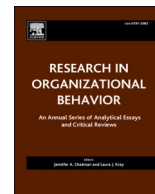




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## Creativity as privilege

Denis Trapido<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sharon Koppman<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Washington, Bothell, USA<sup>b</sup> University of California, Irvine, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Organizational gatekeepers rely on tacit proxy signals of quality to evaluate creative work: status and status characteristics, elite networks, cultural capital, and a set of signals we refer to as symbolic dexterity. We argue that this reliance is due to the “push” of uncertainty and the “pull” of the culturally dominant person-centered view of creativity. Evaluators are “pushed” toward these proxy signals because the quality of creative work is fundamentally uncertain. Evaluators are “pulled” toward these proxy signals because the person-centered view of creativity makes these signals legitimate and easily available decision heuristics. Since members of privileged social groups are advantaged in producing and understanding the importance of such signals, we argue that access to creative work and success within it are largely a privilege. Given that privilege-based selection in creative work is both entrenched and ethically problematic, we explore its implications for organizational performance and organizational reputation and propose strategies that may help organizations reduce its discriminatory impact. We conclude by presenting questions for future research arising at the intersection of the literatures on evaluation in creative work and on social inequality.

## Introduction

The new “cool jobs” are creative jobs—jobs that add economic value through creative work. Creative jobs initially drew attention due to their perceived contribution to economic growth in industrialized countries (e.g., OECD, 1998; European Commission, 2001). Though these initial claims have since been questioned, the surrounding rhetoric, along with changes in people’s expectations about their jobs and glamorization in the popular media, have transformed public conceptions of desirable work. Creative jobs attract applicants by highlighting work widely considered interesting and fulfilling and offering work-based opportunities for creative expression (Lloyd, 2010; Ross, 2004; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Praised as a force for expanding opportunity and progress, creative jobs are purportedly filled by a diverse workforce with a strong meritocratic ethos (Florida, 2012).

Yet a closer look reveals inequalities entrenched in this new workforce. For example, more than fifty percent of job holders in the UK creative industries have class-privileged backgrounds and those with more modest backgrounds who make it in are paid less and are less likely to advance (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Men also dominate creative jobs: in the US, for instance, only 32% of musicians, 30% of television writers, and 25% of architects are women (Hunt, 2015; U.S. Department

of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Women are also less likely to reach the top of creative professions (Miller, 2016b) and are paid less (Lindemann, Rush, & Teppie, 2016). Finally, creative jobs are disproportionately White. In the UK, for example, non-White employment in the creative industries is only eight percent (O’Brien, Laurison, Miles, & Friedman, 2016), lower than the overall non-White employment.

A large portion of this inequality is perpetuated by stringent selection procedures that limit entry into these jobs and success within them. Organizational gatekeepers routinely exclude even formally highly qualified aspiring entrants (Koppman, 2016) and deny recognition to expertly produced work (Boudreau et al., 2016; Caves, 2000; Sgourev & Althuizen, 2014; Staw, 1995; Trapido, 2015). Although selection for quality and skill happens in all types of work, selection in creative work stands out in a way that is particularly prone to reproduce inequality. Once the formal competence requirements have been met, the selection of creative products and workers is driven—far more than in other types of work—by tacit proxy signals of quality and competence. The central argument that we distill from the literature and whose implications we explore in this article is that, because of the heavy reliance on tacit and indirect signals of quality and competence, access to creative work and success in it are largely a privilege—that is, a non-merit-based

\* Correspondence to: School of Business, University of Washington, Bothell. Box 358584, Bothell, WA 98011, USA.  
E-mail address: [dtrapido@uw.edu](mailto:dtrapido@uw.edu) (D. Trapido).

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advantage available only to members of restricted, favorably socially positioned groups. Protected from scrutiny by being undisclosed and difficult to measure, the tacit proxy signals benefit those aspirants whose privilege puts them in a good position to understand and send these signals.

We begin this article by detailing the causal mechanism that links creativity to privilege. We argue that organizational gatekeepers rely on privilege-laden signals to evaluate creativity due to the “push” of uncertainty and the “pull” of the culturally dominant person-centered view of creativity. We present a typology of non-merit-based advantages that evaluators of creative work use as proxy signals of quality and detail how these signals result in an outsized role of privilege in selection. Acknowledging that privilege-based selection is an inherent attribute of creative work but also a source of ethically and sometimes legally problematic inequality, we proceed to explore its implications for organizational performance and ways of potentially reducing its discriminatory impact. Furthermore, we consider that merit-based selection into creative occupations may, paradoxically, also be based on unmerited advantages (Sandel, 2020) and argue that fostering privilege under the guise of merit makes organizations vulnerable to reputational damage. By integrating the literatures on the evaluation of creativity and the reproduction of social inequality, we highlight new, previously-unexplored research directions and potential questions for future research.

### Defining creativity and creative work

Amabile, (1988; 1996) influentially promoted the definition of creativity as the generation of outcomes that are both novel and useful. Going forward, we will use the term “relevant” instead of “useful,” to preserve the initial meaning but also to include creative work whose outcomes may have no strictly practical applications. The novelty-and-relevance definition combines the two criteria multiplicatively—a non-novel or an irrelevant outcome is not creative regardless of how it scores on the other criterion. Although this definition has alternatives (Fleming, Mingo, & Chen, 2007; Kharkhurin, 2014; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005) and has been openly contested (Acar, Burnett, & Cabra, 2017; Godart, Seong, & Phillips, 2020), we leave the definitional debates aside. Other definitions do not delineate the scope of our discussion discernibly more accurately than the novelty-and-relevance definition.

We regard work as “creative” to the extent that it adds value through creativity. Creativity adds value in widely varying types of work (IBM, 2010; Pate, 2020), and there is no natural boundary separating creative work from noncreative work. Rather, the creativeness of work varies on a continuum. The continuum stretches from work where every outcome must have creative aspects to be valued positively (e.g., art, science, design), to work where creativity is often expected but not required in every outcome (e.g., engineering, management), to work where creativity is a bonus but is unnecessary for satisfactory performance, with purely mechanical noncreative work at the lower end. Our arguments in this article apply, to a varying degree, in all types of work except the latter. Consistent with Amabile’s (1988) definition of innovation as successful implementation of creativity within organizations, we term organizations “innovative” when they successfully implement the results of creative work.

### The genesis of privilege in creative work

The argument that links the creative nature of work with non-merit-based advantage hinges on the notion that the quality of creative work is inherently uncertain. We highlight distinctive features of creative work that increase evaluation uncertainty and argue that this inherent uncertainty forces gatekeepers to rely in selection on proxy signals for quality and competence. We further argue that gatekeepers in creative fields are drawn toward relying on these signals by the culturally

dominant person-centered view of creativity. We propose a typology of proxy signals used by gatekeepers in evaluation of creative work. Our typology integrates various proxy signals familiar from prior literature in a general theoretical framework which helps reveal their common implication, the role of privilege in creative selection.

