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"Everyone Wants to Be at the Top": Social Hierarchies, Labors of Accumulation, and Becoming

a Professional Subject in Washington, D.C.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

by

Jaden Netwig

2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"Everyone Wants to Be at the Top":

Social Hierarchies, Labors of Accumulation, and

Becoming a Professional Subject in Washington, D.C.

Jaden Netwig

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Jessica R. Cattelino, Chair

Based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Washington D.C., my dissertation examines the cultures, socialities and struggles of professional accumulation among aspiring think tank professionals, and how they are shaped by the hierarchies and competitive pressures of DC social worlds. I argue that being a member of the think tank professional class is not a natural attribute of persons, but rather an ongoing social process of becoming through which aspirants come to learn how to enact, inhabit and embody their professionality in everyday life. Focusing primarily on lower-status workers such as interns, I explore how aspiring professionals navigate desires and struggles for professional advancement within professional and employment hierarchies in which they are situated as relatively subordinated. Rather than simply sites for knowledge production, this dissertation shows that think tanks are institutional and social terrains for professional class formation and socialization, which both require and replicate subordination as central rites of passage. While think tanks are often understood to be defined primarily by their ideological-political orientation and function as policy knowledge producers, I show that

social processes of becoming a professional subject within competitive hierarchies are central to understanding the role of think tanks as institutional actors that create and reproduce professional class worlds.

Throughout the dissertation, I highlight the ways that professional social formations structured by the imperative of professional accumulation create competition for prestige, status and advancement, and how this shape workers' subjectivities, everyday practices, self-understandings and relationships with others in the social field. In response to pressures of accumulation and the desire for advancement, I attend to how workers not only craft and regulate their own professional subjectivities, but also construct and mediate symbolic understandings that hierarchically differentiate themselves from others. By showing how understandings and forms of professionality and expertise are structured by hierarchies of valuation, this dissertation also sheds light on how power, struggle and differentiation constitutively shape contemporary professional social worlds.

The dissertation of Jaden Netwig is approved.

Christopher Kelty

Akhil Gupta

Adam Moore

Jessica R. Cattelino, Committee Chair

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2020

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This dissertation is less a singular achievement than a work borne of the care and labor of others. I owe more than I can say to the interlocutors whose lives make up these pages. Special shout-out to my interlocutor and friend C, without whom this project would not have been possible. To my mother, for teaching me to keep my head up, and my father, for teaching me to keep my head down. Thank you both for changing my diapers and feeding me when I was on all fours, and for being there always now that I am on just two.

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Introduction

Excerpted from field notes: It is my first week in Washington DC, and I decide to visit a think tank. I assume that think tanks would all be open to the public, and that I would be able to just show up and look around. I put on a white button-up, layered with a new black sweater and a pair of brown shoes. I check myself in the mirror one last time to make sure I look professionally tenable. I then walk out of the door and toward the bus. A cold wind whips at my face.

Figure 1: Brookings Institution (Wikimedia Commons)

I take the bus west toward the downtown core where many of the major DC think tanks are located. When I arrive, the air is clear and crisp, with a cool bite to it. I am nervous. As nonprofit organizations open to the public, I assumed that I would be able to walk right in, and give myself a short tour of the office; maybe speak to some people there. I enter two huge glass doors into the lobby of the building. Not sure about where to go, I walk up to the security guard and ask if I can enter the think tank. 'Do you have an appointment?' he asks blankly.[1] 'No. Can I still go in and check it out?' I ask. Shaking his head and surprised by my naivete, he responds, 'No, you can't just go in. You have to have an appointment with someone.' I look over toward the gold-colored elevators which would bring me up to the office space, and realize that I would not be going anywhere near the think tank office space today. (I later learn that the elevator buttons don't even work unless you have your own electronic security badge or the security guard uses his.) This is my first lesson of access: one cannot simply walk into a think tank. There are tight restrictions on access, and one must be a formal member, have an appointment or

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[1] Reconstructed from fieldnotes. All quotes hereafter with single quotation marks are reconstructed based on live or near-live fieldnotes rather than verbatim.

RSVP to a public event. Only a select few enter the domain of the think tank, and only on specific conditions.

Figure 2: Center for a New American Security (Erin Scott, Erin Scott Photography)

A few days later, shed of my naivete, I show up to the same think tank, with an official RSVP to an event. When I arrive at the lobby, the same security guard checks me in and lets me into the elevator.

It's 10am in an impeccably clean, medium-sized event room. Unlike the vaulted and stately architecture of Capitol Hill, this organization expressed a newly renovated modern aesthetic of brightness, full with vibrant color, with large impeccable glass doors and walls, signifying innovation, transparency, openness and inclusivity to all. Tightly organized rows of chairs face a small, well-lit stage area with a handful of seats for panelists. While open to the public, the attendees are split between upwardly mobile younger professionals in their 20s and early 30s, and older, seemingly more established professionals. Everyone is wearing a suit. We are all still awake and attentive, some sipping coffee, others gingerly eating mini-muffins, careful not to make too much noise. All white, men and women in suits of various ages mill about, some socializing in small groups, the majority sitting individually. Two lower-level female media and communications staff table outside the event with information, advertisements and books for sale. Two male interns stand at the threshold of the doors, greeting and opening the doors for us as we walk in. Another female intern stands at the perimeter of the seating, welcoming attendees into their seats with a bright smile.

On stage, well-dressed panelists sit in expensive, stylish chairs with glasses (not bottles) of water next to them on small tables. The moderator, an austere and humorless policy analyst, checks his personal mic, struggling to find the right place to clip it on his shirt. The audience sits silently, at least a couple open seats apart save for the few small groups that came in together, reading emails on their phones. Here, there are no stragglers of the kind common to public events – everyone, including the audience, is on time. The moderator introduces the panelists, thanking them for being here and listing their names and impressive credentials: doctoral degrees,

organizational affiliations, publication record, prestigious awards, appearances on television, and uses to which their research has been put by major news organizations. Each speaker takes a turn offering a few carefully crafted and eloquent remarks, followed by a moderated discussion among the panelists.

After the panel discussion, a public Q&A period opens up, allowing members of the audience to engage with the panelists and showcase their knowledge simultaneously. "Do we have a mic?" the moderator asks impatiently, looking around, unsure of which lower-status workers are responsible for "running the mic." A few curious heads in the audience turn, peering backward vacantly toward the interns. Visibly embarrassed, the mic-running intern appears and rushes down the center aisle toward an audience member with a raised hand who happened to be a high-level program manager at that think tank. Irritated at the delay, the manager snaps the mic out of the intern's hands without making eye-contact, as if it were a precious morsel of food in the midst of a famine. The intern then steps back, clasping his hands behind his back in a posture of professionality and deference.

After the event, interns move chairs back into place and clean up trash. While some attendees hurry away, others delicately but swiftly make their way toward the stage to talk with the panelists, noting how impressed they were by their talks and how their own professional work has direct connections. None approach the interns or other lower-level staff for conversation. The interns and other lower-level staff tabling are left in reserve, standing or sitting at attention until attendees leave, like inventory sitting idle until thrown into action when needed.

I notice a man standing by himself, so I walk up and introduce myself as an intern-to-be. He responds that he works in the Department of Defense, and quickly but politely takes leave, explaining that he really must get back to the office.

These data illustrate the social relations and cultural formations of expertise, knowledge and professionality in Washington DC. Rather than solely domains of knowledge production, think tanks are organized according to prevailing social hierarchies and unstated forms of power, which are grounded in forms of hierarchical differentiation patterned by local cultures of professionality. Further, I also learned that aspiring professionals, such as interns, did not enter DC think tanks primarily due to ideological commitments or lifelong interests in, but rather to access social networks, organizational affiliations, and epistemic skills that would – hopefully – prove to be professionally career-enhancing. Aspirants used think tanks, in other words, to access specific forms of status-augmenting professional power; and in turn, the social laboratory of the think tank molded aspirants into viable professional subjects through an ongoing social process

of becoming. As I learned, access to the very space of the think tank was mediated by organizational membership and professional status; and specific cultural forms of distinction created divisions and inequalities between people that deeply structured their relationships to one another. The ways that interns and other aspiring professionals negotiate hierarchies and forms of unequal differentiation, grounded in cultural economies of professional capital, form the motivating concern of this dissertation.

This dissertation examines the everyday lives of aspiring think tank professionals as a lens onto contemporary formations of professionality, labor and expertise in Washington DC. I argue that the everyday lives of epistemic workers and professionals are shaped by competitive struggles for, and hierarchies of, professional accumulation. I suggest that understandings of and modes of inhabiting professionality and expertise can only be understood by situating them in ongoing, contested relations of power and differentiation. I focus in particular on how lower-status professionals such as interns negotiate, mediate and enact diverse (though interrelated) forms of professional subjectivity. Rather than rendering professionals as part of a static, given category of persons, I illustrate the social processes through which interlocutors come to inhabit and embody professional class status. Throughout the dissertation, I highlight how professional class formation is a social *process of becoming* rather than a natural attribute.

In this way, this dissertation foregrounds how think tanks and their social networks are not simply institutional terrains for policy knowledge creation, but also laboratories for professional class formation, socialization and reproduction. I analyze the personal experience and cultural construction of the think tank professional class across multiple domains, from regulating corporeal practices of bodily appearance and adornment and performing discipline and productivity within the workplace, to mobilizing symbolic understandings of expertise to

delegitimize others and construct one's own claim to expert status. Across these social terrains, lower-status think tank workers and aspiring professionals come to learn how to inhabit, embody and enact professional class status. By foregrounding the cultural construction of seriousness and expertise, ethnographic analysis provides a unique window onto how think tanks as institutional and social formations operate to form and reproduce members of the professional class specifically concerned with claims to knowledge and expertise.

While this dissertation centers the practices, experiences and effects of professional accumulation, it emphasizes that becoming a competitive professional subject is a social activity rather than an essential given. My interlocutors were not naturally, inherently individualized competitors primed to career-enhancing accumulation. They did not possess an intrinsic desire to advance their careers, were not born with innate knowledge of the practice and value of social networking, and did not naturally possess ideas about what might maximize their value to think tank employers. On the other hand, they were also not reductive expressions of an essential American culture of individualism – I do not suggest that they were simply passive tokens of an essential, individualist cultural type. Rather, for my interlocutors, especially those aspirants in earlier stages of their careers, becoming a competitive professional subject was a *social process* through which they came to become deeply concerned with their status, and committed to culturally elaborated forms of accumulation. Through iterative, ongoing engagement in practices of competition and accumulation in everyday professional life, my interlocutors brought their careers into being and transformed themselves into individuated professional subjects. Professional accumulation was thus not an *a priori* value, but rather a way of inhabiting and perceiving the self and social world that my interlocutors came to learn over time within specific social and organizational worlds. By foregrounding especially aspiring lower-status

professionals' everyday experiences and social practices of subject formation, this dissertation attempts to denaturalize formations of competitive professional accumulation and contextualize them within historically, culturally, socially, psychically and institutionally specific environments.

When I first arrived in DC, I aimed to study how experts produced, regulated and circulated knowledge about security threats, including especially ideas about terrorism, extremism and radicalization. Inside and outside the workplace, I asked questions about ideas, frameworks, and theories related to homeland and national security. To my surprise and initial disappointment, my interlocutors were systematically under-interested in discussing these issues with me. At barbeques, dinner parties, bars and occasionally in the workplace, they would politely answer my questions, but swiftly change the subject whenever the chance arrived, turning instead to issues like the precarity and anxiety of being an intern, the struggles and victories of professional advancement, who did or did not deserve to receive a promotion or be entitled to categorization as a "serious" expert, and how to differentiate oneself from the crowd in a competitive labor market. I realized quickly that it was the interlocutors with whom I spent the most time – those in lower-status employment categories like intern – that most animatedly had issues of professional trajectories and accumulation in mind. Indeed, some cared little about the security-related topics they were working on as interns, conceptualizing their internship as less a medium for intellectually valuable experiences than a form of necessary labor in order to advance into a promotion. While initially perplexed, as I immersed myself in the everyday workplace and non-workplace lives of my interlocutors, I came to see that they are not walking abstract idea-machines bearing only conceptual frameworks in their minds, but rather, human

beings whose perceptions, aspirations and daily practices of epistemic work and self-enhancement are structured by the competitive professional worlds in which they are enmeshed.

Through attending to the lived experience of those around me, I quickly learned that professional and career advancement was at the forefront of my interlocutors' minds. Lower-status workers like interns, while from relatively advantaged and highly educated backgrounds, were embedded within organizational hierarchies that intimately shaped their experience of both themselves and their relationships with others. Employment hierarchies were predicated on a larger symbolic system of professional hierarchy, whereby those with more capital, such as credentials and institutional titles, commanded more power and esteem than those with less. As I learned through becoming an intern myself, there is no universal "native's point of view." Rather, my experience as a worker – and the data to which I had access as an ethnographer – was constitutively shaped by my subordinate positionality as an intern within a complex organizational hierarchy. As I worked as an intern, I realized that these employment hierarchies, shaped by the uneven distribution of professional capital, had palpable effects in the working and personal lives of my lower-status interlocutors. The sphere of the workplace – the epistemic point of production – was not a site of smooth intellection, but rather a space of social hierarchy and the struggle for professional distinction and advancement. My interlocutors were, in other words, *professional subjects*, both constrained and potentiated at once by their entanglement in relations of power, status and prestige that exceeded their own making.

And as I moved from work with fellow lower-status workers to the informal sphere of everyday sociality outside the workplace, I began to see that my interlocutors were deeply concerned about professional status, prestige and advancement outside of the workplace. Given the relative safety afforded by being outside the workplace, my interlocutors expressed deep and

ambivalent concern about career and professional enhancement. They worried about whether they were doing enough social networking; whether others were getting ahead of them unfairly; and whether they would secure a permanent paid position after their internship or not (and what they would do if they could not), among other things. An increasingly competitive labor market meant that my interlocutors were pressured to continually think about and strive for ways to enhance their value and differentiate themselves from others who might be peer-competitors. In this way, I came to understand my interlocutors' practices in terms of a perpetual struggle for career-enhancing professional accumulation – to survive and flourish they must network and gain social contacts, obtain credentials and experience, distinguish themselves from others in ways that elevate them, and enhance their value as employees – even outside of the workplace.

In this competitive context, claims to knowledge, professionality and expertise are not neutral, but rather emerge as a key terrain of struggle for prestige and differentiation. This concern with professional accumulation and advancement expressed itself through internecine symbolic struggles articulated along culturally specific, symbolically meaningful axes of hierarchical differentiation. My interlocutors mobilized shared cultural understandings of professionality and expertise to distinguish themselves from and elevate themselves above others.

The everyday life of professionality was deeply structured imperative of professional accumulation. My interlocutors desires, practices and social worlds were organized around the continual necessity to accumulate skills, knowledge, contacts, relationships, credentials and other forms of professionally valuable capital in order to enhance their professional personhood and advance their careers. The imperatives and pressures of professional accumulation – and the hierarchies they constituted – shaped not only my interlocutors' practices related to being a

working subject, but also their very existential projects of self-making and self-understanding. For example, many of the people that I worked with struggled to distinguish themselves from others on the basis of ideas of experience, credentials, smartness. These everyday practices of differentiation, shaped by the specific cultural meanings of professional capital and grounded in the perpetual struggle for accumulation, emerged as key to understanding how my interlocutors negotiated their local social worlds. This dissertation argues that we cannot understand expertise or professionality without understanding the social forms of accumulation and hierarchical differentiation that underpin it.

While think tanks are popularly understood as incubators for policy knowledge, fieldwork showed me that they are also institutional terrains for the reproduction of class power and distinction. By engaging in everyday forms of competitive accumulation, from clothing practices to transactional social networking, my interlocutors worked to create, reproduce and enhance their class status in ways that separated themselves from non-professionals. So I began to see that while think tanks are indeed interstitial zones bringing together various kinds of professional (Medvetz 2012), they are also spaces for elite, professional class socialization, enculturation and differentiation. However, I found that this professional class reproduction was, as we shall see, not given, but rather aspirational, given the subordinated status of most of my interlocutors. As aspirational subordinates my interlocutors struggled to accumulate forms of professional distinction that would elevate their status, confer social recognition, and differentiate themselves from others in career-enhancing ways. Through daily practices of labor and sociality, my interlocutors struggled to gain access to valuable forms of capital that would enable them to rise up the class ladder.

This dissertation illuminates how, rather than being universal, class reproduction is itself differentiated by local class position within specific organizational and professional hierarchies. Given their subordinate position, interns negotiated and experienced class differently – while they may have been from relatively affluent families, they were not yet economically or symbolically established in DC but rather had to carefully navigate their subordination. So while ostensibly part of the same "professional class," this dissertation attends to the fractures and differentiations within the class that unevenly shape the everyday lives, aspirations and practices of my interlocutors. This reveals that class reproduction is not simply homogenous, but rather articulated in ways that produce intra-class antagonisms, ambivalences, struggles and forms of difference-making that constitutively shape class composition. Working in think tanks in enabled me a granular perspective onto how professional class reproduction is experienced, negotiated and occasionally contested.

1. Ethnographic Methods

Introducing Washington D.C.

Figure 3: Washington Monument, Washington, D.C. Photograph. (Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2017647116/>.)

Figure 4: Earliest known photograph of the White House, 1846. (Library of Congress/John Plumbe)

Figure 5: The Mama Ayesha's Restaurant Presidential Mural (Photo by author)

I conducted fieldwork in the Washington, DC, the federal capital of the United States. The occupied land now within its boundaries was historically inhabited by Indigenous Anacostans, Pamunkey, and Piscataway peoples, some of whom continue to live in the region among settlers. Seized by white European colonial settlers, DC was created by congressional fiat as a federal territory in 1790, carved from the slave states of Virginia and Maryland.[2] From its inception, slavery was legal and naturalized in DC, and it quickly became a major logistical node in the slave trade supply chain due to its prime location between the Upper and Lower South. By the time I arrived, DC was the center of government and hub of expertise, professional class mobility, and polished rationality. There had, however, been a recent change. When I arrived at the dawn of 2018, DC remained neck-deep in the vertiginous political turbulence caused by the 2016 election of real estate capitalist and reality television star Donald Trump. By the time I arrived, an initial wave of shell-shocked liberal melancholy had quickly dissolved into righteous condemnation of the stupefaction and pathology of the "white working class," whose racism and sexism had authorized Trump's ascension. Commentators with PhDs offered carefully argued and cited critiques of the equally weighted new populisms of left and right. As the Republican Party sprinted enthusiastically into capitulation to Trump's seizure of the party, the liberal political class continued to express astonishment about the putative collapse of long-standing values of civility and tolerance, the aberrance of Trump's public discourse, and even the dire threat posed to something called "the liberal international order." "Never Trump" conservatives

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[2] As Damani Davis (2010) writes, "Slavery existed in the nation's capital from the very beginning of the city's history in 1790, when Congress created the federal territory from lands formerly held by the slave states of Virginia and Maryland. Because of its advantageous location between these two states, Washington became a center of the domestic slave trade in the 19th century and was home of one of the most active slave depots in the nation. The rapid expansion of cotton as the primary cash crop for states throughout the Deep South generated a renewed demand for slave labor. Planters and slave dealers in the declining tobacco-centered Chesapeake region of Maryland and Virginia, sought to capitalize on this demand by selling their surplus labor in a burgeoning domestic slave market. As one historian notes, 'Washington offered dealers a convenient transportation nexus between the Upper and Lower South, as the city connected to southern markets via waterways, overland roads, and later rail.'"

who dubbed themselves #TheResistance were then gaining credibility by breaking (discursively) from party ranks, invoking the sanctified republican integrity of Lincoln against the dishonor that Trump had brought to the Oval Office and the reputation of America in The World. It was clear that new political and intellectual forces had ascended to the White House, reaching and reanimating the commanding heights of the state apparatus. This realignment of forces, so the story went, signaled the emergence of a new world absent the old bipartisan hegemony over the representative institutions of capitalist democracy. For all this, however, many of my interlocutors – to put it frankly – could care less. Most of them did indeed think Trump was ridiculous – a "clown" as one put it – but remained generally indifferent to systems of violence and inequality that he represented and reinforced in the eyes of others. If anything, my interlocutors lamented Trump's federal hiring freeze, which instantly dissipated a valuable source of prestigious and stable employment.

I lived in the historically black Northeast DC, in a rapidly gentrifying and whitening neighborhood of Carver-Langston just off of the H Street Corridor. Older Black residents narrated stories of slow transition from Black prosperity and commercial life along H Street, to the social expulsions, buy-outs and dislocations of gentrification.[3] By the time of fieldwork, so explained the business-oriented official H Street website, "H Street has returned to its roots as a thriving, commercial hub, and is home to a diverse, cohesive community. A revitalized visual and performing arts scene, hipster bars, music venues, and a boom of high-end condos and

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[3] The racialized displacement of gentrification has a long history in the nation's capitol. Black DC community activist Yulanda Ward, assassinated in 1980, wrote about the use of dispossession and dislocation to control racialized people and clear the way for real estate capital accumulation: "It was not until 1979 that we discovered and began to research a federal government program called "spatial deconcentration," the hidden agenda behind the phenomenon of displacement. We discovered that displacement had an economic base to be sure, but more importantly, it was a means of social control—a means to break up large concentrations of Blacks and other inner city minorities from their communities. We have witnessed the forced evacuation of more than 50,000 poor inner city residents from the city each year and their subsequent replacement by an affluent class." (Ward 1981)

apartments are quickly reshaping the historic corridor, bringing new opportunities for residents, consumers and business owners."

Northeast DC, including especially H Street Corridor and its adjacent neighborhoods, was rapidly gentrifying, driving new cycles of displacement and expropriation. H Street Corridor and its neighborhoods have become a particular target for "renewal and redevelopment" because they are strategically placed – H Street runs directly west to the metropolitan downtown core and "Think Tank Row," making the commute from H Street-adjacent neighborhoods to downtown DC easy and affordable. As such, the neighborhoods surrounding it have attracted affluent young professionals, most of whom work in government or government-adjacent industries, such as professional and business services ("consulting"), lobbying, think tanks, education, health and a smaller but active computing and ICT sector. As it turned out, some of these young professionals were my colleagues and interlocutors.

By the time I arrived, recent surges of commercial and real estate capital thrown into housing, business and infrastructure redevelopment had already attracted multiple waves of young, upwardly mobile, largely white professionals into the area. Cranes and construction scaffolding for luxury lifestyle apartment complexes along H Street expressed the rapid inward movement of capital, seeking an outlet in – and stimulating – the housing and commodity consumption of these new professionals. This reflected larger economic and sociospatial transformations in DC: one interlocutor told me that DC was no longer just a "government town" but has been successfully attracting "new business ventures and investments" in the last ten years, enlivening economic life of the city and bringing "new talent" into the city.

Throughout my fieldwork, my commute was a particularly indicative site for understanding how gentrifying regimes of propertied whiteness, valuation and capital created

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new lines of racialized class separation. As an younger, upwardly mobile white-presenting professional renting a room in the Northeast, I was myself an embodied agent of gentrification; indeed, my own commute was organized precisely as described above – every day during my internship and almost every day after it ended, I took the bus west all the way down H Street to the downtown core for work and fieldwork. During my commute, I witnessed the classed and racialized sociospatial dimensions of creative destruction and displacement, and the deep social antagonisms that it both incited and reflected. My commute began at the far hinterlands of professionality and prestige, in the lower-income, predominantly Black far eastern end of H Street, whose bus stops witnessed no suited epistemic professionals working for think tanks. As the bus moved west on its route, its occupants became increasingly whiter, more affluent, and more professional, a spatial expression of the racialized class hierarchies that characterized the block-by-block gentrification of H Street. These professionals boasted iPhones and briefcases and wore expensive clothes. They systematically avoided interaction with historical lower-income Black residents, and their networks were fundamentally segregated from those with whom they rode the bus. They were symbolically and spatially marked as occupants of a higher class strata of professionals, most of whom worked in private and public sectors, including think tanks, intimately tied to the federal government. In other words, they embodied the domain of expertise and professionality. Here, on the bus and in my neighborhood, was an originary fieldwork experience – one that attuned me as an ethnographer to the modes and practices of hierarchical differentiation that shaped cultural understandings of who counted as a valued professional and potential expert, and who did not, and why. These initial sociospatial modes of hierarchical differentiation grounded in urban political economy of racial capitalism in DC

forced me to think about how hierarchies of value, expertise and professionality are organized, expressed and experienced among different people in DC.

Like all things, ethnographers do not come ready-made to the field. While I did not expect my neighborhood to spark the initial insights of my research, being open to the world demanded that I think through how formations and understandings of expertise and professionality are not neutral, but rather shaped by longstanding and ongoing regimes of material and symbolic power, differentiation and inequality.

Site and Research Methods

Over ten months in 2018, I conducted fieldwork within and across think tanks in the Washington DC metropolitan area with different political tendencies ranging from farther right to center-left, including: Brookings Institution, New America, American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, RAND Corporation, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, Hudson Institute, Atlantic Council, Center for American Progress, and the Council on Foreign Relations. Ethnographic fieldwork included three months of immersive participant observation and learning as a full-time intern in one prominent center-left think tank (discussed in-depth below); unstructured and semistructured interviewing and participant observation at formal panel events and conferences, and in informal social spaces such as parties, restaurants, cafes, barbeques, movie theaters, homes, apartments and so on; and research visits, observation and unstructured interviewing at a variety of think tanks and research institutes other than the one for which I worked, in both Washington DC and Maryland.

As an intern and ethnographer, I attended over 90 in-person and livestreamed events related to (counter)terrorism and national security more broadly (mostly panel events at think tanks), two large conferences (bringing together national security professionals across academia,

business, government, and think tank), author speaking events at bookstores, formal and informal social gatherings (at bars, gastropubs, restaurants, coffee shops, and homes). This also includes extensive "following" and messaging on social media, especially Twitter and Linkedin, where most DC experts have high public visibility.[4] Because many of my interlocutors traversed professional domains and held overlapping positions, I also conducted participant observation and interviewing at George Washington University, Georgetown University, American University, and Johns Hopkins School for Advanced and International Studies; and interviewed multiple current and former officials from the Department of State and Department of Defense. While I initially aimed to focus on higher-status experts, being in close personal and spatial proximity to lower-status workers – including interns, associates and analysts – made me sensitive to the cultural life of DC from the perspective of the relatively subordinated.

As an ethnographer, for three months I worked as a full-time intern with the Security Program (SP) of a prominent think tank called American Think Tank (ATT).[5] In this role, I performed low-level epistemic labor, including transcribing interviews, panels and other verbal information into text form; data collection, analysis, organization, storage and transmission; maintenance of the online presence of the SP; event coordination and organization; and other miscellaneous tasks like sending mail, printing articles for fellows, running microphones during events, and email correspondence. I worked from 9-5pm in my own cubicle in a large office, alongside a number of other employees, mostly inside my program but also outside my program

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[4] Social media presence and interaction was important among professionals in DC. While I cannot do justice to its import for reasons of space in this dissertation, it hovered in the background of my fieldwork and was often a medium of in-person interaction during many of the scenes that I detail in the later chapters.

[5] Both SP and ATT are pseudonyms. In order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of my interlocutors and disguise their personal and organizational identities, I sometimes draw from data gathered in numerous fieldsites in different think tanks, forming a composite cross-section. While this loses some of the personal and organizational distinctiveness of fieldwork, it conceals information that would lead to easy violations of confidentiality. Where relevant and only if explicitly permitted, I sometimes use real names and organizational affiliations.

in related areas such as healthcare and education reform. I had one formal boss but a number of

de facto bosses from whom I took orders.

I want to highlight two important ethnographic benefits to conducting an internship. First,

as an intern I learned what it is like to work inside of a think tank from the perspective of an

embodied phenomenology of experience (Boyer 2005). I gained a perspective on the lived

experience of the epistemic labor process by developing a local work habitus, incorporating and

utilizing knowledge, skills, and styles of interaction suited to my intern positionality. I learned a

great deal about the day-by-day spatiality, temporality and sociality of epistemic work. I woke up

at the same time, ate lunch at the same time in the same places, and commuted home with other

epistemic workers. As an ethnographer, this sameness of positionality and social proximity

afforded a clearer picture of the concrete realities and animating concerns of my interlocutors.

Second, it allowed me to understand how interns and other lower-status workers negotiate

professional life from the perspective of being a *subordinated worker* in particular. In other

words, I came to see how *being at the bottom of the labor hierarchy* shapes everyday life inside

and outside the workplace, which informed my understanding of the how hierarchies of

employment grade structure the concrete experience of daily life.[6] In this way, I saw that

everyday work and professional life is not the same for everyone, but rather is stratified by the

organizational position in which one is emplaced. Learning about the perspectives of these

workers allowed me to understand how employment hierarchies differentiate different ranks of

worker, and how these structures of difference reflect larger systems of professional hierarchy in

DC. Indeed, the shared lived experience of being a subordinated form of labor, and what my

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[6] It is important to note here, as we explore more in Chapter 2, that interns are at the bottom *professional* rung of the labor hierarchy, but remained above non-professional workers such as custodial and receptionist staff.

interlocutors were articulating to me about this experience, contributed to a shift in my research focus toward lower-status interlocutors.

Through my internship, I was able to access an "insider" view (Brannick and Coghlan 2007) of both the epistemic labor process and the forms and pressures of professional sociality. I utilized what Alvesson (2003) calls self-ethnography, which includes the process of participant learning where the ethnographer negotiates and reflects on their experience performing activities among interlocutors (e.g. everyday work practices). For Alvesson (2003: 126): "A self-ethnography is a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a "natural access," is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher then works and/or lives in the setting and then uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purposes." Conducting self-ethnography meant that reflexivity – reflection on and analysis of my own experience in relation to my interlocutors – was a key ethnographic method of data collection.

Being an insider in a *subordinate* position, however, meant that self-ethnography yielded unique and positionally specific insights. Unlike Alvesson's (2003) description of self-ethnography involving "more or less equal terms with other participants," I was placed in a specifically subordinated position in the organizational hierarchy. This put me in close proximity to the perspectives and practices of a specific layer of workers in DC – interns like myself along with other lower-status workers. I was not simply a coequal, but rather an unequally included member of the professional community. For instance, only through being an intern did I learn that those in higher-status positions are not generally interested in interns, and indeed rarely speak to them unless delegating a task.

Securing an Internship: Positionality, Capital and Access

The process of successfully securing an internship was my most important initial ethnographic experience. Here, I learned that the methodological process of obtaining research access itself can drive theoretical analysis, and teach us much about the social world in which we as ethnographers are interested.[7]

Conducting fieldwork among professional think tank networks in Washington DC required what my interlocutors later called an "in" – a relationship with an insider who can facilitate entrance into the community. With no personal contacts in the think tank community, I spent three months in 2017 searching for an internship, applying for over fifteen positions, and emailing countless program director – to no avail. Through failure, I learned that obtaining an internship was a highly competitive process, and that entering the think tank community was extremely difficult for an outsider with no insider contacts. In early Spring 2017, I discovered the Counternarrative Operations Lab (COL), a publicly and privately funded research center within a public university working on "counter-information and influence operations" that links multiple experts across the think tank, journalism, academia, and military sectors. COL is part of an emerging network of expertise responding to the resurgence of interest in the "weaponization of information" in the wake of Donald Trump's election in 2016, especially in the complex digital spaces and circuits of social media communication. I reached out to the program director, who needed help with the newly renovated website and took me on as an unpaid remote "researcher." Undoubtedly, I was chosen to serve as a researcher because of my academic credentials and institutional affiliation, which made me more visible as a candidate. The COL leadership thought that my writing and research skills would aid them in developing their website. I worked for two years (before, during and after dissertation fieldwork) in this position performing a variety of

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[7] I owe the idea that methodological experience can inform theorizing to Dr. Jessica Cattelino in her Ethnographic Methods graduate seminar.

lower-level duties – tasks that would foreshadow precisely what I would be doing as an in-person intern once I arrived in DC.

I was particularly interested in COL because I knew that it was institutionally and interpersonally connected to American Think Tank (ATT), and I hoped that working for and building connections with COL would facilitate a connection to ATT. Indeed, my supervisor at COL knew the program director of the Security Program at ATT well, so I planned at some point to ask my COL supervisor to connect me with ATT. When I eventually arrived in DC, I inquired about an internship with ATT (before asking my COL supervisor to connect me), and was coldly told in person by a senior policy analyst to "look on the website." After being stonewalled, I asked my COL supervisor if he would be able to connect me with the ATT Security Program in DC. He quickly and directly emailed the Security Program director at ATT, with whom he was good friends and colleagues, and connected us. While not explicitly writing "give him an internship," it was implicitly clear in the email that my COL supervisor was recommending me for an internship. The Security Program director at ATT asked me to come in to their office, and after a ten-minute formality interview, I was offered an internship position. In this way, I had successfully leveraged both my academic credentials, institutional affiliation, and network connections to gain insider access. This interpersonal connection was the only reason I received a formal internship, which opened up an entire social world of interlocutors that made this dissertation project possible. Further, even in the subordinated position of intern, naming both my academic and think tank organizational affiliation made people much more willing to engage with me as research participants (even if they still sometimes remained reticent).

The process of securing an internship taught me two things. First, through obtaining the initial COL "researcher" position, I learned how professional capital such as educational

credentials affords advantages in the labor market and, by extension, access career-enhancing

social networks. This concrete process of leveraging my credentials revealed the social operation

and symbolic value of professional capital in enabling access to elite social networks. While also

producing some complications, my academic credentials and affiliation would continue to help

me throughout fieldwork, making me legible to my interlocutors, many of whom, across

different employment ranks and positions, held MAs, PhDs and JDs. Witnessing how academic

credentials and affiliation function as career- and in my case research-enhancing professional

capital was illuminating. Seeing how professional capital facilitated access to elite think tank

space sparked my initial interest in ethnographically analyzing the social and cultural life of

professional capital.

Second, securing the ATT internship with the direct aid of my COL supervisor

demonstrated the power of social networks to facilitate advancement. I was only able to obtain

an internship through a powerful and trusted mutual connection. A trusted colleague's word was

much more valuable than an application. Indeed, I skipped the laborious formal application

process entirely, which might last up to a month. Furthermore, the speed at which I was offered

an internship was remarkable – I was almost immediately offered an internship after the

connection email between my COL supervisor and the program director at ATT. Through my

successful attempt to gain access to an internship, I learned my first lesson in the crucial

importance of developing social networks in advancing one's professional career.

But it was not just professional and social capital that enabled my access to sites and people

in DC. The methodological process of gaining access to specific field sites and their wider social

networks was not a neutral or given fact, but rather an uneven process shaped and facilitated by

my own embodied positionality. As numerous anthropologists have shown, the ethnographer's

intersectional positionality – including race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and education, among others – shapes not only the kind of data that one collects, but the very relationships with interlocutors and forms of access that characterize field research (Manning 2018; Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013; Fine, 1994). As a white-marked, English-speaking cis-heterosexual masculine-presenting male ethnographer born and raised in the United States with a prestigious institutional affiliation, I was able to gain access to sites and build relationships with people – especially other white men – in ways that would either not have been possible or would have been much more difficult had I not occupied my specific positionality. My positionality facilitated a smoother – if not seamless – entry into the insular world of think tank networks. It not only enabled me to gain access to the pre-fieldwork researcher position at COL and the fieldwork internship at ATT, but also eased the process of snowball sampling and generating contacts in informal spaces. For example, my cis-hetero masculine socialization inculcated knowledge of how to speak about male topics in typically male ways (e.g. sports), allowing me to gain the trust with male interlocutors that I would not otherwise have had. I spent a lot of time (too much time) at parties and bars, where this normative masculine embodiment and language served me well in snowball sampling as an ethnographer. Further, while biracial and not from a middle or upper class background, early in my life I had latched on to the public education system as a means for upward class mobility. Socialization within educational institutions has groomed me in such a way that I have become white- and class-passing, and learned many of the professional norms of interaction shared between academia and think tanks (e.g. email etiquette, technical and writing skills, modes of address, among others).

The relative ease of research access and sociality given my positionality can be contrasted to US-born anthropologists of color and researchers from the global South, who face severe

difficulties in studying white, Western settler colonial societies such as those in North America. This difficulty is structured by a long and ongoing history of white, often male Western colonial anthropologists studying predominantly formerly and currently oppressed and colonized peoples in subordinated positions vis-à-vis the anthropologist (Mafeje 1998). The potential reversal of the ethnographic gaze threatens the very epistemological edifice of hegemonic anthropology, complicating the assumption that Western cultures are neutral and universal. Female anthropologist of color Christine Obbo (1990), for example, was severely discouraged by academics and others for her interest in studying middle-class white Americans.

Through the experience of gaining access to my DC field sites, I learned that methodology is not neutral, but rather provides a lens on how positionality shapes access, and how being white-marked, male and professional confers advantages onto individuals in gaining access to career-enhancing (and in my case ethnography-potentiating) social networks.

Being an Insider/Outsider

In this section, I want to highlight the ambiguities and affordances of inhabiting a dual role as an insider/outsider simultaneously. Along with obtaining an internal position in a think tank, as a graduate student in anthropology, I had an academic background and institutional affiliation which made me legible to DC professional communities, who themselves were highly educated. And as we have seen, my academic credentials and affiliations made me not only legible, but valuable.

My experience as an aspiring professional adjacent to my interlocutors in DC helped me understand their professional worlds. Coming from academia, their competitive and hierarchical professional social worlds were relatively familiar to me. While I did not understand the cultural specificities of professionality in DC, as a graduate student with my own developing professional

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habitus, I had some familiarity with both the structure and meaning of "native statement" and the "kaleidoscope of tribal life" (Malinowski 1922: 184). Many of my think tank interlocutors were very similar to me: upwardly mobile graduate-educated professionals in their twenties and thirties. Those in higher-status positions, often with PhDs and JDs, were analogous to the university professors and mentors that I worked with.

As a competitive and hierarchical discipline, anthropology is a professional social field organized similarly to DC think tanks. The organizational hierarchies, imperatives of accumulation, symbolic forms of capital, professional performativity and transactional social relations in DC reminded me of my experience as an anthropologist-in-training. Like DC think tanks, academic institutions are structured by deeply entrenched hierarchies of labor and prestige, with personal academic advancement is predicated on similar forms of professional capital, including publications, networking, productivity and performances of knowledge.

As an institutionalized academic discipline, anthropology's imperatives of professional accumulation also shape the everyday lives of practitioners in ways differentiated by status. Like DC, practitioners must accumulate culturally specific forms of capital in order to secure and advance their career prospects. For instance, the practice of targeted social networking is paramount for academic aspirants in anthropology (e.g. at conferences), and similar to Chapter 1, aspirants must try to interact with high-value people, such as established academics in prestigious departments. And, as I found also in DC, claims to expertise and status are contested symbolic fields of struggle and differentiation where practitioners compete for artificially scarce forms of prestige. Furthermore, professional capital takes on culturally specific symbolic forms in North American anthropology. For instance, holding a PhD degree is a symbolically valuable credential that is necessary to become included as a member of academic anthropology.

Like DC think tanks, the organization of anthropology is structured by hierarchies predicated on the uneven distribution of professional capital. The distribution of symbolically meaningful forms of capital shape institutional positionality both within and between departments, significantly determining personal and departmental degree of social status. And like think tanks, these unequal distributions of culturally meaningful professional capital organize social hierarchies, determining who wields institutionalized powers of command and who does not.

Additionally, like DC think tanks, powerful anthropological social networks are embedded within specific institutional constellations. Building on literature illustrating systemic inequalities in hiring in academic anthropology, Kawa et al (2018) used social network analysis to show that four prestigious anthropology departments – Chicago, Michigan, Harvard, UC Berkeley – disproportionately possess "sending" dominance in anthropology. Due to academic prestige, graduates from these four departments are disproportionately selected for tenured and tenure-track positions.
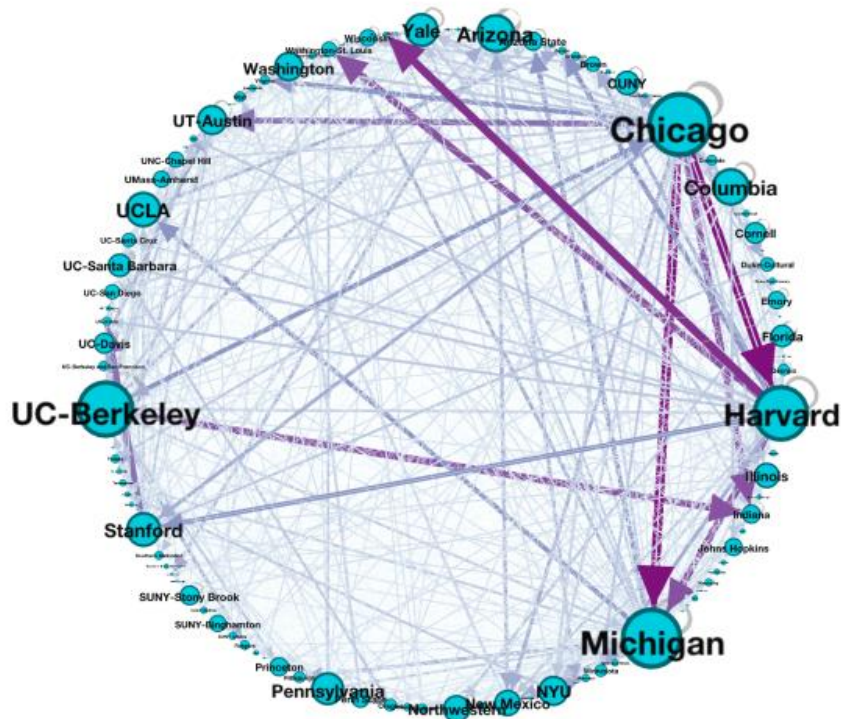
Figure 6: Social Network Analysis Map of Sending Dominance (Kawa et al 2018)

While my experience in academic anthropology helped me contextualize some of the social relations I observed in DC think tanks, I was also an outsider. Even though I was legible to my interlocutors, I was usually outside of their networks, and so met with some amount of skepticism. Further, significant DC-specific norms, practices and ideas were not ingrained in my professional and personal habitus, which allowed me to draw contrasts and differences with the context of anthropology. However, due to the similarities between the fields, differences between them were all the more striking and visible. Paying careful ethnographic attention to resonances, while at the same time defamiliarizing myself from both my own professional worlds and the worlds in which I was enmeshed through fieldwork, aided in understanding the social and cultural practices and perspectives of my interlocutors. At the same time, however, I knew that while culturally similar, DC think tanks and academic institutions are not identical, and their commensurability was not one-to-one. As Cattelino (2010) argues, "Americanist anthropology…

risks deploying theory that is produced within American cultural arenas without attending to the potential for autoreinforcement when concepts are used to explain proximate social lives and imaginaries." As such, I attended to the cultural, psychological and organizational specificity that shaped the professional worlds of my interlocutors.

2. **Think Tanks as Interstitial Actors and Professional Incubators**

Think tanks are powerful organizations that craft and influence government policies and shape the parameters of public discourse. They are nodes in larger "revolving door" circuits of governance, functioning as one stop in a career cycle that moves from think tank to government to academia and back again. As Wedel (2017: 158) argues, the think tank Center for a New American Security, which brought together military generals (e.g. Generals Petraeus and McChrystal), academics, defense contractors, "think tankers-turned government officials" in the State Department and Pentagon, and sympathetic military reporters, was largely responsible for developing and selling the renewed counter-insurgency strategy implemented in Afghanistan in late 2009. As such, this dissertation emphasizes the importance of studying think tank spaces, individuals and networks as a site for the creation and reproduction of the professional class. Here, I follow Ho (2009), who all have studied elite social settings in the global North

The first recorded use of the word "think tank" was in 1959 to describe the Center for Behavioral Sciences (CBS), a relatively new research hub opened in 1954 on the campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.[8] Flush with dead capital after the death of Henry Ford, the Ford Foundation founded CBS under the auspices of a novel "Program V," whose mission reads: "Through scientific work, increase knowledge of factors which influence or

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[8] It is now the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, an interdisciplinary research lab, which offers postdoctoral fellowships for anthropologists, economics, political scientists, psychologists and sociologists; it has sponsored a number of scholars, from Kimberle Crenshaw and Ruth Bader Ginsburg to John Rawls and Edward Said.

determine human conduct, and extend such knowledge for the maximum benefit of individuals and society" (CASBS 2013). The central aim of this organization and others was to generate a space for knowledge production which drew on and cultivated small elite cadres of credentialed experts, whose knowledge might be harnessed to tackle problems of postwar governance, capitalism and war both at home and abroad in light of the Cold War (Light 2003). During the Vietnam War, think tanks like RAND, financed by the U.S. government, universities, corporations and private individuals, used social science theories and methods to describe and measure "insurgent" populations to make them legible to the U.S. military, designing specific social scientifically informed programs for surveillance, control and pacification across Southeast Asia (Long 2002). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many RAND experts utilized their advanced graduate degrees and prestigious academic training to adapt colonial theories of counter-insurgency to the US military's new counter-revolutionary goals in Vietnam (Khalili 2013). RAND was an early successful pioneer of what Joy Rohde (2013) calls the "military-industrial academic complex" or what Robin (2001) calls the "military-intellectual complex," which linked academia and the state in circuits of mutual benefit. By showing how the Council on Foreign Relations used its intellectual prowess to justify a number of military interventions from the 1983 invasion of Grenada to the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Shoup (2015) argues that think tanks operated not only to make security threats legible to the state, but also functioned to legitimate and normalize the geopolitical ambitions of U.S. empire. Since their emergence in the 1950s, think tanks have functioned as key institutional linking agents between different sectors of the professional class, including especially academia, government, military and media.

Conceptually, in the present Pautz (2011: 13) defines think tanks as:

[N]on-governmental institutions; intellectually, organizationally and financially autonomous from government, political parties or organized interests; and set up with the aim of influencing policy. They have no formal decision-making power and claim political neutrality while often making no secret of their ideological standpoints. Some carry out little research themselves and commission external experts or recycle existing research, while others have considerable internal research capacities. Furthermore, think-tanks want to change policy through intellectual argument rather than through behind-the-scenes lobbying.

While this is a helpful at-first-glance definition, Medvetz (2012) highlights the institutional practices and functions of think tanks – what effects they have in the professional social world of DC. He argues that think tanks are "interstitial" actors within the social and political environment of Washington, DC. They are not bounded, isolated institutions, but rather sites and spaces of connection: they act as intermediaries connecting a variety of institutional actors, from the private sector and academia to legislative branch policymakers and career government bureaucrats working in federal agencies. One of my white male interlocutors, Ben, explained:

We are unique, like most think tank programs, in that we are in between the policymakers on the one hand, the legislators, who are making law, or who are working in the executive branch positions that are responsible for making policies that drive a government agency forward on one side of us; and on the other side of us, we have academics, who are highly specialized in certain issues, [and] analysts, who work at either private organizations or work for the government, that are focused on the specialized issues. And where we are, is we're actually in a position that is necessary to facilitate understanding of these very complex issues for an audience that by necessity must deal with many issues at once.

For Ben, think tanks are unique because they are interstitial facilitators, positioned between policymakers and legislators, on the one hand, and academics and other analysts focused on specialized issues. Think tanks exist to bridge the divide between the policymakers and government officials (who one interlocutor joked only "ever read the executive summaries" of policy research), on the one hand, and academics and analysts, who tend to be "in the weeds," on the other. Ben illustrates the interstitiality in this way:

So if you work on the Senate Armed Services Committee, your portfolio may span from ballistic missiles, launching capabilities, to defense capabilities; if you're CT [counter-terrorism] you may deal with CT intelligence and counterintelligence, so by nature the policymakers are

limited in their ability to consume a large amount of information and then turn it out into policy. And analysts, by their nature, are so focused on their individual issues that there's no way that they could really understand how, maybe, countering Shia militias in Iraq factors into a broader US strategic policymaking process.

Here, Ben shows that interstitiality is about translating the viewpoints and interests of one party

to make them legible and actionable to another party. As intermediaries, think tanks perform key

translational functions, enabling differently positioned actors with aligned interests but distinct

modes of understanding, such as policymakers and think tank professionals, to communicate

(Latour 2005; Callon and Law 1982; Callon 1984).

Brandon, a middle-status policy analyst at a well-respected centrist think tank that

sources much its personnel from academia, used similar language of *facilitation* to describe the

role of think tanks.

Our goal is to facilitate the policymaking process. In our world, we conduct primary research. We're really focused on being that academic body, [and] functioning as an academic research institution. We take pride in the interviews we conduct, and the information that we collect, and then get that information to the policymaker and give it to them in a format that they can easily consume and understand. So one of the issues that we sometimes have with interns is that our intern may come in with an understanding of the issues that we are dealing with, but *not* understanding how that information then needs to go to the policymaking community. So sometimes we'll get pushback from an intern (who's maybe brand-new) on the information that we're trying to put into a report and push out, because they say 'well you're oversimplifying the information,' well the reality of the fact is that whether the subset of this sort of militia has Kalashnikovs is only important to an extent, [it] doesn't need a full rundown. So we do sit at this point where, on one side, you have people who have to oversimplify things to understand them, and the other side, people who are used to diving in very deep into these issues. So yeah, our goal is to connect the two and facilitate that sort of understanding of the policymaking process.

While the above fits with Medvetz's (2012) interstitial theory of think tanks, this

dissertation also emphasizes how interlocutors utilize think tank spaces and networks to facilitate

the development of career-enhancing contacts and other forms of capital. In other words, think

tanks are institutional spaces where professionals not only collaborate and communicate across

different modalities of expertise, but also struggle to accumulate and negotiate relationships that

are beneficial for their professional careers and profiles. Echoing this, after explaining the

facilitative functions of think tanks, Jason concludes:

At the end of the day it's all about relationships, especially in think tanks where you're trying to protect your credibility based on your relationships, and you want a job in this administration, so you position yourself this way, and you want your policy to be seen through an untainted light.

This dissertation follows the thread of Jason's emphasis on relationships, credibility, wanting

a job, and, importantly, positioning and performing oneself in order to maximize one's chances

at obtaining a job and the social status that comes with it. While think tanks are often understood

in popular consciousness and the scholarly literature as institutional constellations for policy

influence (McGann and Weaver 2004; McGann 2016), this dissertation suggests that they are

also incubators for the development of professional careers. The social and institutional terrains

of think tanks are about more than government policy influence – they are sites of professional

class cultural and social reproduction, and training grounds where young early-career

professionals learn about and become socialized into the elite, highly competitive professional

environments of DC. Many interns used think tanks as what they called "jumping-off" points to

build networks and gain experience; some higher-status professionals called fellows, who had

recently cycled out of government, university or private sector employment, utilized think tanks

as temporary resting places for developing their professional work, staying abreast of current

issues and continuing to build relationships. This dissertation seeks to make visible the ways that

think tanks operate as social and physical sites for individuals to enhance their professional

value, build social networks, and learn how to inhabit professional subjectivity. In particular, I

analyze the cultures of professionality and career through the social and cultural specificities of

think tank networks. The structure of competitive, career-focused professionality is not singular,

however, but rather linked to broader transformations in the culture of professions which have

increasingly emphasized individual excellence, branding, flexibility and entrepreneurialism with the aim of upward mobility (Graeber 2014).

While I interacted with a variety of people from different professional backgrounds, including think tank interns, analysts and fellows; military and intelligence officers; career bureaucrats in the Department of State; graduate students in international relations; and foreign diplomats, there was a remarkable conformity of core ideological commitments across significant diversity in institutional and professional positionality. In *American Foreign Policy and its Thinkers*, Perry Anderson (2015: 155) argues that though the intellectuals of the "security elite" extend across the "bureaucracy and the academy to foundations, think tanks and media," they are inextricably tied together given similar organizational and professional interests. Anderson explains that across Council on Foreign Relations, Departments of State and Defense, Georgetown University, the Kennedy School, among other institutions of security and foreign policy governance (many of which I studied directly), "positions are readily interchangeable, individuals moving seamless back and forth between university chairs or think tanks and government offices, in general regardless of the party in control of the administration." Following Anderson (2015), I noticed that, among national security and foreign policy elites – aspirants and established experts alike – there was significant unity of ideological perspective in terms of *core* commitments. Liberals and conservatives, for instance, often disagreed on concrete policy options and discursive strategies of articulation and legitimation, but shared a common understanding of the primacy and prerogative of the United States. To be sure, Anne-Marie Slaughter's liberal internationalism and John Bolton's aggressive unilateral neoconservatism are significantly different in tone and details. However, across panels, conferences and publications, however, neither individual – or the intellectual blocs they represented – challenged the

legitimacy of U.S. political, military and economic preeminence. While there are certain lines of antagonism between the foreign policy establishment and certain figures in the Trump administration (see Chapter 4), even professionals who were not aligned with Trump did not challenge the value of U.S. economic and military supremacy and hegemony when articulating ideas about foreign policy and national security. Rather than focusing on this ideational unity-in-diversity, however, this dissertation suggests that, despite ideological and organizational differences, think tanks across the political spectrum are laboratories for professional class formation that train and socialize aspirants, some of whom will go on to become part of Anderson's "security elite."

3. Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, "Transactional Networking and Professional Social Capital Accumulation," I explore how interlocutors navigated the imperative of professional accumulation through practices of transactional networking across formal and informal spaces. I suggest that think tank sites and networks are interface zones – spaces of relational exchange and communication oriented toward the expansion and consolidation of social networks. I suggest that the interfacing properties of not only think tanks as physical sites, but the social networks that they organize and facilitate, make them powerful instruments for the accumulation of professional social capital. Here, I draw from Pierre Bourdieu's holistic conception of capital in "Forms of Capital" (Bourdieu 1986). This chapter sheds light on how transactional networking is an unequal form of exchange structured instrumentally, where individuals must strategize about how to maximize the professional value of social interaction amidst hierarchies whereby those at the bottom seek interaction with those at the top, while the latter have little to no incentive to network with the former.

During fieldwork, I was employed as an intern in a major center-left think tank, which showed me that interns are epistemic workers situated at the bottom of a complex professional hierarchy. Drawing largely from this experience as an intern among interns, Chapter 2, "Hierarchies of Epistemic Labor," explores the everyday practices, experiences and negotiations of work within and across think tanks. I explore how epistemic labor is not neutrally or horizontally organized, but rather constituted by a highly unequal division of labor based on employment grade. In particular, this chapter explores how interns and other low-grade knowledge workers navigate the fraught complexities, ambivalences and hierarchies of the workplace in order to increase the potential of career advancement.

Chapter 3, "Becoming Professional Subjects," examines the formation of professional subjectivity. I analyze how professional subjects engage in self-work both inside and outside the workplace, revealing how regimes of professionality, characterized by accumulation and competition, impinge on lived experience. This chapter foregrounds the demands, difficulties and ambivalent tensions faced by my interlocutors as they attempt to balance the multitude of pressures that characterize competitive professional social fields. Throughout, I attend to the ways that aspiring professionals make sense of their social condition, and how they relate to both themselves and one another.

In Chapter 4, "The Cultural Politics of Expertise," I explore the social construction, mediation and enactment of expertise. I examine how understandings of expertise are mediated through the culturally specific idiom of *seriousness*, and inter-articulated with ideological formations of professionality. Throughout, I emphasize how interlocutors mobilize and deploy forms of hierarchical differentiation to construct the meanings and boundaries of who counts as

belonging to the categories of seriousness and/or expertise. In this way, I attempt to show how expertise is a symbolic field of power, struggle and contestation for professional social status.

As a whole, this dissertation focuses on aspiring think tank professionals in order to shed light on the social and cultural life of professional regimes of accumulation. Knowledge professions and expertise are often seen as egalitarian, meritocratic, and concerned mainly with the abstractions of intellection. The very phrase "think tank" calls to mind solely the practice of thinking disarticulated from cultures of professional power. In contrast to this intuitive view, by examining the everyday lives and experiences of lower-status aspiring professionals in particular, this dissertation discloses how epistemic professional fields are competitive, hierarchical and organized as territories of professional socialization and enculturation. Here, I follow Karen Ho's (2009) insight that elite professional milieus are not neutral, universal or cultureless, but rather contexts deeply implicated in the cultural construction and replication of relations of class, power and unequal differentiation (see also Zaloom 2010 and Riles 2011).

Ethnographic immersion revealed that living subjects are not naturally "professionals"; rather, their behaviors, perceptions and desires must be professionally coded and cultivated through everyday individual and collective labors of self-fashioning adapted to the strictures and potentialities of professional life. Similarly, professional social hierarchies that striate think tank networks were not static and given, but rather actively constructed through relational practices of hierarchical differentiation and distinction. This dissertation explores the variegated social processes through which life *becomes* patterned according to the logic and lens of professionality.

Throughout the dissertation, I highlight the ways that imperatives of professionally advantageous accumulation mold both subjectivities and relationships, and how these processes

are interwoven with practices of hierarchical differentiation which construct and police the

boundaries of unequally ranked groups. In examining how individuals come to think of

themselves and their relationships through the lens of competitive accumulation, and how they

create forms of difference through everyday practices of symbolically potent difference-making,

this dissertation seeks to denaturalize taken-for-granted cultural formations of competitive

professional accumulation.

Chapter 1: Transactional Networking and Professional Social Capital Accumulation

1. Introduction

One winter afternoon, I attended an event entitled "Countering Terrorism: Lessons from the Post-9/11 Period in Europe and the United States" at a prominent think tank along "Think Tank Row" on Massachusetts Ave NW in Washington, D.C. As I entered the sleek and stately modern building with a carefully manicured exterior, a security guard greeted me blankly and requested a form of identification required to obtain a name tag. I peeled the name tag sticker off, stuck it to my chest – "Jaden Netwig, UCLA" – and proceeded. When I finally made it through the labyrinthine hallways to the assigned event room ten minutes early, I hesitantly walked in and surveyed the people in the room, the vast majority of which were white, and the majority of which were male. Everyone was dressed at least a notch above business casual, with the panelists and a host of other powerful-looking figures dressed in formal business attire. There were around 35 people distributed across a large seminar room, equipped with a large table (around which key participants sat) and an outer ring of chairs and standing room (where secondary participants sat and stood). Those sitting at the center table were all wearing suits.

I walked meekly to the outer ring of chairs and sat down next to a white woman and a two white men in their later 20s. I overheard them speaking about graduate school at a local esteemed university division. After a couple minutes of silence, I introduced myself and tried to make small talk. "Are you a graduate student here in DC?" I asked. "Yes." "Cool… how is it?" "It's good," she replied, turning her head swiftly back down to her laptop. I then turned to the two well-dressed white men, and asked them if they were graduate students – to which they replied affirmatively, also turning quickly back to their dyadic conversation. Summoning as much ethnographer's bravery as possible, I asked them what their experience was like as graduate

students. Disrupted yet again by the ethnographer's gaze, one of them turned and responded, nodding: "It's good. You meet a lot of people and the classes are good." At this point, it was clear that they were not interested in conversation. I was not sure why, but my ethnographic guess was that it had to do with being an unrecognized outsider with no discernible social, symbolic or professional capital.

Even though conversation had irretrievably dissolved, I did find out that all three were graduate students at a local university with close ties to this particular think tank, and that the event was on a topic of their mutual interest given their specialization in counter-terrorism. Although I was disheartened at the failure to engage, I later realized that the experience of exclusion – and the relative insularity of elite knowledge worker groupings – constitute the very sociality of knowledge in Washington, DC, across the think tank, government, media and private sector domains. I had nothing to offer these graduate students, and they had come to expand and deepen their connections to a desired professional milieu; for graduate students and other lower- and mid-level knowledge workers, attending events and networking is a primary instrument for building connections that will afford advancement up the professional ladder.

I listened intently to the two speakers – a prominent white male American career foreign service diplomat and a white female Western European counter-terrorism expert – for around 40 minutes, after which there was a small reception with alcohol. In the short Q&A period after the talk, a handful of well-dressed, confident and eloquent individuals asked questions, ranging from the relationship between "security, radicalization and good governance" to what lessons US practitioners can learn from recent counter-terrorism experiences of Western European governments. Each person introduced themselves before asking their question, noting their

academic and institutional affiliations, current occupation and occasionally their distilled area of interest.

These very brief introductions were telling, and revealed that there were a number of people attending that occupied divergent – though all similarly powerful – institutional locations: career Department of State officers; journalists with prominent media outlets; military personnel both civilian and non-civilian; graduate students in political science, government and international relations; visiting academic scholars both foreign and domestic; government counter-terrorism practitioners at state and federal levels; resident fellows at the host think tank, fellows from other think tanks; private sector security analysts and consultants; and members of the public (many of whom were retired government employees), among others. I had initially thought that this might be a gathering of a small and relatively homogenous group of experts in the same think tank program, but it was actually a heterogenous collective of people with distinct – but allied – institutional, professional and academic backgrounds who coalesced to discuss a topic of mutual interest. These sorts of events, which brought together a diverse array of professionals, were common in DC.

As I came to fully understand throughout the course of fieldwork, these think tank sites across digital and physical space operate as sites for vibrant and collaborative forms of sociality and interaction, where professionals with variegated backgrounds come together to debate and exchange ideas in what in local parlance is referred to as the "marketplace of ideas." In this way, think tank spaces operate as what I call *transactional interface zones,* where elite knowledge professionals of various ranks coalesce to network and exchange knowledge and information. While these zones, which feature panel discussions and lectures full of technical jargon and specialized knowledge, are intuitively understood as spaces of intellection, I came to learn that

they were also spaces where professionals pursued relationships themselves in pursuit of building personalized professional social capital. This revealed how think tanks are not simply domains of policy knowledge, but also simultaneously social spaces for building career-enhancing social networks. I argue in this chapter that aspiring professionals utilize interface zones as sites for transactional networking wherein they work to transact valuable relationships and knowledge forms toward the end of professional social capital accumulation.

Think tank-related interface zones draw together a heterogenous array of epistemic professionals with varied backgrounds and forms of knowledge to exchange policy ideas. This heterogeneity is a central feature of the contemporary knowledge economy of the DC policy world; indeed, it is precisely this institutionally disaggregated diversity that enables individuals to accumulate professional epistemic power amidst highly competitive knowledge economies. At the same time, surprisingly, these spaces of transaction are homogenous in the sense that they attract predominantly powerful individuals with large pools of professional capital, such as extensive social networks, major publication streams, and high-status institutional positions. Transactional networking is oriented to the performance and accumulation of, following Bourdieu (1984), *professional capital*. Professional capital is a symbolic system of power and prestige constituted by skills, relationships, vocabularies, credentials, and modes of bodily performativity, among other things, which enhance and elevate the bearer qua professional. Rather than being universal, capital becomes meaningful within the specific professional ecologies with which my interlocutors were familiar. I call the process of its expansion *professional capital accumulation*. In this chapter, I focus in particular on the accumulation of professional social capital in the form of networks of advantageous relationships.

Knowledge workers circulating within transactional interface zones engage in the reciprocal exchange of vocabularies, knowledges and affective forms of recognition ("networking"). This reciprocity is not, however, always balanced or egalitarian; as we shall see, exchange is mediated by professional hierarchies of power and prestige. Formally, these diverse knowledge workers collaborate to exchange relatively abstract "policy" knowledge with one another. But the exchange of policy knowledge is constitutively entangled with a web of sociality, intimacy and recognition which exceeds the boundaries of knowledge transmission. These socialities are enacted to consolidate and expand interpersonal relationships which are as crucial for career advancement as is the development and enactment of specialized disciplinary expertise.

Professional self-crafting and social status enhancement is expressed through and crucially dependent on the development and maintenance of relationships. In order to secure upward trajectories for their individuated careers, aspiring professionals must cultivate longstanding social bonds of professional and personal solidarity built through ongoing forms of association and interaction. As terrains of transactional exchange and sociality, interface zones provide relatively exclusive opportunities for aspiring professionals to learn how to develop and sustain what one interlocutor called "professionally advantageous" relationships. Through social processes of learning and enacting transactional networking, aspiring professionals work to accumulate professional social capital that they hope to mobilize to secure forms of power, advancement and prestige.

