The discipline makes sure that I don't get distracted. . . . It's a
> practice. It's an act that puts me into work mode. It says, this time is about work. (#55)

Routines also tied participants to work when their intrinsic motivation flagged,
helping them to keep up with tasks that supported more self-defining activities.
In doing so, routines attenuated the emotional distress associated with lack of
productivity. One painter, for example, reported going to the studio even on
days when his creativity stagnated, because "I know that I've at least put in
some hours. So there's sort of meaning that's built into it. I can rest my
Protestant guilt work ethic to say I did it. I might not have produced something
very good, but I gave it a shot" (#20). Thanks to the "sort of meaning" afforded
by routine, the day (and self) remained a working one.

While routines provided a buffer from distractions and distress, participants
also described them as conducive to the doing and being that they cherished
and with which they sometimes struggled. Somewhat like the meticulous
warm-ups that put athletes "in the zone" to perform at their best, routines
focused their working self so that they could be fully present in their work. A
consultant told us:

> I take a bath every morning . . . even if I'm in a hurry, because it's a way to set a
> space for the day. . . . I think that's a part of the reflecting and choosing. When I do
> that, it allows me to think about what do I want to choose, who do I want to choose
> to be today, and then whatever I have to do, I'm choosing how I'm doing it from a dif-
> ferent place. (#12)

Another consultant associated routines with space for the inner world to mani-
fest itself in work:

> My inner world, my imagination, my connection to my belief system and what I think
> is true, and my emotional life, all that is really important and grounding to me. It's

where ideas come from. . . . That's where it all comes from. That's another thing routine does for me. It gets me into a space that has me feeling like my inner life is available to me. (#56)

Further evidence for how routines help one be both disciplined and invested in work came from accounts of what happened when people could not follow routines. A software engineer, whose routine was daily bike riding, described how a break in this routine had made working long hours feel not like a productive expression but rather a form of self-deprecation:

I'd . . . go for a two-hour ride every morning, and I would come back and be so focused. My life has been stressful since [having an injury] because I don't have that outlet anymore. I struggle with the work, with structuring my time. I don't have to get out of the house. [I've had] really weird cycles, sort of self-deprecating cycles of overwork. (#6)

Those who could, in such circumstances, reached back to their routines. A coach noted:

When I'm feeling out of control, I get back to being very planful with a to-do list, checking things off and making sure that I'm prioritizing. . . . There are certain routines that I go to that make me feel good when I get lost. I go back to my little routines. I run these little routines, and that makes me feel like I'm not totally out there on my own. (#64)

Connections to physical places. Most participants described having a deep bond to specific workspaces that confined and evoked their working self. A software engineer described his home office as a ''fighter pilot cockpit''— portraying, perhaps unconsciously, his work as exciting and potentially dangerous—and noted the freedom and power he experienced there:

It's not very open and friendly, but I'm in my zone and everything is in arm's reach. . . . When I'm in that physical state, I'm like, I'm omniscient. It isn't really very relaxing. I didn't consciously set out to make it like that, but it wound up evolving that way just because I wanted everything at fingertip reach. Sometimes it's claustrophobic. Not usually. Usually when I'm there I'm in the space in my head more. The open space is in my mind, and the physical space is [tight]. (#15)

The interplay between tight physical space and a spacious psychological state in this comment featured in many descriptions of participants' workspaces. These places were often invested with an almost sacred reverence as locations conducive to concentration and hospitable to inspiration.

Similarly to routines, workspaces confined participants' working self, buffering it from distractions and distress that could erode productivity. One executive coach explained, ''[I have] a section of my home cordoned off as my office. When I'm done with my work, I move into another part of my home. When I get to my office area, I'm ready to produce. I'm ready to go to work. I have all I need at my fingertips. I'm at work'' (44). Describing his favorite workspaces, another coach associated the image of these places with reassuring productivity, relating them to the loneliness and freedom of independent work:

Participant: The places where I work best are the airplane or the train. You've got three hours, a piece of work—cranked, focused, not disturbed, unfettered, unsolicited. The most productive I am is on long-haul flights in business class. . . . I can visualize my seat on the Amtrak. I recognize the place in my brain and go, ''Oh, I know that I'm going to get some stuff done,'' and that makes me feel reassured.
Interviewer: Reassured from what?
Participant: From the craziness of being alone.
Interviewer: But you are alone on the train too, aren't you?
Participant: Well, it's confined. I can't get that distracted. My freedom is not unbounded. I keep finding ways to constrain my freedom. I have to force myself into these periods of high productivity through constrained environments. (#64)

Our analysis revealed that workspaces also evoked the participants' working self, helping them invest in their work. A writer who had used his city's public library as a workspace for 30 years defined it as ''a temple'' and added, ''I cannot think of being away from it.'' In his description, space and self were interwoven as the library became a symbol of and a place to experience the freedom that he cherished in his work:

It's absolutely inspirational, when you walk in . . . it says ''Free to All'' up there. Anyone can come in. So you come in, and it is a temple of knowledge; it was a temple built to the people of [city] by the people of [city]. And when you're in there it really represents the kind of idiosyncratic education I love. It's not the canon of curricula. When you go in, you make the curriculum. You follow one book to the next, to the next, to the next. (#21)

An artist articulately elaborated how she felt, and who she could be, in her studio:

[The studio] is a separate space where you're tapping into your making self or your creative self. When I open the studio doors it's almost ceremonial. I feel like, when you open the door, you are in the space. This is what you do in this space. For a sculptor in particular, our work is so large, generally messy, it's important to have a separate space, a place to be. . . . There's not a day that I come in here that I'm not aware of who I am, what I'm in, what I'm doing, what I want to say. (#65)