### *Creativity breeds uncertainty about quality*

A large body of work has highlighted evaluators’ uncertainty about the quality of creative work outcomes (Caves, 2000; Mueller, Melwani, & Goncalo, 2012; Staw, 1995). This uncertainty has been documented among peer audiences of technological inventions (Fleming, 2001), among gatekeepers in academic research (Boudreau, Guinan, Lakhani, & Riedl, 2016), and in expert panels evaluating R&D project proposals, particularly when evaluation happens under time constraints (Crisuolo, Dahlander, Grohsjean, & Salter, 2017). It is also evident among evaluators of visual art, who fail to assess quality consistently, more so when it involves novel stylistic combinations (Sgourev & Althuizen, 2014). Customers have also been shown to have difficulty in judging the quality of highly novel, unfamiliar products (Moreau, Markman, & Lehmann, 2001; Pontikes, 2012; Rindova & Petkova, 2007).

The uncertainty in evaluating the quality of creative outcomes spills over into uncertainty in evaluating the creative competence of individuals. This is partly because evaluators factor assessments of individuals’ records of creative production into assessments of creative competence, spreading uncertainty from the former to the latter, and partly because individual creative traits are not easily observable (Malakate, Andriopoulos, & Gotsi, 2007). Faced with this uncertainty, organizational gatekeepers tend to limit or dismiss the role of objective indicators when assessing individual creative promise (Huang & Pearce, 2015; Koppman, 2016).

The distinctive feature of creativity that makes evaluators uncertain about its quality is the novelty imperative. Because every creative outcome *must* by definition be novel, even the most qualified professionals and the most sophisticated consumers have no prior experience with it. Creative work outcomes are inevitably unfamiliar to their audiences. The lack of familiarity limits the audiences’ ability to know the quality of creative contributions. As a result, higher creativity is associated with the audience’s uncertainty about work’s quality.

Other novelty-related specifics of evaluation in creative work further increase the uncertainty. First, evaluation criteria in creativity are elusive. Because established criteria, shaped in evaluation of past creativity, tend to miss the value of emergent novelty (Christensen, 1997; Dane, 2010), criteria intended to detect that value must be continuously socially reconstructed, remaining fluid and tentative. Second, the incessant revisions of evaluation criteria limit the circle of people who can keep up. As a result, evaluation criteria in creativity tend to have a distinctly private nature, shared among a select few and rarely articulated publicly. Third, uncertainty about the success prospects of creative work tends to be universal. As Caves (2000) put it, in creative industries “nobody knows” which products will succeed. In contrast to contexts where evaluators may build product-specific expertise over time, the novelty imperative hinders the accumulation of expertise by ensuring that evaluators are constantly presented with unfamiliar products. Worse and ironically, when people are organizationally tasked with evaluating the promise of creative ideas, this tends to lower the accuracy of their evaluations by suppressing the divergent thinking skills they need to evaluate this promise (Berg, 2016). Caves (2000) argued that the institutional structure of creative industries, particularly the prevalence of the option contract, has largely evolved in response to the universal cluelessness about the prospects of creative work’s success.

Although these factors generate high evaluation uncertainty, such uncertainty is not unique to creative outcomes or creative competence. In the concluding section of this paper, we discuss the applicability of our arguments in high-uncertainty contexts beyond creativity.

*Uncertainty and person-centered ideals breed reliance on proxy signals in evaluation of creativity*

Lacking reliable markers of creative merit, evaluating audiences come to use privilege-laden attributes of creators or of their work as heuristics in judging that merit. These attributes become signals proxying for quality and competence in evaluation of creative work. The proxy signals of quality and competence—status, status characteristics, elite networks, cultural capital, and a family of signals which we collectively refer to as symbolic dexterity—are summarized in Table 1. We discuss each signal in detail in the next subsection.

We argue that reliance on proxy signals in the evaluation of creativity results from the dual forces of “push” and “pull.” First and foremost, evaluators are “pushed” toward proxy signals by uncertainty. Uncertain about the merits of creative work and workers, evaluators must nevertheless select creative outcomes to endorse and individuals to hire and reward. Forced to decide under uncertainty, they fall back on proxy signals in judging creative quality and competence.

Reliance on proxy signals is further reinforced by the “pull” of the signals. Evaluators of creativity are drawn toward proxy signals, beyond what we would expect in other types of work, because the culturally dominant view of creativity makes signals associated with individual attributes legitimate and easily available decision heuristics. For much of early Western history, creativity was defined as a craft learned through apprenticeship; yet since the Renaissance, it has been prominently viewed as an innate “gift” and as means of personal self-expression (Becker, 1982; Singerman, 1999). While the pre-Renaissance view de-emphasized creators’ identities, the now dominant person-centered view directly links individual creativity to creators’ individual attributes. By doing so, this view legitimates signals stemming from creators’ identities as a basis for evaluation and endorses the selection of the “right kind” of personalities for creative work.

The person-centered cultural view of creativity brings proxy signals into the foreground in evaluation in at least three ways. First, in contrast to pre-Renaissance Europe, where “the individual artist remain[ed] invisible behind the corporate facades of church and guild” (Kubler, 1962:92), today’s creative products tend to prominently showcase producers’ identities. Creative work typically bears the name of its producer, and audiences recognize the reputation of that producer as a testament to the quality of the work (Becker, 1982; Sgourev &

Althuizen, 2014). Second, audiences tend to prize authenticity in creative work, expecting that creative contributions be “genuine,” “natural” and without “artifice” (Peterson, 1997:211). This expectation draws evaluating audiences’ attention to the individual creator, thus also bringing extra attention to privilege-laden signals such as her status, relations, and the cultural and symbolic aspects of her work. Third, producers tend to embed personal privilege-laden proxy signals in creative products, making the signals more visible and their use in evaluation more legitimate than in other types of products. For example, Childress and Nault (2019) showed that literary agents read tacit signals of authors’ demographics and cultural capital embedded in manuscripts and use those signals to advantage authors with whom they match demographically and/or culturally, thus entrenching social inequalities in creative writing. Because signals are embedded in products, they matter even when the creators are anonymous.

All told, these dual forces push and pull evaluators to rely on privilege-laden attributes when evaluating creative producers and their work. Research has begun to identify specific privilege-laden attributes on which evaluators rely, yet these findings are scattered across sub-fields, including the sociology of science, organizational research on status, scholarship on gender, the social network literature, the sociology of culture, and organizational ecology. Our goal in the next subsection is to bring these findings together into a typology of proxy signals that reproduce privilege in the evaluation of creative work.