The Disaggregated Organization of Professional Epistemic Power

In *The Power Elite* (1956), sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that control of the epistemic means of production was centralized in what he called the "command posts" of the government, military and corporate sectors. These bureaucratic apparatuses, consisting of intertwined forms

of private and public power, remained centralized, hierarchical and insulated; and while they

were organizationally connected, their basic modalities of operation and class composition were

distinct. In contrast, anthropologist Janine Wedel (2017: 2) argues that we have entered a period

marked by a heterogenous class of *influence elites,* "defined by their modus operandi rather than

family or class background, wealth, or institutional position." In criticizing the "command post"

model of professional elites, Wedel (2017) draws attention to the fluidity, flexibility, porosity

and dispersal of elite practices and connections across variegated institutional spaces.[9] In

particular, symbolic understandings, organizational forms, professional sociality and modes of

epistemic practice are no longer isolated within centralized Millian "command posts."[10] Wedel

(2017: 2) explains:

At the top of the food chain are influence elites, who thrive amid fluidity. Specifically, influence elites are defined by (1) their flexibility, shifting and overlapping roles, and lack of fixed attachment to any particular sector or organization in pursuit of their strategic goals; (2) their informality and supplanting of formal structures and processes (while still using them when beneficial); (3) the entities they mobilize, including consultancies, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations; and (4) their role as connectors, position in the official, corporate, private organizational ecosystem (including the above entities), and networks vis-a-vis each other. Because they have arisen to take advantage of a new institutional ecosystem and because they practice a distinctive modus operandi, a novel term is needed to describe them [i.e. influence elites].

Wedel (2017) argues that influence elites are organized in "flex nets," which are not

anchored in institutional positions, but rather traverse institutional and professional boundaries in

flexible networks of power and influence. Expert positionalities are more fluid and mobile than

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[9] I do not have the space to show how those putatively outmoded apparatuses of elite power – class position, family background, racial and gender classification, educational prestige and institutional location – are still powerful shaping forces. That the organization of professional elite power is fluid, flexible and dispersed across institutional space is not a reason to think that the supposedly outgrown bases of social power have been neutralized. It is also curious that so much of the new anthropology of elites has downplayed systematic and interconnected forms of class rule, and the relationship between specific segments of the professional epistemic class and specific fractions of the capitalist class.

[10] While for reasons of space I cannot expand on this here, the disaggregation of governance is part of the institutional dynamics of neoliberalism whereby power becomes decentralized across what Gramsci (1971) would call civil and political society.

C. Wright Mills (1956) older centralized command hierarchies of military, government and business.11 They are relatively unmoored from singular institutional affiliation, often enjoying fluid transference between different interlocking institutional positions; they operate across formal and informal modes of sociality and collaboration, occupying overlapping and interchangeable roles; and they act as intermediary connectors whose power in part derives from their capacities to forge links between different sectors of elites around shared interests (Wedel 2017).

I offer three caveats to Wedel's (2017) generative theory of elite social organization and power. First, in elite professional practices, flexibility and mobility is always conjoined with accumulation – as professional knowledge workers traverse institutional boundaries, they bring their skills, knowledge, behavioral repertoires and social networks with them, leveraging and translating them into new domains for the purpose of capital accumulation. The shift to flexibilization of professional processes should not obscure the fact that flexibility is wielded by successful knowledge professionals as *a tactic of accumulation*. Second, and relatedly, not all "influence elites" are equally positioned to exert influence on the intellectual and policy sphere – there are deep gendered, classed and racialized inequalities and hierarchies in access to the epistemic means of production, acceptance into and recognition by elite "flex nets," and capacities to become prominent in the policy world. Third, while think tanks are not centralized command posts, they continue to be powerful sites *through which interaction is made possible*.12

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11 C. Wright Mills' (1956) centralized and homogenous "command posts" from which elites exert and reproduce institutional power have dissolved under the weight of flexible work regimes, neoliberal organizational "streamlining," and the dismantling of mono-occupational structures of long-term employment institutionalized in the postwar quasi-reconciliation of US capital and labor. Of course, the nature of one's flexibility will differ based on one's subject position – the flexible mobilities of senior experts, for example, are distinct from the precaritized (and often coerced) employment flexibility of interns.

12 While think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations have longstanding overlapping links with the state and strong influence on the formation of government policy (Shoup 2015), newer think tanks such as New America emerged in response to the outsourcing of policymaking driven by neoliberalism and the need for expertise in

Established epistemic professionals and lower-status knowledge worker aspirants utilize the

institutional notoriety, resources and infrastructure of think tanks to build professional careers

and expand their network reach. Think tanks command, for example, reliable funding streams

from philanthropist and government donors, which allows them to engage in sustained projects

with clear conceptual research parameters; they also function as meeting sites for and organizers

of panels and conferences wherein people transact. In other words, think tanks function as

necessary sites through which a variety of individuals and their forms of professional capital

come together to interact and exchange. The kinds of people and capital engaged in think tank

space are indeed heterogenous, but think tanks remain forms of powerful institutional glue which

enable and backstop their associations. As hubs for interaction, think tanks do function as

platforms which facilitate interaction and exchange – even if not on the model of the Millian

command post.

3. **Transactional Networking in Interface Zones and Professional Social Capital**

   Accumulation

Figure 7: Think Tank Conference

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domains of digital information and communication technology (cf. Medvetz 2012). Think tanks such as New
America also emerged as the result of the 1990s rise of new powerful blocs of platform-based tech and computing
capital, which provide strong funding bases (e.g. Google and Microsoft).

Anthropologists have long studied the role of practices of exchange and reciprocity in constituting meaning, relationships and communal identity; simultaneously, they have studied the ways that that these practices construct and reaffirm social hierarchies, divisions and inequalities. As Mauss (1925) emphasized, exchange is a process through which personhood and identities are constructed, experienced and reorganized. Personhood and relationality are constructed through relationships of exchange and circulation which are mediated in gift exchange relations that tether subjects together in relations of mutual interdependence. While Mauss points out how relationalities between people are mediated through the exchange of symbolically meaningful objects, among contemporary DC professionals, it is the reproduction and leveraging of relationships themselves which is valuable.

In her critique of prevailing anthropological theory, Annette Weiner (1980: 71) argues that the "norms of reciprocity" in exchange are not discrete, but rather part of a "larger reproductive system in which the reproduction and regeneration of persons, objects and relationships are integrated and encapsulated." For Weiner (1980: 73), the conventional prioritization of the isolated obligation to give and receive – and the linear and serialized circuit of exchange – ignores the "larger reproductive system" in which norms of reciprocity operate and unfold. Weiner also points attention to the specific cultural idioms through which norms of exchange and reciprocity are organized and articulated; she suggests, for example, symbolically dense understandings of death operate "as a regulatory force in constituting regenerative cycles of relationships" (Weiner 1980: 74). I follow Weiner in attempting to understand the larger system of professional accumulation and reproduction, and the symbolically dense and culturally salient idiom of "transaction" through which it is understood and articulated in experience.

Let us turn to examining practices of transactional networking within interface zones, and the modalities of professional social capital accumulation that they advance. Increasingly, as noted above, the medium of professional capital circulation is the formation, mobilization, and leveraging of not only knowledge and relationalities deployed within professional relationships, but professional relationships themselves. In DC, relationships are organized and understood in terms of the local cultural idiom of *transaction*. Professional practices of interfacing in think tank spaces, which tactically draw together multiple forms of capital, are inherently transactional. Across formal and informal events, and especially after disclosing my project and interest in the "culture of DC," almost universally interlocutors told me that D.C. is "transactional." When I asked what that meant, I received answers with distinct valences, but almost all included one core idea: relationships always involve a process of exchange for mutual gain (mostly but not always immediately reciprocal), and subjective orientations to relationships always involve some form of instrumental calculus (in terms of both what one might gain from the person or situation, and what one might owe them in return in the future). Transaction is thus a social process and relation, embedded within relational economies of exchange, which aims at some form of professional gain. In the memorable words of a close interlocutor with a professional background in counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia, the second most important operating principle of DC after "getting people with power and money into the same room together" is "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Here, transaction is tied to the extension of professional self-interest, where the development of relationships of affinity are utilized as instruments to build professional profiles. By foregrounding the logic of exchange for personal-professional benefit, the culturally rich local idiom of transactionality allowed me to better understand the structure of social relations within interface spaces.

In order to explore processes of transactional networking, every week I attended multiple events, including events associated with the think tank I was interning for, other think tanks, and non-think tank conferences and panel events. This included events at: local universities (George Washington University; Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies; Georgetown University), university-affiliated research institutes, non-university affiliated research institutes, and think tanks (Brookings Institution, New America, Center for Strategic and International Studies and Heritage Foundation, among others).[13] Most of the fieldwork sites were in Washington, DC, but I also attended multiple events and conducted multiple interviews in both Maryland and Virginia. While most of the events I attended were open to the public, I also attended multiple "internal" events at the think tank for which I was working. Some of these were professional development seminars, workshops, organization-wide meetings, and so on; for these, I did not collect data because most were explicitly labeled as private and invite-only, though these experiences as a participant do inform my understanding of transactional networking.

Interface sites of transactional networking include both particular spaces of embodied interaction with specific institutional locations (e.g. events like conferences and panels housed in think tanks or other think tank-affiliated event spaces) and extensive digital communication (e.g. collective video conferencing, one-on-one video meetings, Slack and Google Mail threads). As an ethnographer, I had access to both onstage and offstage interface sites: I attended formal public-facing events (e.g. open panel discussions and conferences); formal non-public or semi-public events (including both *ad hoc* and organized think tank meetings and discussions); and also informal social spaces coded as outside of work (e.g. bars, house parties, apartment

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[13] To maintain confidentiality, I do not include the names of specific organizations that have relatively small staff.

gatherings). I also directly participated in organizing multiple interface events, including two major conferences on topics related to war, foreign policy and international security. As both an ethnographer and worker-participant, I had to balance between being actively engaged in the process of transaction while working, and carefully documenting the transactional practices of others.

I learned about the meaning and value of transaction and professional accumulation in often informal ways. I recognized a man at a few different think tanks events relating to terrorism, extremism and international security, and the third time I saw him I introduced myself and noted that I was doing a research project and had seen him at multiple related events. Bruce was an amiable white man in his late 60s, who leaned in close when talking and was always animated when discussing public policy issues. I had initially thought that Bruce was an older established think tank fellow, who might be doing event rounds to learn about what experts working on similar topics were thinking and extend his network. It turns out that he was a retired government analyst[14] with degrees in engineering and political science, and was not formally affiliated with any think tank, though he was keenly interested in anything foreign policy, geopolitics and international security. He attended think tank events as a member of the interested public, but had decades of professional experience in DC circles, including think tanks.

The next week, Bruce and I met over coffee. He asked what I had found in my study so far, and I stumbled around something about "networks and networking" prompting him to respond: "Okay, yes, well one thing you might want to know [is that] people here stay in their bubbles. There's no incentive to meet or talk with people that aren't helpful for your own work

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[14] When I asked if I might be able to use some of our conversation in my dissertation, Bruce asked me to render his job title no more specific than "government analyst."

portfolio. And that makes sense from a professional perspective, but that's one thing I really don't like about DC. People are really sharp, but they are set on what is professionally advantageous… I don't think like that… I'll go to *any* event, no matter the political perspective, I want to hear what different people are thinking so that I can develop my own view." I nodded and asked, "Is that unique in DC, that way of thinking?" He nods and responds, "Yes, I think so."

In suggesting that there is "no incentive" to exceed the boundaries of one's bubble, Bruce indicates how epistemic professionals – whether aspirants or recognized experts – do not gain professional social capital via transactional networking in spaces where there are no professionally interlocutors in circulation. In other words, "meet[ing] or talk[ing] with people that aren't helpful for your own work portfolio" entails that one does not stand to gain professionally – one is not able to develop relationships with professionally advantageous groupings of others; accumulate profession-relevant policy knowledge which might enable one's own work; or perform specialized knowledge in ways that enhance professional recognition and esteem.

In explaining this, Bruce differentiates himself as more open-minded than those framed as entrapped in their own professional bubbles, obsessed with maximizing their own professional social capital. However, Bruce notes that his openness is primarily directed toward the "political perspective" of various think tanks. This openness to engagement, however, remains committed to the consumption of elite knowledge produced by high-capital epistemic professionals, and only within the dominant think tank circuit. So while Bruce does attend events from multiple political perspectives, he does not, for instance, attend events at less prestigious organizations (say, at progressive nonprofits or think tanks), and so reinforces the dominant instrumental

relationship between transaction and accumulation. Furthermore, Bruce is retired, and so occupies a subject position distinct from those currently employed, who face severely competitive environments which incentivize the enlargement of professional social capital. Bruce, like all interlocutors subject to the competitive professional environments of DC, remains committed to engagement with prominent, high-status organizational networks, thus reinforcing their valuation and hegemony.

While Bruce overstated the rarity of professionals attending events expressing different political perspectives than their own – I observed a wide diversity of political opinion, if not difference in fundamental policy paradigms – he described the way that aspiring and established knowledge professionals engage with others on the basis of what is advantageous and instrumental to them. On rare occasions I met individuals who attended events on the basis of general interest, but more often interlocutors attended events whose participants operated in professional domains identical to or adjacent to their own, where they expressed a professional interest in social networking. For example, during one event on terrorism in Southeast Asia, I met a representative for a private military contractor who was interested in connecting with the panel experts who worked or had formerly worked in the federal government (likely with the ultimate aim of offering services to interested government entities); at another event reviewing recent post-9/11 counter-terrorism policies, and the continuities and discontinuities between the Obama and Trump administration's priorities, I met a graduate student specializing in counter-terrorism who was interested, like many others, in working with the Justice or State Departments (this person was incidentally, an interlocutor who I met through my own networks outside of the think tank for which I was working). The correspondence between professional interest and

attendance of events speaks to the incentive that aspiring knowledge workers have to accumulate policy knowledge and networking experience in domains that are career-relevant.

Unlike Bruce's seemingly more universal disposition, many others emphasized the instrumental, self-interested nature of transactional networking. In informal conversations, some of my close interlocutors advised that professionals, especially those not yet established, do and should engage in targeted networking calculated to build personally beneficial social networks. I was often advised to "be strategic" when it came to choosing which events to attend, who to speak to at those events, and how to negotiate networking without *seeming* like I was only in pursuit of self-interest. After one pickup basketball game, Jerry, a close white male interlocutor, narrated a story about a good friend of his who was stagnating rather than advancing in his career. While Jerry did not name his friend and emphasized that he would never tell him this, he explained that his friend was having career problems primarily because he struggled with building relationships. Although the failure was "not necessarily all his fault," his friend's inability to effectively build "long-lasting professional relationships" meant that while he might survive in the competitive professional environment of DC, he would not flourish in upward promotional movement. The conversation turned to the topic of how to network appropriately, and Robert, a white male policy analyst and excellent basketball player, advised that "you shouldn't act like you just want something out of them [other professionals]," but rather interact in a way that shows others that you potentially offer *them* a mutually beneficial relationship. "You want to get them thinking, 'hey, this guy could be an asset.'"[15] Jerry agreed, adding: "You can tell when it's… there's those people who only want something. I don't agree with that, that's too much, you gotta have some give and take," moving his hands back and forth to symbolize

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[15] When discussing attending public events, Robert counseled further that there is only a "short window of time" in which to network with potential interlocutors after the culmination of events.

reciprocity. While lazily shooting leftover baskets on the court in front of us, another interlocutor Mason, who worked with Jerry, suggested that those new to DC sometimes underestimate the value of networking and building relationships. In joking contrast to Jerry, however, Mason thematized the self-interested, instrumental dimensions of transactionality: "Jerry is the nice guy, yeah you should learn from him, but I have a different perspective on this – you never know who you might need, that's my motto," he concluded as we all laughed as he "airballed." Like other interlocutors, Robert, Jerry and Mason strongly emphasized the importance of "relationships" and relationship building. However, they express a different view than Bruce – that one has to be strategic about sociality, using it as an instrument to build professional relationships and contacts that might at some point be beneficial. The motivating logic of sociality here is transaction, underpinned by the idea that by developing relationships, one might put oneself in a more beneficial position. While Jerry and to some extent Robert foreground the relative reciprocality of transaction, Mason makes visible the self-interestedness nature of transactional networking, embodied in the phrase, "you never know who you might need." Amidst small differences, all of them emphasize the value of transactional networking as a means to professional social capital accumulation.

Transactional Networking and Building Professional Social Capital

Transactional practices are not simply about the exchange of information, but about building strategic alliances that expand one's professional social network, constituting the accumulation of professional social capital. During fieldwork, I began to discern that knowledge professionals gather together during specific moments in specific places (e.g. panels and conferences), and that these groupings had not only a specific institutional composition, but a motivating directionality grounded in transactionality and network expansion. For example, one of the initial events I

attended was a lecture at Georgetown University by a prominent female expert at the State Department on terrorist and extremist threats to domestic infrastructure. It took place in a well-designed, wood-paneled event space at the geographical limit of campus, with an elegant reception after the event. While the attendees, many of whom were graduate students and aspiring professionals interested in working for the State Department, did seem engaged with topic that the presenter spoke on, they seemed much *more* interested in developing contact and familiarity with the speaker after the lecture. While I could discern that attendees were concerned with building professional social networks, I did not yet fully understand the meaning or function of this practice. I often asked myself, during evening fieldnote reflections: what is the motivating purpose for what felt like an endless series of panel and conference events on a bewildering diversity of issues?

What I began to see is that while epistemic professionals do indeed use interface zones like think tanks to perform and exchange knowledge and stay abreast of popular issues relevant to their interests, they also use them to build potentially career-enhancing strategic alliances through the expansion and consolidation of professional social networks. Within interface space, professionals engage in the everyday labor of transaction, which serves as a means to accumulate, negotiate and sustain professional social capital in the form of networks. Through transaction, knowledge workers gain familiarity with one another and one another's professional work; develop personal and professional ties; and exchange valued forms of knowledge related to policymaking and politics. Moreover, and importantly, they negotiate the creation of new linkages, and over time and through repetition, come to transform incipient connections into substantial professional friendships and affiliations. These forms of affinity and association, sustained through professional relationships, enable people to advance their careers. By

exchanging knowledge, and developing professional and organizational links, epistemic professionals expand and consolidate social capital, which allows them to better position themselves for symbolic notoriety and career advancement within their respective institutions.

One day, I sat with Amy and Brad, two analysts working in think tank and government sectors respectively, who had been in the same cohort in an MA program in international security. I knew that they were very close friends, and I asked them how they met. They looked at each other with a smile and told me they met their first year in graduate school. I asked them about what some of the benefits of going to graduate school in DC was. Amy began: "It's good because you get to know people, and then eventually those people become your colleagues. So you have this little network because you're in the same cohort, and most of us are working in grad school, so we get to know colleagues of colleagues if that makes sense, but then once we get out then we all go to work more serious jobs." Brad continues, "Yeah, and you know this is something I've noticed recently, if you stay in touch with people, stay on the alumni listservs and keep up with going to social events, you really have a lot of connections that you didn't even know you had." Amy nods in agreement as Brad concludes, "There's lots of room for growth there," referring to social networks. Later, Brad told me how when he was a think tank policy analyst he had met and built a relationship with a government analyst from the U.S. Government Accountability Office across a few think tank and alumni events (this analyst had been invited by a graduate school colleague of Brad's). This analyst eventually put in a good word for Brad for an analyst position in the GAO, which he secured and for which he then worked. Amy and Brad illustrate the crucial importance of using institutionally specific affiliations to gain access to interface zones (e.g. think tanks and alumni events) that then enable them to build, maintain and

extend social networks. As social capital, these networks can then be utilized to advance one's career, as Brad's career trajectory strikingly reveals.

In interface zones such as think tank events, transactional networking practices are organized according to specific professional hierarchies of valuation. Higher-status professionals are more desired objects of transaction and interaction, while lower-status workers such as interns are not. Professionals of all ranks did not simply aim to haphazardly expand their networks, but rather aimed to transact with individuals that might be professionally valuable in the future. In other words, I came to see that there was a specific instrumental tactical directionality to transactional networking. My interlocutors were not interested in transacting with anyone anywhere, but rather in practice cared deeply about the professional composition of their network. In this way, my interlocutors continually struggled to develop personally strategic rather than randomly organized alliances with others. Across formal and informal interface space, they sought to expand *vertically* and *horizontally*, but rarely if ever downward; and they attempted to organize alliances which were individually and collectively advantageous to career advancement and individual notoriety.[16]

The instrumental directionality of networking formation was a necessary adaptation to the concentration of professional power in DC. Those at the top of the hierarchy within and across organizations commanded prestige due to their possession of various high-value forms of capital derived from both (1) individual professional notoriety and rank and (2) affiliation and employment with powerful institutions.[17] For my interlocutors, many of whom were early-career

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[16] I did observe downward *interaction* between superiors and subordinates, but I would not describe it as *networking* – for those in more powerful positions (like think tank program directors) it did not serve to accumulate substantial social capital, aside from perhaps the perception among colleagues and subordinates that one is a benevolent manager and mentor. It was fascinating that, as an intern, I was most often related to not as an object of peer-to-peer networking, but rather either as a tolerated curiosity (qua ethnographer) or an inferior and relatively meaningless subordinate (qua intern).

[17] We will explore this further in Chapter 4.

professional aspirants, inclusion in these power condensations was desirable because of their professionally advantageous effects. High effective demand, in turn, meant that membership boundaries were finely policed. These power hierarchies disincentivized individuals from transactional networking and relationship-building with those lower in the professional hierarchy, because downward interaction will almost never yield value of the kind required for professional advancement. Rather, individuals orient their transactional networking predominantly with those either at their level or above them in the institutional hierarchy. As an intern, I elicited advice from nearly everyone I met in equivalent or superior positions, and I was never told to downward network with anyone positioned lower in the employment hierarchy. Occasionally, I was advised to horizontally network, because as one interlocutor explained, "peers become colleagues," which illustrates how individuals network with others on the basis of their potentiality to possess future potential benefits for the self. On the other hand, I was never explicitly told *not* to network downward. This is because the downward networking is a contradiction in terms given the universal commitment to professional advancement. In other words, downward transaction would not entail the development of meaningful, professionally beneficia social capital because subordinates are not in positions of social power. Because networking with subordinates does not generate the accrual of career-advancing social capital, individuals refrain from downward networking. The norm against downward-networking is so hegemonic as to be unsaid, its absurdity so taken-for-granted that it did not need to be explicitly described to me as unwise.

My institutional subject position as an intern provided key data on the dynamics of transactional networking and the particular logics of accumulation that they evidenced. Not only was I in a subordinated position within the organizational hierarchy, but the thinness of my

knowledge base and social network betrayed both my lack of experience and lack of symbolic power and value. In short, for most knowledge professionals that I encountered, I was not an object of networking because I was not a site of relevant social capital, rendering me irrelevant to accumulation (and thus advancement). Whom one chooses to transact and build professional alliances with is organized according to the distribution of epistemic and professional power. For example, over the course of fieldwork I began to understand how the distribution and concentration of power shaped the spatial and social organization of think tank events, and in particular the constitution of specific groupings during those events. During public and semipublic events (like smaller policy and book talks hosted by think tanks), attendees self-organize into groups with reasonably clear lines of distinction and concentration of power. For example, during events, those with already existing professional relationships will gather into groups before, during and after the proceedings; and those who recognize one another as potential professional kin (and pools of capital) will coalesce to meet one another, usually using shared professional interest or knowledge as a tool of introduction. Those in subordinate positions (e.g. interns, associates and some junior analysts), on the other hand, attempt to penetrate those groups to the best of their abilities without exuding either desperation or entitlement to belonging.

During one book talk at a center-left think tank for a prominent neoconservative-turned-moderate author named Mr. Boyle, I saw the effects of unequal professional power on the politics of transactional networking in action. The talk took place in a large, rectangular conference room, where Mr. Boyle sat at the end of a long table near the door. After the talk, a group of well-dressed, white male interns in suits crowded around him to in the hope of conversing and asking questions. He answered a few questions before abruptly taking leave of

the interns and turning away from them, which deflated their energy and led them to shuffle around or go back to their seats to retrieve their belongings and leave. After dispersing the interns by taking leave, Mr. Boyle turned toward a powerful program director and beckoned a couple other older men in suits, signaling that they would leave together for coffee, leaving the interns and other attendees to float around the conference room. In this case, like many others, interns struggled earnestly to engage in professionally beneficial transactional networking with Mr. Boyle, to little or no avail – none received personal introductions, and I did not observe any exchange of contact information or any other implicit form of transactional engagement on the part of Mr. Boyle. By implicitly designating interns as devalued partners in transaction and policing the boundaries of inclusion within his high-status network, Mr. Boyle controlled the parameters of transactional networking and enforced the unequal distribution of social capital. This illustrates the way that hierarchies of professional power shape the unequal distribution of social capital, and how transactional desire on the part of lower-status individuals is oriented toward those higher in the hierarchy – but not vice versa.

During fieldwork, I noticed that this configuration – where transactional networking is governed by the distribution of professional epistemic power and the motivational logic of accumulation – occurred across a multitude of different events, spaces and people (rather than being specific to any institutionally or disciplinary specific subset class of professionals). For instance, at a well-known center-left think tank, I attended an event on the reversal of "countering violent extremism" and "counter-radicalization" government efforts during the Trump administration. There were four panelists, and one moderator, all of whom were well known in their respective professional spheres: three in think tanks, one in a hybrid private research institute/think tank, and one journalist. Of the five non-panelists that I met at the event,

four were interested in either collaborating directly with the panelists or working for the prominent institution with which they were affiliated. As I milled around and observed attendee and panelist interactions while eating honeydew melon with a toothpick, I noticed that most of the attendees (including those with whom I spoke) made sure to speak with at least one of the panelists. However, aside from a few polite exchanges, I did not observe sustained social interaction between attendees themselves. As I came to learn, many event attendees that are early-career professionals do not come to events to interact with one another, but rather to interact with those with more professional power. This illustrates a larger pattern where sociality in interface spaces was organized by the desire to transactionally develop social capital in ways that were sensitive to professional social hierarchies.

Many interlocutors discussed how the unequal distribution of professional power shaped the very practices, motivation and directionality of social interaction and networking. Over expensive coffee, one charismatic white male interlocutor in his mid-thirties named Jared, who was a valuable guide to professional sociality in DC, reinforced the non-neutral nature of transactional sociality. Like many others, Jared consistently, despite my denials, thought that I was trying to "land a job" in a DC think tank, and calibrated his advice through that lens. When I asked him about guidelines for interacting at events, mistakenly thinking I would perhaps receive some tips on etiquette, he advised: "You scan the room. [*Mm-Hmm -Jaden]* You go in, you scan the room. Don't be obvious about it, but you know everyone is doing it, that's just how DC works. So find those people, know something about them if you're going to talk to them, don't get anything wrong [about their professional background and activities], and make sure to talk to them. A lot of people think that you're supposed to 'wow' the panel [i.e. during Q&A], but if you look at who's most successful, you'll find those people doing the after-event networking, the

kind of thing that isn't flashy, they're the most successful. If you want to work in international

CT [counter-terrorism], and the Belgian ambassador is right there, you're gonna wanna spend

some time talking to him after the event rather than sticking with your coworkers or grad school

buddies." Here, Jared offers a pedagogy of professional phenomenology with two primary

features. First, he attempts to train my perceptual senses to discern the landscape and

professionally beneficial concentrations of power in social settings. Second, he encourages me to

direct my social attention and energy to those individuals who exude desirable forms of

professional power and capital which might be beneficial to me (e.g. a powerful institutional

position). Through focusing my social energy on them, I would be able to properly

transactionally network and develop my own social capital. Over (much) time and practice, Jared

helped me develop not only the perceptual capacity to sense and identify signifiers of

professional capital and power, but also a professional habitus of subtle self-confidence and

assertion. This pedagogy of professional perception and action allowed me to reorient my

practices, and gain access to prominent individuals which I would have otherwise been too shy

or ignorant to interact with (which, as it turns out, was more helpful as an ethnographer than as

an aspirant).[18]

Transactional Networking in Formal Space and Professional Social Capital Accumulation

We have seen that, in interface zones, transactional networking is a central, and

professionally necessary, mode of interaction that is oriented toward professional accumulation.

Networking and accumulation are not universal or uniform across social and spatial contexts;

indeed, they take on distinctive form in different social contexts, and the institutional and

professional properties of specific contexts shape the content of sociality among knowledge

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[18] This will be explored further in Chapter 4.

professionals. As I learned as an ethnographer-participant, understanding the sociospatially specific expectations of professional sociality – when, where and how to interact, and to what end – was key to getting along in the think tank world. In this section, I describe the social particularities of the embodied practices of transaction with the aim of social capital accumulation within formal spaces; in the next, I describe the same in informal spaces. While formal and informal spaces require epistemic professionals to inhabit and enact socially specific and strictly codified norms and behaviors, they are identically structured by the logic of social capital accumulation. In competitive and demanding contexts like DC, there is no "off" to the incentive and necessity of transactional networking with the aim of career and self-advancement.

While transactional relationships oriented toward accumulation traversed formal and informal social domains, there are distinctive valences in each space. While the topical content of conversation might be similar in formal and informal space, the tone, idiom and embodied expressions of interaction were usually substantially different. In formal spaces such as panel events, most professionals poised for networking were, in the words of one interlocutor, "dressed to impress." They wore suits and carried briefcases, attempting to signify professionality through the body. Indeed, I noticed that it was not just clothing practices that demarcated the social form of formal versus informal networking; my interlocutors also exhibited a distinct interactional style and bodily comportment in formal space. The same interlocutors that were restrained and subdued in suits at panel events and conferences would be louder, more humorous and relaxed in khaki shorts in informal settings. I asked Jack, a white male interlocutor in his late twenties about these differences that I was noticing between formal and informal networking. "You have to adapt, think about it like this, if I was out there at the [formal event] reception with a beer in a polo getting sloshed [drunk], I wouldn't look legitimate and of course nobody is going to say

yeah that's the guy I wanna talk to, he's a serious guy. No, but if you act professionally, people, people you might not even know, are going to be more interested, they're gonna think okay I want to be in this guy's circle," he said, pointing at me as he concluded. Here, Jack connects professional performance to the perception and accumulation of social capital – symbolically valued forms of professionality, including dress and demeanor, serve as social signals that convey that one is a potentially valuable transactional partner and site of beneficial social capital. They stimulate others to desire and openness to being in one's "circle" or network. By modulating their professional self-expression to convey restraint and status at once, interlocutors worked to fashion themselves as valuable networking partners and embodiments of social capital.

In formal space, the transactionality of networking was often underplayed in order to mitigate perceptions of self-interestedness. While many interlocutors in backstage settings emphasized the instrumentality of transactional networking, those in public settings with whom I interacted who knew me less well avoided overt claims that their own networking was organized around the accumulation of social capital. During unstructured interviewing at public events, most participants gave tightly controlled explanations for their participation in events, which predominantly tended to avoided the discourse of networking. In only four recorded cases did participants tell me directly that they were attending to "network"; indeed, the discourse of networking was underplayed even at the handful of *explicit* networking events that I attended, including a "millennial networking" event where most participants were in a similar age grade (and thus, perhaps, ostensibly more comfortable with one another). As we saw earlier, by avoiding explicitly referring to sociality in terms of transactional "networking," my interlocutors attempted to avoid being perceived as primarily instrumental and self-interested.

In DC, transactional networking never operates in a social vacuum, but rather within dense networks of existing associations. In the majority of public and semipublic events I attended, participants knew one or more panelists or attendees, and came to learn about the topic and support their colleague(s). During one event at a conference center in DC on "Terrorism: International Politics and Prospects During Times of Disorder," one white male think tank fellow in a crisp navy suit named John, who had recently advanced to a mid-level position in his program, told me that he had come at the invitation of a colleague who had previous been a peer in his graduate program, where he recently graduated with an MA in international security. He told me that events like these were helpful for both building a knowledge base and getting to know like-minded people in the professional community. Further, he told me that his graduate school networks, including the extended alumni community, were integral to his success at getting a position at the think tank at which he currently worked. In John's case, leveraging existing elite academic-professional networks is key to accessing formal spaces of sociality and accumulation that are beneficial to career advancement.

There are a series of embodied performative rituals of interaction and exchange which organize transactional networking as a social form, especially at formal public events like panels, conferences, lectures, book and policy report publication talks, and so on. These interactional forms are symbolically meaningful iterative rituals which not only mediate the exchange of information, but work to build and negotiate the development of professional relationships. As I learned (sometimes the hard way), there are strict, culturally codified norms that organize these exchanges. Consider, for example, the act of business card exchange, which I observed at nearly every event that I participated in either in my role as intern or ethnographer (or both). On one muggy afternoon, I attended a public event on "renewing" public policy thinking via bringing

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together and lending institutional support to a "diverse talent pool," drawing together a variety of participants from across think tanks, government, nonprofit NGOs and the private sector. I sat at a table of predominantly early-career professionals with various interests, from educational and health policy to international and cyber-security; all of us were in our early to late-20s, in formal attire, with varying degrees of experience and comfort with the setting. We all sat awkwardly as the keynote address stretched on, and clapped politely after it ended.

Afterwards, as we ate lunch, the table enlivened a bit, and we all engaged in light conversation. I was sitting next to a young, and visibly nervous, Latino man named Vincent, who was a few years out of college and now working in educational policy in a local think tank. He told me that he had worked for a local nonprofit on equitable access to postsecondary education, and had recently transitioned into the think tank world. I told him that I was a researcher from UCLA doing a project on DC professionals, and he noted his interest, along with mentioning that he has a few friends who either went to or are going to UCLA. After a few more rounds of polite discussion about the kind of work we do, the moment came to negotiate an exchange of contact information: "Well, here, I'll give you my card," offered Vincent hesitantly, handing me his card. Luckily, during my months of socialization into professionalism, I learned the delicate choreography of business card exchange. A few weeks before, I had been explicitly trained by a close interlocutor in how to properly receive and exchange business cards in a professional environment, and implemented this advice accordingly: I intentionally looked at the card for a few seconds, turned it around to see if there was anything on the back, then turned it back around and looked at it for a few more seconds, thanked Vincent with eye contact, then pulled out my wallet and put the card in (rather than just stuffing it into my pocket), and then proceeded to ask him a question about his work. I apologized meekly for not having a card of my own, but noted

with a laugh that I would be obtaining some as soon as I could. Each moment in the exchange is organized to convey interest and care for the person's professional experience and personhood. These exchanges are small moments of transactional recognition, which create the links of professional intimacy, alliance and coalition necessary to survive and thrive in DC.

After this experience of business card exchange, I began to increasingly notice the use of business cards as a medium of transactional networking in formal space. During one large conference with over 400 attendees, I observed multiple business card exchanges establish professional contact between two individuals previously unknown to one another. One such interaction between two higher-status think tank senior policy analysts was brokered by an introduction facilitated by a mutual professional connection. As an intern working at the event, I stood to attention at the end of a row near where the two senior suited analysts were sitting, observing them discuss their professional interests and work. As the break period between panels came to a close, they amicably exchanged business cards and decided that they would enter into email contact in the next few weeks. This reciprocal act of exchange established the potentiality of a professional relationship and thus opened a new horizon of social capital. George, one of a handful of interlocutors who introduced me to the idea that DC sociality is organized around transaction, explained that the exchange of business cards expresses and solidifies mutual respect and interest, functioning as an offer of a professional bond – but one that is short of friendship. "It's more of a professional relationship" rather than friendship, George explained, "it's not buddy-buddy." By representing the acts of exchange in terms of developing professionally beneficial relationships rather than "buddy-buddy" friendships, George reflects a larger understanding that transactional networking is oriented toward the expansion of social capital.

Transactional Networking in Informal Space and Professional Social Capital Accumulation

Through participant observation and unstructured interviewing, I learned that transactional networking with the aim of social capital accumulation occurs also at informal interfacing spaces. These informal gatherings include: house and apartment parties, "happy hour" bar gatherings, "patio parties" on the workplace patios of think tanks and other organizations, and the occasional dinner at an upscale restaurant. In contrast to formal events described above, explicit networking rituals are less prevalent at informal events, perhaps because (1) these events are tighter-knit communities of people who already have some professional, institutional and/or interpersonal links with one another and (2) these events are at least nominally symbolically marked as non-work spaces. Most of the house parties I attended included guests of the same age grade, employed at the same institution (e.g. a cross-cohort gathering of graduate students in the same department; a party just for employees of a particular think tank program; a party across programs within the same think tank). Because of my own age-grade and networks, as an ethnographer I found myself embedded in informal spaces alongside up-and-coming young professional knowledge workers in their twenties and thirties, who were predominantly white, universally college-educated (often but not always at elite universities) and almost universally graduate-educated, all with middle- to upper-class backgrounds. Usually over half of attendees in informal spaces were white men, but there was also growing faction of young white women workers rising in the think tank ranks, including in security, terrorism and extremism-related positions.

Aspiring professionals utilize informal spaces as crucial sites of transactional networking for social capital accumulation. In informal spaces more so than formal ones, however, professional networking is entangled with the creation and maintenance of more amicable, friendly interpersonal social bonds. Over time, I learned that informal spaces are key sites wherein

professional bonds are created and sustained, often through the development of personal

friendships.19 One key interlocutor, James, explained the importance of networking in informal

space: "… you don't always connect, actually a lot of times you don't, but there are a lot of

people that I'm professionally associated with now that I met through one of those things

[informal gatherings]. Those are sometimes the best places to see what people are really about

and what they work on."

There are three dimensions to transactional practices of accumulation in informal spaces.

First, informal gatherings are highly insular and circumscribed, open only to professionals with

developed and developing professional capital and social networks. Rather than being organized

randomly, many of the informal gatherings I attended had specific professional and institutional

compositions, involving people from specific close and extended networks, usually working in

the same and aligned sectors. For instance, one house party I went to attracted individuals from a

particular esteemed DC graduate program, along with individuals in extended networks who

worked in domains that program graduates usually worked within. The boundaries of inclusion

in informal space are strictly enforced, if never explicitly demarcated; these gatherings are not,

for example, open to the public, and neither are they open to anyone in the neighborhood. Rather,

they are organized for specific cadres of individuals, who possess developed forms of

professional power at the same time that they seek to accumulate more social capital through

participation. This is not to say that informal spaces are *impermeable* – quite the contrary. While

membership and inclusion is policed implicitly, I noticed that informal gatherings – especially

those in public rather than house parties – were open to a wide variety of knowledge workers of

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19 It is important to note here that even at informal gatherings, people were still restrained in their performance, especially with people with whom they were not familiar. That interlocutors were interpersonally friendly, and used gatherings to combine networking and friendship-making, does not mean that they are universally friendly or interested in getting to know anyone independent of social status and prestige.

varying employment grades. But this permeability remained structured by hierarchies of professional power, which meant that those included were almost universally positioned within powerful institutions – think tanks in particular, but also the military, university, government, and private sector, among others. Unless proxy invited via a romantic partner, I did not meet any attendees of informal gatherings who occupied lower-tiered devalued professional locations (e.g. construction, domestic service, hospitality management) outside of domains of high-level knowledge work. Professional location deeply shaped the possibility for invitation and participation in these informal gatherings; in other words, there were high prestige and capital requirements for participation. This makes sense if we understand informal spaces as sites for the condensation and accumulation of professional social capital through transactional networking, rather than spaces disarticulated from professional hierarchies of power and prestige. Despite their informality and scripting as spaces outside of work, informal sites of sociality were not untethered from the structure – and motivational logic – of professional accumulation.

Informal space, while less saturated with onstage work norms, is organized according to existent social networks, and as such are subject to the limits of network composition – one does not invite someone whom one does not know, and whom one knows is shaped by one's professional location and interests. Given the elite professional worlds of my interlocutors, the informal spaces with which I was familiar tended to attract the "up-and-coming" professional aspirants whose careers were advancing in socially authorized directions. This hierarchical composition of informal space (i.e. its structuration by professional location and network reach) inevitably constrains participation in informal space to predominantly in-network individuals with similar professional and class aspirations. Specific professional blocs of individuals occupying high-status knowledge employment with vertical trajectories are thus favored for

inclusion in informal spaces. In this way, only specific forms of capital enable participation (e.g. affiliation with powerful knowledge institutions in DC like think tanks); and in this way only specific, already relatively high-status, individuals are enabled opportunities to develop social capital through transactional interaction. Across multiple informal spaces, for instance, I met a variety of people, all of whom were affiliated with powerful institutions: military (Department of Defense), government (internal congressional research and policy staff; State Department analysts), think tanks (policy analysts and managers), consulting firms (always at one of the "Big Four" firms) and other private security and intelligence contractors. In almost all cases, participants were early- or mid-career professionals who expressed clear class aspirations, often in terms of intra- or cross-organizational promotion.

As we have seen also for formal spaces, inclusion and participation in informal space is importantly shaped by the *desire* for professional accumulation. Interlocutors transacted with those who were or might become advantageous to their own career aspirations, and minimally with those who were likely not to be advantageous. Those extremely rare attendees without the requisite socially recognized forms of capital were marginalized in these informal spaces and their transactional socialities. For example, during my fieldwork in informal spaces, I only met one person without an undergraduate degree,[20] whom I will call Rich. As Rich and I got to know each other over a handful of gatherings, he told me that his lack of an undergraduate degree came at a disadvantage when it came to promotion at his current place of employment. It also led to him feeling marginalized in formally educated spaces; during the handful of times that we were at the same gathering, I did not observe any other higher-capital attendees make efforts to

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[20] To preserve anonymity, I do not use any identifiers for this person, which would reveal their identity given that they were the only person without an undergraduate degree that I met.

socialize with him. During our last meeting, Rich emphasized to me that he was going back to school to get his undergraduate degree in order to become an biomechanical engineer.

Second, interlocutors use informal gatherings as places to deepen, socialize and transact with already existing networks. One of my main interlocutors, Adam, called this "horizontal networking" – developing professional relationships with those with a similar career status. Over a large burger in a loud pub, he explained that horizontal networking is important because it allows one to develop professional social contacts that might prove professionally beneficial in the future in terms of offering recommendations or what he called "vetting," and providing notification of professional opportunities. Here, Adam thematizes the transactionality of horizontal sociality, emphasizing how networking with peers that have upward career trajectories is a solid investment in social capital that might pay off in the future. Horizontal networking was often embodied in the very description of informal social events – one Facebook event invitation described the gathering as a way of "building the [graduate program's] community." The majority of people at informal events I attended were either friends or professional acquaintances of the same career status. In informal spaces, professional and personal links were often intermingled, as people discussed workplace politics, policy research, intellectual debates, national and international politics (a favorite was the operation of the federal government in particular), among other topics.

Importantly, interlocutors used informal interface space to catch up with one another professionally; through informal sociality, individuals who might not see each other daily were able to re-connect and update one another on the development of their careers. When I asked about the value of "catching up," one of my interlocutors Robert told me that these updates are important because they serve as means of gaining mutually useful information, helping situate

each party in the professional social field. This allows each person to determine the extent to which, and how, the other might be advantageous to oneself. Robert explained that he used "catching up" information to inform decisions about how to strategically reach out to people. He recounted attending a moving-away party for a colleague, where he re-connected with a friend, who had become a fellow senior researcher in an allied think tank. After this party, they developed a closer professional relationship, including email communication and occasional coffee meetings, which eventually culminated in the co-organization of a successful panel event. Further, he told me about how he had used "catching up" information gathered at informal events to not only reach out to people beneficial to himself, but to connect *other people* together as well. For instance, he explained, if he learned that a contact secured a new position in lobbying firm, he would better be able to connect his think tank colleagues working on similar issues to this friend. Robert emphasized that the networking relation is not a "one-way street," but rather ideally a kind of reciprocal exchange.

At one apartment gathering on a warm evening, I stood on the patio with two other interlocutors, Jack and Sira. I knew both of them through snowball sampling, but did not know that they knew each other. Over wine, they explained that they both had worked together in a centrist think tank before Sira left to work for a prominent DC consulting firm with private and public clients. While they got along well when they worked together, they had not seen each other in almost a year. Jack later told me he and Sira had kept in better touch after the above gathering, and a couple months later, he reached to Sira to ask if she might broker a meeting with her manager at the prominent consulting firm for which she worked. Jack told me that he was "shopping around" for potential new employment in the private sector, and that he had been interested in Sira's consulting firm for a while given that he had a background and expertise that

fit with their organizational profile. Sira arranged a successful meeting between Jack and her manager, which would not otherwise have occurred if not for the resuscitated connection between Jack and Sira afforded by interface space. Jack and Sira's relationship illustrates how horizontal transactional networking aims at deepening and consolidating already existing social capital, revealing the effective power of social capital in mediating potential forms of professionally beneficial exchange. As Jack and Sira also illustrate, the horizontality of transaction coexists peacefully with the logic of professional accumulation.

Third, professionals utilize informal interface gatherings to extend their immediate network; in this way, these informal spaces are sites for *network extension*. At one gathering at an interlocutor's house in a Virginia suburb, there were more than a handful of alumni at the gathering, along with multiple current cohorts, all from the same graduate program. While circling the kitchen looking for someone to talk to, I noticed a younger current cohort member ask a number of questions to an alumnus on advice about how they leveraged their degree, expertise and networks to secure a job at a leading consulting intelligence firm. In another case, I was involved in a conversation between an alumnus and current graduate student, wherein it was discovered that the alumnus had previously worked at a think tank at which the current graduate student was trying to secure an internship. The current graduate student asked a series of questions about what program management was like, the everyday life of work, and what professional promotion and development opportunities were offered. At the end of the conversation, they exchanged contact information, the current student thanked the alumnus, and the current graduate student promised to send a "follow-up email." The follow-up email was a common gesture after face-to-face contact in DC, signaling the creation of a new interpersonal bond or a means of eliciting further information about employment. Often, interlocutors of mine

working in terrorism and extremism met people in informal spaces who were both outside of their own core network and working in a distinct institutional environment from their own. For example, I witnessed multiple instances where interlocutors, heavily concentrated in think tanks and graduate school, met and networked with individuals in adjacent fields (private security contractors, management consultants, and security agency government employees like the National Center for Counter-Terrorism).

As noted above, the informal spaces to which I had access were composed of early- and mid-career professionals occupying a variety of powerful institutional locations in DC. Core groups of participants (e.g. hosts and their close friends) invited extended networks of friends, which not only allowed for network consolidation with current associates, but also novel forms of contact between core and extended groups (and within extended groups themselves). Informal gatherings facilitated network-extension, often through an in-network intermediary introducing one person to another person. Both core and extended groups were upwardly mobile professional aspirants already in privileged institutional positions (e.g. within mid-status positions in think tanks), and so offered each other potent opportunities to develop professionally beneficial social contact. These forms of transactional interaction facilitated by informal space allowed my interlocutors to meet each other and engage in professional accumulation. As we have seen, these practices embodied the fusion of building and rebuilding basic familiarity and affinity, on the one hand, and professional social capital accumulation on the other (e.g. current students developing their alumni network in order to secure valuable jobs).

Transactional Networking is Hierarchical: Race, Gender and Employment Rank

Within both formal and informal spaces, transactional networking and professional social capital accumulation are intensely hierarchical social processes. My role as a think tank intern

was particularly helpful in affording understanding of the how hierarchies shape the process and experience of transactional networking. As an intern, I was clearly symbolically and organizationally positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. My subordinate status was not only marked by my employment position as an intern, but also through my perceived age, immediate consociates (predominantly other program interns or staff), dress (business casual rather than formal suit), lack of institutional and professional notoriety or formal qualifications, and lack of understanding of local policy jargon. My subordinate status at work followed me into formal and informal transactional networking spaces, marking me as someone without valuable forms of social and professional capital. Because I did not possess the normative signifiers of professional capital such expensive clothes and high-status employment rank, I did not appear to participants in networking spaces as a valuable partner for interaction. When I disclosed that I was an intern, people usually expressed very little interest in my work, which involved mostly menial digital labor. This contrasted sharply with the way that I noticed people interacted with Sean, one of my close interlocutors positioned in a high-status private sector occupation, which included serial questions, discernible interest and longer conversation time.

In networking contexts, transaction is clearly stratified across multiple axes of hierarchical differentiation, including especially race, gender and employment rank. The formation of alliances in networking space is predicated on the exclusion of those in subordinate positions from sociospatial access to interaction with more powerful professionals. As we have seen, networking spaces like panel events are sites for social capital accumulation, and they are organized socially according to already existing unequal distributions of professional capital. Individuals who possessed more professional capital in virtue of their institutional position, professional credentials and peer-ratified knowledge performativity are esteemed. In contrast,

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individuals positioned lower in the hierarchy were constantly attempting to interact with these higher-status individuals, and achieve membership (or at least contact) with higher-status groupings.[21]

During events – from large conferences, to medium-size panel events and small-size internal meetings – low-status interns are sociospatially segregated from both attendees and event panelists. Interns are, for instance, excluded from being panel "liaison," a role which is reserved for positions above the intern level, which meant that they are not privy to what my interlocutors called "backroom" discussions, where higher-ranked organization members meet informally with panelists to both prepare for the panel discussion and network. Usually interns were involved in organizing and administering the logistical operation of events: "running mics" for audience Q&As; "tabling" to sell author materials; answer questions about the event; and, as I quickly learned as an intern myself, telling attendees where the bathroom is. This often meant that "face-time" with panelists and other prominent individuals – along with free time to network– were unavailable to interns and other lower-status workers. For example, during one small conference on the "international dimensions of violent extremism," I noticed that interns were positioned at the entrances to the event, away from the main event space where high-status participants gathered for appetizers and coffee before the main event. Interns stood stationary at these entrances, greeting and giving directions to higher-status attendees as they walked by, bypassing interns with the rare hello or question about how to navigate to the event space.

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[21] There are distinctions here between formal and informal spaces of transactional networking and accumulation. Because informal spaces like house parties condensed individuals who were in similar age grades and positions in the occupational hierarchy, the distinction between high-status and lower-status groupings were less overtly visible. At formal public-facing events, like conferences and panel discussions, on the other hand, the hierarchical organization of groupings – and inequalities in valuation based on professional capital and prestige – were more discernible.

More powerfully positioned epistemic professionals did not have strong incentives to network with those in lower positions, especially those at or near the bottom of the organizational and professional hierarchy – most notably interns, but also younger early-career associates and analysts. In fact, as we have seen, downward networking is a contradiction in terms, especially for those at the upper echelons of the social hierarchy in elite spaces. For example, high-status individuals like program managers or senior fellows have little incentive to interact with interns because they offer no potential professional benefit; in this way, building a relationship with an intern would not constitute a valuable form of social capital. This interactional disincentive is especially acute in contexts where time is sparse and transactional networking to build social capital is crucial. I asked Caleb, a closer interlocutor of mine, about what I perceived to be hierarchically organized inequalities in who is valued as a networking partner. Nodding, he explained, "They're too busy, they've got no time, sometimes they only have twenty minutes to spare in the day and that twenty minutes is not going to go to an intern [laughs], you're just gonna have to get used to that."

Thus, during fieldwork at formal events with professionally powerful attendees, it was rare to see forms of transactional networking between lower- and higher-status individuals. Even basic interaction between lower and higher-status individuals was generally limited unless they were sharing labor of logistics coordination for the event. For instance, during one large conference, the think tank interns and lower-level employees were either spatially segregated (tabling, greeting at doorways, backroom logistics), or integrated into the audience (e.g. doing social media updates for their respective think tanks), but almost never seated alongside higher-status individuals. Further, in this case, after the event, interns and low-ranked employees either helped clean up the event or milled about with one another, while the high-status think tank and other

professionals went to exclusive post-event dinners with one another. At this conference and at the multitude of panel events that I attended, I did not observe higher-status professionals invite interns or other lower-status workers to post-event social gatherings, which happened often. These forms of exclusion from the circuit of transactional networking reinforced hierarchies between different ranks of worker, further entrenching the power and solidarity of small coteries of professional elites and in this way policing the distribution and composition of social capital.

In one case, because I was affiliated with a particular program of a think tank, I was allowed to attend one of these exclusive gatherings at an upscale restaurant appended to a luxury residential complex in downtown Washington, D.C. The selective composition and exclusivity revealed that larger events like conferences are important sites for strengthening professional connections and augmenting network ties. These events are especially important because, as I learned, many think tank program coworkers work remotely with one another and live away from one another, and often do not get to meet in-person. During the dinner, I learned that some of the experts had not met one another in person until this time. While I cannot draw extensive data from this particular exclusive after-conference event,[22] I am able to note that this gathering excluded subjects in inferior employment positions – I was the lowest positioned individual attending. There were no other lower-status individuals at this gathering (e.g. interns), and only two other non-affiliated people in attendance, one of which was a family member of one of the high-status individuals. Of around 22 people, all save one were white, and only five were women. The conversation toggled between topical professional discussion about the conference and small talk about food and traveling plans. While most of the experts knew each other, I witnessed two business card handoffs between pairs who had not met each other prior to the

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[22] Given our relatively close professional relationship, interlocutors have asked me not to use as data anything from this gathering, or from interactions at this conference event.

gathering. Near the end of the dinner, the program director – a white man is his late 40s – gathered the attention of the group and discussed future directions. While this gathering included discussion of short, medium- and long-term organizational goals, it interwove these discussions with practices of building professional affinities and solidarities between members of the group. What this case shows is that these exclusive networking spaces systemically exclude lower-positioned individuals, thus disallowing them entrance to not only participation in professional discussions (of e.g. future plans), but also network extension through building interpersonal bonds and connections (e.g. small talk and card exchange). This reflects a larger pattern where access to transactional spaces of social capital accumulation is deeply structured by employment rank, excluding those at the bottom from both gaining entry to sites of transaction and being perceived as valuable interlocutors by higher-status professionals in the first place.

In tandem with position in the organizational and professional pyramid, racial and gender hierarchies also shaped access to and participation in transactional networking. In elite DC circles, the distribution of professional power is deeply gendered and racialized – white men are disproportionately represented among the professional knowledge elite, and, with notable exceptions, they possess the highest organizational positions and professional qualifications. Their positions, qualifications and prominent publications and connections entail that they possess the most valued forms of professional capital.[23] Because these individuals and groups are capital-dense, they are highly desired networking partners within informal and formal transactional spaces. Unequal modes of valuation on the basis of race and gender entail that the very composition of professional social capital in the form of networks segregated by race and gender. My white male professional interlocutors, for instance, strictly policed the boundaries of

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[23] This will be further explored in Chapter 4.

transactional networking, often excluding nonwhite people and women; these exclusionary transactional networking practices reinforced both inequalities in social capital accumulation, and maintained the racial and gender segregated nature of social capital. By foregrounding the inequalities built into social capital distribution and processes of accumulation, we can see how transactional networking is not simply neutral, but rather structured by the racialized and gendered organization of professional power.

White male professionals systemically commanded the most professional capital and so occupied the highest-status positions in transactional networking space; this disproportionately positioned white men as the primary gatekeepers of professional accumulation, and the most desirous objects of transaction (especially for those in lower and middle positions in the local social hierarchy). At conferences and panel events, for instance, gendered and racial inequalities in presence and power were prevalent. At both smaller panel events and larger conferences, along with everyday workplaces, white men were in the predominant majority, both in terms of absolute population *and* positions of symbolic and institutional power (e.g. program managers, directors, senior fellows, faculty). This was especially the case in epistemic spaces related to national and homeland security. These men often had strong personal and professional connections, based in both organizational affiliation and topical-professional portfolio. While there were many panels over the course of fieldwork that included both white men and women, and to a substantially lesser extent men and women of color, high-status white men still dominated the public stage as arbiters of knowledge.

Despite these gendered inequalities in possession and access to professional accumulation, however, white women were still key epistemic professionals in DC – even within

stereotypically male domains like security, terrorism and extremism.[24] While women are still predominantly relegated to feminized intellectual space, like the domain of international development (perceived as a "soft security" profession), the women with whom I spoke registered considerable gender progress in DC. During my fieldwork, all events, workspaces and informal gatherings that I participated in included not insignificant numbers of women. Nevertheless, these women were rarely at the top of organizational hierarchies of knowledge and policy institutions dealing with security (e.g. executive program manager of a security program at a think tank). Even if still subordinated to the professional and epistemic power of men, women – and white women in particular – have made substantial inroads into the national and international security domain, from think tanks to the military and government policymaking. I was told my female interlocutors of the particularly successful examples of women like Michele Flournoy (formerly slated to become Secretary of the Department of Defense under a Hillary Clinton presidency) and Anne Marie Slaughter, now President and CEO of think tank New America.

While select cadres of (especially white) women were granted inclusion into the male-dominated professional social order, they were systemically subordinated to white men when it came to prestigious positions, speaking opportunities and networking opportunities. Men remained the most valuable speakers and participants in public events related to national and international security. Based on analysis of the racial and gender composition of over 70 events attended in-person or digitally across a wide range of think tanks, nearly 80% of non-audience

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[24] This depended on the think tank – liberal and centrist think tanks included more women and people of color, while right wing think tanks included less.

feature participants were white-presenting men.25 More than once, but only among workers at

liberal and progressive think tanks, I overheard hushed discussions about the need to include

women on panels in order to signify diversity and inclusion – even if men were almost always

the more desired participants. In these instances, there is evidence to suggest that the

signification of diversity, rather than women's expertise, shaped decision-making about

invitation to participate in panel events and conferences.

It was generally extremely difficult to ask touchy questions about gender, especially at

formal onstage public events where I had not established long-term relationships with

interlocutors. This difficulty was only minimally attenuated in informal space, given that

informal spaces are sites for professional accumulation and thus not inseparable from the

structure of patriarchal control. It was understandably difficult to elicit fully open responses from

women participants in either formal or informal space. As a stranger and a male-presenting

person, women had no reason to trust me, especially given my role as a data-gathering

ethnographer. In addition, in contrast to high-status women in secure institutional positions,

lower- and middle-status women, who made up the majority of my women interlocutors, had to

negotiate the possibility that going on-record might put them into professional danger. Any data

gathered, especially if manifested a critique of patriarchal advantage in DC, might be detrimental

to their present and future career advancement. During the initial phase of fieldwork, I naively

explicitly asked questions about gendered inequalities in professional space26; over time, I

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25 It is important to note that the events analyzed are related to terrorism, extremism and national and homeland security. There are other think tank programs, like health and education policy, where women make up a majority rather than minority.

26 I asked, for example, questions such as: "Is it difficult being a woman in predominantly male professional space?" and "How has being a woman shaped your experience in the professional space of national and international security?" These explicit questions did not go over well, and usually, and understandably, resulted in a curt answer which ended the conversation.

learned that explicit questions about gender asymmetries in representation and positions of professional power were inappropriate.

Over time, I realized that these difficulties in accessing women's experience were directly shaped by the fact that women were significantly dependent on male professional power as gatekeepers in order to advance their career prospects. In order to succeed, subordinate women in DC need to access, negotiate and instrumentalize – if not explicitly uphold – the power that elite men have to facilitate or impede their own career advancement. A public or semipublic critique of patriarchal monopoly over the accumulation of professional social capital, and the corresponding institutional power it affords well-connected men, would only be detrimental to someone whose career depends largely on the goodwill of those same powerful men. It is well-known in DC that professional success depends on keeping one's internal critical assessments to oneself (or restricted to a select vetted few). Indeed, keeping one's ambivalent or negative thoughts about others and one's professional situation to oneself was a key element of my own socialization by key interlocutors. Gender adds an additional element of social restraint to the general norm against critical expression – as a woman, one cannot express serious ambivalence, resentment and antagonism, or structural critique without the potential for repercussion by men who occupy dominant positions.

This general failure to gather significant data on gendered experience of spaces of transactional accumulation (using explicit prompts) speaks to how patriarchal professional power shapes women's negotiation of professional advancement. Spaces of ethnographic research were spaces of professional accumulation deeply shaped by the dominance of white men. In these male-dominated contexts, women's success and advancement is minimally predicated on not fundamentally upsetting the fragile gendered order, where men command the vast majority

gatekeeping positions which can make or break a career (especially in domains of national and international security). Whether or not women are critical of the patriarchal professional order, they have a professional interest in not expressing such views (especially to a male stranger researcher). The additional threat of the *possibility of being perceived* as being critical of male domination provides another disincentive. Over time, the norms of the social environment also disincentivized my asking questions about gender and the patriarchal disposition of social power in DC, given that I came to know how uncomfortable this made female interlocutors feel, especially in public settings.27

Alice, a female interlocutor and policy analyst in her mid-twenties, explained the impact that male professional power has on women's capacities for transactional networking. I asked her if she had faced any challenges as a professional woman in DC think tanks. "I think women don't have the same opportunities to network that men do, unless somebody knows you because you're a big name, they see women and they don't automatically think of someone they want to talk to," she explained. Alice emphasized that the difficulty of networking and devaluation of women is organized informally rather than in terms of explicit prohibitions on women, noting also that "men get along better [than men do with women]," softening some of her previous critique. During a later discussion, she advised me that I should be careful to observe not just interaction in public spaces during the duration of events, but also the expression of sociality outside of the formal time of events. Men are happy to briefly talk to women at events, she said, but less willing and interested in inviting them to the pub for an informal drink afterward – a space reserved predominantly for men. She told me to carefully observe the gendered organization of who congregates and leaves together at events. 'You'll learn a lot,' she predicted, 'by seeing who

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27 I eventually ceased asking direct questions about gender in public spaces of transactional accumulation, whether formal or informal. I reserved these questions for interviews with the few close female interlocutors in my study.

is spending the most time together.'[28] As Emily and I became closer, she invited me to more panel events, and I increasingly saw how the benefits of transaction are structured by gender, and in particular how gender-segregated informal spaces of transaction were. As Emily suggested, I often witnessed male professionals consolidate and extend their networks through selective invitation to informal after-event gatherings. This happened among high-status men such as program directors, senior fellows and professors, but also among lower- and mid-status professionals to whom I had more access. With Emily in mind, I began to notice how gender shaped my own experience of transactional networking. Close male interlocutors would invite me out to grab a happy hour drink and food after events, and I would find myself in pub settings with all-male groups in their twenties and thirties, despite the fact that we all had been with women acquaintances just before at an event. One time, I gathered up the strength to lightly ask about this. "Where are Amy and Jen [two women we had been with at the event just prior]?" I asked Jared, a close interlocutor who was sharply socially perceptive, as we walked down the street. He looked at me quizzically, as if wondering why I was trying to stir the pot with regard to such a minor issue, and shrugged his shoulders, perhaps not wanting to thematize their absence. This resonates with Emily's insight that there are gendered inequalities built into the informality of social capital accumulation, whereby male professionals regulate and police the boundaries of transactional networking in ways that implicitly exclude women as devalued networking interlocutors.

As we have seen, this generalized prohibition against criticizing male professional and epistemic power is shaped importantly by local gendered organizational and professional status. Lower- and even middle-status women (e.g. interns and policy analysts), and especially women

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[28] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

of color in these positions, almost universally declined to express any negative thoughts to me qua ethnographer.[29] However, on rare occasions where data-gathering was permitted, successful women higher up on the professional food chain expressed cautious reservations about male-dominated social spheres, especially in security domains where men predominated. In contrast to subordinated classes of women, the elevated institutional positions of this small elite of women allowed them an attenuated form of freedom to critique the patriarchal structure of professional accumulation. One white woman named Joanne, a think tank senior fellow and well-connected journalist, was unexpectedly candid with me given the semipublic setting (an event reception) and universal tight-lipped professional temperament that I was used to. Modulating the volume of her voice to avoid non-ratified reception attendees from hearing, she energetically explained: "[As a woman] You have to do a lot more [than men of similar caliber] to get less! You have to be two times better than any man applying for the same job, and you're not gonna have an easy time networking, that's for sure, it was not easy when I first started out, and that was over fifteen years ago, when it was much worse." Here, Joanne articulates a critique of the *unearnedness* of the professional prestige and institutional power afforded to men, who possess structural advantages in virtue of their gender. She also emphasizes the fact that professional women have a difficult time networking because they are understood as less viable networking partners, and that they must expend more energy and effort in order to network successfully.

