

CLASSIFICATION STRUGGLES IN SEMI-FORMAL AND PRECARIOUS WORK: LESSONS FROM INMATE LABOR AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

To be denied the status of formal worker is to be denied the rights and protections of the formal sector. Such classification is a source of insecurity and uncertainty for many. When employers privilege disembodied employment arrangements, workers in precarious semi-formal settings face many financial and relational challenges, yet receive limited support. In hostile economic, social, and legal contexts, what practices and discourses do these workers draw on to respond to their work situations? When, and against whom, do they struggle for labor embeddedness? Analyses of ethnographic and interview data from two fieldwork projects studying semi-formal work – one study of inmate labor in a US prison and one of a local independent culture industry – reveal that workers engage in collective

Precarious Work

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and independent classification struggles in search of formal and symbolic reclassification. A typology of such struggles is presented. By viewing these practices through this lens, this chapter aims to reveal parallels in the experiences of workers in seemingly disconnected fields and advance our understanding of worker action and embeddedness in contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: Non-standard employment; semi-formal; precarious; employment policy and law; classification; boundaries

For many workers in the United States and much of the Western world, certain supports and rights are taken as granted. Laborers in the formal sector benefit from such guarantees as state-mandated minimum wage (De Almeida, Alves, & Graham, 1995), relatively standardized hiring processes, or equal opportunity protections along criteria including age, sex, or race (Godfrey, 2011), and union or association support and collective bargaining rights (Roever, 2005). Yet, many engage in informal commercial activity beyond the purview of the state (Sinha & Kanbur, 2012), lacking many legal and social protections (Chen, 2012). Some may exchange formal protections for other perks (Venkatesh, 2006), including freedom to continue or discontinue work as they wish, the ability to evade taxation and trade regulations, and other benefits (Godfrey, 2011; Kanbur, 2009). Others may be unwillingly relegated non-formal status (Larson, 2002).

Despite the reach of the formal and informal sectors, not all workers explicitly fall within these categories. Although workers are often implicitly classified in this way, the question of what counts as formal work – and who counts as a formal worker – is still debated (Krinsky, 2007). A growing body of research contends that this distinction is limited in its representation of the lived experiences of work (Hart, 2006; Roever, 2005). Rather than dismiss this dichotomy outright, this scholarship acknowledges that many labor in proverbial grey areas *between* or *straddling* the formal and informal in what may be referred to as “semi-formal work” (Cobb, King, & Rodríguez, 2009). Such workers face unique and overlapping challenges as regulatory status and absent legal protections may beget precarity – lending uncertainty, unpredictability, and risk to the employment relationship (Kalleberg, 2009).

As employers and supply chain managers under contemporary capitalism increasingly privilege these disembedded – that is, deformedalized, self-regulated (Polanyi, 1944) – arrangements, many workers struggle against

this market logic, paradoxically pursuing embeddedness within hierarchies that may constrain market transactions (Sallaz, 2013). To examine this puzzle, I ask: When might workers be incentivized to seek labor embeddedness? Relatedly, how have the changing nature and utility of formal-legal hierarchies impacted labor struggles? What practices and discourses do workers draw on in response to hostile economic, social, and legal contexts, and against whom are their strategies directed? Finally, do the industry, sector, or institutional contexts in which labor is performed influence or limit worker strategies and understandings? Anchoring these theoretical questions to practical concerns, I contribute to an understanding of zones of strategic ambiguity (Bernheim & Whinston, 1998) – in which actors might prefer semi-formality – by illustrating aspects of classification salient to employers and employees, as reflected in collective and individual strategies.

This chapter draws on ethnographic and interview data from two fieldwork sites to explore the status projects of semi-formal workers in precarious settings. The first is a study of inmate labor in a U.S. state prison in the Sunbelt region. The second is a study of independent culture industry work in the Midwest. By exploring trends across these distinct sites, I demonstrate that semi-formal workers engage in shared varieties of *classification struggles* (Bourdieu, 1984) across industries, sectors, regions, and institutional environments. In response to obstacles and complexities related to work status, they engage in collective and individual struggles to pursue bureaucratic as well as symbolic reclassification.

I extend Bourdieu's concept by outlining a typology of classification struggles, detailing the strategies and aims of each. Semi-formal work represents an ideal case with which to develop this analytical tool, as workers in liminal spheres often seek changes in regulatory status and perceived legitimacy (Sallaz, 2010). If the directives of the sociology of work include examining "the meanings that work assumes" and "conditions under which boundaries are drawn among workers" (Vallas, 2016), then analyzing the conditions, contexts, and practices surrounding strategic embeddedness is crucial to developing a fuller portrait of the contemporary Western world of work.

Moving forward, I review the literature on formal, informal, and semi-formal employment, as well as overlap between formality and precarity. Next, I outline Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "classification struggles" and advance a typology of classification struggles through which I frame the strategies of semi-formal workers seeking bureaucratic and symbolic recognition. Finally, I investigate two empirical examples, drawing on fieldwork and interviews with inmate laborers and independent cultural producers. These data, collected in disparate sites, illustrate the applicability of this typology for understanding

worker practices across economic sectors and the effects of classification on lived experiences of work.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF WORK

Classificatory schemes and their boundaries are apparent across social spheres (Lamont, 1992) and reflect shared ideals regarding groups and structure (Durkheim & Mauss, 1903/1963). In the world of work, the traditional classification of *formal* versus *informal* work is prevalent. The history of U.S. legislative conflicts over the boundaries of formal employment is well documented (e.g., Boydston, 1990; Krinsky, 2007).

The formal sector is that which Weber (1947) may conceptualize as rational, legal, and bureaucratic. It entails regulated wage labor and incentives for employers to invest in capital (Webb, Tihanyi, Ireland, & Sirmon, 2009). As such, formal workers may “enjoy relatively high wages, social security, vacation, pension, and employment security as mandated by legislation” (De Almeida et al., 1995, p. 1) in exchange for compliance with regulations (De Soto, 2000; Godfrey, 2011). Formal employers must ensure that workers’ wages, labor time, and duties meet state and federal standards, while workers must meet citizenship, social security, tax, and other requirements (Sallaz, 2013).