*A typology of proxy signals of quality and competence*

*Status and status characteristics*

Evaluators’ tendency to use producers’ social status as a heuristic to infer quality when true quality is difficult to know is a central insight of signaling theory in economics (Spence, 1974) and sociology (Podolny, 1993; 2005). The role of status as a surrogate for quality has been documented in various types of creative work, particularly extensively in academic research. High-status scientists enjoy a recognition premium known as the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968), which is larger when the quality of their contributions is uncertain (Azoulay et al., 2014). When companies go public, investors read involvement of star scientists as a signal of companies’ quality (Higgins et al., 2011). Simcoe and Waguespack’s (2011) natural experiment showed that inclusion of high-status author names dramatically increased the publication rate of

**Table 1**  
Proxy Signals of Quality and Competence.

Proxy Signal	Examples of Signal	Mechanisms of Privilege-Based Advantaging	Representative Creative Contexts Where Relevant (from prior studies)
Status	- Elite credentials - High professional standing - Above-middle class background	- Status bias - 2nd- & 3rd-order evaluations	- Peer recognition of academic publications (Azoulay, Stuart, & Wang, 2014; Merton, 1968; Trapido, 2022) - Valuation of innovative firms (Higgins, Stephan, & Thursby, 2011) - Creative employment (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979])
Status Characteristics	- Gender - Race - Ethnicity	- Gender/racial/ethnic status beliefs - Homophily - 2nd- & 3rd-order evaluations	- Evaluation of musical performance (Goldin & Rouse, 2000) - Consecration of popular music (Schmutz & Faupel, 2010) - Job performance evaluations (Lukysyte et al., 2018; Proudfoot, Kay, & Koval, 2015) - Organizational support of creativity (Taylor et al., 2020) - Academic hiring & promotion (Burris, 2004; Zuckerman, 1977) - “Art worlds” (Becker, 1982) - Consecration of philosophic ideas (Collins, 1998)
Elite Networks	- Mentoring - Learning - Collaboration - Recruitment	- Elite vacancy chains - Within-network hiring - Personal endorsement/consecration - Personal transfer of tacit knowledge	- Creative employment (Koppman, 2016) - Book publishing (Childress & Nault, 2019)
Cultural Capital	- Omnivorous cultural taste revealed in hiring process - Cultural affinity embedded in creative products	Cultural homophily between aspirants and gatekeepers	- Peer recognition of unconventional research (Cowles, 2017; Koppman & Leahey, 2019; Whiteside, 1970) - ... and of technology (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001) - Audience valuation of films (Hsu, 2006) - Success in acting careers (Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & Von Rittmann, 2003) - Recognition of architectural creativity (Jones, 2010)
Symbolic Dexterity	- Framing radical creativity as familiar - Symbolic linking - Respect of symbolic boundaries	- Catering to gatekeepers’ professional creeds - Tacit signaling of sophistication	

engineering proposals, unless uncertainty about their quality was reduced by prescreening. Similar advantages accrue to high-status individuals in artistic work, where objective criteria of quality are even more elusive than in science. [Sgourev and Althuizen \(2014\)](#) found that artists' high status predisposes art audiences to value stylistic novelty in their work. In a study of culinary innovation, Rao, Monin, and Durand pointed out that high-status chefs have "more latitude to be original" (2005: 969), which helps them win food critics' recognition of culinary novelty.

Beside using literal status cues inherent in high social position, audiences may also infer status from beliefs about social groups. Status beliefs are "widely shared cultural beliefs that people who belong to one social group are more esteemed and competent than those who belong to another social group" ([Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000](#): 580). According to expectation states theory, people rely on status characteristics—i.e., group-defining traits that are subject to status beliefs—when assessing individual competence and quality of contributions ([Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972](#); [Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch Jr, 1977](#)). Furthermore, people may infer competence and quality from others'—rather than their own—status beliefs, explicit or perceived, in what researchers have called second- and third-order evaluations ([Correll, Ridgeway, et al., 2017](#)). Second-order evaluations rely on the status beliefs of specific others; third-order evaluations rely on prevalent beliefs in a group. These evaluations tend to matter most in cases where there is not an objective measure of success but rather success depends on the impressions of consequential others, as is the case for many creative products.

In the context of creative work, the role of gender as a status characteristic is particularly well documented. Studies have shown that audiences' reliance on gender as a proxy signal of quality increases under uncertainty, resulting in an increased female disadvantage ([Botelho & Abraham, 2017](#); [Gorman, 2006](#)). Women receive less credit than men for creative contributions ([Goldin & Rouse, 2000](#); [Schmutz & Faupel, 2010](#)). This disadvantage increases with individuals' innovativeness ([Luksyte et al., 2018](#); [Proudfoot et al., 2015](#); [Trapido, 2022](#)) and impedes women's careers by lowering their performance evaluations ([Luksyte et al., 2018](#)) and limiting organizational support for their creativity ([Taylor et al., 2020](#)).

#### *Elite networks*

Decades of research have made it a near-truism that embeddedness in social networks helps people get involved and succeed in creative work. To be sure, networks may boost actual creative competence by facilitating access to fruitful ideas ([Baer, 2010](#); [Burt, 2004](#)), productive collaboration ([Fleming et al., 2007](#); [Obstfeld, 2005](#)), and resources ([Lim, Tai, Bamberger, & Morrison, 2020](#)). Yet networks' role as a non-merit-based proxy for creative competence is also well documented. Sociological studies have shown that many artistic innovations owe their success to support from artists' critical, collegial, and commercial networks, above and beyond any objectively definable aesthetic merits ([Becker, 1982](#); [Jones, 2010](#); [White & White, 1965](#)). In a sociological study of philosophers' careers, [Collins \(1998\)](#) portrayed intellectual communities as vacancy chains where outsiders rarely attain prominence unless they are socially tied with prominent incumbents. Careful to avoid contrasting "true" and socially constructed quality, [Collins](#) insisted that the quality of philosophical ideas is only definable in networks of philosophers' social ties. [Zuckerman \(1977\)](#) documented similar dynamics among scientists, showing how entry into scientific elites depends on social access to prominent mentors and colleagues. [Burris \(2004\)](#) showed that the benefits of elite academic network ties also extend to academic units—university departments derive a substantially larger share of their prestige from involvement in elite hiring networks than from scholarly merits such as productivity, citations, and research grants.