Emilia, a female interlocutor and early-career analyst in her later 20s transitioning into mid-career professional life (and at the time of writing a solidly mid-career analyst directing multiple projects), offered a younger perspective on gendered inequalities of professional transaction.

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[29] One closer woman of color interlocutor, who held a mid-level analyst position in a think tank (but planned to become a lawyer), did express in private severe grievances about gender and racial disparities within think tanks and the larger DC policy community in general, but declined the inclusion of this data in this study.

Initially, Emilia and I had interacted only obliquely in formal settings, such as panel events where our professional networks and interests connected; over time, we conversed at a few house parties hosted by political science and international relations graduate students living in the suburbs. Over time, Emilia came to trust me, even if it seemed that she always remained somewhat skeptical of my motivations as an ethnographer. One day, Emilia and I met at a coffee shop with long wooden tables and in-house mugs in the hip upscale neighborhood of Adams-Morgan. She had just gotten off work from her policy analyst day job at a prominent liberal think tank; she was one of the few younger women I knew advancing in the fields of international security (and terrorism and extremism in particular). Emilia went to Yale for her undergraduate degree, and was then working on an MA degree in political science with an emphasis in security studies; she had also recently worked for a "management consulting group" and as a security analyst in the private sector. Eventually, she told me then, she would like to be a full-time policy analyst and then hopefully program director at a think tank working on issues related to terrorism and international security.

As we ate croissants and drank tea, I asked about gendered experience in male-dominated think tank spaces. "What is it like to be a woman in this kind of space?" I asked. Emilia paused, registering facially what seemed like a muted surprise at a direct question about being a woman in male space. "Well some people say it's still a boys club…," as she trailed off and shrugged her shoulders in what seemed like indecision about whether to agree or disagree with the statement. I had heard other upwardly mobile women interlocutors also use the phrase "boy's club" used to describe professional social worlds. Without directly addressing her own experience, she went on: "If you ask most women I think they'll tell you that it's getting better, and there are workplace incentives in place and professional associations out there to make sure that women

can succeed… and… I'm not saying that there aren't problems with men having a leg up, but in my experience I've been on track with my career goals… I've been lucky to have other women mentors support me, women who are veterans in the policy world." At a later house party, without using the term "boy's club," Emilia explained that she felt that women were often implicitly not perceived by men to be valued partners for transactional networking. One reason for this, she said quietly, is that women tend not to work on the "hard security" issues coded as masculine, and so male professionals perceive their expertise, experience and interests as less important. This is exacerbated, she said, when women occupy lower positions in the hierarchy, such as intern and associate; here, gender and employment rank constitute a double devaluation of women's transactional worth. While sidestepping direct critique of patriarchy and agreeing with Joanne's reflection that women face less structural gender-based impediments to career advancement, Emilia also highlights the way that male supremacy impedes the capacity of aspirational professional women to access relations of transaction and develop social capital.

Alongside maleness, whiteness is a form, mode and means of professional social capital accumulation, structuring the racial dynamics of elite transactional spaces of the DC policy world (Roediger 1991; Hill 1998). Within this world, being socially categorized as white enabled access to key spaces of transactional networking; as such, whiteness organized the spaces of and possibilities for the augmentation of professional social capital. Nonwhite people were systematically minoritized in nearly all formal and informal transactional spaces across a wide variety of think tanks during my fieldwork, and implicitly denied access to spaces of social accumulation that were monopolized by white professionals across gender. Usually, there were no people of color at smaller panel events of between 10-30 people, and even at larger events like conferences of between 30-200 people, I could usually count the number of racial minorities

on one or both hands.30 At every formal and informal event recorded in the data corpus for this project, white-presenting people were in the predominant majority. Furthermore, occupants of the highest professional positions in think tanks and other knowledge institutions were overwhelmingly white men, and to a lesser extent, white women. Based on surveys of website personnel lists, fieldnote profiles of both public-facing (e.g. panels and conferences) and informal events, I estimate that almost 90% of epistemic professionals working in think tanks across employment grades are white-presenting.

The white monopoly on access to transactional networking space for professional social capital accumulation manifested itself in a variety of quotidian ways. First, race and whiteness organized the very composition of social space across formal and informal transactional milieu. Put simply, whether it be a house party of graduate students celebrating a birthday or a public conference on international security, people of color were not invited to, and thus not physically present in, networking spaces conducive to transactional sociality. Nonwhite people, in other words, were excluded from access to interface zones where they might develop professional relationships and extend the content and reach of social capital. When analyzing Facebook event pages for informal events such as apartment and house gatherings, I consistently noticed that very few nonwhite people were invited. This exclusion from the transactional field of accumulation reinforced not only the the organizational non-presence of people of color in the security sphere, but also implicitly regulated the racial boundaries of networks of social capital in order to maintain white dominance. This does not mean that there was explicit racial discrimination against people of color among my interlocutors – there was not. What the racial demography and constitutive exclusions of these spaces means is that people of color were

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30 If people of color were present, they were almost universally audience members or lower-status employees rather than panelists or higher-status employees at think tanks.

excluded from participation in the very forms of transaction pivotal for building career-enhancing social networks.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that professionals engage in transactional networking in formal and informal interface zones in order to enhance and expand their professional social capital. We explored my interlocutors' instrumental and transactional understanding of relationships, and attended to how they carefully negotiated relations of transactional sociality to develop relationships that may be professionally advantageous in the future. We have also seen how transactional networking is not neutral, but rather shaped by hierarchies of professional status and power and other related axes of differentiation such as race and gender. These hierarchies shape both unequal access to transactional spaces of sociality and the social perception of whether one is to be counted as a valuable networking partner. Complementing this chapter's emphasis on how the composition of and access to social capital are shaped by prevailing hierarchies, in the next chapter, we will examine the hierarchies and forms of differentiation constitutive of epistemic labor.

Chapter 2: Hierarchies of Epistemic Labor

1. Epistemic Labor in Think Tanks

An "Army of Interns": On Epistemic Labor

When I first arrived in Washington, D.C. and began searching furiously for people to talk to, I stumbled into contact with Ryan through a non-research acquaintance. Ryan, who would later become a major interlocutor, is a tall white man in his early 30s, known among his peers for his earnestness, competence and always well-groomed facial hair. Growing up in D.C. for a part of his life, he knew his way around both spatially and socially, and always recommended the best local food spots. When we first met, I told him that I was interested in working on creation of knowledge about terrorism, extremism and radicalization in think tanks, and that I was going to be working as an intern for a duration of my research. He broke eye contact and responded with what felt to me like sadly empathic, almost tragic laughter, which I later realized was his way of expressing pity for my prospective condition as an intern (about which, at that point, I knew very little). After some sad laughter, he responded, shaking his head: "D.C. is run by an army of interns." "Nobody will really come out and recognize this, and tell you this," he continued, "but everyone knows it."

Somewhat perplexed but noting the resonance with Marx's (1971 [1867]) formulation of the "reserve army of labor," I pocketed this data piece thinking that it would not be too relevant. As it turns out, the immense and daily collective labor of creating, shaping, and disseminating knowledge – what I call following Goldberg (2011) *epistemic labor* – is central to the institutional world of DC, and think tanks in particular. The object of this chapter is the condition and experience of this "army of interns," and the professional and organizational hierarchies of labor in which they are daily enmeshed. In this and the next chapter, I examine how this "army

of interns" and other lower-status employees experience, enact and navigate the everyday life of epistemic labor in the competitive and hierarchical social environment of think tanks.

The intern industry is enormous – *The Economist* (2014) reports that an estimated 20-40,000 interns work each summer in DC alone. In recent years, this expansion has sparked increasingly fractious interest in the internship as a social form and employment relation (Gardner 2011; Duffy 2017). Grant-Smith and McDonald (2018: 559) argue that internships are a result of "deleterious changes to labour markets," which are "increasingly characterized by competition, precarious work and prolonged transitions to secure employment." Lawyers Tepper and Holt (2015) ask whether internships are forms of "free labor" or "valuable learning experiences." The prominent magazine *Fortune* pointedly and dichotomously asks: "Are Unpaid Internships Exploitation or Opportunity?" As this framing reflects, the discourse about internships often assumes that the wagelessness of internships is their core problematic feature, as if receiving a wage insulates organizations who rely on internships from charges of exploitation and subordination. Avoiding the binary between whether internships are either exploitation or opportunity, this chapter takes a different view grounded in the lived experience of interns and other lower-status workers themselves, some of whom were compensated, and some of whom were not. Bracketing the question of whether unpaid internships are good or bad, this chapter examines internships across their waged and wageless forms, illustrating how interns are immersed in relations of hierarchy and subordination independent of the nature of their compensation.

For four months, I worked as an intern in a prominent think tank performing epistemic labor. At a basic level, epistemic labor involves thinking, defined as "intentional manipulation of cultural forms" (Geertz 1973: 112). In think tanks, this thinking is situated within a professional

and institutional hierarchy of employees, from the lowliest intern "working the spreadsheet" to the highest program manager. The epistemic labor that interns and other lower-status employees engage in is oriented to producing consumable knowledge in a variety of physical and digital forms, from policy research and reports to visualizable data-sets published online. For some theorists, this "immaterial" or "cognitive" labor is new, enabled by the shift to work that emphasizes the development of technical knowledge and use of digitally mediated communication. Hardt and Negri define immaterial labor as the production of "ideas, information, images, knowledges, code, languages, social relationships, affects and the like" by a variety of different kinds of worker, from teachers and fast-food employees, to nurses, public relations consultants, and call-center workers (Hardt 2010 in Douzinas and Zizek 2010: 134; see also Hochschild 1983).[31] Furthermore, for these thinkers, immaterial labor corresponds to distinct regimes of accumulation enabled by rapid technological advances, and new regimes of labor control and surveillance of workers (Lazzaratto 2011; Vercellone 2005; Virno 2009; Marazzi 2011). While theorists of immaterial labor emphasize that capitalist utilization of immaterial labor is exploitative, this chapter highlights how regimes of immaterial labor internal to non-profit think tank workplaces are constituted by hierarchies, and how unequal distributions of non-economic forms of professional power and capital shape labor systems within them. Through foregrounding the experience of workers within non-profit think tanks, this chapter reveals that, similar to capitalist formations of immaterial labor, there are forms of power and subordination within non-profit, non-capitalist forms of production.

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[31] Hardt and Negri (2004) argue that the shift to immaterial forms of producing value has been qualitative rather than quantitative – immateriality has tended to impose its forms-qualities on other sectors of production, even if industrial production is still dominant.

Interns and other lower-status think tank workers perform just the kind of immaterial labor referenced above. They do not produce commodities for sale in the market, but rather do research, connect people, facilitate events, type transcripts, write and post short articles, and participate in meetings, data entry and analysis, among many other tasks in what Roberto Unger (2019) calls the "knowledge economy." I follow Christian Fuchs (2014) in terming this "digital labor," but I use the phrase *menial digital and social labor* to capture the specifically subordinated – and vitally necessary – nature of epistemic work conducted by interns and other lower-status workers. Menial digital and social labor is not work performed by disembodied, despatialized subjects, but rather a form of work which couples the digital sphere of production and communication with the corporeal domain of workplace labor and sociality.[32] Along with intellectual production of "deliverables" like policy research, the menial labor of interns also involves facilitating social relationships in various spaces, from panel events to conferences.

Lower-Status Epistemic Labor: Form of Labor-Power

Let us turn now to the basic features of lower-status epistemic labor. First, it is a specific form of living labor dependent on the expenditure of human labor-power. It takes both waged and wageless forms: most intern labor is an unremunerated gift to the employer in exchange for the (potential) professional capital accrued from affiliation,[33] while a minority of intern workers receive minimal waged compensation. Both waged and wageless intern workers do the same work tasks, though wageless interns – who compose the majority of interns in DC think tanks –

[32] As Mackenzie Wark (2019) argues, information has a foundational material dimension – it is stored and located in space, is exchanged in definite social relationships, and relies on vast physical and human labor infrastructures to survive.

[33] While wageless intern workers share the condition of dispossession of the means of production, they are not quite proletarians in the classical sense: they do not sell, but rather *gift*, their labor-time to their employer in exchange for the possibility of professional accumulation in the form of access to social networks, development of technical skills and experience, and prospective future employment (either at that organization or another).

are not powerful enough as a class to command a wage from their employers.[34] The minority of

waged interns are usually concentrated in a handful of specific organizations, such as New

America and Brookings Institution, whose cultures are more responsive to the needs of intern

social reproduction. While some interns are waged, I did not know of any that were provided

with social benefits such as healthcare or retirement plans. I use the expansive category of

epistemic workers to describe both waged and wageless lower-status workers.[35] This includes

interns especially, but also those non-intern workers who are formally superior to interns and

waged, yet still understood as lower-status workers (e.g. many analyst and associate positions).

Lower-Status Epistemic Labor: Contract Form and Temporary Inclusion

Second, as nominally free individual juridical subjects, interns sign employment

contracts, which temporarily bind their labor to organizationally specific forms of production.

The contract form is the basic unit of relation between lower-status workers and their employers

– it codifies a relationship of subordination, and immediately formally situates interns at the

bottom of a complex organizational hierarchy. These contracts are individuated – interns do not

collectively organize together to seek employment, but rather seek employment as individuals;

further, they are individually picked for temporally specific work tenures by program managers

and their teams, usually from 3-6 months. The contract ensures that during the workday, the

employer consumes the labor-power of workers, who collectively produce and disseminate ideas

and relationships. In exchange, the employment contract affords epistemic workers certain

benefits, such as access to the intellectual means of production (including the building, chairs

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[34] Non-intern lower-status workers, such as associates and analysts, however, are universally waged.
[35] Further, the use-value of epistemic labor, however, is not surplus-value in the Marxian sense, because the productive form of think tanks are not based on capital accumulation, but rather on the allied but non-capitalist non-profit imperative of "running a surplus."

and computers), productivity incentives (e.g. free snacks, occasional lunches), formal membership in a socially recognized institution, and at least minimal access to the social networks within those institutions.

The employment contract opens a new professional horizon for the intern, wherein formal institutional inclusion entails a corresponding possibility of advancement. Securing an internship is transformative – in transitioning from non-intern to intern, individuals become new sorts of professional beings, endowed with symbolic markers of association and employment. One interlocutor, who had recently finished a first internship and had just received news that he had been hired for a second one at a different think tank, joyously showed me the introductory handbook in which his contract was included. "I thought, 'Finally!' I was so relieved," he exclaimed, reflecting on the good news he had received just hours before. He explained that this second internship would be critically important for enabling him to continue building the social networks he had been working to accumulate throughout the duration of his first internship. Another interlocutor who had just entered a new internship excitedly told me of some of the things she had received after her "onboarding" session: an employment contract, handbook, a personalized email address and cubicle, and a security code, all of which signified formal inclusion. Alongside this professional horizon of possibility, however, the contract form and employment relation ensure that epistemic workers are fundamentally disposable. The intern position is not a permanent one, and short-term contracts do not have guaranteed renewal. This places interns in highly precarious positions, uncertain of whether they will remain employed or not at the end of their contract cycle. Only a tiny minority of interns immediately receive promotion upon termination of their internship. The vast majority must find other internships, find different employment, or drop out of the think tank circuit altogether in search of new

avenues. I knew some interns that had completed multiple internships at the same organization but still could not secure employment. Think tank programs rely on these constantly renewed reserves of cheap, technically skilled intern labor to provide elemental forms of labor-power. Indeed, the disposability of interns is an intrinsic feature of the political economy of the think tank labor markets.

Lower-Status Epistemic Labor: Digital Mediations

Third, at the level of the workplace, the epistemic labor process is entangled – conceptually and corporeally – with a range of digital technologies. My early fieldnotes express shock at the amount of "screen-time" during the workday. Most of my time spent as an intern, and as an observer in other think tanks, was spent in front of a computer; almost all face-to-face interactions were mediated by some form of digital technology, especially including phones, desktop computers and laptop computers; and the majority of labor of all in-office workers is done via digital communication in tandem with a digital device. Because work, such as email (Google Mail) and writing (Google Docs) is performed online, almost all work is conducted with internet-enabled digital technologies.

Everyday work is characterized by constant streams of digital communication, over Slack, Google Chat, Google Mail and other platforms. Walking through think tank office spaces at the height of the workday was strangely quiet and active at once. Amidst a constant low buzz of typing and clicking, one would walk past interns, associates and analysts stationed in their cubicles fast at work, eyes glued to the computer screen. Occasionally, one might see one intern leaning over the shoulder of another, both peering at the screen, trying to figure out how to shift a table, resize some text, or re-frame the description of a panel event. While largely digitally mediated rather than face-to-face, intern labor involved constant communication, from the

smallest detail about the title of an article or how to upload an article on the website, to reporting

back to supervisors about the status of task completion.

The degree of face-to-face work corresponded to higher positions in the think tank

hierarchy. Interns were relegated to mostly digital work, only occasionally attending in-person

meetings, while those positioned above intern status often met face-to-face to discuss projects. I

would sometimes see groups of higher-status workers enter the office of a project manager or

conference room for a project meeting, while interns working on the same project would remain

at their cubicle, only to later receive directions via Slack or Google Mail.

Class Biography of Interns

Within organizations working on national and homeland security, interns were

predominantly white, male, in their early to mid-20s, and from middle, upper-middle and upper

class backgrounds. The majority of interns I interacted with were white, college-educated men in

their 20s. However, I did interact with a significant minority of white women in their 20s as well,

who had gained a foothold in the male-dominated elite sphere of security professionals.

Nonwhite people, however, were significantly underrepresented in programs working on issues

of security. Interns are universally college-educated or in the process of obtaining a college

degree, often – but not always – from elite, highly ranked universities such as Ivy League

(Stanford University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton), "Public Ivies" (University of

California, University of Arizona, University of Maryland, University of Virginia) and

prominent DC-area universities (Georgetown, George Washington, American). The majority of

them are planning to attend graduate or professional school, or in some cases already have

completed advanced graduate and professional degrees.

Interns occupy a paradoxical class position: on one hand, contingent, precarious, low-status and unpaid (or at best underpaid); and on the other hand, owners of and/or able to access significant kinds of professionally valuable cultural and social capital (see Chapter 3 for more discussion). Interns occupied the lowest rungs of the work hierarchy, but also were highly educated and came predominantly from relatively high-status class backgrounds. They rarely openly referenced or discussed their higher class background, and it was difficult to discuss class openly in groups given norms against asking and answering questions related to income and wealth. I learned to obtain information about class background through specific biographical details picked up in unstructured and semistructured interviewing.

David, a white male recent college graduate, went to an elite college preparatory private school on the East Coast, attended an esteemed private university in California, and at the time of our interview was winding down a first paid internship. It was unclear the extent to which he was being financially supported by his parents, but he told me that his parents "supported him" both through his expensive undergraduate education and intermittently through his internship. Like many others in his class position, he was considering going to law, business or graduate school, and told me that his family would be providing financial support to him as he transitioned into the next step in his career. While many interns shied away from discussing family financial support, David told me that many interns, especially those who work without wages, receive family subsidies to afford the extravagant rent and cost of living near the think tank corridors in D.C. "That kind of thing is normal," he explained matter-of-factly and with little of the hush-hush typical of discussions around the topic of financial aid. As someone financially buttressed by his family, David represents the norm among interns in D.C. think tanks: young, highly educated white men from relatively affluent backgrounds who receive familial financial support

in order to not only reproduce their lives, but potentiate sustained access to career-enhancing professional capital.

Rarely, interns would talk more in depth about the difficulties of supporting oneself in an unpaid internship, offering a more in-depth explanation of the class character of internhood. Privately, a few interns explained being financially supported by their parents through the duration of their internship due to wagelessness or under-compensation in the context of the political economy of the competitive labor market. One college-educated white woman named Jane working in an unpaid internship at the confluence of security and development recognized that:

I wouldn't have been able to do this without my parents. When I finished college and got this [unpaid] internship, they told me, 'whatever you need, we'll make sure that you are OK,' you know. They get that this is one step I need to take before I can get promoted to a paid position. That's just how it is nowadays, in college we're doing [unpaid] internships and even after we get out, we're doing those internships… and I really don't know how some other people do two or three unpaid internships without help.

To different degrees, paid interns like David and unpaid interns like Jane rely on family subsidies to survive in D.C., and this family support is key to professional success and advancement. By noting that an unpaid internship is "one step I need to take before I can get promoted to a paid position," Jane being subsidized is not simply about basic survival, but about enabling her to create opportunities for accumulating the experience, skills and contacts necessary to advance.

Perhaps because of the material constraints that internships impose, interns from lower-income and working class backgrounds were few and far between in general, and nil within the security domain. The few interns with working or lower-middle class backgrounds that I met were not working in the security domain, but rather in areas like educational policy. While parents in higher class brackets are able to subsidize their childrens' unpaid internships, and thus offset the hardship of wagelessness in a commodified world, those without these advantages are

left excluded from the elite domain of think tank internships. On the other hand, interns from higher class backgrounds are able to access the professional benefits of an unpaid or underpaid internship, and thus gain access to important skills, experiences and social networks which are necessary to boost them into higher-status paid employment.

The exclusion of lower-income people of less structurally advantaged class backgrounds from the think tank domain reproduces dominant social relations of hierarchy and marginalization between classes. These class-based exclusions ensure that think tank networks remain populated by those from higher class backgrounds, creating funnels for higher class individuals into the professional system of think tanks. Inequalities in access to think tanks and their networks reproduce a stratified class system, whereby those of already higher class backgrounds are included as legitimate professional class aspirants, while those of lower class backgrounds are largely deprived of even the possibility of entering the professional social world of think tanks. In this way, think tanks operate as a classed regime of gatekeeping and socialization that actively works to reproduce prevailing hegemonic class relations.
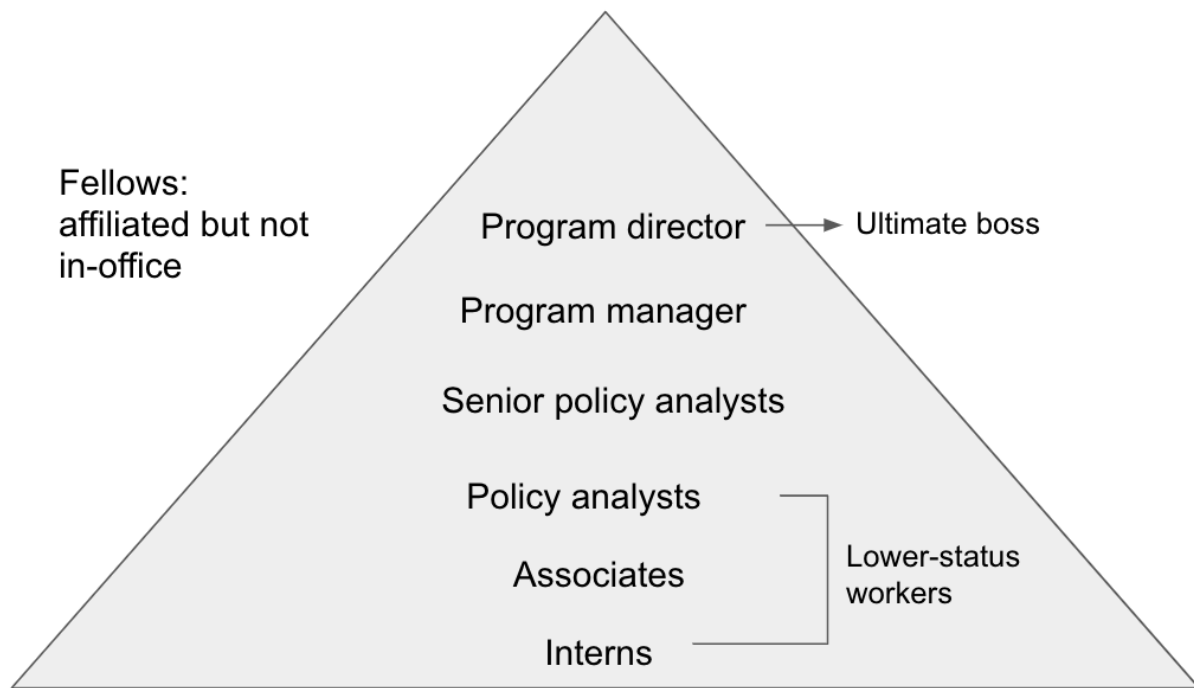
On Method

Figure 8: The Program Hierarchy

While epistemic labor includes all grades of employment from the intern to the program director, in this chapter I focus in particular on those positioned in the lowest strata of the employment hierarchy: interns and other lower-status early-career professionals, including associates and non-senior policy analysts.[36] There are two reasons for this. First, because I was myself an intern at a prominent think tank for a substantial duration of ethnographic fieldwork. I participated in the same menial epistemic labor as other low-status workers from 9am-5pm every weekday. Because I inhabited this position, I began to understand the experience of working in such a subordinated position, and also got to know many interns and other lower-status workers within and outside my organization. I had contact with middle- and higher-status members (e.g.

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[36] While associates and policy analysts are lower-status workers, they are invested with the unidirectional power to command the labor of interns (along with all other higher-status workers above them). However, as "proximate bosses" to interns, both senior and non-senior policy analysts do the vast majority of task distribution to interns. While policy analysts are formally ranked above associates, they do not issue orders to the latter.

proximate and ultimate bosses), but most of my labor and free time during the workday was spent working alongside lower-positioned employees. Further, outside of work, I spent a significant amount of time with these employees. This social and labor proximity enabled a deeper understanding of the cultural logics and practical experience of epistemic work, and also revealed some of the fraught professional tensions and frustrations that lower-status workers must negotiate in the workplace. Sometimes, my own experience as an intern revealed painful but illuminating dimensions of the professional world – for example, my experience being oriented to by others as an object of competition for scarce and desirable jobs.

Second, the experience of those at the lower rungs of the organizational hierarchy reveals the mechanics of the entire hierarchical system of epistemic labor and knowledge production, which depends deeply on the labor of these workers. Interns' experience of the hierarchically differentiated labor process is a lens onto the institutional organization and social effects of employment hierarchies that are central to the creation of policy knowledge. By centering lower-status workers' perspectives, we can see not only how managerial command is enacted and responded to, but how hierarchies at work are negotiated and reproduced in practice.

2. Hierarchies of Labor

I had gone repeatedly to the same think tanks, with the aim of trying to discern the cultural logics and social practices of threat construction. Over time, I began to notice that, across formal and informal settings, my interlocutors were less interested in discussing security threats than in the everyday politics and pressures of professional life. My interlocutors' eyes would glaze over as I asked about theories and trends in terrorism and extremism studies, something that they were not fully enthused to talk about during their free time at a coffee shop or a house party barbeque. However, in trusted company, they were much more interested in

discussing the concerns, realities and hierarchies of professional life: who was getting promoted, and did they deserve it? How does Jeremy like his new job? How did Ann move across organizations laterally and move up the ranks so quickly? Isn't Hank's work overrated, isn't he just following the trend? Why did James get passed over? Where did Anna get her master's degree? One day, in the midst of my own internship, I visited a friend and interlocutor named David for lunch at a bar near the "Hill." A football game blared on the multiple televisions as we found our way to a small table with uncomfortable high chairs. We both sat and perused the appetizer menu. I winced at the twelve dollar equivalent to mozzarella sticks, and decided to stick with the always underwhelming ginger beer, hoping that not eating would not be counted as a norm violation in a bar setting.

As we shuffled our menus around, I tried to gather the courage to drive forward into an interview, but before pressing record I detoured into small talk. Given that we had both just been working, I asked, "How has work been?" He shook his head and raised his eyebrows in an expression of exhaustion, and began a low-volumed protest about the way he perceived his manager to be implicitly undermining him at work among colleagues. David recounted that his manager had not only been assigning him tasks that were not relevant to his professional interests, but also nonchalantly giving critical feedback which should have been expressed earlier in the project process. "He waits til we're halfway through [the project] to mention that the graphs aren't working for him, then I have to go back to the data viz [data visualization] people all over again." David leans in across the small circular high-table, lowering his voice even more. "*You saw the graphs two weeks ago*, but *now* is the time you want to tell me this? In front of my team? What? And you know, and this is what I'm talking about, the problem is always with the project items that *I'm* working on." But, he explained, he would never bring this up with his

manager, because his "domineering" manager would not be happy with complaints. Not only

this, but also because his manager possessed important connections that David needed to lean on.

During this meeting, I came to realize the importance of *hierarchies of labor* in shaping the

everyday experiences of lower-status epistemic workers. The operation of these hierarchies

illustrates the uneven social consequences of ranking and professional distinction for different

grades of worker, and how the unequal distribution of professional capital is enacted, maintained

and replicated in the labor process itself.37 It is not just formal and informal transactional

networking that potentiate professional accumulation (Chapter 1), but also the very forms and

practices of division/differentiation of labor that constitute workplace hierarchies.

As noted in the Introduction, the basic self-stated aim of think tanks is to produce and

circulate forms of knowledge relevant to both public discourse and government policymaking.

Through their function as interface zones of transactional networking and professional

accumulation (Chapter 1), think tanks generate and utilize the social and symbolic capital

necessary to make public interventions. These interventions, however, are dependent upon the

collective labor of an immense number of interns and other lower-status workers, who are

embedded in a complex organizational hierarchy composed of many different ranks of worker.

The complex organizational and professional hierarchies create divisions of labor that shape

everyday experiences of epistemic workers performing this labor.

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37 Here, it is important to note that there were forms of devalued labor designated as manual or non-intellectual. On the floor that I worked on, and on every floor of any building I ever visited, there were multiple janitorial staff, one of whom I came to know well through small talk and the occasional work-gripe (albeit only while walking together in the enclosed stairwells which linked floors). While not obviously categorizable as janitorial staff in normative semiotic terms (i.e. casual dress, did not use rolling cart), staff. One day, one of the staff became frustrated with one of the senior fellows for leaving food debris and other trash on the common tables, which then burdened staff with clean-up duties. During the confrontation, the senior fellow, who was an expert commentator on American political systems and voting behavior, apologized meekly. Shows that there are exclusions and divisions operating between forms of labor designated as intellectual (even of the menial kind performed by interns), and those designated as manual.

But the division of labor is not a natural or immutable form of epistemic production (Durkheim 1893). The stratification of workers into pyramidal hierarchies, invested with different degrees of power over their labor and the labor of others, does not come ready-made. Rather, the hierarchical division of labor – and the concrete relationships of managerial command and negotiation that constitute it – must be created, negotiated and enacted in everyday practices of social labor. Dividing, differentiating and allocating labor in ways that create and enforce hierarchies between different layers of worker is part and parcel of organization of labor in think tanks. The experience of labor is also distinct for workers with different positionalities, and they must navigate their conditions in ways specific to their organizational location in the hierarchy.

In this section, I argue that the workplace labor hierarchy shapes the division and experience of the labor process for interns – the lowest-status rank of epistemic worker. First, I explain how workplace hierarchies are socially, culturally and spatially constituted, and how they shape the division and experience of the labor process. Second, I explain the social operation of hierarchical delegation – the managerial practice whereby higher-status supervisors assign mandatory tasks to interns. I explore how relations of delegation express and reinscribe hierarchies in the division of labor. I then go on to argue that hierarchical delegation deprives interns of control over the living labor process.

Workplace Hierarchies and the Division of Labor

In the social world of DC think tanks, distinctions of rank and title are deeply meaningful, and they shape the experience of subjectivity, sociality and labor. When I first arrived for field research, I understood that there would be complex hierarchies of social rank embodied in culturally specific titles conveying legitimacy and authority. I had come from

academia, where graded distinctions of rank and right shaped the distribution of power in ways that are deeply naturalized. Upon arrival in D.C., I was not prepared for the uncanny feeling of being intimately familiar with the logic, if not the culturally specific content, of existing institutionalized labor and professional hierarchies. Intern, associate, analyst, senior analyst, research fellow, senior fellow, resident scholar, program manager, CEO – these were relatively foreign terms to me, but they were nevertheless descriptions of the granular, vertically organized hierarchies that I was used to. Throughout fieldwork, including in my role as an intern, I came to understand concretely not only how these terms symbolically signified status in ways that differentiated groups of people, but how they shaped social relations and labor processes of these differentiated groups. As I entered the think tank world as a worker and ethnographer, I came to know the complex institutional hierarchies which shaped everyday life and labor through firsthand experience. As an intern, I had a lived sense of being at the bottom of the hierarchy, and of the forms of labor that this position demanded. Throughout this section, I will draw on first-hand experience along with experiences of interlocutors' to explore how workplace hierarchies shape relations and experiences of work.

Symbolic practices of hierarchical titling are central to organizing and maintaining the division of labor and relations of production, whereby interns and other lower-status workers are assigned the most menial forms of labor.[38] Within think tanks, symbolic designation of position in the hierarchy organizes workers into distinct, status-differentiated roles, which map onto differentially valued forms of labor. Titles, such as "manager," "analyst" and "intern,"

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[38] I focus on workplace relations within what I call *programs*, which are formally independent entities, confederated with a number of other programs within the same think tank, which may or may not have overlapping interests and projects (e.g. the Global Security Program, Education Policy Program, and so on). While relations between programs, and program-specific and institution-wide executive leadership, are uneven and complex, this section focuses for the purposes of analytical clarity on intraprogram hierarchies of dominance and subordination across think tanks.

symbolically and institutionally codify differentiation which shapes not only the perception of status, but also the distribution and valuation of labor. In other words, symbolic designations of position in the workplace class hierarchy are mutually constitutive with the material division of labor – one's position in the hierarchy has a direct relationship to the kind, and experience, of labor that one performs.

Those in subordinate positions are tasked with culturally degraded forms of menial work. For instance, those titled *interns* – of which I was one – are clearly positioned at the bottom of the hierarchical social order, and are tasked with the most menial forms of epistemic work: making copies, data migration, news article cataloguing, printing materials for others, transcriptions of events, low-level event planning, website maintenance, spreadsheet data collection, facilitation of events (including greetings, introductions, showing attendees where the bathroom is, and so on), among other tasks that are notoriously routinized, requiring little to no creative engagement. Those in more elevated positions, such as associates and analysts, are tasked with more autonomous and symbolically elevated forms of intellectual labor activity, such as writing, editing, networking and communications with high-level fellows. They might, for example, write and edit policy analysis reports, and conduct some of the research for them.

In-office employees above the rank of intern, such as associates and analysts, are tasked with managing and supervising interns. Those at the highest level of the hierarchy – research scholars, fellows, managers, presidents, among others – direct both mid-level and low-level employees (but have most interaction with mid-level employees, who report directly to them). These higher-grade employees have the most institutional power and independence, and exert more control over their work than either low- or mid-level employees; for instance, they often directly guide the strategic and intellectual direction of projects, while interns and other lower-

status workers were predominantly relegated to implementing their directives. Program managers are responsible for maintaining donor relationships, coordinating with organizational leadership, providing structural direction for projects and, like fellows, producing higher-level intellectual publication products. Fellows are expected to perform the highest valued labor culminating in articles, books and other status-enhancing intellectual products.

During their tenure, interns usually work on multiple projects, which predate and often outlast their employment contract. Liam, a white male intern who always wore an impeccable navy suit (which was unusual for interns unless working an event), explained over coffee the multitude of projects that he had been involved in as a twice-intern. He had co-organized multiple panel events and a speaker series; organized a number of data spreadsheets; and was currently working on a project at the intersection of security, microfinance and banking which involved translating dense literature reviews into accessible summaries. He had also done his fair share, he told me, of even less glamorous menial labor – printing copies, organizing binders of material, sorting articles, mailing information and materials to fellows, and so on. He would like to eventually participate in the development and design of policy projects, but for now was learning a lot from doing low-level work.[39] While happy with his current work, he looks forward to contributing to policy research development either at his current organization or another allied one. In my own case as an intern, I also worked on projects which predated and outlasted my contract. During my stay, I was not engaged in shaping the conceptual design, theoretical analysis, or decisions about what counts as relevant empirical content for any of the projects on which I worked.

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[39] I did not record this unstructured interview, so this is paraphrasing from fieldnotes.

Moving up the employment hierarchy entails less menial labor and more institutionally codified powers of delegation, management and more or less attenuated forms of control over one's labor. In other words, there is an inverse relationship between the amount of menial labor expected and performed, and one's employment rank. While there was minimal blending of work tasks between interns and higher-ranked workers such as associates, higher-status workers like senior policy analysts reliably did not perform the kinds of duties that interns did. In my experience as an intern and participant-observer in other think tank sites, the *segregation of labor* was strictly – if informally – enforced. This segregation is illustrated by the fact that higher-level employees would very rarely engage in the kinds of labor associated with lower-status workers; and the larger the gap in authority between two people, the less likely it was for the higher person to engage in the kinds of menial labor associated with the lower one. As one mid-level employee reflected to me over a bowl of peanuts at a bar, "managers don't run mics" – and neither do they print copies for others or upload articles onto program websites.

Ascriptions of employment rank hierarchically categorize workers, directly shaping the social relations of production governing the labor process. Ranking constitutes and reaffirms a power relation of command inscribed into formations of epistemic labor. Within think tanks, one of the foundational hierarchizing social relations is the symbolic rank differentiation between bosses and subordinates, which has deep implications for the division and experience of labor. Employment rank shapes not only who does what kind of labor, but who is invested with the power of managerial command. Bosses are granted institutionally legitimated managerial authority and command over lower-status workers, who are subject to direction and regulation by their superiors; correlatively, interns and other lower-status workers have little to no potential for contribution to the direction of projects, and have absolutely no power over those positioned

above them in the hierarchy.[40] While I was not privy to many "team" conversations in think tanks other than my own, interlocutors described similar hierarchical relationships at their own workplaces. I asked one interlocutor, Salvador, the only Latino lower-level security analyst in this study, if he had much say in determining his work tasks or contributing to the direction of projects. His characteristically blunt response told a story I had heard before from interns: "No. Maybe if I tried [to give input], but generally no, not really. It makes sense though, I'm only going to be there for three months so my manager is not going to give me any say over the projects."[41]

The boss-subordinate relation is not a binarized one; rather, the hierarchy is structured as a complex pyramid, with various levels and dynamics of authority. Higher-ranked associates and analysts direct the activities of lower-status workers like interns, but both categories of worker are beholden to their shared program managers. Denise, a white woman undergraduate intern for the summer studying political science and international affairs, described the chain of authority to which she was subordinated. During one office visit, I asked her how she came to work on the specific tasks she was conducting, and she explained to me that she hardly saw her program manager, who was in-office one or two days a week. "He's really busy," she explained, "I think he is writing a book right now and there's a lot of fundraising going on, so I don't really see him that much." She received orders from a mid-level employee over email. "[Name of mid-level employee] usually lets me know what he needs help with, and I'll work on that." Further, those categorized as fellows have more ambiguous relationships to program employees – they occupy

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[40] Needless to say, low-status workers also cannot refuse work, which was literally – and for understandable reasons – unthinkable for my interlocutors.

[41] This does not mean that bosses exert total control or surveillance over their employees, but rather that bosses are invested with the power to determine the *kind* of epistemic work being performed by their subordinates, and additionally have ultimate prerogative over the content and form of program projects.

more elevated positions than any program employee (e.g. interns and associates), but they do not generally have direct authority over program employees and everyday project management. [We will explore how these relations of command operate in ethnographic detail in the next section.]

Social hierarchies and divisions of labor are socially expressed through spatially segregating workers according to status. This unequal sociospatial differentiation in the workplace worked to shape and reinforce institutionally ascribed position in the labor hierarchy. Interns, for example, were usually segregated together in clusters in areas that usually were not directly adjacent to program colleagues, spatially marking them as interns. In most (but not all) of my visits to think tanks across the political spectrum, interns were spatially segregated from higher-grade employees, many of whom (but not all) had their own private offices. During one visit to a lesser known think tank in a thick, austere building in downtown D.C., I sat in a waiting room in a large puffy chair, legs uneasily dangling off the overlarge seat with both arms outstretched on the armrests, in anxious anticipation. After some time waiting, a human resources representative came to greet me and give me a carefully circumscribed tour. As we traveled down small, extremely clean glass-adorned corridors that exuded clarity, competence and transparency, I noticed a number of small conference rooms filled with employees whose higher-status was signified by their age and more formal dress. As the corridor opened out onto a large, grey office space, I noticed a congregation of interns – younger, grouped together in individual cubicles, seated at their desk diligently working. While during other visits I was allowed to interact with employees, on this particularly busy day I was only allowed a passive walk-through. Nevertheless, the intra-floor segregation was palpable even if witnessed in passing.

This sociospatial segregation resonated with my own experience as an intern, where I was positioned in a cubicle among other interns in the same or similar programs, separated from higher-grade employees, who either had their own private offices or were located together in another area. These sociospatial practices of segregation served as spatial forms of differentiation, which divide and group workers based on employment rank. The spatial condensation of interns marked and constructed spaces of denigrated menial labor – places where "grunt work" was conducted by the most subordinate class of epistemic workers. Correlatively, higher-status workers were placed either together or in individual private offices, sociospatially marking more valued forms of work and kinds of worker. These sociospatial differentiations reflect American cultural understandings of space and status, whereby spatial segregation functions as a modality of dividing the higher from the lower status (Taylor 2019).

3. Hierarchical Delegation, Dividing Labor and Deprivation of Control

As we have seen, organizational social hierarchies described above shape the division of epistemic labor, and the differentiated burdens with which it corresponds. These hierarchical divisions are necessary for the development and culmination of think tank products, from events to publications, which heavily depend on lower-status workers' menial digital and social labor. As such, these hierarchies are formative elements in the process of crafting, maintaining and executing projects. The smooth functioning of epistemic production would not be possible were it not for the hierarchies constitutive of the division of labor. While interns and other lower-status workers are generally excluded from the intellectual design of projects, they are at the foundation of the labor that sustains them.

In this section, we will explore how hierarchies of authority and command described in the previous section shape the division and experience of the labor process through the lens of

hierarchical delegation. We will examine the everyday practices of dividing and differentiating labor tasks – of bringing the division of labor into being – and how this deprives interns of control over the labor process. The relationship between hierarchical differentiation in status between different ranks of employee, and divisions in the allocation and distribution of labor in the workplace, is not inert. Rather, the division of labor must be negotiated, enacted and replicated in everyday social practices of labor (and labor management in particular). This section suggests that divisions of labor are produced through practices of *hierarchical delegation*, defined as the managerial practice of assigning, supervising, and enforcing the completion of duties. Delegation is the beating heart of the think tank program's social relations of epistemic production.

I suggest that delegational practices are key social mechanisms that perform the differentiating work of dividing and ascribing duties to different employees. The institutionalized workplace hierarchy invests managers with the authority of delegation, and subordinates lower-status workers – and interns in particular – to the commands of managers. Although different grades of manager have different levels of authority, delegation exclusively moves in a one-way direction from managers to subordinates; as such, they are relations of command. Relations of delegation are thus relations of power, by which some people are made to do things by other people (Latour 1984).

Delegational practices determine the kind of menial digital and social labor that lower-status workers daily perform in the workplace, and profoundly shape the everyday negotiations and experiences of work. While epistemic production is dependent on social cooperation, those with institutionalized powers of managerial authority fundamentally dictate the content, form and duration of labor tasks (along with the direction of entire projects).

Managerial practices of delegation not only shape division of labor, but also reaffirm social hierarchies of authority between superiors and subordinates; the allocation of tasks based on differentiated and unequal worker positionalities reinscribes the very structure of hierarchical differentiation in the workplace. In other words, the practical movement of delegation itself reinforces the social hierarchy between different employees, and reiteratively establishes the dominance of superiors vis-à-vis their subordinates.

This section concludes by exploring how delegational practices deprive lower-status workers of control over the labor process. Because it is a relation of command grounded in the institutionalized power wielded by managers, delegation operates to coercively assign labor in a way that deprives workers of freedom to choose the form, content or duration of labor. Given the hierarchical social structure and dependence of low-status workers on access to employment, submission to delegation is ineluctable. Deprivation is not experienced universally, however, but rather is contingent upon the circumstances and attitudes of workers.

Hierarchical Delegation as a Managerial Practice of Dividing the Labor Process

We begin by examining the relationship between hierarchical practices of delegation, and the organization and experience of menial digital and social labor. As a relation of command, delegation was never spectacular, but always quotidian and built into the routine practices of everyday work life. There were no salutes involved, no coercive discipline, but rather (usually) polite, and unremarkable, requests offered by superiors to subordinates: "Can you print these?," "Can you greet attendees at the south entrance?," "Can you make sure attendees don't get lost?" Despite their mundane nature, these requests embody the power to make subordinates move or stay put on a specific set of tasks, and they deeply shape the everyday lifeworlds of labor; indeed, managerial delegation is the primary axis around which the subordinate's actual workday

is structured. As a subordinate, one is assigned tasks by one's superior, and those tasks fill up the workday – delegation composes the very fabric and rhythm of the lower-status laborer's workday.

Much of interns' description of delegation was neutral, and often perplexed about my interest in the minutiae of the "everyday life of work." When I asked about how tasks are distributed, one undergraduate female intern, puzzled at the question given that I myself was an intern with intimate knowledge of the process, explained: "your supervisor will come and give you things to do, based on project needs. I just worked with [fellow intern] on cataloguing cybersecurity attacks. I don't know really how the projects are developed, or what goes into early stages, a lot of us come in and there are already projects going on. I haven't asked about that… that's probably what [program manager] does in consultation with senior analysts."

Johnson, an affable white male in his mid-twenties who cycled to work everyday rain or shine, described his workday: "Well, I do the same thing you do, just write down what you do [laughs]… I come in at 8:45, check my work email, respond to email, build a plan for the day. If it's the beginning of the week, I'll check the week schedule and, and make sure that I've done any prep that I need to do for any events. After these morning checks, I start working on whatever I need to do." *Getting to work on whatever he needs to do* is determined by the relation of delegation, which shapes the elemental rhythm of Johnson's workday. While the delegated serial task system shaped the routine process of labor, Johnson also described a manager-led dynamism or malleability to the workday – if his manager needed something quick-edited, or needed copies or transcripts of something, Johnson would fulfill this task. "I have my list, but things can change. Sometimes that makes things… sometimes difficult because switching to something new means I have less time for my original [task] list." But, he quickly noted, perhaps

sensing the potential for his previous comment to sound like a critique of his organization, "that's also part of what makes interning interesting. You have to have a growth mindset and get used to things being really fast-paced. It's taken some getting used to, but I like it." Furthermore, for Johnson, delegation was often digitally communicated through email by a supervisor, which obviated the necessity of continual face-to-face interactions. Johnson showed me an example of a task list on his desktop computer, and explained that most were tasks that he received and communicated about over email. Here, Johnson's manager mediated delegation digitally, thereby enacting and reinforcing the division of labor without the potential impediment of face-to-face interaction.

While delegation is unidirectional, it is enacted and negotiated through complex scaffolded relationships of power and command between different ranks of employee in the workplace. As we have noted, there are multiple ranks of knowledge worker within think tanks with differentiated degrees of authority: low-status interns, middle-status associates and analysts, higher-status senior analysts, and highest-status program managers (along with fellows, who are symbolically superior but do not have authority over "program staff," often because fellows are not in-office even if they are "resident"). Highest-status supervisors like program managers gave direction to mid-status subordinates such as associates and analysts, and generally used them to delegate tasks for projects to interns. Program managers thus have very little direct contact with interns, either at the informal social level or when it came to task delegation. This structure of delegation meant that mid-level employees, including associates and analysts, often directly supervised interns, and in this capacity directly assign tasks to them. As the most subordinate class of workers, interns are subject to the most direct and non-negotiable forms of delegational authority, regardless of the political or ideological composition of the think tank. However, mid-

level employees often developed more horizontal relationships between themselves which did not involve delegation. I worked with associates, analysts and senior analysts, and in my observation, among themselves, they would collectively deliberate about the division of labor rather than engaging in delegation – a practice reserved for those lowest in the structure of authority. Further, while program managers delegated tasks to associates and analysts, they also often worked cooperatively alongside analysts to conceptualize, develop and finalize projects, such as policy analysis reports.

During fieldwork, I engaged in what one of my co-intern interlocutors jokingly labeled "ride-alongs," where I visited interlocutors in my own think tank (across the office or on another floor), and in other think tanks, in order to explore practices of delegation. During these visits, I would often do my own work, so as to not disturb interns and others who always had extremely busy schedules. When intern interlocutors and I would pause for a short chat, or take lunch, I would ask what their workday had been like and/or what duties they had coming up, and they would respond unexcitedly with a list of tasks that they had been delegated and a brief description: catalogue and organize a dataset, photocopy something, print and send articles to a senior fellow, work on a spreadsheet, run through reams of articles to find specific information, find topically specific articles for a literature review for a policy paper, create an index, copyedit a boss's article, create a bibliography for a boss's article, and so on. After repeated questions about "the workday," Adam, a white mid-20s avid indoor rock-climber and dedicated free-time athlete with whom I had good rapport, began to exasperatedly banter with me. In responses to question about work, he dryly, serially catalogued his tasks: "I get to work, check my email, usually there's something from my supervisor, and I'll start on the thing with the highest priority level." He swung his swivel chair toward his desktop computer and pointed at the screen, where

there was a Google Doc up with some text: "By the end of the day I should have a blurb ready for [event coming up]." Over the course of fieldwork, I began to notice that these kinds of descriptions of menial daily work tasks sounded very similar among interns, illustrating the generalized properties of menial digital and social labor.

While I had significant personal experience of delegated menial digital labor, other interns also provided key windows into how the division of labor was concretely enacted and experienced. I worked closely with an interlocutor named Jason, a white male intern in his mid-twenties with wavy brown hair. Jason was often noticeably quiet in moments when others might talk, but had a mischievous, subtle, hilarious sense of humor. He was the kind of person that took a while to get to know. Once I got to know him, he was very open when it came to joking, but remained at an arms-length distance when it came to personal issues, keeping his personal and family history to himself. I would walk past Jason in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, and in the evening, and every moment he would be hard at work, earnestly typing away, only pausing to switch tabs on the computer to send work emails. I was impressed at how long he could work on a spreadsheet without stopping except for bathroom breaks. As office mates, he implicitly knew when I snuck away to steal time away from work, but I never observed him do the same. Because he was adept at data management, organization and cataloguing – a fellow intern once joked that he could make a fortune running a "home organizing company" – he was often assigned to tasks involving spreadsheets and data collection and analysis. At around 4pm, on one slow workday where I noticed him working on the same spreadsheet all day, I rolled my chair into his cubicle. I asked him what he was working on, and he told me that his supervisor had asked him to put together a database on extremist groups in the United States. He triangulated and cross-checked data from reports of university programs like the Program on Extremism at

George Washington University; news articles from the national and local press; and reports, databases and press releases from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security. He used these different sources to catalogue all potential and actual extremist groups in a spreadsheet, with categories for location, ideology and kind of extremism, extent of activity, and past actions, along with links to substantiating evidence. Turning back toward his computer, he rapidly scrolled through the spreadsheet tabs to show me all of the categories, and then clicked one of the links to show me how he substantiated each of the items. He explained that this spreadsheet data would then be used by his supervisor to write a policy report, which he added he himself would not be involved in writing. Knowing that he was on a deadline and attempting to avoid the possibility of being observed not working, he resumed working. I sat in his cubicle for a few more seconds, watching as he moved back and forth between tabs on the computer, quickly inputting data over and over again. As I reluctantly prepared to roll my way back into my own cubicle, I asked him how he felt doing daily rounds of constant delegated work. "My eyes are burning and my ass fell asleep a long time ago" he joked with a sly, knowing smile, signaling our shared bodily experience as interns. I laughed a few decibels above normative office volume, and reflected internally on how delegation divides labor in ways that concretely affect the temporal and bodily experience of work.

Resonating with Jason's experience, during other visits I noticed that interns had very little interaction with their immediate or ultimate managers aside from delegation. As one interlocutor, Lucas, relayed to me: "Sometimes you sit for hours without even seeing your supervisor! [laughs]" While there is a constant busy circulation of employees of all sorts throughout the intern spaces, Lucas points out that higher-level employees only rarely interact with interns outside of the delegation relation. Whether at my own think tank or visiting others,

the observation of non-digital in-person delegation was remarkably similar: a manager would walk over, ask how a project or task was going and/or ask about progress, and then delegate a specific task (usually a new task or modulation of a present task). During one visit to a center-right think tank with a more formal dress code and interactional culture, I sat in an adjacent cubicle to John, a nondescript, punctual and uneffusive white man in his mid-twenties. Getting access to this particular think tank was excruciatingly difficult, requiring multiple rounds of emails, eventuating in a tight thirty minute visit. I was poised for data collection. Unsurprisingly, I sat alone for most of this window in an adjacent cubicle, struggling to find things to say to John, who was busy at work in his own cubicle. What made things worse is that cubicles are designed to obstruct vision, so that I could not see John without standing up or sitting up and poking my head up. What I did notice was that John's supervisor came over and asked John to make print out copies of articles to be read by the program manager for an upcoming panel event, and also assigned him the task of re-doing a spreadsheet because the data had somehow been corrupted or misplaced. John immediately got to work on copying, and then on the spreadsheet. This small window of time said much about the time and process of labor for interns and other lower-status workers: the only interaction I witnessed was one of delegation between John and his manager, the tasks of which were immediately initiated by John. John, and other workers like him, are relatively immobilized in their cubicles, waiting to receive tasks, and then expected to immediately get to work on those tasks; supervisors, on the other hand, invested with the power of delegation, possess the freedom to assign tasks and interrupt the work flow of the intern when they see fit.

The disconnection between intern and various grades of supervisor also resonated with my own experience as an intern, where I spent most of my days hunched over a desktop

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computer working, interacting with my supervisor usually only if I was being assigned or asked about a task. The vast majority of the tasks delegated to and performed by me were forms of menial digital or social labor. While a senior analyst whom I will call Ben was my main *de jure* manager, depending on the project, I might be approached by a variety of higher-status employees who functioned as *de facto* managers. The program associate, a notch above me but not quite a mid-level employee, would sometimes ask for "help" on certain tasks, which was a euphemistic way to communicate orders; in contrast, the analysts, positioned higher than both interns and associates, would clearly and politely articulate commands which were to be obeyed. Regardless of who happened to be the agent conveying task assignments, however, requests were communicated swiftly, conveying only information necessary for completion of the specific task. Upon being delegated a new task, I would put them onto a queue of tasks to be completed on my desktop computers, and proceed accordingly. Much of intern worklife is menial digital labor, but some of it was *menial social labor*, which did not involve direct forms of epistemic production, but rather the logistical and affective sustenance of those interface spaces of transactional sociality and accumulation that we discussed in Chapter 1. By *social labor*, I mean work that is both social-emotional in nature (e.g. greeting) and involves facilitating and enabling specific forms of sociality (e.g. elite participation in the conference). It is to the delegation of menial social labor that we now turn.

I complemented direct observation of my own and others' permanent workplace sites with participant observation within external sites, such as panel and conference events, where employees across multiple think tanks coalesced and interacted. What I observed in these spaces is that the hierarchical structure of authority and delegation was not just contained within the physical space of the office, but also materialized within internal and external events hosted by

think tanks. These events revealed the mobile and transposable social form of hierarchical relations of delegation, which traversed the inside and outside of the office. Conference events, for instance, were key sites for understanding acts and relations of delegation, and the experience of lower-status workers subject to these commands.

Halfway through fieldwork, it was finally time for the much-awaited mega-conference event "International Security in a Multipolar World," hosted by multiple think tanks, including the one for which I was an intern. It was my first time attending a big annual conference event, which drew together a variety of professionals from think tanks, academia, the military, finance and banking, the business world, and the private intelligence and security sector, among others. I had livestreamed the conference in my pre-fieldwork phase, and anticipated it since arriving in D.C. because of its prominence and importance to practitioners – and now I had a chance to be there in the flesh. I had imagined that attendance would allow me to snowball sample and gain access to a diverse crowd of possible interlocutors, so when the day finally came and I was asked to attend and help out, I was both nervous and excited. On the day of the conference, I dressed "up" in a suit and tie, a few notches above my everyday business casual at work. We were not explicitly advised to wear formal dress, but it was nevertheless culturally expected that all employee representatives of the think tanks hosting the event would be dressed formally. The conference was held at a large, stately but elegant event center right in the heart of downtown D.C., on a street lined with beautiful trees, bike lanes and spacious sidewalks. On any given day, one might find groupings of younger professionals happily on their way to lunch, or lone male suited bureaucrats confidently striding to their next destination while discussing serious matters over the phone. I arrived early and found my way to the main entrance for the conference, where

elevators opened out onto a series of tables with various smiling think tank staff signing

attendees in, handing out name badges, and shuffling around while busy on phones and tablets.

I greeted my supervisors Danny and Andrea and asked what I might be able to do, hoping

that I would be able to observe and interact with people in the main entrance area and central

event space. Danny, who always greeted people with direct and earnest eye contact, handed me

my name tag and asked me if I would go with Dimitri, a newly arrived undergraduate intern from

the West Coast, to make sure that attendees did not get lost in finding their way to the event. The

directions to the event were unclear, and Danny needed someone to stand at a crossroads area to

direct attendees toward the elevators rather than heading in the wrong direction away from the

conference. "Of course," I responded, wondering hesitantly if this would put me in a better or

worse position to interact with attendees. Another staff member took Dimitri and I down a floor

and across a long hallway with immaculately clean shiny floors to where we would be stationed,

and then returned to the main event area.

Dimitri and I stood at the juncture between one long hallway and another, name tag

lanyards clearly visible and standing at attention with our hands clasped behind our backs,

directing people in the right direction to the event. Attendees approached consistently, but not in

large droves. One middle-aged male professional in a suit approached, noticed our name tags,

and without introducing himself or stopping asked '[pointing] is it this way to the conference?'

'Yes, sir, right down the hall and you'll use the elevator on the left to go up one floor,' I

responded, as he nodded while whisking past me down the hallway.[42] I sensed that we would be

here for a while, so I loosened my suffocatingly taut suit collar, relieving some of the physical

and psychic tension associated with masculine business dress. As we chauffeured people along

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[42] Reconstructed.

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the correct hallway – exactly none of them stopping to chat – I made small talk with Dimitri about how he came to work in D.C. He was an undergraduate doing summer internship rounds, and was doing research at his home university utilizing social science, especially sociology and anthropology, to inform counter-insurgency policies. I could tell through body language oriented away from me and lack of eye contact or reciprocal questions that he was already unenthused at speaking with me, and did not seem happy that he was stuck with me – a fellow intern peon – a floor below the main event, socially excluded from both his fellow intern cohort and any access to pre-event socializing.

After a few minutes, I told Dimitri about my research project and asked if I might be able to ask him a few questions while we waited. I sensed that he was especially not interested in interacting with me in a research capacity – he was, after all, here to work. Nevertheless, he blankly assented to speaking with me about his professional life. I asked about what it has been like working with his think tank and how he felt being here at this major conference. He gave a standardized response – that interning had been good so far, that he was excited to be here, and that he wished we could go up one floor to the main event. After a short discussion, Dimitri implicitly conveyed to me that the conversation had clearly expired, and we both resumed full concentration on standing at attention in service of conference-goers. This resumption meant standing silently for the next twenty minutes, with maximal intern professional demeanor (standing straight, both anticipating and receptive to attendees), and taking turns ushering event attendees into the right hallway: 'Right down that way, sir, til the end of the hall and then take the elevator on your left,' 'Right down that way, and take the elevator on the left right upstairs.' If we were not offering directions, we were standing and waiting. In all, we stood for the entire

duration of the pre-event social time to make sure that both early and late-going attendees knew where to go.

In addition to performing the predominant majority of digital menial labor, interns also conduct the menial social labor necessary for the smooth operation of large and complex events like conferences, including logistical services of greeting and directing attendees. Due to their subordinate social status, interns are delegated menial social labor that positions them as doing the least desirable, most routinized forms of work separated from the main event space – including not only waiting and greeting, but organizing name tags and coordinating other people's schedules, among other things. By allocating the most devalued, spatially separated tasks to interns, delegational practices enact and reinscribe relations of hierarchical differentiation that make up the division of labor.

Hierarchical Delegation and Depriving Control over the Labor Process

Delegation restricts the capacity of lower-status workers to control the content of their labor. During the expansion of industrial capitalism, Marx (1971 [1874]) noted how capitalist production processes exerted control over the labor process of wage workers in what he called a process of "real subsumption." While not capitalist in nature, epistemic production is the central imperative of organizational life in think tanks, and its divisions of labor exert tight – if also paradoxically quasiautonomizing – forms of control over the labor process, especially for lower-status workers.[43] In this section, we explore how institutionally legitimated managerial control

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[43] The productivity and work discipline of lower-status workers is enforced by control over the process of labor, which is enacted in everyday work life through delegation. Interns and other lower-status workers would be immediately disposed of if they were not working (and producing) to expectation. Tellingly, I did not witness or hear of any interns or lower-status workers being "let go" before their temporary contracts were up. Unpaid internships are extremely competitive, and those who are selected for internships are workers culled from an enormous pool of qualified applicants. Those who are awarded them are not only highly competent, industrious and productive, but also very motivated to excel and rise up the employment ladder.

over the labor process, articulated through social practices of delegation, deny subordinate

workers' control over their own work.44

　　We have seen that delegation is a mode of command expressed within a hierarchical

employment regime. It is fundamentally a managerial instrument of *enaction* – making

subordinate workers move – backstopped by the workplace hierarchy. Interns and other lower-

status workers do not enter the social factory of the workplace stripped *a priori* of substantive

autonomy, independence and control. Rather, it is the relational structure and routine practice of

delegation – as a practice of institutionalized power – that deprives lower-status workers over

control of the labor process. As a relational power of command grounded in managerial

authority, delegation makes things, people and processes move. Articles are uploaded and

advertised for public visibility, disseminating accessible forms of policy ideas and enhancing the

public reach of the organization; data is collected, organized, tabulated and then transformed into

graphic visuals for elite and public consumption; and high-capital event attendees are guided in

their journey to the bathroom through the labyrinthine hallways of think tanks and conference

centers. Through intervening on the labor process, managerial delegation disturbs, redirects,

modifies, adds, cancels, and molds what workers work on, how, when, where and why they do

so. This division of labor, shaped by and reinforcing hierarchies of rank among differentially

positioned workers, directly shapes the degree and nature of control over the labor process. The

concrete social effects of delegation are realized in compulsory modifications to the rhythm,

temporality and composition of the workday – delegational practices, in other words, have the

unilinear power to transform the minutiae of the workday by adding, subtracting, extending and

modifying basic work tasks.

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44 As we shall see in the next chapter, these expectations of productivity and forms of labor discipline are also
enforced through forms of professional subjectivation and self-cultivation aimed at career advancement.

Because of their subordinate position, interns are delegated menial labor over which they have little to no control. In some cases, interns I spoke with described their relative autonomy in terms of how to go about finishing a task; but most described being directed to tasks for which both method and content were already prescribed. Interns might, that is, sometimes be able to exercise a degree of autonomy over how to complete tasks, but not over what tasks to perform and their responsibility to complete those tasks in the first place. Interns have little choice over *which* tasks or projects for which they are made responsible, and in what order they are to be performed.