The informal sector, conversely, captures employment relationships unsanctioned by the state (Venkatesh, 2006) and lacks legal regulation and social protections (Chen, 2012). Conflicting definitions exist (Kanbur, 2009), yet this sphere is commonly identified by illicit product or means of exchange, or atypical organizational arrangements (Godfrey, 2011). Examples of informal positions include unlicensed street-side vendor, junk collector, or undocumented contractor (Portes & Haller, 2005; Sengupta et al., 2008). Potential risks of informality involve wage non-payment, excessive working hours, inequitable lay-offs, dangerous working conditions, and stigma, in addition to absent pensions, sick pay, or health and injury coverage (Larson, 2002; Sengupta et al., 2008; Venkatesh, 2006; Wilson, 2010). Potential benefits include freedom from external oversight, taxation, zoning, and other regulations (Cobb et al., 2009; Godfrey, 2011), which may allow greater flexibility than the “over-regulated,” “rigid” formal sector (Becker, 2004; Kim, 2015).

Yet, formal and informal work do not form a comprehensive dichotomy. Employers, employees, and organizations may alternate between formal and informal practices. Recent scholars have challenged the formal/informal dichotomy’s analytical viability for its failure to capture the nuanced experiences

of work across and between spheres (Chun, 2009; Douglas, 2016; Sinha & Kanbur, 2012; Standing, 2014). Hart (2006), after “discovering” the informal economy in the 1970s, later warned that thinking of these sectors as distinct entities with clear boundaries may have performative effects. These are socially constructed categories with shifting boundaries and interdependent definitions (Hatton, 2015), which often overlap and intersect (Chen, 2012). Formally licensed entities sometimes pursue ventures not wholly legal (or operate in legal “grey areas”; Webb et al., 2009) or employ unlicensed laborers (Sassen-Koob, 1989). Workers may trade in legitimate goods in unregulated marketplaces (Meagher, 1990), rely on formal bureaucratic structures to engage in otherwise illicit operations (Godfrey, 2011), or misreport pay (Kim, 2015).

With these considerations in mind, this chapter acknowledges that many straddle formal and informal categories exhibiting distinct features and constraints. A spectrum of formality is therefore appropriate. Workplaces and workers are situated at varying degrees of formal practice across different criteria (Loftus-Farren, 2011; Zinnes, 2009) and may shift between them (Douglas, 2016; Kim, 2015). Some arrangements traditionally referred to as informal might instead be thought of as *semi-formal* (Godfrey, 2011).

Simply put, a semi-formal work arrangement is one in which a combination of formal and informal practices “fold into one another” (McFarlane, 2012, p. 90). According to Cobb et al. (2009), employers and workers may vary in formality regarding wage reporting, following labor laws, acquiring and maintaining documentation, or employment stability, with partial- or non-compliance in any of these categories denoting semi-formality. Actors in this sphere may comply with all, some, or no relevant regulations at different times (Godfrey, 2011).

The far-reaching concept of semi-formality reflects diversity on this continuum – recognizing the nuanced nature of contemporary work relations – and represents a notable axis of variation in the lived experience of work. Just as degrees of formality vary (Douglas, 2016), the ways in which work is catalogued often intersect. There may be overlap, for instance, between degree of work *formality* and *precarity*. Precarity in the formal sector receives great attention (e.g., Kalleberg, 2009); yet, as an expansive concept, precarious work spans sectors (Rosaldo, Tilly, & Evans, 2012; Sallaz, 2016; Standing, 2014). Indeed, incomplete employment contracts limit the rights and resources of workers (Williamson, 1985), and the absence of protections may generate or exacerbate risk and uncertainty. Still, formality alone does not guarantee security, and semi-formal arrangements may vary in degree of precarity (graduate student instructor and unpaid intern, for instance, are oft perceived as stable temporary positions wedded to educational functions).

Nevertheless, regulatory classification is a salient counterpart to precarity that remains central to many worker struggles. Absent the protections or legitimacy of formal status, semi-formal workers facing precarity may be incentivized to seek labor embeddedness, challenging prevailing classifications of their efforts in pursuit of legal protections. At this intersection of formality and precarity, classification struggles emerge.

CLASSIFICATION STRUGGLES

To explore challenges faced by semi-formal workers and their subsequent strategies, I employ the concept of *classification struggles*. Following Bourdieu (1984), I define classification struggles as status projects aimed at (a) advancing standing in recognized, hierarchical schemas, or (b) resisting or challenging a particular categorization or its outcomes. Such schemas include those generated by state regulatory bodies and various gatekeepers, as well as societal or “folk” understandings, or broader “categories of perception and appreciation” (*Ibid.*, p. 484).

This concept has perhaps been most widely utilized in studies of language and education – for example, regarding legitimation of non-English languages or multiculturalism in American schools (Olneck, 2001) – but remains underutilized in the sociology of work (cf., Sallaz, 2010). Two noted exceptions are Goldberg (2007), who explores struggles over citizenship status and the rights of welfare state claimants, and Krinsky (2008), who examines strategies of workfare participants seeking formal employee status. These studies rewardingly highlight collective struggles over formal, legal classification, and its material implications. As will be demonstrated below, however, this chapter extends from these works by parsing out additional forms of classification struggles spanning institutional and other contexts, through which workers resist the disembedding tendencies of employers (Polanyi, 1944) and negative treatment and perceptions which may follow.

Responding to the denial of rights and privileges of formal employment, semi-formal workers draw on different strategies – practical and discursive, collective and individual – to advance in position and legitimacy. “A group’s presence or absence in the official classification depends on its capacity to get itself recognized, to get itself noticed and admitted, and so to win a place in the social order” (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 480–481). Formally recognized entities stand to gain much, while the unrecognized are limited in status and recourse (Bourdieu, 1991). As such, the latter may engage in this form of “position-taking,” i.e., acts or pronouncements designed to “defend or improve their

positions” in a field (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 313), seeking legitimacy based on dominant criteria. At the extreme, they may even attempt the “un-making of the classifications currently in use” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 9).