#### *Cultural capital*

Cultural capital refers to class-privileged tastes, cultural interests, and self-presentation styles that are prized by gatekeepers and may therefore be converted into monetary and social advantages ([Bourdieu, 1984 \[1979\]](#); [2001 \[1983\]](#); [Lamont & Lareau, 1988](#)). While economic capital can be transmitted from one generation to the next instantaneously, cultural capital is transmitted through the slow processes of socialization ([Bourdieu, 1984 \[1979\]](#)). A product of a class-privileged upbringing, cultural capital is often misrecognized as natural ability or intelligence by teachers and other evaluators, and its effects on educational attainment have been long-documented ([Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997](#); [DiMaggio, 1982](#); [Kaufman & Gabler, 2004](#)). Only recently has the concept been introduced to studies of organizations and the evaluation of merit in organizational contexts. Such studies show that cultural capital affects occupational entry ([Rivera, 2012](#); [2015](#)) and advancement ([Friedman & Laurison, 2019](#)) because gatekeepers evaluate merit based on cultural similarities in tastes, interests, and self-presentation styles. When merit is defined by creativity, the fundamental uncertainty about the quality of creative work suggests that audiences will be particularly reliant on cultural capital as a proxy for creative merit. Indeed, omnivorous cultural tastes that candidates share with employers help them enter creative jobs without necessarily making them more creative ([Koppman, 2016](#)). Similarly, hiring decision-makers in Big Tech evaluate aspiring researchers with boundary-spanning interaction styles as more innovative ([Chua & Mazmanian, 2022](#)).

#### *Symbolic dexterity*

Symbolic dexterity is an umbrella term that we use to refer to various skills of contextualizing and fine-tuning creative work such that its evaluating audiences are more receptive ([Jones, 2010](#); [Kennedy, 2008](#); [Lowenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012](#); [Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011](#)). Similar to cultural capital, symbolic dexterity proxies for creative quality by catering to gatekeepers' tastes and cognitive schemas. Unlike cultural capital, symbolic dexterity caters to gatekeepers' work-related rather than cultural creeds.

Symbolic dexterity may manifest in at least three ways. First, producers may enact symbolic dexterity by framing radically creative work in ways that are familiar to evaluating audiences. Edison deliberately crafted the design, functionality, and distribution of electrical lighting to resemble those of the gas lighting system which his innovation would displace ([Hargadon & Douglas, 2001](#); [Millard, 1990](#)). Newton's use of accepted geometry to present his laws of gravitation, instead of the radically new calculus, helped his ideas gain acceptance ([Whiteside, 1970](#)). Darwin increased the appeal of his theory of evolution among colleagues by couching its presentation in accepted methodological vocabulary and inserting nods to conventional knowledge about selective breeding ([Cowles, 2017](#)). Second, symbolic dexterity may help link ideas strategically to specific other creators' ideas ([Lamont, 2009](#)). For example, [Jones \(2010\)](#) found that patterns of links between architectural ideas, or "symbolic networks", outperform social networks in determining architects' late-career and posthumous recognition. Other links serving similar purposes include academic citations, literary allusions, and rap music samples. Third, symbolic dexterity may be manifested in respecting symbolic boundaries. Individual and organizational creativity that transgresses accepted boundaries of symbolic categories such as genres or product types tends to be overlooked or penalized by audiences ([Hsu, 2006](#); [Zuckerman, 1999](#); [Zuckerman et al., 2003](#)).

#### *From tacit proxies to non-merit-based advantages*

The literature on proxy signals in creative work typically goes as far as to suggest that selection is driven by a particular proxy for quality or competence. Only a few studies have taken the logic further, to explore how reliance on tacit proxies leads to an outsized role of non-merit-based positional advantages in selection. This link has been most clearly traced in studies that documented disadvantages faced by

women in creative work (Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Luksyte et al., 2018; Proudfoot et al., 2015; Schmutz & Faupel, 2010; Taylor et al., 2020; Trapido, 2022; Whittington, 2018) and the advantage enjoyed by upper-middle-class job applicants due to employers' preference for their cultural tastes (Koppman, 2016).

There are good reasons to expect that such advantages are far more common than has been shown so far, and possibly ubiquitous across types of privilege. Gatekeepers' reliance on proxy signals favors aspirants from privileged backgrounds in at least two ways. First, privileged aspirants are better positioned to produce these signals. Status and cultural capital are forms of privilege. Elite professional networks, even if not typically impenetrable, constitute a form of privilege because they often require resources and costly spatial co-location with incumbents to join. Although symbolic dexterity may theoretically be attained by anyone, the tacit knowledge on which it draws largely resides in professional elites and elite institutions (Collins, 1998; Zuckerman, 1977). Second, privileged aspirants are better able to understand how proxy signals matter. Such understanding, developed through elite socialization, must help strategically cultivate the signals and target their displays to relevant gatekeepers.

Privileged aspirants also benefit from proxy signals' tacit nature. It is telling that studies identifying proxies for quality in creative work almost never gleaned these proxies' importance from public statements. Rather, their importance had to be discovered analytically or, more rarely, from communication not accessible to aspirants. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find job postings or organizations' official documents that admit to evaluating candidates for creative jobs based on criteria such as status, network embeddedness, or cultural tastes. Faced with the need to decide under high uncertainty, gatekeepers resort to publicly unpalatable and sometimes illegal criteria without acknowledging, or possibly even without being aware, that they do so. As a result of the impactful and hidden nature of these criteria, gatekeepers—who are likely to have benefited from the advantages that they are now tacitly rewarding—are given an opening to favor those who are similar to themselves or who fit the stereotypical profiles of creative competence, all while avoiding external scrutiny.

### The dual impetus for research

We described the mechanism of privilege-based selection in creative work as both enduring and ethically problematic. This mechanism is enduring and probably ineradicable because evaluations of creative merit are inherently uncertain and hence dependent on signals that substitute for merit, which privileged aspirants are better positioned to produce. The mechanism is ethically problematic because it rewards on grounds other than merit and reproduces social inequality, sometimes in illegal discriminatory ways.

As the role of privilege in selection for creative work is here to stay, organizational researchers face the task of understanding its implications for organizations' creative performance—that is, successful production of creative products and services—and for organizational reputation. As this role is ethically problematic, researchers face the task of understanding how organizations can reduce the reproduction of privilege in creative work. In the rest of this paper, we will take up these two tasks, articulating emergent answers as well as questions for future research.

### Privilege and creative performance

Privilege-based selection is a subtype of the more general problem of suppressed diversity. When formal or informal organizations favor privileged candidates, they discriminate against members of under-privileged groups and curb the diversity of the workforce. The general implications of diversity for creative performance will therefore inform our understanding of the effect of privilege-based selection on creative performance.

This understanding may be further elaborated by considering the effects of privilege-based selection on novelty separately from its effects on relevance. While the extensive literature on the impact of diversity on creativity typically examines creativity as a single outcome (for many examples, see Bassett-Jones, 2005; Hundschell, Razinskas, Backmann, & Hoegl, 2022), we posit that examining the two aspects of creativity as separate outcomes is helpful both for theoretical clarity and for understanding the managerial implications of privilege-based selection.