The alienating experience of deprivation was often expressed by interns in subtle, nearly imperceptible ways that were easy to miss. Because of their subordinated position, interns did not openly express disaffection toward the way that managerial delegation disrupted their flow of labor. I worked with Kevin, a young white male intern fresh out of an undergraduate degree, who often seemed a bit nervous and self-conscious. Kevin, like other interns, was very motivated to succeed in DC, and was a very diligent worker. One day, I happened to be taking lunch on a table adjacent to Kevin's cubicle; although separated by an open wall that obstructed mutual visibility, I sat only a couple feet from him. I overheard his supervisor approach him in-person and curtly ask if he could manually re-do a corrupted dataset, a task often asked of interns for spreadsheets with multiple users handling large amounts data input and migration. "Manually" here meant typing out verbatim each piece of data for all the categories for a particular input item, rather than moving datasets by copy-and-pasting them. Having done manual data migration many times, it is difficult to overstate the drudgery of manually typing names, dates, ideological labels, cities, states, GPS coordinates, substantiating links, among many other categories, for up to one thousand entries (per project). Paradoxically, the tedious nature of this digital manual

labor did not mean it could be conducted carelessly; on the contrary, it required many hours of intense concentration, given that the data needed to be recorded exactly. 'Yes, definitely, I'll get right on it,' Kevin politely responded to his supervisor's request.[45] Hearing this and knowing what kind of labor it would entail, I was struck with a pang of despair for Kevin. After his supervisor walked away, Kevin, not knowing anyone could hear him – it was lunch, and many of his office mates in the nearest cubicles were gone – he let out a string of curse words under his breath followed by a deep sigh. I was surprised, as I had not heard anyone curse in the workplace, let alone in a way that implicitly targeted the regime of delegation and workload. Further, Kevin was one of the last people that I would expect to curse. I gingerly inched my chair around the corner so that I could see him, and asked sympathetically, 'All good?' Startled, he abruptly and formally replied, 'Yes, I'm fine,' before turning back to his work, sending a signal that he did not want to discuss the incident. While Kevin did not want to discuss the incident with me at least due to the taboo on casting superiors in a bad light, his frustration with how hierarchical relations of delegation forced tedious labor onto his already busy plate was tangible.

In another context, over huge reuben sandwiches in a sleek chain deli filled with younger professionals, I met Malcolm to talk about work as an intern. Malcolm was a newer intern like me, and was working at a prominent centrist think tank. A composed, well-dressed and professional white man in his early 20s educated at a prominent university in California, Malcolm exuded a practiced demeanor, tone and vocabulary which conveyed a professionalism beyond his experience. We discussed our mutual projects for a few minutes – I had been working on cataloguing news and scholarly articles related to radicalization, and he had been working on changes in counter-terrorism policy and practice from Obama to Trump.

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[45] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

I asked Malcolm how much "say" he had in shaping the final outcome of the project on which he was working, to which he nonchalantly responded, "not too much," seeming neither to mind nor to want to continue this line of conversation. I tentatively pressed on, knowing that I was navigating socially treacherous waters – lower-status workers do not like to be put in positions where anything they say might be perceived as negative against their employer, especially on the record. Hesitantly, I asked "Do you, like… choose what you want to do for the day? Can you decide what you want to do?" Malcolm paused, perhaps crafting in his mind his next sentences as the recorder sat prone in the middle of the table. "I don't really decide what I want to do, because I'm not managing projects. Alex [his supervisor] has me working on a few projects, and the work is straightforward… I like the things that I'm doing." In a rather cryptic fashion, Malcolm illustrates that he has little autonomy or control over the content of his labor because he is in a subordinated class position ("…because I'm not managing projects"). He also explains that the work is not negotiable or voluntary; rather, for interns, *straightforward* work entails compulsory tasks to be completed in a timely manner.

All the interns that I interacted with experienced a lack of control over their labor, regardless of the political orientation of the employer or perceived excellence of the intern. Andrew, a handsome, dark-haired intern in his later 20s with a calm, almost sage-like demeanor – now promoted and working at a conservative think tank in DC – was a paragon intern. With a mixture of scorn, admiration and envy, I would often hear off-the-record murmurings about Andrew's excellence (we will explore these emotions in more depth in Chapter 3). He could be counted on to wear the same stylish black shoes every day, and sometimes we joked about the advantages and disadvantages of wearing the same pairs of things on too many days of the week in DC. When we met for lunch one hellishly muggy day at one of the many delicious streetside

hot-dog stands in downtown D.C., he told me that the main program manager will consult with program analysts to develop a project, create a task system and corresponding schedule for completion, and then divide, organize and distribute tasks to their subordinates.

Sometimes Andrew's superiors gave him adequate time to perform a task, but occasionally did not, especially under tight deadlines; regardless, Andrew, along with all other interns I knew, had to perform the work delegated to them without substantive question and with little to no input. Often, as Andrew explained, these tasks did not require any creative input at all: "Usually, they'll [manager] email or just walk over, ask you to do something, and you work on that, that's what we're there for. I'm not sure if that's what you're asking? If you don't know how to do it, then you can ask and maybe your supervisor will give you some guidance, but a lot of times it's the interns in the same program who are working together to figure things out, and we lean a lot on each other. But in terms of the work… usually the things I'm doing are pretty simple, and there's not a lot of 'thinking' [uses fingers to signify quotation marks] involved. Even article sweeping [gathering articles for policy research] isn't that difficult, but it takes a lot of time. You know. But… not a lot of high level analysis and writing… analysts and program directors are doing more of that."[46]

Further, given the mandated division of labor and compulsory structure of delegation, interns and other lower status workers exercised little to no control over the temporality of labor. As we have noted, intern life is shaped by the time of the regular workday, from 9am-5pm, where interns' compulsory tasks fill the workday time. But I also found that the micro-temporalities of the intern labor process *within the workday* are directly regulated and subject to

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[46] On the record, Andrew did not seem frustrated or alienated by this lack of control. This is consistent with my engagement with Andrew at work: he was one of the more overworked interns, but always maintained a stoic, thoughtful demeanor and what my interlocutors often called a "workhorse" habitus. Like Jim, on record Andrew wisely avoided expressing any grievances about subordinated status at work.

change by their various supervisors. This is structured by the irregular temporality of delegation: while delegational practices often scaffold and serialize tasks in a predictable way, managers can also override labor tasks of subordinates in a way that disrupts the "queue" and flow of work for other required tasks. For example, managers often delegate new tasks, which must be added to the queue of existing tasks. On multiple occasions I noticed managers assign new tasks and designate them as more pressing than older tasks, which immediately transformed the experience and cycle of labor by disrupting the existing pattern of work for interns. In the local language of work, this was a normalized feature of the "dynamic work streams" characteristic of "fast-paced work environments." During my own internship and while visiting interlocutors, managerial override was common, especially as mid-level supervisors received requests for new immediate tasks during the workday by the top program manager, which were then down-delegated to subordinate staff. Thomas told me: "Usually, I don't get overloaded, but sometimes I'll have someone[47] give me directions to do something, and another supervisor will ask me to work on something else. This is fine when things are slow, sometimes it gets really slow and I want something to work on, but other times I'll have to juggle five different things, and you can't say 'Ben just gave me this so I can't work on that,' you know? [laughs] That wouldn't work!" This delegational override resulting in task compression and "overload" proved to be an obstacle for many interns, which they navigated through the cultivation of flexibility and openness to immediate changes in work (see Chapter 3).

The temporal experience of deprivation of control over labor could be seen most vividly outside of the workplace, where interns were usually more open with me. Though formally marked as non-work space, some interns chose to bring their work tasks home with them. They

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[47] Interns would often use the word "someone" to avoid designating or identifying their various supervisors.

emphasized to me, however, that they were not explicitly commanded or coerced to do so. Vance, an amiable, positive-thinking intern working at an allied center-left think tank, said nevertheless that taking work home was an "expectation," especially when it came to important projects. "It just happens that way," he explained, "Nobody says take it home with you, but when you've been given things that you have to get done by the end of Friday next week, those things just have to get done." Here, delegation takes on an informal mode of command, where interns are not explicitly told, but implicitly expected, to take work home and unofficially lengthen the workday. The result is that interns like Vance experience a lack of control over the temporality of labor, extending work not only into the non-work home space, but also extending the time of work outside of the formal work week. One evening I arrived with Vance at his apartment after the workday for an interview. He tossed his computer satchel on his coffee table with an audible thud, indicating his frustration, and then sat down on his couch, laying his head all the way back so that he was looking up toward the ceiling. Sensing his exhaustion, I asked how everything had been going recently. "I'm tired," he said, looking wearier than usual. "I don't mind working from home, I actually like working from home, I just, sometimes I get tired of not knowing if I'll be taking work home," he continued, pointing down at his computer with a drained look of dismay and resignation. "I just want to know what time is my time, so I can say to myself 'I'm going to spend this many hours on this, but then I'm done,' you know." I nodded in quiet recognition.

Notes on Lower-Status Workers as Symbolically Devalued Professional Subjects

   "Man, you are not grabbing coffee and cleaning up toilets, but you know where you stand," said Darrell, an African-American intern in a center-left think tank. "You are right there at the bottom," Darrell continued, pointing downward with his index finger to signify lowliness. This was one of only a handful of times when an intern, fully aware of being on-record, gave

explicitly negative commentary on an organization for which they were then still working.[48]

Darrell makes an important point: interns are not performing the *most* degraded custodial labor, but you are nevertheless "right there at the bottom," in his mind perhaps too closely symbolically associated with custodial labor for comfort. He strategically avoids direct criticism of the institutional hierarchies that shape intern experience, instead translating them into a first-person register – "*you* know where *you* stand." Lower-status epistemic workers are marked as subordinate subjects not only through a hierarchical division of labor, but also through the application of devalued symbolic meanings and associations within the cultural system of the organization. Workplace divisions/hierarchies of labor are *coproduced* with differentiating forms of symbolic (de)valuation, which enact and reproduce the subordinate positionality of lower-status workers in the labor hierarchy. As Darrell clearly attests, interns and their labor are symbolically devalued as less credible, praiseworthy, and prestigious.

Lower-status work was universally and tacitly known as degraded and devalued, but this was often disavowed. In the liberal meritocratic cultures of D.C., professional subjects often craft a self-image that abjures – or at least avoids – any explicit commitment to hierarchies of prestige, status and power. This disavowal is deeply contradictory with the lived social experience of hierarchy and the significant pressures on individuals to seek necessarily competitive forms of professional enhancement and accumulation discussed in Chapter 1.

Often, the denigration and degradation of lower-status labor is tacitly expressed in the social relations of the workplace. I had just gotten my third cup of complimentary coffee, necessary for surviving the afternoon of menial data management. I sat down in my grey cubicle

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[48] Darrell's frankness can be partly explained by the fact that I was not in his field or his office, so there were multiple degrees of separation between us. He also did not plan to continue in the think tank space, and was planning on going to an MA program in political science, and perhaps felt less dependent on his organization than someone with career aspirations in think tank.

to resume work, eyes heaving to read the nearly microscopic spreadsheet numbers on the old

lower-resolution desktop screen. Alexa, the graduate-educated woman who sat across from me,

complained to a female colleague in the next cubicle about doing menial spreadsheet work. This

sort of work, she noted, was outside the scope of her job duties, which I knew from previous

conversations normally included higher-level writing and editing. After a few minutes, she

exclaimed, "I didn't go to U Penn to prepare myself to do this!," referring to menial labor of

moving spreadsheet data. I registered the comment, privately reflecting on the naturalization of

hierarchy, and more specifically the dominant common-sense in professional worlds that a

degree is a proprietary credential that entitles one to social elevation above "less qualified"

others. After a long pause, sensing that her comment was accidentally audible and potentially

offensive to the self-esteem of myself and another intern, she peered over our cubicle barriers

and addressed us directly. "Hey… I didn't mean to offend you, I didn't mean it like that. I really

respect interns. I was an intern for a long time. And you're doing a *PhD*, right? [laughs timidly]."

The implicit codes mobilized a putatively shared understanding of and commitment to

naturalized educational hierarchies to repair an assumed harm to my understanding of my own

status. Alexa attempted to redeem her denigration of interns through positioning myself above

her and perhaps others ("you're doing a *PhD*, right?"). I understood and accepted her offer of the

apology. "No worries, no worries at all!" I responded, smiling. This revelation of disavowed

commitments to status hierarchy and entitlement illustrates a social version of what Freud called

"slips of the tongue," through which the truth of unconscious wishes and impulses are exposed.

We need not make any claims about the unconscious in order to see that Alexa's slip revealed

the social realities of – and psychological investments in – hierarchy, which are so often

disavowed by the upwardly mobile liberal professional class.[49]

While rarely avowed, the subordinate status of interns was, in Gramsci's terms,

naturalized "common-sense." Being understood as a degraded form of labor was not, however, to

be considered abject and worthless in the workplace – interns were not Frantz Fanon's (1963)

racialized colonial subject fundamentally excluded from white European society, nor Engels'

propertyless and immiserated English working class; neither were they subjects of Goffman's

(1963) "spoiled identity," which designates persons permanently disqualified from social

acceptance. Lower-status epistemic workers are both contractually and socially recognized as

full employees and members of the organizations for which they work. They are not subject, for

instance, to public stigma and abuse inside or outside the workplace. While interns are often

systemically excluded from access to certain benefits associated with higher status, they are not

excluded from membership in the organizational community. Their structural position is better

characterized in terms of *unequal inclusion* or what Adom Getachew (2019) calls "unequal

integration" – persons and labor situated at the bottom of a hierarchical social system in which

they are constitutively, and unequally, incorporated and relied upon. As we have seen above,

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[49] It is relatively easy to see inequalities in the division of labor on the basis of employment rank, but extraordinarily difficult to discern the symbolic devaluation of lower-status workers at the level of publicly enunciated discourse or practice. Like the logic of postraciality (Goldberg 2015), the liberal "post-hierarchical" institutional discourse of think tanks formally disavow overt relations of hierarchy and unequal power. Indeed, my fieldnotes are filled with institutional mantras like "collaboration" "team-building" "teamwork," which were routinely chanted in speech and writing, which attested to the non-hierarchical vision. Indeed, individuals from all employment grades and across organizations were usually very careful to publicly and in interviews *avoid* recognizing the subordinated position of interns and other lower-status workers. I never heard anyone insult someone for being in a lower work strata, and people were generally respectful in social interaction regardless of rank. At the level of face-to-face interaction and public discourse, the professional world of think tanks was self-consciously "post-hierarchical."

only interns did certain forms of degraded labor largely implicitly refused by higher-status workers.

Despite lower-status workers' (unequal) inclusion, there are multiple ways that symbolic designations of inferiority are expressed and codified in the workplace. First, formal legal ascriptions. As noted above, titles convey and reinforce complex hierarchies of authority and prestige in think tanks. In my own case, I was contractually titled as an intern, which formally positioned me at the bottom of the hierarchy of labor. During hiring, I was given an introductory packet, including an introduction to the organization and a list of varied job duties, and a contract, in which I was explicitly categorized as an intern. Through being categorized as an intern, I entered into a social world of uneven relationships with both peers and superiors, with its corresponding hierarchies of command and responsibility.

Second, symbolic ascriptions of inferiority are mediated through informal everyday interactions. For instance, one's subordinate status is mediated through everyday practices of introduction: bosses are introduced and implicitly named as such, and while one is introduced as "working with" them, the boss' superior title and managerial power of delegation clearly conveys the intern's relationally subordinated position. When meeting new employees around the office, I was introduced specifically as an intern; and when I introduced myself to new people, I learned to refer to myself as an intern. During visits to other think tanks, I was introduced to employees in a way that always expressed and reaffirmed their superordinate and subordinate titles. These explicit and implicit positionings were key to understanding how hierarchical distinctions – and labor forms – are organized and made meaningful in the workplace. Informal everyday practices, such as being named, were formative to integrating

interns into the hierarchy of labor, thereby transforming them into professionally devalued subjects.

Third, echoing the previous chapter, the labor of interns does not *invite* collaboration or engagement – interns are not proprietors of much professional capital or power, and thus are not objects of collaborative social desire for other professionals. The absence of higher-status individuals' sustained engagement with interns (outside of relations of delegation) is a mark of interns' inferiority. Although most people were apathetically cordial to me, as a result of my subordinated status, I noticed that I was not an object of much interest or esteem. I was not consulted for projects on the basis of any potential "expertise," and I was consistently delegated tasks which required little creative thinking (both of which as it turns out were preferable for me, but which were frustrating for some of my interlocutors, as we will see next chapter). Indeed, the intern subject position immediately conveys non-expertise, and I quickly began to understand my position as a devalued professional subject.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the forms and relations of epistemic labor, with special focus on the institutionalized social hierarchies of the workplace and how they shape the division and experience of labor. Social differentiations of rank, and the unequal distribution of duties – the division of labor – are not static, but rather actively created and reinforced through practices of delegation. These powers of delegation are shaped by the workplace social hierarchy, where managers are afforded the capacity to assign and enforce tasks for their subordinates. Delegation has direct impacts on the degree to which intern exercise control over their own labor, often resulting in the deprivation of intern's control over the labor process. In the next chapter, we will

explore how interns and other lower-status workers experience, negotiate and respond to the

pressures of epistemic work amidst professional hierarchies.

Chapter 3: Becoming Professional Subjects

1. Introduction

I entered the DC security sphere assuming that all ranks of professional, from intern to senior fellow and program director, would be intensely committed to the intellectual importance and social value of research on terrorism and extremism. To my surprise, I found that many think tank interns, and even some associates and policy analysts, interpreted the import of the field of terrorism and extremism very differently from the way I had imagined. I asked Harrison, a two-time intern nearing his mid-twenties, about how he came to work on issues of terrorism and extremism at the think tank for which he worked. "I thought, it's a big topic [terrorism] right now,[50] that's something I should look into," he responded, "so I started learning more about it and getting pretty good at it, when my senior year was coming to an end, I knew I had to get an internship somewhere, so I thought, this is something that I've been doing, it could work out." I asked, "So you weren't necessarily super interested in it to begin with?," trying to figure out his relationship to the subject of terrorism *per se.* "Not really, if you're asking if it was my passion, no, but it's something that I felt I could make a career out of" he responded casually. Many interns offered similar contingent narratives of how they came to work on security issues in the think tank world: they had taken a class and found that the most interesting units were on terrorism or extremism; they had not taken any classes but worked closely with a professor who recommended they look for internships in certain topics; and/or they had worked with a professor who had a direct organizational connection to a think tank, among others. Many of them were still searching for their professional and intellectual interest foci, and utilized think tank internships as means to enter the professional domain and explore different intellectual and

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[50] Harrison is referring to 2016-2017, when terrorism was a hot-button issue both domestically and internationally, as the United States and its regional allies waged a war of extermination against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

professional opportunities. Rather than a purely ideological sphere of commitment, interns understood the national security sphere within think tanks – including the high-profile subfields of terrorism and extremism – as a professional domain whose social and institutional constellations possessed valuable material and symbolic resources from which they could draw in order to develop their careers. Interns thought of think tank programs specializing in terrorism, for example, as providing a suitable setting for developing professional interests and networks, and as effective stepping-stones to further career opportunities (whether that be inside or outside security space). Higher-status interlocutors, on the other hand, were much more ideologically and professionally committed to their specialized domain of expertise in terrorism and extremism, as they had built their careers upon claims and commitments to its importance (as we will see in Chapter 4). In contrast, the narratives of lower-status interlocutors, which foreground the personal-professional rather than ideological value of think tank security programs, motivate this chapter's focus on how workers negotiate and experience structures of professionality and the pressures of creating, securing and reinforcing career prospects and viability.

Taking an organizational view, in the last chapter, we saw how think tank workplaces are organized hierarchically, and how these hierarchies shape the division and experience of labor. In this chapter, we turn toward a more experiential analysis of how lower-status workers navigate their positions in the hierarchical professional worlds of DC. Lower-status workers are enmeshed in workplace labor hierarchies situated in a system governed by competitive imperatives of professional accumulation. Within this regime, success is predicated on the process of instilling and enacting normative forms of professional subjectivity. This chapter explores how lower-status workers, including especially interns, work to shape themselves into professional subjects (with varying degrees of success); and how they negotiate, perceive and

respond to the pressures of competition, hierarchy, and the threat of failure. This chapter explores four dimensions of lower-status workers' experience negotiating and responding to the pressures of their world: processes of becoming disciplined and flexible subjects, competitive emotions, the paradox of advancement, and the naturalization of hierarchy and competition.

First, I explore how lower-status workers fashion their professional subjectivity in order to enhance their competitive value, including the combined processes of becoming *disciplined, opaque, flexible* and *self-advocating* subjects. Sometimes, my interlocutors articulated an explicit philosophy of competitive self-enhancement; at other times, they did not explain their actions in these terms but remained committed to them in practice. Amidst these pressures of conformity, second, I describe how individuals experience and negotiate what I call *competitive emotions*, which are shaped by comparative logics of self-assessment. I situate these emotions within relations of competitive accumulation between workers and the continual struggle for recognition, prestige and notoriety. Third, I explore what I call the *paradox of advancement*, whereby the very regimes of professional capital on which lower-status workers rely for the possibility of career success often frustrate them, both at the level of lived experience and actual professional advancement – all while enabling a minority of them. Following from this, fourth, I describe how interns and other lower-status workers negotiate and naturalize various aspects of the social hierarchy and competitive struggle for career-enhancing advantage, including both success and failure.

This chapter attends to the lived experiences of lower-status epistemic workers to show that, rather than smooth spaces of knowledge production, think tank epistemic labor regimes are laboratories for class formation and reproduction. As aspiring professionals, interns and other lower-status workers occupy seemingly contradictory positions: predominantly from professional

class family backgrounds, and at the same time situated at the lowest rungs of the professional labor hierarchy. To make sense of this paradox, these subordinated epistemic workers come to imagine their internhood as one temporary step in a linear trajectory of upward mobility – a necessary rite of passage. But these rites of passage are only forms of 'passage' for a small number of workers – most will not move up the professional chain. This extremely narrow 'passage' enforces and stimulates competitive forms of accumulation, as interns and other lower-status workers learn that advancement is predicated on standing out from the crowd as a valuable professional subject. In this way, think tank internships and processes of epistemic labor can be understood as modes of *creating* professional subjectivities attuned to the demands of competitive self-enhancement and accumulation.

Throughout this chapter, I attend to how processes of professional subject formation fragment and atomize lower-status professional class aspirants. In specific, I attend to how professional systems of competitive accumulation often work to divide epistemic workers from one another, resulting from the entanglement of individualization and competition. This approach follows Cedric Robinson's (1983) claim in *Black Marxism* that colonial capitalism does not homogenize, but rather differentiates, the workers upon which it depends. I add to this an experience-near emphasis on how, by shaping the internal and relational experiences of workers, processes of differentiation are actively negotiated and even utilized by workers amidst competition. Immersion in competitive professional systems leads epistemic workers to individualize themselves and compete with one another, undermining the affective and social possibilities for solidarity and empathy. By offering an analysis of how individuals come to inhabit competitive professional individuality, this chapter aims to both foreground the

fragmentary effects of accumulation and denaturalize the individualizing tendencies of professionality.

Competition, Opacity and Method

Like last chapter, this chapter focuses mostly on lower-status workers, including especially interns, but also relatively higher status associates and analysts.[51] Associates are always positioned closer to lower- than to middle-status labor – they are usually younger, less experienced and do comparatively less higher-level research and writing labor than their superiors. Many associates in this study advanced on to higher-paid positions after a few years, or some form of professional education (predominantly law, business or other form of graduate school). Associates are ranked above interns, but still conduct little higher-level intellectual work (e.g. strategizing about program projects, researching and writing policy reports). In terms of positionality and status, analysts were a more mixed bag. They were definitely ranked above interns and associates in that they often did higher-level work of research and writing, and worked closer with program management, but were still not granted the full independence and badge of expertise that their superiors in management, along with fellows, were afforded. Perception of their social status, however, was organizationally specific; a majority of analysts were granted privileges associated with their status such as policy research and autonomous writing, while a significant minority of analysts sometimes felt that they were treated as a lower kind of worker than they felt was justified.

For a long time – sometimes for entire the duration of fieldwork – those positioned similarly in the organizational hierarchy as myself would hesitate to speak openly with me about their professional experiences. This reluctance became extraordinarily difficult when it came to

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[51] Think tanks have different labels for these distinct forms of employment status, but in the interests of clarity I have chosen to use two terms.

ethnographic inquiry into how interns experienced, reflected on and related to their everyday life at work. While frustrating at the time, upon reflection I realized that these methodological difficulties were key to understanding the how lower-status workers express and regulate professional subjectivity in social interaction – especially with outsider researchers equipped with recorders and field notebooks. I came to see that my interlocutors' reticence to discuss their experience with me was itself a performance and mediation of professional subjectivity, revealing how socialization both organizes and imposes constraints on self-expression.

While interlocutors' reluctance to share – what I call the disposition of *opacity* – is a methodological problem for the ethnographer, it is a professional survival strategy for interns. I was cautioned over and again that information travels notoriously fast in Washington D.C., and seemingly benign comments can be transformed into perceived hostility along the gossip circuit, leading to potential reputational spoliation. Lower-status workers, and precariously positioned interns in particular, had to strictly control what they said to all with whom they interacted. This was especially the case with someone like myself whose sole function was to listen, watch, and record everything that I could. Shared organizational position as an intern did not negate the fact that I was a researcher collecting interview and observational data that might prove professionally disadvantageous to lower-status workers in the future. Open, on-the-record discussion of the experience of organizational hierarchies, for example, would possibly jeopardize lower-status workers' immediate and future employment. Whenever these workers did converse with me openly, they almost always strategically managed the flow of information in ways that were conservative and carefully crafted, ensuring for maximal self-protection.

As an ethnographer, I thus had difficulty with eliciting content from lower-status workers' experiences concerning work, including relationships with colleagues. However, the

more trust I built with lower-status interlocutors – through multiple conversations, meetings, informal hanging out, and in particular expressing some of my own personal experiences – the more they opened up to me about not only their professional lives, but their personal and family lives. The interlocutors with whom I built relations of mutual trust shared their experience with the world of professional work more openly, including negative and ambivalent experiences. Those who did not know me well consistently avoided saying anything that might be perceived as negative about their organization or any of the members, especially including their immediate superiors; with these interlocutors, my ability to elicit their experiences negotiating professional identity or relating to work was severely attenuated.

Qua my role as an intern practitioner, interlocutors encouraged the development of my own practice of opacity. "Your colleagues are your colleagues," advised one intern cryptically on the importance of opacity, "but the more you put yourself in a position where people know things about you that might not look good, the more vulnerable you are." Another intern recommended that, whether inside or outside the office, I should only offer the "PG version" of my life to people with whom I had not established fundamental trust. An older senior policy analyst in his early 30s, who told me that he had been "burned" a few times by people that he had trusted, advised me more bluntly: "Don't trust anyone." The advice I received always encouraged me to be civil and cordial in a professional sense, but restrained and controlled in the output of information that might be potentially damaging to my imagined reputation. "So don't get too close to people," the older senior policy analyst concluded before qualifying himself, "Don't be cold, but just be aware of what you're saying to people and how they're gonna take it."

When I asked John, a mid-career white man who was a gracious host of home barbeques and one of my close interlocutors, about opacity, he told me that people keep their negative feelings "close to home," advising me to do the same. John was by day a suited and restrained mid-career professional, but by night – in the comfort of his own home – a happily loud and energetic orator, almost always discoursing about something as he shuffled around in his house slippers. He explained the strategic logic of "keeping things close to home" in D.C.:

Things get around *fast* here, and you don't want to have things getting back to the people. You complain to someone about your boss, this might be an absolutely justified complaint, but they tell someone else – maybe that's not even on purpose, not purposely against you – sooner or later it's gonna get back to your boss! Maybe not right away, but maybe later you're up for a job and this guy hears from his friend [your previous boss] that you said something, or maybe he [your previous boss] doesn't give you a recommendation or even says you're not good for the job. Not because you're not actually professionally competent, but because you left him sour so he's not gonna recommend you to his buddy. And then you don't have a job!, and you don't even know why… so it's always better to keep quiet, keep things to yourself. Always stay on people's good sides no matter how much they upset you or even affect your professional development. Getting promoted or moving laterally is gonna be a lot harder if you've gained a bad reputation or if people making decisions don't like you.

I also often heard murmurings about individuals being too "gossipy," and was advised to not "make a name for yourself" as a gossiper.

Opacity is not only an expression of professional self-control aimed at self-preservation. It is also a response to interlocutors' perception of me as a competitive threat, given that I was both an intern and ethnographer at once. For many lower-status workers, my role and motives were blurry – was I a peer-competitor intern struggling to ascend the ranks, or a relatively benign researcher who was not interested in think tank employment? In some cases, close interlocutors told me that some people thought I was both, using my dual role as intern and researcher as a way to creatively penetrate think tanks in order to build networks and secure employment. In one account, I was using my PhD status to disingenuously frame myself as a "researcher" in order to unfairly game the system. Some potential interlocutors actively refused to speak with me, or

were passively disengaged and suspicious. These perceptions of me as a potential competitor and object of suspicion were shaped by competitive accumulation – I was evaded precisely because I was seen to be a competitive threat to their advancement. Given their subordination, disposability and unequal inclusion, lower-status workers in particular must constantly be on the lookout for being taken advantage of or outflanked by peer-competitors.

For the first few months of fieldwork I was stunned at the stonewalling, evasion, ignoring, and occasional hostility that I was met with by other interns. My own imaginary of some sense of affinity due to shared class position was at odds with others' perception of me as a (potentially conniving) competitor for scarce resources, attention and employment. Initially confused, I confided in one close interlocutor Benjamin, explaining that I did not understand why interns seemed suspicious of me – after all, I was an intern myself. Usually gentle with my naivete, he quickly snapped back didactically: "They aren't going to be friendly to you. What did you think they were going to think about you?" he said rhetorically, "You look *exactly* like someone on their way up." I shook my head and told him that I was very clear with all of my interlocutors that I am just a researcher with no interest in permanent employment in think tanks. "They don't know that!" Benjamin responded emphatically but this time more sympathetically. Realizing that I needed a longer explanation to understand the perspectives of suspicious interlocutors, Benjamin continued:

They know that you're doing a PhD at UCLA, somehow got an internship, and now you're going around doing interviews. They are going to hear 'researcher' and think 'the people who get promoted,' not someone who isn't interested in working in think tanks. And think about it: they're trying to *get those positions*! Why would they want to do an interview with you and tell you all these details? They don't know what your motive is and they're not going to expose themselves and share anything with you that might put them at a disadvantage.

Benjamin taught me that lower-status workers experienced me as a competitive antagonist rather than a curious researcher. To them, it looked as if I was using "research" as a

cover, especially given that many academics are successful in the think tank world given the high value of their educational capital.

2. Fashioning Professional Subjectivity

Success-enhancing professionality is not an intrinsic, natural attribute of all who enter the think tank world; rather, it must be actively constructed, enacted and maintained. In this section, I describe different ways that lower-status workers' create, enact, and negotiate their professional subjectivities, by which I mean the social practices through which individuals become professional workers adapted not only to the demands of the workplace, but also the social demands of normatively valorized professionality. I call this process *fashioning professional subjectivity*, which is a necessary – but not sufficient – condition of possibility for professional success and advancement. I suggest that workers negotiate and enact self-making processes of professional subject formation in four ways: discipline, self-advocacy, opacity, and flexibility. Workers utilize these four modalities to craft their professional identities, in ways that are calibrated to convey their viability and value as professional persons and vital contributors to the workplace. Workers' enactment of these four cultural forms is crucial for socially presenting and distinguishing oneself as a competent, committed and valuable employee deserving of recognition and advancement.

Like the imperative of accumulation, becoming a normative professional is a compulsory feature of social life in D.C. think tanks. Indeed, practices of professional self-fashioning – like those of transactional accumulation (Chapter 1) – are necessary for even basic professional survival. Professional subjectivation was acutely important especially for precariously positioned interns and lower-status workers, for whom it was key to ascension up the organizational and social class hierarchy. This imperative to become a professional subject is part of the larger U.S.

competitive neoliberal cultural economy of "selling yourself," where individuals must reimagine themselves under a logic of self-investment, converting the self into a form of human capital whose value must be continually maximized (Gershon 2014; Brown 2015). As Natasha Lennard (2018: 3) writes, being "viewed as human capital reduces people to no more than potential earners, with their value determined by their imagined future capacity to make money based on their current skillset and social position" – a way of "reconfiguring life" into "market terms."

Cultural and organizational regimes of control shaped the lives of my interlocutors as professional workers. Think tank aspirants such as interns engage in various forms of self-cultivation in response to the imperative to become desirable professional persons capable of rising up the social hierarchy. Like Foucault's (1975) prisoner in *Discipline and Punish*, lower-status workers engage in surveilling, supervising, and managing their own subjectivities. While not subjected to the prison's spatialized panopticism, workers' subjectivities are shaped by forms of control whereby individuals must engage in reputational management sensitive and responsive to the evaluative views and attitudes of others, including both peers and superiors.

While not overtly disciplinary, the imperative of self-formation is underpinned by subtle forms of coercion built into the organizational culture and political economy of think tank labor markets. In *Capital: Volume One*, Marx asserts that with the advent of industrial forms of exploitation in the factory system, the "overseer's book of penalties replaces the slave-driver's lash" (550).[52] While the lash is not a preferred form of disciplinary subjection in the think tank, we can interpret the threat and reality of disposability, which haunts the intern's experiential

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[52] If interpreted literally, of course, this claim is false. Enslavement involved calculated forms of bodily control of work to maximize exploitation at the point of production and reproduction on the plantation (Baptist 2014). And rather than being banished from the class relation, routinized violence and coercion did and continues to occur under regimes of 'free' wage-labor in capitalist economies.

horizon, as a form of penalty (more on this later).53 For Marx (1874), largely disposable and

exchangeable interns, who fluidly enter and exit tank labor markets flush with unemployed and

underemployed workers ready to replace the employed, constitute a "reserve army of the

unemployed." Oversaturated labor markets, steep entry requirements, and severe competition,

among other reasons, make the fabrication, performance and protection of professional

subjectivity critically important for lower-status workers. Accessing the possibilities of success is

directly predicated on these self-directed forms of professional cultivation – the loss of

employment, and thus symbolic status, hangs tenuously in the balance. Foregrounding interns'

experiences and struggles with adapting to and internalizing the competitive mandates of

professionality allows us to draw connections to workers in other professional fields, such as

precaritized academics (Gupta 2019).

Because the ownership structure of professional capital is individualized – the individual

is the locus of accumulation – so the valued forms of professional subjectivity are also

individualized. Discipline, self-advocacy, opacity, and flexibility are mediated at the scale of the

self, and each refers to the development of attributes of selfhood. Workers' capacity and degree

of professional enhancement depends on the extent to which they can craft themselves

individually.

Fashioning Professional Subjectivity: Becoming Disciplined Professional Subjects

To navigate extremely competitive hierarchical workplaces where success depends on

being perceived as sharp, competent and committed, lower-status workers must learn to enact

and inhabit *self-discipline*. The viability of one's career depends on it. Max, an intern who had

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53 This is not to say that there are no forms of violent coercion in think tanks, or within the world of cognitive and creative labor more generally. While I have decided to omit discussion of it in this dissertation at the request of the affected interlocutor, I heard at least one narrative of sexual harassment during fieldwork.

recently been notified of receiving a policy analyst position, explained forms of self-discipline

needed to navigate the professional world:

There are just some things that you have to do, some really basic things. You have to be on time always, and do diligent work. It might not seem like people are monitoring your work, but people know, they know who is doing diligent high-quality work and who isn't. It's a little different as an intern [e.g. because one is performing menial digital labor], but the principle is still there. Never complain… and never gossip… One more thing, just do the work in the way that your supervisor wants you to do it. When you're at this level [of intern], that's just how it is, you have to jump through the hoops. And when you're promoted – it's similar with that – you write grants, you get the funding, and then you have more leeway… but you need to get the funding first, you have to jump through those hoops to get there.

To explain the norms that interns are subject to, Max invokes the metaphor of "jumping

through hoops," which summoned to my mind during the interview an image of a middle-

schooler in a physical education class or a circus tiger having to perform routinized actions in

order to achieve a standardized goal. Max's advice is common knowledge among lower-status

workers: one must jump through certain professionally defined hoops in order to advance – these

are "just things that you have to do." Importantly, the object of Max's guidance is the

professional self in the workplace, and thus his advice is action-oriented: the things that you just

have to do include being on time, doing diligent work, never complaining or gossiping, and

doing your work *in the way that your supervisor wants it*. Furthermore, jumping through hoops

is status-specific. Max notes that "when you're at this level" – the level of the intern – you have

to jump through hoops. Status ascension, such as a promotion, means the transformation of the

kind of hoops that one must jump through.

Max's advice is not abstract or disarticulated from a culturally specific organizational

milieu; rather, it is oriented to the specificity of the intern as a subordinated epistemic worker

within the think tank workplace. Max's counsel illustrates that interns and other lower-status

workers must learn to develop and enact self-discipline within the productive labor process –

self-discipline, that is, is a manner of inhabiting oneself as a worker. Responding to the self-making demands of professional norms, lower-status workers construct what Martin Arboleda (2020: 78) calls "productive subjectivity" through everyday practices of self-discipline, which integrate technical skills with forms of consciousness adapted to the demands of work. Engineering these productive professional subjectivities requires immense individual labors of self-discipline at the very point of production – the workplace.

Click, clack, click, clack, click, clack, click, clack. Silence and typing – the two seemingly contradictory universals of the think tank office spaces that I visited. Whether interns had their own cubicles or, more rarely, were stationed in collective areas, the sound of typing saturated the atmosphere wherever I went. Workers impressed keys individually but they seemed to enter the body in sound form all at once without distinction. *Clack clack clack*. The constant chattering of the keyboard indexed the collective concentration of the workers – a kind of individualized "social labor" (Marx 1874). Fused to the interminable clacking, however, was an eerie silence. While work required constant digital communication, the office space hosted very little inter-human speech. When arriving at work, even my very own male office mates – sitting a foot away from me – refused to initiate morning greetings, looking up only when I said good morning. This was not necessarily a result of enmity, but rather a normal part of office culture. Existentially, then, most of the lower-status workers' day was spent alone at the computer. Painful greetings at the threshold of the bathroom door were more than I spoke to some during the entire workday. Walking through open office areas, workers had largely even shed the animal curiosity to scan and assess other humans in their field of vision. Unlike the public street or high-school prom, one could walk across an entire office floor without being seen – not because one never entered

workers' visual fields, but because they were tied inextricably to the locus of their work: the screen.

This observation reveals the concrete social form of worker self-discipline in the think tank office, which is expressed through the combined temporality and physicality of labor. First, the temporality of self-discipline: workers disciplined themselves into conforming to the temporal norms of the workplace, which mandated a full eight-hour workday. Lower-status workers made sure to arrive at work either early or precisely on time at 9am sharp. All of my interlocutors – even those less overtly fervent about securing upward mobility – arrived at work at least ten to fifteen minutes early. Interlocutors never left work early unless there was formal accommodation and recognition from management. I did not record any instances of lateness or other forms of hidden insubordination. Interns forewent utilizing the temporal weapons of the weak worker (Scott 1990) – tardiness, skipping out early, along with slowdowns and stalling – in favor of performances of self-discipline that conveyed autonomous self-regulation, professional tenacity and commitment to the organization. While there was some attenuated spatial autonomy for some lower-status workers such as policy analysts, interns always engaged in visible, active work wherever they happened to contingently be.

Second, self-discipline was expressed through the visible physicality of labor. At the same time that interns made sure that their temporal promptness was visible, they also enacted discipline through spatial and physical practices of labor. Interns arrived and stayed in their designated spaces – cubicles or tables. They made sure to be either visibly present at their desks, or visibly working away from their desks (e.g. at clearly visible counters, tables, "pods,"

balconies, private teleconferencing rooms, etc).54 Walking around my own and other offices, everyone looked always diligently focused on their work – typing, reading, meeting, and so on. Within think tanks, the regimentation and control of the spatial location and physicality of intern labor was strict and conventional; while interns' digital work could be done nearly anywhere – from couch to café – interns were generally mandated to be in their cubicles unless in a meeting or given formal permission to work elsewhere. Indeed, in informal conversations, interlocutors recommended that I make sure never be "caught" not working or off-task because this would facilitate reputation-damaging perceptions about me that might "stick," spoiling my professional identity and potentially harming my professional future. Further, the spatial organization of the office was organized around continual productive work, either in individual cubicles and offices or in rooms designed exclusively for meetings and teleconferencing. This contrasted significantly with the cultural image of Silicon Valley office spaces, replete with vending machines, ping pong tables and bean bag chairs used to animate the spatial environment of the workplace.

Self-discipline was enacted through making sure that labor was publicly visible, not just at any particular moment, but throughout all the moments in the workday. Being visibly temporally and physically 'on task' – a major signifier of productivity – was key to mediating one's value as an employee.55 An illustrative example of this is Garrett, a white, handsome, elite graduate-educated man, who was an intern in an allied think tank program. He had considered employment in the World Bank after graduating from a top-10 U.S. university with a BA in economics and an MA in international relations, but decided that the more intellectual route of policy research and writing was a better fit. Garrett was always well dressed, primed to the

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54 This labor visibility was sometimes interrupted or subverted. For example, one interlocutor and I joked about how during low-stakes Zoom teleconferencing calls, he would often mute his audio and turn off his video, and watch television shows, movies, or play games on his phone. This was, however, clearly deviant behavior.
55 This signification of productivity remained important even if the employee's productivity was relatively low.

occasion and context – Friday at 2pm meant business casual, while conferences and panels called for a handsome suit. He had a welcoming if restrained manner proper to the workplace, never being the first to strike up a conversation and always making sure to keep personal details out of them. He struck me as someone who strives to excel while "keeping their head down." Through his everyday work practices, Garrett signified that he clearly understood that dedicated, disciplined work was key to professional advancement. Garrett *always* came thirty to forty-five minutes early to work; although he worked on a different floor, I would often walk by and chat with him, learning that he been in since 8:15 or 8:30am. He would also leave work late, which was unusual for an intern. While at work, he hardly arose from his seat and was always concentrated on work, often skipped or significantly cut short his lunch breaks, and made sure to complete projects to the best of his capacity. He also told me that he almost always left late because he prioritized finishing work rather than his own free time.[56] Garrett's inhabitation of disciplined productivity signified his excellence, commitment, and fastidiousness. Indeed, during informal gatherings, other interns would point out, in their terms, how *dedicated* Garrett was to his work.

Garrett signaled professional commitment and competence through the socially perceptible physicality and temporality of labor – arriving at work early, and steadfastly working throughout and even past the formal workday. Through these forms of self-discipline, workers like Garrett attempt to gain not only skills accumulated through labor, but also social forms of notoriety and distinction that can be used to enhance their position in the social hierarchy. Garrett eventually "cashed in," successfully translating experience, skills and performative self-discipline into a promotion, affording both elevated symbolic status and material advantages.

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[56] This contrasted starkly to my own work habitus – indifferent to the work I was doing, I relished lunch breaks and left immediately at 5pm.

Garrett was able to make what interlocutors labeled an "upward lateral move" – being promoted within the same organization, but moving laterally across programs, which was a rare form of advancement.[57] I asked him about it during a chance meeting in a local downtown coffee shop. In his typical terse and strategically balanced idiom: 'I'm really grateful. I've learned a lot from my program, and I'm eager to start this new opportunity.'[58] He then politely took leave of the conversation, perhaps avoiding the (real) danger that I might ask for a recorded interview about his experience.

Fashioning Professional Subjectivity: Becoming Self-Advocates

Discourses of self-advocacy – along with synonyms like self-motivation and self-direction – permeated the professional cultures of think tanks, shaping both individuals' understandings of the normative attributes of a successful professional, and their own practices of self-presentation at work. Along with being disciplined and productive (see above), lower-status workers are called to become active participants in their own professional development (Kelty 2020). Across semistructured interviews and informal conversations (albeit with a few dissenters), interlocutors told me that professional development opportunities for interns are available, they just need to be actively sought after and seized. While few explicitly placed responsibility for failure on individual lack, almost all recognized that lower-status workers must and should become aggressively engaged in seeking out opportunities of any kind, from participation in policy research and writing to transactional networking and attending internal think tank events. Repeatedly, both directed at myself and others, I heard well-meaning phrases like "it is your responsibility" attached to activities related to professional self-augmentation

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[57] There are also "lateral moves," where no upward promotion is involved but there is a switch of program either within the same organization or across organizations.
[58] Unrecorded, reconstructed from fieldnotes.

such as networking. Because they are new and still becoming familiarized with the work environment, interns in particular were encouraged to seek out these opportunities. Program managers and analysts recommended multiple times that I engage with other think tank programs, and told me that I was free to go to panels and events outside of my program with permission.59

In this way, lower-status workers were called to become "self-advocates." As Foucault (1975) argued, power is not simply repressive and prohibitive, but rather has productive or positive capacities that incite and produce subjectivity. Similarly, lower-status workers continually worked to cultivate themselves as energetic, motivated self-advocates; like participation, self-advocacy was a "particular achievement" (Kelty 2020: 95). In interviews, both peer and superior colleagues told me of what it meant to be a self-advocate. For instance, Mark, a white, animated mid-twenties policy analyst for a centrist think tank, described self-advocacy as means to seize opportunities to develop experience and skills:

Jaden: I've been hearing a lot about self-advocacy… can you tell me a bit about what that means?

Mark: Sure. Organizations, not just think tanks but everywhere, they want self-motivated people. Even if you're coming in as an intern, nobody is going to walk you through. You're not gonna get babied. You have to learn quickly, ask questions, be independent, you have to figure it out: who do I need to talk to about this? How can I streamline this process? Where can I find this data?

Jaden: Mmm-hmm.

Mark: Take policy research, there are *lots* of opportunities for junior staff to collaborate on [policy] report writing, but you're gonna hear a lot of early career staff complain that they aren't being supported. But look – people aren't necessarily gonna know you have expertise in the Caucasus, you know [laughs]? You have to know what's going on, and say, 'hey, I can help with this, and here's how.' Here's what I'll do to advance the project. And then you do the work and you can get published. This is something you maybe won't get immediately – have you worked in a place like this before?

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59 This was a form of freedom predicated, however, on productivity – it was assumed that the completion of outstanding work tasks would be a condition of the autonomy to engage with others.

Jaden: No, not really, but grad school is kind of like that…

Mark: Well yeah it can be uncomfortable, but the point [is] if you learn quickly and stay motivated, you'll be fine, but you've gotta develop those skills quickly or it's not gonna work, then you end up in a place where you don't gain those skills you need.

Mark illustrates that interns and other lower-status workers must develop capacities to facilitate and seize opportunities to engage in professional activities like policy research and writing. Implicit in Mark's advice is that these activities will enable lower-status workers to gain skills and experience that increase their value as employees and function as professional capital for career advancement (e.g. on resumes). As another interlocutor put it pithily at a house party potluck in the Maryland suburbs, "missing out is losing out." Here, workers must vigilantly avoid foreclosing their own professional potentialities by becoming self-advocates – through, for example, asserting oneself into projects. For Mark, successful self-advocacy is enacted through "learning quickly" and "staying motivated," each framed as a disposition to be inculcated into the individual workplace self. As we will see later, however, sometimes active participation does not always translate into marketable skills or other forms of career-advancing recognition.

Often articulated in colloquial local phrases like "putting yourself out there," self-advocacy entails a professional self that is liquid, proactive and always in perpetual forward motion – the opposite of stasis and quietude. For interns, professional subjectivity was never a finished product, but always an ongoing project of gaining professional skills and experience that can be represented on a resume. One white male interlocutor who was considering augmenting his subject matter expertise in order to become more competitive for employment in US-European security collaboration began looking into online certificates and classes that would help him gain a foothold in understanding the "business side of things." This would look good, he told me, on his resume, showing that he was proactive about professional development.

Echoing the imperative of transactional networking (Chapter 1), self-advocating forms of "putting yourself out there" also meant transforming the sociality of the self. Interns, for example, learned to challenge themselves socially to attend events even when one did not feel like it. During times when I did not have the social energy, I was sympathetically reprimanded by interlocutors, who told me that it was necessary to go, that I would not gain any new contacts as an intern or a researcher if I avoided the very places where people came together to interact. Lower-status workers more serious about professional development and contact-making were often the ones that prodded me into joining them at panels, workshops, book talks, and other events. Bryant, a white male intern in his mid-twenties who has since been promoted to a policy analyst position, provided a striking window into the social choreography of self-advocacy. An avowed "Never Trump" Republican, Bryant was affable and he got along with everyone; unlike many other interlocutors, he warmed up to me easily, and welcomed my scribbling of fieldnotes. He was also my go-to person when it came to events – he had an encyclopedic knowledge of what was going on at every think tank, university program and conference around DC. One day, I told him how impressed I was that he could keep track of all of it. "Reminds me of going to the frats back in college, we'd go to all their recruitment events just to get the free food! Except here [at DC events] sometimes there's no food!" he responded, referring to some events that did not offer free food for attendees. Later the next week, Bryant invited me to an event on the Islamic State in the United States that he was professionally interested in. There would be a number of high-profile people there that he wanted to connect with, he explained. Bryant was already there when I arrived, looking dapper and refined in a nice suit, obviously dressed to impress. I walked over to him and he told me that he wanted to speak with someone on the other side of the room, waving his hand in that direction in a signal to follow him. We walked past rows of chairs to

greet a tall white woman in her late thirties, who as it turns out was a senior manager at a powerful center-right think tank. It seemed that they had met before, but did not know each other well. He reintroduced himself, and although he was an intern, he did not explicitly reintroduce himself as such, opting instead to note the program director with which he worked (whom she knew), the projects that he had successfully completed and those that he worked on at present. The senior manager nodded and seemed interested and listening, if not totally impressed. As I stood silently smiling looking back and forth between them as they conversed, I noticed that within a few minutes, somehow Bryant had managed to work in his professional experience, analytical and technical skills, topics he wanted to explore further, and enthusiasm about the manager's personal publications and those of the program for which she worked. Since I was not contributing to the conversation, I eventually took leave of them to "get another drink" (escape). By the time I returned, they were putting the finishing touches on their short pre-event conversation. 'It would be great to be in touch,' he said.[60] The manager reciprocated the feeling, and offered him her business card. He looked down at it carefully, turned it around and paused for a couple seconds, and then put it into his wallet. 'Thank you,' he said, making eye contact with a warm, professional smile. Reflecting on having observed Bryant in action, as we took an Uber back to our respective homes, I told Bryant that I was amazed at the efficiency, effectiveness and sincerity of the interaction with the senior manager. Since Bryant and I were close and often joked about "fakeness," I felt comfortable enough to conclude half-jokingly, "It didn't seem fake at all." Nodding and turning to me with a wide smile, he explained, "Yeah, exactly. I don't say, 'hey here's my resume, you need me.' Because they *don't.* You have to show them without telling them that their team or their organization, or whatever, that they're

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[60] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

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going to do better with you there than without you. You have to show them that you are going to

fit in with and really improve their operation." I nod. By "getting himself out there" and

proactively "selling himself" (Gershon 2014), Bryant embodied local values of proactive self-

motivation, which required a concerted effort to transform and tailor his professional

subjectivity. Bryant not only seized, but as another interlocutor pithily put it, "*created*

opportunities" for himself by enacting self-advocacy in networking contexts.

Fashioning Professional Subjectivity: Becoming Opaque

Third**,** aspirational workers must fashion professional subjectivity by enacting opacity, by

which I mean the self-regulation of information output concerning both personal and

professional life. Through crafting and presenting an opaque personhood, workers construct a

professionally viable self-image that is restrained and contained. If discipline involves

communicating productivity and self-advocacy means being actively self-assertive, opacity is a

form of impression or reputation management (Goffman 1956) that works to control what others

know about oneself.[61] The imperative of inhabiting opacity is shaped, we have seen, by cultures

of competitive accumulation that impact how workers relate to not only themselves, but their

peers as well. Lower-status workers in particular experience a fundamental ambivalence of

professional sociality: while others are colleagues and potential friends with whom one works on

a daily basis, they are at the same time objects of competitive struggle. Responding to these

contradictions, workers must cultivate dispositions of opacity. This includes, first, developing

and conveying a professional self-image whose inner psychic contents are concealed from

others; and second, developing control of the process through which information is

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[61] While related, the form of opacity here is a distinct modality of opacity than discussed above in the section on methodology.

communicated to others, determining when and how personal and professional information is revealed.

While opacity is often understood as negation, I suggest that workers utilize opacity as a modality of communication; enacting self-restraint and self-regulation, that is, is itself a culturally patterned form of professional communication. After one long day of work, I stood around on the sidewalk with a group of interns and other program staff. We discussed our plans for the weekend, and I joked about staying in my room reading a new science fiction book that Barack Obama recommended on Twitter. The conversation warmed up a bit, and I gradually saw more smiles, jokes and laughter. The collective body language of the group softened. Scott, one fast advancing analyst then liminally poised between early- and mid-career status, opened up a bit more than I had witnessed before this moment. Animated, smiling and expressive in gesture and facial expression, he told us that tonight was the beginning of his monthly bar-hopping ritual with close friends, and that the last time he went out he got very drunk. We all laughed, relayed a couple of our own stories of bar-going, and then the conversation naturally pulled in a different direction. After a couple minutes, I noticed that Scott quickly changed his facial composure, tightening his face and wiping his wide smile into a neutral expression. I left the conversation wondering why Scott's emotional expression had changed so dramatically. Embarrassed, the next day he apologized to me that his drunken bar-hopping story had gone too far for his own professional comfort. He seemed worried that the potentially inflammatory story might have tarnished his reputation, revealing information that could be damaging to his career if it was ever circulated beyond the group. As potentially risky topics emerged in later conversations, Scott remained silent or minimally responsive, and did not relay any more of his own stories. During the next few weeks, whenever I saw him he was cool and jokeless, greeting me politely but

resuming work without the normal rounds of chatting about weekend activities. Similarly, at a few meetings and panel events that we co-attended, he remained muted.

During these moments of what Zigon (2018) calls "breakdown" – the momentary rupture of normative orders – opacity is rendered visible as a tactic of self-performance. Scott's drunken bar-hopping revelations likely catalyzed a state of professional anxiety – he had gone "too far," he told me, allowing too much potentially embarrassing information about his personal life to flow into the public world of restrained professional demeanor. In response, in order to restore his professional reputation/self-image, Scott corrected or repaired through rearticulating a contained professional subjectivity characterized by inexpressivity, restraining communication that exceeded the circumscribed and depersonalized professional norms of the workplace. After the group conversation, Scott consistently expressed a more muted disposition, correcting for his earlier violation in order to restore "face" (Goffman 1967). By violating the normative system of opacity, the drunken story functioned as a rupture that revealed the normative background of constraint that shapes the performance and inhabitation of professional selfhood. Scott's experience of the story as a potentially damaging violation illustrates how the norm of opacity – keeping specific personal information to oneself and away from others – is intimately powerful in shaping professional subjectivity.

As I became socialized into the culture of opacity, I learned to respect the intersubjective opacity of others. Early in fieldwork, I had been anxious to collect data, and approached my interlocutors with direct questions which were almost always met with skepticism and reticence. When I mentioned to a closer interlocutor, who had formerly worked as a journalist and so was familiar with the vicissitudes of interviewing, that I was having trouble, she advised: "That's the way we are," referring to D.C. regulars, "You can't pry. People are smart, you've got some of

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the most socially sensitive people right here, all concentrated here [laughs], and they are going to think you're trying to get something out of them even if you're not." This reminded me of when an interlocutor explained that D.C. professional life is organized around "transaction" (Chapter 1). However, while transaction can sometimes be reciprocal, it can also be unidirectional and extractive – lower-status workers were sensitive about relaying information that might put them at an avoidable power disadvantage or somehow be used against them. I quickly learned to ask only the most basic questions, staying away from the inner experience of professionals as much as possible (unless the conversation naturally turned in that direction, which happened occasionally). In this way, I eventually learned to respect professional norms of opacity by not asking questions that might be interpreted as attempts to glean potentially damaging personal or professional information about others. I also learned to embody opacity myself after realizing that being open with other lower-status workers did not build trust, but rather led to alienation. Initially, I would joke about the monotony of work with peer colleagues – one way that I had been accustomed to building solidarity with co-workers in previous employment. Unlike these other workplaces, however, expressing my internal thoughts, especially when they conveyed implicit negative feelings about work, led a couple lower-status workers to decline to engage with me, and eventually avoid interaction with me altogether. Initially confused, I realized that not only did I break norms of professional opacity, but did so in a way that poked too much fun at work obligations that others related to more earnestly. After ceasing all "hidden scripts" of backstage banter and complaints about work, and instead inhabiting my own opacity, I saw relationships improve.

Workers' opacity was a key mode of self-regulation especially when it came to discussion of colleagues, and superiors in particular. Mediations of self-control were acute when it came to any

discussion of bosses. Most interns did not voice, either in unstructured everyday conversation or

semistructured interviewing, critiques of management. On the record, interns voiced the

occasional complaint in a way that was almost always externalized and depersonalized, directed

at an abstract structure rather than a particular person. One intern Mason explained the

challenges he faced working with his boss:

I think the big challenge is [pause]… Alex [boss] works in Los Angeles, and it's just that
communication, 3000 miles away, coordinating and talking just across Slack and email is a bit
more of a chore than being able to get up and walk thirty feet and talk to someone in the office.
The communication thing is definitely a bit of a challenge that we just all have to deal with.
Sitting on hold on conference calls a lot. That's a big one.

While there is no doubt that digitally mediated communication poses distinct difficulties, Mason

strategically externalizes and depersonalizes the object of his grievance – communication, for

example, is technically rather than personally obstructed. Mason's response illustrates how

opacity shapes the register at which the experience of challenges in the workplace are pitched.

By insulating himself from the possibility that his speech might be interpreted as a complaint

against this boss – especially given the gravity of being on-the-record – Mason protects his

professional self-image and mediates himself as professionally restrained when it comes to the

sensitive issue of discussing colleagues and bosses. Mason's case of enacting opacity is

particularly interesting because, in off-the-record contexts, he had imparted that *his boss* was

uncommunicative, and often was not adequately responsive over email, Slack and Google Chat.

Fashioning Professional Subjectivity: Becoming Flexible Professional Subjects

Think tanks mobilized the idiom of flexibility to construct their organizational brands.

Lower-status workers, including myself, were encouraged to meet people, attend others program

events, attend talks, lunches and happy hours, and engage in organizational life more generally. I

was told repeatedly that *participation* in and *exploration* of organizational life is important for

professional development. Like the very individuated structure of professional capital, this call to participate and explore was highly atomized even as it called to mind collaborative engagement, resonating with Kelty's (2020: 96) description of the sort of personhood called forth by participation as a form of "contributory autonomy severed form any collective experience of power."

During one tour of a center-left think tank, a human relations representative told me that while employees are encouraged to work in the program office, employees are welcome to move to different areas or outside the building to work *so long as they get their work done.* Indeed, throughout my internship I noticed that employees – exclusive of interns – were able to work outside their cubicle around the office space; some high-status paid affiliates, such as senior fellows, did not work in the building at all.[62] She concluded with a smile that "we realize that productivity is not just about in-office time." This tethering of flexibility to productivity is key to understanding both how flexibility shapes lower-status workers' practices and perspectives, and how they negotiate contexts in which flexibility is encouraged. The uneven encouragement of employee mobility reveals the general ambiguity of flexibility, where official discourses exclaim the universality of flexibility, while implicitly distributing its advantages and disadvantages unequally according to employment rank. It also underscores that these unevenly distributed affordances of flexibility and freedom remain tied to the imperative of productivity.

Under neoliberalism, the condition, process and embodied experience of work has changed dramatically. While usually non-profit entities, think tanks extend what Boltanski and Chiapello (2017 [1999]) call the "new spirit of capitalism" driven by new managerial forms in the 1990s. Boltanski and Chiapello argued that a new cycle of labor management and capital accumulation

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[62] Higher-status employee mobility, along with intern immobilization, was common across think tanks.

was shaped by transformations in the ideological practices of capitalist firms, including especially the appropriation of notions of freedom, fluidity and autonomy appropriated from the emancipatory legacy of the 1960s. Non-profit think tanks have borrowed much of the same managerial language and forms of entrepreneurial labor discipline based on these reconfigured notions of individual freedom. The "new spirit of capitalism" was also propelled by a modulation of the division of labor within capitalist firms, as formal organizational hierarchies, supervisory control and modes of workplace domination dissolved into ostensibly decentralized networks of creative cooperation among autonomous producers. Repetition, homogeneity and monotony of labor tasks was substituted by a more flexible form of labor discipline that emphasized the bestowal of attenuated forms of autonomy (Boltanski and Chiapello 2017 [1999]; Freeman 1990; Ong 1999). For Boltanski and Chiapello, these changes taken together created new kinds of working subjects – ones for whom freedom and autonomy was mobilized as a form of labor discipline in order to facilitate enhanced productivity. In a similar account, Antonio Negri argues that, due to the reorganization of capitalist command and the requirements of accumulation, the "mass worker" of Fordism – whose work was regimented by the Taylorism of factory management – has given way to the flexible worker of neoliberalism. It is interesting to note, however, that while higher-status employees fit largely into Negri's (2017) mold of the "flexible worker," the work of interns actually often remains interchangeable, homogenous, repetitive and regimented like that of the worker of Taylorism-Fordism. While appreciative of this account, ethnography problematizes the neat link between freedom/unfreedom, and reveals that differentially positioned workers exhibit complex and ambivalent attitudes toward flexibility.

For lower-status epistemic workers, enacting employer-defined forms of flexibility mediates professional viability – being flexible illustrates individual worth and one's virtue as a worker. To varying degrees, think tanks across the political spectrum exuded sensibilities of personal exploration, professional opportunity and intellectual freedom that putatively differentiated them from the coercive surveillance and control of workers in non-"professional" service and industrial labor regimes. However, as a cultural form and social requirement, flexibility was not universal across all grades of employee, but rather was differently inhabited based on position in workplace hierarchies. Differently ranked workers enacted different modes of flexibility, and were subjected to different expectations concerning the nature and degree of flexibility required. Higher-status workers such as senior and non-senior policy analysts and program managers had significant intellectual and practical autonomy – they were not, for example, tethered to their desks but could work in different locations around the office. I would often see senior analysts working on other floors; some of those at the highest rungs such as program managers, directors and fellows would rarely be in the office or never step foot in the office at all. Fellows, for instance, possessed the power to decide what kind of work they pursued (e.g. topics of exploration), the medium (e.g. book or article), the venue (high-volume news outlet, smaller but more elite cultural magazines), work schedule (what hours they worked, when and where), in-office time (minimal or no office time at all). Lower-status workers (and interns in particular), on the other hand, experienced diminished practical and intellectual autonomy. As we saw in Chapter 2, interns do not control the form or content of labor, and possess little power over what project, and project tasks, they were delegated. Indeed, interns were often tasked with labor conducted on behalf of fellows, revealing that the flexibility of higher-status employees is often

predicated on the mandated labor of lower-status workers. Interns also have little spatial

flexibility – they are required to remain at their desks during the workday.63

For lower-status workers, flexibility was often experienced as a form of pressure. We will

consider three forms that the pressure of flexibility takes: *skills and knowledge, willingness to*

work and overwork, and *disposability*. First, lower-status workers had to quickly adapt to

learning a wide array of different skills and knowledge. Offering me a long list of news and

analysis websites, one interlocutor advised: "Sign up for the morning and weekly digest. Make

sure you read this stuff carefully, it will keep you informed." He explained later that it was

important to consume information from a variety of sources – I should keep up not only with

daily news from hegemonic media outlets like *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and

smaller hybrid outfits like *Axios*, but also "intelligent analysis" from journal-like venues like

Foreign Affairs. This diversification is crucial, he explained, because not only knowing

information, but displaying versatility and range with respect to trending topics is a minimum

standard in think tanks. Indeed, I was unprepared for the extent to which think tank employees

expected each other to have shared knowledge about contemporary events in national and world

news; even at half-drunken informal gatherings, serious conversations on politics were the norm.

I tried to get up to speed, but never quite became confident in my mastery of events and analysis

or quick enough to follow the information cycles, and so often found myself backgrounded in

conversations.

Because interns often have to cycle through multiple internships, they learn to become

flexible in terms of both "subject matter expertise" and technical skills. Being able to work on

topics only or predominantly of personal interest was rare among interns; over the course of their

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63 In addition, while full-time permanent staff enjoyed employer-provided provisions to sustain their reproduction
such as health insurance, interns were not, excluding them from some of the material predicates of flexibility.

internhood, most worked on topics and projects only faintly connected to their interests. This is because program directors and their teams determined the shape of particular projects, leaving interns to adapt to fit the labor needs of these projects. This meant that interns, upon arrival in their think tanks and through the duration of employment, needed to be ready to flexibly engage with new knowledges and skills. Most interns expected to be ready to adapt in this way throughout their early-career stage, while at the same time a minority of them came to resent the protracted durations of adaptation and flexibility, as we shall see later. The fact that lower-status workers must specialize in a variety of knowledges/skills that may not be of direct interest to them, and remain fluid and adaptive depending on the organizationally specific demands, was so naturalized as to be unremarkable for lower-status workers. At house parties, I spoke with many buzzed mid-level workers who listed the multiple internships they had before securing a permanent position doing work closer to their interests. While complimenting his boss and colleagues, one mid-status interlocutor noted *how much bullshit* he had to endure learning things and working on projects of little interest to him before being promoted.

