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Good Character: Reality Television Production as Dirty Work

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Good Character: Reality Television Production as Dirty Work

Abstract
Audiences, critics, and academics have raised significant moral concerns about reality television. The genre is commonly criticized for being exploitative, harmful, and fake. By extension, reality TV workers are morally tainted, seen as dirty workers of questionable character. This dissertation describes the sources of moral taint in reality television production and how production workers dispel this taint—making their work acceptable and even glorious to themselves and others—through everyday micro-level interaction. The data for this study comes from approximately 2 years of ethnographic observation at 2 reality TV production companies, attendance at 2 reality TV industry conferences, and interviews with 83 respondents, including reality TV production workers, television network executives, and people who auditioned to be on reality shows. Findings focus on the development process, during which production companies generate ideas for new television shows and pitch those ideas to television networks. First, I describe the development process and three significant moral dilemmas that workers face at this initial stage of production: creating negative representations (e.g. stereotypes), falsifying reality, and exploiting workers. Second, I discuss how even though some reality TV workers aspire to create “authentic” television and portray cast in a dignified manner, commercial demands sometimes pressure them into compromising their values. I find that workers justify making such creative compromises by distancing themselves from their actions or tweaking their standards of quality in their everyday shop floor talk. Third, I describe the significant creative contributions unpaid interns made at one production company and propose that supervisors dispel the moral taint of exploitation by framing their relationships with unpaid interns in terms of mentorship and friendship. Finally, I describe how people who audition for reality shows in development are concerned about workers’ professional legitimacy and moral character, and how workers craft their credentials and manage their affective styles of self presentation to convince prospective cast of their good reputation. I discuss implications of these findings for research on work and labor in cultural industries and for understanding stigmatized workers’ selves and identities in any occupation.

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GOOD CHARACTER: REALITY TELEVISION PRODUCTION AS DIRTY WORK

Junhow Wei

A DISSERTATION

in

Sociology

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

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GOOD CHARACTER: REALITY TELEVISION PRODUCTION AS DIRTY WORK

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I wish to extend sincere thanks to the leadership at Pinnacle Productions and Sunshine Productions for welcoming me into their companies. I especially thank Mark and the casting team at Pinnacle for not only sharing their stories and opinions with me, but also for their friendship and encouragement. Particular thanks also goes to David and the development team at Sunshine for being so supportive of my studies. To all of the producers, network executives, and cast who took time away from their busy schedules to be interviewed for this research, I am truly grateful.

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ABSTRACT

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Junhow Wei

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Audiences, critics, and academics have raised significant moral concerns about reality television. The genre is commonly criticized for being exploitative, harmful, and fake. By extension, reality TV workers are morally tainted, seen as dirty workers of questionable character. This dissertation describes the sources of moral taint in reality television production and how production workers dispel this taint—making their work acceptable and even glorious to themselves and others—through everyday micro-level interaction. The data for this study comes from approximately 2 years of ethnographic observation at 2 reality TV production companies, attendance at 2 reality TV industry conferences, and interviews with 83 respondents, including reality TV production workers, television network executives, and people who auditioned to be on reality shows. Findings focus on the development process, during which production companies generate ideas for new television shows and pitch those ideas to television networks. First, I describe the development process and three significant moral dilemmas that workers face at this initial stage of production: creating negative representations (e.g. stereotypes), falsifying reality, and exploiting workers. Second, I discuss how even though some reality TV workers aspire to create “authentic” television and portray cast in a dignified manner, commercial demands sometimes pressure them into compromising their values. I find that workers justify making such creative compromises by distancing themselves from their actions or tweaking their standards of quality in their everyday
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Prior to the series premier of the reality TV show *Buckwild* in 2013, *The New York Times* reported on rural West Virginia residents’ reactions to the MTV series being filmed in their area. The show followed the social lives of a group of young friends as they partied and engaged in recreational activities purportedly popular in the rural South, for example, the sport of racing trucks through mud bogs called “mudding.” The show was meant to replicate the success of *Jersey Shore*, MTV’s previous hit. And like its predecessor, *Buckwild* was widely criticized for exploiting broad cultural stereotypes and cast members’ fighting and drinking. One resident reported the careful staging of scenes: “I saw one of the crew talk to the lady, tell her exactly what they wanted her to do, then they filmed it over and over until they got it exactly the way they wanted.” Many were reportedly concerned that the show would negatively portray them as “hillbillies.” Kent Carper, president of the local Kanawha County Commission, told the *Times* dryly, “Some folks in West Virginia wear shoes, believe it or not.” Based on a two-minute trailer MTV released online, Senator Joe Manchin III, Democrat of West Virginia, wrote a letter to MTV’s president asking for cancellation due to “ugly, inaccurate stereotypes about the people of West Virginia.” Moreover, he accused the producers of being immoral, encouraging cast to misbehave for the sake of ratings: “You preyed on young people, coaxed them into displaying shameful behavior—and now you are profiting from it. That is just wrong” (Gabriel 2013).

Such scorn and moral condemnation is not limited to *Buckwild*. Reality TV is commonly criticized for being exploitative, harmful, and fake. As Senator Manchin’s quote suggests, this implicates the people who produce reality TV. After all, aren’t they the ones manipulating cast, orchestrating fake scenes, choosing to fill mass media with
degrading images and stereotypes, and profiting from it all? Such questions morally taint reality television production and stigmatize it as dirty work, a job worthy of shame and derision. By extension, reality TV workers are also morally tainted, seen as people of questionable character, as dirty workers.

Given the societal stigma and criticisms the genre faces, how do workers who create reality TV justify their morally questionable production decisions, come to a sense of self that they can live with, and assert identities that can be palatable to others? In search of answers to these questions, this dissertation draws on ethnographic observations at reality television production companies and interviews with workers on the front lines of creating new reality television shows.

Moral Objections to Reality TV

Why do many people find reality TV to be morally objectionable? A significant amount of popular moral concern focuses on the harmful impact that messages within and around reality shows can have on society. People often accuse reality TV of promoting and rewarding “trashy” and unseemly behavior that degrades society and stupefies audiences. Consider the case of Nyjah Cousar, a 23-year-old who gained minor notoriety online through a viral video of her father’s reaction after she accidently sent him a nude photograph of herself. The celebrity gossip website Cambio reported:

Now the girl (Nyjah Cousar) is apparently looking for a reality TV show deal, which would explain the whole "why was she filming all of that?" situation. It was pretty much her audition tape. A lot of people have wondered if the whole thing was real or not to begin with and this just adds more fuel to the fire... Well, it certainly wouldn't be the first time a regrettable moment from someone's sex life helped them score a reality show. (Batur 2014)
According to the author, “regrettable” and undignified behavior fits perfectly with scoring a reality TV show. Readers of the post agreed: “Perfect for reality TV... Like the rest of them, just another ignorant woman with no values or self-respect who is willing to prostitute herself for 15 minutes of fame followed by a potential Porn career.” “Well knowing how stupid Americans are, I'm sure they will buy into this like every other stupid E! show.” Although Nyjah never became a reality star, these comments reveal the derision people have for the genre and its participants.

Reality TV shows seem to be plagued with scandals. Phil Robertson, star of the wildly popular comedic docu-series *Duck Dynasty*, came under fire after calling homosexuality a sin and comparing it with bestiality. The hit show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which followed the family life of a 6-year old child beauty queen nicknamed Honey Boo Boo, came on the air amid controversy about the ethics of submitting children to beauty pageantry. It ended in an even more controversial way: cancelled after it was revealed that Honey Boo Boo’s mother was dating a convicted child molester who had sexually abused Honey Boo Boo's sister. *19 Kids and Counting*, which followed the wholesome life of a Baptist family, was also cancelled after it was revealed that Josh Duggar, the family’s oldest son, had molested five girls, four of which were his sisters, when he was 14 and 15 years old. Months after these allegations surfaced, Duggar also admitted to being unfaithful to his wife and was accused of sexually assaulting a pornographic actress.

Scholars have analyzed reality TV shows as text and found that indeed people perhaps should be concerned about the harm that reality TV images and messages can inflict on audiences and society. Wilson, Robinson, and McCallister (2012) systematically analyzed seven seasons of *Survivor* for “antisocial” behavior, including indirect and verbal aggression, finding that such behavior is more prevalent on *Survivor*
than on the news or previous reality TV shows. Numerous studies have found that reality shows depict racial (Tremlett 2014; Tyree 2011; Wang 2010), gender (Davis, Rogers, and Bryson 2014; White 2013), class, and other stereotypes (Backstrom 2012; Denham and Jones 2008; Kuppens and Mast 2012; Palmer 2013). Empirical audience research has found evidence that reality TV can negatively impact viewers’ body image (Egbert and Belcher 2012), glamorize teen pregnancy (Martins and Jensen 2014), cultivate negative gender stereotypes (Ferris et al. 2007), and create a stronger desire to undergo cosmetic surgery (Nabi 2009).

In addition to promoting harmful messages that degrade society, popular moral concerns around reality TV also focus on how appearing on reality TV can be harmful to cast members. The mainstream press is replete with stories about reality TV participants being mistreated and misrepresented by producers. *Mother Jones* investigated the mistreatment of animals on the set of Animal Planet’s hit reality show *Call of the Wildman* (West 2014). Kai Hibbard, a former contestant on the NBC weight loss competition series *The Biggest Loser*, blasted the show in an interview with the *New York Post*: “The whole f--king show is a fat-shaming disaster that I’m embarrassed to have participated in” (Callahan 2015). According to the article, contestants sign contracts that take away their rights to own their storylines and forbid them to disparage the show and contestants are made to lose weight in dangerous ways, such as working out for five to eight hours at a time. Hibbard said, “There was no easing into it. That doesn’t make for good TV. My feet were bleeding through my shoes for the first three weeks.” The article also claims that producers and trainers found pleasure in bringing contestants to mental and physical collapse. According to Hibbard, “They would say things to contestants like, ‘You’re going die before your children grow up.’ ‘You’re going to die, just like your mother.’ ‘We’ve picked out your fat-person coffin’ — that was in a
text message. One production assistant told a contestant to take up smoking because it would cut her appetite in half."

Perhaps the most popular moral criticism of reality TV is that it falsifies and misrepresents reality, misleading audiences and feeding them lies. Tell-alls about the fakery and manipulations behind the scenes of reality shows are common. The popular series *Storage Wars*, which follows the work of people who buy and sell unclaimed items from storage facilities, came under scrutiny when one of the main cast members charged the program with planting items in the storage units. But this was not at all an isolated scandal. Consider the following online news and blog articles:

- “How reality TV gets ‘written’” *The Onion* A.V. Club (Herzog 2013)
- “Real Housewives, Fake Scenes: New York Cast Caught On Camera Staging Scenes For Show” *Radar Online* (Howard 2013)
- “MTV’s "Pimp My Ride" Contestants Say The Show Was Basically A Lie” *BuzzFeed* (Kliegman 2015)
- “Proof Restaurant Stakeout uses actors to play servers” *Reality Blurred* (Dehnart 2013)
- “‘American Idol' Cop Reject -- Producers Used TV Magic to Make Me a Bitch” *TMZ* (2012)

Indeed, it has become common knowledge that reality television is staged, which has contributed to solidifying the genre’s negative reputation.

Academic studies have documented ways in which criticisms of reality TV’s authenticity is justified. Ethnographic and interview based research on the set of reality TV shows has described how television producers coach, direct, and otherwise shape reality TV participants’ on-screen images and performances (Aslama 2009; Gamson
1994; Shufeldt and Gale 2007; Syvertsen 2001; Teurlings 2001; Ytreberg 2006). Through her ethnographic studies of television talk shows and the reality show *Sorority Life*, Grindstaff (2002, 2011) describes how reality TV images are shaped by producers’ everyday boots-on-the-ground work, especially through various forms of emotion management (Hochschild 2012). In the case of *Sorority Life*, she discusses how camera people expressed disappointment with subtle emotional displays (sighing, rolling eyes, yawning) that prompted the sorority girls to “be interesting.”

Falsifying and manipulating reality can be particularly morally troubling when cast members are misrepresented, mocked, portrayed in an unflattering light, or forced into playing roles they would prefer to avoid. In an NPR interview, an anonymous producer revealed that this is sometimes the case on the set of the popular dating competition series *The Bachelor*:

We have even gone so far as to “frankenbite,” where you take somebody saying, "of course I’d like to say that I love him" and cutting the bite together to say "of course I love him," cutting out the very important "I'd like to say." [It's] definitely very misleading to the viewer and unfair to the cast member, but they sign up for this, fully knowing the reputation of the reality world.

Beyond editing, the producer goes on to describe the strategies she uses to create drama on set, which involves coaxing and pressuring contestants into saying things they are not comfortable saying:

Well, in the private one on one interviews with a producer (like me) it is the producers job to get the sh**t talking started, like "tell me honestly what you think of Sally" — if the interviewee does not want to respond in a catty way then the producer will usually go to the next level, like "well I personally think she is a self absorbed, attention starved skank," and then see if the person will take the bait. Once you start
learning who in the house is not well liked it is easy to start seeding conversations and gossip. Also, if the conversations linger too long on favorite movies and stuff the producers will step in and say, "Ok we all know we signed up for a TV show — so if you don't start talking about something more topical then you can't have the sushi you requested tonight." The smarter cast members start to realize that everything can be bartered. Like, "I will give you a good one-on-one interview about Sally, IF you let me listen to my iPod for the rest of the day." (Brownstein 2008)

The Dubious Character of Reality TV Producers

Due to moral issues like the ones discussed above, critics challenge the integrity of people who create reality TV and question their character. In her book *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, feminist media critic, writer, and activist Jennifer Pozner bashes the genre, arguing that reality TV producers concoct harmful and false stereotypes about, among other things, gender, race, class, beauty, and sexual orientation. The author expresses derision for reality TV producers and begins the book with a summary of these sentiments:

*Nearly every night on every major network, “unscripted” (but carefully crafted) dating, makeover, lifestyle, and competition shows glorify stereotypes that most...* 

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1 Despite the prevalence of moral concerns like those described in this section, and evidence supporting their validity, it is also possible that reality TV’s negative effects are overstated. While critics lament the fakery of reality TV, reality TV audiences are not cultural dupes. Academic studies have found that viewers are savvy about the constructed nature of reality shows and actively evaluate their truth claims (Hill 2005, 2007; Jones 2003). Researchers have uncovered a variety of uses and gratifications that audiences derive from watching reality TV (Barton 2013; Lundy, Ruth, and Park 2008). For example, reality TV can be a useful source of information and provides viewers with strategies to cope with life challenges (Nabi et al. 2006). Although most findings about reality TV’s effects on audiences have been negative, Nabi et al. (2013) argue that this could be due to bias within the research community and the tendency for studies to focus on particularly negative content, rather than anything inherent about the genre.
people assume died forty years ago. Follow me into the rabbit hole of reality TV, and let’s take a look at how television’s Svengalis want us to see ourselves.

On ABC’s The Bachelor and NBC’s Who Wants to Marry My Dad? fifteen to twenty-five interchangeable hotties compete for the chance to marry a hunky lunkhead they don’t know from Adam. Weepy waifs line up to be objectified for a living (or simply a moment) on the CW’s America’s Next Top Model. Branded “ugly ducklings,” appearance-obsessed sad sacks risk their health to be surgically altered on Fox’s The Swan and E!’s Dr. 90210. Starved women get naked for Oreos and men gloat about “dumb-ass girl alliances” on CBS’s Survivor. Women of color are ostracized as deceitful divas on NBC’s The Apprentice, lazy or “difficult” on ABC’s Wife Swap, and “ghetto” train wrecks on VH1’s Flavor of Love and I Love New York. And through it all, slurs like “bitch,” “beaver,” and “whore” are tossed around as if they’re any other nouns.

Who do we have to thank for this?

Meet Fox exec Mike Darnell, who The Washington Post suggests “may be the most influential man working in television.” The phrase “shit-eating grin” could have been coined for this once-disgraced, now embraced king of bottom-feeder reality TV schlock. (2010: 8-9)

Pozner does not simply bash the genre for promoting harmful stereotypes. She also paints reality TV producers as boogeymen who take grinning pleasure in creating negative images.

Pozner describes Mike Darnell as a prime example of reality TV producers’ callous money-lust. Along with partner Mike Fleiss, he created an early reality TV hit with a special called Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?—a competition between 50 women to become the bride of a mystery multi-millionaire—and parlayed that
success into launching *The Bachelor*, another dating competition that became one of the highest rated of all reality series. Darnell became Executive Vice President of Alternative Programming at Fox, greenlighting shows such as *Temptation Island*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Married By America*, *Bridezillas*, and *The Swan*. According to Pozner, television executives and producers saw these shows as “lurid gems” and clamored to work with Darnell for one reason:

Because nothing—not creative quality, not social impact, and certainly not accountability to the public—matters to corporate media companies other than the financial bottom line.

Therein lies the secret to Darnell’s perpetual shit-eating smirk. No matter how crass or asinine his concepts, no matter what twisted new fantasies he dreams up in pursuit of a 40 percent ratings share, he’ll have free rein as long as he remains a cash cow for Fox, which has explicitly encouraged him to “push the limits with impunity.” Meanwhile, the rest of the networks continue to race to meet him in the gutter. (2010: 13)

Pozner’s critique illustrates how criticism of reality TV as text can easily slip into a disdain for reality TV producers as soulless, amoral profit seekers. She does not simply argue that reality TV is profit driven, but also that producers lack moral integrity, deriving pleasure—“shit-eating smirks”—from creating twisted fantasies.

Much of the rancor towards reality TV stems from the perception that reality shows are “fake” and that—adding insult to injury—producers manipulate reality in order to create “harmful” rather than positive images. Critics like Pozner believe that reality TV producers are insidious because they take personal pleasure in these manipulations. “[I]t’s undeniable that reality TV producers love nothing more than to make fools of their cast members” (2010: 52). She further writes:
Before Mike Fleiss was a reality TV kingpin, he was a frustrated sports reporter. Journalism didn’t agree with him, though: “I was being restricted by the facts all the time! I felt like I couldn’t really do anything creative.” Nowadays, Fleiss doesn’t let pesky “facts” get in the way on *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. If the truth isn’t working, he and his staff just get… “creative.”

By putting “creative” in quotes, Pozner suggests that Fleiss lacks the moral code that journalists abide by in reporting accurate facts and insinuates that Fleiss lacks the integrity to care about true artistic expression. Similarly she quotes a *Bachelor* producer speaking callously about molding contestants into stock characters and treating them like prisoners in order to create drama.

… *pretty much every part of a reality show* is manipulated to support producers’ chosen narrative. As *Time* tells it, “Quotes are manufactured, crushes and feuds constructed out of whole cloth, episodes planned in multiact ‘storyboards’ before taping, scenes stitched together out of footage shot days apart”… Contestants are usually not allowed to see friends or family, read the news, surf the Internet, watch TV, listen to their own music, have private phone conversations, or go for walks, dates, or job interviews without camera crews. “It’s like a women’s penitentiary,” one *Top Model* contestant said. They’re kept sleep-deprived and underfed, plied with alcohol, then prodded to spew petty grievances in on-camera “confessionals.” Voila: catfights, tears, crazy antics. Other times, staff psychologists “are more apt to spark fights than to prevent them.” *American Idol* contestants confide their fears and jealousies to Fox-provided counselors, who then feed this information to producers.

“It is pretty satisfying to watch the kids go to crazy town,” a *Bachelor* producer says.”

(2010: 27-28)
The image of the reality TV producer as morally challenged and of questionable character is not limited to feminist media criticism, but is also familiar to popular audiences. The 1998 movie *The Truman Show* starring Jim Carey follows the life of Truman Burbank, a man who from birth is unwittingly the subject of a reality TV show. Truman’s life is carefully orchestrated, down to his wife who advertises kitchen products in everyday conversation. During the film, Truman becomes increasingly aware of this deception and attempts to escape on a sailboat, prompting Christof, the show’s egomaniacal creator and executive producer, to order producers to create a thunderstorm to capsize the boat, which almost kills Truman. Others in the control room protest: “The whole world is watching. We can’t let him die in front of a live audience!” But without hesitation, Christof replies in cold logic, “He was born in front of a live audience.”

More recent popular fictional depictions of reality TV production also portray producers as morally and ethically suspect. The critically acclaimed scripted drama *Unreal*, which aired its first season in 2015 on the cable network Lifetime, takes place behind the scenes on a fictional reality show called Everlasting, a *Bachelor*-like competition in which a handsome suitor selects his wife among a cast of women living together in a mansion. The show depicts reality TV producers as ruthless and/or self-loathing psychopaths who would do anything to have a hit television show. Producers on Everlasting do not only feed cast members lines, script scenes, stage situations, and edit footage to fit their needs, but also actively manipulate contestants and sabotage each other in order to further their own careers. On the first season of the show, a contestant named Mary, who was bipolar and suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder from an abusive relationship, commits suicide on set after an Everlasting producer tampers with her mood stabilizing medication and plies her with alcohol.
Through semi-structured interviews with reality TV audiences, Scarborough and McCoy (2016) provide some empirical evidence corroborating the notion that the general public finds reality TV producers to be of questionable moral character. Most of their respondents had a negative moral reaction to reality TV. Among those who had a negative reaction, half placed the moral burden of reality TV on people associated with production: cast members, producers, and the reality television industry generally. They cited the humiliation, mistreatment, and exploitation of “real” people for the purposes of gaining viewers and getting rich as a warrant for moral condemnation, as well as the negative effects of programs on society, including harmful life lessons and perpetuating negative stereotypes.

In light of the popular media and academic research outlined above, the stigma of being associated with a genre that has a negative reputation and engaging in its morally and artistically questionable production practices clearly threatens reality TV producers’ character and integrity. This study focuses on the sources of such threats to self and identity and the strategies through which reality TV production workers manage those threats.

What is “Reality TV”?

Before outlining my argument and research methods in more detail, it is necessary to define the subject of this study—“reality TV”—a bit more clearly. I begin with a short history of the genre followed by a definition.

A Brief History

Although we tend to think of reality TV as a contemporary phenomenon, elements of current reality TV can be seen in a variety of shows throughout the existence of television. Indeed, scholars do not agree on a definitive beginning of the
genre. Even the earliest television shows featured ordinary people in entertaining, unscripted situations. *Candid Camera* (1948) played pranks on unsuspecting people and captured their reactions using hidden cameras. Quiz shows such as *The $64,000 Question* and *Twenty One* made ordinary people into celebrities, and were extremely popular throughout the 1950s until revelations that producers rigged a number of shows led to widespread cancellation. On *Queen For a Day* (1956-64) women talked openly about their trials and tribulations and a studio audience voted via an applause meter for the one who endured the harshest circumstances to receive prizes. Talent shows were also popular in early television (e.g. *The Original Amateur Hour*, DuMont/ABC 1948-70; *Opportunity Knocks*, Thames 1956-78; *Come Dancing*, BBC 1949-98) (Deery 2015).

Scholars frequently point to documentary film traditions emerging in the 1960s and 70s as influential reality TV predecessors, especially the French tradition of cinéma vérité and the American school of Direct Cinema (Bignell 2005; Biressi and Nunn 2005; Marcus 2014; Winston 1995). Although there were important differences between the two traditions, both depicted ordinary people, or celebrities observed as if they were ordinary, in an unusually accessible and intimate style. Both attempted to capture the “real” as it unfolded, producing the impression of intimacy and immediacy through spontaneous approaches to filming. This heightened sense of “being there” was made possible by changing technologies, including lightweight cameras that allowed for extended on location shooting. A close scrutiny of ordinary people and “fly-on-the-wall” observational style were brought to television in series like *An American Family* (PBS 1973), which is sometimes referred to as the first reality TV show. The show depicted candid home conversations and followed the everyday lives of an upper-middle class Santa Barbara, CA, family, including the parents’ divorce and a son’s coming out as homosexual.
A surge of unscripted programming came to broadcast and cable networks beginning in the late 1980s. These included tabloid journalism and sensationalized news magazines like *Hard Copy* (syndication 1989-1999) and *A Current Affair* (FOX 1986-96), true crime docu-series featuring interviews and reenactments like *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC 1987-1997, other networks) and *America’s Most Wanted* (Fox 1988-2012), and the reality law enforcement series *Cops* (FOX 1989-present), which relied entirely on vérité-style footage of police on the job. Daytime talk shows and courtroom television (*Judge Judy* 1996-present) featuring ordinary people’s emotional confessions and everyday drama also grew in popularity during the 1980s and 90s. Docu-series following the lives of ordinary people took off in the 90s with shows like *A Wedding Story* (TLC 1996-present) and *A Baby Story* (TLC 1998-present). *The Real World* (MTV 1992-present), whose producers cited *An American Family* as a direct influence, established many familiar textual characteristics in later reality shows: casting young adults in ways that would ignite conflict and drama, having cast live in a house filled with cameras and microphones, and using rapid editing techniques (Murray and Ouellette 2009: 5).

While reality shows were already a significant part of television schedules by the 1990s, the year 2000 marked yet another surge in reality programming, beginning with the massive ratings success of *Survivor* (CBS 2000-present) and to a lesser extent *Big Brother* (CBS 2000-present) prompting more investment in reality. Other highly rated prime-time reality competitions followed on major television networks, including *The Amazing Race* (CBS 2001-present), *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* (ABC 2002-present), *American Idol* (FOX 2003-2016), *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC 2005-present), and *The Apprentice* (NBC 2004-present). Other reality competition series on smaller networks became cultural touchstones, like *America’s Next Top Model* (UPN/CW/VH1 2004-present), *Project Runway* (Bravo/Lifetime 2004-present), and *Top Chef* (Bravo 2006-
The number and variety of non-competition series also proliferated, from makeover formats like *Trading Spaces* (TLC 2000-2008) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo 2003-2007) to docu-series profiling the everyday lives of many different people and subcultures, such as *The Osbournes* (MTV 2002-2005), *The Hills* (MTV 2006-2010), *Deadliest Catch* (Discovery 2005-present), and *Ice Road Truckers* (A&E 2007-present).

The growth of reality TV must be understood in relation to its political-economic context (Grazian 2010b; Magder 2009; Murray and Ouellette 2009; Raphael 2009). Various scholars attribute the rise of reality TV to the television industry’s need for low cost programming. The surge of unscripted entertainment in the late 1980s came at a time when distribution channels were rapidly expanding with the growth of FOX as a major network, cable TV, local independent stations, and the VCR. As audiences became increasingly fragmented, advertising revenues were spread thin. At the same time, production costs increased 8 to 10 percent each year in the 1980s for scripted television, primary due to the cost of “above-the-line” talent (actors, directors, scriptwriters). Similarly, at the turn of the century, television faced increased competition for audience attention, this time from the growing influence of digital video, computers, and mobile phones; and scripted drama and comedies continued to increase in expense. Magder (2009) estimated the average cost in 2005 to be $3 million per episode for a prime-time drama, $1.5 million for a half hour situation comedy, but only $700,000-$1.25 million for one hour of reality TV.

Some reality shows are cheap because they film on location rather than renting studio space and do not use sets, props, makeup, costumes, or lighting. Many reality shows keep costs down by relying on non-union production labor and unknown onscreen talent (Andrejevic 2004; Collins 2008). In fact, surges in reality programming
might be explained in part as strategies used to control labor unrest. The 1988 Writers’ Strike, a 22-week event that delayed the start of the fall television season, was one key moment. Unscripted programs were used to fill airtime during the strike, since they relied little on writing talent. Also, the delay in the season gave producers and networks reason to develop future unscripted series. The second wave of reality TV, beginning with Survivor, also came amid threatened walkouts by writers and actors (Raphael 2009).

Aside from cost reduction, the latest boom in reality programming, beginning with Survivor, can be attributed to the genre’s ability to expand audiences despite growing competition for attention. After 2000, digital recording devises like TiVo gave audiences the ability to easily record shows and skip over commercials breaks. Reality series like American Idol and Survivor drew huge audiences that wanted to watch live, rather than record, in order to see the outcome of the competition. Furthermore, these shows integrated brands into their narratives and utilized product placement, so advertising messages could be transmitted despite audience’s skipping through commercial breaks (Deery 2004).

Early competition formats like Survivor also grew audiences by becoming effective global businesses (Keane and Moran 2008; Wei 2014). Reality formats spread globally as production giants like Endemol, headquartered outside Amsterdam, and FremantleMedia in London, sold competition shows like Big Brother and Idol internationally as templates, providing detailed production and marketing guidelines that could be tailored to the cultural context of each new country. Formats reduce commercial risk because they have been previously tested and found ratings success, but can also be tailored to the specifications of each new market. Subsequently, docu-
series like *Jersey Shore* and *Real Housewives* also became formatted and sold internationally.

**Defining Reality TV**

As the brief history outlined above suggests, there has been an enormous variety of shows that have fallen under the reality TV label. Subgenres of reality TV include talent competitions (*America’s Got Talent, American Idol, Top Chef, Ru Paul’s Drag Race, Top Shot*), game docs (*Big Brother, Survivor, The Mole, Amazing Race*), prank shows (*The Carbonaro Effect, Punked, The Joe Schmo Show*), dating shows (*The Bachelor, Blind Date, I Love New York, Married at First Sight*), makeover or transformation series (*Biggest Loser, The Swan, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Flip or Flop, Trading Spaces*), travelogues (*Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations, Bizarre Foods*), item or transaction series (*Antiques Roadshow, Pawn Stars, House Hunters, Storage Wars*), and docuseries following the everyday activities of a central cast (*The Real World, Duck Dynasty, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, The Little Couple, The Simple Life, Jersey Shore, The Hills, Real Housewives, Deadliest Catch, Small Town Security, Cake Boss, Dance Moms*).

This list of shows and subgenres is not meant to be exhaustive. There are probably reality shows that do not fall into any of the categories listed, and some that belong to multiple categories. Rather, my intention in generating this list is to illustrate how the variety of reality shows that exist make coming up with a precise definition of the genre based on format, subject matter, or tone difficult. However, Ouellette and Murray put forth one useful and often-cited definition that takes these variations into account:

We define reality TV as an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real. (2009: 3)
What unites the disparate shows listed is that they are made to be appealing as commercial entertainment and central to their appeal are their claims to reality.

Moreover, Ouellette and Murray distinguish reality TV from news, documentary, and other “sanctioned information formats” in which truth claims are explicitly tied to the goal of public service, as opposed to popularity and profitability:

If the reality programming that we examine here celebrates the real as a selling point, it also distances itself from the deliberation of veracity and the ethical concerns over human subjects that characterize documentary programming in its idealized modernist form. For even those programs that claim to improve the lives of their participants, such as *Extreme Home Makeover Home Edition*, do not carefully consider the ethics and responsibility that come with the representation of “real” people and, as a result, are commonly charged with exploitation of their subjects. (2009: 4)

Their elaboration of the definition speaks to the central issue of this dissertation. Reality TV is not only accused of being morally offensive at times; it is defined by its lack of ethical cleanliness, especially in comparison to related genres like documentary.

It is important to keep in mind that genres are socially constructed and governed by arbitrary boundaries. While people take pains to distinguish between “reality TV” and “documentary,” whether we label any given television show a “reality show” may have less to do with its formal properties than with the social contexts in which these labels are applied. For example, genres are often linked to branding efforts. *American High* was a series that followed the everyday lives of a group of high school students. The show originally aired on Fox, at which time the network branded it a “reality TV show” and played up its teen drama. However, later the series moved to PBS, where the
network promoted the show as a “documentary” and emphasized its potential to educate and inform audiences about the adolescent experience (Murray 2009).