### Privilege suppresses novelty

Members of less privileged demographic groups tend to have different experiences of socialization and structural constraints than their more privileged peers, which in turn may lead to different educational, career, and life choices (Charles & Bradley, 2009; Correll, 2004; Fang & Tilcsik, 2022; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Demographically different people also tend to be embedded in different social networks, partly because similar people tend to associate (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) and partly because they may actively exclude members of other, particularly less privileged groups (Ibarra, 1992; Kanter, 1977; Thomas, 1990; Trapido, 2013). Therefore, when demographically diverse teams and organizations create relationships that cut across demographic attributes, they expose their members to diverse information and ideas (Reagans & Zuckerman, 2001; Reagans, Zuckerman, McEvily, 2004). Conversely, insofar as diversity is suppressed, information and ideas tend to stay within demographic silos.

The link between demographic diversity and diversity of ideas has a straightforward implication for teams' and organizations' potential to generate novel ideas. Because novel ideas arise as combinations of pre-existing elements (Cromptley & Cromptley, 2010; Fleming, 2001; Henderson & Clark, 1990; Kogut & Zander, 1992), opportunities for novelty increase as the number of elements available for combination increases. When member selection in teams or organizations is based on privilege-laden demographics, the set of elements available for combination will be smaller and include redundancies.

As a result, the expected main effect of privilege-based selection on novelty, similar to that of any suppression of demographic diversity, is negative—evaluators practicing privilege-based selection curb the novelty of ideas generated in teams and organizations. The skew toward privileged groups in creative workforce will therefore most severely impede performance when novelty is most acutely needed. This is likely the case in teams tasked with creative brainstorming, in large bureaucratic organizations facing an urgent need of change, and in artistic genres that decline due to waning novelty of artists' contributions (see Lena, 2012; Martindale, 1990).

### Privilege and relevance: the audience contingency

Although evaluations of novelty in work settings are often subjective (Rosenblum, 1978; Guetzkow, Lamont, & Mallard, 2004; Koppman, 2014), researchers routinely conceptualize novelty objectively and operationalize it using objective measures (see e.g. Boudreau et al., 2016; Katila & Chen, 2008; Rosenkopf & McGrath, 2011; Trapido, 2015). Conversely, the relevance component of creative performance is inherently subjective. Relevance (or usefulness, appropriateness, and other related terms used in its place) is definable only by the audience of creative outcomes; any definitions of relevance, no matter how idiosyncratic, are valid as long as they accurately represent subjective judgments of the audience. This may help explain why—in contrast to the converging understanding in the literature that suppression of workplace diversity impedes novelty—research has not converged similarly on an understanding of the relationship between diversity and relevance. Measures of relevance are more difficult to design and apply than those of novelty, and the effect of diversity on relevance is likely to be complexly contingent, varying by the audience that defines relevance, the marker of privilege at hand, and the match between creative

producers and their audiences.

Since subjective definitions of relevance are more likely to be shared within groups than between groups, we expect producer-audience similarity to moderate the effect of privilege-based selection on relevance. For forms of creativity in which audiences are selected through filters akin to those used to select creative producers, producers' privilege will likely, all else being equal, enhance the relevance of their creative work. We would likely see this in fields where creative work is produced for peer audiences, which Bourdieu, 1984 termed "fields of restricted production", such as avant-garde art, poetry, and academia. In contrast, when audiences are dissimilar from the privileged producers—which includes mass consumers and any groups demographically mismatched with the creatives—privilege would likely be an impediment to relevance. We would expect this in fields such as advertising, popular music, and television.

There are hints that awareness of these implications is spreading and informing organizational practices designed to counteract the elitist detachment of creative workers from consumer audiences and the resulting irrelevance of their work. For example, personnel practices aimed at matching employees' backgrounds with those of potential customers may be used to boost relevance (Ely & Thomas, 2001). The shift from highbrow to omnivorous cultural tastes in defining desirable cultural capital (Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Koppman, 2016) may also serve to broaden creative workers' cultural repertoires, making them more sensitive to the preferences of demographically diverse consumers and better positioned to create products and services relevant for such consumers.

### How organizations can reduce the role of privilege in evaluation of creativity

Evaluators' reliance on privilege-laden signals in selection for creative work is ethically problematic. To begin to think about how organizations may be able to limit the impact of these signals, we turn to research on managing diversity in the workplace, which we integrate with theories of creative work. Our focus here is on organization-level interventions, as individual-level interventions such as diversity training are largely ineffective when the organizational practices that guide evaluations reinforce bias (Stephens et al., 2020).

In traditional labor markets, employers experience uncertainty when evaluating job applicants due to information asymmetry—that is, applicants have information about their abilities that employers do not (Akerlof, 1978). This leads employers to rely on signals to make inferences about applicants' abilities like status characteristics (Ridgeway, 2011) and cultural capital (Rivera, 2012). Organizations try to prevent evaluators from relying on these signals and get more information about candidates by making evaluations more systematic or "blind" to applicant characteristics (Reskin & McBrier, 2000; Correll, 2017; Stephens et al., 2020). Making evaluations more systematic typically involves asking employers to specify evaluative criteria in advance (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005) or using absolute evaluations rather than subjective ones; for example, "How many cars did she sell last year?" versus "Is she a good salesperson?" (Biernat & Vescio, 2002). Blinding evaluations typically involves concealing the privileged characteristics of the worker from the evaluator, such as orchestras' use of screens to hide applicants' gender from the jury (Goldin & Rouse, 2000) or technology companies' use of hiring systems that only reveal names and credentials after evaluators select candidates based on test results (Miller, 2016a).

The extent to which these approaches can be widely applied to the evaluation of creativity is an open question. Making evaluations of creativity more systematic is difficult because each creative product is unique and rubrics based on past criteria would miss the value of emergent novelty. Moreover, creative products also largely acquire value through a social process (Beckert, 2009), so they often cannot be evaluated in absolute terms. Concealing the identities of workers is also difficult in many contexts because, unlike a name or a credential which

may be easily removed from a résumé, privilege is often embedded in creative work products. For example, because authors are told to "write what you know," they frequently write protagonists with status characteristics and social backgrounds that mirror their own (Childress & Nault, 2019). More generally, cultural capital and symbolic dexterity—acquired through interactions with professional elites and socialization in elite institutions (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984)—are embedded in creative products through the "good" taste (cultural capital) and optimal positioning (symbolic dexterity) gatekeepers value. As the creativity of individuals is not easy to observe, assessments of individual creativity are frequently based on individuals' records of creative production and many of the difficulties associated with systematizing and blinding creative products spill over into assessments of the creativity of individuals.