At work, interns rapidly diversified their skill set, making themselves capable of working on any number of projects that came their way, whether it involved computer graphic design or data analysis. Some interns – especially those in their first or second years of undergraduate – entered their organizations with little specialized knowledge; others entered already adept with certain technical skills, having learned them through formal education or other work experience (e.g. previous internships, both in and outside DC). Whether they entered their internship equipped with few or many skills, interns learned and worked swiftly to acquire new skills and knowledge, knowing that the time to distinguish themselves was short. The speed at which interns learned was astounding. One intern who entered my workplace two months after I did knew more about

the transnational counter-extremism project that I had been working on than I did after only a few weeks of voraciously consuming information and working on the project. I witnessed one interns pump out blurbs, event introductions, substantial emails, event reviews, short articles, and organization-promoting tweets seemingly all at once. When I asked her about how she had learned all the different genres of writing and produced so much so quickly, she responded simply, "I've always been good at multitasking." In just a month, one interlocutor learned how to use data management software, compose annotated bibliographies, and perform basic data analytics to track the program's online reach (which she later taught me). Here, interns combine flexible forms of learning and utilizing diverse knowledge and skills with maximizing productivity.

Secondly, in a related vein, for lower-status workers becoming flexible meant performing openness and willingness to work, which sometimes led to burnout and overwork. One second-year undergraduate intern explained what she wanted to convey to her supervisors: "I really try to show that I want to be here, like, okay, I've made it this far, now I need to show that I'm willing to work hard. I'm a fast learner and I can manage my workload, that's something I want them to see." As the lowest rank of worker, interns often had to perform maximally exuberant performances of acceptance of any and all work tasks that came their way without opposition or reticence. This was not an outcome of malicious managers, who were relatively conscious of workloads and in my personal experience never behaved harshly or punitively toward lower-status workers. Rather, the generalized culture of work and productivity structured by the imperative of accumulation, shaped interns' performance of willingness. Interns understood that it was important to be perceived as a "good employee" – one that was motivated, productive and keenly willing to engage in tasks – in order to increase their visibility and status.

This performance of flexible willingness to accept work sometimes led to protracted stress and overwork for interns. Because of the division and distribution of labor, some workers were unwittingly put in a position where their flexibility led to an unsustainable labor burden. Matt told me that, during the dreaded "crunch time" in the few days before deadlines, he was informally expected to stay at work until finished, or sometimes work from home.[64] Many lower-status workers disliked the concentrated and accelerated rhythm of work that came with crunched deadlines. Here, flexibility is articulated as the capacity to augment the pace and efficiency of work in order to produce high-quality work with rapid rates of turnover.

One evening, I sat with Ethan in his nicely furnished, sleek apartment with an unlived-in feel in a new apartment complex which often hosted rooftop patio parties. At his glass dining table, we ate "Harvest Snaps," the preferred green pea snack crisp of DC, glued to our computers doing emails as we waited for some friends to come over for wine and cheese. 'Damn it,' he said, frustrated. 'This is too much to do,' referring to the backlog of work that he had inherited from work during his leisure time.[65] 'I'm sorry to hear that, man,' I said, unsure. Ethan dramatically slammed down hard on the keyboard keys as he typed to amplify their audibility, mediating his embodied frustration through the very technology upon which his labor was predicated. After a minute, he pushed his chair from the table, leaning his head back, sighing and running his fingers through his hair before abruptly getting up to go to the kitchen.

During handful of times that we had spent time together informally, Ethan occasionally voiced concerns about struggling with his workload. Like other lower-status workers, he was a diligent, disciplined worker, who juggled not only multiple projects but was always additionally

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[64] Matt worked at a conservative think tank, which I learned through informal rumor had a reputation for more strenuous and taxing work.
[65] Unrecorded, reconstructed dialogue from fieldnotes.

willing to do errands at his workplace. And like others, he was careful around me to either

internalize or externalize his complaints, targeting either the workload itself or his own lack of

time management skills. The past week had been unexpectedly busy for Ethan, and he had to

bring his work home. He was working on collecting articles on extremist violence in the United

States from 2011-2017, summarizing the data, and tracking patterns based on "identity factors"

such as socioeconomic status, gender, age and race. I asked him about how he felt about having

to do so much work, and bringing it home at that. Pausing to think for a moment before

speaking, he said:

Well my boss knows that I'm dependable, I can handle what I'm dealt [workload-wise],
whatever it is. I always get my work done, work first when I'm at work, you know? So when I
look at it that way, I see the positives. It's going to put me ahead. But I also sometimes feel it's
hard to manage. I'm lucky to have my job – I really enjoy it – but, yeah I would say sometimes I
feel like a hamster in a wheel [closes fist, with index finger sticking out, gestures in circular
motion to signify a wheel spinning].

Ethan expresses ambivalent feelings about his overburdened workload. On the one hand,

it is a sign of dependability and virtue, elevating him into a better position for promotion; on the

other hand, he feels that it is difficult to manage, analogizing his situation to a hamster in a wheel

– a culturally devalued and domesticated miniature animal that must meaninglessly run on a

perpetual wheel leading nowhere. For Ethan, enacting willingness to take on work, and

performing versatility and dependability vis-à-vis that work, is both a moral virtue and a form of

professional advantage given that it puts him "ahead" of peer-competitors (although he wisely

does not make the relational nature of getting ahead explicit). His flexibility – and its recognition

by superiors – potentiates feelings of proudness while simultaneously consolidating his

competitive advantage. At the same time, however, this flexibility leads to unsustainable burdens

of work that generate embodied feelings and expressions of frustration and stress. This is a

primary paradox of the intern as a worker: while becoming flexible is linked to building

professional self-esteem and ensuring the possibility for recognition as a good worker, it is also linked to unsustainable demands on individuals that lead to stress and overwork.

Other lower-status workers, however, told me that their employers provide them with substantive, life-enhancing forms of flexibility that respect their free time and the division between work and leisure. This was a flexibility, they told me, worthy of the name. While undoubtedly some interns' effusive complimentary gratefulness directed toward their employer was shaped by necessary self-protection, some interns that I knew well sincerely appreciated their workplace cultures of flexibility. These workers enjoyed the sense of collaborative sociality and flexible personal autonomy afforded by their workplaces. This was the experience of Vanessa, one up-and-coming young white female intern with an undergraduate degree in political science with a minor in mathematics. We talked specifically about flexibility while eating five-dollar tacos in a café that fused gritty industrial aesthetics with the smooth modernity of crisply fonted wall-menus and glistening stainless steel:

Vanessa: I think our generation is more, you know, diverse and open. I think things are changing. It's not like before where it was all about working as much as you can, doing overtime, putting in a lot of hours.

Jaden: Do you think increasing flexibility also means that there's a more blurry line between work and leisure time, like maybe we could be constantly working all the time?

Vanessa: Mmm… I see what you mean, but I don't really see it like that because work-life balance is really important in my workplace. All of my colleagues really care about balance, maybe that's just the culture of my company, because I know that cultures are really different in different places, but in mine there's focus on work-life balance. Whether the atmosphere is chill or not like that is really important for people when they are interviewing. So the other day I was talking to my manager, and I was asking about vacation and PTO and things like that and she said yes we encourage our people to take that time, we want people to be happy and have balance here because that makes us all more productive…[66] And another colleague of mine works at home sometimes but only during work hours, so it's not like people are working at work and then going home and doing another shift. Employers nowadays are trying to attract young talent, and they know that we want real flexibility.

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[66] Interestingly, as an intern, Vanessa does not receive vacation or PTO. She and her boss are referring to full-time, higher-status employees.

For Vanessa, her workplace respected her time and utilized flexibility as a way to enhance workers' lives, reinforcing rather than disrupting the demarcation between work and leisure. In Vanessa's interpretation, flexibility was not experienced as an organizational tool of interminable productivation, but rather a means to allow workers to manage the requirements of different responsibilities (e.g. the colleague who was allowed to work at home, but only during work hours).

Third, interns had to become flexible when it came to reconciling with and managing the condition of their own disposability. Here, self-making flexibilization is an institutional imposition on lower-status workers grounded in their status as precarious sellers of labor-power with temporary contracts. As we have seen, think tanks are sites for the rapid turnover of contingent labor forces like interns positioned at the lowest rungs of the hierarchy. While associates and analysts count their employment tenure in years, interns count them in months – internships are institutionally enforced temporary positions, while mid-level and higher-level positions are permanent.[67] The think tank labor market is thus flush with young, credentialed, skilled surplus workers eager for professional experience to get "in the door."[68] Given the buyer's market, those few workers who make it through the application process to obtain an internship cherish the exceptional opportunity afforded to them. Interns were acutely aware that the predominant majority of them will not find immediate permanent employment after a first internship. A first category of interns – those with undergraduate and often graduate degrees who

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[67] There is much turnover in positions such as analysts, who often are using such positions are jumping-off points for further professional advancement, but the point here is that positions ranked above internships are offered, even if they are not practically inhabited, as permanent rather than temporary.

[68] As we noted in the Introduction, think tanks source young intern workers almost universally from universities, quick to learn and willing to work uncompensated in exchange for professional experience. Internships are, in van Gennep's (1909) terms, a "rite of passage," providing cheap or free labor for think tanks while putatively affording interns with professional skills, contacts and experience necessary for future success.

have had multiple internships already – express strong wishes to secure a stable position after their internships, and were usually eager to prove to themselves and others that they were ready for permanent employment. A second category of interns were current undergraduates, who do not expect immediate employment but are focused on "building up" their resumes in preparation for the future. Interns in both categories were conscious of their precarious status within a severely competitive economy where permanent jobs are few and far between – and where advancement is dependent on the accumulation of career-enhancing forms of professional capital that can only be found through working within think tanks.

In this context, flexibility and the process of flexibilizing oneself took the form of adapting to and reconciling with being a disposable worker. "You have to realize," warned one associate who presumed that I was attempting to seize a promotion in a think tank, "that you can't expect to find a position immediately [after your internship]." Interns come to normalize – if not ever fully acquiesce to – the sense that they are temporary workers, and that there is no guarantee of permanent employment. While none of my interlocutors lauded the disposability of interns, they all clearly understood the predicament of being disposable. Memorably, Sebastian, an exchange student intern from Spain who spoke perfect English due to attending special international schools throughout his life, analogized being an intern to being a *mercenary*, for-hire soldiers that contingently, temporarily fight for money rather than fighting as a member of an organized military institution. "You can ask anyone here," he begins gravely, waving his index finger in a circular motion to reference everyone in the group "we all know it's difficult to find a permanent job. I don't want to sugar coat it, it's hard. Some of us have gone from internship to internship not knowing what's going on, it's really crazy to have to do that when you have a life." Some of the other young interns nod. "You can even do your best, and some of

us know this from experience, you do your best but it still doesn't work out in your favor." I look around to see if anyone is preparing to add, but all defer to Sebastian to channel their experiences into the record, nominating him through silence as their *de facto* spokesperson. "We're like mercenaries, you know," he continues, "we're not sure of anything." A few nods from the others and some half-hearted, ambivalent laughter. While not celebratory of their precarious status as interns, Sebastian and others like him clearly understand their condition of disposability. Implicitly challenging the dominant cultural narrative in the United States that working hard leads to success, Sebastian argues from the perspective of lived experience that this is not necessarily the case – interns know from experience that employment is not guaranteed even for the most disciplined professional subjects. For these interns, being disposable workers is a normal – if disturbing – fact of professional life.

Adapting to disposability expressed itself palpably outside the realm of work, where the slow creep of imminent disposability haunted interns like a recurring nightmare. While spending time with interns after work and on the weekends, they often prepared and pored over applications and strategized about the future, knowing that they needed to proactively prepare for career-enhancing next steps. Shirts untucked and dress shoes transformed into house slippers, in off-time interns scoured all manner of applications on their phones and laptop computers, from graduate school and law school to other think tank positions, imagining different routes to improve their life chances. Inverting the direction of questioning, some asked me what it was like pursuing a PhD, and what professional opportunities it opened. I agreed as one interlocutor noted that most of the highest-status program directors and fellows had PhDs, and most panelists – unless they were military, journalists or career government officials – held doctorates. I also looked over a few graduate school applications for fourth-year undergraduate interns who

wanted to transition immediately into a graduate program after completing their degree, helping them craft their intellectual brand and discussing different programs. By thinking about the opportunities that a graduate or professional degree would afford, and preparing for the imminent end of their internships, interns strategically negotiated the conditions of their own disposability.

Some interns grumbled clandestinely about disposability amidst confidential circles of peers, but just as many seemed to express reconciliation to their temporary contracts optimistically. These interns framed disposability as an unproblematic and natural feature of the labor market. Henry, a white male intern in his mid-twenties working in his second internship, explained: "Sometimes funding doesn't come through, or some [funding] stream dries up, so they [program management] have to stall projects or hire fewer interns – that's not the program's fault. I wouldn't blame program leadership. It kind of comes with the territory, if you want to be part of it, you get used to not taking things too personally. There's always other opportunities out there and if one thing doesn't work out another will."

In this section, we have explored how lower-status workers fashion their professional subjectivities, negotiating the potentialities and constraints of such a process of self-formation. These meanings and practices of professional subjectivity are developed and enacted in response to increasingly competitive labor markets and pressures on workers to distinguish themselves from the crowd. In the next section, we examine how the pressures and struggles of competitive accumulation shape the personal experience and social mediation of difficult emotions.

3. Competitive Emotions

Lower-status epistemic workers are desiring subjects – they have deeply felt aspirations of advancement which shape their professional horizons, everyday practical activities inside and

outside of work, and senses of self-worth.[69] Drawing from Ortner (2005), this section

foregrounds how culturally patterned social structures of competitive accumulation impinge on

the existential contours of lived experience (see also Luhrmann 2006). I focus in particular on

how competitive structures of professionality structure emotional perceptions and judgments of

self and other which are often deeply critical, and how these perceptions are underpinned by

feelings of anxiety about the stability and viability of one's own social status. By focusing on

relationships among lower-status workers, we can better illuminate how the socially competitive

dimensions of professional advancement configure specific forms of emotional experience

during a critical moment of early-career socialization.

In psychodynamic terms, my interlocutors were libidinally cathected in their culturally

defined professional status vis-à-vis others in their social fields – they were, in other words,

emotionally invested in their positionality. These libidinal investments in selfhood, however,

were constituted comparatively. My interlocutors fashioned assessments of themselves in light of

the perceived status and success of others, and in turn judged others in relation to fragile

perceptions of their own perceived actual and potential standing in the professional social

hierarchy. Further, these comparative understandings of the self were filtered through culturally

normative criteria of status, worth and success. For example, interns judged the development of

their own career in terms of culturally defined understandings of the normative temporality of

career progress. Those who perceived themselves to be falling behind compared to others often

generated negative self-perceptions and/or constructed others as objects of negative emotion.

Assessing the status and speed of one's own career advancement is a thus not an absolute process

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[69] In this section, I do not draw on data from middle- and higher-status workers and managers because they did not discuss competitive emotions with me. This is probably not because these relatively powerful workers did not experience competitive emotions, but because they had even less willingness to discuss them with someone who was both lower-status and recording their words.

– interns interpreted their professional trajectories not as self-contained entities, but rather in careful and discerning comparison to others.

Here, it is important to highlight how lower-status workers cathect or invest in social status and self is shaped by the norms of the competitive professional orders in which they are enmeshed, where advancement is predicated on the imperative of accumulation (see Chapter 1) that pressures lower-status workers to constantly compete for artificially scarce social and professional capital, including access to high-value social networks. Lower-status workers negotiate these relations of competitive struggle through what I call *competitive emotions*, negative or ambivalent affective states, deeply shaped by competitive pressures, that provide an interpretive lens for understanding and responding to competitive and hierarchical social relations.[70]

Competitive Envy

Envy is pain at the good fortune of others. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Bk II, Chapter 10)

Envy is a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress, even though it does not detract from one's own. [It is] a reluctance to see our own well-being overshadowed by another's because the standard we use to see how well off we are is not the intrinsic worth of our own well-being but how it compares with that of others. [Envy] aims, at least in terms of one's wishes, at destroying others' good fortune. (Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:459)

Envy is that passion which views with malignant dislike the superiority of those who are really entitled to all the superiority they possess. (Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 244)

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[70] While the sections below examine instances where lower-status workers express competitive emotion, it is important to note that this was usually exceedingly rare to witness unless I had established a very close relationship with the interlocutor. Usually, interns were consistently opaque when it came to open discussion of competitive emotions, whose expression was professionally dangerous because open circulation and attribution would almost certainly result in some kind of repercussions. These repercussions might be mild, in the case of a peer-competitor hearing gossip; they might also be substantial, however, as in the case of a superior hearing that they had been spoken badly about. In addition, lower-status workers were also often reflexively aware that competitive emotions signify potential professional insecurity, and so usually minimized them both on- and off-the-record. Metasocially, these workers sensed that being *perceived as* – by the author or anyone else in proximity to their professional world – someone who might experience and express negative competitive emotions might have harmful effects for their professional image. Competitive emotions are understood as incompatible with the cool, emotionally unperturbed, rational competence of professionalism.

If professionals are desiring subjects, they are anxious ones continually worried and haunted by a self-perceived lack, a feeling shaped by a competitive environment where harsh external parameters of assessment become deeply internalized. Lower-status workers must navigate the competitive pressures of the professional system where peer-rivals are pitted against one another for access to scarce capital and employment. I argue that they do so through envy, an anxious emotion that expresses a subjective sense of insecurity about one's social position and status in the world. Workers' experience of envy reveals that professional self-perception is deeply *comparative*, such that lower-status workers evaluate their own status and worth in terms of their perceived standing in relation to others. To capture this comparative nature of envy, I use the term *competitive envy*.

I sat on the couch across from Maxwell, a recently married graduate-educated white male in his late 20s, in his newly purchased two-story house in a cozy affluent D.C. suburb lined with beautiful trees. We chatted about some of the books on homeland and national security perched in a bookcase on the side wall, and he told me about being a self-described "history and foreign policy buff." We eventually ended up on a discussion of his newly renovated "open-concept" kitchen before turning to the topic of graduate school. We came upon the topic of a younger woman colleague of his, Karen, whom I did not know. "Have you seen her bio?" he asks as I reluctantly sip a cold beer in a primordial act of homosociality. "No," I respond. Scoffing, Maxwell pulls out his phone and begins to type in the Google search bar while simultaneously narrating his opinion of her. "She only has a bachelor's and she's only in her first year at [D.C. graduate program in international relations and security studies]—" "Do you know her?" I accidentally interrupted, noting that he had recently graduated from the same program. Seeming slightly derailed from his initial incomplete thought, he responded, "Not really, she wasn't in my

cohort, but I've seen her at a bunch of department parties. She's alright," Maxwell said as he continued his original line of thinking while pulling her employment and LinkedIn bios up on his phone.

I had sat through one too many affluent white men pulling up (often women's) bios during informal and private conversations in order to criticize a perceived gap between credentials/experience and position, but I reconciled myself to maintaining the bodily performance of attentiveness. Breaking the homosocial order by challenging Maxwell would unleash intolerable consequences, likely disrupting the interview, spoiling my relationship of data extraction with Maxwell, and thus endangering my own pursuit of professional advancement. And so, as Maxwell turned his phone toward me in a summons to look, I leaned in and craned my neck over the coffee table to gaze cooperatively at Karen's profile. Despite his feverishly rapid thumb-scrolling (which typified D.C. professionals in their 20s and 30s), I gathered that she had simply done what all members of the professional class in D.C. (or anywhere) must do to survive: branded herself, showcasing her human capital, experience and expertise, as a means to make herself more professionally attractive and maximize her chances of career advancement. According to her profile, she possessed innovative "project design and data analysis skills," was experienced in using qualitative and quantitative research design to analyze and issue policy recommendations for fast-evolving problems in "urban resilience and security."

"She's been there barely a year," Maxwell protested of her minimal employment tenure, "and Aiden [close friend of Maxwell and colleague of Karen] told me she's flexing for project manager." I neutrally *huh'd*, signifying both my feigned curiosity and attempting to abstain from whatever professional class male game into which I was being ensnared. Perhaps struck with the anxiety that arises upon receiving an unfulfilling response, Maxwell abruptly offers, "You're

studying D.C., that's 100 percent DC," referring to Karen's putative overconfident entitlement, while pointing and wagging his index finger down at my field notebook. While Karen was now attending his graduate alma mater, she was not currently in direct competition with Maxwell for resources, contacts or positions; indeed, as he expressed to me, the overlap in their social networks and professional interests was not dense enough to warrant either direct competitive struggle or advantageous cooperation. Maxwell's envy is *objectless* – it does not aim for possession of a desired object, such as the position of project manager, or in other cases access to a prestigious individual, social group or institution; rather, it is, with Aristotle and Kant, a form of gendered "pain at the good fortune of others" which does not materially "detract from one's own" well-being.

Yet, perhaps this competitive envy was shaped by Maxwell's insecurity about his own status as a competent, worthy professional advancing up the class hierarchy. Maxwell was then temporarily unemployed after finishing graduate school, and was leaning heavily on his in-person and LinkedIn social networks to "land" permanent employment, with limited success. He would never have openly associated his externalized envy with internal feelings of damaged self-worth based on precarious professional/employment status – and indeed he may not have been reflexively conscious even of the possible connection. Maxwell was nevertheless highly reflexive and sensitive about his current underemployed status, especially given his advanced graduate degree from a recognized university and fairly extensive employment history for his age. "It has been difficult, but Sara [Maxwell's wife, working outside of think tanks] has been really supportive, she's lead career right now… I'm confident I'll find something though. I went

back to school and I have the experience – I've been in this position before and it all works out," nodded Maxwell in what seemed like an act of self-soothing.[71]

So while Karen was not a peer-competitor and thus posed no material threat to Maxwell's objective professional status, she represented a menacing *intrapsychic* threat to his sense of professional status – a challenge to what psychoanalysts call the narcissistic "ego-libido," or sense of self-love (Freud 1913).[72] That she would strive for the status of project manager, and (putatively) perceive herself entitled to such a position given her comparatively inferior credentials, was intolerable for Maxwell, who directed envy toward his image of Karen and her perceived entitlement and unjustified possession of social status. Maxwell's case illustrates how the intensely competitive and hierarchical social ecology of DC shapes and sometimes exacerbates interlocutors' vulnerability. Those perceived to be unfairly privileged, advancing too rapidly or unjustifiably entitled are understood as symbolic threats to (masculine) selfhood, rendering them objects of everyday homosocial derision.

Competitive Jealousy

Less often, and unlike Maxwell, my interlocutors expressed jealous feelings toward others. I define jealousy as a form of desire directed not simply at another, but at *what this other is perceived to possess*, often involving a feeling of entitlement to possession of the desired object. The ultimate aim of jealousy is the possession of this object, which is usually some form of professional capital (e.g. accrued through networking with high-value individuals, invitations to conferences, authorship of publications, public and expert recognition of oneself as legitimate

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[71] At the time of writing, Maxwell's prediction did come true, and he is currently employed in one of the positions that he had mentioned during the above interview.

[72] In *On Narcissism*, Freud (1913) argued that libidinal impulses are directed also internally toward the ego, such that psychic life is structured by investment in self-love – a form of primary narcissism. In our context, the felt sense of personhood is tied intimately to professional status, and so perceived threats or challenges to status does injury to the sense of self-love.

and competent). For my interlocutors, the person to whom jealousy is openly directed is a mental representation of their own dispossession or exclusion from ownership of their object of desire, which is fervently wanted and/or imagined to be rightfully their own and not the other's.

I sat with Anita, a white, always impeccably dressed, graduate-educated woman who had just turned thirty during my fieldwork. Originally from Florida, she had migrated to the DC think tank sphere following experience working on developing and implementing domestic countering violent extremism (CVE) programs. While initially halfway between neutral and cold to me, over time we developed a strange relationship, wherein I often fulfilled the role of what psychoanalysts call a "container" for distressing emotions and experiences (Loewald 1960). One evening, we sat at the counter of a local sushi restaurant, one of many hip food joints popping up around my neighborhood. She had had a difficult week, and I could sense that she wanted to "vent" – a culturally coded ritual of communication to which I was exposed only among my closest interlocutors. Despite the relative trust that we had gained, the directness of her venting was unusual given the general social constraints on enmity directed at identifiable colleagues and superiors in the workplace.

I fiddled aimlessly with my chopsticks, never having learned how to use them properly nor developed a taste for raw fish. Loud, tinny *unce-unce-unce* pop music blared directly into my brain, filling the small commercial space with sonic stimulation matched only by the radiant bright-white lighting which left no area unrevealed. A middle-aged Asian sushi chef worked methodically, never looking up, as Latinx workers unveiled huge steaming pots and bustled around the outer rim waiting the counters at which younger professionals caught up, networked and flirted. As police officers harassed and relocated Black residents whose existence polluted the sidewalk just outside the restaurant, I wondered if the other sushi-eating patrons lived in the

new luxury apartment complexes springing up and anchoring themselves in the area like crabgrass. I asked if I could record the interview for research purposes, to which she half-shrugged, nodded and raised her eyebrows in a *yeah I really don't care what you do* form of consent.

I asked about how her work had been going, and she began by discussing how she had not been receiving as much professional support as she had anticipated she would receive in her workplace. "I understand that I need to be more active [in asking for more responsibility, etc], but even when I asked for a meeting, I didn't hear anything back until I sent a reminder… Samuel [Anita's manager] should have… I don't know," she trailed off, eclipsing her thought. Shifting her attention from Samuel, her manager, to her peer-competitor colleagues, she continued, "*Jennifer and David* are always in and out of his office," tightening her lips in an *of course they are* facial expression which mixed resignation and resentment. Implicitly, Anita assumes that Jennifer and David being "in and out" the manager's office assumes special access to the resources, prestige and promotional opportunities afforded by private meetings. As Jennifer and David are both in lower-middle positions equivalent to Anita – indeed they are all colleagues – their perceived unequal access to the manager represents a threat to Anita's professional status in the hierarchy of her workplace.

After I stopped recording, Anita described how Jennifer and David are prioritized as favorites in the workplace because they are always trying to please, praising their superiors' publications and finding ways to work directly on projects with the program director – what we called gaining project proximity in Section 3 of this chapter. While Maxwell did not directly desire Karen's perceived good, Anita's jealousy involves active desire for the possession of what her rivals are perceived to possess – access to and affinity with the program manager, who holds

a major key to forward career propulsion. The professional affection of the manager, along with the attendant forms of capital to be accrued on the basis of this affection, is the ultimate object of Anita's jealous feeling. While I cannot speak to whether Anita's theory of unequal access is true or whether it entailed her peer-competitors' advancement, she is emotionally responding to a very real competitive system of accumulation, where affinity and access to high-value professionals is especially important for lower- and lower-mid status employees (see Chapter 1). In DC, professional access and association – signified for Anita by Jennifer and David's access to meetings – *is* often associated with concrete forms of support: being an object of professional affection by one's superior means more informal mentoring, face-to-face contact, facilitation of contacts, and recommendations for further employment. This competitive context, where advancement is predicated on continual association with superiors, makes sense of Anita's experience of jealousy. Comparing her relative lack of access to the program director to the perceived favoring conferred onto Jennifer and David signified by time "in the office," Anita felt that the "professional development support" her peer-rivals might be afforded was to her detriment. Ultimately, Anita's jealousy seemed to be an expression of a insecurity constitutive of professional personhood, where self-worth is dependent on and organized in terms of comparative social status.

Competitive Resentment

For lower-status workers, resentment is an experiential response to, and interpretation of, the perception of being treated unfairly, especially where being treated as such leads to someone else obtaining unfair advantages that enable their ascension. In competitive professional contexts with often zero-sum struggles over exclusive employment and other positions (e.g. being a panelist, winning an employment position over competitors), resentment is a palpable,

widespread and systemic emotion.[73] In this section, we will examine competitive resentment through the experiences of Walter and Domenico, two lower-middle status workers, both of whom during fieldwork were working in centrist-liberal think tanks.

Walter is a tall, thin fast-talking male associate in his mid-20s with jet-black hair and a witty, reflexive sense of humor. After a first internship, he had moved into an associate position at his then current think tank. Over this time, he had developed many different interests relating to security, including financial and corporate security, but had not yet found a specialization to which he wanted to dedicate his professional life. Like many in his employment position, he was considering either translating the knowledge and skills he had gained into a different field (e.g. corporate security), or going on to obtain further education. On one beautiful Spring day, Walter and I met at an astonishingly priced – but delicious – chic restaurant. We sat outdoors in the "sidewalk cafe," a patrons-only dining area that extended into the sidewalk in a culinary privatization of public space that has become a common signifier of urban gentrification in U.S. cities. I squirmed in my stylized bamboo chair, looked around, and mentioned how nice of a day it was, which Walter politely affirmed.

Walter seemed a bit more open than usual, almost certainly because there were no other sidewalk-café patrons within hearing distance given that it was the middle of the workday. In a carefully controlled tone, he explained his account of how his ideas had been unfairly appropriated for use in a publication without attribution of his authorship/ownership, which had been on in his mind for a few weeks since the publication of the document. He told me of a

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[73] I had a variety of informal discussions in one-on-one and small-group confidence where feelings of resentment were expressed, worked through, and sometimes even laughed about. I wrote about almost all of them in fieldnotes. When I returned to them while developing my dissertation, I contacted the interlocutors to ask if I could include anonymized data about these conversations, many gave an apologetic no (especially those, perhaps not coincidentally, with legal or journalistic training). While these interlocutors consented to be participants, they often constrained the extent to which they were included in the study; this selective denial among research participants was a telling feature of the write-up phase of this research.

series of meetings he had with his team working on different parts of the policy research and writing process, and then mentioned a specific handful of his ideas that had made their way into the final publication: "In the draft meetings I said 'OK we should recommend bringing in community stakeholders for buy-in,' I was really consistent about this, and if you look at the report it's right there. I came up with that… I didn't write it, but that's basically my recommendation… I didn't write it because we weren't involved in the [writing] process." Here, Walter claims ownership over his "recommendations" – concrete pieces of advice for policymakers that often come at the end of policy reports – as intellectual property. However, he is formally excluded from participation in the policy report writing due to his lower employment status as an associate, and so was not able to claim ownership over the ideas.

Walter went on to describe the experience of *invisibility*, which is obscured in discourses of recognition: "I'm there in the acknowledgements, but that's different from attribution, I can't put being in the acknowledgements on my resume." Walter notes that he is recognized as a participant and contributor to the menial digital labor of research, but that this is qualitatively distinct from the capital-enhancing social form of "attribution." Attribution is an individuated form of professional capital, which signifies significant individual contribution to a legitimated project and a specified set of valuable professional skills. While attribution can be rendered legible on Linkedin profiles and resumes in a way that is recognized and valued by others, simple acknowledgement cannot be. In other words, attribution is a form of capital that is professional personhood-enhancing, while acknowledgement is not. Walter explains: "This is what's frustrating, I don't *get* anything from being acknowledged. I'm grateful for it but it means that all that work isn't being recognized, so even if I have that experience, nobody is going to take me seriously if I put that on my resume. I can put it on, but there's no concrete deliverable,

where I can say, 'look, this is what I did, here was the process, and here's the final product, and that's why I'm good for you.' Imagine if I put on there [the resume] that I was in the acknowledgements – that doesn't make any sense."

The power imbalance between himself and his immediate superiors, based in the organizational hierarchies described in Chapter 2, would have made direct confrontation professionally disastrous, and appeal to the program director substantially hazardous. That he had no recorded evidence made his case more vulnerable in a world where some form of documentation is necessary for substantiation.

Walter's resentment is not directed toward peer-rivals, but rather at his immediate superiors, who he thought had expropriated his intellectual property, using it to their advantage. "What they did isn't right," Walter explained, "and it's really unprofessional. You would think that people who have been doing this for years would know better, but I guess not." Walter's resentment is viscerally critical of being excluded from and dispossessed of ownership over his own ideas, whose attribution to himself would have situated him in a more advantageous professional position (e.g. made him more visible on LinkedIn). His resentment is not, however, directed at the institutional power structure which allows superiors to claim dominion over informal intellectual property, such as ideas brainstormed in meetings. The axis of antagonism is contestation over a property claim rather than over the institutional conditions of possibility of what Walter perceived as theft; neither did he take aim at the competitive system of accumulation which renders workers dependent on capital like attribution for advancement.

I sat with Domenico, an ambitious – some said boastful – lower-mid-level analyst in his late 20s who was trying to work his way into a mid-career position but having protracted trouble with doing so. He had told me in a previous interview that he was considering possible career

changes, given that advancement along his imagined professional trajectory was progressing more slowly than he had anticipated. The normative expectation in DC is that professionals be in mid-career positions by the time they push 30. He related to me how he often felt excluded or "passed over" for promotions, telling me that "you never know what goes on behind closed doors," referring to possible bias. I asked him to elaborate, and he plunged directly into recounting a painful recent experience. There had been a recent panel event on terrorism and extremism in Africa, organized by colleagues that he knew in another organization, in which he was not invited as a speaker but only as an audience member. "*I* do work on terrorism in the Sahel. I've been doing this for over five years, but I didn't hear anything from them," said Domenico, referring to not being invited as a panelist. I nod. "Instead they ask Owen, I don't have a problem with him but to be honest his work is subpar… he doesn't even write directly on the Sahel." Here, Domenico represents Owen as a competitive antagonist, and feels resentful toward him because he is invited as a panelist, excluding Domenico from participation in the event as a valued primary participant. Domenico's feelings of resentment are shaped by the pressures of competitive accumulation, where being passed over for a prominent position not only places one in a subordinated position, but occludes the possibility of increasing prestige and notoriety through being a panelist. Domenico understands Owen's advantage to be predicated on his own disadvantage in a way that is unfair according to conventionally accepted norms of status. In sharp contrast to Owen, Domenico perceives himself to be entitled to the invitation because he has professional experience in the area of concern and because Owen's work is allegedly subpar compared to his own.

As an outsider who achieved quasi-insider status on the basis of my professional capital and networks, I was myself an object of resentment, especially given that many interlocutors

thought that I was using "ethnographic research" to conceal my actual desire to obtain

employment within a think tank, unfairly using my academic credentials and contacts to "skip"

past the normative hoops, thereby accelerating my career trajectory.[74] I heard from close

interlocutors that a rumor was circulating about me: my interviewing across think tanks was

really "shopping" for future employment. I desperately and systematically assured interlocutors,

especially if they were suspicious lower- and lower-mid status workers closer to my rank who

might perceive me as a peer-rival, that I was not interested in employment in the think tank

sector. One interlocutor maintained deep suspicion of me up until the point at which he won a

position that he thought I was going to apply for, despite my denial. After getting the job and

realizing that I had been telling the truth when I told him I wasn't applying, he discernibly

slackened his suspicion. My intuition is that winning the position also enabled him to feel more

secure in himself, which allowed him to open up more with others who were no longer seen to be

peer-rivals.

I was obliquely confronted about my unfair advantage once. After one long workday, I went

to "happy hour" drinks and appetizers with peer colleagues – two interns and one analyst – in a

badly under-lit bar where faces were barely perceptible. Marie, a white woman in her late

twenties who had just been promoted into an analyst position after working in multiple unpaid

internships in different think tanks, told me straightforwardly how *lucky* I was to have a job at a

think tank given that I had no experience in the sector. Previously, I had told her how I was able

to skip the application, and obtain an "interview" which was just a formality, because of the

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[74] In one conversation, an interlocutor complained to me that educational credentials are a key criterion of professional value when it comes to competition over employment positions. She relayed to me a story about how many applicants for a position with undergraduate degrees were passed over in favor of those with master's degrees. She told me that there is widespread resentment among lower ranks toward the practice of valuing MA holders over BA holders, especially given that those just out of their undergraduate degrees need positions to gain their initial professional experience.

reference of powerful contacts in my network. 'You are *really lucky*. Most people don't even get an interview. They're doing thousands of applications and they don't even hear back. You got it because you had a contact,' Marie said.[75] Taken aback, I nervously smiled, chuckled and looked down, trying to recall the tactics of conflict-avoiding, depersonalized DC communication in which my close interlocutors had trained me. The two other interns at the tiny table did not know that I had effectively skipped over the formal intern selection by leaning on my high-capital network. I worried about this – after all, the grueling selection process I had the privilege to skip was the same selection process that both of them struggled through. Shaken by either Marie's boldness or my unearned privileges (or more probably both at once), they swung their heads toward me, anticipating a response and accounting.

The moment of decision struck me like lightning: open antagonism, submission, or deflection, although none of the options meant immediate redemption of my irreversibly damaged identity. 'Haha, yeah, I've been really lucky. I'm lucky to have the position,' I responded meekly, echoing Marie's own language.[76] While Marie and I were not close friends or colleagues, I had spent time with her at informal house parties, happy hours, event receptions and formal work spaces. I was surprised that she said this in a conversation with peer colleagues, especially given the cultural taboo on public criticism of others – or, in this case, raw, face-to-face outing. Marie did not need an analytic of "professional capital accumulation' or a theory of 'transactional networking' to know, based in her personal experience of struggle up the class ladder, that my network afforded me material advantages that others were excluded from. Marie's usage of the word "lucky" has culturally specific content – it refers not to random statistical chance or divine intervention, but rather my unequal access/advantage on the basis of

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[75] Unrecorded, reconstructed dialogue from fieldnotes.
[76] Unrecorded, reconstructed dialogue from fieldnotes.

social networks that I was able to access because of my own educational capital and high-status social networks.

The competitive emotions that we have explored in this section are shaped by longstanding cultural norms of individualism in the United States (Cattelino 2010; Brown 2015). In our case, the experience of being an individual is patterned by values and norms of professionality. Specifically, emotional experience is patterned by cultural formations of competitive accumulation whereby aspiring professionals construct their own identities and senses of self-worth through comparative evaluation sensitive to shared conceptions of and commitments to social hierarchy.

4.   The Paradox of Advancement Among Lower-Status Workers

The hierarchies of the workplace simultaneously constrain, and potentiate, lower-status workers' aspirations for professional advancement. We have seen that epistemic workers negotiate these hierarchies through crafting their own professional subjectivities in ways tailored to the social and organizational environment. In this section, I suggest that the imperatives of accumulation generate a *paradox of advancement* for lower-status workers: the very hierarchical relations and competitive pressures of the workplace that constrain possibilities for workers are simultaneously those that must be utilized and leveraged for professional advancement. In *Psychic Life of Power,* Judith Butler (2005) highlights this paradox: regimes of power repress and mutilate subjectivity, while also providing its very conditions of possibility by calling the subject into being. The paradox of advancement is shaped by the competitive and hierarchical system of professional accumulation. As we have seen, interns and other lower-status workers may not enjoy their subordinate status, but they depended employment to gain access to necessary relationships and forms of capital. Lower-status workers depend on their employment

to gain skills and experience, but also gain access to relationships that they can use to expand their network and enhance their prestige. Their bosses are, for instance, often powerful gatekeepers that mediate access to professional opportunities. Therefore, in order to advance, the epistemic worker must adapt and endure a set of social relations that are less than ideal. Indeed, the same exchanges of labor and managerial relations that often frustrate workers are the ones that they must rely on to advance their careers.[77] Interns are situated in a position where they must endure certain stresses, and where, given the stakes involved, the possibilities for frustration are acute. In this section, I suggest that this paradoxical tension materializes in the lived experience of lower-status workers through forms and feelings of precarity, dependence and frustrated and ambivalent reciprocity.

Precarity

In Section 1, we saw that flexibility often means disposability, and that interns and other lower-status workers must become reconciled to the casualization and instability of their employment. Interns and other lower-status workers often must move far distances (e.g. from West to East Coast), shoulder exorbitant rent burdens,[78] adjust socially, culturally, and geographically to a new city, and engage in uncompensated or under-compensated work with no guarantee of permanent employment. They do all of this in order to access the possibility of professional mobility in DC. Paradoxically, one must enter into a space of irremediable risk in order to access the potential of career advancement. Indeed, many come to reconcile themselves to the danger of failure in such competitive environments; as one interlocutor stated plaintively,

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[77] This relationship of supplication and dependence is similar to systems of apprenticeship. Like apprenticeship, internships are designed to train novices into specific skills while also socializing them into professional subjectivity (Lancy 2012).

[78] For instance, 92% of the monthly income of interns at a think tank known to be generous would go to rent for an average one-bedroom apartment.

"it's just how it goes." For many who accept the gamble, potential failure is simply a necessary condition of possibility of professional success. Very few (none in my fieldwork experience) enter the think tank workforce and move up the ladder without having done some contingent work like interning, and all understand the pressures of competition and possibility of failure. Although universally understood, this accepted social condition of insecurity produces precarity for lower-status workers. The lack of stable access to gainful employment, and correlative upward mobility along a normative career trajectory, makes lower-status workers extremely anxious. Importantly, only professional aspirants from higher class backgrounds can afford to do one or multiple unpaid internships. As we have seen, for instance, many wageless interns' families subsidize their social reproduction in DC in order to enable them access to upwardly mobile professional development. In contrast, those potential aspirants from poor and working class families are not able to access subsidies to ameliorate their wagelessness, and so are *de facto* excluded from most think tank internships (which are predominantly unwaged). The anxiety of precarity, then, is an emotion potentiated by the relatively advantaged class status of interns who can afford to live in DC without wages.

Throughout fieldwork, the precarious conditions of employment weighed on most lower-status workers.[79] The visibility of this anxiety was most palpably expressed in "free" time, where the pressures of work dissolved into anxiety about the future. I spent much time with interns outside of work, where they worried about whether they were doing enough to enhance their professional status, and whether this would proximately and ultimately translate into a successful and fulfilling career. As noted in Section 1, to flexibly adapt to the labor market, interns scoured

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[79] There was no overt public discussion of this precarity in the workplace among interns or other employees, and in my experience it was not discussed as a formal policy problem either within think tanks.

LinkedIn and Google Jobs for opportunities, discussing with myself and one another the advantages and disadvantages of staying, leaving and applying.

Many nervously wondered how to balance the likelihood that they would not continue at their current place of employment with their desire to "stay on." Interns anxiously deliberated: How much energy should be invested in work, networking and professional development at the current workplace, versus branching out in search of other opportunities? Would branching out, in terms of meeting new people and learning different skills, make them more competitive or less competitive at the current workplace? Interns knew that there was only a small chance of "staying on," and so had to diversify their options, but this potentially endangered their capacity to move up the ranks with their current employer. Interns explained to me that applying to positions and requesting meetings with new people was psychically burdensome – it took a lot of energy, they said, to apply to positions and request meetings while working full-time. Interns also worried about all the distinct elements of job applications: whether they had branded themselves in sufficiently tailored ways, whether their cover letter and resume were good enough, when and whether they would hear back, and how to impressively interview. They also worried about exposure to relational risks, including how to get into contact with professionals in other organizations that might be valuable contacts without alienating their current employer.

Intern precarity is institutionally enshrined in temporary labor contracts. Once individuals secure internships after an extremely competitive and selective process, they work three to six-month contracts.[80] This contingent temporality generates feelings of instability; throughout their

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[80] In some cases, internships are extended, and more rarely interns immediately secure a promoted position. Usually interns must either re-apply for the same or another internship at the same organization, or simply move on after their contracts are up.

internship, interns are perpetually unsure if they are going to receive employment at their current or another organization. Jennifer, a white, Stanford-educated woman told me:

> If you're lucky, you'll move up a notch where you're already working after your contract is up. But for most of us, you intern and then you're looking for something else, but that's just my experience and the experience of people I know. It's a little disappointing, because then you don't know where to go, and there might not be another internship available. And then if you're trying to move up [i.e. move from an internship position to a higher position], there might not be anything open at that time, or you just don't get anything. So yeah we're all wondering about this [laughs].

Jennifer expresses the situation of many interns in DC. While precarious, unstable employment does not guarantee full employment afterward, it is still required in order to even have a shot. Indeed, interns come to *expect* the instability of employment and likelihood that they will not secure permanent paid work after one or even two internships, generating feelings of perpetual precarity. I asked Lillian, a cybersecurity intern (and one of the calmest and collected twenty-two year olds I have yet met), about what it's like to not know where she will end up. She paused, looked down at the table we are sitting at and moved her water glass and its coaster a few inches to the side. "It's frustrating" she responded curtly without expanding. Sitting with us was another female intern in her early 20s, Helena, who had recently moved to D.C. from Arizona and was still adapting to the culture of competition. Agreeing with Lillian, she offered a more textured account of precarity: "Yeah, exactly, so you're always in this position like, 'am I going to get something? Am I doing everything I can right now, networking, investing enough time to get experience and skills that will help me land a job?" I gave nods of understanding as Helena went on: "It's really difficult to not know, and then it makes you ask yourself, 'am I doing the right thing' and 'how many more times am I going to do this [take another internship in hopes of another job]'?" Here, Helena details how lower-status workers are anxious not only about their future prospects, but also about whether they are accumulating enough human capital ("experience and skills") and social capital ("networking") in the here and now. Helena refers to a common experience of interns in DC – indeed, the majority of interns worried that they were

not doing enough to gain an edge in the increasingly competitive economy. Sometimes, they worried about not getting to know enough people, and at other times about not gaining enough professional experience. In many cases like Helena, interns worried about both.

Given the lack of predictable opportunities for stable employment after one or even multiple internships, some of my interlocutors serially cycled through internships in search of stable employment in a process called "hopping." Emmy, a white male intern with a guarded manner but a bright smile in his later twenties working for a prominent conservative think tank, complained that he had completed an internship with another think tank immediately after completing an undergraduate degree at George Washington University, and this was his second internship with the same think tank. "I really like my position here, and I feel at home, but sometimes I feel like it's really unstable. You never know if you're going to secure another position or not. You're constantly scrambling if you don't." This scrambling is a shared experience of interns as a class – moving from position to position, often involving multiple laborious application processes, in an attempt to find stable employment. Hopping from place to place is ultimately unsustainable, and takes a toll on the psychic and material resources of interns. Those who can afford to take on multiple unpaid internships often expressed frustration with moving from one place to another, learning about the different workplace cultures, skills and people. One interlocutor named David, a white man in his mid 20s working in his third internship and first compensated internship, reflected morosely on his professional situation as we talked amid the penetrating afternoon sun in the backyard of a friend's house. "I'm either at a stalling or a turning point!" he exclaimed, referencing the possibility of either professional fossilization or upward mobility. I asked if he felt optimistic about a future in his area of expertise: "I don't know if I have a future in foreign policy work. I'm planning to take the FSOT

[Foreign Service Officer Test for the State Department], but with the [then-current federal hiring] freeze nobody is sure. This internship is not gonna last so it's up in the air right now." Sometimes trajectories lag into what David calls a "stalling point. At the most demoralizing end of the spectrum, a few interlocutors who had completed multiple internships between the time of fieldwork and the time of writing still have not received permanent employment in a field of personal interest to them.[81]

Unsuccessful lower-status aspirants sometimes normalized their precarity. Spencer, an elite-educated white male in his early 20s and former double intern, struggled intensively to find a job after his second internship. I worked with him often, and noticed that he was intelligent, humble and hard-working. However, he was not particularly adept when it came to choreographing social networking and performing self-branding; while not socially awkward, he was soft-spoken and mild-mannered, often not making a lasting impression on contacts that might be beneficial for career development. He did not vigorously social network inside and outside of work, which limited the reach of his network when looking for positions. Speaking with me from his parents' home in Washington, he soberly explained: "I spent two months looking for a job, nothing quite panned out, so I'm back here [Washington state]. It was alright, it's just kinda how it goes. I tried to use it [his second internship] to land a job… it didn't pan out, but that's okay, I'm moving on." Here, Spencer articulates a common affect of many lower-status workers – being disposable and precarious is *just how it goes*, the normal way that the D.C. think tank labor market operates. Being a worker embedded in a competitive economy predicated on the necessary abandonment

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[81] Some who either can no longer stand hopping, or fail to secure another internship, decide to temporarily or permanently exit the job market entirely. A portion of the majority of interns in their 20s either in or just out of college go home to recoup, rehabilitate and strategize about future next steps (e.g. graduate education, a different career path, waiting until a desirable internship opportunity appears).

of a layer of failed aspirants is how the professional system of DC works, and all who enter this world must take on the risk of becoming part of this excluded population. We will return to this theme in Section 4.

Dependence

Lower-status workers are deeply dependent on their superiors to accumulate professional capital in contacts and skills necessary to advance up the class ladder. While mid-level proximate superiors (e.g. senior policy analysts) come into more direct managerial contact with interns, they are not the primary objects of esteem and networking for lower-status workers. Rather, ultimate superiors such as program directors, who are seen as higher-value subjects of professional power (see Chapter 1), command the most respect, esteem, and desire from interns. This is because ultimate superiors have more professional experience, higher institutional positions, longer publication records, and high-level contacts, which make them more valuable as tools for accumulation for lower-status workers. Furthermore, given their organizational position, they function as gatekeepers who wield power over both formal and informal recommendations.

Annabelle offered an account that was representative: "I learned a lot on my own but I've really been learning the most from working with my team and manager. It's that hands-on experience that matters. I came in with two years [of experience], but I was working on different projects, so it doesn't always translate. I've been really focused on making sure that I'm learning everything I can from Carter [her manager], so I can see it from the inside." While Annabelle expresses a holistic conception of engagement with manager *and* team, interns like Annabelle implicitly understood that they must act in ways that align and put themselves into social contact with high-status superiors. Specifically, interns worked to put themselves into close *project*

proximity with managers – developing relationships through shared labor on epistemic projects. Interns gained contact with superiors through working on projects that they managed, including panel event organization, policy research, and book-related research such as composing bibliographies. Interns' social proximity to managers was gained less through spatial than through project proximity. Because of the highly computerized nature of labor and communication in think tanks, being spatially close was no guarantee for association, and did not necessarily offer more opportunities to network for lower-status workers than digitally mediated sociality. This was especially the case given that managers were often out of the office, working from home, traveling, and networking. In one think tank office, an intern relayed to me that the manager did not even work on the same floor as the interns that they supervised, and that they physically saw the program manager only a handful of times each month. Indeed, another intern at the same office recounted a story when his manager discreetly asked him what another intern's name was, after having walked directly past that same intern to get to his own office for over two months.

Interns thus depended on becoming project-proximate to powerful superiors to ensure that labor participation led to accumulation and advancement. During many homosocial bar gatherings, I was told an iteration of: *get in with the boss*. I was consistently advised that it was unstrategic to organize one's labor *solely* on the basis of the needs an immediate supervisor who might be a mere policy analyst. These immediate supervisors, who one interlocutor resentfully called "middling," were a significant notch or two higher than interns, but much lower than the program manager on the social hierarchy. Thus, I was advised to actively create connections to the "real boss," formally known as the program manager or director. Take on projects, so went the good-intentioned paternal mantra of my male consociates, "with the boss in mind."

Keeping the boss in mind tied potentiating success to reinforcing dependence – lower-status workers could only become successful by dependently tying themselves to a superior. While I was not able to mind the boss successfully, and focused predominantly on whatever work I was delegated by my immediate supervisor, I was privy to a number of interns who did. Jake, a white male intern in his mid-twenties and one of the rare liberal arts college-trained interns in D.C., negotiated project proximity in ways that coupled accumulation *and* dependence. Jake came in to work on a specific project relating to the "Asia-Pacific security pivot," which turned out to be more popular under the Obama administration than Trump, and was thus becoming fast outmoded during the time of fieldwork. As this project lost steam, Jake pivoted to another project that the program manager had initiated and was working on indirectly (this particular program manager, Jake told me, tended to not work directly on the policy writing and research, but rather oversaw and edited the projects). Jake worked well on both this new project which brought him into closer proximity with the program manager, and other tasks delegated by his immediate supervisor. Competently juggling multiple tasks made him liked throughout the managerial chain. Through this active form of outreach through labor, he was able to gain a social foothold with the program manager, using his project proximity to secure a couple of private meetings, which is exceptionally rare for first-time interns. At the end of his internship he possessed both the respect of, and working relationships with, middle and high-status management. Two months after the end of fieldwork, Jake was internally promoted to a policy analyst – a substantial step above intern status. In this case of negotiating project proximity, Jake leveraged his own dependence to secure the accumulation of experience and social contact to enhance his social position in the hierarchy.

The structure of dependence on superiors shapes internecine competition among lower-status workers over access to interaction in the workplace. Interns navigated a complex workplace politics of deference and patronage, inter-intern struggles, all while working to perform competence and confidence. I often saw this materialize in subtle inter-intern competition over involvement in projects. While interns were often assigned to specific projects, sometimes the organization of project work teams was more fluid and *ad hoc*, involving negotiations among program staff over access. Those projects that program directors worked directly on, or that were close to their interests, would be much sought-after by interns. When high-profile and sought-after projects opened up, quotidian internecine struggles over who was assigned to which projects would occasionally erupt. For example, during a night of bowling, interns in an allied think tank told me that there had been internal conflict in their office about a data security project. According to their account, a male intern without subject matter expertise had been informally included and prioritized in a project, at the expense of a woman intern who had more professional experience working on data security. This particular project involved a prominent cyber- and data-security expert in an allied university, whom both interns were interested in working with for professional reasons. This illustrates a general pattern: those interns that were more confident and assertive (and predominantly male), and who could sell their subject matter interest and expertise better, often won bids for involvement. This involvement allowed them to network in a way that enhanced their professional status. Gaining increased proximity to and affinity with program directors was just as important as gaining professional technical skills.

In order to advance professionally, interns faced severe pressure to upward-network with superiors on whom they were dependent. The effectiveness of upward networking is predicated

on the goodwill of gatekeeper superiors, who control access to powerful networks that interns desire to penetrate. Managers and directors are direct conduits not only to technical knowledge and skills, but to opportunities for the development of contacts and resume lines. Working even minimally on a prominent author's bibliography, for example, can be inscribed on a resume and used to extend one's social reach. This asymmetry of power creates relationships of unidirectional supplication between interns and superiors. In order to secure "face-time" with ultimate superiors, interns must sensitively request meetings and work on projects that would put them in proximity to superiors. In so doing, they must negotiate complex and contradictory social norms governing relations with more powerful superiors. In upward networking, interns must ensure that they are not perceived as overdependent, swooning, or prostrating, which makes one seem "desperate" and thus excluded from the category of confident, competent professional. On the other hand, interns must be careful to not be perceived as too aggressive, in which case they might be seen as presumptive and bucking the natural hierarchy. If interns violated these normative rules of upward networking in either direction, they would annihilate or severely hobble the possibility of career advancement.

This dependence of interns on superiors for professional capital provoked ambivalent feelings among interns. Interns acutely understood the gatekeeper role of superiors, and how integral networking and working with them was for their own careers. As was usual, most did not speak directly about their frustration with being dependent on their bosses. Most lower-status workers were careful to relate to me during recorded interviews that their immediate superiors were professionally helpful and supportive at best or trying "their best" at worst – both sympathetic forms of assessment. Of her boss Grayson, intern Anna told me: "Well I think that

he is doing his best, he's working on a lot of projects – I think he's also writing a book – that's a lot to deal with at once."

The rare few that discussed disaffection on the record did so privately. John elucidated his frustration with depending on gatekeepers who provide little support for career and professional advancement. One busy afternoon during our lunch break, I asked John about how professionally supported he felt in his workplace. "I'd say [there's] very little or no guidance at all, just 'get this done, here's your deadline.' When you don't have any guidance, how are you supposed to learn and get connected? That's the point of an internship isn't it?" he says as he moves both hands side to side, signifying an aggravated rhetorical question. By guidance, John primarily means professional development support – facilitating connections, bringing him into the loop on high-profile projects, and working with him on events and conferences. John is frustrated that his main route of access to necessary capital and experience is through someone who he feels does not support him. A few moments later, John qualifies: "Dr. Carson [name of manager] has been good to me and helped me a lot, but it's been difficult sometimes when it comes to not getting the kind of support that I need." Here, the unequal power relations that structure dependence lead John to insulate his former statement, encapsulating it within a larger positive evaluation of his superiors. This understandable contradiction illustrates a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of relations of dependence, where interns feel both critical of and tied to their superiors at once.

Some interns naturalized the unequal relation of dependence and implicitly blamed themselves for not being able to access high-value persons. In this view, it was the interns' own failure to act, rather than power hierarchies of gatekeeping built into the structure of dependence,

that was the problem. Jason, a white male intern, described his relationship with his manager in this way:

> Mr. Steuben [prominent program manager] is the big draw there, but he was gone like half the time I was there, so I didn't get a lot of face-time with him. He's really quick at responding to emails, but I couldn't manage to meet with him much. He's so busy in and out of the office, I really didn't want to bother him you know. I needed face-time to build a relationship with him, but that didn't work out… I'm sure that's one reason why I couldn't find anything afterward.

Jason needed access to the manager in order to gain career advancement/promotion. Because Jason did not network enough to become favored by his manager, he was not able to secure a recommendation, either of a formal or informal kind.[82] He was thus not able to attain enough visibility to stay within the DC orbit of employment. As of the time of writing, Jason is not working in a think tank, as he had hoped during the time of fieldwork.

Regardless of lower-status workers' feelings, the structure of dependence created instabilities in the predictability of professional accumulation. As we have seen, D.C. social networks can be insular and exclusionary, and sometimes whether one is included or excluded from access to social networks depends on the idiosyncratic whims of institutionally powerful individuals. The structure of dependence structurally links interns' professional potentialities for promotion to the preferences of superiors, which imposes an external condition on advancement – the boss is both an agent of affordance and constraint at once. This relation of dependence makes intern imaginaries and actualities of their professional trajectories subject to unpredictable flux. While Rex was favored by his boss, he admitted that "sometimes it's random, if my boss decides he likes you, you're in the clear. He'll take your input more seriously, make sure you get the jobs [tasks] you want. If he doesn't like you, then you're not in a good place [laughs]. If they want to,

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[82] Informal recommendations – a boss sending a colleague in another organization an email message or phone call recommending someone – are often just as (if not more) powerful than a formal letter of recommendation.

they [managers] can really put people through it." While as per usual interns were unwilling to speak in detail about boss idiosyncrasies and biases, rumors did circulate about supportive versus unsupportive bosses: those who enabled the professional success of interns and determined their level of interest in interns on the basis of individual merit, on the one hand, and those who displayed biased favoritism (or no supportive engagement at all) in a way that blocked interns' capital accumulation and access to social networks, on the other.

Frustrated and Ambivalent Reciprocity

Interns are continually told that paid or unpaid internships are necessary rites of passage in the economy of D.C. While many interns resonated with the mission of their employer, they also aimed to utilize the institutional affiliation as an instrument for professional self-augmentation. Lower-status workers understood the enactment of their labor as a form of exchange, and they assumed and expected reciprocity from their employer in return. As a form of reciprocal exchange, interns depended on their internships to function as stepping stones to advancement. However, sometimes the normative linear upward trajectory is more uneven and unstable than expected.

Most interns enter the think tank under the assumption that their internship will serve as valuable and necessary professional experience. This, however, put them in a vulnerable position. While wages allow purchase of immediate objects of consumption, the promise of career-enhancing professional experience and capital gained from an internship is relatively ethereal. Gaining professional capital relies on being embedded in a supportive workplace that places at least some emphasis on professional development for lower-status workers; it also requires that interns be "always on" and actively networking. If either of these conditions fails to come to fruition, then interns face the threat of not obtaining an adequate return on their

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substantial investments. Interns' different experiences and perceptions of employer reciprocity generated different emotional reactions to their experience of work. These emotional reactions are divided into two forms: frustrated and ambivalent reciprocity.

Some lower-status workers expressed *frustrated reciprocity* – the sense that the provision of their labor was not met with equal reciprocal exchange by employers. These workers – especially those that went unpaid and did not find another internship or permanent position – expressed frustration that they did not receive contacts or skills in return for their daily epistemic labors. An exchange that was imagined to be equivalent ended up as non-equivalent. Furthermore, they felt that the self-work of adapting their professional subjectivities to the social and labor demands of the workplace were not worth it.

In *Capital: Volume* 1 (1971 [1867]), Marx argued that non-reciprocality is a constitutive feature of capitalist exchange relations between employer and worker. The theory of surplus value illustrates that the value of wages is necessarily less than the amount of value produced by workers at work; in the difference lies the origin of profit. Indeed, for Marx, the wage form itself, legally mediated as a contractually equal exchange, mystifies the exploitative, nonequivalent exchange of labor for wages. As we have seen, many interns were wageless, and knew not to expect wages from most internships. In contrast to Marx's account of exchanging labor for wages, interns expected that they would receive valuable, career-enhancing professional capital in exchange for their labor, including for example participation on policy reports, which would enable them to advance in order to eventually command a wage.

Olivia, a witty and cynical intern in her mid-twenties who seemed opposite to the archetypal austere, self-serious DC personality, exemplified frustrated reciprocity. In an interview, she reflected on her last internship while currently in a second internship. In her

former internship, she did not receive much "face-time" with program directors or high-status fellows because she was being asked to do multiple things at once unrelated to her areas of interest, such as composing bibliographies. Referring to a fellow who had just published a book lauded by the mainstream press, she explained: "I did his *entire* bibliography. Checked all the references, everything, it took *so much* time. I almost never saw him. The extent of that is something I didn't anticipate coming in, you never actually see these people [laughs]. I knew that was normal, but sometimes you don't even meet them, because fellows and non-resident scholars are not in the office all the time. But that's not really my problem. The thing is we're [interns] doing a lot of their work. And I don't really think there was a lot of real support."

Knowing that conversational territory involving possible criticism of superiors was a touchy subject, I meekly ask if Olivia could tell me a little bit more about what she meant by "real support." "Well I ended up doing all this stuff [for the fellows] and I didn't really learn anything for myself, you know? That bibliography took a lot of time, I was constantly looking up articles, but I didn't gain any skills that I could really leverage. I don't want to get stuck doing the same stuff like that in the future." Olivia did not gain skills or contacts that she would be able to "leverage" – DC parlance for the capacity to use experience and skills to increase one's professional value to a range of employers. In the competitive economy of DC policy worlds, non-leverageable experience does not usually count as meaningful experience for interns, as Olivia illustrates. Given her experience in her first internship, Olivia also worries that future positions might not entail more meaningful work, and that she might be allocated tasks not qualitatively different from the ones she conducted before.

While Olivia felt like she did not receive contacts and skills from her internship, some interns felt that they were excluded from authorship attribution – a key form of professional

capital. While intern authorship on policy reports is exceedingly rare – interns usually exclusively do the menial data labor (Chapter 2) – when opportunities do arise they serve as valuable sites for learning and accumulation. While some technical skills might be gained from policy research and writing, accumulating notoriety and prestige primarily occurs if one can secure direct name attribution on a specific publication, which is main form that publication legibility takes in DC. Lauren, a well-organized, verbally concise intern determined to rise the organizational hierarchy, described a particularly bitter experience of non-reciprocal exclusion from the circle of co-authors on a particular policy report. She told me that she had done research, data collection, draft writing and editing for a policy report on the international security threats that Iran poses, but did not end up being credited as a co-author on the report. Frustrated, she told me that mid- and late-career professionals do not need the attribution, but nevertheless tend to monopolize it. Referring to authorship credit that early-career professionals desire and need, Lauren remarks, "We need it. You spend six months working on something and you expect you'll come out with your name published."