Also, we must note that although the genre is generally stigmatized and reality shows are widely disparaged for their lack of good morals, upon closer inspection the moral universe of the genre is quite broad. As Grindstaff (2002) suggests in her analysis of television talk shows, reality TV programs fall on a spectrum between “classier” and “trashier” fare. Different programs are subject to different levels of moral condemnation. Cast members on Jersey Shore and Dance Moms are loud and confrontational. However, Bringing Up Bates is a top rated docuseries following a wholesome religious family doing everyday activities. While on Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica pop singer Jessica Simpson was famously confused about whether her Chicken of the Sea canned tuna was fish or chicken, the competition series Child Genius, created in cooperation with MENSA, follows ambitious kids as they compete for a $100,000 college scholarship in tests of math, spelling, geography, and current events. Even within the same program, there are moments more or less fitting with popular criticisms of the genre. For example, in early rounds of the singing competition American Idol, contestants were often mocked and ridiculed for their poor singing—especially by acerbic judge Simon Cowell—and portrayed as delusional for believing in their talents. But later the show transitions into an uplifting Cinderella story, praising its champions and highlighting how hard work and true talent have turned them from ordinary people into stars.

Still, despite variation in the level of moral condemnation particular shows inspire, morally questionable production practices remain common in many reality shows. And the more people perceive a show to be morally tainted, the more it seems appropriate to label it reality TV. In January 2016, Discovery Channel released the show Killing Fields, which followed a team of detectives on an active homicide investigation. The show
came off the heels of two popular and critically acclaimed true crime television series, *The Jinx* on HBO and *Making a Murderer* on Netflix. In the *New York Times* review of *Killing Fields*, critic Mike Hale attacks the show for its production values and authenticity, labeling it “reality” in opposition to its more high quality “documentary” precursors:

> While its format may jibe with those of its more glamorous rivals, its rhythms, language and production values are far closer to those of the abundant reality crime shows on channels like A&E and Investigation Discovery.... Perhaps because of the demands of that schedule, or perhaps because this is Discovery rather than HBO or Netflix, “Killing Fields” relies on the kind of obviously staged or at least partly artificial action that typifies the reality-TV end of true crime. The team of investigators holds meetings, tracks down witnesses and waits tensely for DNA results, always with an awkward consciousness of the hovering cameras. (Hale 2016)

Thus, while the genre is difficult to define and certainly varies in content and respectability, a lack of moral cleanliness is key to how many people define and perceive reality TV in general.

**Cultural Production as Dirty Work**

From Hollywood and Broadway to restaurants and galleries, the arts and cultural industries—including reality TV—are important topics of study because they play significant roles in shaping economic and social life. Cultural industries create and circulate texts that influence our understanding and knowledge of the world (Hesmondhalgh 2012: 4). Although communication scholars disagree about the degree of power and the manner through which various media and messages affect audiences, media undoubtedly do influence individuals and social groups. Media shape our sense of how we should relate to each other, our ideas of right and wrong, and connect us with
otherwise distant people and places. People draw on the news, films, comics, music, video games, books, and a variety of other media to construct their fantasies, emotions, and identities. Television is particularly influential. Americans spend more than half of their leisure time or about 2 hours and 49 minutes watching television on an average day (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015).

As cities and nations across the globe transition from industrial manufacture to knowledge-based work, cultural and creative industries are increasingly important economic drivers and employers (Currid 2007; Florida 2014). Between 1980 and 2000, the number of artistic workers grew at a rate of 78 percent in the United States, driven in large part by the rapid growth of audio-visual and broadcasting, advertising, video production, and computer gaming industries (Menger 2006). According to the non-profit group Americans for the Arts (2015), in the United States at least 702,771 businesses are involved in the creation and distribution of the arts and they employ 2.9 million people, including a very conservative estimate of 234,122 in the television industry.

Given the growth of the labor force in arts and cultural industries and the impact their products have on society, it is important to understand the experiences and challenges that cultural industry workers face in their everyday lives. Previous scholarship has identified various issues that impact workers’ wellbeing in the cultural industries. A significant amount of research has discussed cultural industry work as exploitative, precarious, and alienating, as well as cool, fun, and glamorous. I briefly review this literature below before describing cultural production as morally dirty work, a perspective that has received insufficient attention in this line of scholarship.

A significant body of literature focuses on labor conditions in the cultural industries, drawing on traditional Marxist concerns about exploitation as well as recent analyses of the insecure, casual, and irregular nature of work and labor in contemporary
capitalism (Sennett 2006; Smith 2001). This literature highlights common difficulties creative workers encounter: precarious, temporary, and irregular employment; short-term contracts; uncertain career prospects; collapsing boundaries between work and leisure; exceptionally long working hours; free labor, poor pay and lack of employment benefits (Banks 2007; Gill and Pratt 2008; McRobbie 2002; Menger 2006; Neff 2012; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Ursell 2000). Through interviews with workers in UK television, recording, and magazine industries, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) find that these challenges can be subjectively burdensome for cultural industry workers. Their respondents displayed significant nervousness, anxiety, and even panic in relation to their insecure and uncertain careers.

Social scientists and cultural critics have also been centrally concerned about the effects of commercialization on creative workers’ ability to express themselves and create cultural objects of quality and value. Such ideas gained intellectual prominence over half a century ago beginning with the Marx inspired Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Horkheimer and Adorno introduced the concept of the “culture industry” (1977 [1944]) in order to shock readers: the word “culture” was generally equated with the highest forms of human creativity and the most priceless works of art rather than an industrial commodity that could be bought and sold. Scholars following Horkheimer and Adorno argue that mass culture industries are assembly lines, cranking out standardized products, where profit is more important than content. Artists become alienated workers, dominated by an impersonal production process, unable to fulfill their own creative talents. An artist who “goes commercial” is viewed as a “sell out,” trading artistic integrity for financial profit.

Empirical studies of cultural industry workers have complicated these Frankfurt School assumptions about the nature of labor in mass media and commercial culture. In
his study of freelance Hollywood film and recording studio musicians, Faulkner (1985) finds that while film production shares many features of assembly-line manufacture, musicians had a variety of creative experiences and opinions about the expressive content of their work. Music ran the spectrum of being extremely dull and routine to exciting and challenging. Respondents took pride in their skills as instrumentalists and adopted occupational identities as “musicians” rather than as “studio or freelance players.”

Rather than framing cultural industry workers as sell outs, much recent scholarship emphasizes that financial rewards are meager and, as previously mentioned, work is precarious. Scholars argue that in lieu of stable or high income, people are drawn to working in television, fashion, new media, and other commercial cultural industries because of the non-pecuniary benefits those jobs offer: Working in cultural industries is considered cool and glamorous (Duffy 2015; McRobbie 2002; Neff et al. 2005; Wei 2016). Also, workers have some opportunity to be creative, despite the existence of tensions between creativity and client demands. In their study of fashion models and new media workers, Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin (2005) find that workers in both fields feel like their jobs are creative because they can visualize their role in a larger production process, which leads to the subjective feeling of ownership over product and control over labor.

Finally, existing research suggests the importance of studying whether and how cultural industry workers derive a sense of self worth and positive identity from their work and occupations. Sociologists have long studied how all workers, not only those in creative occupations, create and present favorable identities in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. In his classic study *Men and Their Work*, Everett Hughes argues that a person’s work “is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more
significant things by which he judges himself” (1958: 42). Hughes conceptualized work as a “social drama,” focusing on how workers actively shape the meaning of work through everyday interaction.

Dirty work is one key concept from Hughes’ study. Dirty work refers to work roles and tasks that are frequently perceived as shameful, disgusting, or degrading. Although it is easy to see how the term applies to certain occupations—garbage collectors, coal miners, undertakers—Hughes argues that workers in all occupations must occasionally do dirty work. According to Hughes, tasks can be seen as dirty due to physical, social, or moral taint. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) build on this typology by specifying two criteria for each of Hughes’ three forms of taint. An occupation can have physical taint when it is directly associated with garbage, death, sewage, etc. (e.g. butcher, janitor, exterminator, funeral director), or when it is thought to be performed under noxious or dangerous conditions (e.g. miner, firefighter, dentist). An occupation can have social taint when it has regular contact with stigmatized groups (e.g. prison guard, AIDS worker, social worker), or when workers appear to serve others (e.g. shoe shiner, maid). An occupation can have moral taint when it is regarded as sinful or of questionable virtue (e.g. exotic dancer, tattoo artist), or when the worker is thought to use deceptive practices that challenge norms of civility (e.g. bill collector, private investigator).

Despite the social stigma associated with their occupations, dirty workers have a surprisingly high degree of occupational pride due to their active efforts to cast their duties in a positive light. Hughes describes how janitors fight the image of themselves as subservient by focusing on ways in which they are more powerful and skilled than others give them credit for. For instance, they take pride in having insider knowledge about people in the buildings they clean.
Cultural industry work, especially in the mass media industries, is often seen as glamorous, cool, exciting, and otherwise prestigious. The glimmer of Hollywood, images of beautiful and wealthy celebrities, and prestigious awards like Grammys and Oscars help bolster that image and create boundaries between “ordinary,” banal life and media production (see Couldry 2002; Gamson 1994). On the other hand, cultural production, in all fields but especially in mass media and commercial entertainment, is often also seen as morally corrupt. I propose that managing moral taint is a central part of working in the commercial culture industries and one of the biggest challenges workers face in constructing a positive sense of self and favorable impression for others. Given the other face of cultural industries as hip and glamorous, workers may feel especially pressed to rid themselves of such taint. Thus, scholars should not only interrogate cultural industry work as cool, flexible, precarious, or alienating, but also as dirty work.

Moral taint in cultural production can arise from creating what people believe to be harmful images or messages. Moral panics and public outcries against particular cultural products erupt in response to cultural content deemed morally obscene. For instance, heavy metal music came under attack in 1985 Senate hearings amid accusations that its lyrics corrupt children, while rap music was decried for putting society at risk by glorifying violence (Binder 1993). Cultural content might also be seen as morally questionable when it undermines equality for traditionally marginalized groups. For example, sociologists have described how stereotypical images of sexual minorities and lower class people are created on television talk shows through producers’ backstage coaching efforts (Gamson 1998; Grindstaff 2002). Grazian (2003) describes how blues musicians conform to black racial stereotypes with sexually suggestive performances in order to please their live club audiences.
Moral taint in cultural production can also arise when workers are thought to mistreat or exploit others for commercial gain. In the modeling industry, industry experts warn young models against attending “scam” schools that charge students to create modeling portfolios but ultimately offer no means for career advancement. However, more “legitimate” organizations engage in comparable practices. Cultural industries are among the biggest users of unpaid interns (Frenette 2013). Moreover, as previously discussed, creative work frequently involves low pay and long hours. Twelve, fifteen, and even twenty-hour workdays are not unusual on film and television sets; lower level workers, who are the least well paid, often work the longest hours (Polone 2012).

A sociology of morals has recently enjoyed a surge of interest (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). Human beings are innately moral, not simply rational and self-interested actors (Smith 2009). Moral meanings are key materials through which people build community and mobilize for collective action. Morals are also used to draw symbolic boundaries and exclude others (Lamont 1994). But while sociologists have acknowledged that cultural production is riddled with moral dilemmas and have charged cultural producers with moral transgressions, little attention has been paid to how cultural industry workers manage moral meanings in their everyday work or how moral meanings shape workers’ selves and identities.

In light of the various criticisms of the genre discussed at the beginning of this chapter, related to both the morally suspect content of reality TV text and the labor issues surrounding its production processes, reality TV is a particularly good case for examining dirty work in mass media production. How do reality TV producers sustain a sense of good character and integrity, despite doing work that might be seen as morally tainted?
Fieldwork and Methods

Participant observation and interview are suitable methods for learning everyday work routines, analyzing workers’ micro interactions, and understanding workers’ subjective experiences. My analysis of reality TV as dirty work is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork at two reality TV production companies. I first conducted fieldwork at a company I call Sunshine Productions, which I visited regularly from February 2009 until February 2010. Sunshine was launched in the early 1990s and found great success by tapping early into the emerging cable television market, which was and continues to be particularly keen on acquiring unscripted content. The company went on to produce a number of very popular reality series, including ones nominated for Emmy awards.

Sunshine was located in a nondescript office building, dull grey and white conjoined boxes, placed in the midst of a suburban, middle-class residential neighborhood. It shared the building with an advertising agency, a probation office, and other small businesses. Upon entering the office, there was an open reception area, where beside the receptionist’s desk a large flat-screen television was almost always turned on and playing the latest talk show or reality program. To one side of reception, sharing the same space, there was a small conference table. On the other side of reception, also sharing the same open space, there were a few cubicles and a large copy machine. Several doors leading to private offices surrounded the open space. A short hallway led to several additional rooms: three editing suites, a kitchen, and a filming and recording room with a green screen.

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2 I use pseudonyms for the two companies where I did fieldwork, their workers, cast and prospective cast members on their shows, and their show titles.
On the whole, the office looked like any other generic white-collar workplace, neither hip nor luxurious. It was generally kept clean and sparse, with bright white walls, although miscellaneous objects came and went. On my first day, beside the conference table there were a few cardboard boxes, an unhung chandelier, an unplugged television set, a stray office chair, and some seats apparently torn from a sports stadium. The walls were neatly lined with several framed posters of shows Sunshine had produced, as well as one photograph of some workers at the Emmy Awards. The physical office belied the company's former glory and reflected its downward trajectory. Years before, Sunshine was located in a downtown office big enough for hundreds of employees. David, one of Sunshine's co-founders, once told me wistfully that the company would be back downtown again some day.

Although the number of workers fluctuated, there were about 20 during most of my time in the field. It is difficult to provide an exact count of Sunshine's workforce. Many were freelancers, although Sunshine typically re-hired the same contractual workers. Furthermore, television production is a volatile business. Towards the end of my time, the company had not been commissioned to produce any major projects for several months and was forced to reduce its workforce to four full-time staff members. However, shortly after that, they picked up a new project that required them to rehire. Employees ranged in age from a couple recent college graduates to many established professionals in their forties and fifties. A slight majority were men and all were white Americans, except for one biracial (black-white) female and one male of Middle Eastern heritage.

Although the office became increasingly quiet and empty as workers left over time, generally the atmosphere was casual and friendly. Joking and playful banter were a constant part of social interaction. For example, one day I was scheduling an interview
with Wendy, the executive assistant, who was about eight months pregnant. As we spoke, Thomas, one of the company’s partners, got on the floor and swayed his hips from side to side imitating Wendy’s pregnancy exercises, causing her to burst out in laughter. Such playfulness reflected close relationships among workers at all levels. When I asked Jean, a producer, about her superiors, she responded, “I have a very close relationship with them and yeah I look at them more as family…. They are my employer but they’ve been good to me.”

The entertainment industry has a particular reputation among ethnographers for being difficult to penetrate (see Grindstaff 2002; Zafirau 2007). However, I was fortunate to gain access to Sunshine Productions easily through a personal contact. A colleague in my department was friends with Katie, a post-production supervisor at the company. Katie had also been an invited speaker at my university. She thus had some familiarity with academic research and my department in particular. After explaining to her that I was interested in observing daily work at Sunshine, she secured approval for me from the company’s owners.

For most of the year, I visited the office once a week, with each visit lasting approximately two hours. During the summer, my visits were more sporadic. However, when I did visit over the summer, I often went for several consecutive days at a time and stayed for the full workday. While most observations were conducted at the office, I went with workers on several video shoots in various locations. Most shoots were over seven hours long. One shoot I observed took place over three days and involved traveling four hours each way by car with two Sunshine workers. During those three days, the two workers and I spent most of our waking hours together.

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3 I did not visit for approximately six weeks during April and May. I also did not visit for approximately three weeks between July and August.
Almost all of the employees accepted me warmly upon my arrival and continued to be friendly and open throughout my time at the company. They openly shared thoughts and frustrations about their work. As I spent more time with them, I was increasingly accepted as a member of their group. The day after returning from the three-day shoot mentioned above, Jerry, one of the workers on the trip, greeted me enthusiastically. Upon seeing me, he jostled my shoulders and exclaimed with a big smile, “Hey, how you doin’?! Team!”

At Sunshine, the workforce could be divided into freelance producers who organized, scheduled, and directed the filming and editing of television shows and other video; editors who manipulated raw video footage; administrative and operations staff; and development workers. I interacted with a variety of people and observed a variety of activities at Sunshine, including planning meetings, celebratory events, filming, and post-production of video content. I went on video shoots and observed how scenes for reality shows are planned, filmed, and directed. I observed editors cutting filmed footage together and adding video effects and music. However, I spent the majority of my time with a small group that spearheaded development efforts. Development is the process through which production companies create new television shows and pitch them to television networks. David, a founding partner of Sunshine, led the development team. Thomas, another founding partner, and Jerry, director of programming, pitched ideas and directed development projects. Kevin, a young development associate, assisted the others while Larry, an editor, was heavily involved in developing ideas and editing “sizzle reels,” short videos used to illustrate concepts during network pitch meetings.

For most of my time at Sunshine, my role was simply an observer, shadowing individuals or sitting with groups as they worked. I attempted to make myself useful to staff when possible. I assisted during video shoots, for example, by helping to set up,
carry equipment, buy coffee, and clean the set. Employees were aware that I was conducting research that might be published as an academic book or journal article. They treated me like a student learning about their profession and would occasionally ask me about the status of my studies. On most visits I interviewed workers informally, asking them to explain technical aspects as well as their thoughts and feelings about the work I was observing. Workers also updated me about things that happened while I was away from the office and informed me about future plans. Beyond these informal conversations and observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 workers.4

Since Sunshine’s fortunes and workforce were dwindling, I began conducting fieldwork at a company that I call Pinnacle Productions in September 2012 and stayed there through June 2013. Unlike Sunshine, Pinnacle was a brand new company, having only been open for about a year when I first arrived. It was off to a promising start, with one show picked up to air on a major cable network and networks expressing significant interest in other concepts the company was developing. Moreover, despite being new, each of its upper-level staff members was an experienced entertainment industry professional. Ethan, the owner and founder, co-created and produced a number of extremely successful reality shows before starting Pinnacle. Tony, Director of Branded Entertainment, had previously run his own consultancy business, creating media content for a variety of international brands. Mark, the Casting Director, had over a decade of experience in casting for a variety of television talent.

4 When I first arrived, I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with workers about their career paths, feelings about their work, and opinions about reality television. I also later conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with six of the same people in order to ask them about specific events I witnessed in the field and background information about projects I was observing. Both types of interviews varied between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours, with most lasting approximately 30 minutes. These and all other interviews in this study were audio-recorded and transcribed by either a hired transcriber or me.
Pinnacle Productions was located in an upper floor of a Manhattan high rise, on a major avenue with an unending stream of traffic and pedestrians, lined with a wide variety of shops, cafes, and restaurants. The lobby of the building was going through a slow renovation for most of my time in the field, but when complete was clean, modern, and elegant, with approximately fifteen-foot tall tray ceilings and shiny marble floors. Despite its impressive address and building lobby, the interior of Pinnacle’s office was a rather generic, no frills, white-collar workspace, much like Sunshine Productions.

Upon entering, there was a small greeting room, with a constantly manned reception desk, a sleek leather couch with shiny black cushions, and a modern coffee table with magazines—*The New Yorker, The Hollywood Reporter, Cosmopolitan*—strewn in a small pile. The light brown carpet, which continued throughout the office, was industrial grade and a little bit stained. The walls in this area, and for the most part throughout the office, were painted white and looked clean at first glance, but upon closer inspection had smudges, perhaps handprints, and black streaks, perhaps scrapes from moving furniture. On one of the white walls behind the couch hung a framed article from a popular business magazine, two pages and the cover, about one of the shows Ethan had produced.

Past reception was a short hallway. The first room one encountered was the small, windowless casting suite, which Mark, the Casting Director, shared with his interns, and where I spent the vast majority of my time. A few steps past casting was another small room where the post-production coordinator, and the post-production interns he managed, worked on editing and organizing video footage. At the end of the short hallway was the largest room in the office, about twenty-five feet long by twenty feet wide. Four cubicles in square formation, one belonging to each of four development associates, occupied the majority of the room. Since the cubicle dividers only rose
about a foot from the surface of each desk, the space was conducive to conversation. A thick pillar, probably hiding a support beam, awkwardly ran from floor to ceiling through one of the associates’ cubicles. An approximately foot long, rubber rainbow trout was pinned to the middle of the pillar—perhaps a remnant from the show the company was developing about a bait and tackle shop. Crowded against one side of the cubicles was a scrunched row of makeshift desks for interns, consisting of two narrow folding tables, four office chairs, and three computers. A large combination photocopy machine and printer was tucked into the corner.

Doors to the remaining rooms in the office surrounded the cubicle area. Oscar, the director of photography, shared a windowless room with his assistant, decorated with movie posters and holding a metal warehouse-like storage shelf, several tiers tall, neatly stocked with production equipment: cameras, lights, beams, cords, etc. Rooms for the other employees were also cramped, but had large windows. There was a small kitchen, where workers went to grab handfuls of tiny pretzels out of a big plastic barrel. Another room was an editing suite, containing a large desk and computer with multiple monitors and a large flat screen television. There was also a large conference room holding a long wooden table, where development interns would often work on laptops. Finally, Ethan had a large corner office with windows offering grand views of the avenue below and skyline beyond. His big, wraparound desk was rather bare, since he worked off a Macbook Air laptop, except for a neatly maintained rack of file folders and a small stack of books—*Freakonomics* and several about business management.

In the summer months, Pinnacle employees enjoyed “Beer Fridays”, ending the last hour of their workweek drinking bottles of craft beer on the company’s dime. While people worked hard, even at its busiest there was never a feeling of frenzy or bustle. At times, the office was rather empty, since workers were sometimes away at meetings or
on video shoots. On the other hand, occasionally there were an insufficient number of
desks for interns, in which case interns would work on laptops in one of the editing
rooms or on the couch in the lobby, but even on these days the office did not feel
cluttered or chaotic. Days were peppered with spontaneous conversation. Doors were
typically kept open, and workers freely popped into each other’s rooms, whether to take
a break and socialize—telling jokes, showing each other amusing online videos,
discussing weekend plans—or to talk about work—thinking through ideas, relaying
information, planning a meeting, or venting about a project gone bad.

Although the number of employees at Pinnacle fluctuated due to a couple of
hirings and firings, there were 12 full-time, regular employees during most of my time in
the field. Additionally, there were a few freelance, temporary employees working as
directors, sound technicians, and graphic designers. Finally, the company hired over 55
unpaid interns over the course of my fieldwork, about 15 of whom might be working on
any given day. Given the strong presence of interns, the company was young. But also,
among full-time employees, seven were 20-something and the oldest two were in their
early 40s. Ethan, the company’s owner and founder, was 37 years old. Although interns
were gender balanced, all of the full-time, regular employees were white men except for
two white women, one black woman, and one Asian-American man.

I gained access to Pinnacle after meeting Ethan through our mutual attendance
at Real Screen West, an annual reality television industry conference. The conference
allows attendees to contact one another freely through an online interface. After I met
Ethan online, then spoke with him over the telephone, he agreed to let me observe his
company for my research on the condition that I work as an unpaid intern. I chose to
become a casting intern since I did not have an opportunity to observe that process at
Sunshine. Pinnacle employees and interns knew that I was conducting observational
research, but generally I was treated and I worked like any other intern. Ethan expected me to contribute to the company’s productivity. I worked 4 full days a week for about half of my time in the field before reducing to two days a week. Each workday lasted from 9:30 am until 7 pm. Even though I spent one year at Sunshine Productions, since I typically only visited Sunshine once a week for a few hours, I was in the field for many more hours at Pinnacle.

Pinnacle was organized into many distinct divisions. The development department consisted of interns, a Director of Development, and three Development Associates when I first arrived. Later Ethan fired the Director of Development, took over his responsibilities, and hired a fourth Development Associate. The development team focused on creating new shows, mostly for cable networks. Tony, Director of Branded Entertainment, also focused on creating new television shows but with the aim of promoting commercial brands. The production department consisted of Oscar, the Director of Photography, his assistant Kenneth, and interns. Oscar filmed and directed sizzle reels and other pitch tapes. The post-production department consisted of interns and one supervisor and was responsible for organizing filmed footage and editing video. Finally, the casting team consisted of Mark, the Casting Director, and a series of 13 unpaid interns. Casting was focused on finding cast for shows in development. As a casting intern, I worked directly with employees in all departments. I also attended weekly development meetings and served as a production assistant on several shoots for sizzle reels. Still, I spent the vast majority of my time with Mark and the casting interns.

Given my busy role as an intern, I asked superiors to explain work processes in order to conduct my duties. I also occasionally asked my co-workers quick questions to learn their thoughts about activities we were engaged in. However, mostly I learned
about work processes, company culture, and workers’ attitudes and opinions by observing and participating in everyday work and informal conversation. I generally did not take time during the workday to interview, either formally or informally. Towards the end of my fieldwork and over several months after ending my internship, I conducted formal interviews away from the office with 5 full-time employees and 16 interns. After my internship was over, I also conducted interviews with 32 people who underwent the casting process to be featured on one of Pinnacle’s shows.\(^5\)

Out of necessity, both Pinnacle and Sunshine were ultimately focused on development, the process of generating new television show ideas and pitching them to networks. When I first arrived at Sunshine, the company had only one television series in production, which was concluding. Before I arrived at Pinnacle, Ethan told me that his company sold a series to a major cable network. But after the pilot aired, the network did not pick the show up for a full season. Both companies desperately needed to develop new shows and successfully sell them to networks in order to stay in business. Thus, given the inductive nature of ethnography, development became the production process around which I based my analysis. In addition to my fieldwork at Sunshine and Pinnacle, in order to gain a better understanding of the development process and the broader market for reality TV, I attended two reality television industry conferences (RealScreen West 2012, RealScreen Summit 2013) and conducted interviews with 6

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\(^5\) Interviews with employees and interns focused on career paths, feelings about their work, opinions about reality television, and specific events I witness in the field. These interviews varied between 1 and 4 hours (a few of the longer interviews were split into multiple sessions), with an average length of approximately 2 hours. Prior to entering the field, I also interviewed Ethan for 15 minutes about his career path and goals, but he later declined to be interviewed formally in greater depth. I discuss details about the 32 interviews I conducted with prospective cast in greater depth in chapter 5.
cable network development executives and 10 producers involved in development at other production companies.⁶

Chapter Outline

This dissertation contains four substantive chapters. I begin with a context setting chapter, introducing the economic conditions and commercial demands that contribute to the moral dilemmas that I discuss in subsequent chapters. The remaining three chapters describe different ways in which moral character is important for reality TV producers, and the means through which they seek to maintain good character despite doing dirty work. The first two discuss how reality TV workers maintain positive self-concept. The third discusses how producers maintain a good impression for others who might question their character.

The first chapter describes the structure and operation of the market for new reality television shows and some of the particular on-the-ground production practices involved in developing new show ideas. It describes the commercial risks and uncertainties that independent production companies face as they attempt to sell their ideas to television networks, and the strategies companies use to reduce those risks and uncertainties. I discuss how while I was in the field, television networks were most interested in finding “good characters,” by which they mean larger than life personalities who could star in their own reality series. I also describe how one of the central challenges of running a production company is limited cash flow and how tight finances impact everyday work. Ultimately, the chapter illustrates how industrial and economic

⁶ Interviews were semi-structured and focused on development practices in respondents' respective organizations and, if time permitting, career paths and opinions about reality TV. Interviews ranged from 15 min to 2 hours, with an average length of about 1 hour.
context shapes and constrains reality TV workers’ production decisions, including ones that are morally questionable.

The next chapter discusses how producers justify making creative compromises to accommodate market demands. Sometimes producers’ values align with what they believe networks desire, and so creating content that fits commercial pressures is not a moral dilemma. At Pinnacle Productions, creating shows that others might view as “trashy” or “fake” did not bother workers, and in fact were celebrated as both entertaining and commercially viable. However, in other cases producers must compromise their values to appeal to an unforgiving market. For workers at Sunshine Productions, this meant engaging in production practices that they found morally reprehensible, especially creating scenes and settings that were “fake” and staged or portraying cast members in ways that were degrading or unflattering. I describe the rhetorical strategies workers used in their everyday shop floor talk to justify making these compromises and sustain a positive sense of self and identity.

The third chapter focuses on the issue of unpaid labor by describing the internship program at Pinnacle Productions. While some think of interns as getting coffee and doing menial tasks, interns at Pinnacle Productions were intimately involved in the development process, doing skilled production and important creative work. Employees took interns’ ideas seriously and many interns’ ideas were successful with network clients. I explain why interns were so valuable despite their relative inexperience. Then, I focus on the case of Pinnacle’s casting director in detail to argue that supervisors seek to avoid the moral taint of exploiting interns by focusing on their roles as mentors and by framing their relationships with interns as rooted in friendship and genuine caring.
Finally, using observations of the casting process at Pinnacle Productions and interview data from prospective cast members, I describe the impression management workers do to be perceived as morally upright. I found that people who were auditioning for the shows were concerned about Pinnacle Production’s legitimacy and trustworthiness. They were concerned about whether or not the company was reputable enough and skilled enough to bring proposed shows to fruition. They were also concerned about whether or not producers were of good moral character: especially whether they would portray cast in a favorable light and whether they were scam artists. I describe the strategies Pinnacle used to convince prospective cast that they were legitimate and trustworthy partners, finding that having a favorable online presence was particularly important in this context.

Collectively, the chapters demonstrate that reality TV producers—and thus perhaps workers in other fields of commercial cultural production who are popularly vilified for lacking moral character—care deeply about being seen as moral figures and also genuinely desire to be moral people. They describe how cultural industry workers actively manage the meaning of the moral transgressions they make, or that others fear they will make, to create a positive sense of self and identity.
Throughout my time in the field, Sunshine Productions was in a state of decline. One of the editors, half-jokingly, told me that I was witnessing the “death of a production company.” At one time, Sunshine was one of the most successful reality TV companies in the country, having produced a number of hit series. At the height of its success, the company employed over 300 workers and occupied a large office space located in the bustling downtown of a major city. However, when I arrived in the spring of 2009, the company employed 27 workers, a number that dwindled throughout my fieldwork, and had re-located to a much smaller space in a grey-white boxy building in the middle of a quiet, middle-class residential suburban neighborhood where rent was cheaper.

The company’s woes were evident one day when the coffee machine broke. Katie, a producer, ran out to buy a new one and briefly interrupted a meeting between David and Thomas, two of the company’s three founding partners, and three other workers, to hand Thomas the receipt for the machine.

Thomas tells the group that Katie had purchased a new coffee maker for $30. Abbey slightly sits up in her seat and says, “Oh no, I didn’t know she was going to Bed Bath and Beyond. I have $10 off coupons in my car.” She repeats that it is a shame Katie could not have used her coupons. David, slouched in his chair, with a slight smile says jokingly, yet with a tinge of embarrassment, “How low have we sunk.” Thomas responds smiling and in good humor, “We haven’t sunk that low. When we are conducting our meeting at Bed Bath and Beyond, then we are low!” (Fieldnotes)

For all of the company’s long time workers, but perhaps especially for David, the Director of Development, Sunshine’s slipping fortunes were a source of consternation.
Development is the process through which production companies generate new ideas for shows, cast ordinary people, and package those people and ideas into pitch materials in order to sell their concepts to television networks. It was through development that Sunshine could one day produce another hit television series—or any series for that matter—and perhaps return to its bustling downtown office, rather than continue its downward trajectory towards losing the ability to rent any office space at all and being forced to hold production meetings, as Thomas jokingly suggested, at Bed Bath and Beyond.

