Rising Scholars Conference
Meaning of Work Research Presentations

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Minh is a Ph.D. Candidate in Organization and Management at University of California, Irvine. Her research explores relationality, that is, the work of human connections. Using ethnographic and qualitative methods, Minh studies how people approach their work and occupations under the influence of their connections, interactions, and relationships with other people, including but not limited to friends, lovers, family members, colleagues, customers, and strangers.

ABSTRACT:

The Empathizers: Institutional actors and their intersecting narrative paths

In this paper, I present an inductive qualitative study on Phoenix, a student resource center specializing in supporting undocumented students—undocumented immigrants who attended undergraduate and postgraduate programs at a university in the United States. My data first reveal that workers at Phoenix followed and demonstrated four disparate narrative paths in their daily work: protecting families, engaging in political advocacy, enforcing social justice, and helping others. For example, while it was not an official work responsibility, workers following the path of "protecting families" were committed to supporting less socially privileged family members of undocumented students, as these workers themselves also had undocumented family members. Meanwhile, workers following the path of "enforcing social justice" viewed their work as a way to enforce justice for "other people" with whom they did not have any personal connections. Interestingly, even though the differences among the four narrative paths could lead to conflicts among workers, these workers still worked together in the same organization and collaborated on projects, thereby supporting the same people and communities.

While exploring the above phenomenon, I view the work at Phoenix as "institutional work"—purrposive actions of individuals and organizations trying to create, maintain, navigate, or disrupt institutions (Gehman et al., 2016; Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In my study on the work at Phoenix, some of the institutions that workers were trying to navigate and disrupt were formal (policies and laws governing undocumented immigrants), while others were informal (the social divides faced by undocumented immigrants). While various studies (Creed et al., 2002; Gross & Zilber, 2020; Zilber, 2007) show that institutional actors face conflicts and competition generated by different logics, opposing accounts, and disparate narratives of the same issue, less is known about the "connective tissues" (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 224) that can bind these actors together, helping them overcome differences and conflicts at work. More specifically, we know little about how disparate narratives presented by institutional actors can relate to one another in the context of their work.

 Filling this gap in the literature, my study adds a new perspective focusing on the reconciliation of different viewpoints among institutional actors –how actors with disparate narrative paths are able to work together instead of combating one another. In my study, I ask: *What engenders relationality among these disparate narrative paths?* In my findings on the workers at Phoenix, each narrative path followed by workers had a different temporal anchor focusing on either past memories, present actions, or future visions. Some workers were haunted by the pain, trauma, and injustice witnessed or experienced in the past; some workers were motivated to implement their political advocacy plans for their communities in the future; and other workers solely focused on helping people in the present. Even the narrative paths with the same temporal anchor (for example, past memories) had different subjects of anchoring (for example, memories of separation from one's own parents versus memories of suffering workers' ways of thinking and their daily work strangers). These differences shaped the activities, suggesting a potential for conflicts among workers. However, as all workers shared a strong empathy for marginalized people and communities, their disparate narrative paths present filled with "helping actions," when all workers evaluated the intersected in an enacted present impacts of their work activities as helping people with whom they empathized. In other words, the workers were able to work together because the different narratives and temporal paths all led to the same practice: "helping people" in an enacted present.

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Samuel Mortimer is a PhD student in business ethics at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Samuel studies issues relating to meaningful work, drawing on both moral philosophy and qualitative empirical methods.

ABSTRACT:

"All money ain't good money": the meanings of money for meaningful work
Samuel Mortimer and Katherine Klein

It is well established that workers sometimes accept lower salaries for work they perceive to be more meaningful. Scholars take individuals with callings to be an extreme example of this phenomenon, as people who "work for passion rather than for pay or advancement"[1]. However, little empirical research has directly investigated the attitudes that called workers have toward financial incentives. Financial incentives are one of the strongest motivators for most employees when choosing jobs, and workers usually prioritize high salaries over highly meaningful work. If workers with callings are nonetheless expected to put aside financial considerations when making their career choices, this raises the question of how they would respond to financial incentives to change jobs.