Lauren's experience is an instance of what Marx (1844) called alienated labor, the way that workers must relinquish their ownership over the fruits of their labor. Under capitalism, the worker sells her labor-power in exchange for a wage, but thereby divests herself of possession of the products of her labor. For Marx, these products – called commodities – come to dominate the worker as an antagonistic, alien force that determines and impinges upon their life. This alienation is not incidental, but a constitutive feature of the exploitative class relation between employer and worker. While Lauren was not alienated from a commodity object, she was alienated from a immaterial symbolic object of value – the professional capital afforded through authorship attribution. In the professional economy of DC, authorship recognition is highly

valued, and to be stripped of it is a form of alienation. Lauren felt her labor did not receive a commensurable form of recognition via attribution. This is a particularly distressing experience because, as Lauren notes, lower-status workers need such attribution to enhance their resumes. If Lauren's labor could not be translated into a socially legible and publicly circulable format (e.g. a line on LinkedIn) through attribution, Lauren would not be able to enhance her professional personhood and thus not advance. Further, the non-reciprocality of the unequal exchange violates the expectation that work be rewarded in culturally recognized and professional beneficial ways by employers. By being effaced from attribution, Lauren's labor, congealed in the digital form of the report, was covered over and left unseen, and indeed confronted her as an "alien" object when it was released without her being attributed.

Others expressed what I call *ambivalent reciprocity,* where they feel that the exchange of labor for skills and experience has been unequal but still valuable. Maya, a thoughtful, soft-spoken intern in her early 20s, expressed her ambivalence in this way: "I went in thinking 'this is gonna be a great hands-on experience,' I'll make some contacts… I thought this experience was really gonna help me in the future," she explained. "I met people – that was really helpful – but I didn't learn much that was really necessary for where I want my career to go… the most valuable thing I got was the line [on the resume]." I often heard the phrase "the line" or "a line" used by other interlocutors to refer to an entry on a resume that substantiates and mediates professional experience. These "lines" are symbolic instruments of conveying one's professional value. For my interlocutors, the ideal intern experience would match the accumulation of "lines" inscribed on a resume with personally valued professional experience. But for interns like Maya, the line was disarticulated from a work experience considered professionally valuable. For instance, Maya did not feel that she gained career-enhancing skills or subject matter expertise,

but she nevertheless gained a symbolically powerful affiliation which could be reflected on her resume. While ambivalent about what she had received, Maya nevertheless perceived that it would be useful for self-advancement.

Like Maya, other lower-status workers felt that their experiences were not ideal, but still valuable especially concerning what Maya referred to as a "line on the resume." I was told that ambivalent reciprocity was a relatively normal modality and experience of exchange with employers. I was often told by lower-status workers that you might not be placed in an internship that you *loved* or that was directly relevant to your intellectual and career interests. But no matter, they explained – given the value of "the line," especially amidst a competitive job market where any advantage affords a possible competitive edge, one would be remiss not to take any internship opportunity. Even the most interest-distant internship was a way to exchange one's labor for "a foot in the door," affording access to social networks, professional socialization, technical epistemic skills, and institutional affiliation, which might propel the ordinary intern into the next stage of their career.

5. **"Everyone Wants to Be at the Top": Naturalizing Competitive Accumulation**

One evening I sat with Adam, an interlocutor with whom I often had strong disagreements in friendly debates which we made sure always stopped just short of hard feelings. I gingerly complained that many of the interns I spoke with cycled through multiple (often unpaid) internships with no promise of permanent employment afterward. I argued that interns are put in a position where they *must* take on internships in order to make themselves minimally attractive to future employers, but that this is only a necessary – and never sufficient – condition of landing an actual secure paid job. Adam's facial expression signaling sympathetic

understanding resolved itself after a few moments into a reticent shrug. "That's the game – everyone wants to be at the top but you have to put in a lot of work to get there."

Conflating what I took to be the injustice of subordinated position of interns with their putative "wanting to be at the top" was a peculiar inversion, but it revealed how workers naturalize the hierarchies and forms of subordination that constitute hegemonic understandings of normative career trajectories in DC. In this section, I explore the naturalization of competitive struggles for accumulation aimed at advancing up the social hierarchy, and how lower-status workers come to identify with – and occasionally contest – competition for prestige, status and position.[83] First, I show how lower-status workers come to identify with social relations of competition, and in particular competitive forms of accumulation. Second, I explain how interns make sense of subordination through the idea of *temporary sacrifice.* Third, I discuss how interns explain success and failure in the struggle for competitive accumulation/advancement. Fourth, I examine two exceptional cases of interns who contested or rejected the prevailing norms and values of competition.

Before we begin, it is important to detail how interns are subject to particularly intense forms of pressure to compete and succeed. This is because they embody a striking tension: on the one hand, interns are subjects of major and recurring human capital investments, rendering them relatively high-value and technically skilled forms of labor; on the other hand, interns are situated in a subordinated position in the symbolic and organizational hierarchy, subject to

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[83] I would also suggest that, despite the discourse of universal potential advance for all workers based on meritocracy and commitment to hard work, the political economy of knowledge institutions like think tanks rely on a class of permanently subordinated workers excluded from even the promise of class progress, in particular those in staff, service and custodial positions. Further, many of these workers, overwhelmingly people of color, are excluded from the symbolic legitimacy associated with the specific regimes of professional accumulation in which they are enmeshed. These workers are not, in other words, even recognized as on the same career trajectory as those attempting to become "experts." Due to their racialized and gendered class subordination as *non-epistemic* forms of labor, these workers are not legitimate recipients of the forms of professional capital that matter. However, this claim is outside the scope of this chapter.

protracted forms of insecure, un- or under-compensated work. As relatively advantaged and valuable workers placed in organizationally devalued positionalities, interns face a predicament that is culturally understood as potentially resolvable through upward mobility.

Given that their professional subjectivity is the effect of an immense personal, familial and social labor, interns face more intense pressure to compete and succeed professionally; the stakes of failure are high relative to the enormous level of psychic and material investment. Furthermore, in the early-career period of internhood, there is a substantial gap between investment and return: high investment in one's professional subjectivity, such as prestigious education, relocation to work in DC, and performance of menial duties, does not immediately translate into permanent, symbolically valued positions for interns; rather, interns must engage in ongoing projects of professional self-making in order to ensure their return on investment. Shaped by both the fear of failure and desire to transcend their subordinate status, interns are psychologically tied to normative ideas of professional success. They are acutely conscious of the gap between current and desired employment position and professional status, and their aim is to close that gap. As consciousness of this gap makes success all the more anticipated and sought after, interns throw themselves daily into the competitive struggle for accumulation.

The contradiction between being institutionally and symbolically subordinated as a devalued kind of worker and simultaneously being part of a privileged class layer shapes the existential investment that lower-status workers have in their professional careers. While interns know that they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, they imagine and expect themselves to rise up the professional hierarchy, and this was their vision for themselves. Given their material and psychic investment in themselves, they deeply desire professional advancement, thus organizing the majority of their professional practices around this goal. This often meant that the general

imperative of competitive accumulation and hierarchies of status went unproblematized among lower-status workers. Given their paradoxical position and investment in career, interns mostly identified with the formations and relations of competitive accumulation in their respective workplaces as a means to achieve advancement.

Identifying with/Naturalizing the System

Washington, D.C. think tanks are extraordinarily competitive places. There are few symbolically valued, permanent positions for employment, and lower-status workers must struggle through rites of passage like internships to secure them. In everyday conversation, I noticed that social hierarchies and competitive struggles for accumulation were naturalized and normalized features of the social world. For example, a fellow intern told me how she had been entered into a "competition" to pitch ideas for a next project. Rather than teams of interns pitching projects together, management had decided that each intern would be individually pitted in a competition against all the other interns in her program. While never explicitly stated, it was known that these competitions operated as systems of vetting, wherein winning entailed symbolic prestige and increased chances of receiving full-time employment in the same organization. In response to news of a competition, I let out an emaciated gasp of disappointment, exhausted with gamified competitions between workers, noting to her how individualized this seemed. Given that she was a closer interlocutor, I naively assumed that she would share in my distaste for management pitting workers against one another – even if in the form of a happy game. 'I know,' she responded exuberantly, 'It's great. I'm really competitive, so when I heard about this I got really excited.'[84]

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[84] Reconstructed from an unrecorded phone conversation.

This example, and the generalized pattern it reflects, grates against the conventional Marxist understanding that class consciousness – and what Mario Tronti (2020 [1961]) called "class hatred" – emerges from the shared experience of class exploitation.[85] In general, interns developed neither class consciousness nor a direct critique of the social hierarchy and system of competitive accumulation in which they were enmeshed.[86] On the contrary, with few exceptions, hierarchy and competition were naturalized as the legitimate form of organizing social relations. Indeed, hierarchy and competition were *values* that were actively invested in by many lower-status workers. As Adam above explained, it is not just that individuals understand that there are competitive hierarchies, but that they actively desire and believe they should be and will be at the top of these hierarchies. The very conceptualization of a professional career in DC think tanks is predicated on this investment in and expectation of ascension.

For all workers, professional advancement and success was a deep, experiential desire. "I'd like to be a CEO," one upwardly mobile interlocutor in his late twenties said of his future, "or some kind of executive in the private sector." For interns, desire is aspirational, oriented toward the future. Lacan theorized the nature of desire in his concept of the *object petit a* – that fantasy object which the subject desires and imagines will fill or complete a constitutive "lack" in the subject (Lacan 1988 [1954]). For Lacan, desire is asymptotic: the subject is in a constant state of reach toward the fulfillment of a desire that is in actuality constitutively unattainable. While Lacan argues that the impossibility of fulfilling desire is constitutive of the psyche, he fails to capture the way that social, cultural and political forces shape the objects of desire and

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[85] Of course, close friendships were developed among interns.
[86] This claim must be qualified by the potential methodological problems with collecting data. I believe that lower-status workers had more resentment and criticism of the social world of think tanks than I was privy to based on my researcher subject position, but I cannot verify this incontrovertibly. I am sure that some of this lack of evidence is an artifact of interlocutors' attempt at reputation management and fear for possible revelation of identity and reprisals which would endanger professional success.

manner of investment. Similarly, theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) argues that cruel optimism, the condition whereby people invest in and optimistically hope for an object that is unattainable, is a constitutive feature of subjectivity within regimes of late liberal capitalism. Both Berlant and Lacan assume that the object of desire cannot be obtained. In contrast, I found that a select few interns *do* accumulate enough knowledge, skills and relationships (professional capital) to enter the domain of socially ratified professionals, crossing the threshold from temporary contract labor to permanent institutional affiliation – in other words, from lower-status to higher-status.

The success of a few interns is predicated, however, on the exclusion of a larger segment of disposable epistemic workers from advancement, who are not able to pass from liminal to included status. The systems of professional competition to which all are subject ensure that advancement, and the security that comes with it, is exceptional.

That advancement and success is exceptionally rare makes it all the more fervently desired. Hopeful, aspirational forms of professional desire motivates many interns to continue along the grueling path. It is the horizon of possible success that shaped lower-status workers' perseverance through their temporary status as interns. When I asked what interns wanted out of the internship, they began with the near-at-hand: technical skills, subject matter expertise, social contracts; however, when asked what their ultimate goal was, they almost unanimously referred to high-status positions in think tanks (e.g. program manager and senior policy researcher), government (e.g. State Department), or allied professional domains (e.g. law) – all positions imbued with culturally hegemonic symbolic authority and substantive autonomy over labor.

While the competitive professional milieu of DC deeply shaped the subjectivities of lower-status workers, nearly all of them entered the think tank world already primed for social hierarchies and the imperative of competitive accumulation. To varying degrees, that is, they

understood the symbolic and institutional organization of hierarchies of professional capital and social status. Interns gained familiarity with these professional formations through family modeling and enculturation, where they learned and internalized the norms and values of competitive professionality. The professional desires and motivations of interns for advancement were shaped not only by the external pressures of competitive labor markets in DC, but by personal histories of family socialization.

Most interns came from upper-middle professional class family backgrounds, where professional success and corresponding norms of self-formation are not just deeply valued, but normatively ingrained and expected. Interns' parents' and siblings' employment spanned a range of professional class positions: professors, lawyers, realtors, financial consultants, dentists, energy, aerospace industry, engineering, medical device entrepreneur.[87] During house parties and happy hours, I learned of a brother who went to business school and was now a successful entrepreneur, and a mother who was a high-level physician at a university hospital. When I asked about family backgrounds, many interns told me that they came from families that valued education as a means to professional mobility. The pursuit of dominant symbolic goods for upward mobility was a natural feature of growing up in a family where both parents and siblings had advanced graduate and professional degrees. Having family members in professional class backgrounds enabled interns to familiarize themselves with the professional world before entering think tanks. "Both of my parents and my brothers are professionals," said one white male interlocutor from a wealthy family in Maryland nearing his mid-twenties, "so yeah I had some sense of what I wanted to do early on, I knew that I had to get some internship experience while in school. Now I'm thinking I'll go to law school… then we'll see." In the family

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[87] Interestingly, I did not meet any interns whose parents were politicians at any level of government.

constellation, both the status-signifying symbolic meanings of professionality and the concrete

modalities of self-investment necessary for accumulation were valorized, enabling my

interlocutors to gain a sense of normative behavior in D.C.

Given family formation and the pressures of the D.C. labor market, lower-status workers

tended to identify with and naturalize the competitive hierarchies and forms of accumulation in

which they were constitutively enmeshed. These workers were in a particularly difficult and

precarious position – temporarily employed, unsure of the future, and all intensely ambitious. In

order to survive as a viable professional subject in D.C., lower-status workers had to actively

incorporate, understand and enact norms and values governing advancement, such as

comparative assessment, educational self-investment, and skill accumulation, among others. In

their material practices and psychological investments, these workers developed their

subjectivities according to the normative constraints of upwardly mobile professionality. In this

way, they came to *identify with/naturalize* the norms, values and practices of (1) hierarchy and

(2) competition. We will now explore these dimensions in turn.

Naturalization of Hierarchies (1)

For lower-status workers, the identification with and naturalization of hierarchies was a

matter of *practical necessity*. Put simply: lower-status workers, whose positions were not secure,

came to identify with and naturalize hierarchies because to do otherwise would result in

obstruction of their upward professional mobility. The naturalization, or at least passive

acceptance, of hierarchies based on taken-for-granted regimes of professional capital is a

requirement of self-advancement. In particular, through practices of deference to superiors,

lower-status workers reify the status- and authority-conferring properties of professional capital.

While we have seen that intern deference is enacted through submission to delegation within

hierarchical divisions of labor (Chapter 2), it is also expressed in everyday ritualized practices of regard, esteem and compliance.

Symbolic designations and understandings of inferiority and superiority shape the behavior of lower-status workers, who must remain vigilant about how their behavior is perceived vis-à-vis their social position. Interns tacitly understand, for instance, that culturally coded direct or indirect forms of disrespect toward superiors can be threatening to their career prospects. Anxiety about unintentional disrespect saturated informal conversations, where interns often strategized with me about how to approach their immediate and ultimate bosses. Interlocutors often asked my opinion of whether emails sounded "offensive" or "weird," euphemisms for violations of norms of deference and respect for authority. I witnessed interns apologize multiple times for being too slow in completing tasks or for being "late" when the formal deadline for task completion had not yet passed. Interns' sensitivity was shaped by the structural power imbalances between themselves and their bosses – one weird-sounding email, they worried, might cost them. By cautiously regulating others' perceptions of their behaviors in ways attuned to power hierarchies, interns unintentionally worked to naturalize those hierarchies.

Interns' sensitivities to norm violations, and their naturalization of hierarchies of status, is structured by the threat that their nascent professional identities or employment status might be spoiled. Resisting the naturalization of prevailing relations of power, through for example foregoing regulation of behavior in favor of voicing direct/indirect criticisms of superiors, would result in social exclusion. At the most radical and rare end of the spectrum, this includes employment termination. One interlocutor recalled a story of a lower-middle-status analyst being "let go" because she too consistently bucked the policy analyses of her higher-status workteam. *That's why you keep quiet*, he told me, referring to keeping even mild formal work-related

commentary toward superiors to yourself until you secure a position from which to speak securely.

Throughout fieldwork, I did not record any overt violations of hierarchical relations of deference and respect. This is understandable – lower-status workers systematically avoid such actions because they would result in the diminishment of status and pose a material threat to advancement. However, as an intern, I once accidentally offended against the social order in a way that revealed what happens when naturalized power hierarchies of deference and respect are disrupted. One afternoon, I met a fellow intern for an informal tour of a well-known centrist think tank (unbeknownst to me, this would be my one and only visit). During the tour we unexpectedly bumped into a program manager in an adjacent program to the one for whom my interlocutor worked. I later learned that he was a prominent and accomplished figure in his field, with multiple single-authored books and powerful connections in the academic, government and policy worlds. I introduced myself, and unsure of whether to strike up conversation or continue on our way, awkwardly asked about the location of his office. 'Are you back that way?' I asked timidly, pointing down the hall.[88] Unfamiliar with where what interlocutors called the "boss offices" were relative to subordinates, I had tragically pointed in the direction of the lower-tiered offices reserved for middle-status employees. Taken aback, the boss raised his eyebrows, responding bitterly as if I had soiled his status (in front of an inferior no less!): *No*, he wasn't, he was on *the other side* of the office space. The other side, I was later told, was where the more luxurious, isolated, windowed offices for the managerial class were, set off from the cubicles reserved for lower-status workers. After the boss had walked off a safe distance, my intern interlocutor turned to me and silently mouthed *oh my god* as I shook my head in embarrassment.

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[88] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

Her *oh my god* signified that I had accidentally but powerfully disrupted the tacit norms

governing subordinates' respect and deference to superiors. Like many other prominent high-

status professionals in DC, the boss assumed that I *should have known* where his office was

because of his naturalized superior social status. An irredeemable faux-pas, but one that

illustrates that violations of norms may lead to potentially career-destroying exclusion and

stigma in D.C. cultures of deference to symbolic authority.

Naturalizing Competitive Accumulation (2)

Lower-status workers also tend to identify with and naturalize competitive professional

accumulation – processes and practices of gaining professionally valuable technical skills, social

contacts, institutional affiliations, social media notoriety, among others, in ways that elevate

oneself above other competitors for status, employment and social prestige. Despite their locally

specific subordination, most lower-status workers have significant self-investments oriented

directly toward professional advancement, such as long-term education, dense and strategically

located social networks, and psychic self-identification as an aspiring professional. These

investments in professional subject formation are the primary currency of social recognition in

DC; as such, they also shape the very experiential structure of selfhood for many lower-status

workers by constituting perceptions of self-worth. Furthermore, as human capital investments,

lower-status workers expect that these self-investments will – sooner or later – translate into both

secure employment and social prestige.

Through enculturation, interns come to naturalize the general imperative of competitive

accumulation, along with the specific normatively valued forms of professional capital (e.g.

education) which signify status and advancement. I asked Joseph, one interlocutor who had just

moved from an intern to an associate position, what he had learned from his stint as an intern and

how he had obtained a promotion. Assuming that I was asking advice for my own professional

advancement, he responded:

> It sounds harsh, I know, but you have to beat out the others, it's a good thing you are doing a PhD at a top school, that's definitely what got you in and that's what is going to help you move up. What you need to work on now is gaining inside experience. Read everything high-quality that you can, go to events, to anything you can. Don't mimic other people though, people are going to know immediately [snaps finger] if you're just an automaton. D.C. has so many of those.

The foundational practical axiom here is "beating out" others – a primary, relationally

organized feature of competitive accumulation. For Joseph, gaining a competitive edge meant

accumulating multiple forms of capital, from specialized knowledge from reading new material

and attending events, to social contacts gained at those same events. He congratulates my

graduate education as a signifier of worth and competence. Similarly, another interlocutor

Kenneth advised me to reach out and meet as many people as I could, not because I "wanted new

friends," but because DC is a "small world where knowing someone can get you a long way."

Kenneth juxtaposes the naivete of friendships with the realities of competitive struggles to build

and maintain professionally beneficial social networks. Constructing and reinforcing regimes of

competitive accumulation is enacted not only among the lower ranks, but also among those in

middle and high-status positions. During a weekly meeting I overheard a side conversation

referring to an intern applicant, where a senior manager told an analyst, 'I'm really impressed

with him. He's got a master's and a few years of industry experience.'[89] Similarly, assessing

individuals on the basis of their valued capital was a natural feature of determining the viability

of applicants for membership on think tank program websites. As an intern, I was responsible for

digitally combing through various applications and queries to the website. Those queries and

applications for membership that managers were most interested in were universally ones that

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[89] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

demonstrated some kind of normative credential (graduate degrees and military service in particular).

Naturalizing systems of competitive accumulation did not necessarily involve conscious, intentional identification. Sometimes, lower-status workers expressed passive/resigned reconciliation to the pressures of competitive accumulation, rather than positive identification and inhabitation. Barbara, a white woman in her early twenties who was near the completion of her undergraduate degree in New Mexico, explained: "I've already got internship experience, but the hope is that going to grad school will put me in a better, more competitive, position once I'm done." I knew Barbara well, and she was not aggressively competitive person; unlike many others, she welcomed me into the D.C. fold and showed an atypical warmth and openness. Understanding that normative self-investments such as intern experience and graduate education were key to upward mobility in the think tank sector, she reconciled herself to self-invest in order to put herself into a better competitive position.[90]

Explaining Subordination: Temporary Sacrifice and Professional Futurity/Aspiration

We have seen how lower-status workers understand, negotiate and naturalize the social hierarchies and forms of competition in DC think tanks. But how do lower-status workers come to naturalize a system in which *they themselves* are constitutively subordinate? In this section, I suggest that interns make sense of their subordination in relation to normative teleological understandings of professional advancement, where individuals must temporarily perform undesirable labor in order to gain access to more desirable employment and forms of social

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[90] While Barbara was an atypical personality, the revolving internship-graduate school-permanent employment triad was a fairly typical trajectory for many young interns, associates and assistants that I met. They would gain internships in college or just out of college, cycle out into graduate school, then return to either think tanks or other policy-related organizations with both work experience and the credentials to substantiate expertise.

status. Here, individual professional trajectories are constructed and imagined as both vertically

upward-moving and sequentially linear; that is, normative professional development is conceived

in terms of cumulative and progressive advancement through a series of positions in the

organizational hierarchy – what one interlocutor humorously called the movement "from intern

to boss," analogizing it to Drake's famous song "Started from the Bottom."[91] This is underpinned

by the larger cultural idea hegemonic in the United States that individual hard work eventually

leads to class success – the "American Dream" (McGinnis 2009).[92]

To make sense of their subordination, interns and other lower-status workers conceived

of their degraded positionalities in terms of what one intern called *temporary sacrifice* – a

necessary period of subordinated labor that conditions and makes possible future advancement.

This socially necessary period of temporary subordination, the story went, is key to *potentiating*

professional success. This period might be discrete (a three or six-month internship leading to a

higher position), or organized sequentially (from an internship to graduate school and then back

again into a higher position). Successfully navigating this period would enable upward

movement in the organizational hierarchy, where one would be able to conduct a progressively

smaller proportion of undesirable labor, while simultaneously gaining proportionally more social

status and prestige.

The discourse of temporary sacrifice was a hegemonic, taken-for-granted part of

professional ideology in DC – it was intoned across all ranks, from the newest intern to the most

seasoned doctorate-holding expert. I was insistently told that one can only move up the hierarchy

through performing such labor, as it enables one to gain experience, skills and contacts. This

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[91] The song's chorus goes *Started from the bottom, now we're here*, referencing upward class movement.
[92] As we shall see in a later section, however, lower-status workers also acutely understand that – and experience how – hard work does not always entail success.

pragmatic explanation of temporary sacrifice was coupled with the idea that, independent of being a learning experience, experiencing a long process of various degrees of subordination was just how professional mobility operated in D.C. *That's how it works here*, I heard in various iterations, in loud bars and sanitized offices alike. This trajectory – a relatively grueling rite of passage period of subordination predicated on desire for promotion to a higher status in the future – resonates with many other elite professions, including law, finance, and medicine (Zaloom 2011, Starr 2008).

This section focuses in particular on how interns utilized the idiom of temporary sacrifice to make sense of their condition, and construct it as a temporary liminal condition. Interns keenly understood their low position in the division of labor, but rejected the idea that this was a permanent condition; rather, subordination was perceived as a liquid condition and rite of passage to be progressively transcended. Importantly, interns did not *explicitly* naturalize their subordination; rather, they naturalized the social system whereby lower-ranked workers must undergo temporary subordination in order to advance. They grounded and justified their current condition as a social one in the light of professional futurity, rather than a natural and eternal one universal to their categorization as intern. For them, temporary subordination was just one step in a longer upward teleology of professional mobility. This understanding of temporary sacrifice was underpinned, as we have seen, by the classed promise of hope – that investment in themselves, their work experience, and their organization would enable them to rise past the condition of intern.

Trevor was a white male intern in his early 20s who had recently completed an undergraduate degree in economics and international relations at a major Public Ivy on the East Coast. Trevor was known by friends and non-friends alike for his straightforward, sometimes

patronizing manner of speaking – a sympathetic friend of his described it as his "more-rational-than-thou" style of conversation. While Trevor was decent, thoughtful person, he seemed to enjoy antagonizing people to the point of frustration, and often entered into arguments with others just to play "devil's advocate." More than once he turned a conversation into a debate that ended in uncomfortable silence. When the idea of unpaid internships came up, Trevor – an unpaid intern himself – energetically offered his interpretation:

> It's a learning experience, that's what people don't get. Everyone complains, [whiney voice] 'I don't want an unpaid internship,' but you have to look at it this way – you're getting an *experience*, the internship is an experience, you're not getting paid, but it's going to put you ahead and make you more competitive… you can jump ahead of people if you get that experience, get to know people and grow your network. One of the best ways to start is an internship.

Trevor understands interning as a necessary temporary sacrifice that must be actively utilized to advance one's professional profile. He constructs internships as "learning experiences" that are beneficial to the intern because they are receiving valuable skills, contacts and professional know-how that will accelerate their professional trajectory and make them more competitive in the labor market. This resonated with advice that I was given from higher-level analysts, fellows and managers as well: actively use this time as a learning experience. Internships are configured here as an equal (or near-equal) exchange that ultimately benefits the individual intern, rather than an institutional relation of unremunerated labor exploitation. As was his wont, Trevor dramatized his explanation of internships as equal exchange through mobilizing the foil of the whiney-voiced complainer. Complaint about being uncompensated is mediated as naïve, revealing a misunderstanding of how interns stand to gain from interning. Complaint is professionally self-damaging because it covers over the opportunities that interns are afforded to become more competitive subjects – by complaining, complainers impede themselves from getting "ahead" and "growing their network."

Shane, a former intern who was now working as lower-middle status policy analyst at a center-right think tank, offers a similar – albeit more empathic – account of the necessary temporary sacrifice that interns must undergo in order to ascend the class hierarchy:

You have to assist people higher up on the food chain to really learn and get access…—you can send out however many emails but 99% of those people are not going to meet with you, but look, if they get an email from Joe-the-former-colleague saying 'Jaden is motivated and knows his stuff, can you meet with him?' they are gonna be way more open to talking with you. The way you get in with Joe is by showing him that you are competent, and that might mean you work on some things that you're not too interested in. Some people don't want to do that, and I get that, they have degrees and they don't want to work as an underling, believe me I wouldn't want to either, but that's what you have to do. [opens both hands and raises shoulders to signify a rhetorical question] Where isn't it like this? You have to work under people and take those steps before you are gonna be able to be in a position to call the shots.

Like Trevor, Shane suggests that being an intern is a two-way street: while sympathetic to those for whom interning is not ideal, interning nevertheless affords access to "learning" skills and "gaining access" to social networks. Here, Shane also foregrounds the sacrifices that interns must make in order to access social capital – one might not be able to work on topics and projects that are of interest. I saw this pattern play out with many intern interlocutors, who often found themselves working on projects that were of little or no interest to them, but which they struggled through in order to be perceived as a competent, dedicated employee.

Shane also notes that going through the process of being subordinated worker is a necessary, inescapable rite of passage inscribed in the social architecture of professional mobility in DC. Rhetorically asking "where isn't it like this" discursively naturalizes the temporary subordination of interns. For Shane, this is the natural hierarchy of the professional world – one must "work under people and take those steps" before advancement into a position of "calling" rather than receiving the shots. Aspirational lower-status workers must respect the normative system of sequential progress if they are to ascend into more respected authority positions with more dignified labor.

Older, more experienced lower-middle-status workers in their mid- to later-twenties positioned a notch above interns like Shane told me that experience is "rewarded" in DC. Over beer Jack, a white male lower-middle-status policy analyst told me matter-of-factly that "putting in the time" is required to become professionally successful. Jack told me that he understood that being a precarious intern is difficult at the same time that he had little sympathetic to say to struggling interns. He explained that he had worked multiple part-time jobs to put himself through college, and completed three different internships, before landing his first full-time policy analyst position. While working in two of those internships, internal positions opened that Jack applied for but did not receive, which forced him to find work elsewhere. Further, as a lower-middle status analyst, he was still not where he wanted to be in terms of control over his work and income level – even achieving higher status does not immediately or necessarily entail a fulfillment of professional goals. Here, *putting in the time* encapsulates the temporal dimension of temporary sacrifice: one must endure temporary subordination, sometimes multiple times and with different organizations, before securing a stable position of higher status. Jack experienced this subordination and attendant disposability first-hand, and expected that others go through a similar process if they were to achieve advancement.

Echoing middle-status workers' dictums that "putting in the time" interning is just "what you have to do," many interns were much less effusively positive about being in a subservient position than reconciled to its professional necessity. Interns understood that they were devalued workers performing the most subordinated forms of epistemic labor; they also understood, however, that this kind of work is necessary to build the skills, contacts and capital required to ascend the professional hierarchy. Putting it simply, one intern interlocutor stated that the primary value of an internship is that it is "a stepping stone." No intern said that their ultimate

goal was to stay in their current position in perpetuity; rather, internships were *tactical* choices chosen by interns in order to better position themselves in the labor market.

The idea of temporary sacrifice allowed interns to perceive their subordination as not only momentary and transcendable, but a universal rite of passage. While the social hierarchies of DC may not be ideal, at least they were equally applied in that all must pass through the subjected condition of intern. There were, however, perceived violations of the norm that destabilized some interns' image of the universality of temporary sacrifice, provoking intense negative reactions. While the discourse of temporary sacrifice helped interns make sense of their own subject condition and construct it as a necessity, violations of its universality meant that what seemed to be a necessity might in fact be a unevenly imposed.

During one informal apartment "kickback" (smaller than a party but bigger than an intimate dinner), I sat with a group of interns working in both think tanks and the private sector in a clean fifth-floor apartment furnished with new Ikea furniture. Everyone present was under 30. CNN played silently in the background on a slim television as people settled in to the living room with their bulbous wine glasses. I sat on a couch next to the interlocutor who had invited me; across from us sat three well-dressed interns along with two other interns standing behind the couches. Outside of my comfort zone, I neurotically munched on the chips and salsa sitting on the coffee table to self-soothe.

After a few experiments with multiple simultaneous conversations, we all acquiesced to the reality that the sizing of the group made a whole-group conversation inevitable. The couch triad of interns brought up an acquaintance of mine, Robert, who was a lower-middle status analyst in an allied think tank to my own. Not knowing that I knew Robert, the couch interns interpellated the entire group into a critique of Robert, who was a known acquaintance to all save

one of them, but not a member of their immediate core network. In their view, Robert had secured a full-time, paid policy analyst position without having undergone the requisite period of temporary sacrifice – while he had experience outside of D.C. in an internship, he obtained a higher (but still lower-middle status) position as a policy analyst without actually interning in D.C., skipping over the normative cycle of interning that most in the room were then experiencing.

One couch intern, Cosette, revealed that she had applied to the same position, and was not successful despite the fact that, according to her, she had more internship experience and professional skills than Robert. She also noted tacitly that she not only had more education than Robert – a master's degree from a major university in the United Kingdom – but that she had attended more prestigious institutions than he had. According to the logic of competitive accumulation whereby professional capital stock determines value and employability, Cosette should have been chosen over Robert, who allegedly embodied a lack of professional capital. That she was not chosen for the position over Robert disrupted her expectation that competitive self-investments, such as education and experience, necessarily entailed access to higher positions. Being passed over, especially by someone like Robert who was perceived to be comparatively deficient, tarnished her sense of self-worth and entitlement, generating feelings of resentment similar to the ones described above. The other interns expressed sympathy with Cosette's sense of unfairness, some shaking their heads in a combination of resentment and disbelief. In a gesture of solidarity with Cosette, one male intern James exclaimed that Robert clearly did not "deserve" an elevated position without having gone through the process of gaining professional experience and exhibiting competence in the workplace. Next year James would enter the first year in an MA program in global risk at Johns Hopkins' School of

Advanced International Studies, and he explained analogically and jokingly that he *wouldn't get a degree without doing the work*. Why should Robert, then, have gotten a permanent paid position without doing the work? Given what Cosette had said about Robert's allegedly anemic professional and educational background, another male intern named Cody pointed out that, unlike Cosette, Robert had not adequately *diversified his portfolio*, adding more to the claim that Robert was not deserving of his position.

The conversation went round for a few minutes, joining earnest resentment with nonchalant gossip into a bewildering mixture, gathering in its orbit evidence of both Robert's unworthiness and the unfairness that his unearned position symbolized. The group did not target the systemic hierarchies and unequal distribution of advantage in D.C., however, but rather foregrounded the undeservingness of Robert as an individual. Robert the individuated professional subject had not accumulated enough intra-D.C. experience and skills to justify his position; he should have "diversified" his portfolio of projects and skills by working across different organizations or on different projects within the same organization; and most fundamentally he had not "done the work" – something that everyone else in the room was currently doing in order to secure future advancement. For these interns, advancement was something that was earned through enduring the temporary sacrifice of being subordinated intern workers. Robert was constructed as unworthy of his status and position in contrast to the time- and labor-intensive subservience that everyone else had to bear as a taken-for-granted professional rite of passage. This critique of Robert revealed that those who are perceived to violate the naturalized rules of professional upward mobility by not following the normative trajectory of passing through internhood are stigmatized, in particular among lower-status workers. Robert's putative violation of the socially expected stage of temporary subordination as

an intern disrupted the group's sense that interning was a universal and necessary feature of the D.C. social hierarchy. In a disruptive challenge to the givenness of temporary sacrifice, Robert's perceived ascent also meant that their own professional trajectories might not be as stable as imagined.

Explaining Success, Explaining Failure: The Discourse of Individual Meritocratic Advancement

In this section, we turn to the question: how do lower-status workers legitimize and explain both professional success and failure? Drawing on two cases, I suggest that they mobilized discourses of meritocratic deservingness to explain success *and* naturalize failure.

Tony, a brawny white male interlocutor and policy analyst in his mid-twenties from Illinois, often joked that he worked "like a mule." He worked like a mule indeed. While proud to maintain a work-life balance where he could spend time biking and working out, Tony worked furiously and diligently during the workday, taking only a strict 30 minute lunch break or forgoing lunch breaks all together in favor of eating at his desk while drafting emails. Tony was also a respected and loyal office mate, not one to engage in what he called "office politics." One day, we had a candid conversation about success and failure in the competitive environment of D.C. When he asked what interesting things I had found in my fieldwork, I told him that many interns relayed to me the difficulties of navigating the competitive environment of D.C. think tanks. As if he had himself been pondering this very topic, he responded:

D.C. isn't a forgiving place, that's for sure, I wouldn't argue with anyone about that, though I *do* think that you have to take effort into account. If someone is making a good salary, I'm gonna say, great, they are doing well for themselves, the first person they have to thank is themselves.

Tony begins with a common feeling – D.C. is not a "forgiving place," but rather an institutional field of competitive accumulation. Nevertheless, in this context, he explains that the ultimate causality of success lies in the individual person's will and fortitude. The good salary, a major

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symbol of professional power central to the normative idea of success, conveys the value and status of the professional subject. Tony locates the origin of the good salary in the will of the individual self; while there may be others to whom the successful person is grateful for aid, the first person responsible for commanding a good salary is oneself. Tony's explanation illustrates how workers interpret and construct success through the lens of individual determination and merit.

The other side of explaining success with reference to individual aptitude and excellence is the individualization of blame for failure. James, a veteran intern, explained his experience negotiating both the challenges and potentialities of working in a competitive environment:

There are a lot of opportunities available to interns. So in my case, my manager told me right at the beginning that I should be using this [internship] as a networking opportunity, like 'get your job done but make sure that you meet people and make this as beneficial to you as possible.' He made it very clear to me that you have to put in the work, but this is also a professional opportunity to network, and it's really up to me to do that. And that's what I made it. Every chance I got, I would go to lunches and happy hours, events, conferences, ask people to get coffee, whether it was for personal or professional reasons. I got canceled on *three times* for coffee with someone I really wanted to meet, but finally it worked out. You just have to do it… so nowadays with all of the chances we're given to network, I really don't think there's any excuse for not getting out there, especially for people in our generation.

Here, James carefully does not explicitly individualize blame for failure, but asserts that there is no "excuse for not getting out there." James is correct that there are a multitude of networking opportunities for the enterprising intern; indeed every social interaction is loaded with the potential for successful or unsuccessful networking. But regardless of the scope of opportunity, James represents the failure to network and enhance one's professional persona as a *problem of individual will*. Utilizing an archetypally liberal formulation, he draws on his own experience "getting out there," and finally meeting a high-capital contact, as evidence for his theory of advancement and failure.

Embodying/Negotiating Success: Humble Douglas

Relational struggles of competitive accumulation sometimes led interlocutors to naturalize their own – and others' – individual superiority and excellence. Others, however, inhabited professional success by taking up the strategy of performing humility – downplaying or diminishing the individual causalities of success. Mediating humility allowed those on an upward trajectory to mark their enhanced status without explicitly locating its birth solely in their own will. While understandings of individuated meritocratic advancement permeated everyday social life and formatively shaped understandings of success, these humble professionals opted to background their own distinction in favor of recognizing others.

Amidst status hierarchies and the interminable struggle for competitive accumulation, those in successful upward movement had to negotiate their own advancement in light of the perceptions of others – who may or may not be satisfied with their own trajectory. Because professionals are continually comparatively assessing one another and calibrating their status vis-à-vis others, marking status advancement such as a promotion is a tricky and sensitive issue. Among lower-status workers, one of most reviled dispositions of the successful person was boasting, which was condemned as "unprofessional." Boasting stimulated negative feelings among workers sensitive to their own positionalities, transforming the boaster into an object of backstage ridicule. Many lower-status workers bitterly resented the boastful. Even those not particularly performatively arrogant could be subject to accusations just in virtue of getting promoted. Status advancing professionals, then, knew not to boast. On the other hand, however, for these professionals, culturally patterned forms of success – moving up a notch in the hierarchy – remained symbolically and existentially important to convey to others.

Advancing interlocutors found a balance through the humble performance of professional advancement. One of my interlocutors, Douglas, a white man in his late twenties moved from a lower-middle status analyst position to a middle-status senior researcher position in a different university-aligned think tank. After leaving his previous position but before starting his next one, Douglas hosted a house party celebrating the organization-crossing promotion, inviting members from his previous and prospective organization. He lived with his fiancée Jaime, a sharp and non-talkative consultant at the prestigious McKinsey and Company, and their impeccably groomed dog Jasper in a smaller but well-finished townhouse in a recently gentrified D.C. neighborhood. Douglas and Jaime were classic instantiations of the new D.C. knowledge elite – white professionals in their later twenties from upper-middle class backgrounds with advanced graduate degrees, moving progressively up through the ranks.

As I entered the house, I noticed that it was chock-full of food and drink. Beverages of all kinds sat ready on tables; craft beer with creative labels lined the granite countertops; La Croix seltzers filled the magnificent glossy chrome refrigerator. Wherever one stood in the living room or kitchen, a drink or snack was within easy reach. There was even a cooler full of alcoholic drinks that caught me by surprise as I entered the hallway to the bathroom.

The dense flesh-smoke of the barbeque filled the air as I stepped out into a backyard full of well-dressed, toned professionals in their 20s and 30s. The women wore chic sun hats and dresses, the men fitted polos and collared shirts accented with expensive sunglasses, showing that brains and body do indeed go together. Men gathered around the masculine space of the barbeque, debating when the meat was cooked and the merits and demerits of grilling versus other styles of cooking. The small backyard also hosted an impressive array of consumable and non-consumable amenities – trays of finger foods and appetizers, a bowl full of mystery alcohol,

aluminum containers filled with burgers, hot dogs and buns; along with a ping pong table, darts, and a series of beer games for the adventurous. Douglas and Jaime knew how to put on a house party.

In the warm late afternoon sunshine, Douglas stood on the back patio smiling, one arm clasped around Jaime. Posture perfectly upright and dressed in a wrinkleless button-up shirt and jeans, Douglas addressed the crowd in a booming, assertive voice with no hesitance. 'Hi everybody, welcome, gather around,' he summoned.[93] Those of us on-patio paused our conversations; those off-patio talking on the backyard grass turned to attention. He then offered a well triangulated speech celebrating his promotion, calibrated to the perceptions and positionalities of those in attendance, who spanned from nuclear and extended family to future bosses and lower-status policy analysts. As you all know, he began, he was heading off into a new position soon. He earnestly thanked his former colleagues and the organization for which they mutually worked, expressing how he had been supported every step of the way during his previous employment. While recognizing the value and contribution of networks he had built in his previous job, he then shifted to express his excitement at moving forward into his new position. Concluding, Douglas raised his glass for a toast, afterward receiving animated applause.

Douglas' gathering and toast illustrates the performance of humility. His toast served to appreciate and compliment those in his network, further ingratiating himself to them and cementing links of affinity and association necessary to build network strength. His recognition of the contribution of his former colleagues, and excitement about working with prospective ones, marked his status enhancement by socially and temporally bridging past and future professional life. While the promotion was the object of the gathering, at no point did he mention

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[93] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

the relationship between himself, his work experience and/or credentials, and his promotion. Indeed, his comments were performatively self-diminishing and primarily other-oriented, concerned with conveying his gratitude to those in attendance.

While self-diminishing in a sense, Douglas' humble performance was a key semiotic form of mediating and marking his success in advancement – his promotion, after all, was the object of the gathering. Enunciating his professional ascent and success humbly in the form of a toast performed a doubled labor of both celebrating – and diminishing – the self at once. In this way, by enacting culturally coded forms of humility, Douglas hailed a new stage of increased professional prestige in a way that did not expose him to the danger of being labeled boastful.

In the next two sections, I describe two anomalous – but illustrative – cases of interns who expressed alienation with D.C. professional and workplace cultures.

Sandra: Resentment, Alienation and Frustration

Sandra was a Latinx intern from a middle-class background, who had completed a master's degree one year earlier and had been working as an intern for nearly a year. She was one of a significant number of interns who entered think tank employment as an intern already with completed graduate education. In contrast to undergraduate or immediately post-undergraduate interns who tended to use think tanks as jump-off points, many graduate-educated interns like Sandra wanted to remain in the think tank world for the longer-term. At work, Sandra was cordial and almost reserved, known around the office as a steadfast, effective and creative employee. Outside of work, she was more vibrant and relaxed, with a contagious laugh and excellent stories about "mansplaining" and other workplace absurdities. In her off time, she wore crisp white Nikes with a red logo – unusually stylish for D.C., which I was told is known to be

reliably far behind on the fashion curve. Like all D.C. workers with upwardly mobile aspirations, she was always extremely busy, juggling multiple projects, events and meetings at once.

Sandra had a complicated, ambivalent experience working in D.C. think tanks. During our mutual lunch hour, she told me about her experience:

Well, it's a mixed bag! Definitely. When I first started interning, I had an idea of where I wanted to go with it. If you would've asked me, you know a year ago, what I would be doing [now], I don't know what I would've said but it wouldn't have been *this* [working as an intern]. It's not that it's really bad, I just don't feel like I'm being valued in a way that's equal to my skills and experience. Sometimes it-- professional development--feels winner take all, it doesn't work for me.

I nodded in sympathy with the difficulty of living in the "winner take all" environment of professional life. After a moment of silence between us, Sandra's tone then shifted to a mix of bitterness and disappointment:

I'm just disappointed, you know? You work so hard, it's a lot. If I could go back, I'm not sure what I would do. I thought that after all I have gone through I would have something more to show than a lot of internship experience. It makes me feel, I feel a little bit robbed, I didn't get my master's for nothing.

Here, Sandra expresses disappointment and resentment, stemming from the asymmetry between the amount and intensity of work that she invested in professional advancement, on the one hand, and what she has "to show" for it, on the other. She had worked her way through a graduate degree[94] and dedicated almost a year of her life to working in the think tank world, assuming that this would translate into a higher social status and more meaningful forms of work – to no avail. She says that she did not obtain her "master's for nothing," indicating frustration that she was not getting back from the world what she had put in. In her words, she felt "robbed" of the professional opportunities that she imagined that she would have at this point in her life.

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[94] It was a common assumption among all ranks that graduate education is a gateway to higher paid, more stable, and personally meaningful employment.

Sandra judged her self vis-à-vis normative timelines of professional progress, against which she determined her own ranking in the social hierarchy of advancement. Interns and other lower status workers are told implicitly and explicitly that graduate education would enhance opportunities and status, and that working hard and long for an organization would be rewarded in a timely fashion with permanent, dignified employment. In cases like Sandra's, these things do not come to pass, thus making her feel devalued and under-considered. Sandra's case illustrates just how deep norms of professional advancement and accumulation shape self-perception.

Dillon: Rejection and Scorn

The case of Dillon illustrate a rare instance of a lower-status worker who expressed rejection and scorn toward the professional culture and hierarchies of D.C. Dillon is a tall, toned white man in his mid-twenties with slim rectangular glasses, who had lived in multiple places throughout his life, from California to Massachusetts. He always spoke honestly and concisely without excess or exaggeration, unless he was telling a story, in which case he lit up with theatrical energy. He came from a lower middle-class, relatively conservative family, and unlike many others that we knew, he went to a less normatively prestigious public state university in his home state of California. He was a couple years out from an undergraduate degree in political science, and did not have a graduate degree. He had never lived in Washington, D.C. before becoming an intern, and confessed that the culture was a bit "alien" for him.

From our first encounter while scanning doughnuts at a badly attended panel event that was too early in the morning, Dillon and I got along well. We were both almost the same age and grew up in dual-family duplexes on the West Coast. We laughed about the inter- (and intra-) family feuds that duplexes seemed to encourage, and reminisced about how entire families

interacted more in the neighborhoods where we grew up. I often bowled over in laughter as he told me childhood stories of playing baseball in the middle of a cramped, double-parked street, hitting a good one only to have it veer off and ricochet off one of the parked cars, provoking the entire group to scurry away to hide behind bushes, around fences and in clandestine back-alleys. Dillon was an unconventional sort of polymath – for his undergraduate senior thesis, he had done research on Colombia and other post-conflict zones in Latin America, but also read through the entirety of David Foster Wallace's formidable and arcane 1000+ page *Infinite Jest* in high school.

Dillon had just ended a lower-middle ranked policy analyst position. This position was one significant (and paid) notch above intern, but one that remained symbolically associated more with a lower rather than higher grade of employee. Dillon had done "his time," working his way up through two back-to-back internships to achieve his current, lower-middle status position as a policy analyst. Paradoxically, it was Dillon – who had a relatively stable, paid position of higher rank than interns – who articulated the most stringent and bitter critique of the systemic hierarchies of the think tank world. Dillon described the alienation he felt through six months of work as a policy analyst:

When I first got the position I thought, 'okay, let me just figure things out.' I tried to stick to what I was asked to do… you know, don't rock the boat. This would hopefully lead to something better where I'd be doing more advanced work. But all I did was six months of cataloguing and writing descriptions, sitting there reading and uploading news articles for most of the day. I didn't even know what exactly some of that cataloguing was for. Man, I did more serious research for my senior thesis!

Upon being promoted from intern to policy analyst, Dillon anticipated that he would be doing more autonomous work that would enable him to exercise and further develop technical subject matter expertise, including especially policy report research, analysis and writing. Instead, Dillon's was relegated to what he called the "lower-tier stuff": writing tasks that

included captioning, writing descriptions for panel events, writing reviews of conferences, doing research for and writing sections of policy reports on less sought-after topics, and revising and editing those same reports. While some of this labor was designated as specific to the position of policy analyst, it also bundled in much menial digital labor of the kind usually reserved for interns (see Chapter 2). This was frustrating for Dillon, who perceived himself to be relegated to degraded forms of unstimulating labor that occluded the opportunity to exercise and develop his professional skillset.

He felt ultimately that his work not only atrophied his professional development, but also put him in an unfairly subordinated position incommensurable with his skillset, experience and qualifications. Like Sandra, Dillon felt that the work he was assigned to do was below him. He explained that had already performed the temporary sacrifice of interning, expecting that upon promotion he would be rewarded with more advanced and dignified work. When this did not come to pass, he began to feel alienated. That Dillon was formally ranked above intern made the degraded nature of his duties even more frustrating. "It wasn't right," he concluded, "I wasn't being appreciated or supported, eventually I got tired of it."

I had asked Dillon to talk during a particularly difficult transition period in his life. He had recently ended his analyst position, and the separation did not go according to plan. After over six months in the position, Dillon decided to take a break from the think tank world, unsure of whether it would be temporary or permanent. Lowering his voice to keep out of range of others, he recounted a meeting with his manager where they discussed his decision to find different employment:

So I schedule a meeting and say, 'I've appreciated my time here but I'm heading in a different direction.' People move around, this happens all the time. I tell him I want to find something else, but within a reasonable timeframe, like a few months, so they have time to find a replacement. That's normal, right? He leans back [Dillon mimics pompously sitting in a chair,

both hands clasped behind his head, leaning backward] and tells me it would be best if I left at the end of the month. This fucking guy.

By painting his boss in a vividly negative light and referring to him derogatorily ("this fucking guy"), Dillon violates one of the axiomatic norms of professional sociality in D.C.: never speak ill of your colleagues or your boss, on or off the record, especially to someone who is not a trusted confidante.[95] Here, Dillon voices a palpably disaffected scorn for his boss, reflecting his larger disillusionment and rejection of the hierarchies of D.C. However, Dillon gives not a critique of hierarchy *per se*, but rather of the way that he experienced being in a subordinated position that he felt both impeded his professional progress and insulted/humiliated him by virtue of delegating work that was symbolically categorized as below his rank.

6. Conclusion

Taking an experiential view, this chapter has been situated in the social nexus of interns' and other lower status workers' interminable struggles of competitive professional accumulation, which are oriented toward enhancing individual professional status and value. In the first section, in the context of intense competitive pressures, I explored how lower-status workers transformed themselves into normative professional subjects through a variety of self-practices that traversed the inside and outside of the workplace.

Systems of professional accumulation create inequalities of power and prestige, and intense forms of competition between workers. In the second section, I examined how lower-status workers interpret, relate to and negotiate both their own and others' professional lives through the lens of competitive emotions. In the third section, I analyzed the *paradox of advancement,* which refers to the ways that the very things that lower-status workers rely on for potential

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[95] Undoubtedly, as in a few other cases, Dillon's openness to expressing potentially professionally self-damaging opinions was in part a result of his having exited the think tank world and thus become dismissive of its norms.

advancement sometimes function to frustrate them. In the fourth section, I explored how lower-status workers naturalize both status hierarchies and forms of competitive accumulation, and how they make sense of subordination, success and failure.

This chapter foregrounded the contradictions rather than smooth development of professional subjectivity, including the entanglement of subordination and aspiration, where lower-status workers underwent periods of subjection within think tanks in order to ensure their professional viability and access to upward mobility. This temporary sacrifice – saturated with the promise of promotion – was an organizing force of epistemic labor across think tanks, underpinning the very structure of internships as an employment form. Underpaid and wageless internships are often the only route to accessing the social capital and institutional affiliation required to advance in the think tank knowledge sector, meaning that interns must reconcile themselves to them or remain excluded. By offering these precarious employment opportunities that are often the only way into the professional field of think tanks, employers depended on and stimulated understandings of temporary sacrifice, which allowed interns to make sense of their condition as one necessary pit-stop on the way to eventual advancement. This affective tethering of professional promise to symbolic and material subordination under the idiom of temporary sacrifice worked to naturalize the condition of subordination by framing it as part of a sequence of upward movement and professional inclusion. As we have seen, it also generated conditions under which both muted (and occasionally more overt) resentments and peer-rival competitive antagonisms burst forth into my interlocutors' consciousness.

At the same time that lower-status workers were subordinated, however, they also occupied relatively privileged class positions – ones that came with social, cultural and familial expectations that they enter the professional class within a normative time-frame. This

paradoxical coupling of professional subordination and relatively advantaged class status made my interlocutors' experience all the more paradoxical. As crucial rites of passage necessary for think tank employment and professional class ascension, internships were an object of anxiety in my interlocutors' experience. This pressure to succeed through internships made the imperative of competitive accumulation vis-à-vis others all the more imposing given that only the most 'competitive' aspirants achieved full-time employment.

By focusing on the complex experiences of lower-status epistemic workers, this chapter illuminates how think tanks are not simply domains of knowledge production, but also laboratories of class formation and reproduction. Think tank cultures construct and cement professional subjectivities across the inside and outside of the workplace, reflecting and reinforcing personal expectations and desires for advancement through accumulation. This chapter allows us to see how professional class formation is not unilinear or homogenous, but rather shaped by affects tied to culturally imagined upward professional trajectories, where subordination is rendered not as a static condition but rather a temporary sacrifice required for professional advancement.

Chapter 4: The Cultural Politics of Expertise

"People with advantages are loath to believe that they just happen to be people with advantages. They come readily to define themselves as inherently worthy of what they possess; they come to believe themselves 'naturally' elite; and, in fact, to imagine their possessions and their privileges as natural extensions of their own elite selves. In this sense, the idea of the elite as composed of men and women having a finer moral character is an ideology of the elite as a privileged ruling stratum, and this is true whether the ideology is elite-made or made up for it by others."
–C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*

1. Introduction

Expertise is often described as neutral, natural, universal and objective – as an attribute inherent to a person in virtue of possessing specialized forms of knowledge. Anthropology and allied social sciences have shown, however, that expertise is a heterogeneously organized and culturally specific social form that must be enacted and reproduced in everyday practice. Boyer (2005) defines "an expert as an actor who has developed skills in, semiotic-epistemic competence for, and attentional concern with, some sphere of practical activity" (Boyer 2005: 39). Recent work linking governmentality studies and social studies of science and technology (SSST) has called attention to the role of expertise and expert knowledge in governance (Mitchell 2002; Scott 1998; Eyal 2006; Rose and Miller 2008; Stampintzky 2013). Eyal and Bucholz (2010) argue for a "sociology of interventions," which understands expertise as a network of effects rather than an individuated property or set of sociological attributes of persons. Expertise is understood here as a distributed and heterogeneous "network connecting together actors, devices, concepts and institutional and spatial arrangements," which requires continual assembling, coordination and mobilization to produce effects in the world (Eyal 2013: 877; Latour 2007). These accounts focus on how objects, concepts, devices and actors assemble themselves to construct, enact and circulate knowledge deemed expert and authoritative in the public sphere.

For Eyal and Bucholz (2010: 130), objects of expert knowledge do not "preexist the activity of governing, but [are] constituted in and through this activity." Simialrly, anthropologists and STS scholars have called attention to how expert networks engage in practices of translation and association within and across "epistemic jurisdictions" (Boyer 2008; Abbott 1988), attempting to "define and distribute roles, and mobilize or invent others to play these roles" (Law and Callon 1988: 285). Cadres of experts negotiate to enroll the epistemic and practical power of others into unstable alliances, which enable the precarious co-development of shared orientations to both knowledge problems and prospective solutions (Callon 1984). Scholars have noted, however, that expert problematizations are not unified *a priori* across social domains; it is only through the continuous localized practices of enrollment and collaboration that diverse experts come to see knowledge problems – and solutions – as shared (Callon and Law 1982; Latour 2007). Through social practices of contingent alignment, knowledge is stabilized and translated across experts domains such that they become shared "matters of concern" for a diverse array of experts (Latour 2007). It is this social work of converting phenomena into shared problems or matters of concern that makes effective public interventions by experts possible (Boyer 2008; Eyal and Bucholz 2010). In this way, scholars have examined how, what and whose forms of knowledge, become articulated into the public sphere as authorized interventions. As such, they have brought valuable attention to the relationship between diverse networks of expertise, governance and public intervention.

While appreciative of prevailing anthropologies of expertise, this chapter conceptualizes expertise as a form of power, structure of advantage and mode of distinction and differentiation constitutive of professional social hierarchies of valuation. I focus less on how expert knowledge becomes an intervention in the public sphere, or how heterogenous networks of actors, objects

and technical artifacts are arranged such that they produce truth-effects, and more on the *cultural politics of expertise*: how symbolic understandings and forms of expertise are articulated in ways shaped by relations of power and the professional struggle for hierarchical distinction and differentiation. Indeed, I suggest that expertise itself is not an object but rather a terrain on which professional struggles for accumulation play out – with all of the uneven and fractious effects that this entails. I focus in particular on how my interlocutors utilize a variety of dominant, culturally elaborated symbolic resources to organize and construct who does and does not count as an expert – and why. Rather than rendering expertise as univocal, this chapter shows that it is organized and expressed in a variety of ways, from racialized economies of epistemic value to gendered bodily practices of appearance and adornment. While Eyal and Bucholz (2010) directly suggest that examining the "sociological and cultural characteristics" of expertise is outmoded, I suggest that analysis of just such characteristics remains important in understanding the forms, practices and effects of expertise in everyday professional life. In so doing, we can discern how expertise is not simply a neutral, taken-for-granted property of persons independent of relations of power, but rather a complex social formation shaped by various forms of inequality and hierarchical differentiation. Here, I follow the lead of feminist theorists like Donna Haraway (1988), who called attention to how patriarchy shapes understandings of who counts as having an "objective" point of view, designating men as the default arbiters of knowledge.[96]

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[96] Forms and claims to possession of expertise and knowledge are shaped by inequalities of race, class, gender colonialism and other forms of power, violence and inequality. Foucault (1975) famously argued that power is constituted and reproduced through knowledge of its objects, whether they be prison inmates or inner sexual lives. Other theorists have argued that claims to knowledge – and the very epistemologies through which we conceptualize the world – are racialized, classed and gendered products of long histories of violence. Scholars of coloniality have shown how knowledge is constructed through the lens of colonial difference (Said 1978, Asad 1973). Latin American theorists of coloniality argue that the very epistemological models used to understand social realities are racialized, colonial schemas that center and elevate the status of the United States and Wesern Europe (Mignolo 2011, Quijano 2000). Indigenous scholars of settler colonialism like Simpson (2017) and Simpson (2014) argue that Indigenous knowledge, such as claims to sovereignty over land and relationships to the non-human world, are erased

In this chapter, I highlight two interrelated features of expertise. First, it is a form of hierarchical differentiation. As Carr (2012) writes, "expertise is also always ideological because it is implicated in semistable hierarchies of value that authorize particular ways of seeing and speaking as expert." Expertise, and the related culturally situated idiom of "seriousness" in DC, is a social tool used to hierarchically differentiate the self from the other, shaping who is perceived as 'serious' or an 'expert,' and who is not. Second, I emphasize that formations of expertise, including their politics of ascription and labeling, are not neutral, but rather are dynamic terrains of struggle for power and distinction that operate within what Pierre Bourdieu called a "political economy of symbolic power" (Swartz 2012) characterized by contestation over prestige and status.

In Section 2, I explore practices of constructing, performing and enacting seriousness and expertise, focusing on three dimensions: bodily practices of appearance and adornment; academic cultural capital such as title, credentials and publications; and possessing exclusive knowledge about what intellectual material is "in." In Section 3, I use a case study to explore how the symbolic distinction and elevation of some as 'experts' is predicated on the symbolic degradation of others designated as non-expert or non-serious, and how this cultural politics of designation is entwined with the larger institutional economy of epistemic power in DC. In Section 4, I turn to analyzing how race and white supremacy shape unequal practices of valuing knowledge. I argue that racialized economies of epistemic valuation – ways that nonwhite professionals' knowledge is construed as particular rather than universal and in this way devalued – structure understandings of expertise.

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by settler colonial epistemes governed by the possessive anti-Native property logics. These epistemes are foundational to the racist settler nation-state and what Estes and Yazzie (2016) call "anti-Indian common sense."

Following the previous chapters, this chapter foregrounds how think tanks and their social networks are not simply institutional terrains for policy knowledge creation, but also laboratories for class formation, socialization and reproduction. Being an intern allowed me to understand first-hand the processes and practices of socialization into professional cultures of seriousness and expertise. I came to learn, like others, not only how to enact and value culturally mediated forms of professional subjectivity and distinction, but how to construct and interpret forms of differentiation that separated the valued from the devalued. This chapter reveals that think tanks are not neutral and cultureless, but sites for training individuals into cultures of hierarchy, difference and distinction in ways that are patterned by dominant cultural meanings. Similarly, this chapter emphasizes that becoming a think tank professional is not simply about the materiality of the epistemic labor process, but also involves learning to inhabit and embody culturally specific forms of professionality in ways that enhance personhood. By foregrounding the cultural construction of seriousness and expertise, ethnographic analysis provides a unique window onto how think tanks as institutional and social formations operate to form and reproduce members of the professional class specifically concerned with claims to knowledge and expertise.

2. Constructing, Performing and Enacting Seriousness and Expertise

My most relaxing moments after fieldwork days consisted of making and eating dinner while listening to left-wing radio programs. I would arrive home around 6pm every weekday, and breath sighs of relief as I fried fish, steamed sweet potatoes and boiled collard greens in my newly untucked work clothes. During one of these moments, I had forgotten that I was supposed to be hanging out with a friend and interlocutor named Jeremy. I had just happily slopped a huge dollop mayonnaise onto my plate (for dipping the fish) as I heard a knock on the back door of the

kitchen. Shocked, I lurched out of my chair and stumbled to the counter to turn off my portable

speaker just as it blared some iteration of: "THIS IS PART OF A LONG LEGACY OF U.S.

IMPERIALISM IN THE…" Jeremy, who sometimes understandably seemed to be doing reverse

ethnography and was sometimes unsure of what was going on in my mind, entered skeptically.

"What were you listening to?" Without being explicitly told that the content of this podcast was

beyond the limits of acceptable opinion in DC, I knew that what I had done was wrong. The

moral compass that my new cultural milieu had installed into me convulsed with guilt.

Somehow, deep down inside, I knew in my heart that this podcast counted as *biased* rather than

serious. In DC, imperialism was not a word that anyone respectable or serious would associate

with the United States. Alas, full lying did not seem right in this situation. "Oh, I just heard about

it, it's called the *Intercepted* podcast by *The Intercept*." Jeremy looked at me uncertainly, with a

touch of skepticism, before deciding to give me the benefit of the doubt as an innocent neophyte

and instructing pedagogically, "Watch out for them. They aren't a serious outlet for news."

While comical in retrospect, my lurching for the speaker demonstrated that even after only a few

months I had developed a tacit knowledge of the boundary between *serious* and *not serious*

forms of knowledge, speech and practice in DC.

    Through immersion in the everyday life of my interlocutors, I learned that the idea of

"seriousness," like expertise, is a master symbol of professionality in DC, organizing and

mediating who does and does not count as a valuable, legitimate person.[97] Seriousness and

expertise are not abstract properties, but rather culturally specific indexes of legitimacy,

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[97] I kept asking professionals in their twenties and thirties about "expertise": what it meant, what made an expert an expert, what they considered themselves experts in. Some of them seemed disoriented and unsure about questions like this about expertise. Eventually, one interlocutor told me straightforwardly: "I don't think of myself as an expert, I think of myself as a professional." This led me to understand that sometimes professionality was a more salient cultural category than expertise, and that mediating 'serious' professionality sometimes took precedent over explicit self-designations of expertise. At the same time, it should also be said that professionality functioned as a necessary condition and idiom of expertise.

authority, credibility, and status. Being perceived as and embodying seriousness makes one a

valuable professional subject in a way that guarantees inclusion and standing in the community

of professionals. The cultural form of seriousness is analogous to what anthropologist Karen Ho,

in the context of Wall Street investment banks, calls "smartness." "On Wall Street," writes Ho

(2009: 40):

> "[S]martness" means much more than individual intelligence; it conveys a naturalized and
> generic sense of 'impressiveness,' of elite, pinnacle status and expertise, which is used to signify,
> even prove, investment bankers' worthiness as advisors to corporate America and leaders of the
> global financial markets. To be considered "smart" on Wall Street is to be implicated in a web of
> situated practices and ideologies, coproduced through the interactions of multiple institutions,
> processes, and American culture at large, which confer authority and legitimacy on high finance
> and contribute to the sector's vast influence. The culture of smartness is not simply a quality of
> Wall Street, but a currency, a driving force productive of both profit accumulation and global
> prowess.