Unlike Sunshine, Pinnacle Productions was on an upward trajectory when I first arrived in 2012, having just sold a pilot to a prominent cable network after being open for only about one year. Perhaps the company’s greatest asset was Ethan, its confident leader and founder. Having previously co-created one of the most popular reality shows on cable, by his mid-thirties Ethan was able to afford a large house in the suburbs with his wife and children and to launch Pinnacle with an office space in an impressive Manhattan high-rise along a major avenue. The first time I spoke with Ethan, he told me about his dreams for the future of the company:

Ethan: The vision for the company is to be as broad based in entertainment as possible. We are heavily focused on reality right now but one of my executive team members here is very—he comes from the scripted world, so we have certain scripted dreams. And I think in our business it is not what you can make, but what you can sell. At the moment we can sell reality TV as well as anyone, so we are just trying to get on the map and sell as many shows that we truly want to be involved in as possible. (Interview)

For Ethan, dreams of an entertainment empire began with selling reality TV. Just as Sunshine would stake its revival on its development activities, Pinnacle would also
wager its lofty ambitions on its ability to generate new ideas for reality shows and successfully pitch them to network buyers. And success in development is certainly a wager: after Pinnacle’s pilot aired, the network dropped the show rather than picking up a full season.

For new and struggling production companies like Sunshine and Pinnacle, practically all work is focused squarely on development. Thus my fieldwork inevitably grew to focus on the activities and anxieties around the market for new reality TV shows. However, development is the life force behind any production company. Reality TV production companies need to sell shows in order to stay in business and all have dedicated workers focusing on just that task.

This chapter contributes to reality TV studies by describing development activities from the perspective of independent production companies. A number of academic studies have described how producers cast and manage ordinary people on reality TV sets and the commercial logic behind reality TV industry practices, including the international sale of formats, interactivity with audiences, and brand integration (Aslama 2009; Grindstaff 2009; Jenkins 2006; Keane and Moran 2008; Shufeldt and Gale 2007; Syvertsen 2001; Ytreberg 2006). Industry professionals have also penned how-to books discussing reality TV production and development (DeVolld 2011; Essany 2008; Lees 2010; Thirkell 2010). However, missing is a description of the on-the-ground production practices around development as everyday work and the meaning workers make of these activities.

I begin by describing the broad structure of the reality TV industry and differences between production companies in their relative ability to gain a commission. I discuss how running any production company is a risky commercial venture due to the fickleness of television markets and networks maintaining control over the rights to TV
series. Then I describe some of the everyday processes involved in developing new reality shows, including how production companies generate ideas for shows, cast those shows, and create pitch materials to present to network buyers. Finally, I discuss how moral taint enters into the development process through the creation of negative textual representations, fakery when creating pitch materials, and the exploitation of workers and prospective cast members. In doing so, this chapter provides a backdrop for analyzing the meaning and experience of doing development work that is the focus of the remaining chapters.

**Structure of the Domestic Market for Reality TV**

Two sets of organizations are the primary players in the market for reality TV shows: television networks and independent production companies. The production company is the vendor and the television network is the client in this relationship. Network development workers are responsible for thinking and strategizing about what kinds of programming the network should acquire and for hearing pitches from different producers. One network executive I interviewed estimates that he takes about 200 scheduled pitch meetings every year, and hears even more pitches on an informal basis, over email, and when attending industry conferences. Production companies pitch shows to television networks in the hopes that the networks will buy their ideas and pay them to produce the show. Production companies work for television networks on a project-by-project, contractual basis. Networks pay them to do the day-to-day creative and administrative work around making shows, including filming, editing, and administrative tasks. For example, production company workers do casting, manage talent, scout for shooting locations, hire freelance production workers, and organize filmed footage, among other duties.
Over the past few decades, the number of television networks has exploded. This is part of a larger trend in which advances in transmission technologies have led to a proliferation of media products and increasingly segmented media audiences (Hesmondhalgh 2012; Parsons 2003). By 1999, the average number of television channels per US household had increased to over 60 (Caves 2005: 127), and currently cable subscribers can choose from hundreds of options. The big four broadcast networks, ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox, remain among the most watched. However, cable networks like Bravo, MTV, Discovery, TLC, HGTV, and Travel Channel have more recently been home to some of the highest rated shows—*The Walking Dead, Breaking Bad, Duck Dynasty*, among others.

Huge amounts of content are needed to fill these many television channels, which has allowed a variety of television production companies to emerge and thrive (Hesmondhalgh 2012: 355). Emerging cable networks in the 1990s relied particularly on reality TV as a source of cheap programming, but the genre continues to dominate cable today. Among the over 1400 different television shows that premiered on cable and network TV in 2014, over 57% were reality shows. Among these reality shows, over 55% were brand new, rather than subsequent seasons of established series. Most networks carry some unscripted programming, with channels like Discovery and Travel focusing almost entirely on such content. Although other networks like Disney and Cartoon Network do not carry any reality series, most networks have some mix of reality and scripted programs.

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7 These statistics are based on data I collected from Cynopsis, an online television industry news digest, which lists daily television show premieres. I tabulated all television show premieres listed throughout the year 2014, noting each show's genre, season, and the date and time it aired.
Independent production companies vary widely in their size and influence. Some, like Freemantle and Endemol, are subsidiaries of large, international corporations with thousands of employees and many divisions, covering various realms of mass media. These large, corporate firms sometimes produce scripted entertainment, including comedies and dramas for television and theatrical films, in addition to reality shows. However, most reality TV production companies focus specifically on producing unscripted television programs. Such companies might have a staff of 20 or fewer people and perhaps one or two shows on TV. Others might staff hundreds of employees and produce dozens of shows. Still others might have no credits or experience at all; any individual or group can claim to be a production company.

Using the case of the Hollywood film industry, Faulkner and Anderson (1987) argue that buyers are reluctant to use untested sources of supply. Thus, an “active elite” with similarly high earnings, productivity, and prestige dominate the labor market in Hollywood film and work together repeatedly. Similarly, in the case of reality TV, network executives tend to work repeatedly with the same production companies (Hamilton 2014). Networks consider established producers to be more reliable and trustworthy partners, having previously demonstrated an ability to deliver programs on time, on budget, and at an acceptable standard of quality. Network executives also prefer established producers because they understand how particular networks operate, unlike green producers who may need training in administrative procedures or creative expectations.

Preferred production companies are more “in the know” about what kinds of shows networks are looking to develop next. They meet with network executives more frequently to discuss ideas. Established reality TV production companies also benefit from elite agency representation, while neophyte producers often do not have agency
representation at all or are represented by less reputable agencies. Previous research suggests that being represented by an elite talent agency is extremely important for career advancement in Hollywood (Bielby and Bielby 1999). In reality TV, agents regularly distribute “network mandates” that summarize various networks’ programming needs. Such inside information is helpful because what is currently on television does not reflect how networks plan to evolve in the future. Producers can read trade publications like the Hollywood Reporter, Variety, or Real Screen Magazine, but these typically analyze broad trends rather than detail specific networks’ strategies. Pinnacle received the following mandate for Syfy from their agent:

Syfy’s interest in traditional paranormal shows i.e. GHOST HUNTERS is starting to wane. They would like to find a new, fresh way into the paranormal space. Secondly, they would really like a family docuseries whether it is a real family or a work family living the “SyFy Life” i.e. DOOMSDAY PREPPERS or even Syfy adjacent like ICE ROAD TRUCKERS because the scenery out in the middle of nowhere feels very “SyFy”. They are not interested in clip shows, magazine shows or anything related to inventors. They want those big, loud characters doing unique and daring activities.

With this information in mind, a production company’s development team would actively try to generate ideas for shows about families, but avoid clip shows, magazine shows, and shows about inventors. The company might brainstorm new spins on paranormal shows, while avoiding ideas that resemble Ghost Hunters.

Furthermore, reputable production companies more easily win commissions because they have more opportunities to pitch ideas. Most networks will not hear unsolicited pitches, but rather only meet with production companies who have agents or lawyers who can set meetings up for them. Television networks occasionally present
opportunities for unrepresented production companies to pitch their ideas. For example, the annual New York Television Festival holds competitions in which any independent producer can submit an application for the opportunity to receive development funding and potential mentorship from sponsoring networks. The Real Screen Summit, the largest annual conference for reality and documentary television, offers open “speed pitching” events in which network commissioners hold quick meetings with production company workers to hear ideas. However, such events are relatively rare and conferences can be prohibitively expensive. In 2013, admission for one attendee to the Real Screen Summit started at $999 for early registrants. Thus, rather than pitching their ideas directly to television networks, neophyte producers typically must pitch their ideas to established production companies and enter into an agreement to jointly develop.

Preferred producers with strong ties to networks will sometimes receive commissions even without making an initial pitch. Many television networks generate ideas for new shows in house and farm those ideas out to trusted producers for further development. Also, since television networks in the US typically own the rights to shows, when a new production company successfully pitches an idea, it is not unusual for networks to request that the new production company co-produce their show with a more experienced company or for the established production company to take the show over completely.

Given the advantages of size and prior credits, as well as the attractiveness of “cashing out” on success, independent production companies have an incentive to merge and get bought up by larger companies. Beginning in 2013, there was a boom in consolidation among reality TV production companies (Flint 2014). Industry insiders termed this flurry of activity a “gold rush,” as production companies were being sold for
as much as 16 times their cash flow. Fremantle (American Idol, America’s Got Talent) acquired a 75% stake in 495 Productions (Jersey Shore). British media giant ITV paid $360 million for 80% of Leftfield Entertainment (Pawn Stars), $40 million for 61.5% of Gurney Productions (Duck Dynasty), and $30 million for 65% of Thinkfactory Media (Marriage Boot Camp). As of June 2014, ITV was an owner of six companies in the US with more than 100 shows in production. Through these purchases, ITV could then develop shows internationally, bringing content and formats across Europe, Australia, and the US.

**Commercial Risk and Uncertainty**

At the 2013 Real Screen Summit, David Lyle, CEO of National Geographic Channels US, opened a panel discussion called “Hunt for the Next Big Thing” by commenting on the impossibility of predicting television’s next big hit:

David Lyle: William Goldman, when he wrote the book *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, started by saying, ‘In Hollywood’—meaning movies—‘nobody knows anything.’ And in TV I think it’s like that, except we know even less, that it’s very hard to know what the next big thing is going to be. I’m giving the panel a sort of ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ card that we can sort of talk about it, but there’s that one unpredictable bastard that you can never rely on: the audience...

Media industry scholars and professionals have long acknowledged that commercial success is uncertain. The market for reality TV is similarly unpredictable. Television networks grapple with appealing to fickle home audiences, while independent production companies must cope with the uncertainty of selling new shows to television networks.

While neophyte producers struggle to break into the industry, even successful production companies cannot predict whether or not networks will continue to find value
in their pitches. Known for specials like *Devoured: Return of the Man Eating Super Snake* on Animal Planet and reality series like *Mobsteel* on NBCSN, Hoff Productions has been operating for over 20 years and produced over 700 hours of programming for dozens of networks as of 2015. However, the company has experienced wild swings in its ability to sell programs. In 2010 the company had revenues of approximately $12 million based on 60 hours of production. But for each year from 2011 till 2014 it produced less than 15 hours of programming. Finally, the company rebounded in 2015 with over 40 hours of programming (Hamilton 2010, 2015). After Pinnacle’s first pilot was dropped in 2012, the company was unable to sell any new series until 2015, when it finally sold three shows. Hoff and Pinnacle are fortunate. Despite its many successes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Sunshine Productions was wrapping production on just one series when I entered the field in 2009, and since then has vacated its offices, unable to sell any new shows.

Fickle television markets make running production companies financially burdensome. As in other cultural industries, reality television production requires a great amount of initial investment from creative workers. While pitching shows for possibly months or years without selling anything, companies must maintain an office space, employ creative and administrative staff, and create pitch tapes. Even after selling a series, companies often continue to front their own money. It is not unusual for production companies to begin working before first payment and even before contracts are signed in order to prove themselves to networks and hope to establish a stable business relationship. In a panel discussion at the Real Screen Summit, Adam Cohen, co-founder of the production company Super Delicious (*Cupcake Wars* and *Farmer Wants a Wife*), attributed his company’s success in part to giving networks the
impression that the company could defy budgetary constraints, beginning with their first show for MTV.

Adam Cohen: We had had just one show that we had made for MTV at the time, the *Big Urban Myth Show*, but we did such a great job, fingers crossed, that would make enough of an impression, that we had a relationship with MTV, and they handed us another show to do and then another one after that. We really pulled out all the stops to make it look like an incredible program and the President of MTV took us out to breakfast and he said, ‘How did you make this show for the money we gave you?’ Well, that’s our secret. Hire us again and you’ll get a product that looks like that. The toughest thing is making your mark and having something so that people can say this production company can do an excellent job with the restricted budgets we have in cable, and they can deliver and deliver on time.

Members of the panel agreed that in order to make a good first impression, it is important to invest as much time, money, and effort as possible into a first commission. Thus, production companies often invest the fees they earn from the network back into making the show.

Investing in development and new series is particularly risky because networks typically own the rights to shows. Some production companies may be able to negotiate more favorable deals, in which they retain more ownership. But frequently, despite creating a show, production companies make money only as work for hire, doing the everyday boots-on-the-ground production work, rather than profiting off their idea as intellectual property. Moreover, since networks own the shows, they can replace the original production company whenever they see fit. Being replaced is burdensome given the investments production companies make in developing a series and ensuring the
first season is a success. According to Thom Beers, owner of Original Productions (Deadliest Catch, Ice Road Truckers), commenting at a Real Screen Summit panel:

Thom Beers: I create a TV show, and that first season, we expect it's a zero, it's a loss leader, I'm putting every nickel I've got into that show. My executive producer fees, everything I earn, I'm putting into that show because I want to make a great show, and the idea that a network can then take it away from you and give it to somebody else is fucking onerous. I think that that is the most absurd thing I've ever seen in my life. And they should not be allowed to do that. I cannot believe that they still have and control it. When you're out there putting your life and your blood and your sweat into a show, and your money; everything you've got and then they can go, 'Well you know what? Nice work, but we're going to give it to somebody else the next time.' It's like I cannot believe it. It's untenable.

This practice is evidently not uncommon. Pinnacle developed a car restoration show for about a year, managing its cast, creating pitch materials, and shopping the concept. But when Pinnacle finally sold the show, the network handed it off to a more established company. Likewise, Sunshine inherited one of its most successful series from a different production company, only for the network to drop Sunshine in favor of yet another company late in the show's run.

How Production Companies Develop New Reality Shows

Everyday development work at production companies generally consists of three intersecting work processes: generating ideas for new shows, casting, and creating pitch materials. It was not unusual for Pinnacle to be developing 100 or more different shows in various stages—from initial research through network pitch—at any given time. The casting team typically worked on a dozen shows at once. Ethan, the owner of the
company, expected each development associate to present at least a few new ideas to him every week. On the other hand, at Sunshine the development team only worked on a few shows at a time, putting more of their eggs into fewer baskets, so to speak. Below, I describe ideation, casting, and creating pitch materials in more detail, focusing on similarities across production companies.

**Ideation**

The first step in development is generating ideas for new shows. Ideas might begin with the name of an individual who would star or company that would be featured on the show. Or an initial idea could consist of a type of individual or company, social group, social scene, or social practice: florists, biker gangs, wedding planners, metal heads, doulas, track stars, sugar daddies, bowling leagues. Workers might also think of ideas for television formats: a singing competition featuring senior citizens, celebrities learning to ride horses, makeovers in a traveling van.

One week Clay, a development associate at Pinnacle, pitched an idea for a show he called Retail Hunters, describing it as “House Hunters for the fashion/beauty world. Each episode, a client will look at three different properties they want to use to open a boutique, hair salon, spa, bridal salon, etc. In the end they will choose one space and we will see the transformation of the space from when they first saw it to when they open their doors for business.” That same week Sasha, another development associate, pitched a show she called Thrift Store Connoisseur: “Find a chic, fashion maven who knows their way around a thrift store or flea market to dress women. Our fashion expert/funny girl would approach people in a thrift store/flea market, ask to help them find stylish clothes that enhance them.”

Ideas pop into workers’ heads out of the blue, both in and out of the office, during work and personal time. Show concepts come spontaneously while they are taking a
drive, walking their dog, taking a shower, cooking dinner. Workers encounter events, people, conversations, and various media in their everyday lives that inspire ideas, and are constantly on the lookout for potential talent. The star of one pilot that Pinnacle produced was “discovered” by coincidence when a development associate was taking a walk through the East Village and stumbled across his store.

However, development workers do not simply wait for divine inspiration or for reality stars to fall into their laps. Grindstaff (2002) finds that talk show producers review existing media, including magazines, newspapers, trade publications, and other television programs, for possible topics to feature on their shows. Similarly, it is common in many production companies for development workers to set aside time to read a variety of magazines, newspapers, and websites as a routine strategy to actively search for individuals, communities, and topics that could form the central cast or concept of a show. At Pinnacle, these included Vogue, Cosmopolitan, GQ, People, Smithsonian, New York Time, New York Post, LA Times, Wall Street Journal, YouTube, Huffington Post, Buzzfeed, and Reddit, among others.

Initial ideas that are promising enter a stage of further research and conceptual development. Development and casting workers conduct Internet research and interview potential cast in order to learn more about the individuals, groups, and social practices under consideration. In doing so, workers formulate a better understanding of which specific individuals and what specific activities could be featured on a show. They can then assess whether or not a show is viable: whether a good cast can be identified, whether a clear vision emerges for what the show is about and what form it might take, and most importantly if these would be appealing to network buyers.

Casting
Not all production companies have dedicated casting teams. At Sunshine, casting workers were hired on a freelance basis, whether on shows in production or for development. At both Sunshine and Pinnacle, development workers conceptualized new shows and searched for appropriate cast. However, given the importance of finding compelling reality TV characters, Pinnacle hired Mark, a casting director, as a full-time employee to complement their development efforts. While development workers identified potential cast by conducting web searches and reading various media, Mark and his team of casting interns used more systematic methods.

On rare occasions, the Pinnacle casting team left the office to conduct an open call audition or to visit specific persons of interest. However, the vast majority of castings took place in the office and consisted of the following routine procedures. First, the team would conduct various forms of outreach, locating appropriate candidates and sending out casting notices. Second, after receiving submissions, casting interns would individually call applicants and evaluate them over the telephone, determining who should pass to the next stage. Third, those who made it past the phone call were interviewed and video recorded over Skype. Finally, recordings of successful Skype interviews were edited down to approximately thirty-second clips containing highlights of the conversation for further evaluation.

The first step in casting was outreach, the process of identifying people who might be appropriate for and interested in being part of a particular show, and alerting them to the opportunity. Interns would search for individuals and organizations through Internet research and email casting notices to them. For example, for a show about car restoration, interns conducted Google searches for and emailed automotive businesses. Interns also posted casting notices on community message boards of interest groups related to the show’s premise, or asked moderators to post it for them. Some
occupational, interest, and demographic groups have formal associations at the national and regional levels. Workers contacted association leaders, hoping to distribute the casting notice through an email blast to the association listserv. Mark also distributed casting notices through talent listservs and casting websites, including the entertainment and talent sections of Craigslist, Jeff Gund’s Info List, Backstage, Casting Networks, and Reality Wanted. Finally, to create an ensemble cast, workers relied on established cast members to help reach out to their own friends, family, co-workers and acquaintances. The established cast members would typically provide a list of people they thought were good candidates, whom casting workers would then call or email individually.

In general, interns called every person who responded to outreach efforts, and continued to do so until the project was complete. Interns could conduct fifteen or twenty interviews a day if they were focused, but it was also not unusual for interns to conduct only one or two a day or none at all if they were engaged in other tasks. Most telephone interviews were between five and ten minutes long, but they varied in length, depending on how long they held the intern’s interest. Mark was primarily responsible for conducting Skype interviews at Pinnacle during my time in the field. On a typical day, Mark might conduct four or five interviews. During the busiest days, there might be up to nine or ten Skype interviews scheduled. Each interview was relegated a half hour block, although they varied in length depending on Mark’s level of interest.

Skype and phone interviews were similar in style and content. They were casual and relaxed, resembling a friendly conversation that might happen when meeting someone for the first time at a dinner party. A typical starting question was, “Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your work?” Often questions focused on interpersonal relationships: “Who else works at the company? What are they like? Is there any drama?” Or the nuts and bolts of the work or hobbies the show might profile: “Can you
tell me about the bowling competitions? How often are they? What are they like?” or
“What kinds of services do you guys offer at the shop?”

Successful Skype interviews were edited for presentation to others in the
company, especially Ethan and members of the development team. While Skype
interviews could last 30 minutes or even longer, they were edited into approximately 30
second—or certainly no more than two-minute long—clips containing only highlights
from the conversation. The finished edit included basic facts like the person’s name and
possibly their location, age, and job. But it primarily was composed of very short sound
bytes, one after the next in quick succession, to give the viewer a sense of what kinds of
activities they might engage in on the show, and, most importantly, showed off their
personality, the manner in which they talked and behaved. The edited interviews
resembled a rough version of those often seen on reality TV shows, where cast
members provide commentary and reactions as “talking heads” during the program.
Interview questions and any other sounds workers made were edited out in order to
focus solely on the applicant.

Pitch Materials

During the development process, production companies create a series of pitch
materials to present to television networks. The network provides notes and feedback,
explaining why a show is not a good fit for the network, why a concept needs further
development, and how best to develop the show to fit with the network’s goals. If a
network thinks that an idea is promising, they will ask the production company to bring
them more materials and/or make changes to existing materials for further assessment
based on their feedback.

Written pitch materials include one sheets, slates, and episode summaries. A
one sheet is a one or two page long text document that summarizes the main premise of
the show. If the show is a competition or game format, it explains the structure and
goals of the competition or game. If it is a character driven docu-series, then it describes
each cast member and the settings in which they interact. A slate provides similar
information, but text is condensed and presented in visually attractive Power Point-like
slides with graphics and perhaps pictures of settings and characters. Episode
summaries detail what would happen in each episode of a season.

Throughout my time in the field, the majority of production companies relied on
creating character-driven docuseries, following the everyday lives or activities of a
central cast (Real Housewives, Pawn Stars, Deadliest Catch), as opposed to
competition formats (The Voice, The Amazing Race, Project Runway). As format ideas
decreased in importance relative to finding “good characters,” video became increasingly
important during initial pitches relative to written materials. Video provides better proof
that producers actually have access to the characters, settings, or activities they aim to
document on television. While written materials can communicate show concepts, plots
or formats, they cannot show how a character looks, acts, speaks, and sounds.
Production companies might first soft pitch a concept to a network verbally or over email
with a log line, a brief, one- or two-sentence summary of the main idea for the show. But
if the network executive thinks the soft pitch has merit, he or she will ask the production
company to create a character tape or sizzle reel. Typically production companies will
include one or the other type of video in their initial pitches.

Character tapes are edited video of interviews with cast members. Often these
are recordings of casting interviews and auditions. Character tapes might imply the
concept of the show, but focus on showcasing the cast: who they are, what they look
like, and how they behave. Character tapes created via Skype interview grew in
popularity during my time in the field. Sunshine did not use Skype interviews as a
regular part of their development efforts. On the other hand, the same edited Skype conversations that circulated within Pinnacle were used in pitches to network executives. Sometimes the company would create more elaborate character tapes by stringing together and interspersing Skype interviews with different members of an ensemble cast, perhaps also adding pictures, graphics, and music. On rare occasions, Pinnacle created character tapes from in-person interviews using professional recording equipment. While the content of these would be the same as a Skype interview, these character tapes would have a more polished presentation.

Sizzle reels are short, approximately five minute long trailers that introduce the central cast and concept for the show. Sizzle reels resemble a small segment or cut together segments of a finished TV show. They tend to be fast paced and can jump between scenes rather than present a coherent narrative. They “sizzle” and excite like a movie trailer. Sizzle reels require much more of an investment than Skype tapes, which explains Skype’s growing popularity in reality TV development. After paying for screen talent, freelance production workers, travel, equipment rentals, and other expenses, sizzle reels typically cost $10,000 to $15,000. Shooting reality TV that looks polished and professionally produced requires skilled workers and quality equipment, cameras that cost thousands of dollars, computers with expensive editing software, microphones, etc. If the network wants to see a sizzle reel after it is pitched paper materials or a character tape, it might provide development money to the production company to help cover production costs. Still, production companies often self-finance sizzle reels since development money is uncertain and sizzle reels are more impressive than casting tapes.

While a finished sizzle reel could go straight to pilot, more often networks will ask for further proof of concept by providing development money to create a presentation
tape. A *presentation tape* is a short, approximately 15-minute segment of an episode, or what amounts to an extended sizzle reel or a miniature pilot. If the network is still interested after seeing the presentation tape, it may commission the production company to shoot a pilot, a full-length first episode. Pilots may or may not air on television, and pilots that do air may or may not get picked up as an entire series. Network executives might want to see more or less materials depending on their confidence in a show. A character tape could go straight to pilot or series, and a show could be dropped at any point.

**Moral Taint in Development**

During the development and casting of new reality shows, many of the same moral issues emerge that might be salient at later stages of production. As noted earlier, dilemmas include how television text might be beneficial or detrimental to viewing audiences, and how production and labor practices might be beneficial or detrimental to workers and screen talent. Below, I discuss three sources of moral taint—negative textual representation, fakery, and exploitation—in the context of development. In development, workers make creative decisions that are solidified or become routine at later stages, including who to cast and the central premise, aesthetic, and tone of a show. These emerging textual representations might later have negative repercussions for the individuals depicted or the social groups they represent. Also during development, workers might create pitch tapes using production procedures that fool or misinform audiences through fakery or inaccurate depictions of people, situations, or events. Finally, companies might exploit workers and talent, profiting off of their labor, services, or images without adequate compensation, or submit them to unsavory working conditions. The temptation for companies to engage in these morally
questionable activities is heightened in development given the strong commercial pressures previously discussed.

Negative representations

Given the great risk and uncertainty production companies face by participating in the market for new TV shows, development and casting workers do their best to shape the content of their ideas to fit what they believe networks will find most appealing. Workers rely on their general knowledge of the television landscape—what is on TV and what shows have the most buzz—to help assess what kind of content is resonating with audiences. However, production companies cannot blindly imitate hits. Networks desire new shows that fit their specific brands and the trajectory they want to go in the future, rather than necessarily what is currently or was previously successful. Producers attempt to understand what trends are still hot and what trends are over.

In the years leading up to and including my time in the field, the most popular and talked about reality shows included ones that received significant moral criticism. *Jersey Shore* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* are paradigmatic cases of this moral backlash. *Jersey Shore*, a series following a group of twenty-something Italian Americans living together in a house for the summer on the New Jersey shore, debuted amid controversy over its casual use of the ethnic slur “guido” and its portrayal of Italian American youth as drunken bimbos and buffoons. “We find this program alarming in that it attempts to make a direct connection between ‘guido culture’ and Italian-American identity,” said Joseph Del Raso, the President of the National Italian American Foundation, prior to the first season of the show in 2009. At the same time, Andrew DiMino, President of UNICO National, an Italian American service organization, called for the show’s cancellation, saying it is “trash television” (Morgan and Melago 2009). The series drew further controversy for promoting violence against women when MTV promoted an episode
featuring Snooki, one of the main cast members, getting punched in the face at a bar (Kinon 2009).

A few years later, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* similarly premiered to widespread criticism for its stereotypical portrayals of the rural South and harmful treatment of child performers. The series followed the family of Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson, a 6-year-old child beauty pageant contestant who rose to fame on the reality series *Toddlers & Tiaras*, around their small hometown in Georgia. *The Hollywood Reporter* bemoaned the series as “the green light to laugh at rednecks and fat people, which is how Honey Boo Boo’s mother, June, aka Mama, readily describes the family,” and calling its readers to “hold fast against the dehumanization and incremental tearing down of the social fabric, even if this never-ending onslaught of reality television suggests that’s a losing effort” (Goodman 2012).

Shows like *Jersey Shore* and *Honey Boo Boo* dominated public discussion of reality TV in the years I was in the field, and contributed to the genre’s negative reputation. At the same time, given the large audiences and cultural buzz they generated, such shows were attractive to reality TV developers looking to replicate success. In the wake of *Jersey Shore*, other series set in New Jersey and featuring gaudy personalities flourished: *Real Housewives of New Jersey*, *Jerseylicious*, *Jersey Couture*. Likewise, *Honey Boo Boo* was part of a wave of series set in the rural south, depicting “redneck” culture: *Party Down South*, *Hillbilly Handfishin’*, *Moonshiners*, *Duck Dynasty*. Aside from sub-cultural specifics, these series were also part of a larger trend in which networks and production companies focused on creating character-driven docu-series, shows that focused on the everyday lives of a central cast, and defined “good” reality TV characters as people who were “big personalities,” larger than life, brash, outgoing, and possibly abrasive.
This shift in attention towards such big characters and sensational content was evident in network programming strategies during this time. At the 2012 Real Screen West conference in Santa Monica, California, a representative from Lifetime stood before an audience of about twenty-five audience members in a small conference room at the luxurious Fairmount Miramar Hotel, presenting the cable network’s vision for the future and the types of pitches they desired from production companies. She told the attentive audience:

Just to give you an idea of what works for us and what we are looking for from the creative community, people still have the conception—many of you still have the conception that Lifetime is intimate portraits. It’s softer. It’s a bit more older skewing. It’s a bit more graceful and genteel. And if you are pitching on that, we are open for it, but the things that I’m going to show you clips of hopefully illustrate a different tone and attitude, a very playful attitude, very strong and loud characters, unabashedly so. We’re gonna say that over and over again. (Fieldnotes)

To illustrate her point, she began playing a promotional clip of the network’s most recent hit *Dance Moms*, a docuseries following Abby Lee Miller, a confrontational children’s dance teacher, and her dance studio. In the clip, a fight between Abby and one of the children’s mothers breaks out. The child cries, “I just want to go home.” The mother screams at Abby, “Stop eating. That’s why you’re fat!” The clip cuts to a male announcer saying cheekily, “You know you can’t wait,” over a title screen. Amusedly scandalized “oh”s and chuckles emerged from the crowd. “All new episodes of Dance Mom’s coming this June. Your life. Your Time. Lifetime,” the announcer concluded. The Lifetime representative continued, “We own it. That is a loud clip right there.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, there have always been a variety of reality TV shows, many of which have not been subject to high moral scrutiny. Just as *Honey*
Boo Boo premiered in 2012, Sundance Channel released the stereotype busting series Push Girls, following the everyday challenges and triumphs of four women in Los Angeles who are paralyzed and use wheelchairs. Moreover, trends shift rapidly in television. In the years after I finished fieldwork, largely in reaction to prior criticisms waged at reality TV, networks began shifting towards more “authentic” and less sensationalistic content. At the 2016 Real Screen Summit, History Channel’s President and GM announced that the network would soon be airing more documentaries and scripted dramas. “We’re adding more premium hours into the mix,” she said (Ritchie 2016). Meanwhile, also at the Summit, Marjorie Kaplan, president of content at Discovery Networks International, encouraged producers to find inspiration in critically acclaimed, “auteur-driven” scripted dramas, like Jenji Kohan’s Orange Is the New Black and Vince Gilligan’s Breaking Bad: “There’s an opportunity in unscripted to think like that. I think there are great storytellers, and that’s a piece that’s different between television and YouTube. If you want real stuff, there’s plenty of that on the web. Our job is how to tell stories differently and I think having a creator at the center is a great way to do that” (Ravindran 2016).