To classify something as on the wrong side of a social boundary is to deny power or privileges accompanying inclusion (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). This is as true for the world of work as any other. Hence, despite Polanyi’s (1944) assertion that labor embeddedness is problematic for laborers and society at large, workers may nevertheless see benefits in formalization. As Simmel (1900/1978) notes, workers may prefer formal wage labor within a firm over piece rate or individual work because “objectified” wage labor, despite limiting individuality and bonding the laborer to the organization, offers guarantees which piece rate cannot (pp. 285, 340–341). “To move from unrecognized labor to formal employment,” says Sallaz (2013), “is to undergo an ontological transformation. One becomes not simply a body to be bought and sold, but an industrial citizen endowed with certain inalienable rights and protections” (p. 50). Liminal workers such as student athletes (McCormick & McCormick, 2006), sex workers (Gall, 2016), inmate laborers (Thompson, 2011), graduate students (Julius & Gumpert, 2002), and others have engaged in “classification struggles aimed at redefining the terms and conditions of the employment contract” (Chun, 2009, p. 527), seeking recognition and reward as formal workers.

Classification struggles are not exclusively group projects, nor purely aggregates of individual strategies (Bourdieu, 1987). Position in classificatory systems has palpable effects for individuals as well, who may engage in classification projects of their own (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 484). What’s more, it is not only legal recognition that groups or individuals may seek, but public or interpersonal vindication. The link between work status and identity is strong (Kalleberg, 2009; Leidner, 2016) and workers also struggle against *outcomes* or *implications* of classification.

Classification struggles, then, take different forms. Noting these variations, I present a typology of classification struggles (see Table 1) to better operationalize this facet of Bourdieu’s theory.

The first form of classification struggle that I outline represents collective efforts to attain formal recognition in the eyes of employers or the state. Pursuing strategic embeddedness, workers may seek entry to the formal sector through the reclassification of their labors and the establishment of more standard employment contracts. Through “symbolic acts of nomination” (Sallaz, 2010) – that is, by appealing to entities with the power to nominate, or, formally *name* and designate their labors as legitimate under policies characterizing employment within formal–legal hierarchies – they may assert

Table 1. Forms of Classification Struggles in Semi-Formal Employment Relations.

	Bureaucratic/Legal Identity	Moral/Symbolic Identity
Collective action	<i>Struggles for nomination</i> Seek bureaucratic recognition, advancement <i>Struggles for industrial citizenship</i>	<i>Struggles for group legitimacy</i> Seek social recognition, legitimacy; combat stigma <i>Struggles for personal dignity</i>
Individual action	Seek cross-sector mobility, graduation	Seek personal legitimacy, vindication
Struggle against	Classifying bodies, present and future employers, managers	Employers, gatekeepers, peers, public perception
Changes pursued	Regulatory protection, material compensation	Image, social standing

entitlement to an array of rights, material benefits, and protections presently withheld. I refer to these as *struggles for nomination*. Worker movements appealing for state classification as formal employees are represented here, for example, the unionization projects of sex workers (Gall, 2016) or graduate student workers (Julius & Gumpert, 2002).

In addition to collective efforts, many workers find themselves in more individualized circumstances, yet still seek formality. As such, the second form represents individual quests for legal identity through advancement from semi-formal positions to relevant formal ones. This includes attempts to translate skills and capabilities garnered from semi-formal experience into formal employment – that is, to reformulate one’s current labors in the terms of the formal labor market. This may be observed, for instance, in the homeless can collector reframing their skills into the more legitimate title of “recycler” in pursuit of employment and legitimacy (Gowan, 2010). These attempts to recommodify one’s skills in a manner which makes them marketable in formal industrial society are here referred to as *struggles for industrial citizenship* (Sallaz, 2013).

In addition to structural positioning and material security, workers in precarious semi-formal contexts face challenges to legitimacy tied to classificatory status. The third form represents resistance to perceptions of illegitimacy of worker groups via “struggles over the symbolic representations of social divisions that help to construct a hierarchical social order” (Olneck, 2001, p. 333). I refer to these as *struggles for group legitimacy*. They may precede or accompany struggles for nomination. In many cases, before formal status is granted,

workers must sway perception. For example, female laborers post-World War II struggled against notions of “women’s work” in continued endeavors for workplace empowerment and strategic embeddedness (Milkman, 1982). Workers engaging in “participative mobilization” to contest managerial authority and transform work structures (Vallas, 2006) might also fall here.

The fourth form represents personalized moral appeals for recognition or dignity (Hodson, 2001). “Morality is the structuring principle in the world-views of American workers” and is “important in maintaining a sense of self-worth and dignity” (Lamont, 2009, p. 51). Much like struggles for group legitimacy, these *struggles for personal dignity* are directed not at typological positioning itself, but at social outcomes of classification. Workers may struggle against undesirable treatment resulting from classificatory status and moralized perceptions of illegitimacy. This includes, for instance, full-time student resistance to images of “non-worker” (merely avoiding “the real world”; Martin, 2011) and may involve “facework” (Goffman, 1967) as laborers manage impressions and seek respect along the road to embeddedness.

These forms are not mutually exclusive. One might engage in several struggles simultaneously or sequentially. Alternatively, many may avoid classification struggles, perceiving regulation as precipitating constraints best avoided (Kim, 2015).

DATA AND METHODS

Semi-formal work arrangements exist across economic sectors, though no express qualities of labor itself concretely marks them as such. Rather, employment status “depends on the larger context and processes through which the activity acquires meaning” (Sallaz, 2013, p. 42). To examine semi-formal work settings and worker strategies, I draw on data from two ethnographic research projects. All locations and participants are anonymized.

The first fieldwork project is a study of inmate labor in a men’s state prison in the U.S. Sunbelt region, referred to as Sunbelt State Penitentiary (SSP). This research draws on 18 months (upwards of 800 hours) of ethnographic observations and 82 in-depth interviews (69 with medium security inmate workers and 13 with prison staff members) conducted in 2015 and 2016, investigating the structure of the prison employment system and practices and understandings of inmate laborers. This chapter will rely on data from two prisoner work programs at this site. The first is a sign shop where approximately 30 inmates produce street signs. Participants lauded this program for its higher rate of pay, opportunities for skill development, and degree

of autonomy unavailable in most prison spaces. The second program is a “food factory” warehouse where over 80 inmates prepare and package prison meals. This worksite was commonly derided for its low pay, monotonous and deskilled tasks, and stricter oversight and surveillance.

The second ethnographic fieldsite is a local independent rap music scene in a mid-to-large-sized Midwestern city. Data are drawn from three months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2012 as a member of various local record labels, entourages, and musician cliques, and 35 in-depth interviews with independent cultural producers. I call the music scene Mid City for its position geographically and for its median status in the world of independent music production. It represents a standard U.S. city in terms of hip-hop activity and resource disparities, typifying all but the largest cities: there are no large record labels, few recording studios, one rap radio station, and no arts unions to represent its many independent producers (Gibson, 2014).