The last sentence of this quote illustrates the sequence of being, being in, doing, and expressing that rendered participants' work, at its best, a reflection and extension of the self. In contrast to accounts of workspaces that focused on how they separated work and home, these accounts emphasized how workspaces made participants feel at home in the work. One consultant said:

My office in my home creates an atmosphere. When I walk through that door and cross that threshold I step into a space that embraces all of the different aspects of myself. I feel at home in there. The look of it, the smell of it, everything is inside of me, but you can see it externally. It keeps all of the parts of myself in front of me. All those things that could happen if I decided to spend time and energy on them are right in front of me. (#56)

Like others, she claimed that it was impossible for her to do substantive work elsewhere:

> If I didn't have this space that is really carved out and dedicated and all mine, then I feel like I would be working in the dark. It would limit my ability to dream and give myself tasks. I would do whatever was right in front of me and most urgent. I wouldn't have the room to germinate and invite my attention and compost. (#56)

The quote suggests that what might dissipate without a personal workspace would not just be the boundary of the working self but also its capacity to remain productive and to dream work up.

Connections to significant people. All participants described people that they drew on for reassurance and encouragement. None of them had regular peer groups that anchored their work identity, and some recalled past disappointments with such groups. But most mentioned having select people with whom they initiated contact and how that contact was crucial to their productivity, creativity, and on occasion their sanity. One participant, for example, recalled that "someone tried to get a group of nonfiction writers going, for a monthly lunch. It seemed like a good idea to get everyone together and kind of recreate the camaraderie that none of us have. It was a disaster. It was no fun. It sucked. It was terrible." The gathering never took off, but he hastened to add, "I have one friend who's a writer. She's a woman whom I really think of as a colleague, and I talk to her a lot. That's the person I'll call for advice" (#59).

Connections with significant people bound participants' working self by reassuring them, soothing their anxiety. One coach said that she would reach out to friends when she was struggling with work because "friends are always better at being compassionate to me than I am to myself. It's a bit of a kindness infusion" (#48). Another designer described the reassurance and productivity boost provided by the interest her sister and a classmate had taken in her work:

> The fact that two Stanford MBAs seem to think [pursuing this work] is a good idea is a pretty good sign of hope. Because, you know, [otherwise] it would've been me like, flaky artist girl, like, "Oh, I'll sell cards to this person, that person." She did some financial predictions and was like, "You could actually make a living at this," which so inspired me to get off my butt and get going. (#7)

In this quote, her sister's predictions reassured her that her work was worth pursuing, which helped her keep the negative identity of "flaky artist" at bay.

Connections with significant people did not just soothe participants' emotional tensions; they also emboldened them to let those tensions inform their work. A coach described how a counselor had helped her embrace the uncertainty and angst about who she was:

> Five years ago I left my last role in an organization and had a crisis of who I was. I worked with a career counselor for almost a year. She helped me understand that, instead of seeing my career as this series of failures or experiments that didn't really go anywhere, I could think of myself, which now is the way I do think of myself, as more of a pioneer, working in a field that doesn't yet exist. . . . Since that realization I have become much more successful professionally, much more comfortable in my identity personally, it's easier for me to manage the cocktail party uncertainty because I'm like, "Yeah, I'm a pioneer. People don't know what I'm doing and that's actually part of what I'm doing." (#56)

The relationship with this counselor, it seems, had normalized her precariousness, reframing it as the experience of a pioneer, and that identity made uncertainty self-affirming. Similarly, a designer recalled a memorable conversation with his father, who had also been an independent worker. The designer had just turned down a commission because it was neither conducive to self-expression nor did it pay well. ''I said, 'Well, we have been refusing work.' He said, 'Wow, you just graduated, and now you're in, and it's really scary''' (#4). Graduating and being ''in'' as an independent worker, this connection helped the designer understand, did not come with relief or reassurance. Being really scared, it seems, was a kind of affirmation.

Without their most significant people, participants claimed, they would be more anxious and less daring. And when they felt that way, they often reached out. One filmmaker described her spouse as fundamental to staving off her anxious questioning on unproductive days:

> I usually have a Tigger personality, very high energy, and it's New York crazy. And [on a bad day] I feel like Eeyore. I am just low and nothing is going right, and I suck and I'm a failure. ''Why am I doing this? I have an MBA and I'm not making any money. Why am I so cheap? Why don't I rent an office?'' It's a total death spiral. The only way I get out of it is my husband, because he's like, ''You're doing awesome, tell me what you've done.'' And I'm like, okay . . . and then I stop. . . . He just picks me up when I'm feeling down. . . . He helps me recognize that I'm doing something and that I've made progress rather than just waiting for the Academy Award to roll in. (#40)

For this filmmaker, the reassuring and emboldening presence of the other person ''held'' her by reminding her of her productivity. Shifting her focus from awards to progress, he helped her defend against a sense of losing herself, again expressed through the metaphor of death.

Connection to a broader purpose. Several participants described a sense of purpose as the most important success factor for an independent worker. Purpose oriented and elevated participants' working selves. One executive coach captured these different facets as follows:

> A big distinction between successful business independents and the ones that go back [to employment] or aren't as successful, is when you can get to that place [where I] know what I'm meant to do. It gives me resilience for the ups and downs. It gives me the strength to decline work now that isn't in alignment or doesn't serve the greater purpose. It gives me a quality of authenticity and confidence that clients are drawn to. It's helpful to building or maintaining the business and serving the people I am here to serve. (#63)

Purpose oriented participants' work choices. One painter, for example, reflected on the importance of anchoring his work to the self first, rather than to external demands:

> [It's important] to find subjects that are vital to you. Emotionally, or spiritually, or whatever, it is very important. And not get hung up on subjects that are trendy or you think other people might want to buy. That's a very tough line to walk, but if

you're going to come in every day to work on something, it should have some grav-
ity. (#20)

A consultant's statement of her purpose tied her work to the needs of the
world at large: ''I want to see a world where leaders know how to and demon-
strate their ability to connect, engage, and inspire those around them.'' That
purpose, she explained, served as ''a barometer for work that I say yes to and
work that I say no to. I've turned several gigs away, because they did not line
up.'' In a previous stint as an independent worker, she recalled, ''I had work
when I wanted it and needed it. But it wasn't satisfying because I was just tak-
ing work that came to me.'' This time, she said—using a phrasing that tied self,
life, and work—she had a purpose that ''I will organize myself and my work
and my life around'' (#47).