However, in the years I was in the field, the pressure among development workers to find “big, loud characters” was strong. And even if producers themselves were opposed to making sensationalistic television and images that might perpetuate negative stereotypes, they still had to confront the enthusiasm that others within the broader production community did have to develop shows that morally tainted their work and occupation.

Fakery

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most common critiques of reality TV is its lack of authenticity. During development, workers create pitch tapes that
employ production techniques akin to those used to create reality TV series for broadcast, including ones that manipulate reality in ways that popularly stigmatize the genre. As I will discuss in the next chapter, workers vary in their attitudes towards faking reality as well as in the production techniques they employ. However, here I will describe some specific practices that many producers do use when making pitch tapes that are arguably the most morally suspect. These include practices related to scripting, casting, directing, and editing.

When *scripting* television pilots, sizzle reels, and character tapes, workers invent plotlines, plan scenes, and write dialogue before filming. In planning what cast members say and do on camera, workers shape cast members as characters, influencing how audiences might interpret their biographies and personalities. When creating character tapes via Skype, casting and development workers sometimes feed people lines or ask leading questions during interviews in order to produce desired sound bytes. Sizzle reels, presentation tapes, and pilots may be even more elaborately staged. For example, Pinnacle created a comedic docuseries following the lives of four single girlfriends in Los Angeles. Workers conceptualized the show as a “misfit version of *Sex and the City.*” Like the famous HBO scripted series, it featured the personal and love lives of four female leads. In the opening scene of the presentation tape, the girls sit in a diner discussing creative ways they can meet new men. The ladies decide to go to a bar pretending that they are part of a bachelorette party, since, they reason, men seem to be attracted to brides to be. The ladies arrive at a dimly lit, lively and crowded bar, flirt with men, and banter. After some comical encounters with prospects, the ladies ultimately do not land any dates, but rather dance the night away. However, the entire tape—from the topic of the ladies’ opening conversation, to the decision that they would have a fake
bachelorette party, to the course of their evening at the bar, to the drinks they were holding—was preplanned.

When creating pitch materials and reality shows, workers also cast people, rather than capturing relationships that would have blossomed without producers' interventions. For instance, in the previously described show, the pitch tape portrays the four ladies as best friends. In reality, Pinnacle built the show around one of the ladies and interviewed many of her friends and loose acquaintances to build the cast. Ultimately, some in the group of four had never previously met. Moreover, since the bar scene was completely staged—shot during the day when the bar was closed—all of the patrons were hired actors and extras. The men who flirted with the ladies at the bar auditioned for their roles. Cast were coached and directed on set and during interviews. They were told in advance what scenes they would participate in filming and how those situations would unfold. Sometimes producers fed lines to cast members and told them how to emote and react to situations, shooting multiple “takes” in order to ensure a satisfactory performance. Finally, workers edit videos in ways that significantly modify what cast members say and do on camera, inserting music, graphics, and images to frame situations in ways that are misleading, and also overtly manipulate video through “frankenbyting,” switching words and phrases around to change the meaning of a sound byte.

**Exploitation**

As mentioned in the introduction, production workers in television and film are notoriously overworked and underpaid. While work-related issues in reality TV receive less public attention compared to moral issues related to textual representation and authenticity, worker exploitation is a significant ethical concern within the production community. Perhaps the most public of reality TV workers' grievances have been
related to freelance workers’ ongoing efforts to unionize, including through walk out
demonstrations by *America’s Next Top Model* and *Shah’s of Sunset* writers and editors
in 2006 and 2014 respectively. In both situations the striking workers were fired,
although in the later case the network and production company ultimately relented,
offering the editors a union contract including health benefits and pension (Dayen 2014).
Exploitative labor conditions in reality TV are a particular moral blight on the genre given
the relatively better pay, benefits, working conditions, and union representation in
scripted TV (Nolan 2014).

Production companies limit costs by using cheap and provisional labor, a
common practice across the media and cultural industries. Limited cash flow, and thus
the inability to adequately compensate workers, is a particular problem for new
production companies and others focusing the bulk of their efforts on development, like
Pinnacle and Sunshine. Most of my respondents refused to disclose their financial
compensation. However, one development associate at Pinnacle reported an annual
salary of $35,000. Employees did not receive health insurance. A development
associate at Sunshine worked evenings as a sushi restaurant waiter in order to make
ends meet. Moreover, while Sunshine did not use any interns, as I will discuss in more
detail in a later chapter, Pinnacle relied heavily on the labor of over 55 unpaid interns
while I was in the field.

Neff (2012) argues that increasingly in various industries, but particularly in the
creative industries, workers are willing to take career risks due to the prospect of
success. In lieu of offering workers financial stability, new and struggling production
companies rely on their workers’ commitment to development and faith that their ideas
and hard work will eventually pay off. Speaking at the Real Screen Summit, Alan
LaGarde, President of Paper Route Productions (*Buying Alaska*, *Yukon Men*), attributed
his company’s success to the extraordinary investments his team made in effort and money towards development:

I think for us, the biggest reason that we were able to be successful is by having loyal people working together. And it was having that loyal group of people to work with that made it affordable because you talk about cash flow, there was no cash flow, whatever money we had we kept sinking into making something else, making that first show work. Making all those pitch tapes because when you’re a new company everybody knows, there’s no network that’s giving you money to go out and shoot a tape so you’ve got to go out there and do it. All those people I’ve just mentioned, we went on some of those crazy trips across Alaska and across places to try funding them ourselves, using Priceline to get hotels and just whatever it took to get the job done. So it was really a lot of hard work and just having great people that you count on, that are going to be there for you, even though there isn’t a lot of money to make it work and that’s how it happened for us.

According to LaGarde, a new production company’s success is dependent on a company and its workers’ willingness to go the extra mile and do “whatever it took to get the job done” despite financial hardships.

Aside from the exploitation of production workers, exploiting cast members is another ethical concern in development. Just as development workers sometimes tolerate low or, in the case of interns, no pay in the hopes that the production company will sell a series, prospective cast members also invest their time and, in some cases, money into development in the hopes that they could become a reality star. Sunshine did not pay cast to appear in pitch tapes. At Pinnacle, financial compensation for appearing in pitch tapes was inconsistent. Generally, the company did not pay cast to appear in character tapes or sizzle reels, but did pay cast to appear in presentation
tapes and pilots when they received development funding from networks. Pinnacle paid the starring cast members of a house flipping show $2,000 for their appearances in the pilot episode, which took three weeks to shoot and required twelve hour workdays. For the main star of that show, participating in the pilot and previous pitch tapes was a financial loss. He ended up spending about $60,000 of his own money to invest into flipping a house for the pilot. Similarly, Pinnacle created a sizzle reel starring a psychic from England, who was not financially compensated for her time, but rather paid for her own flight to New York City to participate in the project.

Most prospective cast think of appearing in pitch tapes as an extended audition, so do not expect to be paid for their participation. However, given the ambiguities of the development process and the genre’s negative reputation, prospective cast have reason to suspect that a production company may mistreat them for their own profit or benefit. As I will explain in the last chapter, prospective cast do sometimes question whether or not they are being swindled and whether the production company is offering them a real opportunity. These ambiguities stem from the development process. As previously mentioned, when casting for shows in development, workers call and email people out of the blue, asking them to submit their information and photographs. Since most production companies are not household names and the shows that they are casting for do not yet exist, these prospective cast members can only judge the company’s moral character on their existing knowledge of the genre.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of the development process, the players involved and the key practices that production companies use in their everyday work to generate ideas, search for cast, and create pitch materials. At the same time, the
chapter has begun the task of describing the meaning these practices hold for reality TV workers. Production companies experience development on the one hand as a source of great risk and uncertainty and on the other hand as a source of hope and optimism, as each idea could potentially be discarded at a moment’s notice or grow to become television’s next big hit. Development activities are also morally charged. The textual representations of individuals and groups that are emergent in conceptualizing a reality show, the manipulativeness of the production practices used in creating pitch materials, and the manner in which workers and performers are treated and compensated for their labor are all potential areas in which development work can be morally tainted.

I have described how commercial forces relate to moral issues in development, particularly how the market demand for “big characters” puts enormous pressure on companies to create new shows that have problematic representations and how low cash flow due to investment in development leads to exploitative labor practices. However, it is important to remember that human beings are not always rational actors and commercial pressures do not always lead people to abandon their values. In fact, sociologists have documented how economic activities are sometimes driven by morals, meanings, and cultural values, rather than the other way around (Brown 2013; Wherry 2012; Zelizer 1983). Although they exert an extremely strong force, commercial pressures during development certainly do not always lead reality TV workers to abandon their values and tastes. However, they do create heightened situations in which their moral character is tested and workers are forced to confront the idea of their jobs as dirty work, whether because they do indeed decide to engage in morally questionable action or because other producers, with or without moral qualms, continue to develop shows or engage in practices that perpetuate the genre’s negative reputation.
How workers uphold positive selves and identities despite wading in these muddy waters is the focus of the remaining chapters.
CHAPTER 3: CREATIVE COMPROMISE AND IDENTITY WORK

The tension between creativity and commerce has long been one of the central issues animating academic studies of the cultural industries. One of the main reasons workers are drawn to such industries is that they offer the opportunity for creative expression (Lee 2008; McRobbie 2002; Neff et al. 2005). In the case of television production, Ursell notes that for freelance workers in the UK “expressions of pleasure, pride and possession most often attach to worker contributions to content, to the ideational, visual and/or aural qualities, of the piece being produced; their pleasure derives from the scope they are finding for aesthetic self-expression” (2000: 819). However, due to pragmatic constraints, creative desires are not always realized.

Qualitative research describing day-to-day work in various fields from live music (Grazian 2003) to television production (Gitlin 1983) has found that workers compromise their creative desires in response to commercial pressures, and managerial practices can constrain creativity and aesthetic innovation (Born 2002, 2004; Dover 2001).

How do cultural industry workers negotiate the tension between commerce and their own creative fulfillment? Some scholars have described how cultural industry workers choose career paths that favor either financial stability or creative satisfaction (Becker 1963; Paterson 2001). Others have argued that individuals and companies cope with commercial constraints by attempting to build a positive reputation and

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8 This chapter is adapted from a previously published article (Wei 2012). Portions of the original manuscript are reproduced here in compliance with Elsevier’s authors’ rights. The original manuscript can be found using the following citation: Wei, Junhow. 2012. “Dealing with Reality: Market Demands, Artistic Integrity, and Identity Work in Reality Television Production.” Poetics 40(5):444–66. The original article is also available via the following link: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304422X12000484
seniority, which are associated with more creative control (Faulkner 1983; Zoellner 2010). Cultural industry workers, however, are not only confronted with tensions between creativity and commerce when making career path choices. They also cannot resolve such tensions completely by building networks and reputations. Rather, workers must deal with such tensions in their everyday work. Particularly, creative tensions arise in everyday contexts when cultural industry workers want the products of their labor to reflect their identities, yet are unable to create the products they desire due to pragmatic constraints.

I argue that workers negotiate tensions between creativity and commerce by doing identity work (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006; Snow and Anderson 1987), finding ways to actively construct their identities in a manner that preserves a positive understanding of who they are as creative people. The concept rests on an understanding that identities are not static and fixed, but rather are multiple, contextual, and shifting. It assumes that identities are not simply imputed onto individuals according to their social roles. Rather, individuals use a range of strategies to actively create, present, and sustain identities that are coherent and positively valued. Such strategies involve individuals’ mental activities, how people form an understanding of the self (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008). And they may include physical or interactional activities, such as “(a) procurement and arrangement of physical settings and props; (b) cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance; (c) selective association with other individuals and groups; and (d) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities” (Snow and Anderson 1987).

The specific dilemmas that instigate identity work among cultural industry workers vary by context. For example, Elsbach (2009) describes how toy car designers must create products that are highly standardized and stylistically similar. Their dilemma
is the inability to express their individualities and be perceived as distinctive. The designers remedy this situation by focusing on their own and recognizing other designers’ “signature styles,” that is the unadvertised and unofficially recognized stylistic variations that appear in the details of their designs. However, perhaps the most common dilemma facing cultural industry workers is the inability to create products that meet their artistic standards of quality. Workers have particular artistic values and tastes, which reflect their moral or aesthetic ideals and are important parts of their identities as creative professionals. Creating a product that meets these values and tastes gives workers a positive sense of who they are and what they stand for.

Previous authors have described how workers construct identities in response to creating work that does not reflect their artistic values and tastes. According to Faulkner (1983), Hollywood film composers are socialized to believe that dealing with compromise is part and parcel of who they are as professionals. Composers trade stories with each other about their experiences with the filmmakers who employ them. Trading “war stories” helps them learn to live with compromise and find ways to successfully work with filmmakers who do not understand music and prevent them from creating aesthetically satisfying compositions. Becker (1963) describes how dance hall musicians develop an understanding of themselves as separate from their “square” audiences, who force them to play music they dislike. Musicians foster this divide by distancing themselves from their clients physically (e.g. staying on stage rather than mingling, avoiding eye contact) and socially (e.g. use of slang, consuming avant garde culture, only socializing with other performers).

Faulkner and Becker characterize employers’ demands as the primary source of workers’ creative frustrations, implying that workers and employers often have very little in common. However, the relationship workers have with their employers varies by
context. While Faulkner and Becker focus on individual freelancers, many cultural industry workers, including freelancers, work in organizations where relationships are stable and co-workers and employers share a common history and culture.

Unlike Faulkner and Becker, Gotsi et al. (2010) use the concept of identity regulation to emphasize how managers help their staff overcome tensions between art and commerce, rather than cause such tensions. Identity regulation refers to the range of strategies managers use to direct and influence their employees’ identity work (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Specifically, Gotsi et al. conducted an ethnographic study of five leading product design firms and identified two specific types of identity regulation. The first type, identity differentiation, involved separating roles associated with conflicting identities (e.g. temporally through different project phases, spatially with different work spaces). The other type, identity integration, guided workers towards embracing disparate roles as synergistic (e.g. mentoring and selection of people who are able to balance creative and commercial constraints). Although Gotsi et al. describe particular managerial practices, material and institutional arrangements, and efforts at socialization, their reliance on interviews rather than participant observation led them to overlook the interactional strategies managers may use when regulating their staff members’ identities.

Previous research has certainly acknowledged that cultural industry workers make sense of their work via interactions with peers and supervisors. Nevertheless, the existing literature has not paid sufficient attention to the particular interactional strategies workers use to maintain artistic integrity when commercial demands prevent them from producing work that reflects their values and tastes. Moreover, existing research has not clearly articulated how workers of different status resolve such frustrations. The literature has particularly overlooked managers’ and employers’ subjectivities, focusing
instead on employees’ subjective responses to their superiors. They thus do not acknowledge that non-managers and managers may share some common frustrations and negotiate them collectively.

In this chapter, I will discuss how cultural industry workers maintain artistic integrity despite having to make artistic compromises. I introduce two identity work strategies, distancing and evaluative tweaking, as methods individuals use to resolve this problem. I describe how workers use these strategies in their micro social interactions. Particularly, I argue that the situations in which workers use these strategies, which strategies they use, and whether they are used to deal with compromises in shared or idiosyncratic values differ by workers’ status as manager or non-manager. But first, since particular sources of tension between creativity and commerce vary by context, I will describe the values and tastes most salient to workers at Pinnacle and Sunshine.

**Creative Frustration in Reality Television Development**

As previously discussed, various critics attack reality television for being inauthentic and for creating media representations that are damaging to individuals and society. Thus, feeling compelled by commercial demands to create reality TV that is morally suspect, whether due to lack of truthfulness or problematic representations, might be a particularly salient source of creative frustration among reality television workers. However, whether or not reality TV workers—and cultural industry workers in general—feel such frustration depends on whether or not their values and tastes are aligned with products and production practices that are commercially valued. In other words, creative frustrations exist when workers feel forced into doing what they see as dirty work, but not all workers believe that creating commercially viable content is dirty.
Little research has been conducted about how reality television producers feel about the product of their labor, whether with respect to truthfulness or the politics of representation (but see Dover 2001; Hautakangas 2010; Zoellner 2010). I find that reality TV workers vary in the degree to which they use truthfulness and representing cast with dignity as standards by which they judge the quality of their own work. Pinnacle Productions often embraced representational and production practices that others might criticize as morally questionable. On the other hand, workers at Sunshine Productions generally held disdain for what they saw as “trashy” reality TV and instead embraced what they defined as “real” reality TV. Since Sunshine workers rejected styles of reality TV that were more commercially viable, compared to Pinnacle workers they more strongly experienced creative frustrations when accommodating network demands.

**Reality as Entertainment at Pinnacle Productions**

Previous research has described how people doing various kinds of dirty work understand their occupations as positive or even honorable despite the stigma society places on their vocations (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). At Pinnacle Productions, creating reality TV that was truthful was not of central importance, despite societal condemnation of falsification in reality TV. Workers generally had a nonchalant attitude towards inventing scenarios, feeding cast members lines, and hiring actors. According to Clay, a development associate:

Clay: For people to be angry about reality TV is a waste of time. And I think what annoys people a lot about reality TV is that it is called reality TV.... Cause people get mad at the fact for whatever reason that things are set up or in some cases faked. What are you mad about? I don’t know what there is to be mad about. (Interview)

In everyday conversation, workers treated faking reality flippantly or as a matter of fact. Pinnacle rented a luxury hotel suite in Manhattan to film for a sizzle reel about a psychic.
In the sizzle reel, the hotel suite was presented as the psychic’s office, even though the
physic did not have any offices in New York City. The sizzle reel also showed the
exterior of another office building that was neither the hotel nor the psychic’s actual
office with a caption that read “Madeline’s Office, New York City.” When Mark, the
company’s Casting Director, saw a rough cut of the sizzle reel for the first time, he
remarked amusedly with a smile, reading off the caption, “Madeline’s office.” Mark
regarded such misinformation with amusement, rather than disdain or discomfort.

Pinnacle workers did not express concern about the ethics of misrepresenting
someone or something on television by using production techniques like scripting, pre-
planning scenes, hiring actors, and using editing to alter the meaning of dialogue.
However, definitions of authenticity vary. Pinnacle workers did value authenticity defined
as realism. They valued realism for its dramatic appeal. Workers understood that
audiences find reality TV entertaining because it represents some degree of reality,
rather than pure fantasy or fiction. But it was enough for audiences to believe what they
were seeing was real, rather than actually being factually accurate. Oscar, who directed
many of the company’s pitch tapes, compares reality TV to a magic trick:

Oscar: The illusion of magic is not real. It is an illusion. I don’t want to know how it
happened. I want to suspend my disbelief. I think it is personal to everyone you ask,
you get a different answer. Certain things I know are fake, but I don’t want to know
how they are fake. I just want to suspend my disbelief and be entertained. Reality
TV or unscripted reality television is pure escapism… I guess at the end of the day if
the viewer believes that it is real, then that is enough. (Interview)

According to Oscar, like magic, allowing viewers to suspend disbelief, rather than
avoiding manipulative production techniques, is most important for producing
entertaining reality TV. This is not morally problematic for him because he sees

pleasure or escapism as reality TV’s central goal. Clay agrees, but also adds that audiences understand that reality TV is not purely real and do not seem to care.

Clay: It is fun for viewers to see real people doing what they do and not actors. You want to keep that mystery. And for people who know that there is some mystery to reality TV, some setups, they still watch it. Why do they still watch it? Because it is entertaining and that is all that matters. (Interview)

Clay does not see "setups" as morally problematic because what is most important is keeping the audience entertained. According to Clay, savvy audiences don’t care whether or not shows are misleading as long as they are entertaining.

 Similarly, Pinnacle workers generally did not question the ethics of representing individuals or groups in an undignified manner. They sometimes relied on stereotypical images of groups by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation when developing television shows. They also at times depicted individuals as doofuses, ditzes, villains, or otherwise as characters with less than flattering attributes. However, the company did not view this as problematic because workers found entertainment value and expressive or creative pleasure in such caricatures. Many especially saw comedic value in producing over the top performances that aligned with a camp sensibility. Moreover, Pinnacle’s stance towards fakery was aligned with their penchant for creating caricatures, as both advanced the greater value of producing entertaining reality TV. The company valued manipulating reality to create over the top reality TV characters as an expressive act that allowed workers to be creative and find pleasure in comedy.

One ordinary day in the casting office, I was editing a pitch tape, stringing together Skype interviews to present the cast for a show centered around a gay nightclub. Mark, the Casting Director, and Andrew, a casting intern were working quietly
at their nearby desks. In one of the Skype recordings, a cast member discussed his participation in a statewide gay beauty pageant. As I began working on this clip, Andrew swiveled his chair to watch the Skype recording with me:

Towards the end of the Skype [the cast member] says with seriousness and matter-of-fact confidence, “My chances for winning [Mr. Gay] are very high right now. Very high. I’m the only contestant right now who is actually doing anything.” Andrew leans back in his chair with a cheerful smile and says with a bit of mischief, “We should have cut it off at ‘I’m the only contestant.’” Mark and I laugh heartily. I actually was thinking the same thing. “Can we do stuff like that?” Andrew asks Mark earnestly, wanting to learn. Mark, still working at his computer, hands on his keyboard, responds flippantly, “Yeah, it’s actually encouraged.” Everyone goes back to work. (Fieldnotes)

Andrew suggests editing the clip in a way that not only changes the facts—the man was not the only contestant—but also depicts the cast member as somewhat of a doofus—sounding highly invested and serious about a beauty pageant that, having so few contestants, is trivial. Mark and I find comedic pleasure in this manipulation and mockery. While Andrew’s question suggests that such an edit might cross an ethical line, Mark affirms the group’s shared attitude towards the edit and we all return to work without qualms.

Through such moments of interaction, Pinnacle workers created a shared culture centered around a certain comedic sensibility, one that valued reality TV characters with over-the-top personalities and that lacked significant concern for the politics of representation. According to Kristen, a casting and development intern:

Kristen: I think it goes without saying things are not politically correct. You need to have a sense of humor about it. No one was an outright sexist or an outright racist.
You know what I mean? But like it was funny. The show that we were working on before I was leaving was called Ghetto Fab Asians… I came up with this logo that was this you know the bling dollar sign necklace, like that, but instead there is a yin [yang] sign. Things like that were obviously not politically correct and I wouldn’t say in school, but its kind of like, you kind of have to be a little bit racist but in good humor, not in a bad way. (Interview)

Pinnacle workers were able to develop reality shows around stereotypical racial, gender, and other troupes because it was part of their shared culture. As Kristen notes, she would not express this brand of humor in other contexts, such as at her well-regarded, private university. However, Pinnacle employees created an insulated culture in which these sensibilities became acceptable and even valued. Furthermore, such cultural values thrived because workers rarely entertained counterviews. When I asked Andrew what his opinions were about the company’s perpetuating stereotypes, he responded:

Andrew: We weren’t there to promote a certain agenda. We were there to sell a show that could make money, right? That’s not the way I looked at it at all. I never thought about it once till you just said it. (Interview)

Andrew was able to never think about the politics of representation because workers collectively did not give significant consideration to such critical dialogue.

Pinnacle workers all had some college education. Many majored in some form of media studies, in which critical scholarship is typically a central part of the curriculum. They were not cultural dupes. One might image that, being relative outsiders, interns might have been especially prone to harbor critical viewpoints. However, I never witnessed any critical comments from interns while I was in the field. This lack of pushback was perhaps due to workers’ becoming lost in Pinnacle’s strong culture. But in fact some interns were critical of the company’s practices. These interns did not voice
their alternative viewpoints because they did not want to disrespect their co-workers.

According to Felicia, a casting intern:

Felicia: I once kind of told Mark, what you are doing is wrong. And he just got super offended.

Jun: How did you bring it up to him?

Felicia: I told him something similar to what I told you, like these people are willing to say anything to be in the spotlight, and Mark was like, “Yes, but that’s their choice.” And I was like, “But we know better. You would never do this [audition for a reality show], would you Mark?” And he was like, “No.” And I was like, “Then why are these people doing it? They don’t know better.” And he just got very defensive very quickly, so I dropped it.

Jun: What did he say?

Felicia: I think he was just like, “You don’t know” like, “You’re trivializing my industry.” Like, “You’ve never watched reality television.” Like, “This is a job. I’m doing this for the people. These people are willing to do it themselves.”

Jun: And you dropped it?

Felicia: Yeah

Jun: How come?

Felicia: Because I could tell it upset him, and he is a pretty defensive person to begin with, and he takes criticism harshly in any form, and I really care about him and he really cares about what he’s doing, and I didn’t want to step on any toes.

(Interview)

While Felicia surely wanted to maintain a good impression before her superior, she did not simply drop her critique out of concern for her career prospects. She also understood that the shows the company was creating reflected Mark’s values and
tastes, his identity as a creative. Criticizing the ethics of his work meant questioning whether or not he was a decent person.

In short, creating reality TV that was as authentic as possible and that represented subjects with dignity was not of primary importance in the development process at Pinnacle Productions. Rather, the company valued creating reality TV that was above all entertaining. Thus, faking reality or representing subjects in an undignified manner in order to cater to network demands did not create significant frustration or a sense of creative compromise. In fact, engaging in what others might stigmatize as dirty work was potentially a source of pride among Pinnacle workers if such work allowed them to create shows that were highly imaginative, absorbing, and humorous.

“Real” Reality TV at Sunshine Productions

Unlike at Pinnacle Productions, workers at Sunshine Productions highly valued making reality television they considered authentic and “real.” For most workers at Sunshine, telling “true stories” was a central part of how they viewed themselves and their identities as creative professionals. According to Paula, a producer:

Paula: I don’t really believe in manufacturing stories. I figure it’s our job to tell the story that happened. So I try to remain pretty faithful to how things really are. I’m not really interested in manipulating things to make them look different. (Interview)

Paula believes that her role as a producer involves staying “faithful” to stories, as opposed to “manufacturing” them. Paula’s response was representative of most Sunshine workers, distinguishing their particular standard of authenticity as a defining part of themselves and their work.

Creating “real” reality television was not only an individual preference, but also reflected a shared set of values and tastes that was an important part of Sunshine’s
organizational culture. Sunshine workers associated creating “real” reality television with their company in particular. Jean, a producer, explains: “There is a lot of bad reality TV out there that is definitely staged, but I do think that this company tries very hard to portray the true stories of these people” (Interview). Jean and other Sunshine workers believed this was unusual:

Jean: I don’t think that’s the case everywhere. I mean you watch some of the silly reality shows on TV and they’re, you know, you can tell that they are either staged or they’re just trying to get, ratings. [Laughs] Shock value…. I think we’re just trying to portray reality television. (Interview)

Previous authors have argued that common standards of authenticity help documentary makers shape a shared identity that unites them as a professional group (Dover 2001; Zoellner 2010). However, Sunshine workers believed that valuing authenticity was particular to their company rather than something shared with the larger reality television professional community. Indeed, their view contrasted sharply with the organizational culture at Pinnacle.

When Sunshine workers evaluated the “reality” of reality television, they often focused on whether or not its representations were truthful or sincere. Specifically, they considered reality television to be more truthful and thus “real” when it excluded or minimized acting, scripting, editing, casting, and other manipulations of production and mediation that affect how people or situations are represented. Their definition of “real” reality TV was also entwined and jumbled with the idea that quality reality TV represents its subjects with dignity, as opposed to shows they viewed as “sensational television,” focusing on conflict or mocking their subjects’ deficiencies. Carl, an editor, contrasts an admirable show, Oprah, with sensational reality television, which he dislikes:
Carl: *Oprah* or whatever talk show, the pacing is different. You let people talk and tell their story. More and more of what I see on the reality shows is just conflict driven. It’s just trash, people yelling at each other, people in fake scenarios.

(Interview)

Carl and other Sunshine workers saw “trashy” television as morally problematic for its fakery and its negative representations. However, as I will further describe later in this chapter, when people evaluate reality television’s authenticity they pick and choose specific criteria. Although Sunshine workers drew on some vague standards, the precise criteria they used to define a reality television program as “real” and morally sound depended on the situation.

Sunshine workers may have associated themselves with “real” reality television in order to gain status and distinction. Previous scholars have argued that authenticity generally confers prestige (Fine 2003; Grazian 2003). Furthermore, people often associate conflict and sensationalism with “trashy” or lower-class entertainment (Grindstaff 2002). Dissociation from reality television shows may thus represent a tacit class judgment and be desirable as a form of class distinction (Allen and Mendick 2013; Bourdieu 1984; Shoshana 2016; Wayne 2015). However, Sunshine workers’ desire to present people with respect and dignity also reflected a genuine concern for the well being of their cast and the social groups they represented. When I was on location filming the sizzle reel for *Riders*, a show about a traveling carnival company, Kevin, junior development associate, was reluctant to focus on the carnival workers’ dirty, ramshackle living quarters. When I asked Kevin why he felt this way he responded gravely, “Well, that’s not really the truth,” explaining that he did not want to perpetuate negative stereotypes about carnival workers.
Sunshine’s ideal of authenticity was fostered through doing work that fulfilled their values and tastes. Workers used projects that met their standards of quality to construct positive mental understandings of who they were as creative professionals. Such understandings were created and maintained interactionally as workers discussed likes and dislike while working with colleagues. One morning I was sitting with Kevin and Larry, an editor, who was editing the Riders sizzle reel:

Larry continues to work. After a moment of silence, Larry changes the subject. With his eyes still on his monitors and mouse in hand he says nonchalantly, “I really like a show like this because it’s really based on reality.”

“Because it’s not manipulative,” Kevin, leaning back in his chair, says matter-of-factly.

“This is the best stuff to edit,” Larry continues. “You just let it unfold… I’m interested in the everyday person, and that’s what this show allows me to get to if you can get there. You know what I mean?” (Fieldnotes)

As this conversation illustrates, cultural industry workers are sometimes able to express their artistic values and tastes through the products they create. They draw on these instances to do identity work by actively constructing positive identities as cultural producers with artistic integrity.

While maintaining their aesthetic and moral ideals, Sunshine workers were also extremely pragmatic. They understood that in order to stay in business, networks had to pay them to produce television programs. So, they crafted shows in ways they believed would maximize success in the product market. David, a company partner who also led the development team, discusses how his efforts were focused on appealing to network executives:
David: Well, I think that every single shot is based on will it have an impact on the buyer. Will it make – every single thing is based on is the buyer going to look at it and think, “Cool, I like that.” It has nothing to do with my emotions or anybody’s emotions. It has everything to do with is the buyer going to sit there and have a reaction to it, because otherwise you’re wasting your time. (Interview)

Sunshine employees believed that heightened drama and larger-than-life characters were appealing to buyers. According to Katie, post-production supervisor:

Katie: I do know that overall networks do want to see the same thing. They want to see a good story. They always like to have a good character…. Now again, you know, it’s reality TV, so the more controversial, the more talked about, the better. The networks love that. (Interview)

David echoes Katie’s sentiments when describing a show in development that he believes will please buyers: “The [show] has outstanding personalities that you can’t take your eyes off of, a lot of action, a lot of stuff going on, and good emotion, you know, really powerful emotion… lots of tears and good stuff going on” (Interview). According to Kate and David, reality television with “controversial” and “outstanding,” rather than ordinary or everyday, characters and stories will be most successful in the market.