Given the difficulties associated with making evaluations of creativity systematic or blind, new strategies are needed. Additionally, because creative work is often produced in arrangements other than traditional employment, we expect that effective strategies will vary by context. In the next subsection, we begin by proposing an approach that may be useful when organizations are hiring candidates for creative work, emphasizing distinct strategies for employers selecting employees working largely independently on a project-by-project basis (e.g., a freelance graphic designer) versus more collaboratively within organizations (e.g., a full-time art director in an advertising agency). We differentiate between these two forms of work because, in addition to the individual and cognitive processes involved in the former, the latter requires understanding how the candidate produces creative work within a set of roles and relationships. We then propose strategies that may be useful when intermediaries are selecting products for organizations to distribute to general and peer audiences. We differentiate between general and peer audiences because the level of novelty desired and the way relevance is understood differ for these groups.

### Selecting candidates for employment

Creative work may be produced by full-time employees of organizations, freelancers working independently on a project-by-project basis, and contractors working for defined periods. When hiring for all these work arrangements, employers attempt to evaluate the creativity of applicants. The high uncertainty surrounding the success of creative products spills over into these assessments because employers do not know whether someone's record of creative performance is due to ability or luck because in creative production "all hits are flukes" (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006). Given the push of uncertainty and the pull of the dominant person-centered theory of creativity, evaluators likely fall back on privilege-laden signals that affirm their own experiences, feelings, and stereotypes.

To reduce evaluators' reliance on privilege-laden signals without systematizing or 'blinding' evaluations of creative people, evaluators may benefit from systematizing evaluations of candidates' creative process. For creative work conducted independently, this could involve using structured interviews to understand how a candidate thinks through a creative problem. For creative work conducted collaboratively, this could involve using tryouts to understand how the candidate produces creative work within a specific set of roles and relationships. For both, evaluators could design rubrics listing behaviors and practices shown to facilitate creative work that they could then look for in their interactions with candidates.

When hiring someone for a position that requires creative work largely produced independently, one potentially useful strategy would be to use structured interviews to systematize evaluations of applicants' creative work process. Take the case interview in consulting as an example. Evaluators ask applicants to solve business problems they are likely to encounter on the job and assess whether applicants structure their thinking, pick up on cues, and can perform simple calculations. Likely as a consequence, consulting has less biased hiring outcomes than

fields like law that use unstructured interviews (Rivera, 2015).

To apply this to the evaluation of creativity, interviewers could use structured interviews to ask applicants to solve a creative problem they are likely to encounter on the job and assess candidates' responses using rubrics listing cognitive and interactive behaviors research has shown to facilitate creative work. For example, if an evaluator were hiring a freelance web designer, the evaluator could ask him to design a landing page for a travel website with a set of realistic requirements and explain the rationale behind his choices. Say the candidate reports that he used a grid layout to showcase travel destinations because he saw a similar approach used by a university to highlight different departments. This is an example of analogical reasoning—making sense of a new problem by relating it to an old one (Reeves & Weisberg, 1993; 1994). Likewise, the candidate may say that he chose a layout based on feedback he received in the past and acknowledges that the layout has limitations. This shows that he is an active feedback receiver who shapes the content of feedback he receives (Harrison & Rouse, 2015).

When hiring for a position that requires creative work produced in a team embedded in an organization, evaluators also need to see how candidates perform with a specific set of creative roles and relationships, which makes tryouts a useful approach. A tryout is when candidates are brought into the organization and embedded into assignments, roles, relationships, and tasks (Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). A useful example is MBA internships. Prospective employers temporarily employ MBA students in full-time, entry-level positions. Through these internships, they observe interns' skills and abilities firsthand, and as a result, the gender gap in initial salaries later offered to MBA graduates declines (Sterling & Fernandez, 2018).

To extend this to evaluations of creativity, evaluators could have tryouts with candidates and assess candidates' performance using rubrics of social behaviors shown to facilitate collective creativity. For example, when hiring a full-time creative director in advertising, the evaluator might bring the candidate into a brainstorming session for a new sports shoe targeting teenagers. The evaluator could present the problem as she sees it: the client wants the concept to be consistent with their brand, which was developed around an older demographic but also wants to grab the younger consumer's attention. If the candidate were to restate this problem giving it a new meaning—for instance, saying it is the same as one she faced trying to promote a cleaning product targeting environmentally conscious consumers—she would show that she could use reflective reframing, a practice associated with collective creativity (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006).

#### *Selection in product markets*

Creative work is also produced by self-employed workers connected to organizations through intermediaries such as brokers, agents, and editors, who select ideas, prototypes, or products for organizations to produce and distribute. These arrangements support creative producers' autonomy while buffering organizations from some of the uncertainty associated with creative production (Hirsch, 1972). Yet the push of uncertainty and the pull of the person-centered view of creativity are felt here too, and intermediaries often rely on their experiences, feelings, and stereotypes about creativity to evaluate products: for instance, Hollywood executives use stereotypes of what creative people should be like to select film pitches (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003) and literary agents use a story's resonance with their own life to select manuscripts to pursue (Childress & Nault, 2019).

To reduce evaluators' tendency to rely on privilege-laden signals, evaluators may benefit from strategies designed to help them assess the novelty and relevance of products apart from the signals of privilege embedded within them. To evaluate product novelty, evaluators may construct a measure of how different the product is from other products and select products with the desired level of novelty for the targeted audience. To evaluate product relevance, evaluators may benefit from seeking outside opinions: non-experts for products targeting the public

and a more diverse set of experts for products targeting peer audiences. Ideally, evaluators would use strategies targeting novelty and relevance simultaneously.

To evaluate product novelty, one potentially useful approach may be to construct a measure of the degree to which a creative product differs from other products on some material features, which could serve as an "objective" indicator of the desired type and level of novelty (see Askin & Mauskapf, 2017; Criscuolo et al., 2017). This includes text-based products like scientific articles and patents (Leahey & Moody, 2014; Foster, Rzhetsky, & Evans, 2015; Trapido, 2015; Boudreau et al., 2016; Trapido, 2022) as well as non-text-based products like songs and paintings (Askin & Mauskapf, 2017; Banerjee, Cole, & Ingram, 2022). For example, Askin and Mauskapf (2017) assigned songs quantitative values on features such as tempo, mode, and key, as well as more complex features like acoustic-ness and danceability, and compared the distinctiveness of those features to those of other songs. Intermediaries in music like A&R representatives could use this measure to select products with the desired level of novelty—moderate for popular audiences (Askin & Mauskapf, 2017) and high for elite audiences (Pontikes, 2012)—without relying on privilege-laden signals.