A broader purpose elevated participants above their daily struggles onto a
place where they could grasp the broader impact and significance of their work.
A consultant to musicians summed up the contribution of his own composing
and mentoring of other artists:

> It was Ronald Reagan, who said—actually, it was Peggy Noonan [Reagan's speech-
> writer] who said through the mouth of Ronald Reagan—''America is a song culture.''
> That's how we get so much of our values. And I think it's important that I could influ-
> ence the culture through good songs. (#14)

Purpose also helped participants reframe their struggles. ''[When] you think
about the bigger picture,'' noted a freelance writer reflecting on his frequent
rejections, ''it really allows you to reframe failure in terms that go beyond 'I
wasn't good enough''' (#62). After describing a conversation that reminded her
of how meaningful her work was, a textile designer said:

> Basically, when you look at it, I make area rugs. I work on my hands and knees in my
> disgusting basement. But I don't care. I mean, Picasso worked in some paint-strewn
> studio and he's who he is, and I know I'm not ever gonna be that, but long after I die
> people are gonna have my rugs. And you know what? I'm not sure if that's what's
> important anyway. What's important is the self-fulfilling part of your work, and most
> people who work at some corporation don't have that. They're just a number. (#30)

Being reminded of the artistic purpose of her mundane, solitary activity, it
seems, made that work a form of self-expression that transcended both its
physicality and, for a sentence or two, her own demise. The image of personal
fulfillment, if not artistic immortality, was brightened with a contrast to the
allegedly impersonal nature of organizational work.

When participants lost their connection to purpose, they reported experien-
cing the emotional tensions we described earlier. One consultant recalled:

> I was looking for clients so [I took] this opportunity when it was presented. Part of it
> was the persuasiveness of the leader, but it was also a sense of desperation. Like,
> ''OK, I got to take this. I need a pay day.'' I think I had lost some of my sense of pur-
> pose. . . . Purpose is what it's all about, and in the absence of it, I experience tremen-
> dous depression. (#55)

The absence of purpose, this quote suggests, turned desperation for money into a more personal and pervasive form of suffering, a depression of sorts.

These different types of connections kept participants from experiencing an unproductive, unfulfilled self—full of anxiety and unable to work—and helped them experience a productive and fulfilled one. By removing distractions and attenuating distress, these connections bound the self to work enough for participants to remain productive. By helping them to invest fully in their work, the connections liberated the self to treat work as an expression of the self rather than a reaction to external demands. A consultant put it as follows:

> There's a sense of confidence that comes from a career as a self-employed person, you can feel that no matter how bad it gets, I can overcome this. I can change it. I can operate more from a place of choice as opposed to a place of need. . . . It may be mythology, but I think as an employee, there's a sense that because you need this job, you're coming from a place of need as opposed to a place of real choice. (#61)

It is worth noting how this consultant catches herself offering a mythologized account of employment and yet deploys it anyway as a contrast that reinforces the value of her choice.

When participants lost a sense of those connections, they described what another consultant termed "the dark night of the soul" (#9). They experienced the full force of emotional tension, and their productivity flagged. When "I don't see any connections with anything anywhere," noted one more consultant, "I'm impatient, agitated, emotionally disturbed" (#12). In the long run, such experiences might lead one to seek the cover of an organization, as the experience of a consultant who was in the process of starting a company illustrated. This is how he motivated his choice to let go of independence:

> Here I was, week after week, on the road, in these hotels, at these clients, alone, alone, alone, alone, with an occasional associate who would come. I got very lonely, and I started to feel depressed. I started to feel depressed in my loneliness, and all of that together led me to believe: A, I want to build an annuity value and an asset that I can rely on later in life; B, I want to focus on one or two topics, and; C, I'd like to have a really good team of people with whom I can journey into this last phase of my career. (#63)

In short, continuing to cultivate connections helped participants work through those "dark nights"—not avoiding them but owning them as part of their identity and as a choice rather than as a threat (in that present hurt did not imply future harm)—and allowed them to experience uncertainty and still feel confident in the future. The space that holding environments afforded appeared to be not just one of safety and familiarity but also one of openness and possibility. "It's not comfortable but it's possible," said one consultant (#56). Another stated, "You don't want things to get too settled, because then it feels like you're not introducing yourself to enough new opportunities to learn, in order to keep your edge. You want a certain amount of unsettledness, and at the same time, you want to be able to sort of plan out a future" (#13). In such moments their work identities felt viable and their selves vital. Table A4 in the Online Appendix offers additional supporting data.