Like smartness, seriousness is an idiom of both expertise and professionality.[98] It is utilized

to construct hierarchies of value, distinguishing the boundary between the legitimate and

illegitimate. And like smartness, the seriousness of some people over others becomes naturalized

as an intrinsic property of their personhood rather than a culturally constructed designation used

to organize status hierarchies and replicate unequal power relations. This chapter foregrounds

this *relational* politics of seriousness and expertise: being understood as serious or an expert is

mutually constitutive with the fabrication of subjects and forms of knowledge designated as non-

serious or non-expert. As we shall see, interlocutors mobilized discourses of non-seriousness and

non-expertise to delegitimize and devalue while simultaneously elevating themselves. While

sharing a similar operational logic, these diverse delegitimation struggles are structured by

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[98] According to the cultural logic of DC, while seriousness is a necessary condition of expertise, it is not always co-extensive with it. One might convey and embody serious professionality without necessarily being characterized as an expert. This might be the case, for instance, for early-career professionals, who might be seen as serious but not necessarily experts in their field. However, it still stands that being understood as seriousness strongly aids in mediating expertise.

culturally specific meanings, from understandings of gender difference to differential valuations of academic cultural capital. These forms of hierarchical differentiation, which divide the legitimate from the illegitimate, and the valued from the devalued, are central to cultural formations of expertise.

While closely related to the trope of smartness, DC think tankers' construction and utilization of notions of seriousness to distinguish themselves and others as valued professional subjects is importantly different. Unlike on Wall Street, quickness, fluidity and impressiveness is less important for DC knowledge elites than accumulated credentials, knowledge, contacts, and experience, along with more "mature," self-serious professional demeanor. Indeed, many interlocutors were careful to point out that those who are too "flashy" or "trendy" would not count among the ranks of the serious.

I also draw on Karen Ho (2009) to emphasize that seriousness and expertise are not essential, static properties inherent to persons. Rather, they are social relations which require an immense and ongoing everyday labor to create and reproduce. In other words, mediations of seriousness and expertise must be enacted in order to be made legible and palpable in social life. As Carr (2012: 19) suggests, expertise as an "intensively citational institutional practice, rather than a powerful cache of individual knowledge." The object of this chapter is to explore how, in variegated ways, seriousness and expertise are made, negotiated and contested in practice. Rather than framing seriousness/expertise as static accumulated pools of professional power, I examine their mediations and enactments through the everyday lives and practices of my interlocutors. To explore this, I draw on Judith Butler's concept of *performativity*. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler (1999) argued that gender is not an essential and ahistorical attribute of bodies, but rather a culturally constructed relationship created through iterative

practices. "Gender," Butler (1999) writes, "is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." Like gender, there is no stable, intrinsic essence of "expertise" or "seriousness"; rather, symbolically meaningful performative mediations perceived as "serious" bring the cultural form of seriousness itself into being.

The Dress Code: Gendered Politics of Bodily Self-Presentation

It is a classic summer day of hellish and muggy heat in DC, one of many still and wretched days with no breeze. Steven is giving me an informal tour of the historic district of Capitol Hill. "DC was built on a swamp," jokes Steven, "so it gets really muggy," to which I weakly, miserably laugh. My body is adorned with all of the ritualized accoutrements of male professional respectability – a full suit, tie and dress shoes. I walk upright and intentional, just like my male pedagogue-interlocutors taught me. I did not realize how excruciatingly long the summer's day walk was from Congress to the White House through the National Mall, and my unforgiving dress shoes are already starting to gnaw at my heels, forming blisters. My collar and tie, coiled like a snake around my throat, are nearly suffocating in the heat. I daydream of shorts and home, wondering how people here can stand dressing like this in the summer heat. As Steven and I walk west, it is surprisingly quiet given that the machinery of American government surrounds us on all sides.

Steven guides me through the institutional veins of Capitol Hill, where the everyday elite labors of governing make the world move, deciding who lives and who dies. He points

animatedly at different buildings as we walk – the Senate and House buildings, Supreme Court, White House, and other lesser known government entities. Mostly white men and women in suits stride around, necks craned downward toward their phones, some taking Ubers and Lyfts for just a handful of blocks. Steven explains that to avoid arriving sweaty at their next important meeting, professionals opt to take air-conditioned rideshare transportation instead of bearing the 5-minute walk. This is a routine feature of DC professional mobility, he explains. The lived experience of heat made this palpably sensible, yet a question still remained: why do people dress in ways that seem to exacerbate discomfort? The answer involves cultural values and norms of normative professionality in DC: formal clothes signify professional respectability, competence and status, and to be taken seriously in DC it is imperative that one wear them.

Anthropologist Terence Turner (1980: 486-487) wrote that "man is born naked but is everywhere in clothes (or their symbolic equivalents)." "The surface of the body," he suggested, "seems everywhere to be treated, not only as the boundary of the individual as a biological and psychological entity but as the frontier of the social self as well… the body becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in all its culturally multifarious forms, from body-painting to clothing and from feather head-dresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed." Social norms and values become inscribed on and expressed through the body, whose adornment and public presentation convey culturally salient meanings about selfhood, status and power. In this section, I focus on cultural practices of bodily adornment in the form of clothing, which reveal important dimensions of the organization of the professional social worlds in DC. As Marshall Sahlins (1976: 179) argues, "the system of American clothing amounts to a very complex scheme of cultural categories and the relations between them, a veritable map… of the cultural universe."

As an "expressive medium" (McCracken 1986), clothing is thus an important site for understanding how individuals and groups configure, mediate and express meanings about themselves and their relationships to others.

As material signifiers of status, clothing in DC conveys and constructs forms of hierarchical differentiation. Similarly, Petr Bogatyrev (1971) suggested that Slovakian Moravian folk costumes are material representations of "systems of difference," that construct corresponding "conceptual" systems of difference. Individuals are organized into age-grades, for example, through costumes that discriminate between categories of person based on clothing fabric, shape and color (Bogatyrev 1971). Clothing, then, serves as a material representation of the prevailing hierarchies of the social world. Similarly, in DC, clothing is used not only to express one's personal and professional identity, but also signify one's elevated social status and exclusive membership in the category of "serious" in ways that differentiate the self from others, organizing persons into distinct status hierarchies. This resonates with Karen Ho's description of how bankers mediate smartness, which "must be represented and reinforced by a specific appearance and bodily technique that dominantly signals that impressiveness; not surprisingly, such characteristics as being impeccably and smartly dressed, dashing appearance, mental and physical quickness, aggressiveness, and vigor reference the default upper-classness, maleness, whiteness, and heteronormativity of ideal investment bankers." Like Wall Street investment bankers, the suit – the hegemonic form of bodily adornment for men and women in DC – mediates both normative professionality and potential inclusion in the group of people designated as serious. In this way, suits are not neutral; rather, they express and reinforce relations of power, distinction and advantage in ways that demarcate expert from non-expert. Neither are suits universal across all axes of social difference; rather, they must be embodied and

performed in ways that are specific to one's socially perceived gender. Not only are status hierarchies mediated through clothing, but gender differentiation as well is enacted through different gender-specific forms of suits.

In this section, I argue that clothing constructs seriousness. More specifically, culturally valued forms and combinations of clothing mediate worth in ways that create and enforce the line between serious and non-serious. Following Polhemus (1989), I emphasize the ways that meanings about the person are communicated in ways that are non-verbal, including through styles of dress and manners of embodiment. While I do not argue that clothing is a sufficient condition of being categorized as "serious," it is undoubtedly a necessary condition – not conforming the prevailing standards of dress in DC entails exclusion from social belonging and thus access to spaces of accumulation. Individuals utilize clothing to mediate seriousness in an attempt to be socially perceived as serious. In this section, we explore the process of becoming a professional man and woman through clothing, respectively.

In contrast to places like Los Angeles and New York, many interlocutors joked with me that DC notoriously does not follow fashion trends. I heard phrases like "behind the curve" and "conservative" applied to the fashion cultures of DC. "DC is still very conservative," explained one male interlocutor, "We aren't pioneers in fashion." This opposition to fashion trends allows DC professionals to construct and signify the stability, objectivity, neutrality and rationality associated with ideas of seriousness and expertise.

Figure 9: The suit: Everyday masculine professional clothing (Credit: Carolyn Merritt)

Within weeks of arrival to the field, I had been seriously advised handful of times that I

needed a suit – business casual clothing or even unmatched blazer-pants combos were not going

to cut it. I needed a full matching suit, including especially a matching jacket and pants, and

dress shoes. One interlocutor Caleb recommended that I purchase one from a trendy online

retailer called Combatant Gentlemen. These suits, he told me, "are not the best of the best, but

they are decent quality." When I saw the $300 price tag on the suit, I complained that this was

absurdly exorbitant, joking that I had never paid $300 for one set of clothing in my entire life.

Laughing, he said that this was at the lowest end of the price spectrum for a suit that would meet

the minimal normative standard of DC. There was, Caleb explained, a complex cultural formula

for clothing in DC: in order to show basic personal worth and respect for others, I needed to buy

and wear a suit that met minimum standards of "decency" and didn't "look cheap." "You won't

be *taken seriously* if you show up with a cheap suit [my italics]," Caleb counseled. "You can

immediately tell when someone has a cheap suit, the shoulder pads are too big, the fabric is low-quality, it just looks bad." Here, Caleb makes the important connection between clothing and being "taken seriously" – that is, being a reputable, respectable member of DC knowledge professionals. Not knowing precisely what seriousness was but knowing that I needed to embody it through clothing, I realized that I must purchase a suit.

At last, after a few botched interviews in business casual clothing, I swallow the $300 and bought a new suit. A few days later, I am standing, struggling to tie the tie for the suit across from Gabriel, a close male interlocutor lounging on a large leather couch. Fumbling with the tie in front of Gabriel, who looked on neutrally, made me feel embarrassed and incompetent, reminding me of the childhood feeling of frustration that welled up whenever I could not get the basketball into the hoop in front of a coach or color properly within the lines in front of a teacher. "Goddamnit," I exclaim, failing to complete a half-Windsor knot yet again, feeling a rush of blood to my face, "Can you help me?" With a warm, soothing smile reminiscent of the best patient, supportive coaches, he stands up and comes to my aid. "Do you know where suits originated?" he asked, re-routing my frustration, as he ties my tie on his own body before handing it to me. "Nope," I respond, feeling more calm. 'The old kings and monarchs used to wear them in their courts to distinguish themselves from their subjects – they could afford them when their subjects couldn't.'[99] "Hmm," I respond, noting that DC hierarchies of clothing felt remarkably similar to an outsider. These anecdotes illustrate the symbolic importance of clothing in mediating minimally acceptable forms of professionality, and in hierarchically distinguishing oneself from the crowd.

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[99] Reconstructed dialogue from fieldnotes.

As I came to learn, there are specific cultural logics that govern when and where a suit is worn. At panel events and conferences marked as highly formal, suits are mandatory; wearing informal dress in these settings would immediately mark one as non-professional and unserious. Indeed, I did not witness individuals of any rank wearing informal clothes such as t-shirts in any formal event spaces. Spaces marked as less formal such as the daily workplace did not generally require a suit, but implicitly enforced a minimum threshold of business casual dress, including button-up shirts and high-quality khakis. In spaces marked as informal, on the other hand, such as apartment and house parties and bar events, wearing a suit would be considered abnormal. Over time, I learned the associations between different social spaces and expected types of dress, and how to navigate relevant forms of professional demeanor. Given that I went to many formal events as an ethnographer, I might wear my suit twice during the week, and then have it dry-cleaned over the weekend, which was a common cross-gender practice in DC. While sometimes my interlocutors laundered the shirts at home, they always took their suits to be professional dry-cleaned. I was told that this not only keeps suits at the necessary level of cleanliness to mediate professionality, but also "keeps up the quality" of the suit over time.

In the cultural world of DC, dress forms and bodily comportment are significant ways that subjects signify and embody professional subjectivity. In order to fit into my new social world and role in DC, I forced myself to not only physically adorn my body with normative professional male clothes, but to performatively stylize my bodily practices to convey standing and status. Ethnographic research in other sites, including in Los Angeles among wheelchair basketball players and Puerto Rico among anti-colonial activists, only required that I wear my usual everyday clothes – a t-shirt and non-dress pants or jeans. Doing research in DC, however, with all of the cultural protocols of dignified self-presentation and bodily expression of

professionalism, revealed the signifying power of bodily self-presentation. In particular, it illustrated how cultural values like credibility, competence, and expertise are materialized and secured through the body and its acts. Membership in the community of DC professionals is not just about the raw capital of educational credentials and work experience, but of embodying legitimate professionality through corporeal practices of signification and performance.

As we saw with Caleb's advice – you won't be taken seriously if you show up with a cheap suit – the suit has a culturally elaborated class character. Aside from being a material representation of status, the minimally acceptable DC suit has another kind of materiality – it is prohibitively priced for lower-income people, excluding those who cannot afford it from access. Those who cannot afford a minimally decent suit are *de facto* excluded from the domain of epistemic professionals in DC. Suits are a way, then, to mediate one's class position and symbolize that one has the necessary resources to enter into membership in the category of serious professionals.

Seriousness, however, is not simply universal, but rather shaped by cultural understandings of gender mediated through clothing. Indeed, dress practices are utilized to differentiate human bodies into distinct gender categories; clothing is a means to corporeally signify and establish the boundary between 'male' and 'female' bodies by associating certain forms of dress as masculine or feminine. It is for this reason that we also explore in this section the gendered processes and practices of conveying seriousness and professionality. Gendered norms, however, were never enforced in explicit, enunciated gendered terms – I was never told to "become a professional man" or that "this is how professional men dress." Rather, I had to learn to understand and practice the cultural codes of male dress and performance through extended socialization among male-presenting (and female-presenting) peers.

When I first entered the mysterious male cultural worlds of clothing, I was overwhelmed with the amount and intricacy of the rules governing bodily adornment. Over time, I learned that the male clothed body as a whole, along with the particular clothing elements, are critically important for mediating specifically masculine forms of seriousness.[100] To mediate seriousness, male-presenting individuals must adopt specific forms of clothing and bodily adornment designated for men – what I call, following Ashcraft and Flores (2010), *professional masculinity*.

As we have seen, the focal form of professional male clothing is the suit – a central vector of seriousness. The suit is the normative standard dress form for professional men in DC think tanks along with allied sectors like the private sector and government. Upon arrival in DC, I was told that I needed at least one versatile suit that could be combined with many different shirts, belts and shoes. "You need a standard suit [that] you can wear to anything," advised my close male interlocutor Liam. It was important to get color right, said Liam, and there were two dominant and commonly accepted colors of suit in DC: navy and grey. Other colors were implicitly stigmatized as strongly discouraged because they attract too much attention to the body. Without stating it explicitly, however, it was obvious that not only were men not supposed to wear non-generic colors, but they were not supposed to wear colors cast as feminine, such as pink or cream. I told Liam that I was unsure of which color to get, to which he responded that "navy is your best bet." This echoed the advice I heard from others that navy is the most popular and generic color for suits, and has become in recent years the normative standard. As a color described as neutral, navy conveyed the disinterested professionalism proper to the male professional identity.

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[100] As Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992: 13) write, the "dressed person is a *gestalt* that includes the body, all direct modifications of the body itself, and all three-dimensional supplements added to it."

While suits are universal requirements for men, there are distinct male schools of thought in DC when it comes to the particularities of suit stylization. One basic distinction was between men who ascribed to more "contemporary" or "modern" styles and those who were more "traditionalist." I was trained in the masculine arts of suit-wearing by a handful of interlocutors that stylized themselves in the latter more "traditional" category. These white male traditionalists in their later twenties and early thirties spurned the more trendy modern/contemporary look of "slim-fit" suits, pants and ties as "unprofessional"-looking, preferring the so-called "classic" fit which did not fit as tightly to the body. I told Liam that I had noticed these slim-fit suits worn around DC, especially by young male interns. Nodding, he explained: "Yeah, these guys, it might be their first suit, and that's the style, but it just doesn't look good. It makes you look immature."

My traditionalist interlocutors advised that most established and recognized professionals wore more traditional suits, and I would be wise to follow their example. And indeed I began to notice that this was true: older, more established professionals who were known as established experts almost universally abided by the traditionalist rules of male dress. By designating modern styles as immature and unprofessional, my interlocutors symbolically associated younger, lower-status individuals as less serious and worthy of respect, in contrast to those in more traditional formal clothing who were associated with being more serious professionals.

In tandem with color, the "cut" of the suit is important for mediating serious professional masculinity. My interlocutors all recommended that I purchase a single-breasted, two button suit (see Figure 9), which has two halves that button together in the front. This stands in contrast to other non-normative varieties, such as the double-breasted jacket, which were described as either too "showy" or simply "outdated." Most male professionals that I knew wore the hegemonic

single-breasted two-button suit, and I saw other varieties only a handful of times during fieldwork. The "cut" includes norms concerning the fit and length of the suit jacket, which are subject to close inter-male scrutiny and judgment. Sleeves, for instance, must fall properly on the threshold of the wrist, without covering the hand or revealing the part of the forearm prior to the wrist. One unfortunate interlocutor whose suit jacket sleeves consistently stopped an inch or two too short was made fun of behind his back at parties, despite his higher rank within the organization, illustrating that (formal) organizational and (informal) symbolic status can sometimes come into conflict with one another.

Dress pants must normatively complement the suit jacket if the embodied whole is to fulfill the criteria of serious professional masculinity. Pants cannot be too tight or too baggy, too short or too long, too thin or the fabric too "cheap-looking." They must always be darker colors, and generally should match the color of the suit jacket. Brightly colored and patterned pants are non-normative and deeply stigmatized, and I never saw either worn by individuals of any social status. Lighter colors and patterns generally signify adolescence, trendiness, and femininity (or a combination of all three), traits which are incompatible with embodying professional masculinity. Trendiness, for instance, was associated with the stylized performativity and dress cultures of Los Angeles and New York, which were, for DC professionals, unbecoming of a serious professional.

Length of pants is also important for mediating masculine professionality. In the words of one interlocutors, pants should "fall perfectly" right on the top of the shoes – while standing, socks should not be visible, but nor should the pants length cover the entire shoelace. While normative dress pants length was taught to me explicitly by male interlocutors, symbolically charged lessons in length were also expressed informally through everyday interactions. One

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day, as I walked with a few male interlocutors to lunch on the street in downtown DC, we passed a thin younger male professional wearing a "modern"/"contemporary" suit: an all-black tight-fitting suit jacket and pants, a white shirt with a smaller collar and pants that ran a couple inches above the shoe. At this later point in fieldwork, I had had enough enculturation to perceive that this person looked non-normative, carrying and conveying himself in a manner opposed to the way that my interlocutors had been advising me. Lowering his voice and turning toward the group after we were out of hearing distance, one bold white male interlocutor named Leo mocked the short pants as "too girly," associating them with femininity, and implicitly with queer forms of embodiment that disrupted the heteronormative order of masculinity. The others looked around at each other and strategically smiled and nodded in a way that silently affirmed the "too girly" description without verbally expressing agreement or amplifying the ridicule through a follow-up epithet. In the classic strategic mode of DC professionals, the others collaborated with the ridicule while at the same time remaining muted perhaps due to reflexive concern it might be too much a politically incorrect form of male bonding.

Figure 10: Informal, "Calfornia"-style Saucony shoes (left) and black Oxford dress shoes (right) (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

As I came to learn, masculine professional clothing is defined by much more than suit jacket and pants. As Eicher and Roach-Higgens (1992: 13) note, "the supplements added to [the body] must be considered types of dress because they are equally effective means of human communication." There are number of other key clothing items that are central to conveying serious professionality, such as shoes. I did not anticipate how important shoes would be for mediating professional selfhood and making a good impression on others. During one bout of male banter on the topic of my inauguration into the world of suits, a handful of interlocutors debated what part of the body was assessed first when entering a room. '*The whole thing*,' one tall white male interlocutor in his twenties emphasized adamantly, 'It's about your whole presentation.' Another agreed, but emphasized that the suit is still the most important overall. One older, more experienced male interlocutor in his early 30s who had been silently listening to the debate while attending to frying his mini hot dogs in a pan on the stove momentarily stopped and turned toward us, waving his metal spatula back and forth like a wand, 'Let me tell you something – *shoes* are the first thing that everyone looks at right when you walk into the room. They'll find a way to look down at your shoes… So you can't wear those,' he said while looking down at my Sauconys (Figure 10), informal quasi-athletic shoes popular on the West Coast but seemingly unheard of in DC.[101] "Too California" he concluded as we all laughed. Indeed, I often caught people that I had just met and even long-time interlocutors glancing down at my shoes.

As I learned the hard way, male shoe norms are excruciatingly particular. To be socially ratified, men's shoes must be relatively muted shades of black or brown, thin and fitted to the foot, not too big and not too small (see Figure 10). For example, one of the major violations of norms of masculine professionality is wearing "cheap shoes." Because I was trying to cut corners

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[101] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

on a tight budget, I bought knock-off versions of black Oxford dress shoes, assuming that they would be fine for my purposes. A few days later, I wore these shoes to meet an interlocutor Ryan, with whom I was going to attend an event later that day. When I asked if they looked good-enough, he responded reticently with disappointment, as if reluctant to tell me his thoughts. 'I can tell those are not real leather,' he said while looking down at them, immediately inspiring a feeling of buyer's remorse, 'and if you scuff them even a little bit, you'll really be able to tell that they're fake.'[102] To my frustration, he explained to me that anyone familiar with professional clothing would be able to tell that they were "knock-offs" (i.e. not real leather). And true to Ryan's prediction, when I eventually scuffed them and much of the black color came entirely off, the contrast with the more durable scuffed look of leather was evident, revealing the 'fakeness' of the knock-offs.

Figure 11: Example of a "tacky" modern collar with small width (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Once I had acquired a suit, and still on a tight budget, I went to the closest H&M, a Swedish-owned transnational mega-retailer, to buy a few sets of shirts. Later that day, I showed them to an interlocutor, Richard, with whom I had good rapport, and who was a proponent of the "classic" as opposed to modern/contemporary style. To Richard's horror, the shirts I had bought were low-class *fast fashion*, definitely unsuitable for the professional world of DC. He advised

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[102] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

that "modern" shirts – those with thinner collars that leave less room between the tie and sides of the collar – are "tacky" (Figure 11). These degraded shirts defiled the professional masculine personhood of the wearer, expressing a lack of understanding, acceptance or financial ability to fulfill dominant dress norms. In contrast, dress shirts categorized as "nice" with larger collars were more expensive and made with high-quality fibers, sometimes costing around $100 (my interlocutors often notified me via WhatsApp if there were sales, e.g. 3 shirts for $120). Richard showed me a couple baby-blue examples of higher-quality shirts and explained the differences in detail. The nice shirts, he explained, were made of thicker, more natural rather than synthetic materials (e.g. acrylics), and visually non-transparent. Guided by Richard's "professional vision" (Goodwin 1994), I quickly learned to recognize the difference between cheap, low-class shirts, and the preferred "nice" shirts of established and aspiring male professionals alike. Opposed to tacky shirts, nice shirts were symbolic mechanisms of differentiation, separating serious professional male subjects invested with authority, competence, legitimacy and professionalism from their unserious, defiled others. The popular negative trope of "tackiness" used to describe lower-quality shirts naturalizes the prestige of "nice shirts" while disguising their class character. Like the prohibitive cost of suits in general, the quality of shirts had a direct correlation with their cost: the more financially prohibitive, the more status conferred to the wearer. Those who could afford these nice shirts symbolically and materially conveyed their able class status; those who could not would not be even potentially counted among the class of serious professionals. For example, even if they gained access to the spaces of transactional networking discussed in Chapter 1, they would not be taken seriously given the way their "tacky" clothing would convey their own symbolic degradation. Indeed, those with lower-quality, tacky shirts and suits were predominantly interns with less disposable income given their wagelessness or

undercompensation. Given the classed nature of shirt possession and symbolization, shirts were

utilized by my interlocutors as an instrument of both professional prestige-making and social

exclusion at once.

Figure 12: Common tie forms: Half-Windsor knot and full-Windsor knot (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

For male-presenting people, ties and socks are symbolic modifiers of professional

masculinity which are, within certain parameters, dress forms subject to less stringent regulation.

They are unique cultural forms in that they have special semiotic functions – more so than suits

jackets and dress pants, they operate as signifiers of masculine professional *personality*. While

suits work to signify normalcy, conformity, and neutrality, ties and socks can be utilized to

mediate the uniqueness of individuality.[103] In folk schemes of clothing classification, socks and

ties are understood as secondary items that are more personally customizable than the more

standardized repertoire of, for instance, shoes. I was told that, when paired with a nice suit,

"interesting" socks and/or ties with vibrant colors or figures convey that the person is "relaxed"

and "laid-back" while also retaining their professional persona. These secondary forms of dress,

in other words, function as symbolic accentuations of one's professional identity. While some

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[103] This is, of course, not universal. Many professionals wore ties and socks in a way that did not attempt to convey unique individuality.

men stuck with the classic dark-colored socks and standard solid or patterned tie; others wore socks with bright colors (e.g. light purple, pink, teal), symbols (palm trees, pineapples), or color/pattern hybrids (e.g. purple concentric triangles). Importantly, however, "interesting" socks and ties are only acceptable when coupled with expensive, high-quality suits – only in this combination do more creative, heterodox secondary items become valued as accents rather than aberrations. Once I was told about sock and tie norms, I began to notice men using them to accent their professional embodiment at events. For example, as a prominent panelist at a major conference, one expert with a PhD in philosophy wore a crisp, expensive navy suit complemented with light purple socks. While maintaining a quality of masculine professionalism, through "interesting" socks this interlocutor communicated to the crowd his unique, individual personality.

There was a granular bodily etiquette to socks given their role as an element within a holistic mediation of professional masculinity including the larger suit. I sat with Charles, my favorite interlocutor with a broad, vital laugh. We often ate dinner and watched *The Sopranos* together after work, joking, laughing and trying to impersonate the un-impersonatable Tony Soprano played by the late James Gandolfini. Standing or sitting, still in work clothes but with untucked shirts and unlooped belts drooping to the side, the animal stench of our male workfeet poisoning the air, we would choreograph and act out scenes. During one of these evenings, the topic of socks emerged from the ether. Knowing that I was not familiar with all the intricate norms of embodying dress in DC, the always talkative Charles explained that the color of socks should always match the color of pants. This does not mean that the colors need be identical, but that there should be color "continuity" between the pants, socks and shoes, rather than a conflict. But this was not all – there were rules governing how to enact socks in different bodily practices

while wearing a suit in professional settings. "Next time, watch how they [male professionals] sit. You'll see them pull their pants up just a bit like this just before they sit," as he pinches his jeans between thumb and index finger at upper thigh level and quickly pulls upward, lifting the pants in a way that revealed his socks. "This also makes it way more comfortable to sit," he added, which I came to learn was indeed true when wearing dress pants because it gives the buttocks and waist area more room.

Combined with the material forms appended to the male body, cleanliness and grooming was an important for mediating serious professional masculinity in DC. Deviant bodily states and forms of bodily appearance were immediate disqualifiers from seriousness. As Turner (1980: 486) writes, "Cleanliness, as the removal of all 'natural' excrescence from the surface of the body, is thus the essential first step in 'socialising' the interface between self and society, embodied in concrete terms by the skin." Male cleanliness had very specific corporeal referents among my interlocutors, who were universally clean shaven or had well-groomed facial hair; were scented with masculine-marked deodorants; and had short, well-regulated hair and nails. Early on in fieldwork, my male interlocutors explicitly told me that maintaining my bodily appearance was important not only for work in DC as an intern, but also to get access to people as an ethnographer.[104]

The symbolic function of hair is a particular site of bodily concern for men. Short, well-groomed hair was the enforced norm. Both long hair and unkempt short hair was perceived as deviant; indeed, the only times I ever saw men with unkempt hair was in the privacy of their own

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[104] Non-normative weight was also perceived as a deviant bodily state. While a couple of my interlocutors might be classified as on the heavier side, the vast majority were "toned" – neither extremely thin, nor extremely muscular, but rather just muscular enough to signify that they worked out and 'took care' of their bodies.

homes or apartments, but *never* outside in public space, whether in the office or at public events.

As Turner (1980:488) writes of hair:

Hair, like skin, is a 'natural' part of the surface of the body, but unlike skin it continually grows outwards, erupting from the body into the social space beyond it. Inside the body, beneath the skin, it is alive and growing; outside, beyond the skin, it is dead and without sensation, although its growth manifests the unsocialised biological forces within. The hair of the head thus focuses the dynamic and unstable quality of the frontier between the 'natural', bio-libidinous forces of the inner body and the external sphere of social relations. In this context, hair offers itself as a symbol of the libidinal energies of the self and of the never-ending struggle to constrain within acceptable forms their eruption into social space.

Following Turner, by policing the unruliness of facial and head hair and containing the "bio-

libidinous forces of the inner body," male professionals convey gendered civility and

professionality. With Turner (1980: 488), the "removal of facial and bodily hair" enables

professional men to "contain within a social form the biological forces and libidinal energies that

lie beneath." To my surprise, one of my closer interlocutors with whom I lived even

recommended for my own benefit that I get a haircut when my hair crossed the threshold of

professionality, which revealed the significant difference between my own and my interlocutors'

standards of hair management. Men were also expected to shower and shave daily, and exert

control over their facial hair. Men must be clean-shaven, or more rarely but acceptably, have

finely groomed facial hair such as short, well-tended beards. Early in fieldwork, as I got ready

for work, I asked my roommate, who had experienced in think tanks and the private sector,

whether short "stubble" was permissible for the workplace. I walked over to him and showed

him the extent of growth of short hairs around my mouth, cheeks, and chin. "No, that's not going

to work, go clean shaven," he responded with military confidence.

In DC, this normative cleanliness is symbolically associated with serious professionality

– those who took normative care of their bodily appearance and were perceived as clean were

understood as professional, while those perceived as dirty, unclean, unkempt were symbolically

and socially excluded. Indeed, so strong was the norm of cleanliness that I never observed anyone associated with think tank social space to be 'unclean,' or even deviate slightly from normative standards. Aside from bodily hygiene and maintenance, to have dirt, grease or any other substance on the clothes or skin was unconscionable. Like the Kayapo, "To be dirty, and especially to allow traces of meat, blood or other animal substances or food to remain on the skin, is considered not merely slovenly or dirty but actively anti-social" (Turner 1980: 488). For my male interlocutors, having substances on the clothes or body would be a mark not only of generalized anti-sociality, but of a bodily appearance that fundamentally contradicts the meaning of professionality. Hudson, an affable and patient interlocutor in his early thirties, recommended emphatically that I do "bathroom checks" – periodic visual checks of my bodily appearance, including not only clothing but my face, hair, teeth and breath, especially before, during and immediately after events that might be important for my career.[105] "I can't tell you how many times my bathroom checks have saved me," he reflected. While unsurprisingly I did not record any instances where I observed symbolically polluting substances on the clothes or body of my interlocutors, the anxiety over substance-based uncleanliness was reflected in the "horror stories" that I heard from interlocutors about people spilling coffee on their clothes before or during important meetings or events.

Dress forms are not simply about mediating *one's own* professional identity, but also about communicating to others one's respect – or disrespect – *for them*. Social enactments of "nice" clothing – clothing that is not, in DC parlance, tacky or cheap – signal regard and

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[105] I was puzzled about conducting bathroom self-checks *after* events. They are necessary, he advised, because you just might get invited to any "after-event" dinners or gatherings where you still have to present yourself professionally. Indeed, I was invited once to a dinner after a major conference, where my bathroom check served me well. When I later told Hudson about this, he laughed and we wondered playfully about the social consequences of not having done the check.

recognition for others. In other words, clothing practices are esteem-signifying, other-oriented forms of communication that mediate one's own (dis)regard for others. Through their own bodies, professionals externalize their internal mental attitudes about the other. If becoming a masculine professional is about self-referential signification, it is also concerned with communicating to others *recognition of their own esteemed social status*. My interlocutors explained to me that normative clothing not only displays one's own professional identity, but also communicates one's respect and admiration for the status of others; by dressing in conformity with professional male standards, one communicates to others that *they* are worthy of recognition. To my embarrassment, early in fieldwork I violated this norm, which revealed the critical importance of esteem-signifying bodily dress practices for my DC interlocutors. During the first month of fieldwork, I had finally secured an interview that I had been working hard to obtain with a mid-level policy analyst at a right-wing think tank. At this time, I was still in my rebellious ethnographer phase where I refused to submit to the norms of professional male clothing that I had by then been hearing about a lot from interlocutors. (I had somehow managed to resist professional clothing for my entire life and was not about to start then.) I arrived maximally dressed 'up' according to my personal taste: a nice sweater over a collared, tucked in button up shirt; new, clean chinos; and… the well-worn Sauconys that one interlocutor had rightly dubbed "too California" for DC. My interviewee, Ava, hospitably came down to meet me in the lobby of her think tank. As she entered, I registered that she quickly conducted a visual full-body scan from my head to my feet, an act which always paralyzes me for a split second regardless of the context. The interview went for about forty minutes, and it seemed to go well – I was excited that it looked like I could indeed interview in DC without making any irreparable social mistakes. After the interview, I thanked her, we smiled and shook hands, and I left

buoyant. I had a haunting feeling, however, that the buoyancy masked a deeper worry of mine that while she was cordial with me, something about me did not sit well with her. I disavowed the suspicion and took the bus home. After three emails without a response, I did not receive a follow-up interview. I was disappointed, and I told Connor, one of my roommates and interlocutors. After asking a couple questions about whether I said anything offensive or off-putting, to which I responded no, he asked what I was wearing, which caught me off guard. I explained my outfit that day; as my roommate, he knew about the California Sauconys. "Of course you didn't get another interview," he responded in a tone halfway between advice and *how could you be that clueless* reproval, "when you walk in with shoes like that, you are showing disrespect, like you don't care."

Professional masculinity is not simply about physically covering the body with normative clothing, but about *embodying* that clothing in ways that convey serious masculine selfhood. Even though I now possessed a suit, I worried to one interlocutor, Lincoln, that I did not feel comfortable wearing it. Lincoln was a traditionalist with style in his late twenties whose clothes were always high-quality. The largest stock of ties I have ever witnessed was draped across a special apparatus in his room dedicated only to ties. "Sleep in your suit," he responds to my worry nonchalantly, to which I laugh, assuming that it was a joke or local figure of speech. His face remained blank. "No, I'm serious, sleep in your suit, you need to make it feel like your second skin and the best way to do that is by sleeping in it. That's what I did when I was first getting used to wearing suits." Incredulous, I respond, "Really?" "Yeah, when I first started working here [in DC], every day during the week I would sleep in my suit until I got used to it. It wasn't fun, but it worked." I did not end up taking his advice, but it illustrates the extent to which clothing practices are ingrained in and articulated through the unconscious, embodied

dispositions that Pierre Bourdieu (1972) called the *habitus*. For Bourdieu, habitus refers to the bodily dispositions and schemes of appreciation that become sedimented in the body as taken-for-granted, unconscious ways of acting in and perceiving the social world. The habitudinal dispositions that Lincoln and other male professionals worked to install in themselves over years of immersion in DC cultures of clothing and embodiment made practices of male professionality come to seem natural to them. The suit, in Lincoln's words, became like a "second skin." As a newcomer, my own habitus was unfamiliar with the dispositions of male professional embodiment, and so I had to learn the rules and styles of comportment more explicitly. As such, I had to learn how to convey through the body key cultural values of male professionality necessary to cultivate an image of seriousness.

My closest interlocutors emphasized the corporeally enacted cultural value of confidence more than any other in mediating serious professional masculinity. As anthropologists Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992: 19) suggest, "gendered dress encourages each individual to internalize as gendered roles a complex set of social expectations for behavior," including gendered styles of embodying cultural values. Unsurprisingly, as a cultural neophyte embodying masculine confidence in a suit did not come naturally to me. Teaching me how to do this involved significant forms of painstaking homosocial choreography. Anthony, a white male policy analyst in his mid-twenties, spent hours showing me the ropes, teaching me how to embody masculine professionality and correcting my mistakes. During one visit to his apartment in the young Columbia Heights area in preparation for a large event where I had to wear a suit, he gave me a full lesson in how to embody masculine confidence. I stood with him, suited, in the middle of his living room. '*Put your arms to your side like normal*,' he instructed emphatically. 'What are you

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talking about *like normal*, this is normal for me!' I responded with joking seriousness.[106] He realized that this was indeed how I held by arms in relation to my body while standing idle in a suit, and stepped back to analyze. After pondering, he walked over, grabbed both of my arms, and pushed them slightly toward my body. He then told me to 'straighten my back.' I adjusted my shoulders, rolling them much too far back as if I were bad model posing at a bodybuilding competition. He laughed heartily at my overcompensation – thankfully with me, not against me – and then moved to correct my deviant, outsider-signifying posture. He walked to my side, put one hand on the top of my chest and the other hand on my back, and pressed in order to straighten my back and shoulders without rolling them unnaturally too far backward. He then took a few steps back and evaluated my stance. 'That's a little better,' he said, nodding unconfidently.

Unlike the more patient, didactic pedagogy of interlocutors like Anthony, sometimes learning how to mediate professional masculine confidence came fast in the form of a live correction. I arrived with a close interlocutor Connor at an event too early, so we stood and talked outside the venue. Connor was not one to mince words, and while not mean-spirited, could come off as slightly abrasive for those without thick skins. He knew that I was trying to learn everything I could about how to get along in DC, and he was always very straightforward in instructing me about professional dress, manners, comportment and etiquette. Today, he was no less direct and helpful. Unbeknownst to me, I stood in my suit with my hands in my pockets. We stood in typical male social formation that I had known since my primary school days: standing side-by-side, at a safe heteronormative distance, talking while looking out rather than

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[106] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

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directly at each other. As he turned toward me, noticing my bodily comportment, he coolly instructed:

Don't put your hands in your pockets. You have to be there, look confident. I see a lot of guys standing there looking dumb with their hands in their pockets [mimics by putting hands in pockets], and I can tell immediately that they're interns. [Looks downward at hands in pockets] Look at the way it makes your suit bunch up. You see a group of young guys standing around with their hands in their pockets, you know [points to imaginary group]: interns, right there. Sometimes you even see older guys do it, they think it looks good, I just think to myself 'that looks stupid.' [Referring to the previous 'older guys with hands in pockets,' not me] You look like an idiot standing there with your hands in your pockets.

While I was taken aback, I understood that he was only fulfilling my own request that he teach me how to be in DC. After this lesson, I came to realize that men with hands in their pockets were perceived as if they were anxious and unconfident, hiding themselves through covering their hands. After this, I refrained from standing with my hands in my pockets, especially while waiting as an intern at events, and noticed that this mundane bodily practice created a sense of confidence, allowing me to more easily inhabit professional masculinity in social space.

Once I had tentatively mastered the art of simply standing in a suit, I could advance to the professional handshake – another crucial symbol of masculine confidence. I stood with Anthony, the patient teacher of masculinity mentioned above, in his apartment, receiving another lesson in mediating confidence through the body. "Okay, now try a handshake," Anthony encouraged. I walk across the small living room and extend my arm for a handshake. "No, no, don't look *down* at my hands when you come to shake my hand, you have to look me in the eyes while giving me a handshake," he said calmly but directly like a good instructor. "Why?," I respond, both interested in the cultural logic at play and worried that I would accidentally miss the other person's hand if I wasn't looking down at them. "It just looks bad, it looks like you aren't confident in yourself."

In terms of embodying serious professional masculinity, I also had to be taught strict rules of suit buttoning, which were simple on paper but complex when actually enacted in practice. I could throw my body into a suit, but without embodying the granular habits of male professionality, I would not be taken seriously. I was visiting with two interlocutors in their late twenties, Nathan and Caleb, at their shared apartment, after having attended an formal event that required I wear a suit. I had been walking a lot that day in my fake dress shoes, and was eager to rest on one of their huge puffy leather coaches in the living room. I sat down, pleased, smiling and ready to hear their review of the day. 'You can't sit down like that,' Nathan comments as Caleb looks on. 'Like what?' I respond. 'Look at your suit, you didn't undo the button.' 'Oh,' said Caleb, recognizing what Nathan was referring to. I look down at my suit and notice that, given the fastened button, the two sides of the jacket are bunched up and wrinkled. Nathan continues, 'You always have to undo your button *before* you sit down.' Caleb chimes in, 'It looks dumb if you don't.' 'Okay, like this?' I ask as I stand up, look down at my suit jacket, and clumsily unbutton the top button using two hands, as Caleb lets out a sympathetic laugh. Nathan walks over to me and stands next to me, side-by-side, 'No, not with two hands, you have to do it with just one hand. And don't look down at it. Watch me,' he says, as he uses his left hand to seamlessly unbutton his jacket using only his thumb, index finger and middle finger.[107] I mimic him, and after practicing a bit, I get the hang of unbuttoning using my one hand, without looking down. Following the proper one-handed buttoning etiquette displayed bodily knowledge of the social norms governing professional masculinity, mediating one's competence, confidence and inclusion.

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[107] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

From pocketed hands and handshakes to suit buttoning, these excerpts illustrate that purchasing and wearing a suit is simply a necessary but not sufficient condition of enacting and mediating forms of professional masculinity socially perceived as 'serious.' One also needs to develop what Marcel Mauss called "techniques of the body" (1979 [1934]) – unspoken, largely unconscious culturally patterned embodied practices that become naturalized ways of expressing oneself and orienting to the social world. Mauss (1979 [1934]: 97) wrote that techniques of the body are "the ways in which from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies." For someone unfamiliar with the male professional habitus of DC, I required explicit training in how to "use my body" in ways that were not only culturally legible, but gender normative as well. In particular, my male interlocutor-teachers helped me learn how personify a masculine form of confidence mediated through bodily comportment, including fine calibration of the relationship between all the body parts.[108]

For female-presenting people in DC, embodying professional femininity – gendered norms of clothing and bodily adornment designated as female-specific – is critically important, and it is structurally policed and regulated in ways similar to professional masculinity. To be taken *prima facie* taken seriously, women had to adopt professional femininity; and like professional masculinity, it is a key bodily device for enacting and mediating seriousness. In the generally liberal cultures of think tanks, women are encouraged to lean in, and white women in

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[108] Whether one fulfills and embodies norms of professional masculinity was verified not only through inter-male communication, but also through interaction between myself and women interlocutors. While men would with a neutral thumbs up or a polite affirmation, in contrast I noticed that a handful of women interlocutors used compliments to authorize and recognize my professional masculinity. Because I only wore my suit on special occasions, when I did it sometimes became an object of attention. When I arrived at an event, a younger female colleague of mine said with a hint of surprise, "You look handsome! You really clean up nice, I didn't expect that!" The word handsome expresses not only the transcendence of adolescence, but in this context also conformity to heteronormative forms of gender and class distinction. I became handsome only when wearing expensive, straight-presenting, normative dress which conformed to the conventional gender and class discipline of the DC social world.

particular have accumulated attenuated, yet significant, access to classification as serious.[109]

While white women remain a minority in higher-status positions in think tanks, they now sit on

panels, attend conferences and conduct policy research toe-to-toe with men, and male

interlocutors told me ambivalently but sympathetically of the increase in women bosses.

Methodologically, as a heteronormative male ethnographer I had a difficult time learning

about how women relate to the clothing norms of professional femininity. Women who did not

know me rarely seemed interested in speaking with me at all, let alone about how clothing the

body in professionally feminine ways worked to secure one's position in the social hierarchy as a

serious practitioner. Backstage practices of clothing and becoming clothed were gender-

segregated in DC: in contrast to male interlocutors, I did not have access to women's spaces of

"getting ready" – putting on clothes, shoes, makeup, jewelry, and so on before going to work or

events. This limited the extent to which I could observe and understand how women negotiate

and experience norms of professional femininity, and in particular how embodying feminine

professional clothing conditioned one's acceptance as "serious" or not. I did, however, observe

and interact with many women, and was able to triangulate between what I observed as a

participant (e.g. at events and informal gatherings), and the little that I was explicitly told about

signifying feminine seriousness through clothing.

Rules governing women's professional clothing and gendered embodiment seemed even

more difficult to balance than those of men. The central idea that my women interlocutors

relayed to me was that women had to carefully negotiate a balance between normative

understandings of professionality, on the one hand, and "attractive" femininity, on the other.

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[109] While one might observe a significant minority of white women think tank participants in the security sector – up to 1/3 of the audience at certain security-related events – nonwhite women, on the other hand, are an almost absent minority. At informal and formal events, there were usually none or occasionally one or two nonwhite women in attendance; at maximum, I observed only a handful of nonwhite women at one event featuring other women.

Combining both in practice was tricky. My closest female interlocutor Sophia, a binational policy analyst with dual French-United States citizenship, occasionally brought her small, even-tempered dog Zucchini over to my place to dogsit while she went away for the weekends. One day, she explained the tension: women had to convey through clothing and other bodily adornment that they were respectable and professional, while at the same time embodying normative forms of attractive femininity.[110] Women, she explained, had to corporeally mediate conservative, competent, and respectable professionality, while simultaneously being attractive and 'feminine.' They must do so, however, without being perceived as "sexy," which as considered deviant by men and women alike. For example, professional women, Sophia said, would *never* wear stiletto high heels, pink lipstick, shirts showing cleavage, or the like. This balance between professionality and non-sexy femininity was strictly regimented: I was told that hair must be attractive but non-romantic (no flashy highlights or racy curls); makeup should be subtle but discernably face-enhancing (extravagant makeup like "winged eyeliner" and deep eye shadow was seen as deviant); nails must reflect self-care without being gaudy (so-called artificial "fashion nails" were prohibited); form-fitting but not hypertight dress pants; attractive blazers with flattering but conservative colors; dress shirts and blouses that fit well but refrained from showing too much skin (which was deemed "unprofessional"); shoes must *always* be "closed-toed" (whether in "pumps" or other modest high heels).

Furthermore, Sophia explained, women needed to communicate self-possession and confidence *without* being perceived as too "pushy," "aggressive" or "overbearing," which she said were epithets often used against women who stood their ground vis-à-vis men. Because femininity is unconsciously rendered in the patriarchal imaginary as submissive – even in

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[110] Unrecorded, based on fieldnotes.

enlightened DC – women who cross the threshold of male understandings of female confidence were often described as pushy or aggressive.

In this way, professional femininity is constructed in opposition to non-professional femininity. The appearance of the professionally feminine woman stood in stark contrast to the non-professional woman marked as lower-class, who was culturally imagined to wear bright lipstick, too much makeup, fake eyelashes, unbecoming stiletto heels or open-toed shoes, and "romantic" or "sexy" non-conservative hairstyles. These kinds of clothing practices were constructed as non-professional, and associated with a form of femininity devoid of professionality. These gendered forms of bodily signification served to not only construct professional femininity in contrast to non-professional femininities, but also differentiate professional women from professional men. By adorning the body with clothing saturated with gendered meanings of professionality, women, along with men, demarcated male from female domains of professional being.

<center>*   *   *</center>

Near the end of fieldwork, I showed a video of a lecture to an interlocutor who had been my closest mentor when it came to learning how to dress professionally as a man in DC. I had been at that particular lecture in person, and at the beginning of the video, I paused it, pointing to one of the panelists: 'I see what you have been saying now [about clothing], when I saw this guy, I thought *dang he looks good*.' 'See, you're learning,' he said with an archetypal smile that a master gives to a successful pupil. It was true.

Credentials, Publication, Experience

I had sat through many formal introductions at events as a graduate student, and so when I arrived in DC, I thought I knew what to expect. Introductions, I thought initially, are dataless –

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they are the times when attendees generate ideas for dinner, clandestinely check their email, or put an important but heretofore forgotten reminder into the phone calendar. During introductions, from the most prominent experts to the mid-level senior researcher, I tended to cognitively zone out, jot-noting important facts about the person in case I needed them but otherwise paying little mind to the introductions themselves. But after a couple months of fieldwork, I realized that introductions are performances with symbolic content and meaning of their own, and they are tools used to mediate and reinforce the social status and prestige of their subjects in ways that are deeply saturated with cultural meanings. *We're so grateful that Dr. Hanson has joined us today,* I heard often in different iterations. "He won the Robert Dahl award, it immediately establishes credibility, especially for Americanists in political science. He is a spectacular political scientist… An impressive record," gushed one introduction. A "pre-eminent professor of international relations" who has "been studying terrorism for three decades" and is a "senior fellow in international security," sung another. Another panelist was hailed as having a long list of books – *we don't know how he does it* – and is additionally "widely published in *Foreign Affairs, Politico, CNN* and *Washington Post.*" The list could go on: number and prestige of books, degrees, institutional positions in universities, among others. Introductions filled with accolades of professional capital not only render visible the location of the person within a social field, but also display, reify and reinforce their symbolic power, prestige and status in ways that differentiate them from others. In so doing, introductory adulation marks them as the valued speakers in the room, investing them with the authoritative power to speak as embodiments of expertise. In this section, we will explore how symbolic forms of specifically academic professional capital are mobilized to construct and mediate ascriptions of seriousness, conferring

on their bearers legitimacy and prestige. We will examine the major symbolic forms of constructing seriousness: education, publication and experience.

First, in DC as elsewhere, educational credentials are understood to convey the individuated talent and merit of the holder. This association is shaped by longstanding liberal cultural ideals that associate educational aspiration and success with personal merit and talent (Goldthorpe 2007). In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu (1984) argued that academic qualifications are major forms of cultural capital drawn from institutional centers of professional power. Bourdieu grounded the symbolic value of educational credentials in the politics of class reproduction: access to and ownership of sedimented forms of cultural capital, expressed in the form of credentials, enables one to signify and reproduce one's superordinate class status. As exams and credentialing became used as gatekeeping mechanisms into professional and managerial occupations, accumulating qualifications became forms of institutionalized cultural capital that mystified class privilege and prerogative as individual natural talent and hard work (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1978; Brown et al. 2014). Furthermore, Bourdieu (2006: 10) argues that the reproduction of class power through monopolies on cultural forms of capital such as credentialing is concealed from view precisely because it is naturalized as individual merit: "the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled."

Within think tanks, educational credentials have a culturally and organizationally specific meaning: they are signifiers of seriousness, a key idiom of expertise. Charlotte, a white female senior policy analyst in her late twenties, explained:

Education is really important here. DC is a super educated city, everyone really values education. I read an article recently about how we have one of the best reading cultures in the country, people are constantly reading and talking about books. People will take you more seriously if you are more educated. You know if you tried to come here with an AA or something, you wouldn't be laughed at, especially if you have military experience, but you aren't going to get a job at CSIS [Center for Strategic and International Studies, a major think tank] [laughs].

Interlocutors often gave neutral descriptions that emphasized DC as an "educated city" with people that "value education." Less often, especially if on the record, interlocutors like Charlotte revealed the connection between the putatively neutral "valuing education," and less neutral organization of hierarchies of valuation that put less educated people at the bottom. As she concisely put it, "people will take you more seriously if you are more educated." Furthermore, while people with less education are devalued, they are not necessarily "laughed at," and this insight was indeed borne out in my fieldwork experience. I occasionally interacted with people with non-normative levels of formal education because they took non-traditional pathways (e.g. one interlocutor who had entered the military early and was then getting back on board with postsecondary education); however, each of them was then pursuing or planning to pursue a formal degree to enhance their employment chances. Everyone in and around think tanks without a BA degree (e.g. interns) were pursuing a BA. Those who were not pursuing or planning at least undergraduate levels of education were excluded from the formal and informal spaces associated with think tanks – not intentionally, but rather as a result of the fact that those with lower levels of education did not have access to employment in think tanks, and also did not have access to the social networks of my interlocutors. While those with non-normative education were indeed not "laughed at," they were implicitly devalued. Further, every single panelist or speaker that I observed in-person or over livestream was highly educated – single BA holders were actually rare for those in esteemed "expert" positionalities. Those without high levels of education were

excluded from the category of expertise, and thus were not conferred the privilege of being panelists or speakers at events.

Educational credentials and institutional pedigree is a central signifier of prestige in think tank space and more generally in DC.[111] In "The Forms of Capital" (2006), Bourdieu suggests that the objectification of cultural capital in the form of educational credentials enables the fabrication of a "hierarchy of achievement" whereby those with different amounts of capital can be assessed relative to one another (Brown et al. 2014). For Bourdieu (2006), this hierarchy of achievement, based on educational qualifications, can then be used as a metric to judge the value of workers on the labor market. My interlocutors used educational credentials not only to interpret the differential value of labor, but also the distribution and degree of professional seriousness. The prestige and institutional pedigree of educational credentials shape the extent to which one is socially perceived as seriousness. First, there is a hierarchy of degree prestige: BAs are expected and unremarkable, MAs are increasingly expected but still function as valuable capital, and PhDs and JDs remain extremely valuable in enhancing prestige. While there were many (predominantly older) professionals without PhDs, nearly all high-status positions were occupied by those with at least an MA from a recognized institution. Across twelve think tanks, over 80% of presidents, CEOS, and program directors held PhDs or JDs (nearly 100% had MA degrees), while no interns, associates or policy analysts held PhDs or JDs. Aside from undergraduate interns, there are no members of the think tank community *of any rank* without a BA degree. And while MAs and PhDs from established institution in North America and Europe

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[111] In the capitalist cultural and political economy of the contemporary United States, academic institutions – especially those ranked highly according to normative metrics – command a disproportionate amount of institutional power, influence and credibility. Their social hegemony allows them to extract financial resources from their surrounding communities, and secure the allegiance and subordination of populations excluded from access. Formal affiliation with these institutions, and especially receipt of advanced degrees, translates into a substantial degree of individual professional power in think tanks and the larger DC world (if deployed properly).

are automatically esteemed, PhDs are positioned higher than MAs and command more symbolic

importance. The higher the perceived value of educational credential, the more one is understood

to be serious and considered for membership in the category of expertise. Second, there is a

hierarchy of institutional pedigree when it comes to educational credentials. In informal

conversations, people constantly asked about educational pedigree, i.e. where someone had done

their undergraduate and graduate degrees. Only elite pedigrees, however, were explicitly

articulated and discussed by interlocutors. During a party, I found myself in a one-on-one

conversation in the kitchen with a well-dressed, refined woman in her later twenties. She asked

me about myself, in a way that seemed as if she herself could not tell whether she was

comparatively evaluating or genuinely interested in me. Disconcerted by what I felt was an

under-the-surface scrutiny concealed by a neutral question, I mentioned that I was a graduate

student in anthropology doing research on DC professionals. Interest piqued, "Master's or PhD?"

she asked. "PhD," I responded, to which she nodded and *hmph'd*. Without prompting, she then

rehearsed her own elite educational pedigree: a BA at Yale, an MA at King's College London,

and another MA from Georgetown University. She applied and got into a handful of PhD

programs but decided not to attend, wanting to focus instead on "building a career" rather than

continuing in academia.

The strong valuation of educational credentials in DC, and PhDs in particular, contrasts

starkly with popular discourses that frame PhD holders as overqualified and underskilled when it

comes to employment outside the formal university academic sphere. While there is indeed an

oversupply of doctoral degree holders in the academic labor market, think tank employers along

with the larger think tank community understand PhDs as valuable forms of symbolic capital

which buttress claims to seriousness, knowledge and expertise. I was told by one senior fellow at

a liberal think tank that PhDs often signify "specialized disciplinary training" and the possession of discipline-specific quantitative and qualitative analytical skills that enhance policy research and writing. This makes those with doctoral degrees valuable assets to think tank employers.

The practice of naming advanced educational credentials is centrally important for the work of constructing professional seriousness and expertise. The symbolic importance of credentials is materialized in quotidian semiotic devices like name tags, either pinned to the chest or printed on publicly visible name cards during panel events. I noticed quickly that people of all ranks made sure to address those with doctorates as "doctor," whether introducing them or in everyday conversation.[112] This naming practice marked the named as occupying a higher status, constructing them as serious and worthy of respect.

Often, the symbolic importance – and psychic investment in – the naming of credentials is expressed in moments entirely outside of authorized spaces of knowledge, such as the seminar room, panel event or conference. It was a routine fieldwork day organized around attending a panel event. It took a long while on the bus from my neighborhood, but I finally arrived at the large event center, and walked into the huge lobby with shiny floors that looked like marble. At the end of one of the hallways near the elevators, a middle-aged Black security guard sat bored behind a large desk. As I walked up to the desk, a small white man in a suit with an expensive briefcase rushed past me, as if on the last leg of a track race. His legs carried him swiftly across the floor toward the security guard, as fast as possible but just below the threshold separating walking from running. His bald head glistened in the bright light, reminding me of the ancient dome-headed dinosaurs that fascinated me as a child. As it turns out, we were both slightly late, and both going to ask the security guard for information on how to get to the event. I arrive at the

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[112] While I cannot be sure about the social function of this, my interlocutors constantly referred descriptively to both their educational degrees (MA, PhD, JD), and their institutional pedigree (but only if elite).

security guard's desk a few seconds after the dome-headed man in a suit just in time to hear the security guard ask him indifferently, "What's your name?" "Brown," the man responds hurriedly, referring to his last name and panting like a dog. The guard scans the sign-in sheets for those officially RSVP'd to the event. "John?," asks the guard. "*Dr. Brown*," corrected the man emphatically, affronted at the absent honorific in the address of a subordinate. Unmoved, the guard responds, "You're attending Terrorism Event in Room 123?"[113] "I'm a *panelist* for that event," the man responds impatiently, calling the guard's attention yet again to his esteemed and superior social status. Unimpressed, the guard checks him in with a stroke of his pen and tells him to walk down the hall and take the elevator two floors up. I check in after and follow the bald man up to the event. At the event, he exuded confidence and eloquence during his lecture, masterfully verbally citing all the literatures that he had command of and that informed his own intervention in the field. While clearly proud of his own eloquence, with his peers during and after the event he seemed gracious and cordial. This case illustrates the symbolic and psychic importance of naming credentials in social interaction. By unintentionally using the bald man's first name, the security guard disrupted both the man's self-image and perhaps a normative rule of the social hierarchy which demands that those in socially subordinate positions refer to superiors by their credentials.

As the dome-headed Dr. Brown above illustrates, educational credentials were objects of deep psychic investment and identification for DC professionals, and central to their self-understanding as serious experts. To illustrate another case of this, I offer an account of a major – and never repeated – fieldwork mistake with an interlocutor, whom we will call Dr. M, an expert on extremism. He has been a foundational player in the developing counter-extremism

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[113] Event and room number pseudonymized to avoid revealing the identity of Dr. Brown.

ideas across think tank and media spaces, and his work has been featured in such varied places as *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. He has spent the majority of his career an author, senior fellow and researcher at major think tanks and other hybrid initiatives. Unsurprisingly, it took a bit of ethnographic labor to secure an interview with him. We met over online video because this was not the time of year that he lived in DC. He sat in a collared dress shirt in front of a large bookshelf in what looked like a bright, spacious office. After greetings, I asked, "So you did your MA in terrorism studies and then went to the International Studies Institute [top-10 think tank pseudonym]?" He immediately and visibly frowned. He instructed me that there were no MAs in terrorism studies when he went to graduate school, and that he actually held a PhD in international relations, but never went into academia. I apologized, noting that I had missed his PhD given that some online bios did not include it. He accepted my apology, but seemed a bit annoyed that I had asked for his time without my having done basic homework. When I later described this mishap to an interlocutor, he laughed and exclaimed "oh my god." Always one for "tough love," he chastised me that the lack of preparedness and knowledge demonstrated disregard for Dr. M's professional stature: "These guys, you don't do that. If you get an interview with someone like [Dr. M], that means he's doing you a favor, so you have to come prepared. You have to know what his work is on, his affiliations, all the major stuff. I'm not talking about memorizing his publication record, but at least you should know where he did his PhD."

If credentials are crucial for constructing the professional identity of seriousness, interlocutors also deployed them as weaponized devices for comparative judgment and (de)valuation. While the performative naming of educational credentials was ubiquitous in DC, it was always socially rendered in neutrally descriptive terms – interlocutors asked each other

about credential and pedigree in a way that avoided overt forms of comparative evaluation. For instance, in informal conversation, naming credentials was met with the neutral or positive "oh," "interesting" or "that's a great school." However, as my interlocutor Adrian explained to me, information-extraction in general and learning about others' education in particular were ways that people worked to "size each other up." Metaphorically, the 'larger' the size the higher the quality of the person. The content of the metaphor has culturally specific meanings in DC: whereas size among athletes might refer to agility, endurance, mental fortitude and physical strength, in DC one of its central referents is educational credential and pedigree. The prestige and ranking of credential and pedigree shapes the perception of one's size and thus social standing in DC. While extracting information about credentials usually never erupted into public forms of comparative devaluation, in one illustrative case it did, where one interlocutor named Annette used educational credentials as a ranking device to delegitimize another person and shore up her own professional identity. I offer an extended excerpt from fieldnotes to set the scene:

Small gathering at an interlocutor's apartment, slightly different crowd than usual, positioned a few significant steps higher than intern, most people in mid-status positions in their later twenties and early thirties. All white, pretty equal male/female ratio. Clear that these people were well-connected; the apartment was well-furnished and nice, everyone has good jobs (FBI contractor, works for big lobbying firm, government affairs, etc). Somehow we get on the topic of educational background. Turns out Annette and Adrian both have double master's degrees. Annette asks Adrian where he got his second MA multiple times (the first time he avoided the question), he says a French university and says it isn't prestigious. Annette was also educated partly in western Europe and seems to know that university, and she makes an underhanded gesture which clearly signals that going to this less esteemed university is less prestigious or worthy. I am surprised to see that Adrian doesn't seem visibly offended at all. On the way home in the car, Adrian and I are discussing superiority and prestige afforded by being affiliated with prominent top-ranked universities, I ask him whether he noticed that Annette made an underhanded gesture about the "less prestigious" university he attended in France, noting to him that he seemed not to mind at the time. He says he "absolutely" recognized her gesture, and says: "I'm fully confident and fine with my self-esteem; I don't need to brag to people about going to the best schools, I'm comfortable with the opportunities I've had with my education."

Here, the terrain of interpersonal struggle is cultural capital in the form of educational credentials and pedigree – the practice of identity work is organized and mediated in terms of these specific academic currencies of value. Annette mobilizes the relative prestige deficit of Adrian's graduate alma mater to construct his professional personhood as less serious and deserving of respect and recognition *in contrast to* the comparatively superior professional identity of people such as herself, who commanded identical credentials but possessed a pedigree culturally understood as superior. Annette's elevation of her professional stature above Adrian's is predicated on the devaluation of his professional status via an attack on the reputation of his educational pedigree. Adrian, who was a close interlocutor of mine, was a master of strategic communication. Even though he clearly registered Annette's public subordination of his educational credentials, he refrained from defending himself, and even controlled his facial expression such that it seemed as if he did not perceive the jab or mind at all.