To evaluate relevance for products targeting the public, evaluators may benefit from using laypeople to assess the relevance of creative work. When assessing the relevance of creative work products, experts typically use their cultural capital and symbolic dexterity to understand their relevance and meaning; for example, they may recognize features of styles and emotionally respond to the manipulation of a field's conventions. In short, experts appreciate the "good" taste and optimal positioning a privileged creator has embedded in her work. Laypeople, by contrast, evaluate creative work without the same cultural capital and symbolic dexterity. They may find a piece of art emotionally powerful due to its manipulation of a convention that is known widely, not exclusively to those socialized into the elite art world (Becker, 1982). Indeed, in the circus arts industry, lay audiences' evaluations of acts are more accurate predictors of popular success than the evaluations of the creative managers charged with making these decisions (Berg, 2016). In such a way, using lay audiences' evaluations to select creative products could reduce reliance on privilege-laden signals embedded within creative products that experts cannot unsee.

When the relevant audience is one's peers in the field, however, lay audiences do not understand what makes products appealing precisely because they lack experts' cultural capital and symbolic dexterity. In these contexts, privilege and relevance cannot be separated because privilege-laden signals are what make products intelligible and give them meaning. Perhaps the only way to reduce reliance on privilege-laden signals for peer audiences is to open the field up to less privileged individuals in the hopes that this will broaden the way relevance is understood. For example, the #OscarsSoWhite movement began in response to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominating an all-White slate of actors in 2015 and 2016. In response to the outcry, the Academy's Board of Governors increased the diversity of the Academy's members, all of whom are eligible to vote for the Oscars. In 2017, seven non-White actors were nominated and in 2018 four were nominated (Ugwu, 2020). When voting for acting performances worthy of an Oscar, an Academy member from an underrepresented group may consider a performance that her more privileged colleagues overlook because it resonates with her personal experiences. As such, diversifying peer audiences—though often not something that can be achieved at the organizational level—may help reduce reliance on privilege-laden signals.

In summary, in traditional work settings, organizations reduce evaluator bias by making evaluations more systematic or "blind" to applicant characteristics. But applying these approaches to creative work is hard. Systematizing is hard because each creative product is unique. Blinding is also difficult because privilege is often embedded in creative products themselves. We propose strategies that attempt to bring the essence of these approaches to evaluations of creative work.

When hiring creative workers, we suggest that structured interviews may help identify candidates for largely independent work and tryouts may help for largely collaborative work. When selecting creative products, we suggest evaluating product novelty using objective, possibly mathematically constructed measures and having, depending on the context, non-experts or a diverse set of experts evaluate product relevance. We expect these strategies will help evaluators reduce reliance on privilege-laden signals without sacrificing creative performance, although this is an empirical question we hope future research will address.

### The causal entanglement of privilege and merit: implications for organizational reputation

Our discussion so far—and the literature that informs it—has regarded privilege-based and merit-based selection in creative work as alternatives and has been built on contrasting the two. Even if analytically distinct, privilege and merit are, however, entangled in a causal loop. Privilege is well known to ease access to learning (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972). When people use the learned skills to succeed in work, Matthew-like effects solidify their hold on privileged positions (Damian, Su, Shanahan, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2015; Walberg & Tsai, 1983). Organizations may take steps to shift from privilege-based to merit-based selection, as we argued above; yet the privilege-merit-privilege casual loop is unlikely to allow this shift to be complete.

The implications of this causal entanglement for organizations have barely received research attention. Insofar as the implications for political institutions can serve as a guide, the causal entanglement of merit and privilege may become a lasting problem for innovative organizations' reputation. The values of diversity and openness that members of the skilled creative class ostensibly profess (e.g., Florida, 2012:56–59) stand in ironic contrast to their often-negative attitudes toward working-class, less-skilled groups left out of the virtuous privilege-merit-privilege cycle (Kuppens, Spears, Manstead, Spruyt, & Easterbrook, 2018; Sandel, 2020). Sandel argued that policies driven by such attitudes “have eroded the dignity of work and left many feeling disrespected and disempowered” (2020:19); they have fueled resentment in the working class and are largely responsible for the ongoing anti-establishment and anti-globalist political backlash and the weakening of the reputations of democratic institutions.

Neither the privilege-merit-privilege loop nor the smug negative attitudes are a creation of the innovative organizations of today. Yet these organizations have a central role in sustaining them. Organizations' ostensibly merit-based personnel practices, which in reality favor candidates from privileged backgrounds (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020; De Schepper, Clycq, & Kyndt, 2023), are at the core of the day-to-day mechanism excluding less privileged people from prestigious creative jobs. This role makes innovative organizations, particularly global and large ones, vulnerable to reputational damage. Their reputation as sanctuaries of entitlement and as engines of social inequality may in milder cases subject them to ridicule, such as when their employees are portrayed anxiously contemplating survival without company-provided food or the prospect of brief unemployment between two prestigious jobs (The Onion, 2023). In less favorable scenarios, such reputation may create political pressure for higher taxation, antitrust action, and restricted access to international labor.

### Creativity as privilege: contribution and a research agenda

In this article, we argued that access to creative work and success within it tend to be restricted to members of privileged social groups. We made several contributions. First, we argued that, due to high and inevitable uncertainty and the dominant person-centered view of creativity, evaluators rely on proxy signals of quality in creative work more than in other types of work. Second, we aimed to provide an exhaustive

typology of such proxy signals. While each signal has been theorized previously, our typology brings the signals into an integrated framework and reveals their common implication. This implication—that privilege has an outsized role in selection in creative work—is our third and central contribution. Fourth, we explored the implications of privilege's entrenchment in creative evaluation and selection for organizational performance, personnel practices, and reputation.

By exploring questions at the intersection of the research on evaluation of creativity and the research on the reproduction of social inequality, our article contributes new study directions. The dialogue between the creativity and inequality literatures started only recently but promises to be fruitful (Godart et al., 2020:503). We join this emerging dialogue hoping to stimulate the research on selection into work that involves creativity and the implications of this selection for the composition of the workforce and the success of creative people and organizations employing them. Several specific questions for future research emerge from our arguments.

#### *When do which proxy signals of creative quality matter?*

Although prior research has identified contexts where each privilege-laden proxy signal matters, we have no theoretical account for what makes particular signals more or less impactful in a context. Thus, cultural capital may matter less when audiences are mass consumers, and symbolic dexterity may matter less when creativity is evaluated by risk-comfortable gatekeepers who are “market makers” (Pontikes, 2012). Furthermore, in some forms of creativity, proxy signals may be prominent but fail to produce privilege. For example, in counterculture art and in genres on the margins of broader fields such as hip-hop, belonging to within-genre elite networks may be a proxy signal of quality in the usual sense and yet be entirely unrelated to privilege. A task for future research is to understand the contingencies that determine the strength of particular proxy signals and of their privilege-producing effect.