Addressing pragmatic concerns like commercial viability does not necessarily conflict with satisfying cultural industry workers’ values and tastes. For example, visually beautiful and technically well-crafted reality television appeals to both production company workers and network executives. At Sunshine Productions, the desire not to manipulate could sometimes also be satisfied at the same time as market demands.

One early morning, I accompanied Jerry, director of programming, and Kevin, development associate, on a four-hour long car ride, traveling out of state to shoot part of the sizzle reel for Riders. In the car, as we drove through rolling green hills, Jerry and
Kevin casually discussed their visions and plans for the shoot. Jerry and Kevin reminded each other that in order to create a coherent story and capture marketable drama they should impose, perhaps by “staging” scenes and pushing characters to emote. However, they decided to wait and see if they had “good raw material” before staging drama. At the end of the three-day long trip, Jerry and Kevin indeed allowed the story to unfold without staging. Drama was captured naturally when a battery exploded. One of the characters got acid in his eyes and was sent away in an ambulance, returning to work the next day with a clean bill of health. In this case, Jerry and Kevin were able to accommodate both the demand for the dramatic and the desire not to impose by waiting to see if they had dramatic material before having to stage it.

However, ordinary life does not always involve tension or conflict. And even though producers attempt to cast the most eccentric people they can find, ordinary people are not always exciting or dramatic. Therefore, Sunshine workers often manipulated situations and people to heighten drama and excitement by coaching cast on set, scripting scenes, and editing to create stories with interesting plot lines. Larry, an editor, explains:

Larry: [W]hen you get into an edit room you’re basically sorting through everything trying to like make a story happen out of a wealth of footage. You know, so it’s like I’m trying to make things happen. A lot of times, you know, forcing things to happen [that] maybe didn’t happen naturally so it feels like it still has a natural story arc... So normally, I would start with a blank script and I would just start going through and editing and then I’d put my music in and my pictures and make it all feel like it, you know, make it entertaining is the bottom line, so people will watch it. (Interview)

The desire to achieve commercial success clearly shaped Sunshine’s work. One prominent way the company tried to achieve success was by manipulating reality to
appeal to audiences and gatekeepers. Since Sunshine producers and editors manipulated situations and individuals to seem more exciting and dramatic, despite their taste for the authentic, workers faced particular tension between creativity and commerce.

Maintaining Integrity When Faced With Creative Compromises

Cultural industry workers must sometimes compromise their values and tastes in response to pragmatic concerns such as market demands. These instances challenge workers’ definitions of who they are as cultural producers. Given the sharp contrast between their desire to produce “real” reality TV and their perception that networks desired more sensational fare that would require them to manipulate reality, Sunshine Productions is an ideal case with which to examine how workers resolve such tensions. Thus, I focus on Sunshine in the remainder of this chapter. I argue that cultural industry workers actively rationalize creative compromises in order to maintain their positive identities. Two such identity work strategies emerged during interviews with individual workers at Sunshine: distancing and evaluative tweaking.

Workers can distance themselves from disliked products by framing those products as separate from the self. For example, workers may distance themselves by defining products as flukes, temporary or not representative of their ordinary products and proceedings. According to Larry, an editor:

Larry: [Sometimes] we’ll make it look, camp it up a little bit, where we’ll make somebody look like a little more of an ogre than the guy might have been. Or make the girl look a little more mean than they might have been. Just to create the drama, cause that’s what people want. You know what I mean? People want to see stuff that’s like a little more over the top... But on average I think we do it... a lot of the
shows were, the ones we started with here were more doc-like very documen-more documentarish... So it’s more their account of what’s going on. So there wasn’t a lot of fakery in that kind of stuff. (Interview)

Although Larry acknowledges that he does “create the drama” to satisfy market demands, he emphasizes that most previous Sunshine projects do not include “a lot of fakery.” He justifies occasional compromises in what he perceives to be authenticity by rationalizing these cases as abnormal and not representative of the type of television he helps create.

Workers may also blame others for undesirable decisions or outcomes. At Sunshine, workers often distanced themselves from instances of manufactured drama by associating such cases with actors external to the organization, such as particular clients, or an abstract “audience” or “market.” According to Jerry, director of programming:

Jerry: I may not agree or feel that it’s in my aesthetic interest, but you can’t always have that. It’s a very rare experience where you’re being paid to do whatever you want, on your own aesthetic whims. You’re in a business and there’s people paying you to deliver certain successes. (Interview)

Jerry rationalizes compromising values and tastes as necessary given the demands clients place on him. As indicated in earlier sections, workers believe that a particular style of reality television is most commercially viable, particularly television with heightened drama and conflict. However, workers can reason that they only produce such television because others demand it from them—that manufacturing drama is
necessary due to their roles as employees and salespeople but is not a reflection of their artistic identities.⁹

Besides distancing, workers can also maintain their artistic identities through evaluative tweaking. Since values and tastes are subjective, workers may tweak the artistic standards by which they judge their work. In the case of Sunshine Productions, employees valued “real” and “not manipulated” reality television. But the meaning of “real” was not completely consistent or precisely defined in workers’ ordinary discourse. What workers considered real or authentic slightly shifted from moment to moment. Carl describes a Sunshine show he edited in which ordinary people were forced into situations set up by producers. Still, he defends the show’s reality:

Carl: [The producers] would come up with a crazy scenario… that’s really kind of contrived and they added a lot of elements to it, but it was real… you’d go through all these hoops and it would be kind of gimmicky, up until the end of the show… seeing the shock and joy in the woman’s face, and that was a real moment, even though it was contrived and set up, it still had a great payoff. It never failed to impress me, what happened at the end of that show. (Interview)

Despite the show’s conflicting with the ideal of no manipulation, Carl positions the show as “real” by redefining this standard with respect to the genuineness of the woman’s expression, rather than the production techniques used earlier in the show.

In another example of evaluative tweaking, David, director of development, describes a meeting scene in the sizzle reel for Flower Queen, a show about floral designers. In the scene, Jennifer, the design company’s owner meets with two of her

⁹ Dover (2001) and Zoellner (2010) have found that documentary producers distance themselves from commissioning editors at television networks who force them to compromise their tastes for economic imperatives. However, these authors frame such distancing as evidence of critical reflexivity and resistance, rather than a strategy workers use to maintain artistic integrity when they make creative compromises.
designers to plan an elaborate wedding centerpiece that the bride had supposedly asked for at the last minute. In fact, the bride had not asked for the centerpiece:

David: I said what we’re gonna do is give this bride something she didn’t ask for and give her the centerpiece of her dreams, but I need everything else to be as real as possible. I didn’t want them to plan it out too much. I didn’t want Jennifer to have too many conversations with [the designers] about it. I wanted to catch them as off guard as possible. So, while that meeting was quote unquote staged, some of the elements in that meeting were real. They had generally not designed it yet at that point… everything else that happened in that, in terms of trying to get it built and getting it into the wedding that day, all of that was real. I didn’t— we didn’t really manufacture any of that. (Interview)

Despite staging the meeting scene and pretending that the bride had requested the centerpiece, David positions the situation as acceptable since he did not stage the centerpiece’s actual design and construction.

Individuals use both distancing and evaluative tweaking as identity work strategies, reflecting their recognition that sometimes they must make compromises while in other cases they produce work that meets their standards of quality. These strategies may seem like contradictory methods of rationalization: distancing frames disliked products as separate from the self, while evaluative tweaking associates products with the self by re-framing compromises as reflecting one’s values and tastes. However, Sunshine workers use both strategies for the same reason, to preserve their identities as workers who value authentic reality television.

Managers’ Use of Talk as Identity Work and Identity Regulation
Interview data reveal that distancing and evaluative tweaking are identity work strategies that workers have at their immediate disposal to preserve artistic integrity. Workers of all positions and statuses readily deployed these strategies when issues related to artistic compromise arose during interviews. However, interviews do not necessarily reflect how subjects behave or what they say in their day-to-day interactions. Ordinary verbal interaction is a key means through which people do identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987). When do distancing and evaluative tweaking emerge as talk in ordinary social interaction? According to Fine, creative constraints in the workplace are often “taken for granted and treated as merely a reality of the occupation” (1992: 1277). Indeed, artistic constraint did not dominate ordinary conversation at Sunshine Productions, suggesting that workers do not feel the need to constantly and openly defend their identities against compromises. Rather, distancing and evaluative tweaking emerge verbally during micro interaction when situations lead workers to explicitly articulate their compromises, and/or when workers consider compromises to be particularly egregious or frustrating.

Workers’ role and status in an organization shapes when and why they use identity work strategies interactionally to preserve artistic integrity. Managers at Sunshine were experienced program makers with both creative roles and business responsibilities. They were more directly responsible for the financial well being of projects and the organization as a whole than their subordinates. They were also the workers who most often communicated with agents and network buyers, and thus had the most knowledge of what courses of action might garner commercial success. Finally, their status gave them both the power and responsibility to provide the overall vision and detailed direction on projects. Thus, unlike their subordinates, Sunshine managers were placed in situations where they had to verbally direct others into actions
that appealed to market demands but could compromise artistic integrity. They initiated verbal identity work when market demands compelled them to present their staff with new courses of action that compromised the group’s common desire to make “real” reality television.

Such managerial efforts are apparent in the following example. The interaction took place the morning after David, director of development, met with the company’s agent and got his feedback on the *Riders* sizzle reel. Larry, an editor, and Kevin, junior development associate, had been working on the sizzle reel with David for several months. David met with Larry and Kevin in Larry’s office to debrief the two on the agent’s feedback.

Larry’s office was small and windowless, but light from a single lamp reflected on the peach colored walls, giving the room a warm, cozy glow. Larry sat at his desk, on top of which are two computer monitors and a laptop, as well as miscellaneous papers and a few knickknacks. Kevin and I sat on a small, blue IKEA loveseat. We were all turned to face David, who was sitting behind a large wooden desk beside the loveseat. David was loud, agitated, and animated, looking at each of us alternately as he spoke. He said the agent wanted more images of danger and drama in the sizzle reel, images that would have been impossible to capture during our short time filming for the video. Both Larry and Kevin listened attentively with serious expressions, their eyes glued on David, as he vented about how the agent’s requests would require them to manufacture reality:

David: They’re totally about… if you have to manufacture it, manufacture it and that pisses me off…. How can you possibly go in and show people what’s real when you’re asking them to not be real?!

Larry and Kevin shared David’s sentiment:
Larry: [Calmly, slightly shell-shocked] I- I- I’m dumbfounded [Kevin simultaneously: I’m dumbfounded] too. Because really what they’re asking for is scripted.

David: … They’re asking you, you know, can you forget to chain down the—

Kevin: [Chuckling sarcastically] ride and set a child on it?

David: It’s like seriously. It’s ridiculous… literally they think the hottest talent on television right now is the fat woman on the Repo show on truTV.¹⁰

Following David’s lead, Larry and Kevin rhetorically distanced themselves from “scripting” and “manufacture,” setting a boundary between themselves and the agent, who they demonized as not sharing their tastes. David associated the agent with manufactured sensationalism: “the fat woman on the Repo show.” In distancing themselves from such manufactured television, they retained their identities as workers who valued the “real” and authentic.

Despite affirming his artistic identity through distancing, and prompting his employees to do the same, David had to respond to the agent’s credible advice. The company had no television shows in production. They were not bringing in a steady income. David thus abruptly changed the focus of the conversation:

David: And it doesn’t matter if they tell her to act wacko or not. To the viewer, she’s wacky. Totally compelling. So, you know what? We’re gonna sell this show, because I believe in this show and, um, we know we have an outstanding environment that nobody else has—

Kevin: is tapped into, yep—

David: And nobody else will get this. [David slaps the desk with his palm definitively]… So the best thing to do right now would be to string out the most…

¹⁰ Operation Repo is a reality television program about car repossessions broadcast on truTV, a cable television network.
don’t censor ourselves. Go through, find the most outrageous bytes we have….

They just need five or six minutes of like oh my god are you kidding me.

Kevin: [Sincere and nonchalant] Yeah. Ok.

Although he encouraged his employees to make the video as “outrageous” as possible, David also maintained his identity as someone who valued authentic reality television by subtly distancing himself from “the viewer,” who he infers is responsible for their need to create “wacky” television. David’s rhetoric signaled to Kevin that their actions were appropriate and he accepted David’s plan.

Although Kevin was ready to proceed, Larry continued to be upset:

Larry: The hard part for me is if that’s what they want it to wind up being, it doesn’t, morally to me, making them look like a bunch of assholes doesn’t feel right.

Attempting to comfort Larry, David initially could not find his words, suggesting that it was difficult for him to justify making an inauthentic and sensationalist sizzle reel. But then he employed a rhetorical strategy, distancing their making a sensationalist sizzle reel by defining it as abnormal and temporary:

David: But, you know, I do think this. I do think… that if you… if you, um, in the course of once you get the series sold, and in the course of the series, the segment about, the drama you can build [naturally] about getting the [rides] built would stand—

Kevin: Mm hmm [agreeing]

Larry: Right-

David: and the overall arching of the series, you wouldn’t have to be quite that outrageous.

Larry: Right.

Kevin: No, you wouldn’t, not at all.
Larry and Kevin were evidently convinced by David’s rhetoric. Despite endorsing a course of action that required them to violate their artistic values and tastes, David maintained his and his employee’s identities as authentic reality television makers.

David’s actions reflected, in part, his desire to ensure efficient production. When I interviewed David a few weeks after his meeting with Larry and Kevin, I noted that Larry seemed particularly upset and asked whether he was trying to alleviate Larry’s frustrations:

I wanted him to understand that I was as frustrated by it as he was likely to be, because I think he did feel better after he saw I was frustrated, and that was really genuine... was I trying to make him feel better? Yes. I was trying to motivate him to be involved. The worst thing in the world is having an editor who’s not involved, who’s just pushing buttons. That will never work. You have to get that editor to be invested in the process so that they can bring their own vision to it. And what ended up on that screen is a lot of – visions – editing techniques, shady graphics, that’s all Larry’s skills. So I needed him to be as energetically and creatively involved as possible. I wanted him to know I was as pissed off about having to do this as he was (Interview).

Managers are sensitive to their staff members’ feelings, and attempt to stimulate investment in creative work when they feel morale is low or might be in danger. When work is not a reflection of their values and tastes, workers may complete their tasks less enthusiastically and perhaps less effectively. David’s attempts to regulate his employees’ artistic identities reflected these concerns.

However, David’s actions were simultaneously a form of self-management, an attempt to maintain his own artistic identity. David was genuinely upset about manufacturing conflict for the Riders sizzle reel:
I hate fake. It’s not real. It’s not reality. I understand the need to sell a series. I do. I certainly do. I wouldn’t want to not sell a series but... I just hate fake. I’ll put that on my tombstone. I hate fake (Interview).

David clearly felt the need to appeal to commercial demands, even when they conflicted strongly with his personal values and tastes. Although he attempted to stimulate investment and enthusiasm among his employees, because David shared his employee’s values and tastes, his speech simultaneously served to alleviate his own frustrations.

During the above-described meeting, David and his employees were noticeably upset and agitated. However, managers do not only rationalize compromises when alleviating their employees’ or venting their own frustrations. Rather, when no one is overtly frustrated, managers still do such identity work when suggesting actions that compromise artistic integrity. After completing the sizzle reel for Flower Queen, a show about floral designers, the team went out for lunch at a local casual restaurant to celebrate. During lunch, David said that if Flower Queen became a show, he would have to manufacture drama because Jennifer, the main character, was too controlling and nervous about showing any flaws. He mentioned an episode of Ace of Cakes, a reality show following the day-to-day activities of a bakery, in which he believed producers staged a scene with the bakers conducting a “mouse séance” to deal with a mouse infestation. David said that while he would stage such a scene at Jennifer’s design company, he added that actually creating problems, such as a real mouse infestation, would just be “wrong.” David tweaks his definition of what is acceptable in terms of manufacture. Rather than manipulation of reality being globally wrong, he defines a particular type of manufacture as wrong instead, creating problems for the specific person they are filming. No one was evidently uncomfortable before, during, or
after David spoke. The atmosphere at lunch was relaxed and celebratory. Managers thus engage in identity talk not only when their staff members are overtly frustrated, but also to quell potential frustrations when advocating courses of action that might compromise their shared values and tastes.

**Non-managers’ Distancing Through Venting**

Staff members sometimes join their managers in distancing and evaluative tweaking when managers initiate such identity work to negotiate compromising shared values and tastes in favor of marketability. However, managers and employees do not have equal roles nor do they hold equal power. The ability to express one’s artistic identity varies by an individual’s level of authority within an organization. Fine (1992) finds that in the restaurant world, chefs and sous chefs have more authority in making aesthetic decisions than the cooks who they supervise. Similarly, at Sunshine Productions the director of development and executive producers had more authority to make choices than development associates, production assistants, and editors. Non-managers had to deal not only with artistic compromises induced by appealing to the product market, but also with creative differences between themselves and their superiors.

Previous research has found that, through talking with one another, cultural industry workers distance themselves from managers and employers who direct them towards work that conflicts with their artistic values and tastes (Faulkner 1983). Sunshine employees distanced themselves from managers during micro social interaction when venting frustrations to colleagues about creative differences with their managers. Through venting, they maintained their idiosyncratic artistic identities by defining their values and tastes as separate from those of their superiors.
One day Kevin, junior development associate, and Larry, an editor, were editing the *Riders* sizzle reel together. They approached a section of the video with a narrator reading a voiceover (VO) line introducing Herbert, one of the show’s main characters. David, Sunshine’s mustached director of development, had written the voiceover line.

Kevin: … then we get into that stupid Herbert line right after that?
Larry: Yes. I’m not sure if [David] wants to try the other thing, but…
Kevin: What’s your thought on that?
Larry: … I would write less VO… But the mustache is gonna want, you know.
Kevin: [Breathes out in exaggerated exasperation] The mustache (Fieldnotes).

Kevin and Larry distanced themselves from the “stupid” line that David wrote. Both would prefer to introduce Herbert’s character with less narrated voiceover. However, knowing that David was unlikely to change the voiceover, they vented and sarcastically referred to David as “the mustache.” As this exchange illustrates, workers vent frustrations to each other that grow from idiosyncratic differences in artistic values and tastes between themselves and their superiors.

However, workers’ frustrations do stem not only from differing aesthetic opinions, but also from the perception that managers have prioritized marketability over artistic integrity. Todd, a minor celebrity, was the star and an executive producer of a Sunshine show in which he helped ordinary people confront their past mistakes. Todd himself had once been the subject of a minor scandal. He was publically accused of cheating on his wife. Todd’s confronting his own scandal would be the springboard for the series. Jim, an editor, was working on the pilot episode of the show. I sat with Jim one day in his office as he worked. Todd came in and out several times to give notes and directions. After discussing a section of the episode describing his indiscretions, Todd left the room.
Jim began working on the segment, opening some computer images of newspaper clippings and headlines referencing Todd’s affair. He muttered to me:

Jim: So highly embarrassing for him.

Junhow: What?

Jim: Um, [in a stage whisper] he’s selling out! [Chuckles sarcastically]. You know kind of his story right? (Fieldnotes)

Jim distances himself from Todd’s decision to use his personal life to promote the show. Over the following weeks, Jim grew increasingly negative toward the project. After Larry, another editor, told me that Jim had vented about the show to him, I asked Jim directly whether he was enjoying the project. “No,” he responded. “Because there’s no direction?” I asked. “That, and I don’t necessarily believe in the concept of the show. And that makes it really hard to be real gung ho about it.”

These examples illustrate how during interactions with peers workers are at times critical of and distance themselves from their managers. However, the values and tastes that workers criticize their superiors for embracing are idiosyncratic rather than shared. I never observed employees criticizing Sunshine’s managers for compromising the company’s shared taste for “real” reality television. The identity work that Sunshine managers do when interacting with their staff helps them present themselves as producers who deeply value authenticity in the same manner as everyone else in the organization. Managers’ identity work helps workers maintain a collective artistic identity around shared values despite market demands. On the other hand, distancing themselves from their managers helps workers maintain their idiosyncratic artistic identities despite having to follow their managers’ creative vision, including when they believe their manager is prioritizing commercial success over artistic integrity.
Conclusion

Workers in the cultural industries care deeply about satisfying commercial demands as well as expressing the ethical values and aesthetic tastes that are important parts of their identities as creative professionals. Some analysts may assume that workers who produce cultural goods and genres that are socially stigmatized, like reality TV, are more likely to feel strong tensions between creativity and commerce. However, I have described how market demands and workers' values and tastes are not necessarily in opposition, even when those workers are creating cultural products that others might find morally reprehensible. While critics could easily condemn development activities at Pinnacle Productions as dirty work, Pinnacle workers adopted logics that allowed them to see their shows as entertaining and find pride in their creative accomplishments. On the other hand, workers at Sunshine Productions did have values and tastes that clashed with those they believed were marketable. Ultimately, I have described how Sunshine workers also found ways to rationalize and justify their dirty work, although, unlike at Pinnacle Productions, doing so involved overcoming the discomforts and frustrations of creative compromise.

How do cultural industry workers maintain their artistic identities despite compromising their values and tastes to accommodate commercial demands? Focusing on the case of Sunshine Productions, I have argued that workers maintain artistic integrity by actively constructing their identities through identity work. I have described two identity work strategies, distancing and evaluative tweaking, and argued that workers in managerial and non-managerial roles use these strategies differently during social interaction. Particularly, Sunshine managers often initiate identity work while justifying decisions that threaten shared values, while employees often do identity work
to distance themselves from superiors whose directions conflict with their idiosyncratic values.

Previous research investigating tensions between creativity and commerce often ignores managers’ subjectivities and implies that managers and employees have little in common. I have argued that managers are not only interested in pragmatic concerns like selling products, balancing budgets, and maintaining organizational efficiency. They, like their employees, are also concerned about maintaining artistic integrity. Managers and employees certainly hold idiosyncratic and conflicting artistic values and tastes. However, they may also share common artistic values and tastes, and negotiate the frustrations of making creative compromises collectively.

Managers’ and workers’ identity work has implications for managerial power. Extending previous authors’ claims that managerial authority in the cultural industries does not rely on strict Taylorist strategies of control (Smith and McKinlay 2009), I argue that managerial power rests on their ability to demonstrate understanding and involvement in the creative process. In some cases, idiosyncratic differences in artistic values and tastes spur workers to distance themselves from their managers and paint superiors as lacking taste or artistic integrity, weakening workers’ respect for their managers. However, when managers present the same values and tastes that employees hold dear as important parts of their own artistic identities, they demonstrate to their employees that they have artistic integrity. Through identity work around shared values, managers re-direct hostility employees may harbor away from them and towards people outside the organization. Thus Sunshine’s managers imply that while they are responsible for directing projects, they are not ultimately to blame for compromising authenticity.
My analysis of Sunshine Productions has described how workers maintain their positive identities despite making creative compromises. However, identities can also shift and evolve as workers actively construct them in response to external pressures. Particularly, workers may shift to focus on different standards of quality to represent who they are as creative professionals. Faulkner (1971) and Becker (1963) suggest that some musicians deal with artistic compromise by taking pride in their technical instrumental skills rather than the quality or style of the music performed. Zoellner (2010) argues that documentary makers have developed values and tastes to evaluate the quality of their work that align with broadcasters’ commercial demands. Similarly, at Sunshine Productions authenticity may become a less significant part of constructing workers’ artistic identities. However, during my time at Sunshine workers’ taste for “real” reality TV remained strong. Thus, I do not speculate about why one set of standards might wane and other standards might become more prominent parts of how workers define themselves. Future research might further investigate the circumstances under which workers’ artistic identities shift.
CHAPTER 4: UNPAID INTERNS AND RELATIONAL WORK

Within the entertainment industry, reality TV has elicited a significant amount of concern for its exploitative labor practices. *Deadline*, an entertainment industry trade magazine, reported on employee grievances at FremantleMedia, the production company behind *American Idol* (AI) and other highly rated reality shows:

FremantleMedia continues to profit from AI and its other hit shows, while writers and other behind-the-scenes workers often face substandard working conditions. FremantleMedia employees have charged the company with multiple labor law violations, including withholding overtime pay and failure to provide state-mandated meal or rest breaks, among other grievances. Currently, FremantleMedia workers do not receive industry-standard benefits guaranteed by a union contract, including pay minimums and health and pension benefits. (Finke 2008)

Similarly, *TheWrap*, another widely read online trade magazine, called reality TV “the invisible front in Hollywood’s labor wars.” Jeff Bartsch, a reality TV editor who worked on *America’s Next Top Model, Supernanny, and Blind Date*, told TheWrap, “Reality TV is the Walmart of TV production. Networks pit production companies against each other and bid production budgets down so low that producers often feel that the added cost of union contracts would cost them, and their employees, their jobs” (Cunningham 2012).

The Writers Guild of America East conducted an online survey of reality TV writers and producers in 2013 and released a report stating that 60% of survey respondents worked more than 8 hours a day and 85% never received overtime pay (WGA East 2013). The report attributes exploitation specifically to reality TV’s low budgets compared to scripted TV. While the History Channel has a per episode budget of between $225,000 and $425,000 for its reality shows, *Royal Pains*, a moderately
popular scripted show on the USA cable network has a per episode budget of between $2 and $2.5 million. Media outlets picking up on this report blasted reality TV, with *Cracked Magazine* saying its “Business Model is Built on Exploiting Workers” (Brown 2014) and *Salon* offering the headline “Reality TV’s workers scandal: Shows accused of stealing millions in wages” (Eidelson 2013).

Academic studies have discussed how exploitative labor practices are not only common in reality TV, but are typical in the cultural industries more broadly. For instance, it is common in various creative fields, including music recording, book publishing, and fashion modeling, for management companies to require talent to repay initial production and promotional expenses (Grazian 2010a). While modeling agencies typically pay for new fashion models to take preliminary test photographs, take catwalk lessons, and rent housing in new cities, the models must repay their agencies through their earnings, causing many to be in debt (Mears 2011). Organizations also offset costs by hiring workers on a short term and contractual basis, making employment in the cultural industries increasingly precarious and risky for individual workers (Gill and Pratt 2008; Neff 2012).

But while we know that exploitative labor practices are common in cultural industries and exploitation is an ethical concern among entertainment industry professionals, we know little about how cultural industry workers in managerial or supervisory roles dispel the moral stain of exploiting others. Zelizer (2012) defines *relational work* as “the creative effort people make in establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations.” She argues that in all economic action people erect boundaries between distinct categories of social relationships and define certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate and inappropriate within those boundaries. In her study of unpaid women who do aesthetic
labor in VIP nightclubs, Mears (2015) draws on this concept to argue that women consent to providing free labor when their relationships with party promoters are successfully framed as rooted in friendship, fun, and leisure. For instance, promoters recruit women by portraying themselves as desirable companions, dressing meticulously and creating a friendly persona.

I propose that relational work is not only important for explaining why workers consent to their own exploitation, but also for how supervisors vulnerable to charges of exploitation make their morally questionable actions acceptable to themselves. I draw on the case of unpaid interns at Pinnacle Production to suggest that employees can feel morally clean and even great about their supervisory roles by defining their relationships with interns in terms of mentorship and friendship.

Unpaid Internships

While cultural industries are among the major users of unpaid interns (Frederick 1997; Neff 2012), internships are becoming increasingly common in general. An estimated 50% of American college graduates in 2008 held an internship (Greenhouse 2010). But despite the prevalence of unpaid internships in the cultural industries in particular and the growing importance of internships in general, little research focuses on describing in detail what interns actually do and what meaning employees and supervisors make of their relationships with unpaid interns.

Frennette’s (2013) study of interns working at major and independent US record labels is one notable exception. He discusses internships as provision labor, reflecting how they are temporary, conditional, and ambiguous. In the popular imagination, interns perform grunt work of little relevance or use for developing their professional training or education. However, Frennette found that record industry interns perform a variety of
tasks, from the mundane and menial to professional duties similar to the high level work of their supervisors. For instance, low-level assignments included stuffing envelopes, ordering lunch or coffee, running errands, making photocopies, and answering phones. Higher-level work included doing research, writing press releases, managing artists’ MySpace profiles, and scouting potential bands.

Another exception is Mirrlees’s (2015) analysis of 20 job ads for internships at 19 different reality TV production companies. All but two of these opportunities were for unpaid internships. The job ads indicate that production companies look for applicants to have both hard skills (e.g. communication skills, software and hardware competence) and soft skills (e.g. etiquette, affect). The ads suggest that production companies expect interns to do a variety of skilled tasks: imagine, research, and develop new reality TV show concepts; write, review, and edit scripts; search for, attract, and interview cast; set up scenes, coordinate lighting, and film the action on set; and digitize, craft, and edit filmed footage. While the ads do not promise monetary compensation, they suggest that interns can hope for future rewards by gaining experience, networking opportunities, and mentorship.

In this chapter, I expand on these studies by describing interns’ roles and contributions at Pinnacle Productions. I begin the chapter by describing some general features of the internship program at Pinnacle and characteristics of the interns who worked there. Then I present two broad sets of findings. First, I describe how Pinnacle is certainly vulnerable to the moral taint of exploitation because the company relied heavily on interns’ unpaid labor. Especially for casting interns at Pinnacle, menial tasks were not the norm. Rather, as Mirrlees suggests is the case elsewhere, interns were an integral part of creative production at the company, contributing substantively to the television shows Pinnacle developed. Interns did creative and expressive work including
video editing, acting on screen, writing scripts, inventing show ideas, and all steps in casting. I also explain why interns were valuable despite their relative inexperience: immediate supervisors reviewed interns’ creative work before it was shared more widely, employees grew to trust interns over time as they provided more training and guidance, some interns were older and had substantial professional experience in other realms, and many creative tasks did not require specialized knowledge.

In a second set of findings, I examine how employees dispel the moral taint of exploitation despite benefiting from the labor of unpaid interns. I suggest that supervisors dispel this moral taint by doing relational work, defining their relationships with interns as that of a mentor providing valuable professional experience. I then focus specifically on the case of Mark, the Casting Director, and his group of interns to describe the conscious effort Mark made to build friendly relationships and a creative community with his interns. I suggest that by framing his mentorship role as rooted in genuine friendship, Mark was not only morally cleansed from the taint of exploitation, but could also feel good about himself as a kind and caring person.

**Who are Pinnacle Interns?**

Interns at Pinnacle could work in development, branded entertainment, production, production management, postproduction, graphics, or casting. Some worked in multiple areas, switching between days or after a period of time. I was a casting intern for the entirety of my ten months working at the company, but also frequently helped development associates on projects and assisted the production team on a few video shoots. During that time I saw many interns come and go. Most interns stayed at the company for at least three and a half months, the length of one college semester, and many stayed for about seven months or two semesters. Sally, who
worked in casting and development, stayed for about one year. Beyond a couple of exceptions, interns worked at least two or three days a week and stayed the full workday, from 9:30 am until 7 pm. During my time in the field, the company brought in over 55 unpaid interns. I worked directly with 13 other casting interns (see table below). On most days, there were two or three interns in casting, although on some days I worked alone with Mark, the Casting Director.