Identity Viability and Vitality of Self

Viability of work identity. The viability of a work identity is the perception that one has the ability, and will likely continue to have it, to produce the work that keeps one's work identity going. We infer, based on participants' recollections, that holding environments helped them to manage emotions, remain productive, and, over time, develop an identity that could withstand emotional tensions. One explained how his view of what being an artist meant had changed over time:

> You're more idealistic up front. You have a passion and the idea that passion will carry you to success. As you get into it, you realize how much work there is to do. It's not as romantic as people think, being an artist. . . . The naïveté is a bit of protection against what you're going to encounter, the ups and downs, and hopefully when reality hits you, you have enough experience to be able to say, "I can deal with this. I can pick myself up. I can move on. I can have a better afternoon, because my morning sucked." You work out ways of working through it. You feel good about yourself for being able to do that. (#60)

Confidence in the ability to sustain one's working life was a cherished accomplishment and an antidote to the precariousness of participants' work and identity. One executive coach described the evolution of her work identity. At first, she recalled, "it was really just a personal challenge to say, 'I'm a coach,' when I felt like, 'How do you claim that? You're just starting out.' I found a way to tell the story over time." What made that story viable and satisfactory, she went on to suggest, was the ability to stick with work that fit it:

> When I started out, if you breathed, you could be my client. Now my biggest challenge—because I'm extremely fortunate, and I really specialize—is to just do things that I want to do. I have a tendency to chase after shiny objects that look interesting. I must be disciplined about really trying to both define and stick to my knitting. The more I do that, the happier I am. . . . I've developed that muscle a bit over time, to be able to say, "That's very nice of you to ask me, let me offer you some names of people who do this." (#48)

The discipline to say no to assignments that would stir up emotional tension was, for many, a marker of success. For some, this discipline included detaching from critics. One writer said:

> I've learned over time that the external validation is ultimately hollow. And chasing it is almost corrosive to the soul. The reviews, the sales rank, all the Twitter stuff, there's not value added intellectually to me. It doesn't feel fulfilling. It's not happy making. . . . I worked a ton over time to try to get off that rollercoaster as much as I can. (#59)

Not all emotional tensions, however, could be avoided by rejecting activities and perspectives that were likely to provoke them. Hence the theme of being able to tolerate emotional tensions recurred in our interviews, especially among participants who had been working independently for longer. "So much of who

you become as a writer has to do with your emotional maturity,'' said one (#50). Reflecting on his journey, a software engineer said:

> I've worked on this a lot, and I'm not going to kill myself. I was a lot tenser when I was younger. I wasn't as mellow. I would get more upset more and more angry, and more manic. ''I have to get this done, I'll drink a pot of coffee,'' type of thing. Now I'm like, ''It's not worth it, it happens all the time, that's how life is.'' (#2)

Drawing on a challenging youth and the experience of counseling, a designer described how she had developed ''a lot of emotional coping skills'' that came in handy as an independent worker:

> In a lot of ways, that is the biggest thing that I can bring: calmness in the face of what feels very uncomfortable. Even just being able to say, ''Yeah, this situation is really s**t and, no, we shouldn't call [a client] up and tell them x, y or z.'' . . . I would prefer that this wasn't one of the job skills I need, but it is. (#5)

Even one participant who had started working independently only recently glimpsed that this was a task he would need to master. ''I'm new at this,'' he noted, ''and being rejected is not something that I have learned to live with yet. You have to live with a lot of that'' (#8).

The internalized capacity to stave off distractions and contain the emotions that independent work entailed helped people experience their precariousness as tolerable. Their confidence in the sustainability of their working life was often bolstered, and in turn perhaps sustained, by comparisons with organizational employees. Several people we interviewed noted that independent work had forced them to develop a mindset and skills that made them safer in, and put them at the forefront of, the contemporary world of work. One consultant said:

> There was a time, 20 years ago or whatever, where if you were doing a good job in a reasonably good company, you had pretty good job security. That's no longer the case in any company. . . . [Consultants] who are any good at what they do are actually more stably employed than just about anybody else. (#53)

Vitality of the working self. The vitality of the working self is the sense that one can be fully alive in one's work. This perception sustained the personalization of participants' work and identity. Experiences of being present, authentic, and enlivened by work were another accomplishment participants cherished. ''I love this kind of work,'' said one coach. ''I feel much more alive and authentic and honest and joyful doing it'' (#54). Another put work at the center of a life well lived:

> I see that life is work and work is life, and that a life well lived is a life where you're doing your passion and you're doing what you love. Life and work to me are melded into one. When I wake up in the morning, it's not like, ''Okay, I was in my life, now I go to work.'' It's actually ''My work is my life, and my life is my work.'' . . . [People] like me have passion for what they do. They don't separate it. There's an aliveness that accompanies work. It's learning my craft, reading about it, delivering it, being with people. That gives me life. Life is the ongoing journey of becoming my craft. (#64)

That journey of becoming might be life-giving, but it was not always pleasant. As another participant remarked, ''I love that vulnerable, humble feeling. Where you're out of your depth and you're learning something really exciting. I love that. But it's extremely excruciating. I can break into a sweat sometimes because I'm trying so hard to just think'' (#24). A consultant said, ''I am so blessed to be able to bring my own unique experiences, passions, talents, and suffering together for the benefit of others.'' He went on to describe a crucial shift in his emotional life: ''I had a significant breakthrough when I shifted my internalized sense of suffering from something that caused me to be hopeless, to being hopeful. I realized that the suffering made me incredibly strong and that it was important for me to include that in my work'' (#55).

Over time, it seems, participants' holding environments helped them interpret emotional tensions as sources of learning and growth. Casting those tensions not as temporary disturbances but as valuable features of their working lives, participants appeared to develop a self that neither needed nor wanted too firm a definition and was freer because of it. Describing his early wish for the reassurance of status, and a fellow artist's reaction to it, one painter recalled:

> [Seven years ago] I was picked as the best emerging artist in [major city], and I had been in an emerging artist show at [museum] in [year] also. At that time, an artist who was already making it in the gallery world said to me, ''Welcome to Limbo.'' And I said, ''No, not me! Not me! This is the beginning and I'm onward and upward.'' But I see what she meant now. (#25)