Differences between these seemingly anomalous cases are revealing for the study of worker struggles in the contemporary era. Indeed, such comparisons of distinct sites are traditional to the sociological study of work. As Hughes (1951) attests, “the essential problems of men at work are the same whether they do their work in the laboratories of some famous institution or in the messiest vat room of a pickle factory” (p. 318). The cases of inmate labor and independent cultural production in particular were selected because, although they are linked in their liminal legal standings and precarity, they are distinct in several ways which reveal patterns in worker action that might otherwise be overlooked or misattributed. First, these sites fall on opposite ends of a spectrum of bureaucratic embeddedness. Inmate participants in the first site labor within the prison, enveloped by a powerful institutional bureaucracy but denied many protections under labor laws. On the other hand, musical artists in the second site operate in a weakly institutionalized (decentralized, imbalanced) field, lacking supports in their artistic careers. What’s more, these fields are distinct in terms of workers’ willingness to participate in them. While inmate laborers are compelled to work as a facet of punishment (Hatton, 2017), artists make voluntary material sacrifices to pursue their labors as a calling (Cornfield, 2015). The productive efforts of participants across these sites also reflect their distant positions in the world of work. Whereas inmate participants at SSP engage in traditional production practices in warehouse conditions, Mid City artists produce cultural objects and perform in various settings.

Differences in labor process and institutional structure between this disparate set of cases allow for parsing forms of struggles out from the particular content and bureaucratic contexts of labor. Shared experiences and practices

tied to broader changes in the world of work emerge with comparison across sites. Rather than the product of idiosyncratic occupational and institutional settings, comparison reveals that worker reclassification strategies are tied to the status of worker protections under contemporary capitalism, which presents parallel challenges for these laborers. To unpack these phenomena, I forgo thick descriptions of field sites or participants and present data decisively, emphasizing instead the applicability of the presented framework by analyzing common patterns (Brekhuis, Galliher, & Gubrium, 2005). That these distinct cases nonetheless give rise to equivalent forms of worker practice speaks to the generality of my analysis.

CONTEXT: CHALLENGES OF SEMI-FORMAL CLASSIFICATION IN TWO SECTORS

Participants across sites experienced limited protections, arbitrary expressions of authority, and status challenges; yet, despite struggling against dissimilar audiences and structures, each sought security and dignity through labor embeddedness.

Inmate Laborer Challenges

Social, legal, and economic factors involved in inmate labor classification have been well documented (e.g., Thompson, 2011; Zatz, 2009). Lacking formal status, penal laborers are denied access to many employment guarantees. For instance, they have little recourse against imbalanced and non-transparent hiring practices. Proponents of penal labor often tout its ability to transfer marketable skills and “work ethic” (e.g., Brown & Severson, 2011); however, at SSP, skilled, productive work was rare and many faced unequal access. Those possessing marketable skillsets or close ties to others in desirable programs often fared better in the hiring process. When asked how he secured his position in the shop – often regarded as the “best prison job” – one participant said: “It’s often about who you know in here. [A friend] handed in an application for me, which helped. I also used to work signs on the outside and mentioned that [in my application].” According to another, “[If] you know the right person, you’ll never get stuck in a shitty job.” Prisoners lacking proper skills or resources were commonly relegated to undesirable jobs like the food factory. This worksite captured men who resisted work or failed to secure positions in other programs. It was referred to as “prison within

the prison” where inmates got “stuck” – few transferred to more coveted positions during my fieldwork.

Additionally, inmate workers face opaque firing practices. As one staff member put it, “[we] don’t have to have a paper trail to fire somebody.” This was especially apparent in the food factory. Staff there estimated a turnover rate of two workers daily. Demotions occurred regularly, often without explanation. One inmate expressed discontent when moved from the freezer section, which he enjoyed, to meat prep, an entry-level position which he despised. “That *bitch* [manager] fired me,” he shouted when I commented on the move. When asked why, he responded: “I dunno – she wouldn’t tell me. Fucking *bullshit!*”

Inmate pay is also unreliable. They may be denied wages or receive compensation below wage minimums. Despite attempts to increase compensation over the years (Thompson, 2011; Zatz, 2009), most working prisoners today make under \$1.00/hour. At SSP, many could expect to earn closer to \$0.20/hour or \$4.00 per week, after deductions for various prison fees. This weekly wage was roughly equivalent, for instance, to six 3oz packs of ramen noodle soup or one tube of toothpaste in the prison commissary. One worker, Rich, expressed frustration with prison wages: “I’m not happy about the pay. If anything, I barely get by. I’m not talking about *wants*, I’m talking about *needs!*” he exclaimed. “It’s not enough.”

If injured on the job or ill, inmates miss out on other protections:

We get no workman’s comp. If we get hurt on the job, we have to go to medical in the yard – and we *still* get charged the *four* dollar medical fee just for the visit. That’s several days’ pay right there! Plus, to go to medical, you have to miss work and you don’t get paid for that. So that’s at least a week’s wages right there just for getting injured at your own damn job.

Many reported skipping medical appointments to afford other expenses. On one occasion, I witnessed one man castigating another for visiting the nurse instead of purchasing additional food from the commissary store.

Inmate workers often faced criticisms regarding work status within the institution. Many staff members regarded inmate work not as employment but punishment, rejecting worker legitimacy. Inmates resented this treatment: “They’re just trying to punish us. They show authority instead of showing gratitude for us working here.” Another complained, “They call work a ‘privilege,’ but we’re *required* to do it. ... If work is a privilege, then why do we get in trouble if we decide not to do it?” Inmates in low-skill worksites also faced criticisms from other inmates. Unlike “youngsters,” “dummies,” or

“cell warriors” working elsewhere, several skilled workers framed themselves as “professionals” who “*appreciate* our job.” Distinction also occurred *within* worksites. In the food factory, some cooks referred to themselves as “the hard workers” who “have an important job here,” justifying the slight autonomy and higher pay (\$0.05/hour extra) received over deskilled coworkers.