Table 1. Casting interns working directly with me

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Work before Intern</th>
<th>Work after Intern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Casting</td>
<td>Financial analyst</td>
<td>Financial analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Freelance casting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Freelance casting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darnell</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Casting</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Casting</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desmond</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>Theater marketing manager</td>
<td>Freelance casting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>Graduate student (MFA)</td>
<td>TV network intern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>Fashion merchandiser</td>
<td>Freelance casting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting/Development</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Casting/Production</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interns varied in terms of age and professional experience. Many interns were college students, particularly those who began in the summer. Sally, for instance, was a bubbly 19-year-old Boston University student with long brown hair and a trendy style. She dreaded returning to school, and ended up staying at Pinnacle, first in casting and then as a development intern, for almost three semesters. Although she was unsure about her career path, she enjoyed the internship. Her well-to-do family financially supported her life in New York—she enjoyed sushi dinners—but they also expected her to “learn responsibility” and so aside from her internship she worked a part time retail job at a fashionable chain clothing store.

Some were recent college graduates. Tiffany was a loquacious young woman, with the ability to ramble about anything and everything, and loved to host dinner parties. She started as a casting intern at Pinnacle just after graduation from a public university in the Midwest. Her father was a successful businessman and paid for her spacious
studio apartment in a doorman building on the Upper East Side. Cody, also a recent college graduate, came from a comfortable middle class background, his mother a grade school teacher and father a credit manager, but had to take out loans to attend a “cheap” (as he described it) local college where he majored in film. He was a hipster, wearing snug jeans and big, square, plastic framed glasses. At night and over the weekends, he waited tables at a hip restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Other interns had quite a bit of professional experience. Heidi was 25 years old and grew up in a working class Long Island neighborhood, where she still lived with her parents. She always carried a Nintendo 3DS in her purse and wore the same outfit almost daily, a big grey hooded sweatshirt, baggy jeans, and a red bow pinned in her short brown hair. Enrolled in a master’s program in screenwriting while interning, she was obsessed with all things Disney, and dreamt of one day working in their studios. Andrew was 27 years old and grew up in an upper middle class New Jersey suburb. He dressed fashionably and had long, floppy hair; Mark teasingly called him “Justin Bieber.” After graduating at the top of his high school class and then from an elite private university, he worked at a hedge fund for several years. Feeling stifled and wanting to explore alternative career options, he applied to the internship at Pinnacle on a whim, without previously considering a job in entertainment. On the other hand, Desmond, who was 28-years-old, had been working in entertainment for years: acting in the national touring company of a major musical, doing development research for a cable news show, managing marketing efforts for theaters, among other jobs. Desmond also had a master’s degree from an Ivy League university and created and starred in his own award winning web series. At 33 years old, Sasha came to Pinnacle interested in a career change. Prior to joining Pinnacle as a development and casting intern, she was a fashion merchandiser, working in the corporate offices of a major clothing brand. While
it was common for interns to come to the office wearing jeans and t-shirts, Sasha always looked stylish yet professional in blouses and slacks, her hair cropped fashionably short. She was opinionated and smart, eager to make a career in television.

**Interns as Creative Labor**

Despite being unpaid, interns in various departments played important roles in developing television shows at Pinnacle. In this section I describe how interns were an important source of creative labor, contributing significantly to the substantive content of the company’s shows. I then discuss why the company valued interns’ contributions and trusted their creative judgments, given their relative lack of experience.

*Free Creative Labor*

Interns sometimes performed menial, low-level work. For example, post-production interns helped organize video, transcribing dialogue and “logging” raw footage (watching and labeling it by content). Transcribing in particular was time consuming, tedious, and did not require critical or creative thinking. Likewise, interns in the production department worked as production assistants on set, helping to transport and set up lights, cameras, and other equipment. This work involved significant manual labor, loading heavy containers into and out of moving vans. It also included running errands and managing “craft services,” ordering and setting up food and refreshments for cast and crew. On several of the shoots I observed, one of the production interns sat alone without complaint for hours in the front seat of a moving van to guard expensive equipment inside.

However, interns also did creative and expressive work that contributed significantly to the content of the shows the company pitched. For example, post-production interns with knowledge of editing software from academic coursework
created pitch tapes and edited online videos the company produced with minimal supervision. Interns also occasionally performed as actors on camera in pitch tapes. The company filmed a sizzle reel for a hidden camera prank show, for which I played one of the “victims.” In the staged scene, I pretended I was a furniture store customer trying out beds and was startled by a prankster suddenly appearing in bed beside me. They filmed several takes of my screaming and acting startled. When making a pitch tape for a show about people who want to leave their harried coastal lives for a more relaxed lifestyle in the Plains States, a development intern was interviewed at length on camera, for which she improvised and invented a story about her desires to move and details about her family life.

In the development department, interns helped come up with storylines and ideas for episodes of prospective series, wrote “soundbytes” or lines for cast to say on camera during interviews, and wrote drafts of paper pitch materials. However, their primary task was to generate ideas for new television shows. Either the director of development or development associates would occasionally brief the interns on what topics (e.g. cars) or sub-genres (e.g. makeover series) networks were looking to buy. If the company had impending meetings with particular network development executives, interns would be asked to generate ideas that would fit those particular networks’ brands and mandates. However, generating ideas was a continuous job for the development interns. Many reported that they were given little guidance and supervision, and spent entire days sitting in front of a computer entering whatever ideas they could come up with into the company’s “development slate,” an active list of ideas for shows and shows they were actively developing and pitching to networks.

Having interns generate as many ideas for new shows as possible was an integral part of Pinnacle’s development strategy. Ideas for new shows are the lifeblood
of any production company, especially new ones looking to make a mark in the industry. After production companies gain a significant degree of success, television networks seek them out as production partners. Networks will approach them to either further develop or simply produce specific show ideas that network development teams generate in house. However, prior to gaining status as a network go-to, production companies must generate their own ideas and develop a reputation as creative and competent. The company sought to create as many new show ideas as possible in order to demonstrate to networks that they are creative and active. This is why development workers asked interns to brainstorm ideas for specific networks prior to taking meetings with those networks. Furthermore, generating as many ideas as possible is a useful development strategy because networks reject the vast majority of pitches they hear. Having a full slate of ideas on hand means that there is a constant stream of new “backup” ideas the company can draw on when other ideas are rejected.

In casting, interns were assigned responsibilities that assistant and associate-level casting workers might perform in other companies. Occasionally, casting interns retrieved papers from the printer located in the cubicle area or ran personal errands for Mark, the casting director. However, Mark was usually apologetic about asking interns to perform such menial tasks. Casting procedures typically followed four steps, and interns were integral to each of these. First, Mark and the interns would conduct various forms of outreach, locating appropriate candidates and sending out casting notices. Second, after receiving submissions, casting interns would individually call applicants and evaluate them over the telephone, determining who should pass to the next stage. Third, those who made it past the phone call were interviewed and video recorded over Skype. Mark was primarily responsible for conducting Skype interviews at Pinnacle during my time in the field. Interns conducted Skype interviews only in rare
circumstances, usually due to a last minute scheduling conflict that took Mark out of the room. Finally, interns would edit down recordings of successful Skype interviews to approximately thirty-second clips containing highlights of the conversation for further evaluation.

The important creative role that interns played in the company was reflected in the seriousness with which staff took their ideas and input. For instance, Cody, a casting intern, pitched an idea to make a show about “party princesses,” actors who dressed as fairytale characters to entertain at children’s parties. This was one of the few ideas for which the company invested in creating a sizzle reel and a full set of pitch materials to present to networks. Likewise, Kayla, a college student intern who worked in casting before I arrived and returned to take an internship in production halfway through my time in the field, also played a key role in creating a show starring a nurse practitioner who managed a medical clinic in the South. Pinnacle pitched the show and, although ultimately it was not sold, one network was seriously interested and funded Pinnacle to produce a pilot. The pilot, however, was not aired. Kayla was surprised by how much responsibility she was given and how much influence she had:

Kayla: I like the amount of independence they give us. I am sometimes shocked at the amount of things they have trusted me to do. I’m like, I’m only an intern. But I can do it. And I love that I can see—the direct result of my working I found this girl Lauren. She sounded crazy and interesting. I wanted to try and talk to her. We set up a Skype and we talked to her. He [Mark] passed her on and now it is [the pilot].

After I left the field I learned from interviewing Mark that casting interns became even more integral to his work. They began conducting Skype interviews independently as part of their regular duties because Mark’s time was diverted to another project that required his full attention.
So to think I found her and I called her and I knew that I liked her and she could be something and that is a direct result of something an intern did. (Interview)

Casting interns shaped Mark’s creative decisions. According to Kayla, Mark was initially skeptical about Lauren because he had originally conceptualized the show to be about a male doctor. However, Kayla was able to convince Mark that Lauren had great potential and the show ultimately shifted its focus:

Kayla: Mark wanted a young male doctor, kind of like a hot doctor living in the South that all the ladies want to see, like a cute doctor. So, obviously she [Lauren] is a female. We advertised for male doctors. And she called and was like, “I know I don’t fit, but I didn’t graduate from high school and I’m a doctor and I see crazy patients.” And she said, “I didn’t graduate high school.” And I was like, “This girl is crazy.” So I was like, “Mark, call her.” And he was like, “No, she’s a girl.” I was like, “Mark, I really like her.” And he was like, “Fine, call her, interview her.” So, I called her and interviewed her, and she was charming and funny and the stories she was telling me about the clinic were funny and she had this crazy story about how she didn’t graduate high school and had a baby but became a nurse practitioner, and now has a big family business. And I was like, “Mark, honestly, I know you wanted a hot guy, but this is a hot mom girl. She is pretty. She has a crazy clinic in the South. It is everything you wanted, except it is a girl.” So, he Skyped her, and that was that. (Interview)

When I asked Mark how he makes casting decisions, he told me that he relies on his “gut” and his own personal tastes. However, he also placed great importance on the influence of his department:

Mark: I’m paid, basically, for my taste. I’m paid for my opinion. So, I either like you or I don’t, but I rely a lot on my team to assist me. For example, when Roy [a casting
intern] was like, “Oh, you should really give her another chance,” or you would be like, “I really like this person.” Mike [a prospective cast member] is a perfect example. You guys forced—you guys—I don’t know which one it was, but you all were the ones who convinced me to give him [Mike] another shot.... I’m not by any means the exclusive decision-maker. I rely heavily—and that’s why it’s so important for me to have great interns because I don’t have a full-time assistant. (Interview)

Mark relied on casting interns to do the same work that would otherwise go to a paid employee. Although their choices and input ultimately needed Mark’s approval before receiving further consideration and development, casting interns’ opinions and tastes clearly played an integral role in the department and company’s creative process.

*Why Pinnacle Values Interns’ Creative Contributions*

Given interns’ relative lack of experience, why would Pinnacle place trust in their judgments and value in their creative contributions? First, although interns had significant autonomy while working, immediate supervisors evaluated and approved the products of interns’ creative labor before those products were shared more widely. Although casting interns made casting decisions, their choices were not shared with Ethan, the owner of the company, and the development department until Mark approved them. The development interns shared their ideas with development associates, and those ideas only filtered up to the development director or Ethan if the development associates thought they had merit.

Employees grew to trust interns over time as they provided training and guidance and evaluated interns’ creative work. Within the casting department, new interns typically spent about an hour on their first day watching pitch tapes the company had previously created. Interns also regularly watched Mark conduct casting interviews over Skype and learned how he asked questions and made decisions. From watching Mark
interview prospective cast, interns learned that the company placed great importance on finding “big characters” and how exactly to identify one.

Andrew: The first time I interviewed someone I asked Mark, “What do you want me to ask them? What am I supposed to be gauging?” And all he said was, “Personality, personality, personality.” Um, everyone has their own personality, but working for Mark and sending him ones that he didn’t like, I realized that it was more about people kind of going out—people were excited. People were outgoing. I don’t think he liked even, monotonous types of people. I think he liked people that had a lot of different levels to them. (Interview)

Mark also monitored how new interns conducted interviews to ensure they were interacting with prospective cast in an appropriate manner and making appropriate casting decisions. One of the first projects I worked on was a show focusing on the fireworks industry. After I spoke with one prospective candidate over the phone, Mark, without turning away from his computer, casually asked me how the conversation went. While Mark had been sitting beside me working quietly on his computer, he evidently was also eavesdropping on my interview. I felt unsure about what decision to make:

I respond, feeling uncertain, “He was ok.” Mark says casually, “He seemed to know about illegal stuff.” I tell Mark that he investigates explosions, and travels around the world seeing why malfunctions happen. Mark stops what he is doing and slightly perks up, “Oh you see, I think that sounds interesting.” I respond, feeling encouraged, “Me too… I guess I should have asked more about that stuff.” I show Mark his website and as soon as it opens, there is an image of him holding a huge fireworks shell. “Oh!” Mark immediately exclaims. I tell him that he has a “tricked out fire truck” filled with fireworks that he takes to local events. Mark tells me immediately that we should Skype with him. (Fieldnotes)
In talking through decisions like this with Mark early in my internship, I learned what kinds of stories and situations the company valued. This particular case was “good” because Pinnacle valued shows featuring people who did extremely unusual activities. Mark was aware of how interns progressed in making casting decisions and grew to trust them over time, as he explained in a formal interview:

Mark: After a while, I wasn’t listening to your conversations. You weren’t even in the same room as me, but I trust—I knew you. You and I knew each other, so you knew what you were—I just—I trusted what you were looking for.

However, even prior to training and getting to know them over time, workers had great confidence in many of the interns. As mentioned above, some came to the company with significant professional experience, albeit typically not in reality TV. Nick, a 33-year-old development intern, was a standup comedian. Development associates drew on his experience, asking him to write jokes and invent comedic situations they could use in pitch tapes. When 28-year-old Desmond first arrived, he had already worked in paid positions as a theatrical casting assistant and a development researcher for a cable news show. He had a master’s degree for an Ivy League university. The week before Desmond started working Mark told me with a smirk that I was going to have “competition,” citing Desmond’s credentials. He and Greg, a development associate, both wanted Desmond to work with them exclusively but ultimately agreed to split his time.

On the other hand, experience was not necessary to do a good job in development and casting. Although working a camera for the production team and using editing software in post-production required interns to have significant technical knowledge and skill, these were not necessary for evaluating cast or generating development ideas. Mark believed that if interns “got” reality TV, meaning if they were
appreciative viewers or fans of the genre, they had sufficient knowledge to do basic casting and development work.

Mark: Anybody who watches reality TV is a casting director because everyone has an opinion about—everybody has an opinion on who they like and who they don’t like on a reality show, and that’s pretty much what we do. What I teach you is the administrative part of it all: how to find, how to do this, how to Skype, how to do this. Everybody has a fucking opinion. Your mother can be a casting director if she has an opinion on who she likes on *America’s Next Top Model.* (Interview)

Professional experience also was not necessary for development and casting interns because their creative contributions were typically the product of their life experiences outside of the entertainment industry. Just as Frennette (2013) reports was the case in the music recording industry, younger interns at Pinnacle were valued for their knowledge of current fashion and trends.

Mark: We’re working in a very trendy space and I’m old (41 years old). I’m the oldest person I work with. I’m the oldest person in that office and I work with 19-year-olds. I work with people that are half my age. A lot of these people will take my job eventually, and if I was freelancing, they would get the job over me just simply based on the fact that they’re more current than I am. So, it’s important for me to keep people in my space that are current. (Interview)

But even older interns were valuable due to their novel life experiences. For example, the company worked on a show about families that practice home schooling after one development intern who was home schooled pitched the idea.

Interns drew on their everyday lives as inspiration for ideas: what they see walking through their particular neighborhoods, stories circulating within their online social networks, and experiences from their pasts.

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Dispelling the Moral Taint of Exploitation

Given how heavily Pinnacle relies on unpaid interns as creative labor, employees who supervise interns are vulnerable to the charge of exploitation. How do they dispel this moral taint? In his analysis of intern job ads posted by reality TV production companies, Mirrlees (2015) found that companies recruit unpaid interns by offering them hope for a career-building experience. Ads framed internships as stepping-stones to paid employment through skills acquisition (e.g. “hands on experience,” “learn about TV and film development first hand”) and exposure to or mentorship by industry professionals (e.g. “pick the brains of the leadership team,” “work directly with Tina Eisner, the casting Manager”). Just as ads use these logics to attract intern candidates, one important way workers in supervisory roles dispel the moral taint of exploiting unpaid interns is by carving out a role for themselves as mentors providing interns with valuable professional experience and drawing boundaries between themselves and others who take a less active role with interns. They do a form of what Zelizer (2012) calls relational work, “establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations,” and drawing boundaries between sets of relationships based on appropriate and inappropriate economic behavior.

Jeremy, Pinnacle’s post-production coordinator, was troubled about the morality of Pinnacle’s internship program, particularly because interns did work that, according to him, would typically be paid. This moral taint made supervising unpaid interns uncomfortable at times: “It feels weird sometimes, when you are asking interns to do a lot of things that you would normally just pay someone for. It feels a little like exploitation.” However, he believes that unpaid internships are worthwhile and not
exploitative when they provide interns with new skills and experience, which he attempts to provide for his post-production interns.

Jeremy: One person can only do so much, so we lean on our interns to do a lot of things. But my interns in post—they’re getting—they’re basically doing a lot of assistant editor work. And my hope at least is at the end of three months, they can go out with this experience and get assistant editor work.

According to Jeremy, in order for interns to gain valuable experience, they should have a mentor who can teach and guide them, not simply hand them assignments. He felt uneasy about interns who did not receive any mentorship, such as the graphic design interns. The company did not have a graphics department and none of the employees were graphic design specialists.

Jeremy: There is a difference between getting experience and doing someone’s job… [Graphics interns] aren’t getting the hands on approach that someone on post or casting would… They aren’t getting the guidance. They’re just like, here, can you do this? And they’re like, yeah, I can do this, and he does it. (Interview)

In order to help dispel uneasy feelings of exploitation, Jeremy did relational work by carving a role out for himself as a mentor to his interns and distinguishing the mentorship his interns received as better than what graphics interns received.

Similarly, for Mark, the Casting Director, providing interns with good mentorship and valuable experience dispelled the taint of relying on unpaid labor. Mark clearly benefitted from having interns. As discussed in the previous section, casting interns discovered prospective talent and generated new television show ideas that Mark brought to Ethan’s attention, that the company subsequently developed, and that garnered attention from network buyers. Having productive interns reflected well on Mark’s leadership ability and allowed him to demonstrate the importance of casting for
the company’s operation. When I asked him whether he thought the internship program at Pinnacle was ethical, he acknowledged that there was something dubious about the arrangement, responding earnestly, “I guess I feel like people were being taken advantage of.” However, he did not feel bad about his relationship with unpaid interns because of the guidance he provided:

Mark: I think it is ok to an extent. I think it is ok for me. I think I did a very decent job mentoring and helping, but I don’t think its ok for every—others, you know, sit back and don’t really give two shits about those who are working for them. (Interview)

Through Mark’s efforts, casting interns certainly did benefit from their time at the company, particularly by gaining professional knowledge, hands-on experience, and employment through expanded professional networks. Casting interns were not performing menial tasks, but rather learned the intricacies of casting and development. When Mark felt they were no longer benefiting from the internship, he encouraged them to leave and made it his responsibility to help them find jobs.

I follow Mark to the cubicles. He is telling [development associates] Reid and Clay that he has been sending interns job notices and that Cody has interviews at [two production companies]. He tells them Kayla also has an interview and adds, “We’re like the only production company that isn’t hiring. I have to do something for these kids.” Reid nods casually, agreeing. Clay is silent… Mark and I return to the casting room, and I ask, “So, Kayla is applying as well?” Mark says yes and tells me he also sent job notices to Sally and Frank… He says that he would get me a job, but that he figured I couldn’t take one yet. (Fieldnotes)

Mark told his interns that if the company ever picked up any shows, he would hire them to work as casting assistants and associates, but throughout my time in the field Pinnacle did not sell any shows. Instead, Mark served as a reference for them and
voluntarily gave interns inside leads on job openings through his professional networks. Kayla, Tiffany, Cody, Desmond, and Sasha all got paid freelance work at other production companies through Mark’s contacts. During the relatively short period of time I spent at the company, Sasha was hired as a development intern, then became a casting intern, left the company and worked freelance in casting for a few other production companies, before being hired back at Pinnacle as a development associate on Mark’s recommendation.

However, the exchange of unpaid labor for professional experience was not always even, but rather tilted in the company’s favor. For example, Kayla ended up interning twice at Pinnacle. The first time she worked primarily with Mark. She returned half a year later to work in another department, interested in gaining production (camera, sound) experience. But after Mark requested her services she was drawn into dividing her time between production and casting, despite having already learned the skills that Mark could teach her the first time around. Although Mark later tipped Kayla off to paid freelance opportunities at other production companies, he forwarded this information to other casting interns as well who had put in less time.

Still, Mark did enough as a mentor to prove to himself that his use of unpaid interns was ethically sound. The mentorship efforts that Mark made allowed him to frame his relationship with his interns as “respectful” rather than exploitative.

Mark: They’re working for me, so I’m gonna give back… I respect people. And they’re working for me. I had no staff. Literally eight people were working to get the job done and they were all doing it for the experience so I wanted to give them a good experience. (Interview)

Intern Supervisor as Caring Friend

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In her ethnography of VIP nightclubs, Mears (2015) finds that club promoters do relational work, establishing relationships with young, attractive women and framing those relationships as friendships in order to compel those women to attend clubs and perform unpaid aesthetic labor, helping the clubs attract wealthy patrons by appearing beautiful—many are working fashion models—and enhancing the venue’s atmosphere. She argues that the young women happily consent to this exploitation because they see their relationship with promoters as a friendship. Rather than focusing on the meaning of friendship to the people providing free labor, below I delve deeper into the case of Mark and his casting interns to argue that establishing friendly relationships with unpaid workers can also help supervisors feel good about themselves in their exploitative roles.

Mark made a conscious effort to build a friendly creative community with his interns. The casting team bonded and became close through their common experiences and the perception that they shared similar aesthetic tastes. In light of the friendships he formed with his interns, Mark’s mentorship role did not only morally cleanse him from the taint of exploitation, but also made him feel like a good person, someone who was truly kind and giving.

Mark and His “Department”

Mark was a lanky 41-year-old man. He lived alone in a small studio apartment, which he owned, on a gentrified street in the East Village. He loved to travel around the world and spent most weekends in the summer at the beach, things he could do being single and without children. Family was important to Mark. He was close with his niece and nephew, his brother’s children, who he saw regularly. Mark was gay and unabashedly engaged in cultural practices that signified his sexual identity, for instance, addressing others—including Andrew, a straight, male casting intern—sassily as “gurl.” He put effort into his appearance, regularly taking spin, boxing, and yoga classes to stay
trim. There were specks of grey in his neatly trimmed crew cut, as well as the stubbly beard he grew intermittently during my time at the company. He dressed stylishly and youthfully for work in crisp collared shirts and dark washed jeans. Mark was friendly and outgoing, the type of person who could hold a conversation with anyone at any time. He was also not timid when sharing his feelings and opinions. At work and in life, Mark was expressive. When he was serious, he would furrow his brow with a look of great concern. When he was amused, he would laugh heartily.

When Mark first came to Pinnacle he wanted to hire a full-time casting assistant as a member of his team. After all, he had an assistant working under him the last time he was employed full-time for a production company. Moreover, the director of development at Pinnacle had multiple development associates working for him. In production, the director of photography also had a permanent assistant. However, when Ethan told Mark that another assistant was not within budget, Mark made his interns into the assistants he needed and desired.

Mark: I was in a position where I was—here’s the deal. I wasn’t given a staff. So, I had to work with what I had. So, I was given youth who were smart and creative and excited, depending on who they were, so I took advantage of it because I didn’t have any paid staff. (Interview)

As previously described, Mark—like employees in other departments—relied heavily on his interns to do necessary creative work. He referred to them as his "department" or his "team" in casual conversations and during staff meetings.

The casting department was located in a small, strangely shaped, windowless room. It completely lacked natural light. The ceiling, which was about ten feet tall, was finished with off-white, square Styrofoam tiles and florescent tube lighting. Had it been a regular rectangle, the room itself would have been about eighteen feet long by fifteen
feet wide. But a curved wall bulged into the room, joining the midsection of two other walls that would have otherwise met to complete an ordinary rectangle. This curved wall eliminated almost a quarter of the room’s usable space and was painted bright mustard yellow. The other walls were white. The room would have been large for one person, but there were two or three interns sharing the space with Mark most days.

The room was furnished modestly. Just upon entering, a large cabinet with plain black doors, perhaps from IKEA or Target, held a few cardboard boxes of old casting materials, some carelessly strewn papers, and a snack shelf that Mark occasionally stocked with candy, cookies, Pop Chips, and Pirates Booty brand popped corn snacks. Three desks lined the walls, only a couple feet apart from one another, one for Mark and two for interns. Each had modern, black, adjustable, swiveling office chairs on wheels. One of the intern desks was in fact a folding table with metal legs and a false wood top, about five feet long but only a bit more than a foot wide. The other two desks were identical, new and functional if not stylish or elegant, with overhead cabinets and large work surfaces, also made of some type of synthetic wood. Mark sat at the desk adjacent to the yellow, curved wall, while an intern would occupy the desk on the opposite wall. On top of each of the three desks were black combination telephone-answering machines with long, tangled cords, up to date iMac desktop computers, color-coded file folders, post-it notes with scribbled messages, and silver mesh pencil cups holding a fistful of pencils, pens, and markers in various colors. Occasionally serving as additional tabletops and occasionally as seats, there were three tall wooden barstools staggered along the curved yellow wall. When a third intern was working that day, he or she would either share a desk with one of the other interns or use one of the barstools as a makeshift desk while working on a laptop.

*Fostering Friendship*
Mark and the interns became intimate colleagues, bound by spending hours together in close quarters, their shared work experiences, and the feeling after expressing their opinions when developing TV shows that they had common cultural tastes. However, this feeling of closeness within the casting team was not coincidental; Mark did relational work by actively cultivating it. Whether or not he could get long with interns was a major factor in Mark’s hiring decisions: “It’s important for me to like the person, just like personally like them, because I share a physical space with them all day long.” Moreover, he consciously fostered a relaxed and open social setting:

Mark: There’ve been times where we were laughing on the floor in the middle of a Skype in the group, you know? But I’m also very—I create an environment where people can do that. I create an environment where you can lean over my shoulder if you want to, which you have. Do you know what I mean? I don’t create an environment where it’s like sterile, and you have to—you’re the assistant; you have to stay over there. That’s not the space I’ve made. (Interview)

Workdays at Pinnacle were peppered with spontaneous conversation. Doors were typically kept open, and workers freely popped into each other’s rooms, whether to take a break and socialize—telling jokes, showing each other amusing online videos, discussing weekend plans—or to talk about work—thinking through ideas, relaying information, planning a meeting, venting about a project gone bad. The casting office was an active social hub, with workers circulating in and out throughout the day. The casting interns were fully a part of this social scene. Mark and his interns shared personal stories about their families, their love lives, their career goals and dreams with each other. There were often pressing projects to complete and deadlines to meet, requiring the casting team to work continuously. But in any case, the mood was relaxed
and friendly, as illustrated in the following fieldnotes, taken one Friday morning in mid-June:

Mark greets me cheerfully when he arrives this morning, carrying a large duffle bag, backpack, and a small, black plastic bag. A couple of thin bottle necks peek out from the top of the plastic bag. I ask him where he is going this weekend. Fire Island. He is looking forward to it. Mark drops his bags in the corner. Looking around the empty room, I ask him, "Where is everyone?" He replies casually, without concern, "Well, Andrew is on Andrew time." Andrew typically comes in late. Then, he says amusedly, putting on a thick Long Island accent, that Heidi [who is from Long Island and has an accent] is not coming in today because she is helping her dad fix his kitchen. Her dad is paying her for it. "It's so butch," he says chuckling, as he plops down at his computer. He changes the subject, telling me nonchalantly that Freddie has been going to Fire Island to sell bracelets. [Freddie was a jewelry designer we had previously cast in a show. Mark swooned over him constantly.] "Oh God," I mutter, teasingly. Mark laughs lightheartedly and clarifies, "Freddie is not going." We both turn to our desks and begin working…

Fifteen minutes later, Tina [a casting intern working that day in development] meanders into the room. She sees the black plastic bag of alcohol sitting on a stool by the wall and looks inside. She asks Mark where he is going. He tells her cheerfully, Fire Island. She comments casually that the alcohol he has is "very dry." "I know," he replies pleasantly. The woman at the store already warned him. Tina points cheerfully at Mark’s daily schedule, which as usual has been printed from Google Calendar and taped to the cabinet above his desk. In one corner of the calendar today, there is a Post-It Note, on which is drawn a large heart, shorthand for "love" and Tina’s signature, indicating that she—rather than another intern—had
printed it for him this morning. I do not understand this inside joke, but Mark plays along, saying with some excitement that he wants to take a picture of it. He tells Tina to point at the calendar. He takes a picture. He tells Tina to put her face by the calendar. She poses happily. He takes another picture. Mark then settles into his computer, checking email while continuing to chat with Tina, who shifts the conversation. She tells Mark excitedly that she just got a new job as a hostess at a hookah bar. His eyes still on the computer screen, he asks her which bar, and it turns out it is in his neighborhood. They casually discuss the merits of smoking hookah for a minute before Tina changes the subject again, exclaiming, “I have to add you on Instagram!” Mark adds her, as she laughs, “Don’t judge me on my scandalous life.” Mark looks through some of the pictures she has posted: a trip to Pittsburgh, winning a debate award, etc. Then, without explanation Mark leaves the room and Tina follows. Before leaving, Mark quips, smiling, “Why so quiet, Jun?” I mumble and shrug with a smile, ”I don't know.” He imitates me, in good humor, and walks out the door. He returns several minutes later, without Tina, and works at his computer.

Andrew does not arrive until almost 11 am. When he comes in he sees Mark’s duffle bag and asks me if I am going away for the weekend. I tell him I am not, but Mark is going to Fire Island. Mark tells us that he will be leaving at 3 today, and also will be going to K-Mart to run an errand, so we can feel free to leave early today as well. A while after Andrew has settled, Sasha breezes into the room with a smile and says hello to everyone. She and I make plans to see Superman and to work out together over the weekend. She tells me that she and Desmond are getting together tonight, and invites me, but I already have plans… Sasha leaves and Andrew, Mark, and I return to work.
Tina and Kristen [another joint casting and development intern] come into the room, and Mark asks Ty where she left off yesterday working on the Newspaper project. She says she had been building an outreach spreadsheet, looking up newspaper contact information online. Then the interns settle into chatting casually, as Mark works quietly… I notice that Kristen has a Fendi purse. It is large, black, shiny, and angular. It looks perfectly new. She is also wearing a fashionable, long, black blouse and very short, cut off jean shorts. Sasha walks purposefully into the room, holding a printed piece of paper. Seeing Kristen’s shorts she compliments Kristen sassily, “She’s givin’ me legs today!” Kristen strikes a pose and smiles. Sasha nudges through the interns to get to Mark, and takes a more serious tone to talk about the contents of her printed sheet. Tina and Kristen leave quietly. Sasha holds the sheet in front of Mark for him to read. Andrew and I are turned around in our desk chairs, forming a small circle with Mark, who is turned around in his chair, and Sasha. Sasha tells Mark that a company has pitched us ideas and she needs to figure out if they are any good. She wants to know what Mark thinks. One is about putting together a cheap wedding. She says the other is straight guys working in a gay resort. 