Years later, that same rejected feedback had become his own conviction. ''There is no arriving,'' he conceded, ''that's a myth''—a recognition that likened the self and its ongoing work to the kind of artwork he was fondest of and described as follows: ''. . . a piece of art is at its best when it's kind of open and suggesting; its possibilities are there, but they're not there to the point of being so finished that they're dead. It's like there's a certain amount of discovery left in it for the viewer, too'' (#25). This theme included mentions of failure as formative of one's work and identity, as well as necessary to learn to live within the fluidity of independent work. An artist gave a lengthy account of how she came to cherish the elusiveness of clear definitions for her self and work:

> I think of opportunities that could have put me on a [different] path, like getting into a big fancy gallery in New York early on. I don't know if I would be the same artist today. That sense of struggle, and searching for who I am and what I want to say, I don't know that I would have reached hard enough if those early doors opened. . . . It was so disgustingly exciting. This was pre-children, pre-marriage. I worked crazy hours, just dedicated myself like a crazy lady. It felt completely honest, and completely truthful, completely real. I was so poor, sometimes I didn't even know how I was going to go grocery shopping. Something would come up. A random person would buy a little sculpture, and I'd go shopping. It kept flowing. To this day, people want clear artist statements, ''This is what my work is,'' and I think, ''I can't do that.'' What I can say is that it's fluid from beginning to end. If you work in an honest way and you're making work that is meaningful to you, and hopefully meaningful for others, that has to be the foundation of everything. . . . It's a terrific journey, from year to year, so revealing of yourself and of the way the world is. (#65)

In this quote, struggle and fluidity are not just cast as manageable or tolerable but as ''disgustingly exciting'' and necessary to one's honesty and self-discovery in the work. A consultant echoed this: ''The dark side of [independent work] is the struggle, the not knowing, being with the pain of it. You have to stay with it, is what I've learned in the past 3 years. You have to stay there and be willing to go into the abyss'' (#34).

The capacity to experiment and reframe the emotions that independent work engendered as energy for their work helped people experience precariousness as generative. Toward the end of our interview with the coach who had come to see herself as a ''pioneer,'' we asked if she regarded her working life as precarious. ''Since re-imagining my identity as a pioneer I don't know that I would frame it as precariousness anymore. I would instead frame it as just really living'' (#46). A consultant said, ''I feel comfortable in my own skin. I might always be playing with the edge of my expertise because that's what I like to do. I always like to be learning and experimenting with something new, but I feel a lot of confidence in doing that'' (#56). She concluded, once again comparing herself with employees, that independent work was a healthier kind of risk:

> [Working independently] is taking a risk but really creating the life that you most want. I'm betting that makes me a healthier person—physically, mentally, and emotionally. I believe that I am much healthier than I would be if I worked in an organization. (#56)

By transforming emotional tension into a tolerable and valuable aspect of their lives, personal holding environments redeemed these workers' loss of organizational ones and perhaps sustained portraits of the latter as secure yet deadly places. They made participants' exposure a source of learning, their vulnerability a marker of courage, and their struggle less of a product of circumstances and more of a personal choice. If they could not be free without risking falling apart, they could at least, over time and on the best of days, fall apart productively.

DISCUSSION

Organizations typically serve as identity workspaces for their members (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Organizational socialization shapes people's identities (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Pratt, 2000) and emotions (Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999), and leaders, peers, and cultural scripts anchor members' identities and help buffer them from anxiety (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960). Our study of independent workers revealed that lacking the anchors and buffers that an organization provides renders work identities precarious and personalized. Deprived of the constraints and comforts an organization can offer, these workers found themselves in a void that clarified who they were not—organizational members—but left it up to them to define who they were in a predicament characterized by loneliness, freedom, and unrelenting direct exposure to the free market. Such a void engendered intense and sometimes conflicting emotions that people attempted to fill by producing work that reflected and bolstered the self. Our theory suggests that the active cultivation of a personal holding environment is crucial to managing these emotions so

that they enrich rather than drain independent workers' productivity and their identity.

For the workers we studied, emotional tensions were not a stage on the path toward identity clarity (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008) or equanimity achieved by identifying with a collective (Hogg, 2007) and partaking in the defenses it provides (Jaques, 1955). They were a recurring experience to be reckoned with. The distractions and anxiety brought to the surface by weak or absent holding contrasted with the focus and fulfillment that holding seemed to make possible. Containment kept emotional tension at bay and let purposeful work continue uninterrupted. Interpretation reframed emotional tension as intrinsic to and valuable for people's working lives, and it cast one's work as a choice and a reflection of the self rather than a reaction to others' demands. What was held, then, was the person as he or she produced work that defined, expressed, and developed the self.

Our findings suggest that personal holding environments comprise four kinds of connections—to routines, spaces, people, and purpose—that provide the containment and interpretation that keep the self bound to work and liberate it through work. Through constraining, confining, reassuring, and orienting the self, these connections help to contain people's activities and emotions and thus bind the self to work. This facet of connections helps people remain productive and sustains the viability of their work identity. Through focusing, evoking, emboldening, and elevating the self, these connections help people interpret their activities and emotions and thus liberate the self through the work. This facet of connections helps them remain inspired and sustains the vitality of their working self. A viable identity, in turn, makes precariousness tolerable, in that one has enough capacity to keep working through it. A vital self makes precariousness generative, in that one has enough freedom to keep growing through it. Viability of identity and vitality of the self also sustain a caricature of organizations as controlling and alienating, thereby reinforcing the sense that more is gained than lost in their absence, and in so doing, transform a potentially deadly void into a creative space.