Finally, inmate laborers lack reliable grievance systems and trusted advocates. Food factory workers reported particularly little certainty. Responding to the suggestion that he approach managers with concerns, one participant scoffed: “One of *them*? No way! ... They don’t care about grievances unless it comes from the warden.” When asked if appealing to the warden was effective, he shrugged: “Not that I’ve ever seen.”

Independent Cultural Producer Challenges

The regulatory status of culture work often begets uncertainty and instability (Leidner, 2016), with high risk of unsuccessful professionalization (Menger, 1999). Independent artists in Mid City, working at the boundaries of formal employment, faced many challenges to livelihood and identity in pursuit of artistic careers.

In this weakly institutionalized field, hiring practices were unstandardized. Employers such as club owners or promoters relied heavily on social ties in evaluating applicants (Granovetter, 1985) and implicit agreements were often favored over contractual arrangements (Macaulay, 1963). Gainful performance work was difficult to secure. One man, Marko, had been performing for 10 years yet still struggled to secure consistent work:

[When] we first started, there was promoters that wouldn’t even give us the opportunity to play at venues ... We’ve had situations *recently* where people won’t give us show slots, y’know – they just don’t wanna give it. Despite Marko’s large fanbase, steady gigs remained elusive.

According to participants, a few local acts were hired disproportionately often to perform at higher-paying events. Certain artists all but monopolized profitable billings, while others struggled for whatever exposure they could muster. To what degree this imbalance was based on merit or other subjective criteria is difficult – if not fruitless – to determine. Yet, it illustrates a common feature of semi-formal work: without consistent criteria for hiring from a pool of seemingly atomized applicants, uncertainty and frustrations may rise alongside economic hardship (e.g., Mears, 2011).

Mid City rappers and DJs often complained of inconsistent or inequitable pay, as when small venues hired whomever they could pay least. Hank lamented this lack of credentialing:

Now, everybody's a DJ, and they're all undercutting each other ... The club owner doesn't think about, "Well, are you any good? Can I see your [music] library? Can I see what gear you use?" All they hear is "100 bucks for a night."

Lex recounted the difficulty of staying financially afloat when performance and recording returns did not always cover investments:

A *lot* of money is going into this. And at some point you just have to figure out a plan that makes sense on how to draw revenue. Because it's not about making money, but for an independent artist, the money keeps you alive. Like, you *need* the money to keep the machine alive, because there's no big record label. You *are* the label.

Most sought secondary employment for subsistence.

Independent cultural producers often face challenges to legitimacy or are regarded as non-workers. Though they appear driven by non-monetary influences, musicians and other artists are nonetheless workers. They engage in effort to produce value, subsist in part (or wholly) on artistic income, and must report pay to the Internal Revenue Service. "Both pecuniary and non-pecuniary factors influence all workers' decisions, but with some differences in the relative importance of these factors between different groups of workers" (Throsby, 1992). Artists – and others motivated by passion or ideology – differ from "professional" laborers purely as a matter of degree.

A select few cultural producers achieve true professional status, while most remain confined to independence. Unlike professional producers, who are represented by major production or performance firms with accompanying prestige, profits, and benefits, the independent majority subsist without guarantees. As semi-formal workers, they largely lack union representation and may engage in ongoing disputes to establish such support (Cornfield, 2015).

Finally, many cultural workers face disdain from friends and loved ones over their continued musical pursuits, occasionally with tangible consequences. As relationships crumbled over a shortage of income, familial support – vital in the absence of employment benefits – often diminished. According to Bruce, fielding criticisms from family is the main challenge of artists, who are often perceived as passing up more legitimate employment options to pursue music. Victor struggled to balance recording time with appointments for roofing contracts, which his wife perceived as his real job. Others, like Scott, were troubled by the "gamble" of continuing their musical careers: "I'm gonna sacrifice benefits, possibly. I'm gonna sacrifice *good*

money I could make [elsewhere] to roll these dice and be a full time performer.”

STRUGGLES OVER BUREAUCRATIC/LEGAL IDENTITY

In the face of classificatory structures aimed at codifying legal statuses and thereby power arrangements (Bourdieu, 1984), semi-formal workers may contest classification to demand formal status and its accompanying perks and protections.

Struggles for Nomination

Unionization and Solidarity

The lack of a collective voice – a form of representation precarity (Standing, 1999) – is a common trait of semi-formal employment. Pay and treatment are often diminished as a result. In response, workers may engage in collective struggles asserting claims to greater protections. During fieldwork at both sites, workers frequently discussed union formation and strikes. In some instances, references were made to plans for future action; in others, to past experiences as a means of framing current predicaments.

In response to inconsistent hiring and firing practices, absence of a grievance system, low pay, and other concerns, prison laborers at SSP discussed lobbying to be regarded as formal employees. This is not without precedent in the penal field. Following a series of strikes and work stoppages over decades prior, inmate laborers in many states attempted to unionize in the 1970s (Thompson, 2011). In conjunction with broader prisoner’s rights campaigns throughout the United States (Wacquant, 2009), inmate unionization movements sought employee status for incarcerated laborers. Those in successful movements gained institutionalized grievance systems, increased wages, access to worker’s compensation, appropriate safety gear for dangerous jobs, and other victories in line with formal recognition. Inmate unionization spread nationally with varying degrees of success but was eventually quashed. Following defeat in court against the state of North Carolina in 1979, prisoner unions nationwide were disbanded (Thompson, 2011). Inmate laborers were once more relegated to the boundaries between formal and informal employment.

Despite attempts to unionize inmates or establish rigorous standards for employment and compensation, state and federal courts have upheld the notion that inmate labor should not be considered a formal employment relationship (Cashman, 2004). Inmates in Sunbelt State nevertheless referenced the power of collective action, sanctioned or otherwise. Lamenting food factory wages and work conditions, one young inmate sought to motivate his coworkers: “I think they should pay us more and treat us better. You know what would happen if we all *striked*? This place would shut *down*. No food. It could happen!” According to several older inmates, however, the potential for collective action may have passed with the aging of their cohort. One middle-aged food factory worker described collective struggles of the 1990s, including how his generation of prisoners used to react if unhappy with correctional administration: “Back in the ‘90s ... we’d sit down [strike]. But now, these new cats are timid. They don’t want to risk their shit – their [good behavior status], their *points*. Then they’ll lose their phone privileges and they can only get \$40 in store each week [with loss of privileges].” His coworker chimed in, adding that even skipping work is a risk that many will no longer take: “This job – you don’t do it or show up? You lose [privileges].”