To explore this, we conducted a three-year qualitative study of the workplace motivations and turnover intentions of distinguished US public school teachers recently hired to turn around four underperforming schools. They had been chosen because of their passion and commitment, but at the same time they were offered significant financial incentives to join the project (an additional three-year stipend of about 20% of their usual base salary). Many described themselves as called to their work--indeed, some opined that one had to have a calling to work at schools like these. By the end of the study, the teachers were faced with the choice of staying at these schools after the additional stipend had been withdrawn, or moving to more highly paid work elsewhere. This setting enabled us to explore how teachers reconciled their callings with their decision to pursue--or in some cases turn down--significant financial incentives to change jobs. We conducted 276 semi-structured interviews throughout the course of the program, interviewing most teachers at multiple time periods. Many of the teachers volunteered their opinions on the additional stipend without prompting from the interviewers.

The teachers perceived a tension between, on the one hand, presenting themselves as being called to their work, while on the other accepting significant financial incentives to come and teach at these schools. We found evidence of five sensemaking strategies the teachers employed when reconciling their callings with accepting these financial incentives. 1)Censuring: They criticized colleagues who were just motivated by the money, or only here for financial reasons. 2) Double-barreling: But they saw no problems with being motivated by money as long as one is also motivated by some

other non-monetary concern, like helping underprivileged students. 3) Disowning: In fact, they saw it as inevitable that teachers like them would be motivated by money, and expressed that moving to a more lucrative job when given the opportunity is just what highly qualified teachers like them do. 4) Moralizing: Moreover, they saw it as only fair that they should receive a larger salary to participate in this program, because--and only because--they were working so hard in these challenging schools. They deserved the extra pay. 5) Equating: They were nonetheless reluctant to express that they had directly traded off meaning and money in joining the program or would consider doing so later on, only endorsing changing jobs on the promise of greater financial incentives if the new job would enable them to fulfil their calling at least as successfully as the last.

1 Bunderson, J.S. and Thompson, J.A., 2009. The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the double-edged sword of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative science quarterly*, 54(1), p.35

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Micah Rajunov is a PhD candidate in the Management & Organizations department at Boston University. Micah's research asks how people make sense of their work and their professional identity, especially in the context rapid societal or technological change.

ABSTRACT:

Working for Fun: Precarious Careers of Professional Video Gamers

In this inductive qualitative study I ask, What does work mean when the boundariesbetween leisure and labor are blurred? More people are turning away from traditional full-time long-term employment and toward precarious work-- work that is unstable, insecure,and risky (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). As precarity appears to be the new normal, evenamong middle class professionals, the significance and meanings of work are also changing(Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017). Professionals increasingly feel obligated to seek workthey enjoy (DePalma, 2021; Sharone, 2014). And careers crafted from fun hobbies—their leisure—are lauded as the ultimate way to achieve fulfillment through work (Duffy, 2017).Yet what entices and keeps people committed to their fun yet precarious careers isrelatively unaddressed by scholars.

Through esports I explore the changing nature of work in a digitalized world. Withthe rise of high speed internet and streaming platforms, the booming esports industry nowallows competitive video gamers to turn this disciplined hobby into their job. Butprofessional gaming is more than a job; in pursuing play for pay, professional gamers entera precarious career in which competition drives a zero-sum market and organizationalinstability normalizes their insecurity. Furthermore, they depend on a complex esportsecosystem built around rapidly evolving technology and business models. Despite theseconditions, gamers sacrifice educational or professional prospects for a chance to live outtheir dream. Studying pro gamers can contribute a fuller picture of mechanisms thatpromote and sustain precarity by blending work and play.

Methods & Data
This is a qualitative inductive study relying primarily on interviews, supplemented bydigital media (such as documentaries, news and blog articles, user generated social mediacontent). I've collected 65 interviews with esport players, coaches, staff, and executives. Isampled participants at cross-sectional stages of their career: semi-pro/amateur, currentlyactive pros, and retired pros.

Preliminary Findings
Gamers accept and justify the harsh and precarious conditions of play by defining their work through leisure. They contrast pro gaming to a 'normal' job through several mechanisms: working hard before they get paid, and the non-commodification of fun. I identify three frames through which pro gamers define their esports career in relation to work in general. In the first frame, a gaming career is fun and temporary, separate from a 'real' professional career. The second frame blends fun and work by seeking a longer-term career in esports. In the third frame, 'real' work is not enjoyable, so pro gaming is the only career worth pursuing. Each frame affects their gaming career (entrance, experience, and exit) and longer-term professional prospects. Which frame an individual uses is influenced by their class-based (economic and social) resources as well as institutional structures that shape their context.

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