Our model focuses on why and how independent workers cultivate holding environments and how these affect their work and identities. It does not imply that everyone succeeds in cultivating one or that people craft one once and for all. Our findings suggest that when people lose the connections that hold them, their precariousness becomes intolerable and their efforts feel futile. We contend that all four types of connections are needed to hold viability of identity and vitality of the self in balance, and our findings also suggest what might occur when one or more are lost. A predominance of connections with routines and places, which in people's accounts more often appeared to bind rather than liberate the self, might result in a viable identity without enough of a vital self. The person might feel stuck, bound in the work but lacking a sense of possibility or growth. A predominance of connections with people and purpose, which appeared to liberate more than bind, might result in a vital self without enough of a viable identity. The person might feel inspired and free yet unable to get work done. In the absence of holding, we contend, precariousness leaves participants uncertain and exposed, driving them to yearn for the cover of an organization.

Theoretical Contributions

Our study makes important contributions to the literatures on identity and emotions, systems psychodynamics, and independent work.

   Identity and emotions. We contribute to the identity literature by exploring the unfolding of identity work in the absence of an organization that serves as its referent and host. If studying identity work within collectives has highlighted the reassurance and esteem afforded by achieving optimal distinctiveness within those collectives (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006), our study of such work in the absence of a collective highlights the nature and management of emotions associated with striving for optimal dynamism, that is, a balance between viability of identity and vitality of self. A viable identity, we theorize, gives the self enough boundaries and stability. A vital self retains the spontaneity and energy to transcend and reshape those boundaries in the face of possibilities. Our focus on optimal dynamism here, driven by our findings, does not imply that optimal distinctiveness does not matter to those who work independently, just like the focus of prior research on optimal distinctiveness does not mean that optimal dynamism might not be significant for organizational members. Rather more modestly, we argue that the struggle involved in striving for optimal dynamism is a salient focus for independent workers. This struggle is marked by the existential emotions that accompany it and may be managed but perhaps never resolved.

   While scholars have suggested that the resolution of conflicting emotions is necessary to sustain (Creed, DeJordy, and Lok, 2010) or repair (Petriglieri, 2015) identification, they have generally treated positive or negative emotions as signals of people's success or failure, respectively, to achieve a desirable degree of overlap between their identities and those demanded or offered by a collective (Burke, 1991). The types of emotional experiences that have attracted the attention of work and identity scholars have typically been rooted in organizational flux of various kinds, from organizational change (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001; Christensen and Hammond, 2015) to disruptions in the stability of or criteria for membership (Bartel and Wiesenfeld, 2013), to threats to the organization itself (Grandey, Krannitz, and Slezak, 2015; Petriglieri, 2015). Emotion is then treated as an outcome associated with disturbances to or within the organizational atmosphere. Our study corrects this over-focus on the organization in the experience of work by documenting the management of emotions that have been neglected or assumed to be resolved once identity is moored in membership (Van Maanen, 1998).

   The anxiety and fulfillment our study foregrounds were less social and more existential than those revealed by identity scholarship focused on adaptation or resistance to a collective, such as an organization. Participants' anxiety and fulfillment had less to do with inclusion or status in a social system and more with facing the market alone with their work, and with their work alone. The loss they feared was of a vital self rather than of valued others. The accomplishments they prized were endurance and freedom rather than safety and status. The successful management of those emotions did not dissipate them but rather transformed them into fuel for ongoing work and identity work. These findings complement research that has put resolution of emotional tension as

the cardinal accomplishment of identity work (Winkler, 2016), showing instead that holding emotional tension may be necessary to do personalized work.

Shifting focus to the holding of emotional tensions in relation to efforts to craft viable identities and vital selves, we contribute to an emerging view of identity as an ongoing process (Giddens, 1991), a flow rather than a possession (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012), and stability as the exception rather than the norm in organizing (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Our study points to the limits of the metaphor of identity ''construction,'' with affiliations (or roles) as building blocks and emotions as signs of (in)stability but never ongoing features (Winkler, 2016). Construction might be possible only when identity is solid enough. When identity is fluid, as for the people in our study, the important questions become how to contain it, how to conserve it, what might consume it, and what keeps it flowing. We tackled these questions describing the conditions that keep the flow of identity smooth and generative rather than turbulent or sterile.

Scholars have suggested that the uncertainty and anxiety of contemporary life often lead people to seek refuge in the certainty of totalitarian groups and ideologies (Hogg, 2007; Standing, 2011). Our study marks a different and more hopeful path to deal with those experiences, documenting workers' courageous refusal to surrender to despair and the conditions that make such refusal possible. Not all the tension the workers we studied experienced was due to conflicting emotions. Some of their anxiety was univocal, associated with concerns about not getting, or losing, work that had both socio-economic and existential value. Nevertheless, our findings about conflicting emotions provide empirical evidence for conceptual arguments that such conflicts are frequent and pervasive for workers lacking strong attachments to organizations (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016) and affirm propositions that such ambivalence is not always dysfunctional but can be actively sought as a means of promoting personal growth (Ashforth, Rogers, and Pratt, 2014) and even wisdom (Weick, 2004). Our data contribute by describing the process through which ambivalence may become a source of vitality. In doing so, we also broaden the view of vitality as a positive feeling of having energy available (Spreitzer et al., 2005) by incorporating in the concept the generative potential of a broader range of intense and at times conflicting emotions and showing its role in the maintenance and development of identities.

Systems psychodynamics. This paper enriches theoretical conceptualizations of holding environments at work (Kahn, 2001) and of their role in identity development (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). We are the first, to our knowledge, to examine how workers cultivate holding environments when they lack organizational ones and to document how these environments' functions—the containment and interpretation of emotions and activities (Shapiro and Carr, 1991)—occur in this context. If the rise of identity research results from a historical moment when identities are more frequently accomplished than ascribed (Baumeister, 1987; Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas, 2008), scholars need to understand how people cultivate the conditions within which they accomplish identities. Our study illustrates how connections to routines, places, people, and purpose support the emotional management and ongoing

productivity that underpin viable identities and vital selves. In doing so, we expand extant scholarship on holding environments.