He looks up with a big smile and juts his fist in the air, as if in victory, “Yes! What do I have to do to get this show?” Andrew and I lightly chuckle in amusement at Mark’s enthusiasm. (Fieldnotes)

In addition to having friendly and informal conversations, Mark and the casting interns also forged bonds because they shared common work experiences. Again, Mark made an effort to foster such common experiences. Since interns only worked a few days a week, Mark made it a point to keep all interns informed by updating them towards the start of each workday about the status of projects, including progress other interns had made and any feedback from Ethan or the development department. Also, although
workers typically conducted casting interviews individually, Mark encouraged interns to observe as he conducted Skype interviews with prospective cast. On any given workday, the interns present would generally watch Mark conduct at least one Skype interview and discuss the outcome afterwards together.

For example, in a casting for a show about home schooling, Mark Skype interviewed a family of six, including parents and four pre-teenaged children. Desmond and I lounged in our desk chairs behind him and watched quietly. The family was cramped around a beaten, old, brown fabric lined, two cushioned loveseat. Mark asked the family when and why they started homeschooling, how they get along with one another, among other questions related to their daily lives and the homeschooling experience. One of the children, an 11-year-old girl, was particularly outspoken and at several points replied with sass to Mark’s questions. For instance, when he asked whether or not the kids socialize, the girl put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. With a furrowed brow she replied bluntly, “Excuse me, Mister! Does it look like I don’t socialize?” Upon hearing this Mark leapt out of his chair, mouth gaping open, smiling, and rapidly walked in circles in surprised amusement. After the Skype was over, he immediately turned around to me and Desmond and commented amusedly.

Mark: That girl is fucked up. How can those parents not like bitch slap her?
Desmond: [Laughingly] I think its funny… She kept saying, “Hello! What do you think!?”
Mark: She was like [he cocks his head to the side imitating her], “Mister!”
Desmond: I can see her after college. She could work at Vogue one day.
Mark: She’s a bitch though. She has no friends.
Desmond chuckles. Soon after, Mark gets up to leave the room, telling us he will be back in a moment. Just before he is out the door…
Mark: When I was like, “Do you guys socialize?” she was like—

Mark and Jun both simultaneously exclaim delightfully, “Excuse me, Mister!”

Desmond chuckles before Mark exits the room. (Fieldnotes)

Mark and interns would emotionally react and share those reactions with one another during Skype interviews and discuss their opinions afterwards. This ritual provided the team with opportunities to display collective enthusiasm for their favorite candidates. One of the shows that the casting department worked on for many months was a knock-off of *Jersey Shore*. Andrew recalls how workers reacted to castings for that show:

Andrew: Like with a lot of the Jersey Shore guys, I think [they] would say something—maybe it was like catty or maybe they would tell a joke or they would just say something that we would just all chuckle at. I don’t think it was related to the work. I just think we all thought the person was quirky. (Interview)

Although casting the show was work, Andrew sees Mark’s and the interns’ reactions as reflections of their personal tastes. Moreover, he uses workers’ common reactions towards the “Jersey Shore guys” as evidence that they share similar standards.

Workers’ perceptions that they held shared personal tastes led to feelings of comfort and solidarity within the department.

Kristen: I think everybody was really comfortable with Mark and he had a good sense of humor and people were just comfortable with each other and all the interns were like, were on the same, on the same playing field in that they agreed on what was funny and like what we wouldn’t be offended by. (Interview)

Similarly, according to Heidi:

Heidi: We were all just a bunch of misfits, all just fitting in, cause we were all just—cause we all just liked the same thing.
Jun: Which was?

Heidi: You know, we all enjoyed drama and reality TV and gossiping about people.

[Laughs]. (Interview)

The strong bonds interns forged with one another and with Mark were reflected in how their relationships persisted for years after their internships ended. Most of the interns who I worked with visited Mark in his office after leaving. We also stayed in touch over social media and via text messaging. On several occasions during my time in the field Mark Skyped with former interns:

We are working, and suddenly Mark is on Skype with a young woman, with long brown hair, lying in her bed, the camera close up pointed at her face, her chin resting in a couple of pillows. It is a former intern named Felicia. She says that she “literally just woke up.” Mark says, “I thought I would just say hi to you really quick cause you just popped on [to Skype].” They chat casually, with Mark asking if she has class and whether she has a job yet. She is “nannying” and talks about classes she was thinking about taking. (Fieldnotes)

Even after another intern named Tiffany moved to Los Angeles a year after her internship was over, Mark saw her when he visited the city. He sent a text message to Sally, Cody, Frank, and me—the other casting interns she spent the most time with at the office—reading “LA bitches” with an attached selfie of him and Tiffany smiling together on a palm tree lined street.

_The Benefits of Friendship_

In her study of young women doing free aesthetic labor in VIP nightclubs, Mears (2015) argues that the women happily consent to their own exploitation because they understand their relationships with club promoters as friendships. Similarly, the friendly relationships Mark cultivated helped make casting interns feel good about laboring for
free at Pinnacle, in part because it was fun to spend time with friends, but also because they felt like Mark genuinely cared for them and that they belonged to a community. Interns felt empowered to contribute their ideas because of the supportive and caring work atmosphere Mark provided.

Kayla: I don't do well in fast paced, cold environments. I get scared, and I get quiet and I don't do well. But when I walk in and it is just me and Mark and we are quiet and we can talk, that really allows me to do the best work that I can do. So, it is important that everyone is like that. No one doesn't know my name. All those things are very important to me. And I think I work better when I feel cared about. (Interview)

Furthermore, interns enjoyed being part of the community Mark had cultivated, making it difficult for some to leave.

Jun: Can you tell me about how you felt the last day in the office?

Heidi: I felt sad. I spent a long time in my life trying to find where I belonged, and I never belonged anywhere. And I only felt like I belonged two times in my life, when I first became a film major and went to post, and when I went to Pinnacle, were the only two times in my life when I felt like I belonged somewhere. So, it was hard leaving someplace where you felt like you belonged. (Interview)

However, Mark’s establishing friendly relationships with interns did not only help interns consent to their own exploitation. It also helped Mark feel good about himself despite his arguably exploitative supervisory role. As I explained previously, being a mentor allowed Mark to reason that although interns were unpaid, they received something in exchange for their work. The additional filter of friendship transformed the meaning of Mark’s mentorship role from a cold exchange of labor for experience into a warm act of benevolence and genuine care. Thus, mentorship and friendship paired
together served a one-two punch in expelling moral taint. While mentorship allowed Mark to morally cleanse himself from the taint of exploitation, friendship additionally made him feel good about his supervisory role.

Mark believed that the friendships he had with interns made him a particularly good mentor because his actions came from the heart. He made this clear one December evening while chatting with Sasha and me at the company holiday party. Ethan had treated all Pinnacle staff, including interns, to free finger foods and drinks at a bar and restaurant close to the office. The bar was “classy” with a clean, dark wood interior and patrons overwhelmingly dressed in business-wear, men in collared button down shirts. Sasha had been working as a development intern, but was interested in joining the casting team. With a drink in hand, Mark was loud, animated, and smiling cheerfully. Sasha listened nodding in rapt attention.

“You’ve seen my team. I’m like a mom. I will take care of you a hundred percent... I’m the nicest person. I will give you a hundred percent support. I will like put my heart out to you to make you happy.” He tells her that she will get “twenty to thirty times more experience” working in casting compared to development. “We are friends so I am not looking to take advantage of you at all. I want from Jun what I need, but I want him to walk away with what he needs…. I’m your friend. I want you to succeed. Whereas other departments, they are doing their gig and that’s that.”

(Fieldnotes)

Mark drew on his friendships with interns as evidence that he mentored with genuine benevolence. The fact that casting was a close-knit “team” demonstrated that he was truly committed to interns’ wellbeing.

Mark viewed benevolence as an attractive and rare personal quality. Mentoring interns thus validated Mark and helped him see himself positively as a good person.
Mark: I'm just a giving person and I care about people. I don't think it's a very common thing for people to really—I mean if you look at the others that worked in that office I don't think they really took their interns under their wing like I did... I think it's in my nature just to kind of help people. (Interview)

Mentorship was not something he had to do, but rather something he did out of the goodness of his heart.

Mark: Technically, if I really, really wanted to, I could just sit there and do nothing. All I am responsible to do there is manage them. I'm just very hands-on. That's just who I am, but it's also my nature. I take them on as children. (Interview)

Thus, while relying on the labor of unpaid interns, because of the friendly relationships he cultivated, Mark did not only see himself as morally clean, but also as an exceptionally caring person.

Conclusion

As home audiences, we typically associate reality TV with the use of ordinary people rather than professional actors as on screen performers, but we put less thought into who is doing the behind the scenes production work. At Pinnacle Productions, "ordinary people" rather than seasoned professionals did not only perform on camera. Interns with just as little experience in reality television production were also responsible for much of the company's backstage creative labor. Not all reality TV production companies use unpaid interns. Sunshine Productions did not have any interns. However, the case of Pinnacle Productions shows how interns can be central to the creative output of culture producing firms—including reality TV production companies—and why companies not only accept but also highly value interns' creative contributions despite their inexperience.
This chapter also shows how despite benefiting from the labor of unpaid interns, employees can feel morally clean and even good about their supervisory roles by defining their relationships with interns as a mentorship and friendship. Mark did relational work by actively fostering common experiences and friendly relations with his interns, forming a creative community, and erecting boundaries between himself and others who had more distant relationships with their interns. By defining his relationships with interns as one of a mentor providing valuable professional experience, and his motivation to be helpful rooted in genuine caring and friendship, Mark not only saw himself as morally clean but also felt proud and received validation from managing unpaid interns.
CHAPTER 5: PROSPECTIVE CAST AND REPUTATION WORK

Given the moral corruption some attribute to reality TV producers, why would cast members trust working with them enough to participate in the development process? The previous two chapters have focused on how workers maintain a positive sense of self despite engaging in morally questionable practices. This chapter turns to how people outside the production community understand workers as professionals, including their moral character. Specifically, I describe the reservations prospective cast had about Pinnacle Productions, and how workers dispelled negative impressions prospective cast held about them.

Sociologists have argued that having a good reputation helps cultural producers attract collaborators and clients, especially in the commercial culture industries. Some scholars have suggested that given the difficulty of predicting whether cultural products will be successful on the market, clients evaluate new products on the basis of producers’ previous track records, which provide evidence that they are capable of doing good work (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Delmestri, Montanari, and Usai 2005). Faulkner and Anderson (1987) find that Hollywood filmmakers—producers, directors, cinematographers—tend to work with others who have similar levels of success with respect to earnings, Oscar recognition, and number of previous films. Faulkner (1985, 2003) has also argued that being sponsored and mentored by a reputable professional is critical for neophytes attempting to break into Hollywood.

Previous studies have also discussed how reputation is established through cultural producers’ individual, strategic efforts at self-promotion and through the collective activities of other participants within an industry or art world (Becker 1982;
Jones 2002; Lang and Lang 1988). One important way producers establish a good reputation is by actively building their credentials, attempting to accumulate a record of critical and commercial success. Producers also signal competence by affiliating themselves with other reputable individuals and organizations. For example, Bielby and Bielby (1999) find that elite talent agencies play important roles in promoting television and film writers’ careers by “packaging” them with reputable directors, producers, and actors to collaborate on creative projects.

Scholars have paid less attention to how cultural producers manage their reputations through everyday interaction. One notable exception is Zafirau’s (2007) ethnographic study of Hollywood talent managers. Individuals and organizations in all areas of social life do impression management in efforts to ensure that others view them favorably (Goffman 1959). Zafirau argues that talent managers do a particular type of impression management called reputation work, “the intentional activities that participants perform in order to create the perception that they are legitimate, according to institutionalized expectations” (101). Success in the culture industries, whether commercial or artistic, is uncertain given the volatile meanings of cultural objects. In lieu of more concrete information about what levels of success can be achieved in the future, participants use information about individuals selling a cultural product to signal the sellers’ competence and expertise symbolically.

Zafirau argues that a talent manager must “act like a talent manager ‘ought to’ look in order to maintain his legitimate membership in Hollywood’s tightly-knit business networks” (100). Favorable impressions can help talent agents maintain their elite client base, broker deals with film and television studios, and gain employment in leading agencies, while failure to abide by shared norms of self presentation can be grounds for exclusion from such business networks. Specifically, he describes how talent managers
create physical and emotional work environments, give gifts to people they hope to impress, and enact styles of selfhood that conform to institutionalized expectations of what successful and legitimate Hollywood professionals should look like.

This chapter extends previous research on how culture-producing organizations signal their reputation to prospective collaborators. Particularly, like Zafirau, I also describe the everyday interactional and performative contexts through which producers manage their reputations. However, while previous studies describe how producers establish and maintain their reputations among industry insiders and elites, I focus instead on how organizations convince non-professionals that they are reputable and thus worthy creative partners.

In addition to participant observation at Pinnacle Productions and interviews with workers, this chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with 32 people who either applied or were scouted to potentially appear in one of the Pinnacle’s shows in development (see Table 2). I recruited participants via personal email or telephone after I had finished my internship at Pinnacle. I focused on recruiting respondents from shows that I was familiar with or worked on as an intern in some capacity so that I would be more familiar with their experiences and could tailor my questions. Although I did not randomly sample, I attempted to recruit participants from a variety of shows and who had experienced varying degrees of success in the casting process from being cut after one phone interview to filming a pilot.
I begin the chapter by discussing prominent concerns prospective cast members had about working with Pinnacle Productions. Given the general reputation the genre has for perpetuating stereotypes and featuring harmful media images, one would expect prospective cast to see reality TV workers as morally tainted and evaluate a production company’s reputation on the basis of moral character. I found that, indeed, prospective cast saw workers as somewhat morally suspect, but they also evaluated workers based on whether they believed workers could help them meet pragmatic goals. Specifically, (1) they were worried about whether Pinnacle workers were ethical image-makers or wanted to create media representations that might harm cast members or society. Also, (2) they were concerned about whether Pinnacle workers were legitimate professionals. They associated illegitimacy with dubious morals, seeing workers as potential con
artists. They also associated illegitimacy with incompetence, questioning whether workers actually had the expertise to make a commercially viable television program.

Next, I describe three characteristics of a production company that inform how prospective cast perceive workers’ legitimacy and moral character: the company’s credentials, workers’ affective style and manner of self-presentation, and how workers perform routine production procedures and work tasks. Prospective cast actively sought out Pinnacle’s credentials online and judged workers’ affective styles during casting interviews. Pinnacle workers, likewise, did reputation work by consciously crafting their online credentials and manners of self-presentation during casting interviews as strategies to convince prospective cast that they are legitimate and morally clean professionals. However, prospective cast also judged routine production procedures that workers took for granted. Specifically, they judged how competently workers performed their duties, and how much time, effort, and money the company invested in those tasks.

I conclude by showing two key ways in which prospective cast members’ status as industry outsiders shapes the work necessary to convince them that workers are legitimate and morally upright. First, since ordinary people are geographically dispersed, rather than physically located in media centers like Hollywood, production workers do much of their impression management through digital technologies used to communicate with prospective cast remotely. Second, prospective cast lack knowledge of industry shop floor culture, and so unlike industry insiders, they do not evaluate whether a company is reputable according to the entertainment industry’s institutionalized standards.

*Prospective Cast Members’ Concerns About Pinnacle Production’s Reputation*
Reality TV cast are not naïve amateurs, but rather actively judge producers and production companies according to their own moral compass and strategic self-interest. Prospective cast evaluated Pinnacle Production’s reputability based on moral character and professional competency. First, given reality TV’s negative reputation as a genre, respondents were concerned about workers as morally upright image-makers. Second, they were concerned about whether workers were legitimate professionals rather than morally questionable scam artists or hacks incapable of doing good professional work.

*Ethical image-maker*

Respondents recognized that not all reality shows are the same. Some were optimistic and interested in the possibility of appearing on television for the opportunity to bring underrepresented social groups media attention or to promote their business interests. Still, respondents were familiar with reality TV’s negative reputation and understood that many reality shows feature images that may be unflattering to individual cast members or perpetuate harmful stereotypes about the broader communities they represent. They were aware that Pinnacle might engage in dirty work, profiting off creating negative media representations.

For example, Nate (Age: 41, show premise: Geek culture) was excited about possibly appearing on a reality show that might combat negative stereotypes about geeks, people with an avid interest in games, media, or technology. But he was also concerned about Pinnacle’s particular intentions:

Nate: I wanted to make sure we weren’t exploited… escaping the stigma of a geek being a nerd and squeamish little guys that don’t, you know, aren’t cool or aren’t part of the cool crowd, which is actually exemplified in some of these TV shows… there is one contest show that is on, *King of the Nerds*, or something like that. I really don’t like the way geek culture is portrayed on that show. I think its—its demeaning. It
doesn’t represent us well. And that’s my main reaction to when I first heard about this [Pinnacle show], like what are they trying to do? How are they gonna—what’s their approach to filming us. Is it going to be, oh look at these nerds and what they do and it’s not as cool as normal folk do? I was not going to participate in anything like that. (Interview)

Respondents were concerned about whether Pinnacle was interested in producing trash TV. They defined trashy television as inauthentic, sensationalistic, conflict-driven, reliant on stereotypes, and thus ethically dubious. Elaine (26, doulas), a midwife, believes that reality TV has the potential to create positive images. However, she was hesitant about working with Pinnacle:

Elaine: Sometimes I feel like reality shows are completely garbage and you’re really not getting any dose of reality. And some of it can be really great when it’s more like documentary style. So, I was more interested in just finding out like what is the actual goal of this show.

Elaine had reason to be skeptical about Pinnacle’s character. Another production company had previously approached the midwifery community online and was not initially forthright about the type of show they wanted to create. According to Elaine, that production company ultimately prioritized sensationalism over reality.

Elaine: It was presented initially that they wanted to do a show about people having home births and specifically people who wanted to have like destination births like on a beach or in their backyard or something. It was presented as very just like, “We

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12 In Grindstaff’s (2002) study of television talk show production, talk show guests distinguished between “trashy” and “classy” television. One guest she interviewed was grateful to have been on a “classy” show rather than one “like Ricki Lake and all them trashy shows with all those people causing a bunch of heartache and cussin’ each other out.” One Oprah guest she interviewed was nervous about appearing on national television but trusted Oprah “not to do anything sleazy” (2008: 152).
just want to follow your clients and them be cool with us taping their birth," when in reality when our clients got through the initial interview, what they actually wanted to show was present people that were having their babies by themselves in the wild. So, they wanted to edit it without the care providers there... This is just further perpetuating the myth that like everybody is freaking nuts and doesn’t care at all, like they just want to have their babies in a mountain stream with nobody there, which is great TV like sure that is awesome. But that’s not what is being presented as real. (Interview)

Given her experience with this other production company, it was reasonable for her to be suspicious about Pinnacle. The other company did not only want to present her clients as “freaking nuts” in order to create “great TV” but also initially misrepresented their goals in order to rope people into participating.

While some respondents were worried about creating media images that might harm society or their social group, others were more concerned about how appearing on reality TV might damage their own wellbeing. Tyler (36, bowling leagues) worried that his reality TV persona might undermine his professional presentation of self at work.

Tyler: What sells is not the straight-laced, prim and proper personas in reality shows. I work in a very HR-driven, white-collared environment, where I don’t even like to tell people I bowl because of the stereotypes that come with that. Add to that whatever editing or ‘situations’ producers might create that now are woven into something that may distort me, or distort my image that I work hard to uphold in my professional life, and I would be worried. (Interview)

Tyler’s concern stems from his understanding of reality TV as dirty work, producers engaging in the morally dubious practice of creating “situations” that distort peoples’ images in order to create a marketable product.
Others respondents were concerned that appearing on a sensationalistic reality show might harm their businesses. Jack (59, car flipping), a high-end automotive restoration firm owner, thought he might use reality TV to promote his business, but was uninterested in appearing on a show that emphasized drama and conflict between his workers.

Jack: Stuff where we would have to present ourselves in a conflicting way, we just wouldn’t do it because it wouldn’t present us well to future clients. I think it would actually drive people—the kinda clients that we’re looking for would go elsewhere because they’d just say I’m not gonna trust my million dollar vehicle to that bunch of goofs. And those are the clients that we tend to go after, is the guys that have very deep pockets and wanna do the job right. (Interview)

Like other business owners, Jack was concerned about how he might look to future clients. While reality TV has the potential to be a powerful promotional tool, it can also detract potential clients if it creates a brand image that is unappealing to or does not match a company’s target market.

*Legitimate Professional*

Prospective cast were not only concerned about how ethically Pinnacle might represent them or social groups they care about. They were also concerned about whether or not Pinnacle workers were legitimate professionals. Some associated lack of legitimacy with moral corruption, questioning whether or not Pinnacle and its workers were using reality TV castings as a front for ulterior and possibly sinister motives. According to Bethany (26, Guidos), “I’m not trying to have some creeper stalk me... I’m not just trying to talk to any guy who can just come and kidnap me” (Interview). Mike (27, Guidos) was also initially unsure about the company’s legitimacy:

Jun: But what do you mean by legit?
Mike: Legit as in like, you know, you’re not like some—this is something to give as an example—you know, we’re a modeling agency and give us five hundred dollars and we’ll take your headshots and we’ll represent you and this and this and that. A scam like that. (Interview)

These misgivings are not specific to reality TV, but rather may have sprung from general concerns and stereotypes about the seedy underbelly of the entertainment industry, such as forced sexual favors on the casting couch and Hollywood swindlers looking to take advantage of starry eyed hopefuls.

Others were concerned about the company’s legitimacy because they wanted to work with a company that had influence and status within the professional entertainment industry. They wanted to be sure that Pinnacle was a real company offering them an opportunity that could actually come to fruition. According to Mike (27, Guidos), participating in the development process may have been “making a mountain out of a mole hill” since Pinnacle may have been a group of amateur producers with no industry experience: “You could have very well been college students who made up this Pinnacle Productions, and just, you know, just nothing was really going to come out of it or anything like that” (Interview). Freddie (31, Guidos) also reasoned that anyone could pretend to run a production company:

Freddie: You have to understand what their motives are for taping, if they’re a legit company, if they know what they’re doing, if they have the right connections, you know, it’s not just some bullshit company like you are meeting with these weirdos that could be posing for some shit... Anybody could say, oh, I’m a model. I’m an actor. You have to have some type of a backing on it, some legit understanding that there is some actual, real productions happening and not just some bullshit.
For him, a production company’s legitimacy is important in terms of making his investment in the project worthwhile:

Jun: What would be the danger of it being a bullshit company?
Freddie: Well, it’s a waste of time and, you know, you’d get nowhere with it... I work [at my job in fashion] for billion dollar companies. I’m not just working for like some small mom and pop shop. I work for major corporations. That’s the same thing. You’re going to be involved with something that matters, and not just something that is insignificant and a waste of time. (Interview)

Like Freddie, respondents were commonly concerned about wasting time and effort being involved with a company that was not professionally competent and lacked the organization or resources to be successful.

Credentials

One strategy producers use to convince prospective cast that they are reputable is showing off their credentials, their previous production credits and working relationships with other reputable members of the entertainment industry. Production companies and workers list their previous credits online. Pinnacle maintains a website similar to many companies’ in style and content. One page of their website has information about staff, with headshots and short biographical sketches that include previous production experience. The website also has a separate page featuring the company’s “work,” including some sizzle reels and the company’s demo reel, a composite video of their previous projects.

Beyond the company’s website, individual staff members maintain personal websites, including LinkedIn and IMDB profiles, that list their credits and the production companies or television networks where they have worked. Maintaining a professional
profile online is especially important in the creative industries where employment is primarily contractual and short term. Workers must consistently market themselves to prospective employers. Mark, the casting director, had his own website that included a professionally photographed headshot, biography with previous credits, information about services he offers, and links to his LinkedIn profile and other social media sites.

Production companies and workers actively curate their online professional identities. Credentials are not fixed, but rather workers manipulate them in order to make themselves appear as reputable as possible. Pinnacle Productions was a new production company without any television series on the air during my time in the field. The company had to work around this lack of experience when presenting their credentials. One way they did this was by borrowing credits from workers’ pasts. For instance, the company’s online demo reel featured shows that Ethan, the company’s founder, had executive produced with his former production company. Another way Pinnacle worked around its lack of experience was by providing vague information. Production companies frequently list television networks on their websites as “clients” or collaborators, an indication that they are recognized by other reputable businesses in the television industry. Pinnacle included a long list of television networks on their website. The company had no shows that were actually picked up by networks, so instead Pinnacle listed networks with which workers had done projects in the past and ones that had expressed interest in, but ultimately did not pick up, shows the company had pitched. However, the company never specified on the website how it actually worked with the networks.

In addition to simply listing their credentials online, workers actively shared their credentials with prospective cast, especially when they thought the company’s reputation might be in question. They did this verbally during casting interviews. The owner of the
company had created a popular reality show, which workers would usually name when describing the company to prospective cast. According to Kristen, a casting intern:

Kristen: We would just say, “We are a TV production company. We mostly focus on non-scripted shows. We are located in New York City.” And if they had questions we would answer the questions. Mostly they would ask, “Oh, what have you done?” We’d be like, “The owner of the company came up with [name of show].” And that would, like, get them. (Interview)

Workers also directed prospective cast to their websites and online profiles. In casting for Queens of Armenia, the working title for a prospective docu-series about Armenians living in America, Mark emailed the following casting notice to leaders of Armenian community organizations:

CASTING: Group of Armenian Friends

Are you and your friends totally Inseparable?

Are you all the center of the Armenian social scene?

Are you ready to show off your Armenian Pride?

A Major television production company is currently casting a group of Armenian friends for their own reality show. We are in search of men and women with over the top dynamic personalities who strongly identify with their Armenian roots.

If interested in learning more please email armeniancasting@gmail.com with info about you and your friends along with current photos and a contact telephone number.

One early recipient of the casting notice replied via email:

This is a nice way of collecting names, phone numbers and pictures.

Any proof that you are linked with anyone?

A gmail address is not enough.
Mark responded to this concerned individual, “Please check out Mark Simmons Casting for our credentials,” and included links to his Facebook and Twitter accounts. Subsequently, Mark included these social media links when emailing the notice to prospective cast.

The company’s credentials played a large part in convincing prospective cast that the company was reputable. Many of my respondents read about the company online to make sure it was legitimate. According to Abby (Age not available, Doulas), who the company contacted to potentially star in her own show as a doula:

Abby: I did research into your company and Mark. I found out that I liked his experience and his credentials. It seemed like he knew what he was doing in the industry... I remember looking at Mark’s LinkedIn profile. I know that he has experience. I don’t know if this is true, but it seemed like he had been with the company for a few years and had experience with past companies and he had done some shows that I was familiar with, or I at least had heard of... Just the fact that they had a good track record and it wasn’t something that was like a new start-up or brand new and they were just looking to... It actually seemed like you did have interest and did have the experience needed to make this go somewhere if it was something that either of us wanted to do. You weren’t just some lay people that were trying to pitch reality shows. (Interview)

Abby was convinced that the company was legitimate because of Mark’s credentials, years of experience working on well-known shows. Specifically, his credentials convinced her that he, and by extension the company, had the competence and level of experience necessary to make successful projects in the future.

Prospective cast were also concerned that if they appeared on reality TV, producers would create negative images of them as individuals, of social groups they
seek to champion, or of their businesses. They evaluated whether or not Pinnacle workers could be trusted to produce positive images through their credentials.

Abby: I also wanted to make sure that they were shows that people don’t have a negative connotation of—if I would have done the show, it wouldn’t have been about drama. There would have been nothing trashy about it. If I would have seen on a track record of a casting agent shows that really are known for that kind of stuff, I probably would’ve backed away because that’s not what I was interested in. That’s not who I want someone to turn me into. (Interview)

Since prospective cast members cannot evaluate a show in development, which does not yet exist, they instead rely on evaluating production company workers’ past credits as a proxy for what the new show might resemble, and particularly whether it would conform to reality TV’s negative reputation as trash TV.

However, prospective cast interpreted what they read about the company online in unpredictable ways. Sometimes these varied interpretations benefited the company. For instance, Julia (28, Cannabis business) was convinced that Pinnacle was legitimate due to the existence of the company’s IMDB profile. IMDB—the Internet Movie Database—is an online database that lists information about television and film companies, production workers, performers, movies, and television shows.

Julia: I did go to IMDB with you guy’s name and try to figure out what’s going on because I was [questioning] are they legal? Is this [show] going to happen? … I do remember seeing a name, a profile that was completely blank, but it did have a profile. I was like, that’s good, that’s perfect, that means something.... You know, you don’t just have an IMDB profile if you’re not real. (Interview)

When Julia searched IMDB, she found that the company’s profile was completely blank. Indeed, the company did not have any series in production. Others may have
questioned the company’s legitimacy or reputation due to this lack of listed credits. However, the mere existence of an IMDB profile assured Julia of the company’s legitimacy. On the other hand, after visiting the company’s website, Tyler (36, Bowling) felt lukewarm about the company:

   Tyler: …it wasn’t totally fly-by-night, but also didn’t see any affiliation with anything ‘bigger’ or more well known to suggest this would go anywhere. Kind of figured this might have been an attempt to pull something together and then sell the idea to a major network… have this cheesy image of that *Seinfeld* episode in my head.

   (Interview)

Tyler believes the company may be a start-up without any true credibility in the industry, referencing an episode of the sitcom *Seinfeld* in which the characters Jerry and George, lacking sufficient experience, bumble through pitching a television show to a TV network. While the company’s web presence may have convinced Tyler that it was not “totally fly-by-night” he specifically cited a lack of credentials as making him skeptical about the company’s legitimacy. “I don’t recall seeing any specific reference to actual shows currently on the air,” he told me.

   Furthermore, despite workers’ attempts to curate their own and the company’s websites and social media profiles, prospective cast draw on content from across the web to assess the company’s credentials. Like many of my other respondents, doing a web search on the company was the first thing Elaine (26, Doulas) did upon receiving an email from the company asking whether she would be interested in potentially being part of a reality show.

   Elaine: I like Googled the email address and the company name to make sure – like first of all to make sure there weren’t like headlines saying they were scam artists or something. But also just to see if it was a legitimate company, like a typical generic
Google search… the shows from different networks [the company did] were listed and then I think I went through maybe like the first three pages of Google with enough hits for those three pages to say like okay, this isn't something completely pulled out of thin air. (Interview)

Similarly, Alex (34, Guidos), an aspiring celebrity who applied to a couple of shows Pinnacle was casting, believes information about companies is easily found online, and a lack of information signifies that a company may be fraudulent and harmful.

Alex: The good thing I think about today is that everything is so easily accessible as far as information wise. You can really find out if somebody is BSing about something but it’s very hard to hide with being online because any real company or reputable project is going to have some kind of online footprint. (Interview)

Elaine and Alex assessed whether the company was legitimate and whether their projects were reputable through information found not only on websites that workers curate, but also through the larger footprint the company has left online. Thus, the company’s ability to control how prospective cast judge its reputability through its online presence was limited.

**Affect and Self-Presentation**

Zafirau (2007) argues that Hollywood talent agents build their reputations by conforming to certain affective styles and manners of self-presentation. Particularly, he reports they created a hip mood in the workplace. Workers kept a casual, attractive, and stylish dress code. Off color jokes and street language were common. His fieldsite had a golf putting set. At the same time, he discusses the importance of people seeming professional. Hollywood talent agents should be socially adept and charismatic. They are engaging speakers who have a knack for telling stories. They should appear
confident and hard working, rather than apprehensive and flustered. They should be calm and poised in the face of a potentially harried workplace and stressful situations.