#### *Privilege without gatekeepers?*

The logic of our theoretical argument linking creativity to privilege hinges on the role of gatekeepers. By virtue of their organizational position, gatekeepers control access to creative work, its evaluation, or both. Gatekeepers may exercise this control when creative work happens in formal organizations, in positions such as managers, directors, or producers. They may also exercise it as intermediaries such as brokers, agents, and editors and in roles such as critics, art dealers, or patrons. In our argument, gatekeepers in formal and informal organizations are the locus of the social action—selection based on privileged characteristics proxying for quality—reproducing privilege.

The influence of gatekeepers, although very common, is not uniform across types of creative work. Forms of creative work exist and will likely keep emerging in which creatives reach audiences without gatekeepers' approval. To the extent that dependence on gatekeepers' approval is minimized, our argument predicts that the relation between privilege and selection will be minimized too. We expect this relation to be weak in forms of creativity with a direct creator-audience interface including street art, community-oriented forms of handicraft, and the various, often rapidly developing types of online content creation.

On the other hand, emerging sociological research suggests that privilege in these types of creative work may be sustained by influencers without formal authority to select people or products who nevertheless have substantial power to consecrate and promote (Christin, 2023; Christin & Lu, 2023; Song, 2023). In such informal types of gatekeeping, influencers' and their audiences' reliance on status and status characteristics may have the same or similar implications for privilege as formal gatekeepers' reliance on such signals has elsewhere. Future research on existing and emergent types of direct creator-audience interfacing may clarify whether the reproduction of privilege in them is indeed reduced or merely taken over by diffuse groups of informal



gatekeepers.

*Where does symbolic dexterity come from?*

Most of the sources of non-merit-based advantage we describe have documented social origins, except for symbolic dexterity. This exception is likely due to the fact that the literature on symbolic dexterity largely assumes that actors' decisions to employ it—for example, by making novelty appear more conventional, referencing other ideas, and respecting symbolic boundaries—are strategic choices. We argue that the tacit knowledge on which symbolic dexterity rests primarily resides among professional elites and in elite institutions; in other words, employing it may be a strategic choice but not everyone has the knowledge needed to make such a choice. For instance, Koppman and Leahey (2019) found that academics who successfully publish using unconventional methods do so by making their novelty more conventional and are more likely to be male and working at high-status institutions. This suggests that members of some social groups may be less likely to have or use symbolic dexterity. Insofar as that is the case, we ask: Which creative workers are more likely to possess symbolic dexterity and for what reasons? Are some workers more likely to be rewarded for their use of symbolic dexterity than others? How and to what extent can symbolic dexterity be made teachable and learnable in non-elite social contexts? These are important and largely unanswered questions.

*When and how do privileged characteristics shape creative performance?*

The implications of privilege-based selection for the creative performance of individuals and organizations remain largely an open question. Existing research at best provides fragments of an answer. The negative effects of privilege-based selection on the novelty aspect of creativity are established theoretically and empirically, but its effects on the relevance of creative work are poorly understood. We proposed that this effect may vary substantially across types of audience, markers of privilege, and producer-audience combinations. Because of the multitude of contingencies, this variation may be difficult to theorize convincingly without simultaneous empirical checks. We conjectured that producers' privilege may increase relevance when their audience has similar privileged characteristics and decrease it otherwise; future empirical research may test and add nuance to this conjecture.

The occasionally opposing effects of privilege-based selection on each of the two aspects of creativity present further performance questions. May the novelty-suppressing effect of privilege-based selection help avoid excessive novelty (which audiences are known to penalize)? When may the boost in relevance due to privilege-based selection outweigh the concomitant decrease in novelty, resulting in higher overall creative performance? Furthermore, the relationship between privilege and creative productivity—that is, the volume of creative output—is potentially important but rarely researched. Future research may fruitfully explore whether and when privilege makes creative people more or less productive.

*When and how can organizations reduce reliance on privilege?*

A wide range of employers evaluate creativity. Within that range, the types of work in which evaluations occur may make our proposed strategies more or less useful. We highlight three differences: whether evaluators are selecting people or products, whether jobs are independent or collaborative, and whether audiences for products are lay or peer. Yet there are likely important dimensions of difference that shape the effectiveness of these proposed strategies. For example, the permanence of the employment arrangement and the embeddedness of the individual within the organization may shape which strategies are more useful. Research is needed to better understand when our proposed interventions will be more or less helpful.

*To what extent does privileged-based selection cause reputational damage and what are the implications for organizations?*

We expect the reputational implications of privilege-based selection for innovative organizations to be a growing challenge for organizations and for organizational research. The reputation of “Big Tech” as a breeding ground of privilege may grow, putting them alongside industries more traditionally targeted for elitism such as “Big Law” and finance. Leaders of innovative organizations may find that designing effective responses to this reputational damage and to the resulting political and regulatory pressures becomes a lasting priority. Future research will tell to what extent these expectations are justified.

*Privilege in high-uncertainty contexts beyond creativity*

Finally, our argument that privilege has an outsized role in selection into creative work because of the inherent uncertainty applies regardless of the source of uncertainty. It would similarly apply when evaluators are uncertain about quality for reasons other than creativity. Studies have shown high uncertainty about quality when evaluation is hindered by information asymmetries (Akerlof, 1970) or time constraints (Crisuolo et al., 2017), and when market developments result in a blurring of evaluation standards (Sgourev, 2013). Uncertainty is also likely to be high to the degree that the object of evaluation is complex. While we have kept our task in this paper manageable by focusing on creative work, future research may explore other high-uncertainty contexts where privilege has an outsized role in evaluation and selection.

## Conclusion

The creative sector has been widely lauded as a force for expanding opportunity and social progress (e.g., Florida, 2012). Yet we argue that employment and advancement in creative occupations are largely a privilege restricted to members of certain groups. Some sources of non-merit-based advantage, such as the Matthew effect and “old boys’ networks”, are well-documented. But others are more subtle and hidden in the creative work itself, such as having the “right” taste and symbolic positioning. As a result of privilege-based selection, even employers who actively seek diversity may end up with a relatively homogeneous workforce. This hinders the career opportunities of workers, the access of the organizations that employ them to new ideas, and the development of the cultural products and knowledge to which these organizations contribute. We strongly encourage scholars to broaden our understanding of when evaluations of creativity are based on privileged characteristics and how to open our organizations up to creativity from all parts of society. Organizational scholarship at the intersection of social inequality and creative work will be uniquely qualified to inform this understanding.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data Availability

No data were used for the research described in the article.

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