Also denied rights and protections as semi-formal workers, many independent cultural producers in Mid City discussed unionization. In many music scenes, such struggles have been successful. In part because of the dual nature of their work as source of income and art, the common perception is that “musicians’ motivations, concerns, and job characteristics may be different from those of other workers, especially prototypical unionized workers” (Abramson, 1999, p. 1660). Compared to most formal sector unions, artistic trade organizations have little recourse to demand compromise from employers, meaning that venues, studios, and others need not meet their demands. Regardless, such organizations remain inaccessible to many independent producers. While expansive artistic unions do exist (e.g., American Federation of Musicians, which negotiates compensation for instrumentalists), the majority of the nation’s cultural producers remain truly independent. These are “self-contained bands or other enterprising artists who self-record and self-promote their music” (Cornfield, 2015, p. 124).

In Mid City, many “artist advocates” expressed desires for collective representation. Several collectives in the area formed around this principle. Ben, a member of a small record label founded on such a premise, boasted of emotional – if not economic – support that he and his compatriots provided one another for want of a true union. “It’s like, we’ll help you with your project, and you’ll help us with our project,” he said of the group’s collective nature. “It feels more like a musical union, sometimes.” Some Mid City

rappers shared desires to establish an official union, the likes of which exist in a handful of U.S. cities. Hank reported such an agenda:

I've been thinking seriously about a way to honestly unionize the artists here ... Even if it was just like, monthly meetings or something, where everybody got together and knew what everybody else was doing and was on the same page, because you're only hurting each other [by competing independently].

When employers favor disembedded arrangements – driving down wages and destabilizing collective action — many Mid City artists and SSP inmate workers struggle instead to formalize their efforts. Through unionization or similar collective endeavors, they might establish their labors as commodities worthy of being bought and sold in the formal market in exchange for equitable pay and other benefits.

Struggles for Industrial Citizenship

Scaling the Classificatory Hierarchy

Regulatory status also elicits responses from participants as individuals. Solo struggles for formal classification and legitimacy were common, especially among participants at SSP, for whom inmate status created barriers to the formal labor market and its benefits. The effort to enter the workforce after prison by drawing on prison work experiences represented one such struggle for formality. With hopes of securing perks and benefits of formal work, many discussed plans to navigate the negative resume effects of incarceration (Pager, 2007). Some food factory workers reported plans to seek food industry employment, and the majority of sign shop participants disclosed plans to seek employment in similar shops in the free world. To do so, these workers would have to reformulate their current labor in formal labor market terms.

Translating prison work experiences on job applications or resumes was central to this struggle. One sign shop employee confided that he valued his position expressly because it provided “real experience” to “build up his resume.” Another man, release date approaching, boasted of his future job prospects in the industry, thanks to the resume that he had constructed working in the shop.

One day, I found two inmates, Scotty and Felix, huddled before a sign shop computer, crafting a resume for Felix. Scotty typed while Felix dictated from crumpled post-it notes. He waved me over to see their work, a one-page document, outlining his experiences and sign shop skills. Thanks to this document, he declared, he would surely get a job when released. On his

post-it notes were jotted different resume “buzz words” suggested by a civilian staff member. “Here, under *Skills*,” he instructed Scotty, “put ‘computer *software* skills learned in the shop.’” Under the heading “Responsibilities,” he asked Scotty to list “training new hires on software and hardware,” and “ensuring productivity and efficient completion of jobs from start to finish.” Felix’s aim, he would tell me, was to acquire a job in an outside shop, carefully drawing on his prison work experience. “See, it doesn’t say [that I work at] a *prison* sign shop. Hopefully they’ll read this and say ‘Oh, he knows *engraving*?’ You know. ‘Oh, he can do *vinyl*! ... *And* screen printing? Oh! You know?”

Beyond – and often before – transitioning to the formal economy, struggling for industrial citizenship entails reclaiming, “essentially, power over words used to describe groups or the institutions which describe them” (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 13–14). Struggling against the negative status of *inmate worker*, Felix strategized to frame himself instead as *sign maker* and *trainer* – recognized skills and titles in the market he sought to enter. Deliberately decoupling his skills from the prison context in which they were developed, he bolstered his chances of graduating from semi-formal to formal employment.

Viewing Felix’s actions through the lens of classification struggles reveals the overlapping nature of challenges experienced by the incarcerated. Beyond the stigma of criminal records, they are temporarily removed from the formal labor market and therefore lack regulatory protections (Lageson & Uggen, 2013). The hardships of reentry, then, are shaped by criminal justice as well as labor institutions. Rather than turning toward semi-formal or informal markets, which may boast lower barriers to entry and increased flexibility, these men strategically seek to embed their labor in formal hierarchies by translating prison experiences into something marketable in the formal sector. Through this, they struggle against employers and state actors who might limit their access based on criminal history or work history gaps. Escaping the precarity of semi-formality is here linked to circumventing the “black mark” of incarceration (Pager, 2007).

Cross-Sector Dual Employment

Unlike inmate laborers, independent cultural producers are not barred from participating in the formal labor market during their tenure as semi-formal workers. Wages and other benefits from dual employment were central to the classification struggles of independent artists seeking to advance to formal status.

A lack of regulatory protections and collective voice often results in low or unreliable pay for creative work (Cornfield, 2015). Two participants outlined their resistance to this:

LOGAN: The first thing I ask now [when offered a job] is ‘what you paying?’ I don’t even bring [a club owner] shit if they not talking a good amount.

MALCOLM: And it’s sad that he has to do that. Cause if you want, like, services, then I feel it’s only right that you should pay *something!* Like I told him, ‘if it’s nothing but 40 dollars’ worth of alcohol, then no.’ Cause we don’t drink that shit up.

LOGAN: I should not leave in the red!

MALCOLM: Yeah, cause gas ain’t free! And we’re telling people to come, putting promotion into it, and we get nothing off the *door* [cover charges]?

Each worked second jobs to supplement pay received from performances. They, as others, would attribute this to pay struggles in the industry.

