

**NEXUS WORK:**  
**MANAGING AMBIGUITY IN MARKET-BASED CREATIVE PROJECTS**

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## ABSTRACT

In highly uncertain market contexts (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Jones, 1996), the development of creative products is often organized around projects—emergent organizing efforts deliberately established for a limited purpose that dissolve upon completion (Baker et al., 1991; Bielby et al., 1999; Jones, 1996). Entrepreneurial individuals driving these projects must not only acquire and retain resources, but also integrate contributions from many different types of experts in order to develop creative products. While scholars have identified the importance of brokers who bring others together to foster innovation in organizations (Baker & Obstfeld, 1999; Obstfeld, 2005), this research does not fully address how actors might integrate creative contributions when members of the organizing effort do not share the same organizational context, culture, norms, and incentives. Further, while recent work moves beyond a merely structural depiction of brokerage roles (Gould & Fernandez, 1989), this work falls short of examining what brokers do in the course of developing creative projects.

To fill this gap, this research examines the work practices of actors in the position of bringing creative projects to fruition in the marketplace – actors we define as nexus actors. With in-depth, ethnographic research of Nashville country music producers, we find that integrating contributions, ideas and talents from disparate experts involves managing three different types of ambiguity associated with these projects. By examining the work practices enacted by nexus actors, we develop a grounded theoretical conception of the contours of the nexus role and the challenges invoked in bringing creative projects to fruition in markets. (See Figure 1.)

The practices we identified may thus constitute a repertoire of practices enacted by producers as a coping strategy (e.g. Orr, 1996) to manage ambiguity and exert control over the creative process when the formal control and authority mechanisms associated with traditional

project management techniques in organizations were lacking. We find that without a shared organizational structure and process to guide the production process, fulfilling the nexus actor role required significant relational skill.

We contribute to the creativity literature by focusing on the work practices used to integrate contributions from different types of experts into a coherent creative product. As currently theorized, brokers act more as conduits rather than integrators of ideas. By focusing on nexus actor work practices, we developed a grounded theoretical understanding of the work involved in managing one type of a brokerage role that is particularly relevant to market-based organizing. This research informs how “social skills” (Fligstein, 2001) can elicit cooperation in cultural fields and the conditions that shape the work of nexus actors. By understanding nexus work, we also learn how social order is created in emergent organizing efforts.

This research also furthers our understanding of how managerial practice takes shape in project forms of organizing - particularly in cultural industries. While research in the cultural industries often focuses on demand uncertainty or consumer tastes, the theory of nexus work emphasizes ambiguity rather than uncertainty. This focuses our attention on how meaning is interpreted (Martin, 1992; Weick, 1995) when producing a cultural product. Ambiguity has meaningful implications for managerial practice since it calls for social construction and invention (Weick 1995: 95). In the case of producers, ambiguity elicited work practices that were often aimed at the social construction and management of meaning. But these practices were also pursued for very pragmatic reasons – to expand the parties’ ability to generate creative ideas, to preserve relationships, and to create the conditions that have been found most likely to foster creative work in organizations (e.g. Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, and Herron, 1996).

**FIGURE 1**

**Managing Market-Based Creative Projects through Nexus Work**