In Winnicott's (1964) theorizing, the holding environment facilitates the emergence of a coherent self from a feeling, acting, thinking body in Mother's arms. The containment of emotion and activities, and the interpretation of experiences and gestures, lets a child come to regard him- or herself as a separate, bounded being. When Winnicott's "Mother" is good enough, the self acquires its first attribute: truth. A more precise way to define the somewhat vague and controversial (Ibarra, 2015) concept of a "true self" (Winnicott, 1965), we contend, might be as the viable identity of a vital self. "True" is the accomplished identity of a self that can tolerate being alone, feels in charge of its actions, and is courageous enough to explore the world. Thus our study marries Winnicott's theorizing with what happens to adults when they cultivate a "good enough" set of connections to persevere and thrive while working outside an organization.

Much like Winnicott's good-enough Mother, what seemed to matter for the workers we studied was not that those connections were always there but that they were available when needed. Furthermore, the holding we documented seems close to the kind Winnicott described—intimate, personal, and potentially fragile. It hardly resembled the more stable and institutionalized, if unreliable and impersonal, kind that participants reported having experienced in organizations. While our study might imply that independent workers create only a surrogate for an organizational holding environment, we suggest a more provocative possibility: perhaps organizational holding is the surrogate of a personally cultivated one instead.

Extant conceptualizations of holding environments at work have assumed their existence within an organization and have articulated how holding within them soothes employees' distress, focuses their attention, and allows them to return to the performance of their role (Kahn, 2001). Such conceptualizations, somewhat like Winnicott's, locate safety in the holder's arms and excitement out in the world. Our focus on a different kind of holding environment from those studied to date, however, allowed us to revisit another aspect of the clinical conceptualization to which management scholars have paid less attention: namely, that the aim of holding environments is not always to socialize those who receive the holding by inducing conformity to norms through sensegiving and inducing reassurances of belonging through affirmation. Their function is often the opposite: to challenge people to question, experiment with, and transcend their self-definitions (Kegan, 1982). Some kinds of holding might yield risk-taking and excitement as well as soothing distress. Within the holding environment, Winnicott (1975b: 297) wrote, a person's true self "may at last be able to take the risks involved in starting to experience living." This liberating function, portrayed in Winnicott's original theorizing and elaborated in research on human attachment from Ainsworth (1979) onward, is one that our findings highlight. It is not psychological safety that our study brings to the fore, but tolerable and generative precariousness that, if held, creates potential for growth. Seen this way, holding environments are a different resource than organizational practices that support a climate of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Baer and Frese, 2003). The connections independent workers forged did not provide psychological safety that made identification feasible and desirable.

They served a diametrically opposed function, constituting a holding environment that made individuation in the absence of a collective possible.

Our participants' eloquent accounts of the joys and burdens of independent work represent an expression of the broader predicament of making a living and crafting lives in the gig economy. In this context, an organizational system is absent, and thus workers face the necessity of creating a system of their own, lest the only system they are in relation to be the vast and unbounded one of the free market. Our story might not feature organizations (other than as ghosts of the participants' imagining), but it does feature organizing. It is organizing that lets people create the space they need to get their work done and express themselves, and it helps them experience some emotions and defend against others. If traditional systems psychodynamic theories cast the role as the interpretive lens, emotional lighting rod, and expressive avenue for the self in organizations (Kahn, 1990; Triest, 1999), our study suggests that work productivity has a similar significance for those working outside the confines of a collective: it helps people define, express, and develop their selves. We thus take systems psychodynamics research beyond the confines of organizational roles where its seminal insights were developed (Trist and Bamforth, 1951; Menzies, 1960; Miller and Rice, 1967), while remaining within the conceptual bounds of its concern with the interplay between work tasks and emotions (Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999). Sociologists have portrayed workers outside organizations as largely deprived of alternative communities and shared ideologies (Kalleberg, 2009) that could serve as social defenses (Menzies, 1960), with the only notable exception being discourses praising the value of self-discovery (Potter, 2015) or self-reliance in the free market (Lane, 2011). Our findings echo these views and yet reveal that workers cannot always deploy such redemptive narratives. Thanks to a systems psychodynamic lens, we have provided a theory of the arrangements that help people frame independence as a choice and manage the resulting struggle productively.

Independent work.   For all the sensationalism surrounding the gig economy, academic studies focusing on independent work are still rare. Our findings respond to recent calls for richer accounts of, and theorizing on, the lives of people who work independently (Barley, 2016). They complement Barley and Kunda's (2004) observations on the experience of technical contractors crafting an identity as itinerant professionals. Like Barley and Kunda's workers, ours expressed discontent with the constraints of organizational life, framing their working conditions as a liberating choice. For our workers too, ''independence required interdependence'' (Barley and Kunda, 2004: 221) and connection to others. In contrast to contractors, however, the challenge for the independent workers we studied was not positioning themselves in relation to more stable employees and learning ''to live with their liminality'' (Barley and Kunda, 2004: 288). It was putting their personal roots in wholly different ground. Nor did they respond to their predicament by identifying more with occupational peers (Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno, 2016). They chose instead connections that had more to do with support and inspiration than common titles, credentials, and roles.

We found few parallels between the experiences of the workers we studied and those of teleworkers, who are physically but not contractually untethered

from organizations. This might be due to the fact that most research on tele-work considers its impact on workers' outputs rather than on their experience of work (e.g., Shamir and Salomon, 1985; Storey, Salaman, and Platman, 2005). But a recent study, in an intriguing parallel to ours, found that in organizations in which telecommuting is common, the office comes to be perceived as an impersonal, barren, and meaningless place (Rockmann and Pratt, 2015). Perhaps when employees invest in holding environments outside the office, the office is less likely to be perceived as one and becomes a distant repository of disowned negative feelings about work.