Second, publication record is another index of professional status that mediates seriousness. Publications are a way for individual professionals (and their organizations) to gain and maintain notoriety, spread ideas, and develop social networks (cf. Chapter 1). Given that think tank professionals of all grades imagine themselves to be intellectual arbiters of policy knowledge, publication output is an important criterion of power, and central instrument of individual and organizational self-legitimation and accumulation.[114] Publication record is also so symbolically important because writing remains a central form of communication in DC knowledge economies. While televised and live oral practices, such as panel events or media interviews, are prevalent, they are often organized around the publication and publicization of

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[114] Although as an intern I was not privy to higher-level strategic conversations, I was told that output is an important metric of productivity and effectiveness for the donor class, and is thus key to the maintenance and augmentation of funding.

written forms (e.g. individuals are asked to be panelists, or sit on an interview with the news media, because of their putative expertise, which is signified by publication record). As a modality of power, then, the written word retains its hegemony as the symbolic currency of distinction, whether in its digital or physical form. Economies of publication – the continual flurry of reports, articles and books – thus constitute the terrain upon which competition over prestige, distinction and professional power unfold, constituting an intense terrain of struggle for knowledge professionals. Publication was a deeply important object of self-identification and psychological investment. This is understandable given that these are, among other things, central mechanisms of professional advancement in think tanks.[115]

Think tanks as organizations play a central role in facilitating the dissemination of publications – and this is one reason why institutional affiliation is so important for making oneself professionally viable. Think tank programs, for instance, often use their Twitter feed to highlight their own analysts' and fellows' work, linking this work to broader lay and specialized publics. This circulation might result in media requests for an interview, which boosts individual and organizational notoriety. As institutional platforms for publicizing, circulating and digitally hosting published work, think tanks are important instruments through which name recognition can be accumulated and reinforced. For those on the lower end of the professional hierarchy, opportunities to utilize think tank platforms and networks to produce authored material are vital to seize.

While individuals are rendered authors on think tank publications, they do not own copyright to their written content. For example, if one authors an article for an internal think tank

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[115] Indeed, an ongoing commitment to publishing articles and books was an important criterion of inclusion for non-resident fellows at think tanks, which exchange association with the think tank for publication output associated with the organization (among other things, like television commentary).

publication, they cannot rescind the article without the permission of the organization. Interns and other employees do not generally care about non-ownership over copyright, given that recognized authorship itself is more symbolically important for enhancing professional personhood and notoriety than actual substantive control over copyright. Furthermore, while think tank publications are often co-written with multiple authors, they are not generally peer-reviewed by external individuals. This, among other dynamics, gives managers and directors at the top level of the employment hierarchy disproportionate power over what writing projects get off the ground, what eventually becomes published, and who makes it to the byline. While single-authored publications confer the most prestige, co-authorship remains important for professional status-making, especially for interns, who are positioned such that they must take what they can get. This produces significant internal competition among interns to make it onto the byline (cf. Chapter 3).

Interns come to learn very quickly that publication record is important for mediating professional status, and that success depends on accumulating a publication stream either in internal think tank publications or in external venues such as print and digital media and news outlets. While interns did not generally have their own extensive publication records, they often constructed hierarchies of interpersonal valuation based on assessments of publication quantity and quality, thus demarcating valued from devalued forms of professional legitimacy. Often, publicationless interns that I knew would discuss and debate whose writings were worthwhile based on their venue, point of view, writing style, policy relevance, political relevance, newness or "innovative" intervention, and theoretical approach. These settings allowed interns to exercise their developing forms of perception and assessment of others on the basis of dominant forms of professional capital in the form of publications.

Epistemic professionals judged and assessed each other often in terms of publication record. Specifically, the number and kind of publications, along with the prestige of the venue which hosted them, were used by my interlocutors to construct their own professional seriousness in relation and contrast to others. There were no explicitly stated uniform metrics for assessing the cultural value of one's publication record, so I had to learn the complex hierarchies of value and distinction that shaped understandings of publications. There are some universally condemned venues such as *Breitbart News* (heavily criticized during the time of fieldwork) and *The Intercept*, publication with which would result in immediate expulsion from the category of serious professional.116 To generate credibility and the perception of professionality, one must publish in venues designated as serious, including *The New York Times, Washington Post, Politico, The Economist, Foreign Affairs, The Wall Street Journal, Slate*, along with most scholarly journals such as *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Security Studies* and *International Security*. Using publications to demarcate the serious from the non-serious extended into the interpersonal realm, where my interlocutors assessed one another on the basis of not only number of publications, but ranking and esteem associated with the venue of publication. On one lazy Sunday, I was hanging out with an interlocutor Nolan, a white male senior policy analyst. A mutual acquaintance of ours came up, who was a policy analyst – one significant notch below Nolan. She and Nolan had had some kind of bad interaction (or perhaps relationship) at some point, although I was not able to obtain any details. He dismissed her as "unimportant" and "not going anywhere." I had recently gotten coffee with this person, and I weakly tried to defend her, saying that she worked hard, had a lot going on, and did indeed publish a lot in media outlets, along with doing her normal policy report writing. Nolan pulled her bio up on his phone and

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116 This is, of course, shaped by the political composition of my interlocutors, which were overwhelmingly moderate pro-state, pro-capitalist liberals aligned with the Democratic Party.

instructed: "Yeah, but look at where she's publishing – those are internal publications, or look [scrolls down], opinion pieces in the *Washington Post* or managing press releases. People really try to inflate themselves but it's easy to see through [that] if you know what to look for." Because weekly or monthly publications internal are easier to publish in, Nolan understands them as subordinate modes of publication, thus conferring less prestige and less claim to seriousness or expertise.

As the anecdote about introductions illustrated, expertise and claims to seriousness must be constructed through communication and performance. As signifiers of seriousness, publications are vitally important to display, both digitally and physically. Aside from bios across LinkedIn, personal websites, and profiles on organizational websites, seriousness and expertise were mediated through material culture. Seriousness became materially embodied in publicly displayed artifacts, such as physical books and magazines. Upon entering think tanks, one would see physical publications lining the walls, sitting on lobby bookshelves, even framed like family pictures in the hallways and offices. Brookings Institution even had a small bookshop with huge glass doors in its lobby, which exclusively hosted Brookings experts' books. Displaying these material artifacts mediated the seriousness of both individual and organization.

Third, experience was another category of constructing and mediating seriousness. The concept of experience has long been an object of research among anthropologists and historians (Turner and Bruner 1986; Scott 1991; Throop 2003; Zigon and Throop 2014). Anthropologist Robert Desjarlais (1994) argued that anthropological research on experience often relies on Western assumptions about the bounded self, including interiority and self-reflection, psychic depth, and narrative continuity through time. Raymond William (1979: 128-129) describes experience as the "fullest, most open, most active form of consciousness." In these accounts,

"experience" is interrogated for its hidden assumptions or used as a conceptual analytic. In contrast, in this section, I focus on the term "experience" itself as a mode of symbolic power and object of contestation among my interlocutors, and how practices of mobilizing ideas of "experience" are patterned by cultural understandings of professionality. As Geertz (1973) suggested, symbols are media of meaning-making – they convey, organize and transform human understandings of the world. However, when mobilized in social practices, symbols are also instruments used to convey and reproduce symbolic power and hierarchy; as devices for claiming power, they are also sites and objects of intense contestation and struggle. Among my interlocutors, the word "experience" was used to symbolize, construct, and refer to personal legitimacy and expertise. Specifically, it was used as a linguistic instrument of hierarchical differentiation: my interlocutors conferred the label "experience" on people in ways that either elevated or denigrated their claim to serious professionality and/or expertise. As such, "experience" was often a site of contestation, as individuals struggled to articulate the validity of their own professional experience, undermine that of others, and forge tactical alliances.

Agreement on the symbolic function of applying the label "experience" to persons was generally shared among the community of professionals; my interlocutors agreed that attributing "experience" to someone was a way of legitimating their expertise and professionality – if you are categorized as experienced, you are worthy of not only of recognition and esteem, but also material promotion and advancement. Being socially perceived as experienced, that is, is a form of professional capital. I asked one interlocutor, Easton, a thirty year old white man who was planning to enter a career in the State Department once the federal hiring freeze let up, about what being "experienced" meant:

You see guys, men and women, they have worked in the State Department or the private sector for years, so they have some credibility when they talk about the issues. But then you see a lot of

younger people, and this is my generation too where I see this a lot, they have written a few published pieces or an opinion piece for the Guardian and they think 'oh that's experience,' but it's not, that doesn't stand up to five or ten years of serious experience, you really can't compare the two.

My interlocutors disagreed, however, over the *social distribution of attribution or ascription* of "experience"; that is, the terrain of the struggle for my interlocutors was the economy of ascription, i.e. who should be considered experienced versus who should not.[117] During informal gatherings, I often heard comradely (rather than antagonistic) conversations among my interlocutors about whether someone had enough "experience" to justify their legitimacy to speak on a certain topic or their expertise more generally. As we waited for a rideshare after a panel event one evening, one interlocutor joked that a recognized expert who had asked a long question at the panel Q&A had a monotonous voice. Another interlocutor agreed and added that he personally did not trust the policy thinking of that particular expert. Half-serious but not committed to an earnest debate, yet another interlocutor responded, 'Are you going to trust decades of experience or a fast talker that sounds good? I'd say the decades of experience gives you the authority to speak on US-Afghan policy.'[118]

"That's Old News": On Being Quick or Sluggish and Knowing What's In

Before going to the field, I read a significant amount of primary source material on national security, including ethnographer and political scientist David Kilcullen's 2013 *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerilla*. By imbibing primary source material, I attempted to learn about the "native's point of view" (Geertz 1973). By the time I arrived in DC,

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[117] Sometimes, the *kind of experience* was an object of contestation as well. One might have a significant amount of experience, but not the *right kind* of experience. In one conversation, Erik Prince, cofounder of Blackwater (now Academi), was brought up as an example of someone with the wrong kind of experience. It seemed to me, however, that the discourse of legitimate versus illegitimate "kinds of experience" concealed the underlying reason for dismissing Prince – his policy agenda was either opposed by or too overt for my interlocutors who dismissed him.
[118] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

Kilcullen's book was four years old – an imperceptible blip in geological terms, but as it turned out, a gaping chasm in DC terms. Thinking that material that I had read published within the past few years would be relevant, I thought that it would be a good idea to invoke them to build conversations with potential interlocutors. I often attended lectures by academics in various stages of their careers at the local universities, such as Georgetown, George Washington University and American University in particular. I attended the lecture of one up-and-coming academic, Dr. Mitchell, a white, soft-spoken, warm bespectacled man in his mid-thirties with a PhD in political science, who toggled between academia and think tanks. In his role as an instructor, he was "dressed down" in a button-up shirt and pants without a suit jacket. Mitchell had already established a minor reputation for himself as a terrorism and counter-insurgency expert with a specific research focus on processes of radicalization. After his lecture, I approached the podium, told him about my project, and asked if he was willing to speak with me. Having just finished the lecture, he seemed busy and exhausted, but graciously offered to walk out with me. While waiting for his Uber, we talked. Like many other academics working in think tanks, he had a PhD in political science from a major university in the Northeast United States. He was then juggling teaching, think tank work, and a few academic papers in the pipeline. Noting his interests in counter-insurgency, I asked if he liked David Kilcullen's book. "Oh, that's old news. He was really big a few years ago, but now not so much."

This anecdote is one of many instances where interlocutors described certain authors or intellectual trends as being "old," "outdated" or "irrelevant." Before one interview with Andrew, a white male policy analyst with an MA in international studies nearing his mid-twenties, I perused his bookcase while he fetched water from the kitchen. The five-shelf medium-sized bookcase was taut and organized, smaller than the mega-shelves in the offices of the academics

that I spoke with, but perhaps more bustling than the bookshelf of an ordinary person. It was filled with a combination of biographies of various renowned American leaders (one on Alexander Hamilton caught my eye), investigative reporting, academic monographs, and miscellaneous books from his master's program. Bending over to browse the books on the bottom shelves, I saw Mark Mazetti's *The Way of the Knife*, published in 2013 – one that I knew. 'Cool, did you like *The Way of the Knife*?," I asked as Andrew came into the living room to sit down.[119] 'Yeah, it's good, but that is *really* outdated by now, Obama-era," he responded, adding, "you should be reading stuff coming out now or in the last year, but not older than that.' Coming from academia, I had a sense that intellectual forms quickly become irrelevant, but a socially mandatory one-year shelf-life was surprising. Andrew's opinion resonated with that of many others I spoke to informally, whose reading recommendations included material published within the last few days or weeks in the case of articles, or in the last year in the case of books.

My interlocutors' practices of categorizing intellectual content within hierarchies of value was part of a larger social universe where forms of knowledge were actively divided into new, relevant and valuable versus the old, outdated and irrelevant. These negotiated practices of division and demarcation illustrate what I call a *micropolitics of cognitive consumption*, by which I mean practices of locating, categorizing, reflecting upon and discussing forms of knowledge embodied in a variety of media; combined with the way that these practices shape particular relations of power organized in terms of understandings of expertise. As the anecdotes illustrate, cognitive consumption is not simply an individuated practice of information intake, but something that materializes through social interaction with both objects and people; as such, it is a social practice with social effects embedded in and reproductive of relations of power and

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[119] Reconstructed from fieldnotes.

prestige. In particular, practices of demarcating old and devalued from new and valued were ways for interlocutors to mediate *their own seriousness* through being 'in the know.'

I focus in particular on the written form – books and articles – as the primary practice of cognitive consumption, as epistemic cultures in DC remain focused on the written form as the hegemonic mediator of knowledge. If anthropologists have increasingly emphasized the "socially consequential role of documents" (Hull 2012: 254), here I focus on the socially consequential role that mastering *knowledge of documents* plays in mediating self-referential ascriptions of expertise. In particular, I suggest that practices of *communicating* one's mastery and understanding of intellectual material through defining it as relevant/irrelevant, old/new is a mode of constructing one's own expertise. These practices show that one not only knows about, but consumes, the most socially valued material.

There are two key kinds of work that communicating cognitive consumption does. First, the pejorative phrase "that's old news" does not define its objects neutrally, but captures the way that interlocutors constructed valued versus devalued forms of knowledge. Denigrating material as devalued "old news" was much less a form of principled struggle against intellectual enemies than a way to construct as valuable content that is currently emerging – my interlocutors characterized intellectual material more in terms of just being "old" and irrelevant rather than being fundamentally illegitimate as forms of knowledge.[120] The authors of "old news" and their intellectual content is not illegitimate; rather, these authors' content is simply deemed irrelevant to the contemporary and thus low in value. In other words, descriptions of intellectual material as "old news" is a device of distinction, not rejection.

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[120] I recorded a few instances, however, of principled intellectual struggle, e.g. one interlocutor with links to the military seemed to truly hate anti-imperialist progressive journalist Jeremy Scahill, along with Andrew Bacevich, a leading *conservative* historian of US empire and military intervention.

Second, by commanding the power to represent some things as "old news," interlocutors mediated their own intellectual superiority and excellence vis-à-vis others who are not 'in the know' (and perhaps not even capable of consuming information either at the speed or level of sophistication that they are able to). One day, I sat with Chris, who was a helpful if reticent research participant, but not the most socially subtle interlocutor of the bunch. Although I cannot be sure, I got the sense that he was intimidated by my being in a doctoral program (whenever I said I did not know something, he often came back with 'well you're in a PhD program, shouldn't you know that?' sorts of responses). There came a lag in the conversation, and I told him that I had recently read parts of Ali Soufan's 2017 *The Anatomy of Terror*, which had been published about seven months prior. Throwing his head back slightly, he scoffed, saying "wow you're doing historical research now?" Confused, I laughed, thinking it was a joke I did not understand, only to later realize that he was ridiculing me and referring to the book as being outdated. While other interlocutors had more subtle ways of characterizing knowledge as outmoded and irrelevant, this anecdote illustrates in striking detail the operation of a general pattern. For my interlocutors, defining something as "old news" was not simply about devaluing it as an outmoded form of knowledge, but also about conveying to others one's own seriousness and expertise as an arbiter of valued (versus devalued) knowledge.

"The distribution of knowledge," writes Crick (1982: 304), "creates categories of the knowledgeable and the ignorant." Similarly, by ridiculing me as having access only to outdated "historical" material, Chris constructed himself as possessing access to scarce, highly exclusive knowledge about what counts as a valued intellectual form. In contrast to myself, he also utilized this quotidian act of demarcation to self-referentially construct his own seriousness as someone entitled to determine the boundary between valued and devalued knowledge. By classifying

things that I mentioned as outdated and thus devalued, Chris positioned himself as "in the know" – as having not only specialized knowledge, but having the magical capacity to determine what counts as worthy of attention. Like secrets, as Jones (2014: 54) writes, these acts of division "produce value through both the exclusion of outsiders and the inclusion of insiders." As we have seen, insider knowledge is contradictory – it "must itself be performed in a public fashion in order to be understood to exist" (Herzfeld 2009: 135). Chris' seriousness as an arbiter of valued versus devalued knowledge is constructed only through the public performance of constructing me as his opposite.

3. Making the Non-Expert: Delegitimation as Political-Intellectual Struggle

My fieldwork commenced at the threshold of 2017-2018, a period of political turmoil, polarization and transformations in the balance and ideological makeup of forces within the government. The seizure of the state apparatus by the Trump administration through electoral mandate had been accepted, but not quite normalized, by centrists and liberals alike in DC. Unlike at the time of writing, 2017-2018 witnessed an explosion on articles, books, thinkpieces, podcasts, documentaries, and television which struggled to understand the politics and psychology of "Trumpism," and worked to circulate a preferred narrative of its rise. For some self-proclaimed experts and pundits, the political victory of Donald Trump signaled the terrifying "end of expertise." Multiple elite news outlets issued editorials and opinion pieces on how respect for expertise had been corroded by Trump's alleged populism and hatred for expert knowledge. *Harvard Magazine* warned of the "dangerous antipathy to expertise"; the *New York Times* complained about how in the Trump era "ignorance has become a virtue." The furor over the putative collapse of expert legitimacy even congealed into a well-reviewed book entitled *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*, which

lamented the rise anti-expert and anti-intellectual public sentiments, blaming hostility to expertise on the failure of higher education, the internet and the media.

While the end of expertise was framed in universal terms – as if expertise referred to an objective and natural entitlement to mediate authorized knowledge – another interpretation is possible. While the destabilization of expertise ramified across multiple sectors of governance and knowledge, I focus here on terrorism and extremism expertise. I suggest that the "crisis of expertise" referred less to the dissolution of respect for terrorism/extremism expertise *per se* than the destabilization of a previously hegemonic faction's command over the claim to and domain of terrorism/extremism expertise in DC. In the Obama era, dominant blocs of terrorism/extremism expertise – especially those aligned with the Democratic Party such as Center for American Progress and Brookings Institution – commanded authority and legitimacy across think tanks, media and government policymaking. For instance, key interlocutors associated with this bloc staffed executive levels in the Obama administration, including positions in the Department of State, Department of Justice and National Security Council. Masking the political-intellectual situatedness and interest of their putatively neutral expertise, these dominant experts exercised hegemony to ensure that they represented the universal figure of expertise, speaking for the whole on issues of national and homeland security, among others. This hegemony was punctured, however, by a counter-hegemonic force embodied in one man whom we will call Dr. Bill Bringleton.[121] He holds a PhD in political science from a major European university, and is published across scholarly, popular and national security-specific venues in the United States and Europe. Before working in the Trump administration, he was

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[121] Bringleton is a pseudonym for a high-level executive branch counter-terrorism advisor who at some point worked for the Trump administration. To avoid identification, I have altered certain important details, but without distorting the general picture of Bringleton as a professional subject. Bringleton explicitly declined to be interviewed for this project.

considered a known figure in counter-terrorism policy thinking – he had published in major Pentagon-affiliated scholarly journals, and held adjunct and full positions at respected private and military-affiliated institutions such as Georgetown University. He had lectured on counter-terrorism for the Department of Defense in the post-9/11 period. While not understood as a leading counter-terrorism expert, he was undoubtedly not a pariah in the field before his affiliation with the Trump administration. However, in 2017-2018, within the security circles of mainstream centrist liberal-leaning think tanks that I interacted with, Bringleton was an object of widespread vitriol.

I argue that Bringleton, a counter-hegemonic force in counter-terrorism thinking vis-à-vis the previously dominant centrist liberal factions, represented a *political and intellectual threat* to the prevailing liberal hegemony of the Obama era. Bringleton both enacted and symbolized a disorienting shift in epistemic and political power, whereby previously dominant networks of expertise became marginalized in favor of oppositional farther right networks of expertise. This section explores how previously hegemonic, but then threatened experts, worked to delegitimize Bringleton. I suggest that these previously dominant experts waged political struggle against Bringleton and the right power bloc he represented on culturally salient terrain the commitment to which was shared between blocs: the very knowledge-authorizing claim to expertise itself. The specific tools they used to wage this political struggle were similarly symbolically potent and shared among the community of experts: the economy of professional cultural capital. Previously dominant experts engaged in an antagonistic politics of attribution, whereby they rendered Bringleton as lacking normative forms of academic cultural capital. For instance, they described him as both unprofessional and uncredentialed, thus polluting and undermining his claim to expertise and de-authorizing his knowledge. By attempting to delegitimize him on the

terrain of academic cultural capital, experts relinquished him of his claim to expertise and thus right to inform state policymaking,

In a number of off-hand remarks, I was told that formerly dominant think tanks, whose members staffed or had the ear of the Obama administration, became quickly marginalized by the Donald Trump White House. Certainly, I was told with a muted laugh, they no longer held positions on the National Security Council. The entire hegemonic system of centrist liberal epistemic rule had become severely destabilized by the ascension of the Trump administration, catalyzing a crisis of identity and social power.[122] This group – what I call the *liberal power bloc* – was closely associated with the centrist liberalism of the Obama administration from 2009-2016.[123] Following Poulantzas (1978), a hegemonic "power bloc" is a complex configuration of "class fractions" organized across a network of allied institutions and groups, which embody a "conflictual unity of the alliance in power" with an "unstable equilibrium of compromise among its components."[124]

This bloc spanned across think tanks, the media, and academia in particular in a dense, revolving web, including: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy, Politico* and to some extent *The Atlantic* on the online and print news media end; *MSNBC* and to some extent *CNN* on the cable news television side; Georgetown, American and George

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[122] While there were certainly criticisms of Obama's foreign policy, the utilization of drones and special operations forces for counter-terrorism targeted killing remained dominant common sense for policymakers, think tankers and career bureaucrats. This is particularly evident given that the Trump administration itself has continued to rely on the necropolitical counter-terrorism tactics and strategies developed by the Obama administration.
[123] This in contrast to a conservative power bloc, represented most notably by the think tank Heritage Foundation, which supported and staffed the Trump administration, developed a number of its policies, and whose members with whom I spoke had positive things to say about the Trump administration. While I spoke to a number of people in conservative think tanks, I did not interact with many on an everyday informal basis.
[124] For our purposes, this power bloc exercises not the total societal form of hegemony in Gramsci's sense, but what we can call *regional hegemony*. This is not societal hegemony as the exercise of class leadership over the whole of society, but rather a more local hegemony within the institutional 'regions' of counter-terrorism and CVE knowledge production.

Washington University on the academic side; and primarily Brookings Institution, Center for American Progress, Center for a New American Security and to some extent New America on the think tank side. A number of my interlocutors, for example, served as mid- and high-level advisors for the Obama administration in counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism policy; at the time of fieldwork in the post-Obama era, they had moved to or resumed appointments in think tanks, the media and academia. After 2016, the knowledge, expertise and social networks of this liberal power bloc became irrelevant, marginalized and even directly undermined by the discourse and policymaking in the Trump White House. In a word, the liberal power bloc was eclipsed as a distinct, farther right configuration successfully if unevenly captured key policymaking positions and instruments (e.g. the NSC). Not only was the liberal power bloc dispossessed of access to crucial sites of federal institutional power, but their expertise no longer commanded the kind of symbolic esteem and prestige that it once did during the Obama years. These inter-elite political struggles waged within the "institutional materiality of the state" (Poulantzas 1978) sparked intense and disorienting ferment about who counted as a serious, legitimate expert, and what forms of knowledge were to be categorized as authoritative.

When I asked about the idea of expertise and what makes someone an expert in informal everyday conversation and unstructured interviewing, Bringleton was often invoked as an example of the opposite of expertise in a kind of cultural tautology. Expertise was not given a clear definition or even a set of necessary conditions, but rather was defined negatively through opposition to Bringleton, the paradigmatic non-expert for security professionals in 2017 and 2018. At bars and barbeques alike, he was often laughed about – sometimes with intense, self-serious derision and other times with less abrasive hand-waving dismissal – and singled out as "not a serious scholar" or simply "not an expert."

Some interlocutors leaned on 'in-the-know'-signifying rhetorical questions to render

Bringleton illegitimate. When I asked why he was not considered an expert, one senior policy

analyst asked rhetorically if I had read his dissertation (I hadn't), without further explanation and

under the assumption that the invalidity of dissertation speaks for itself due to its low-quality. Dr.

Ian, an esteemed academic specializing in terrorism who had been working across academia and

think tanks for over thirty years, also deployed rhetorical devices to convey the non-expert

illegitimacy of Bringleton. "Have you read his book?" he asked rhetorically while laughing, "If

you read his book you'll see what makes someone legitimate!" Like the other policy analyst

above, Dr. Ian performatively described Bringleton as a non-expert through his own authoritative

negative assessment of his written material. Nevertheless, while getting the point – Bringleton =

bad – I remained puzzled qua ethnographer. I continued, asking about what specifically makes

someone a verified expert. Dr. Ian explained:

> Serious scholarship and publishing in university presses or university scholarly publications that are refereed often under very strict and pretty exacting standards is very different from publishing elsewhere… The qualifications of being a bona fide terrorism specialist is publishing refereed publications, and having your work… you know, submitted to scrutiny, especially by fellow experts, or fellow specialists, academicians.

There are at least two important elements here: publishing in esteemed academic journals, and

having those publications peer-reviewed. Bringleton, Dr. Ian concluded, had not fulfilled these

criteria. (Interestingly, Bringleton *had* published articles in at least two peer-reviewed military-

scholarly journals, including one with a still-prominent academic.) In any case, for Dr. Ian,

Bringleton perhaps did not have enough academic cultural capital in the form of number of

publications housed in high-ranked scholarly journals. By implicitly representing Bringleton as

falling short of this standard, Dr. Ian delegitimizes Bringleton, attempting to strip him of any

claim to expertise. Dr. Adam, another academic interlocutor with a PhD in political science

working in a think tank that was directly marginalized by the Trump administration, also

constructed Bringleton as an aberrant, illegitimate non-expert:

He isn't qualified to speak as an expert on much, but certainly not on jihad—what's so interesting to me is that [Bringleton] is— it's so different from what you would see with climate science. He's clearly trying to challenge the dominant narrative of what I would consider legitimate experts are trying to say about Islam, rightly pointing out that this is not a conflict between Islam as a religion and Christianity, or the West, that this is a little bit more nuanced, that there's a conflict within Islam and we're only seeing one part of that conflict. But what's so interesting to me is that there's no equivalent of [Bringleton] in other controversial or sensitive discourses. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't know of somebody in the climate science debate that is presenting himself as a legitimate expert on terrorism and Islamism, with really very little to show for his expertise, very little to back that, his expertise. It doesn't mean that there aren't critics on both side, but it's a different way of making that argument and trying to claim authority. In the climate change [debate], the strategy is really to nuke the idea of scientific authority altogether, so it'd be weird to portray yourself as a scientific authority, whereas with terrorism you want to keep the frame of terrorism because, especially for folks that are more in Bringleton's camp, it's a really useful frame, but you also need to somehow claim authority that you may or may not have. He's probably the leading example of it but there's plenty of others that portray themselves as scholars of Islam and experts on Islam that really just have no, in my view, no real standing, no real ground to stand on when they make that claim. It'd be one thing if they studied in Damascus for five years and learned Arabic, but that's few and far between. There's a few folks that come out of the Middle East and are fluent and take a more conservative approach, and those voices I certainly disagree with but I don't necessarily begrudge them their claim to expertise.

Bringleton and his unpopular insurgent knowledge is contrasted against "legitimate experts" and

their "dominant narrative[s]" about Islam, which reject the racialized Huntingtonian clash of

civilizations discourse. Drawing a parallel, Dr. Adam suggests that while climate change skeptics

attempt to "nuke the idea of scientific authority," or fully reject institutionalized science's claim

to knowledge, Bringleton tries to appropriate the label of scientific, credentialed expertise for

himself but "with really very little to show for his expertise" and "no real ground to stand on"

when making claims for expertise. Dr. Adam also seems to take direct aim at Bringleton's

training and specialized corpus of knowledge, criticizing his artificial understanding of Islam as

not insufficiently informed. For Dr. Adam, Bringleton was trying to deceptively appropriate the

signifier "terrorism" to brand his own expertise and enhance his own professional value.

Interestingly, Dr. Adam even constructs Bringleton as outside the possible parameters of expertise – while there are conservative voices that Dr. Adam can rationally disagree with and whose expertise he can recognize, Bringleton is expelled from the community of expertise and rationality entirely.[125]

The critiques leveled at Bringleton by Drs. Ian and Adam illustrate the struggle against Bringleton at the level of contesting the legitimacy of his academic cultural capital. The Drs. contested Bringleton's claim to expertise on the basis of commonly shared understandings of hierarchies of value attached to academic credentials, publications and knowledge. Despite Bringleton holding a PhD from a major European university, his credentials, training, experience and claim to specialized knowledge were challenged as insufficient – the Drs. construct Bringleton as having no legitimate claim to scientific expertise. And not only was the caliber of his knowledge and writing questioned, but also the symbolic power of the venues for which he wrote (i.e. not published in major scholarly, peer-reviewed journals). Academic cultural capital emerges here as a major terrain of the definitional and jurisdictional struggles over the meaning of expertise, with the conflict centering on the authority and esteem of credentials. If Bringleton had not ascended to become a key counter-terrorism policy advisor, thus symbolically and materially representing a threat to the prevailing liberal power bloc, he might have been categorized as a colleague, curiosity or at worst a subordinate member of the intellectual community of serious experts; but in ascending to power, he represented an ideological marginalization of the hegemonic power of counter-terrorism knowledge and expertise in DC. As a result, mainline experts of the liberal power bloc entered into a professional-class version of an open war of maneuver on Bringleton, directly naming and criticizing him on and off the

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[125] While Drs. Ian and Adam challenged Bringleton over his publications, claim to specialized knowledge, and general right to expertise, I also heard others target the very legitimacy of his PhD credentials.

record, in violation of the previously discussed norms against criticizing others in DC (especially while on the record).

Along with a perceived lack of academic cultural capital, Bringleton was delegitimized as a non-expert through being discursively labeled as "politicized." A definition of what a "politicized" person or form of knowledge was among my interlocutors was difficult to pin down; whether someone counted as politicized often felt more like an ethereal, atmospheric "structure of feeling" than the crystalline, objective, scholarly definition that so many prided themselves on. For mainline experts, Bringleton threatened the hegemonic rhetorical and intellectual styles of the Obama-era; even if my interlocutors disagreed with some Obama policies – and many of them did – they emphasized that Obama's more technocratic, sober, lawyerly approach informed by 'expertise' stood in stark opposition to the heavily "political" tone and posture adopted by Bringleton and the Trump administration more generally. In informal conversations, for instance, Bringleton's politicization was contrasted to the cool, informed rationality of someone like Ben Rhodes, an Obama counter-terrorism advisor with a more carefully crafted and lawyerly rhetorical style. Aligned with the liberal power bloc, my interlocutors opposed expertise, understood to be neutral, universal, objective, non-partisan and informed, on the one hand, to non-expertise, defined as politicized, biased, subjective, partisan and 'politically' motivated, on the other. By continually marking the pathological difference of Bringleton through the tag of politicization, they not only excluded Bringleton from their community, but also sealed off their own domain of legitimate, non-"political" expertise from the spoiled form of anti-expertise that Bringleton represented – the category of politicized non-expertise was separated from that of non-political expertise, and never the twain shall meet. Interestingly, Bringleton represented less a threat to the collective self-understanding of the

liberal power bloc as 'non-political' than a challenge to the symbolic and institutional power and legitimacy of their formerly hegemonic 'non-political' expertise *per se*. By ascending into the White House from the relative intellectual margins, Bringleton evaded rather than fought on the liberal power bloc's epistemic territory, exceeding the bounds of the previously dominant discourse about terrorism and extremism.

These struggles to delegitimize Bringleton translated into the spoliation of his professional identity. For Goffman (1963), persons with "spoiled" identities are stigmatized in a way that excludes them from acceptance into the community. This led the predominant majority of my interlocutors to not only disassociate themselves from him, but construct their own professional identities in opposition to his spoiled and delegitimized one. Through practices of delegitimation, Bringleton was transformed into a symbolically potent axis of difference. One white male expert with a PhD in international relations said:

It's really this pseudo-intellectual movement that has tried to kind of prop up around terrorism that for whatever reason they've been able to get away with it for like fifteen years. That's why I'm so reluctant to identify as a 'counter-terrorism expert' because I don't want to get locked in with—if you're an outside observer and you see Bringleton claiming to be a counter-terrorism expert, then I don't want to be that, I don't want to be seen as being that class of scholar or expert… It's harder for an academic who actually studies this stuff somewhat dispassionately and objectively to enter the fray and be taken as an independent voice.

In denigrating Bringleton, these mainline professionals shored up, consolidated and communicated their own claim to expertise over and against Bringleton and the "pseudo-intellectual movement" that is a part of.

At this point, we might ask: how are internecine political struggles for epistemic hegemony and institutional power channeled through constructions of expertise which work to demarcate experts from non-experts? I suggest that the assault to delegitimize Bringleton as a non-expert can be understood as a struggle over symbolic and institutional power, articulated through

culturally specific understandings of expertise grounded in the institutional structure and balance of professional epistemic power in DC. Through attacks on academic cultural capital and discourses of politicization, formerly hegemonic experts from the liberal power bloc constructed Bringleton as a non-expert in order to undermine his claim to expertise and delegitimize the putative *source* of his professional power. While framed in neutral terms of "expertise," the struggle against Bringleton was situated within specific networks of institutional power which had an interest in undermining the power of Bringleton and the intellectual forces that he represented. For instance, all of the individuals that attacked Bringleton had positions in, or were aligned with, centrist or center-left think tanks known for being more liberal and aligned with the Democratic Party. Although hush-hush to the point of near inscrutability (and thus taken with an ethnographic grain of salt), I heard multiple times through the gossip chain that experts from think tanks like Brookings Institution, Center for American Progress and Center for a New American Security who expected positions in a Hillary Clinton administration were bitterly disappointed.

Wielding rhetorical weapons like politicization and peer review that in Obama-times would license or de-license expertise among previously hegemonic communities of expertise, mainstream experts waged political delegitimation struggles against Bringleton on the only terrain that they knew. These struggles reflected larger concerns among liberal communities of expertise in particular that the Trump administration fomented an anti-expert atmosphere that threatened their symbolic and institutional status. In conclusion, we can see that practices of delegitimation were part of an *epistemic-political power struggle* – Bringleton represented not only a threat to the liberal power bloc's symbolic powers of expertise by disrupting the valuation of their knowledge; but also, through direct institutional capture of key advisory positions in the

Trump White House, materially expropriated them of the counter-terrorism policy positions and instruments that they had securely possessed during the Obama administration. In other words, we should situate two phenomena in the same analytical frame to understand delegitimation as epistemic-political power struggle: (1) Bringleton's intellectual opposition to the policy and intellectual frameworks of liberal counter-terrorism/extremism experts who were concentrated in a handful of Democratic Party-aligned think tanks, and (2) Bringleton's rise to prominence and power by taking a key position in the Trump White House, eclipsing the power of the liberal power bloc's ability to shape the ideological and policy landscape in the executive branch.[126]

4. White Supremacy, Racialized Economies of Epistemic Valuation and the Construction of Expertise

In the previous section, we explored one strategy of constructing non-expert subjects in the case of Dr. Bringleton. In this section, we explore how racism and white supremacy shape forms of unequal inclusion in the community of experts. As Karen Ho (2009) illuminated, notions of expertise are not neutral, but rather shaped by various forms of inequality that shape understandings of who counts, and does not count, as an expert. Indeed, like smartness, expertise harbors exclusionary functions that construct and secure naturalized forms of epistemic dominance for some that are predicated on the devaluation of others. While think tank professional classes proclaim the potential universality of expertise, and the neutral conditions of its ascription, this section shows that being understood as an expert is shaped by unequal, racialized economies of valuation. Rather than a neutral descriptive term, expertise is a cultural formation and mode of differentiation structured by race and white supremacy. I argue that, through practices of differentiating knowledge in spaces of accumulation such as panel events,

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[126] I was also told that right-wing think tanks like Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute were elevated in importance during the Trump administration.

nonwhite knowledge is constructed as particular, in contrast to the universal, unmarked expert knowledge of affluent white male professionals in particular.

While discourses of seriousness and expertise are culturally and organizationally specific, DC think tanks are not unique incubators of racism, patriarchy and white supremacy in the United States. Since at least the revolutionary struggles of the Civil War, which led to the formal legal inclusion of formerly enslaved people through the 13th Amendment (Dubois 1935), "colorblind" racial liberalisms have served to conceal systemic racial inequalities that oppress and devalue nonwhite people while conferring symbolic and material advantages to white-designated people. Numerous scholars have criticized "colorblind" (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and "post-racial" (Goldberg 2009) discourses as tools used to conceal ongoing patterns of racial domination and deprivation. Further, they argue that racism is not exclusively about individuals or groups harboring intentional or attitudinal prejudice; rather, racism is also articulated through the organization of social relationships that result in the oppression of racialized people (Harrison 2005). Post-racial discourse can serve unwittingly (or perhaps wittingly) to conceal the operation and sustenance of white supremacy as an institutional structure and practice that affords white-designated people advantages that are predicated on the exclusion of nonwhite people from those same advantages. With Frances Ansley (1989: 1024, n129), I define white supremacy as "a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings". I would add, however, that white supremacy is also system of social relations whereby whiteness functions as an unmarked category seen as normative, universal and neutral by whites and non-whites alike,

along with an instrument of constructing racial hierarchies and placing white people in positions of racial superiority, power and advantage. The unmarkedness of whiteness, rather than conscious and expressed attitudes of white racial supremacy, grounds this section.

The language of and commitment to diversity and inclusion is strong – if not hegemonic[127] – in most think tanks. Many think tanks used internal demographic statistics to shape organizational policies on diversity and inclusion. The liberal think tank for which I worked had several diversity-specific initiatives, and an active internal discussion of how to support diverse professionals and create an inclusive community. From rank-and-file to leadership,[128] the discourse of diversity and inclusion were key tenets of rhetorical commitment and tools of image branding (Partridge and Chin 2019). Indeed, sensitivity to considerations of racial and gender (if not class) discrimination and prejudice was key, especially among the centrist and center-left think tank professionals that made up the majority of my study participants.

In some ways, the 'politically correct,' postracial performativity of professionals, however, covered over implicit forms of racial animus and devaluation, including anti-Blackness. This was expressed, for instance, in the way that some interlocutors racialized urban space. One interlocutor advised me simply, "don't cross Bladensburg," referring to Bladensburg

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[127] In right-wing think tanks, I witnessed emerging polemics against the "diversity-industrial complex" and "woke academia," which have now become popular epithets on the intellectual right, so diversity and inclusion was by no means universal.

[128] For example, Brookings Institution's President's Message on Diversity reads: "It is my sincere belief that we derive great strength from diversity. If Brookings is to continue to play a leading role across its fields of study, we must commit to reflecting—in personnel and diversity of perspective—the global community we aim to serve. For this reason, I have made inclusion and diversity, or I&D, central to every aspect of Brookings's work in the future. Inclusion and diversity is deeply personal to me. In my 45-year career as a national security professional and Marine Corps General, I was afforded the great honor and good fortune to serve alongside so many extraordinary men and women that came from all walks of life. Their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives challenged us to be better. I understood the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity—of acknowledging where we have work to do, and committing to improvements."

Road in Northeast DC, which bisected, on the one hand, the historically Black and low-income but gentrifying neighborhood of Carver-Langston, which was witnessing the rapid influx of younger affluent white professionals (including myself, a rent-paying graduate student in one of the flipped houses in the neighborhood), on the one hand; and the neighborhood of Trinidad, which remained predominantly Black and low-income, and still left relatively untouched by the forces of development and gentrification, on the other.[129] One day, I walked with a male interlocutor in downtown DC, past a cute ice cream store, some clothing boutiques and a few large luxury brand stores. He asked where I lived, and when I mentioned H Street in the Northeast, he gave a surprised look. "I remember going down there when I first moved here, I went halfway down H street and had to turn back [laughs]", he said, leaving the reason why he had to turn back – increasing blackness – assumed yet palpably unexplained. Another widely renowned and respected older white male professor told me that the neighborhood on the wrong side of Bladensburg used to home to an "huge open-air drug market" back in the 1980s.

The notion of expertise and being taken seriously was rendered by professionals as something self-evident, with clear criteria for inclusion, separated from what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2009) calls "couplings of power and difference." I sat with Dr. Bryson, a middle-aged mid-career white male PhD-holding interlocutor working in a fellow position, in his large office. He sat behind a large desk that wrapped from one side of the room to the other, with a bright window behind him. I asked unsurely about "who can be an expert," and he ran with the ball. "Well anyone can be an expert, that's not really the question," he said, offering an academic re-framing that I had come to know well in graduate school, "I would ask more specific questions: does this person have the experience and background to show that they are specialist, are they, in

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[129] I often walked through this neighborhood to get to Tony's Boxing Gym where I boxed, or if I missed the bus.

the case of a scholar, are they using their disciplinary training to drive policy forward?"

Reflecting the paradoxical logic of liberal post-raciality and post-patriarchy, Dr. Bryson affirms

the universal possibility that *anyone can be an expert* while simultaneously affixing specific

conditions to the category of expertise – conditions which are shaped by symbolic inequalities in

epistemic valuation and material inequalities in access to elite institutional worlds structured by

race, class, gender and other forms of hierarchical differentiation. Aside from the evocative

definitions of the meaning of expertise, Bryson affirms the US-based meritocratic, equality-of-

opportunity imaginary of expertise found in centrist liberal think tanks. In this view, the criteria

for expertise are relatively transparent – are you using your training to "drive policy forward"? –

and the professional opportunity structure is level. The potential for inhabiting the domain of

expertise is truly *universal*, rather than differentiated by race, class, gender, nationality, and so

on.

But the elite post-racial meritocratic multicultural liberalism of DC think tank professionals

obscures systemic inequalities in access to the entwined matrices of institutional power and

professional prestige. These inequalities place nonwhite professionals in racialized economies of

epistemic valuation which segregate and devalue their knowledge. The colorblind logic of

"anyone can be an expert" obscures the way that *symbolic differentiation and devaluation* is

inscribed in the everyday knowledge practices of DC professionals, including the distribution of

intellectual value along chains of writing, reading and participation in events.

The Particularized Knowledge of Nonwhite Professionals

Think tank spaces and events were dominated by white people. Nonwhite people were

either non-existent or in the slim minority at think tank events, whether as panelists or attendees.

Of the over 90 public events that I attended – from small panel events to lectures, book talks and

conferences – there were four that featured a majority of women panelists, and two that featured a majority of nonwhite panelists. Semipublic or private events were no different. Attendee demographics at events worked similarly: the supermajority of attendees at think tank events across the topical and organizational spectrum were white (and even more so when it came to events related to security, terrorism, and extremism). Events featuring nonwhite people were systematically more sparsely attended than those of white people (and white men in particular), and thus did not attract the interest or attendance of the more prestigious experts – most of whom were themselves white – who in turn attended panels and events featuring majority white male panels. These asymmetries in attendance, however, were not neutral; rather, they reveal how the hegemony and valuation of white masculine knowledge is enforced informally through practices of unequal attendance organized on the basis of race and gender.

White professionals dominated panels on the most prominent high-value topics, attracting the most attention, interest and attendance: geopolitics and the nature of world order, military grand strategy, and terrorism and extremism writ large, among others. These topics were not only considered more symbolically important and prestigious, but also more eternal and 'universal.' Events with broad, macrostrategic or theoretical topics such as "How Should the Next President Counter Violent Extremism" were universally paneled by white male professionals. With control over intellectual markets, white male professionals dominated the public expression of knowledge about putatively universal topics, writing books with such grand titles as *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*. This mastery and oligopolic control of the public expression of knowledge on culturally valued topics conferred significant personal prestige and status.

This universality stood in contrast to the epistemic particularism of events featuring nonwhite professionals, which were framed in non-universal terms, such as "Jihadism and Radicalization of Women in the Middle East," or "Deterring Radicalization in Somali Refugee Communities." During fieldwork, I was not aware of any events on 'universal topics' such as national security or military grand strategy where nonwhite professionals composed a majority either as panelists or attendees. Indeed, nonwhite professionals rarely even sat at all on panels concerning topics understood as universal, which was the reserved domain of white expertise. Nonwhite professionals' particularized topics and corresponding forms of knowledge were positioned in a subordinate relationship to the universality and prominence of white (often male) knowledge. By positioning white professionals as the dominant experts on socially-valued topics considered 'universal,' nonwhite knowledge was designated as 'particular,' thus devaluing and subordinating it in contrast to the valued universality of white knowledge. In this section, I offer two brief cases to illustrate this claim.

Case 1: This was my first and only security-related event featuring African-American panelists. It was explicitly racially marked, with the title "What the African-American Community Can Teach Us About Countering Radicalization." When I entered the event space, a large, bright open room, I saw two African-American professionals, Dr. Jordan and Mr. Cooper in nice suits sitting with the white male moderator on the stage. In general, the event was sparsely attended compared to other panel events featuring all-white male panels: there were a handful of younger and middle-aged African-American professionals in the crowd, along with a majority of less than fifteen white professionals.

Jordan and Cooper gave a few prepared remarks on extremism and radicalization within the African-American community, focusing on the specificity of the relationship between Black

communities and patterns of radicalization, rather than general theoretical issues of extremism

and radicalization or specifically white supremacist terrorism – a domain reserved for white

theorists. They discussed instructive examples in the history of Black deradicalization, including

the Nation of Islam's implementation of an anti-radical reform program after the death of Elijah

Muhammad in 1975, which led members of the Nation of Islam to adopt less militant views of

race and the state. Finally, they explored how some anti- and de-radicalization government

programs might be implemented today among 'at-risk' Black populations, in ways that were

sensitive to issues of racial discrimination in government policy. In the formal Q&A Jordan and

Cooper were not asked about larger theoretical considerations in extremism studies or about

counter-extremism policies as they applied to non-Black people (e.g. white supremacists). In the

informal, non-livestreamed Q&A afterward, one audience member asked about Black Lives

Matter being a potential site for "radicalization." Dr. Jordan and Mr. Cooper resisted the general

characterization, but affirmed that there are radicalized tendencies in BLM.

Case 2: In contrast to the previous case, another panel featuring three Asian-American

women of Korean descent, Ms. Kim, Ms. Lee and Ms. Park, was *not* explicitly racially or gender

marked; rather, it was posed in geographical terms: "The U.S. Security Pivot and the Threat of

North Korea." At this time in early 2018, before the Trump administration's spectacular

discursive confrontations with Kim Jong-un in early 2019, the topic of North Korea was low on

the list of important security topics in DC. It commanded little attention and esteem from

experts, and there were very few events, articles or media appearances on North Korea in early

2018.

When I arrived five minutes early, I noticed how sparsely attended the room was. Instead

of the normal clusters of people with a few seats open characteristic of other events, I saw long

rows of empty seats punctuated by a few attendees sitting patiently. I checked the YouTube livestream, and only seven people were watching from home, in contrast to the usual forty or so for other events that I had attended (e.g. majority-white panels or book talks by white authors). Like the first case, Ms. Kim, Ms. Lee and Ms. Park spoke only on issues specific to North Korea and the United States, including the repressive policies of the North Korean government, tensions with South Korea, and how the United States might develop a policy that hems in the geopolitical aspirations of Kim Jong-un. Unlike many white male experts, they were not asked about things like "broader strategic considerations," "military readiness" or other topics that are deemed more universal and theoretical, topics which were, again, the domain of white men. After the event, I read each of the panelists' bios and noticed that all of them predominantly wrote and did panel and media appearances on North Korea. This example reflects the larger pattern that Asian people, and especially Asian women, never spoke on general issues of national and homeland security, but were relegated to panels and events on security issues in specific Asian countries, such as South Korea and Japan.

While the panel title was not advertised as being specific to women or concerned with issues of gender, it is interesting to note that this all-women panel was convened during a time when North Korea was a subordinate topic in DC security circles. As I tracked the upsurge in discussion of North Korea in early 2019 due to President Trump's belligerence, I noticed that it was white men who commanded attention on panels, webinars, lectures, cable news interviews and the like. Once a topic becomes internationally prominent and media-saturated, affording career-enhancing opportunities for self-promotion via public engagement, the baton is passed back to the unmarked expertise of the white male experts. Interestingly, as the "national security problem" of North Korea became an international media spectacle in late 2018 and early 2019 as

Donald Trump threatened war against Kim Jong-un, male experts became much more prominent voices across think tank panel events, cable news and the print media.

By relegating nonwhite people to 'specialized' topics and unintentionally designating their knowledge as particularized, white people are elevated into positions of expertise where their knowledge is seen as universal. As we saw in both cases, white knowledge is constructed as normative, universal and unmarked, while nonwhite knowledge is particularized. Not only are nonwhite experts relegated to speaking and writing only on issues related to their specific subject position, but they are also implicitly understood as incapable of speaking to broader, more 'universal' and 'theoretical' issues, which are practically understood as the domain of white male experts. If nonwhite epistemic professionals participate in the think tank security space at all, they were almost never representatives speaking on more 'universal' security topics, such theories and trends in terrorism and extremism writ large. If nonwhite professionals did sit on panels, they were predominantly invited to speak on specialized issues related to their perceived positionality as African-American or Asian.

In both cases, nonwhite knowledge is less attended, interesting, and worthy of attention. White professionals in general, and high-powered experts in particular, had little interest in what nonwhite people had to contribute. This racial politics of interest and attendance reinforces the structure whereby nonwhite people's knowledge is devalued and designated as less important in contrast to normative white male knowledge, which is implicitly perceived as more universal and valuable. My argument is not that nonwhite professionals were explicitly segregated, coerced, or discriminated against – to my knowledge, they were not told that they were prohibited from sitting on panels or writing articles about topics dominated by white professionals. Indeed, nonwhite professionals had sincere interests and expertise in their specialization, as in the case

with the panel experts in both cases. Rather, due to implicit, colorblind racialized economies of epistemic valuation, nonwhite professionals were not seen as valued, authoritative contributors to 'universal' knowledge, but rather were relegated to their own devalued, specialized sector.

The colorblind discourse of D.C. obscures the systemic exclusion of devalued forms of knowledge, shaped by larger structural patterns of social inequality. As we saw in the Introduction, poor and working class Black residents – many of whom live within walking distance of think tanks – are not considered serious experts whose knowledge is worthy of esteem, recognition and lucrative compensation. But even when nonwhite people gain entrance into the elite social spaces of expertise, they are largely circumscribed to domains of epistemic particularity, as if their knowledge is only relevant to the category of differentiation in which they are socially placed. And not only is nonwhite knowledge particularized, it is also devalued by being rendered less important and worthy of attention than that of white male professionals. While this section focuses on the few nonwhite people who have entered the predominantly white and affluent arenas of expertise, I want to highlight the fact that there are still very few nonwhite people of any rank working in think tanks, and even fewer working in programs relevant to national and homeland security.

DC professionals are not overtly racist or sexist – they do not express explicitly prejudiced attitudes or statements. For purposes of fairness and theory, it is important to emphasize that as an ethnographer and participant in social life in DC, with the exception of one case, I did not encounter overt expressions of discrimination, exclusion or any form of direct verbal abuse. At the level of public discourse and personal interaction, the professional world of DC is cordial, respectful and non-discriminatory. Indeed, many interlocutors openly expressed criticisms of overt, intentional forms of racism and sexism in particular, and seemed to reflect

earnest belief in non-discrimination and equality in access to graduate education, employment, promotion, wages and other instruments of class mobility. For my interlocutors, at the expressed ideological level, all were welcome in the pursuit of professional accumulation.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that, rather than being universal and cultureless, understandings of expertise and seriousness are socially constructed, inhabited and replicated through everyday social practices shaped by hegemonic cultural norms of professionality. To become considered serious in DC requires immense individual and collective labors of mediation, ranging from practices of bodily adornment and comportment to the accumulation and performance of symbolically powerful credentials. The cultural form of seriousness is closely related to and often entwined with that of expertise, both of which are signifiers of social worth, authorization and status. Turning toward expertise, this chapter suggested that expertise is not a static object or attribute, but rather a contested social field of struggles over power and differentiation. Claims and counter-claims of expertise expressed fierce disagreement over who counts as an expert versus who counts as an invalidated non-expert. While these forms of overt contestation over expertise are important, there are also more implicit, unsaid ways that expertise is hierarchically distributed. In the final section, I argued that expertise not neutral, but rather is constituted by inequalities of race and gender, which render nonwhite knowledge particularized and devalued, while elevating white masculine knowledge as valued.

<u>Conclusion</u>

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I set out to examine the social and epistemic life of counter-terrorism expertise within and across think tanks. I wanted to know how forms of security threat are developed, managed and circulated as institutional and intellectual objects. I assumed that my interlocutors – from the lowest intern to the highest program director – would be deeply interested in discussing ideas about terrorism, extremism and radicalization. Entering the Security Program as an intern, however, revealed a starkly different landscape of concern. Those around me were much less concerned with ideas and frameworks than in how accumulating bodies of skills, contacts and knowledge – whether or not related to terrorism – would afford professional and career advancement. The intellectual specificity and ideological content of understandings of terrorism, extremism, radicalization was significantly less salient than the capacity of networks and knowledge to function as instruments for professional accumulation. Modifying my analytical frame from abstract to concrete helped me make much more sense of what was going on around me with respect to labor, sociality and the value of expertise and other local cultural labels like seriousness. For instance, the work we were all doing as interns was dull, repetitive, and unenjoyable, and contrary to my initial expectations, interns in the Security Program were not necessarily interested in issues related to security. Interns and other lower-status workers, however, actively engaged in this epistemic labor not because they loved to catalogue news articles on spreadsheets, but because gaining experience, contacts and a strong recommendation would help them gain a foothold in an increasingly competitive economy.

Using think tank networks as a lens onto formations of professionality and expertise, in this dissertation I have shown how professional life and experience is shaped and striated by

competition, hierarchy and the perpetual struggle for professional accumulation aimed at advancement. My interlocutors negotiated labors of professional accumulation across an array of social and symbolic landscapes both inside and outside the workplace. With this in mind, in this Conclusion, I discuss the potential contributions that this dissertation makes and conclude with a reflection on the future of professionality.

Potential Contributions

There are a few perhaps surprising contributions that this dissertation makes. First, it contributes to an anthropology of class experience and formation (Graeber 2014; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Ortner 2003; Kalb 2015). I have argued that my interlocutors, such as interns, are not separated from the larger cultural and political economy of class, but rather are epistemic *workers* – an empirically specific category referring to those who sell labor for wages (and, as we have seen, also often sell their labor not in exchange for wages but rather the promise of professional accumulation). This dissertation situates these workers' experiences alongside the recent intensification of precarious, insecure and benefitless contract work driven by transformations in organization of bureaucratization and capital accumulation (Moody 2017; Srnicek 2017; Gupta 2019). While think tanks are not based on production for profit, they have – like capitalist firms – retooled and adopted employment regimes based on the labor of unwaged and undercompensated casualized workers (Kalleberg 2011; Moore 2019).

This dissertation has shown that while lower-status workers like interns in DC can be understood as precarious workers, they occupy unique, relatively privileged class and social positions: they are highly educated, from relatively affluent families, and deeply aspirational and upwardly mobile. While they are a subordinated faction of precarious worker, their class and organizational position is predicated on the potentiality of professional ascendance. Both

psychically and sometimes actually, they may be interns today, but tomorrow they will be managers, fellows and directors. Unlike many other low-waged precarious workers, interns sell their labor in exchange for the promise of professional capital accumulation. As we saw in Chapter 3, interns undergo the temporary sacrifice of subordination in order to accumulate the skills, experience and contacts necessary to rise up the hierarchy. In this way, while DC interns are indeed subordinated, undercompensated and wageless workers, they are set apart from Deliveroo, McDonald's and Amazon workers, along with other precarious service and industrial commodity production workers, whose positions do not imply or enable class advancement, and who do not generally understand their low-wage work in terms of an upward professional trajectory (Guendelsberger 2017; Cant 2018).

This distinction allows us to see that there are varieties of precarity among those who must sell their labor in general and even among those workers classified as precarious in particular, and that it is important to attend to the social, cultural and psychic specificities of class positionality and composition. For instance, by understanding how precarity and insecurity is made sense of through anticipatory commitments to upward mobility, we see how culturally specific imaginaries of professionality based in individualized upward movement shape how individuals relate to their subordinated class position. In this way, we can render visible forms of culturally specific differentiation which shape the contours of class experience, and generate divisions and separations between workers. While much has been written on worker organizing across industry and sector (Moody 2017), my dissertation might enable us to think about how to build bridges between precarious workers amidst differences in personal orientation to professional trajectories and identifications.

Second, this dissertation shows that expertise is not a static object, but rather a contested symbolic terrain of struggles over power. While anthropologists have described expertise as a repertoire of practical-technical competencies (Boyer 2005) or a heterogenous network that produces public interventions (Eyal and Bucholz 2010), this dissertation adds that expertise is an intraprofessional site of symbolic struggle over distinction and differentiation. As we have seen throughout the dissertation, there are a multitude of ways that expertise is operationalized as a field of power, including mediations of professional masculinity through bodily adornment; the relational politics of transactional networking; intellectual-political delegitimation struggles; and particularization and devaluation of the knowledge of nonwhite professionals. My central contention has been that interlocutors intervene in the field of expertise through everyday practices of *hierarchical differentiation* through which aspiring and established professionals work to construct and maintain their identities vis-à-vis others. The making of difference is the axis around which claims and counter-claims to expertise and seriousness are organized, illustrating a continual struggle bring oneself into relief in highly competitive professional environments. Immersive ethnography enables us to see how these tools of differentiation, however, are also not universal, but rather patterned by culturally specific symbolic goods, such as academic cultural capital.

Third, this dissertation complicates the classical Marxist story of class consciousness (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). According to this story, workers condensed in workplaces and/or in similar structural positions in the class hierarchy develop some sense of shared affinity, identification and solidarity that enable them to engage collectively in class struggle to win concessions from their employer. In contrast, among my DC interlocutors, I found that the development of solidarity – let alone class struggle – rarely if ever occurs. I found that one

primary reason why solidarity is not developed among lower-status workers is because their

personal and professional lives are structured by pressures to maximize one's professional value,

an imperative predicated on individualized forms of accumulation (see also Gershon 2014).

While, as Sandra and Dillon in Chapter 3 illustrate, the structure of accumulation does not

obliterate subjectivity, the pressure to competitively enhance and advance professional

personhood is certainly an omnipresent, ongoing impingement on lived experience. After all,

careers and resumes are not collective labors for social ends, but rather forms of individuated

prestige and notoriety. Furthermore, extremely competitive labor markets, where success is

predicated on professional capital stock, mean that those in similar career positions and sectors

are peer-competitors for scarce employment. The very individualized ontology of

professionality, that is, precludes and disincentivizes non-instrumental forms of cooperation and

solidarity among epistemic workers. Furthermore, as Chapter 2 described, lower-status workers

are divided into unequally ranked categories, such as intern, associate, and policy analyst,

corresponding to different degrees of prestige. These forms of hierarchical differentiation,

grounded the institutional form of think tanks as organizations, separate workers from one

another not only in terms of kind of labor, but degree of prestige and status, further incentivizing

the maintenance of separation.

The classical Marxist story of class composition, and the development of class

consciousness, does not account for the how professional cultures of hierarchy and

differentiation shape – and impede – the development of class consciousness. Even though

interns were often in close social, physical and digital proximity with one another, very little

solidarity and support developed between them. Indeed, as we have seen, sometimes even basic

polite conversation was difficult to come by with other interns given often unsaid forms of peer-competitor competition inside and outside the workplace.

As Bourdieu (1972) argued, social structures are not abstract and disembodied, but become internalized as "structuring structures" that shape perception, motivation and appreciation. Among my interlocutors, the cultural imperative and necessity of individualized professional accumulation created deeply felt psychic investments in professional distinction and advancement vis-à-vis peer-competitors. The *competitive* nature of accumulation meant that, at a psychic and experiential level, lower-status workers, along with others in higher ranks, did not generally feel empathy and solidarity with one another. What I call competitive emotions in Chapter 3, for instance, were prominent categories of feeling that my interlocutors expressed about one another. In the aspirational, competitive social worlds of DC, an injury to one was manifestly not an injury to all. Here, the way that individuated logics of accumulation shape the phenomenological orientations to other beings in the world dampens and even crushes possibilities for developing relations of mutual support and solidarity. This is not to say that there was no support to be found, but rather it took the form of highly circumscribed and privatized forms of affinity and friendship. As we have seen, these privatized forms of solidarity are shaped by the very structure of professional sociality, where accumulation is dependent on keeping potentially professional damaging information outside the gossip circuit and public sphere.

This dissertation shows that hierarchical forms of differentiation and division are active social processes grounded in culturally elaborated struggles for competitive accumulation. Ethnographic attention to the cultural form, content and motivating impulses of difference-making enables us to reflect on how social architectures of accumulation in competitive professional settings shape the way that we relate to one another, structuring whether we imagine

others to be beings for whom we care, or beings with whom we compete. Critically examining how accumulative urges transform and mutilate our experience of one another is a crucial task for social analysis today, and with this dissertation I hope to have illuminated not only the logic and practice of accumulation, but also a horizon for struggling against professional accumulation and imagining alternative ways to relate to oneself and one another.

(Anti)Professional Futures?

The concept of professional accumulation has been central to this dissertation. Both terms of the concept are coequal: on the one hand, the imperative of accumulation is shaped by norms and values of professionality, and on the other hand, the experience of being a professional is constitutively structured by the imperative of accumulation. To survive and flourish qua member of the think tank professional class, lower-status workers (along with their superiors) must rise fresh and poised every day ready for the accumulative struggle, embodied in everything from the choice of clothes to the performance of labor and sociality. In *Capital: Volume 1* (1971 [1867]), Marx argued that living labor becomes subservient to and led by an alien will and intelligence – capital, which is structured by the irrepressible logic of self-valorization and expansion that Marx, following classical political economy, called *accumulation*. While epistemic workers cannot be fully reduced to the impersonal domination of professional capital accumulation – they are not simple passive "vessels" for circulation – we have seen that their lives, desires and perceptions are indeed deeply subordinated to the logic of accumulation.

Dissertation fieldwork and writing has forced me to reflect on the very idea of professionality. Professions are formations of modernity: the professional emerged and constructed itself as a figure opposed to non-professionals, legitimated as such by proprietary claim to superior knowledge and competence authorized by institutionalized gatekeeping

mechanisms like licensing, exams, certifications and education (Ritzer 1975; Bourdieu 1984). The scourge of the last forty years of neoliberalism has destroyed the conditions not only of the working class, but also undermined the material conditions of relative professional class advantage (Duménil and Lévy 2018). In some sense, the symbolic regimes of distinction and differentiation that set professionals apart from proletarians lag behind their increasingly deteriorating material conditions. From doctors to academics, work conditions, employment security, and 'social wage' benefits of professionals are becoming increasingly precarious even as the "symbolic profit" and cultural reputation of our positionalities, titles and credentials still command *oohs* and *aahs*. A question arises: in our world of endemic and multiple crises and accelerating immiseration for the "condemned of the earth" (Fanon 1961), will professionals commit what Steve Osuna (2017) called "class suicide" – the dissolution of identification with power, advantage, distinction and superiority? Or will we cling desperately to those forms of symbolic and material property that we have accumulated and which have conferred to us relative esteem, security and prosperity? Will we protect or abolish not the socially relevant and beneficial content of professions, but their commitment to accumulation, hierarchy and entitlement? The answer will never be found in a dissertation, but in the concrete individual and collective struggles and self-activity of we in the relatively privileged professional classes, from technicians and engineers to academics and nurses. As old Marx wrote in *The German Ideology* (1841), "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence."

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