The Census Bureau’s 2010–2012 American Community Survey revealed that, in New York City, upwards of 85% of self-proclaimed artists worked day jobs in the formal sector to supplement unsteady arts income (Virgin & Boilen, 2014). In places like Mid City, where few if any artists residing in the city have secured professional contracts or major record deals, this percentage may be higher. “Even moderately successful artists often hold down routine jobs to make ends meet. Consequently, for many recording artists ... every available source of income is important” (All, 2012).

Mid City artists commonly considered performing and recording music as their primary employment, even if other activities generated greater income. Holding second and sometimes third jobs was normative. Food and beverage industry work was most common; some worked in unionized trades.

Balancing joint employment posed problems for many. For instance, during my fieldwork, Victor cancelled recording studio sessions on several occasions when his roofing job interfered. There were exceptions. Lee, for instance, managed to balance cultural production with formal work with less conflict: “I’m a union plumber, actually,” he said. “It doesn’t really get in the way, ‘cause I work mainly, ya know, 7:00 to 3:30 every Monday through Friday. So, I mean, it doesn’t really interfere with [my music] at all.”

Lee represented the minority. For most, maintaining dual, cross-sector employment remained challenging, yet essential. Dependence on other work was central to the classification struggles of these artists – graduating from semi-formal to formal status in their music careers required secondary

income and benefits. Additional wages often went toward artistic pursuits. Many participants and their families relied on support from their formal jobs; still, they maintained “independent artist” as their dominant career status while struggling to break out in the industry and formally reclassify their labors.

STRUGGLES OVER MORAL/SYMBOLIC IDENTITY

The sociology of work has heretofore approached classification struggles as directed at advancement in codified hierarchies for material reward (e.g., [Goldberg, 2007](#); [Sallaz, 2013](#)). Yet, classificatory status has ramifications for identity and symbolic standing as well. This section will explore worker efforts to resist negative implications of classification via cooperative and interpersonal strategies.

Struggles for Group Legitimacy

Resisting Representations

Work-related social identity may itself be precarious and regularly tested or rejected ([Leidner, 2016](#)). Demanding respect for their labors – whether forced or voluntary – semi-formal workers engage in collective struggles over social outcomes of classification. Many inmate laborers engaged in resistance games ([Burawoy, 1979](#)) in the struggle to resist indignity in their work lives ([Hodson, 2001](#)) and contest poor treatment accompanying negative status. That is, they participated in collective violation of institutional regulations, rendering transgressions into assertions of autonomy amidst arbitrary authority. When directed toward prison staff members perceived as disrespecting inmate work efforts, this defiant practice may be understood as a coordinated classification struggle over symbolic worker identity. Through such games, workers resisted the *meaning* and *outcomes* – chiefly, misrepresentation as non-workers and resultant poor treatment – of semi-formal classification.

A *snacking game* was a central component of work in the food factory. Inmates were forbidden from partaking in the food they prepared, which many regarded as a denial of “perks.” Risking expulsion or demotion, workers secreted bites of cookies, lunch meat, and other snacks while on the job, frequently in close proximity to prison staff. Inmate conspirators monitored

the comings and goings of staffers in order to secrete fistfuls of food, or hide away items for later. Men from different stations made “hand-offs” to one another – e.g., passing slices of bologna in exchange for a baggie of peanut butter. A smiling inmate with cheeks full of food was a common sight. The challenge of the game was to direct these smiles at staff.

The *rules of the game* were passed down from veterans. For instance, while his coworkers filed out to lunch, one newcomer remained behind to ask permission to take an extra bag of chips with his meal. “You’re not supposed to ask me that!” the staff member shouted. Another inmate intervened. “You’re supposed to *sneak* it,” he told the new worker. “Like *this!*” He mimed folding up his orange apron as if concealing a snack underneath. “Oh,” came the timid reply, “I just didn’t want to break the rules. I don’t want a [disciplinary] ticket.” Leading the man out to lunch, the veteran inmate instructed him with a grin: “Next time just take it.”

Such games were central to workers’ assertions of legitimacy. The snacking game and the discourse surrounding it represented resistance to the withholding of perks, bound to more general complaints of despotism and disrespect. “I don’t look at it as stealing,” one man said, “I look at it as making the pay right.” Declarations that “they should pay us more and treat us better” were common. “*We’re* human beings *too*. We need to be treated like we’re supposed to be treated.” Another man said:

You can make more money just sitting at home [in your bunk] playing cards ... but for those of us who are out here trying to improve our lives – out here *working* – we get treated like *shit*. It ain’t right. It’s supposed to be *corrections!* They’re supposed to be teaching us ways to *improve* ourselves for the outside!

This man, desiring training to “improve [himself] for the outside,” highlighted a link between the symbolic hurdles of his current status as semi-formal worker and structural barriers to entering the formal market to be faced upon release. Unlike workers in the prison sign shop (with access to resources and training to build resumes and bolster their chances at industrial citizenship), food factory workers faced compounded difficulties.

Identity and material challenges often intertwine. Alongside fiscal hardships (e.g., inadequate pay), workers’ collective identity was regularly questioned (resulting in feeling “treated like shit”). The drive to strategically embed inmate labor was motivated in part by the want of fair treatment. Through practices like the snacking game, inmates resisted indignity in oppressive work environments, collectively struggling against negative representations tied to classificatory status.

Struggles for Personal Dignity

Seeking Respect for Artistic Work

Mid City artists frequently expressed frustrations with fans not “investing” in them, financially and emotionally. Many attributed this to not being a “major label” artist – i.e., a formal worker in the field of cultural production. Desire for greater personal support or respect for independent artistry was widespread, as were struggles against the classification of “non-worker” imposed by family, friends, and others. The identities of cultural producers as working professionals are often challenged (Leidner, 2016). Resisting such perceptions was central to artists’ trajectories toward formal status. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, there may be lag between changes in perceived status and access to material resources – that is, “between the nominal and the real” (p. 481). Appreciation at home, then, was an important first hurdle.

Many participants reported a scarcity of emotional support. When Raven opted to pursue music “full time” after college, her parents were upset: “I’m a first generation *college* graduate out of my home. To *my* parents – my dad always thought that right after college I would go to my master’s program and get a master’s degree.” The relative financial success of former classmates was sometimes used to critique her career choice, as when her father pointed out that she has “friends that have *nice* cars and have *cool* spots [homes].” Alternately, Wade received criticism for continuing as an independent artist after the birth of his son. Against accusations of “neglecting” fatherly responsibilities by not pursuing a more stable career, he attested:

This doesn’t *have* to be a sacrifice. A lot of these guys [rappers] get older and have kids and quit. What does that show [their children]? That you have to stop doing what you love if you want to have a family. No, you have to do what you love. I want to teach [my son] that.