Our study also expands observations that independent work, while potentially less alienating than work in an organization, can also be more consuming. Independent workers tend to work longer hours (Barley and Kunda, 2004), and working conditions meant to free people up often end up facilitating the intrusion of work into their personal lives (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates, 2013). Our findings suggest that the emotions associated with independent work might be a reason. Without an organization, not to work is to potentially put one's work identity at risk on a daily basis. The alternative self to that of a fulfilled worker is not an alienated one, in this case, but one without a working identity and an avenue to express the self at all.

Generalizability, Limitations, and Future Research

Generalizability. Our insights cast light on a growing population of workers who labor independently and whose work has a personal component. A recent report by McKinsey & Co. (2016) estimated the number of independent workers to exceed 160 million in the U.S. and Western Europe. While the media has focused on low-skilled workers operating through technology platforms (e.g., Uber), the report suggested that the vast majority of independent workers are in the kinds of knowledge-intensive and creative occupations we studied. It is to this ''silent majority'' of the independent workforce that our theorizing, with all the caution necessary for an inductive study, might most readily apply. Naturalistic generalizability (Stake, 2000) suggests that such workers' identities become precarious and personalized, setting off the process we described. But employees at knowledge-intensive firms with whom we have shared our findings often react with ''I feel the same way!'' Such anecdotal observations suggest that our work might have theoretical generalizability (Firestone, 1993) to some workers who labor within organizations.

Sociologists have argued that the ''new economy'' (Sennett, 2006) is structured into a dual labor market, segregated into a primary market comprising secure work bundled into ''jobs'' and ''careers'' and a secondary market comprising insecure work contracted as needed (Sweet and Meiksins, 2013). Whereas the latter was once confined to low-paying manual labor, it has expanded into the enclaves of white-collar ''knowledge work'' (Alvesson, 2001), so that ''insecurity has spread throughout the economy and affects a widening spectrum of workers'' (Sweet and Meiksins, 2013: 75). Our findings might be relevant for workers who labor in insecure arrangements, have little organizational identification, have high autonomy, and/or view work as an avenue of self-expression. This description captures a growing segment of employees for whom organizations are less significant as sources of

identification and who tie their work identities to more-proximal and reliable anchors, such as their abilities or close colleagues (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008).

   Limitations and future research. Our research shares limitations common to studies in which theoretical insights are gleaned from a distinctive sample with inductive qualitative methods. Our sample was not a naturally occurring group; rather, we built it to meet theoretical criteria, and it drew on a relatively privileged population of creative and knowledge workers. We studied individuals who claimed to bear the burden of precariousness due to their choices and to whom work granted plenty of opportunities for personal expression. This opportunity may not be available to all independent workers. In fact, we speculate that a marker of privilege in the fluid workplaces of this day and age might be experiencing precariousness as liberating rather than just anxiety-provoking. Workers engaged in production and service work, for example, might have different experiences. Though we expect that the absence of an organization gives rise to emotions similar to those we observed, the connections that hold them might have less to do with liberating a creative spirit and more to do with keeping the self at work. Future research might fruitfully investigate whether these workers still strive to personalize their work or whether they invest more in non-work activities. Furthermore, we did not compare the experiences of independent workers with those of a sample of organizational employees. Although we drew on past research about the latter, any parallels and contrasts we speculate about need to be revisited empirically.
   We also studied the experience of independent workers at one point in time. Future research over a longer period might gain a different and valuable vantage point on the process we describe, illustrating the evolution, establishment, and dissolution of holding environments. Similarly, other studies might consider the extent to which independent workers draw on broader cultural discourses (Gerber, 2015)—for example, that of the struggling artist—to bolster their identities, or to what extent these dynamics are similar in cultures in which independence is less of an ideal and belonging to collectives is more highly prized (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).
   Interpretive psychodynamic theorizing of the kind we employed in this paper has long been known to offer rich and holistic, if sometimes not precise, accounts of the cognitive and emotional underpinnings of individual and organizational phenomena (Westen, 1992). We have resisted the suggestion that the sacrifice of precision at the altar of poetics is an inevitable feature of this perspective. We have sought to balance the two, satisfying scholarly demands for conceptual precision while honoring participants' experience of living and working in an under-bounded predicament. Though a theory is always an abstraction, we hope we have crafted one that mirrors the phenomenon we sought to elucidate. Future research might sharpen our theory further, perhaps using methods that highlight the distinctions among its various elements as well as their relations. For example, it would be interesting to further examine, perhaps with quantitative, survey-based methods, the interplay between the types of connections that constitute holding environments, the intensity of these connections, and their effects on independent workers' identities and selves.

The efforts the independent workers we studied made to craft connections to other people and to places offer insights into the growing popularity of co-working spaces and collective ''hives'' (Bacevice, Spreitzer, and Garrett, 2015). Although the workers we studied did not seek out such spaces, future research could explore the extent to which these spaces provide a similar ''surrogate'' of holding as employing organizations. Researchers might also explore how digital platforms facilitate or hinder the personalization and precariousness described here.

Conclusion

The performance of work can range from an intensely personal experience (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010) to a routinized and even alienating one (Henson, 1996). For people working outside of organizations, the pendulum swings to the former as they invest their selves in the performance of work. More so than being *at* work, they become their work, or more precisely they become *in* their work. Such a porous membrane between work and self necessitates personal holding environments to weather and harness the emotional storms that accompany working without the cover of an organizational roof. As more people become untethered from organizations, neither identities nor holding environments are simply lost or found once and for all. Living and struggling well with the anxiety of precariousness becomes more important, and potentially fulfilling, than sustaining the illusion that, if only contained and interpreted well enough, that anxiety will dissipate. Thriving in the gig economy may require cultivating the connections that help one to continue finding and avoid losing one's self.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article can be found in the Online Appendix at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0001839218759646.

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