Struggling for respect was often framed as inherent to independent artistry. For Marko, this involved cutting ties (characteristic of “the grind” or “paying dues”):

I’ve sacrificed relationships with women. I’ve sacrificed *money*. I’ve sacrificed, oh my god, friendships at times, because not every friend understands what you go through. Family members don’t necessarily always get why you do it. It’s a lot that I’ve been through to get to just *this* level of success. And you get to a point where you get thick-skinned. Like, rejection doesn’t *bother* me anymore.

Monetary sacrifices (e.g., passing up steadier, non-artistic work) were often intertwined with relationship troubles. “That’s the age old struggle with artists,” said Scott, “being appreciated *and* getting paid strictly for your art.”

The search for dignity extended to interactions with industry gatekeepers. According to Lucas, “I can go to the radio station right now and tell [the DJ] how phenomenal, how *hot* my shit is and they’re gonna just look at me and say ‘Ah, he’s just another artist trying to get on.’” According to Hank, as an independent artist, he must constantly remind himself and others: “You’re *professional* and you deserve to be paid, and you deserve to be treated properly, you deserve to have everything that everybody else is getting.”

The classification struggles of individuals seeking respect for themselves and their position are often hard-fought. To many, legitimacy remained tied to formal status and fiscal guarantees. But legal and social standing are often related, as are struggles against undesirable ramifications of each. Similar to inmates’ collective struggles against indignity, Mid City artists struggled individually against symbolic ramifications of classificatory status. Rather than accept criticisms of work and status, struggles for personal dignity involved opposing negative representations, like Wade or Hank, or distancing oneself from critics, like Marko. The key, said Scott, is passion and perseverance. “At the end of the day, if you have an undying passion for something, you *can’t ignore it*, no matter how uneasy it is to attain it. ... You have to be willing to sacrifice.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Formality – typically constituted by opposition to informality – confers legitimacy and support to awardees of formal status, leaving outsiders vulnerable. For semi-formal workers straddling the boundaries of the formal and informal sectors, hiring and firing standards, evaluative criteria, and other work structures and protections may be vague or absent. Workers in this liminal situation are “disembedded” (Polanyi, 1944) – excluded from formal status and the perks of inclusion under formal-legal hierarchies. Ambiguity in employment relationships may benefit employers, while workers face increased precarity. In addition to (or perhaps resulting from) the denial of formal protections, many face scrutiny from peers regarding employment identity. Classificatory standards, however, do not go uncontested. Many in precarious semi-formal work contexts seek legitimacy and security through classification struggles.

The experiences of inmate laborers at SSP and independent culture workers in Mid City speak to these challenges and their responses. Facing hostile economic, social, and legal contexts, these workers drew on practical

and discursive strategies to pursue formality, resist disadvantages of semi-formality, and reframe their work as meaningful. Practically, they battled negative representations through collective games, organized or planned to lobby for supports and compensation, and tactically prepared resume materials to break into formal markets; discursively, they defied framings of illegitimacy through strategic narratives.

Viewing these strategies through the lens of *classification struggles* reveals parallels in worker trials and practices in distant fields. Participant groups faced institutional environments that, though distinct, produced comparable hurdles. Privileging rational–legal authority over inmates’ moral claims, SSP resisted worker struggles for support and legitimacy within the total institution. In Mid City, weak institutional structure enabled gatekeepers to similarly wield arbitrary authority in opposition to artist attempts at unification. Employers in each field relied on ambiguity to limit worker action. Shared experiences across these settings highlight the influence of classification on practice, disconnected from particular field conditions such as work content or institutional form. Instead, liminal legal standing resulting from disembedding tendencies under contemporary capitalism unites these workers in a “double movement” (Polanyi, 1944) against such trends. As more employers in an age of rising precarity retreat from formalization, workers like these embrace it. Hence, rather than deprive worker agency, labor embeddedness here represents its expression. This may be of interest to organizations or movements’ researchers, particularly scholars of agency and structural context (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, for an introduction to this literature).

Table 2 summarizes the struggles outlined above. Collectively, semi-formal workers at these sites sought formal reclassification as suited their needs (with varying degrees of success) and opposed negative perceptions from peers, family, gatekeepers, and others. Similarly, individual workers

Table 2. Classification Struggles among Inmate Workers and Independent Cultural Producers.

	Bureaucratic/Legal Identity	Moral/Symbolic Identity
Collective action	Artists seeking unionization, inmates considering strikes	Inmates seeking respect via collective resistance
Individual action	Inmates translating experience on resumes, artists supplementing efforts to advance	Artists seeking respect from friends, family, gatekeepers

contested classificatory criteria, transmuted semi-formal experience into formal market terms, and asserted dignity despite negative classification. Struggles over bureaucratic/legal identity appear linked to mobility strategies – salient among workers seeking advancement to new positions in the field of work. Struggles over moral/symbolic identity, alternatively, appear most salient among workers contesting perceptions of current standings. These are not mutually exclusive; many workers pursued overlapping struggles, demanding respect for current field position while strategizing for the next.

This work has identified various forms of classification struggles. Future research should investigate processes by which they emerge and develop, individual and collective progression between forms, and distinctions between the struggles of workers of varying tenures. This typology may be applied to other semi-formal sites or to the informal sector, in which, despite certain benefits, many workers seek reclassification or struggle against work-related stigmas (Venkatesh, 2006). Exploring additional worksites affected by disembedding tendencies and precarity in this way will advance our understanding of zones of strategic ambiguity in which actors privilege atypical arrangements.

Finally, it should be noted that the inmate laborers discussed in this analysis typify millions of workers in the U.S. who have been impacted by the rise of mass incarceration over recent decades (Western & Pettit, 2010). Many of the nation's prisoners are compelled into semi-formal employment relationships as a facet of their punishment (Hatton, 2017); many more face significant hurdles to formal labor market participation following contact with the criminal justice system and may be limited to semi-formal or informal offerings (Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Pager, 2007). As these trends persist, semi-formal work warrants much closer attention than it has received. This chapter seeks to establish a foundation for this line of inquiry.

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