Pinnacle workers also employed particular affective styles and manners of self-presentation when interacting with prospective cast. Casting interviews were a particularly important time to project the right image, since these conversations were the first personal contact prospective cast had with the company. Casting interns were responsible for conducting most screening interviews with prospective cast. Thus, one challenge the casting department faced was ensuring that inexperienced interns were competent and behaved professionally. Interns were certainly aware of this need.

Kristen, who was a college student at the time of her internship, discusses interviewing prospective cast over Skype:

Kristen: It was me and [another intern] doing the interviews. And we both looked like twelve-year-old girls. So, we were trying to like make it look like somewhat professional and not like we were bullshitting them. We would want it like somewhat professional, like we are a real production company. Like we aren’t just two little girls that are interviewing you for our own personal entertainment. (Interview)

In order to seem legitimate, workers typically avoided telling prospective cast about their status as interns. According to Felicia, another casting intern:

Felicia: I was being a character to them in the moment as much as they were being a character to me.

Jun: What do you mean by that, being a character to them?

Felicia: I was playing the casting girl. I wouldn’t tell them I was an intern. Mark wouldn’t let me. He’d be like, “Tell them you work in the casting office as one of my casting assistants.” (Interview)
Aside from withholding information about their status and identifying as “casting assistants,” in order to appear legitimate, interns also had to “play a character.” Casting workers emphasized the importance of seeming “professional” during interviews. This largely meant maintaining enough confidence and calm to be conversationally competent. Chloe, a casting intern, describes another casting intern who she and others considered a poor interviewer:

Chloe: He was so nervous about saying the right thing that he would have to write out what he was going to say, and when something strayed off of the script, he got really flustered. His personality off the phone was bigger than life, so loud and crazy. But when he got on the phone, he just got so nervous and really quiet and stumbled a lot. So, it was kind of interesting to see how he really struggled speaking to people, but not at all when they were in front of him. (Interview)

Chloe emphasizes that rather than being nervous and flustered, interns should be at ease so that they can facilitate a smooth, not awkward, conversation. Tiffany, also a casting intern, describes how co-workers made fun of another casting intern named Frank, who did not meet these standards:

Tiffany: Every single person in the room, the second he hung up, just like died laughing. It was like Clay, Reid, Greg, we were all just losing it. And we were like, “Frank, what”—like he just lost his train of thought, I guess. And so he said something so weird or asked like a really weird question, and he just sounded so dumb, and like not prepared. And it was just so—it didn’t sound professional. (Interview)

Tiffany and others shamed Frank for being unprepared. However, it is worth noting that typically workers barely took any time to prepare before each interview. Rather, the questions they asked were broad and generic. A typical question to start
with was, “Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your work?” Often questions focused on interpersonal relationships: “Who else works at the company? What are they like?” Or the nuts and bolts of the work or hobbies the show might profile: “Can you tell me about the bowling competitions? How often are they? What are they like?” or “What kinds of services do you guys offer at the shop?” Sometimes workers would rely on email submissions to generate questions, but usually they would just glance through the submission and rely on standard questions they ask all applicants for a particular project, and then generate follow-up questions on the spot according to how the interviewee responded. Competence thus had less to do with being studied and more to do with being emotionally prepared, having enough confidence to generate questions with comfort and ease.

In addition to being conversationally competent, in order to appear professional, casting workers also believed that they should maintain a certain level of decorum. Workers made an effort to be polite and respectful, thanking people for their time, asking them how they are doing, refraining from using curse words, and generally acting friendly and pleasant. Workers also hid their negative assessments from prospective cast during meetings and interviews. They understood that displaying feelings of disgust or boredom would be rude. Sasha, a development associate, describes meeting one aspiring cast member in person, who turned out to be boring.

Sasha: I was bored. I was ready to start yawning with her. Ethan started yawning in front of her… then he tried to use the excuse that he has kids – toddler and stuff. So I don’t know. He was like, “It’s not you. It’s—I was up all night with my kids.”

_Mortifying._ (Interview)

A similar incident occurred one day when Mark was interviewing a fireworks technician over Skype. It was customary for workers to turn their cameras off during Skype
interviews, so that the interviewee could not see them but they could still see the
interviewee. Although he was asking the fireworks technician questions with an upbeat
tone, Mark physically expressed his boredom, slumped in his chair, his eyes not on his
computer screen. Skype provided a Goffmanian (1959) backstage for Mark’s body
language, but it did not mask any audible emotional reactions. At one point Mark
opened his mouth wide and let out a yawn. After doing so, he quickly cowered, raising
his shoulders up and bearing his bottom teeth, as if to silently say, “Ooops.” Luckily for
Mark, the interviewee did not hear the yawn and continued talking without pause.

In addition to wanting to appear professional, the manner in which workers
carried out interviews also reflected their desires to evaluate whether or not prospective
cast would be entertaining reality TV characters. Grindstaff (2002) describes how talk
show producers do emotion work (Hochschild 2012), manipulating their own emotions
and emotional displays in order to elicit particular on-screen performances from talk
show guests. Likewise, Pinnacle casting workers managed their own emotions to see
whether or not they could get a good story or performance out of prospective cast.
Although what workers were looking for varied by show, they were often hoping to see
whether or not they could coax prospective cast into delivering over-the-top drama and
conflict or into telling juicy, sensational stories. However, they did so in a way that
minimized the impression that they were manipulative reality TV producers, conforming
to the genre’s negative reputation. As Mark told me instructively the first time I
conducted a Skype interview, “You want juice, but you don’t want to scare them.”

Workers believed that being friendly and personable would help ease prospective
cast into delivering entertaining performances. Although casting interns felt pressure to
maintain a certain level of decorum, they also learned that in order to see whether a
candidate truly had potential, they had to also have a friendly and causal demeanor.

According to Tina, a casting intern:

Tina: You don’t want to be stiff. I thought you had to be very professional. That’s how I first took it, and then Mark was like, “Girl, you gotta loosen up. Like, no.” So, it is talking to them like you are a person too. You are just like them. You know. You are trying to be a fun and energetic person trying to get a good story out of them. You don’t want to be like, [exaggeratedly proper, with mock British accent] “So, tell me about Howard. How is this?” Cause no one is going to connect with you.

(Interview)

Although workers believe it is important to act “professional” in order to secure their legitimacy, they also try to act friendly and personable, rather than too stiff or formal.

Chloe, another casting intern, re-iterates the point:

Chloe: I think you have to be overly friendly, cause you want them to be comfortable enough to speak to you and say stuff that—kind of pull stuff out of them that they wouldn’t necessarily say to people… If you are very nice to them and sweet to them and don’t sound very aggressive they’re more willing to kind of say, “Oh, the girl I work with, she’s a bitch, but I kind of like her, but she’s kind of nasty.” Then you start laughing and you’re like, “Oh, I know exactly what you mean.” You kind of relate to them and make them feel like it is a friend conversation and less of an interview.

(Interview)

Workers believe that a friendly demeanor makes them seem trustworthy rather than judgmental or manipulative, even though they were managing their emotions in the hopes that prospective cast would be comfortable enough to behave outrageously or divulge scandalous details in their lives. Workers attempted to make interviews have a
conversational flow, rather than aggressively dictating its course according to a predefined agenda.

Although some casting interns fell into their roles more readily than others, interns’ affective style during casting interviews was the result of backstage work. In order to ensure that workers conducted interviews in an appropriate manner, Mark would comment openly about interns’ performance. For example, one morning in the casting office Mark was chatting casually with me and Sally, another casting intern, as we were preparing to start the day:

The three of us are at our desks. Mark spins his chair around towards Sally and me. “Oh my God. So, yesterday was the first day Cody interviewed [a prospective cast member],” he tells us with a chuckle, lounging in his chair. “Aww, how did it go?” I ask, turning towards him. Mark is light hearted and smiling amusedly as he says it was “bad.” Sally has also turned around and is listening in amusement. She asks what Cody was like. Mark throws his hands up helplessly and says with a smile, “He was just Cody.” He imitates Cody on the phone. Leaning hunched in his chair, with half closed eyes, and shaping his hand into an imaginary receiver says lackadaisically, “Hi, this is Cody calling from Pinnacle Productions. Umm…”

(Fieldnotes)

Although Sally and I did not witness Cody’s actual interview, we learned from Mark’s interpretation of the event what affective style we should not imitate. We should be friendly and energetic, rather than lackadaisical. We should not hesitate—“Umm”—or be awkward and stilted, but rather should be able to ask questions with ease and project the confidence of a professional.

Beyond getting explicit feedback and listening to Mark’s comments, interns learned how to conduct interviews by watching more experienced interns and especially
by watching Mark. Due to the casting room’s tight space, everyone could hear each other speaking with prospective cast. Typically, when Mark conducted Skype interviews interns would stop what they were doing and observe, or at least listen in while continuing to work quietly. According to Tina, watching Mark was a key part of learning how to do interviews:

Tina: Watching Mark for the first like week and a half, learning it all from him. Honestly, I had no idea what to say to these people. And doing my first Skype I was so nervous. I was like, thank God Mark is with me when I was doing it. So, he was—you are like a little baby bird. You just watch him do it... It’s like watching the master at work. I think you can totally agree with that. (Interview)

Indeed, Mark conducted interviews with incredible ease, always speaking without any hint of hesitation. The interview flowed out of him without effort or thought. No matter what his mood, he always sounded friendly and upbeat, his voice lilting up inquisitively at the end of phrases. Interns who Mark believed could not competently interact with prospective cast in this manner were given fewer interviewing duties. For instance, Cody—who Mark playfully mocked—only conducted a few interviews over his entire internship experience, whereas most others (including me) conducted hundreds of interviews. Instead, Mark primarily assigned Cody editing and research tasks.

Casting workers’ efforts to behave like competent professionals during interviews was evidently effective in convincing some prospective cast of the company’s legitimacy. According to Bethany (26, Guidos), who responded to a casting notice and was interviewed over the phone and over Skype:

Bethany: I could just tell you weren’t some Joe Schmo off the street. You sounded professional, um, like you were from an actual company. But you were still having
fun with it without crossing any boundaries I guess or being—you know what I mean? Not unprofessional.

Jun: Do you just mean by the way we talked or was it something specific we said in terms of information we gave you or something?

Bethany: No, just the way you were interviewing me, I could tell that you were with an actual company rather than just some guy in his bedroom. You know? Like calling me and conducting an interview but had no clue what he was doing. Like, I could tell that you were experienced… I feel like you had everything very uniform, like the questions you were asking me you weren’t just pulling them out of nowhere. You were like [snaps fingers rapidly] ready to go. You knew exactly what you wanted from me. (Interview)

Bethany believed the company was legitimate because of interviewers’ front-stage performances, their “uniform” manners of speaking and ability to ask questions without hesitation or self-doubt.

Prospective cast were also comforted when their interviews flowed like friendly conversations. This signaled to them that workers were interested in getting to know their stories, perspectives, and expertise, rather than imposing a scripted, possibly unflattering, role onto them. Prior to her Skype interview, Elaine (26, Doulas) was nervous that the production company would be interested in making an unflattering reality show fitting the genre’s negative reputation. “Is it going to be my worst nightmare of exactly what I didn’t want a reality show to be like?” she wondered. However, her fears dissipated after speaking with casting workers, believing they had a genuine interest in learning more about her and her profession:

Elaine: I felt like it seemed like you guys were still in maybe like the developmental side of figuring out what it is you wanted to make a show about or like you were
looking to make a show about. So that seemed promising, like they don’t really know what we do so I have no problem talking to somebody about what it is that we do.

Jun: Can you say again why that was promising?

Elaine: Because to me that says you don’t already have a script that you want, like you’re looking for somebody to fill roles. Like you’re actually just looking, like what is it? This is interesting what these people do, like maybe we could have a show based around what it is that they do versus here’s this out of the box idea that we want to make a show about let’s find people that fit into these categories to do that.

Elaine came to this assessment because of how workers managed to make the conversation flow:

Elaine: You guys had a lot of questions about things and like were building off other things that we had been saying, which a huge part of like active listening is that, so if you’re repeating things back to us that we’re saying and then asking a question on top of that versus just saying like, ‘Okay, yes’ and then next question. (Interview)

On the other hand, prospective cast felt uneasy when workers did not seem to listen to their points of view, as indicated by their affect and emotional displays.

According to Natalie (36, Alien enthusiasts), who casting workers interviewed over phone and Skype:

Natalie: It was almost like a sort of snide, snarky—there was giggling when I would answer the questions and sort of—okay yeah, when I was talking about something pretty serious that they were asking me. I didn't feel that they were taking my answers seriously coming from a place of understanding, but then more of a oh my God, we're going to have so much fun casting these crazy people kind of scenario… even though the ratings are up and people are watching it, there's still making fun of people that are at the center of it and I just feel like that's awful. (Interview)
In Natalie’s eyes, workers’ emotional expressions, their laughs and snide remarks, reflected the genre’s negative reputation, making fun of people for “ratings.”

**Routine Production Procedures**

Pinnacle workers put conscious effort into presenting their credentials to prospective cast and managing their affective states during casting interviews to make themselves and the company seem as reputable as possible. Moreover, prospective cast evaluated whether or not Pinnacle was reputable according to the company’s credentials and workers’ affective styles of interaction. However, prospective cast also drew on their observations of workers’ routine, everyday production practices to construct their understandings of the company’s reputation. These were tasks that workers would undertake for pragmatic ends and that they viewed as routine, rather than as opportunities to impress prospective cast.

Prospective cast evaluated how knowledgeable, organized, and efficient producers were when performing everyday work tasks. Skillfully handling everyday work signaled that the company was legitimate, rather than a front for a con artist or a hack with no professional knowledge or experience. Tom (22, Magic pranks), a magician who was cast in a show for which Pinnacle shot a sizzle reel, believed the company handled administrative tasks associated with the shoot competently:

Tom: It seemed very put together and professional and uh, not like a scam or anything creepy like you wanted to film me and do something that’s gonna hurt my career… Everything seemed put together. The contract, them calling me, and everything, setting up the interview, and Clay [the development associate]… he seemed really professional with that.

Jun: What do you mean by professional?
Tom: You know, just followed up with the emails, responded right away, told me everything that was going to happen. (Interview)

Having paperwork in order, meetings scheduled in advance, and responding promptly to messages signaled to Tom that he was working with a legitimate company, rather than being scammed.

On the other hand, prospective cast became skeptical about the company’s legitimacy when they did not think workers were competent in performing their everyday work tasks. Casting workers at Pinnacle turned their cameras off during Skype interviews such that they could see the interviewee, but the interviewee could not see them. Most prospective cast figured this was a standard industry practice or accepted the authority of casting workers and did not think twice about it. According to Issac (22, College friends), who interviewed for a potential show about his college dance troupe, “I just kind of thought this is how they do it. I just kind of accepted it” (Interview). However, for others the practice signified a lack of professional competence.

Benjamin (26, Car flipping): I did find it very peculiar, which honestly completely turned me off, on the Skype interview I couldn’t see him and it was—He said it was because he was recording us, which is a complete lie because I am a very good IT guy and know that you can do that [record] with Skype [without turning your camera off]… It didn’t lend a lot of credibility. (Interview)

Prospective cast also assessed the company’s legitimacy by how much money, how much time, and how many resources it had available to invest into production. Tom (22, Magic pranks), the magician, was initially skeptical about whether or not Pinnacle was an experienced and established production company:
Tom: All the time people send me, oh audition for this, send your resume for this and this and this and this and, you know, half those shows are just fake little baby start up production companies that I would rather not get involved with.

However, after filming the sizzle reel, he was impressed with the high-end production equipment the company used on set, the time the company put into the sizzle reel, and money the company presumably invested.

Tom: They put in the money for the cameras and the whole production and it was a bigger thing than I actually thought it was going to be for a three minute video, filmed for two days for a three minute video. They probably put in thousands of dollars for all of you guys to work it. So, they must have really envisioned this working. But the first impression was that it was just going to be a nothing, that it would fall through.

But it wasn’t. Pinnacle was a good company. (Interview)

Indeed, the company did invest their time and energy into making the sizzle reel because they believed that the show had potential. And although the upfront cost of producing the sizzle reel was marginal—it was shot in New York City, so there were no travel costs. The equipment used belonged to the company. Although they hired one audio technician to work on set for the two day shoot, all other workers were salaried Pinnacle staff and unpaid interns—the company did have financial resources available to own professional equipment and hire staff.

Prospective cast were particularly concerned about how much time and effort workers invested into learning about them and their perspectives. Respondents believed that investing time and energy into learning about prospective cast meant that the company was serious enough about the success of the project to carefully screen candidates and also that the company was interested in giving voice to cast members’ perspectives. For some prospective cast, the technological medium companies used to
communicate with them signaled their investment. Abby (Age not available, Doulas) was interviewed by several production companies after an article was written about her practice in a popular magazine.

Abby: [One] company was just exclusively emailing, and I wasn’t too comfortable with that. I just thought that talking on the phone made it like my time was more valuable to them and I appreciated that. The other company that emailed me would just send me batches of questions to answer to see if they were interested in moving forward. And I get it, but at the same time, it took a lot of time to answer them and I didn’t necessarily want to move forward with a company that couldn’t just pick up the phone or Skype me or get to know me as a person.

For Abby, using Skype indicated that companies were invested and competent.

Abby: Any monkey can sit behind a computer and send emails. You actually have to see how someone acts in person and if they would be a good fit for TV before you take any further steps. So I think that that just proved to me that a company was genuinely in this for the right reasons, but really understood what they were looking for and had a specific type of person that they wanted to see on Skype. And they were looking for me to share my story, but also to make sure that I wasn’t something that couldn’t fit in with a TV show. (Interview)

According to Abby, communication technologies help production companies identify attractive television personalities, but also indicate whether or not the company is “in this for the right reasons.” Phone and especially Skype signify that workers are interested in having her share her own story, rather than imposing one on her.

Since there are no agreed upon standards through which prospective cast judge a company’s reputation, prospective cast had varying interpretations of Pinnacle’s production procedures. Furthermore, because prospective cast lack intimate knowledge
of reality television production processes, they sometimes misinterpreted the intentions behind producers’ routine actions. While Tom, the magician described above, walked away from Pinnacle with a positive impression of the company, Sebastian (49, Magic pranks), another magician who took part in the same sizzle reel, interpreted the production process more negatively. Tom was impressed by how much time the company invested into filming the sizzle reel, but Sebastian believed the company invested very little time in getting to know the cast:

Sebastian: I thought it was kind of thrown together a little too fast. You know what I’m trying to say? That kind of gave it away that they’re not really—they just want to have something. They’re not really interested in the real substance of the show. If something is put together in two weeks, you’re not gonna have something that’s really, really thought out. If you really want to invest into a show, learn about the guy you’re doing the show about first. Learn about my [magic] show, and what I can do in a [magic] show. You didn’t even bother going to my [magic] show. (Interview)

For Sebastian, the company’s lack of investment was linked to its neophyte status, their lack of reputation in the industry. He commented, “They are a new company. They don’t have anything off the ground.” He believed that the company was not truly interested in promoting and representing him and the other magicians, but rather was taking advantage of them by creating a sizzle reel to help establish its own reputation.

Sebastian: I thought it was nothing more than a showcase of what the company can do... They are shopping to networks, going to networks and they are saying, listen. This is what we can do. We are so and so production company... This is what we can do at Pinnacle... Tell me if there is anything you see. And let’s create a show and you come up with the guy or whatever the situation the script Mr. Network,
cause they’re gonna be fucking funding the show... We’re just showing you our editing techniques and our production techniques.

Sebastian’s conclusion reflects his lack of knowledge about reality television production. Pinnacle was serious about pitching Sebastian and the other magicians as characters. While production companies must convince networks that they have the technical skills, the primary purpose of creating a pitch tape is to showcase talent. According to one network executive:

The sizzle reel comes in many shapes and forms. Sometimes they are very fleshed out and you get it right away. When it is a very exciting character that you think is gonna connect with your audience, then that’s all you need. Sometimes you’ll see a Skype call, which is sort of the new way that people are doing casting now, literally just a face talking though a low-resolution piece of video. (Interview)

As this executive points out, the level of technical polish in pitch tapes is much less important in terms of selling a show than having an exciting character.

Just as Sebastian and Tom had different interpretations of how their sizzle reel was produced, prospective cast also interpreted the initial casting process differently. As previously discussed, one way prospective cast evaluated casting workers’ intentions was by judging the communication technologies they employed during interviews. For Abby the doula, Pinnacle’s use of Skype reflected the company’s willingness and desire to learn about her. However, Nate (41, Geek culture), who the company scouted for possibly starring in a show about geek culture, was skeptical about being interviewed over Skype. He found it strange that the company wanted to use Skype, given the fact that he lived in New York City and could easily have traveled to the company’s Manhattan office.
Nate: I would think for something like a reality show you would want to see them in person. See what they’re like in person, and not over a video. That to me was a little bit like, alright this doesn’t seem as legitimate as we thought it was, cause why wouldn’t he call us in? Unless they live in like Florida or another state, then I can understand the legitimacy of it… They’re in Manhattan. Why wouldn’t they want us to come in person? (Interview)

Nate questioned the company’s intentions due to workers’ use of Skype. Like Sebastian, due to his lack of intimate knowledge about reality TV production practices and shop floor culture, he misinterpreted the meaning of producers’ actions. Nate did not understand that Skype interviews have become a standard method for casting in reality television. Production companies record interviews on Skype, and send these recordings to networks when pitching new show ideas. Skype has become such a common tool that at Pinnacle, even when prospective cast were local the company still conducted casting interviews over Skype. As a matter of fact, Pinnacle workers have even conducted Skype interviews with prospective cast in the office on a few of the rare occasions when prospective cast physically visited. They sat in separate rooms and Skyped, despite being only feet away, so that workers could record the interviews for their pitch materials.

**Discussion**

In order to attract clients and collaborators, culture-producing organizations must establish and maintain good reputations. When developing new reality TV shows, production companies must convince ordinary people that they are reputable so that they will agree to work with them as on-screen performers. Prospective cast were concerned about Pinnacle’s legitimacy, whether the company was a fraud that might
scam them or a hack that lacked the professional means to create a viable television show. They were also concerned about whether Pinnacle workers were ethical imagemakers or whether workers wanted to create media representations that might harm cast members or society. I have described three characteristics of production companies that inform how prospective cast perceive their reputations: the company’s credentials, workers’ affective styles and manners of self-presentation, and how workers perform routine production procedures and tasks.

Prospective cast members’ status as industry outsiders shapes the work necessary to convince them that the company is reputable in two key ways. First, since ordinary people are geographically dispersed, rather than physically located in media centers like Hollywood, production workers do much of their reputation management through digital technologies used to communicate with prospective cast remotely. Second, prospective cast lack knowledge of industry shop floor culture, and so unlike industry insiders, they do not evaluate whether a company is reputable according to the entertainment industry’s institutionalized standards.

In describing the strategies that Hollywood talent agencies employ to build their reputations among industry insiders, Zafirau (2007) discusses the importance of creating appropriate physical workplace environments. One element of physical environment is geographic location. Top talent agencies had to be located in Los Angeles, and also the right neighborhood within the city, Beverly Hills. Another element of physical environment is the design aesthetic of the workplace. Reputable talent agencies are housed in buildings with impressive exteriors and sleek, “feng shui” interiors.

However, commercially viable, independent reality TV production companies have emerged across the country. Half Yard Productions, which has produced dozens of reality shows including Say Yes To The Dress, The Last Alaskans, and Hillbilly
Handfishin’, has offices in both New York and Bethesda, Maryland. Warm Springs Productions, whose shows include Mountain Men on History Channel and Log Cabin Living on HGTV, is located in Missoula, Montana. Furthermore, developing new reality TV shows requires production companies to do casting across the country. Shifting programming trends have had production companies scouting for characters in New Jersey, the rural South, and Alaska over recent years. Moreover, producers believe that extraordinary characters are in short supply and so they do not limit their searches to their own hometowns. Although Pinnacle Productions developed many shows with people living in or around New York, they also worked with prospective cast across the country as far as Florida, California, and Illinois, and even developed a show starring a psychic from England.

Due to this geographic dispersal, location and office interiors are less important factors in establishing a production company’s reputation among prospective reality TV cast. Even prospective cast who advanced to later stages of the development process sometimes did not step foot into Pinnacle’s office, since they lived across the country. Rather, relationships are established remotely over the phone, online, or via Skype. As I have described in this chapter, listing credentials on websites and online profiles as well as communicating effectively with candidates over the phone and Skype were significant parts of how workers actively managed Pinnacle’s reputation. Similarly, prospective cast searched the web to find information about the company, and evaluated the company’s legitimacy and trustworthiness based on which technologies workers used to communicate with them remotely.

Zafirau also grounds the concept of reputation work in neo-institutionalist theory (Powell and DiMaggio 1991), emphasizing that impression management is “governed by institutionalized rules that are constructed at the level of the organizational field” (101).
In the “small, incestuous world” of A-list Hollywood film and television production that Zafirau describes, favorable impressions are achieved by conforming to cultural scripts that are shared within that particular sector of the entertainment industry. Impression management strategies and the standards by which participants evaluate one another’s reputations in Hollywood are similar across organizations due to shared industry-level culture.

However, in the case of reality TV, the standards by which prospective talent evaluate production companies’ reputations are not institutionalized because ordinary people know little about reality television production and its shop floor culture. As I have described in this chapter, prospective cast at times disagreed with one another as to whether or not Pinnacle was reputable because they drew on different standards of evaluation. They also sometimes based their conclusions on misunderstandings of the production process. Finally, prospective cast evaluated routine production activities that workers took for granted, rather than consciously performed to create a favorable impression.

Beyond the case of reality television, other realms of cultural production also rely on recruiting talent from pools of amateurs and neophytes. For instance, agents find fashion models across the country and globe by scouting them on city streets or contacting them online after seeing their pictures on social media. Models may have never considered working in fashion prior to being scouted, lived far from fashion capitals, or started at such a young age that they know little about the inner workings of the industry (Mears 2011). In such cases, it is likely that prospective talent will also question cultural producers’ legitimacy and attempt to learn more about their reputations. And producers will use similar strategies and face similar challenges as reality TV
development workers with respect to managing their reputations, relying on digital media in response to geographic distance and being evaluated based on unpredictable criteria.
CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Like workers in all occupations, reality TV producers care about what they do for a living because their work reflects who they are as people, including their values, beliefs, personalities, personal histories and—as I have emphasized in this study—their moral character. Given the importance work has for how people see themselves and how they are viewed by others, my goal has been, as Everett Hughes puts it, “to penetrate more deeply into the personal and social drama of work, to understand the social and social-psychological arrangements and devices by which men make their work tolerable, or even glorious to themselves and others” (Hughes 1958: 48). Moral taint is one hurdle that workers must use such social and social-psychological devices to overcome.

Producing reality TV is a morally fraught endeavor. In order to stay in business, production companies must find ways to reduce financial risk and tailor the content of their shows to reflect what they believe is most marketable. Thus, many reduce expenditures by relying on cheap and precarious labor, including unpaid interns. Some also create misleading or potentially harmful media images in order to streamline production and attract audience attention. Generally, people regard exploitation, falsifying reality, and creating media images that rely on stereotypes, defame its subjects, or encourage negative social behavior as immoral practices. Being associated with such practices has stigmatized reality television production as morally tainted dirty work.

The pressure to engage in commercially expedient yet morally questionable production practices is particularly acute in the development process, since the success
of development work is essential to the survival and growth of any production company, and perhaps even more salient for companies like Pinnacle and Sunshine, which had no television shows in production and few alternative sources of income. While development workers seek to find good reality TV characters, they also are concerned about maintaining their own good moral character. I have discussed how workers maintain positive self-concepts despite doing dirty work, and also how they maintain a good impression for others who might question their character and integrity.

First, I have described how reality TV workers sustain a positive sense of self and identity despite producing media content that is commercially expedient but morally suspect. Sometimes producers’ values align with what they believe networks desire, and so creating content that fits commercial pressures is not a moral dilemma. At Pinnacle Productions, creating shows that others might view as “trashy” or “fake” did not bother workers, and in fact were celebrated as both entertaining and commercially viable. However, in other cases producers must compromise their values to appeal to an unforgiving market. For workers at Sunshine Productions, this meant engaging in production practices that they found morally reprehensible, especially creating scenes and settings that were “fake” and staged or portraying cast members in unflattering ways. Sunshine workers engaged in rhetorical strategies of distancing and evaluative tweaking in order to separate their actions from their positive identities and temporarily adjust their moral standards to accommodate these transgressions.

Then, I focused on exploitation as a moral dilemma by describing the internship program at Pinnacle Productions and the case of Mark, Pinnacle’s casting director. While interns stereotypically perform menial tasks like getting coffee, unpaid interns at Pinnacle were intimately involved in the development process, doing skilled production and important creative work. One might easily see Pinnacle interns as exploited labor,
since many unpaid interns’ ideas were successful with network clients. However, Mark
did *relational work* by creating a role for himself as a friend and mentor to his interns—
encouraging a collegial social atmosphere, cultivating experience by giving interns
substantive work tasks, and helping interns find employment opportunities at other
companies after internships ended. This allowed him to draw boundaries between
himself and colleagues who he saw as more exploitative and see himself as not only
morally clean but also kind and benevolent.

Finally, I focused on how reality TV producers maintain a good impression for
potential collaborators who might question their character and integrity. I found that
people who were auditioning for Pinnacle’s shows were concerned about the company’s
legitimacy, whether it was reputable and skilled enough to bring proposed shows to
fruition. Prospective cast were also concerned about whether or not producers were of
good moral character: especially whether they would portray cast in a favorable light and
whether they were scam artists. Given the geographic dispersal of prospective cast,
creating a favorable impression over various communication media was particularly
important. Pinnacle workers actively crafted their online credentials and their micro-level
interactions with prospective cast over the phone and Skype to appear as legitimate and
trustworthy as possible. However, while these strategies were effective, because they
were industry outsiders, prospective cast also evaluated the company’s legitimacy and
character in ways that workers could not anticipate.

More broadly, this dissertation has illustrated how dispelling moral taint is
important for building trust and solidarity in cultural production, which should be relevant
to professionals interested in maintaining smooth working relationships and to scholars
studying managerial power in creative work settings. My findings bring further support to
theorists who have argued that managerial authority in the cultural industries relies on
demonstrating an understanding of and involvement in the creative process (Smith and McKinlay 2009). Despite doing morally dirty work, workers can gain respect from the staff they manage and potential collaborators when they demonstrate that they all share common values. At Sunshine Productions, managers presented the same taste for “authentic” reality television that their employees held dear as an important part of their identities. By demonstrating their artistic integrity, Sunshine managers maintained control over their staff by redirecting hostility employees may have harbored for falsifying reality or presenting cast in an undignified manner away from themselves and towards people outside the organization. Similarly, one of the chief concerns prospective cast had about working with Pinnacle Productions was whether workers shared their values and goals. Casting and development workers established trust with prospective cast by employing an emotionally friendly tone and asking open-ended questions to demonstrate an interest in getting to know cast members’ perspectives.

Besides explaining how trust and solidarity are formed in workplace relationships, this dissertation is relevant to critical scholars hoping to expose injustices in cultural production and eliminate problematic media images. I have discussed the specific strategies and logics workers employ through everyday micro-interaction that help them justify doing work that others—including Marxist and critically oriented scholars—find morally reprehensible and allow them to dismiss feelings or impressions of wrongdoing. Problematic media images and production practices are justified on the ground through workers’ attempts at upholding a positive self and identity. From a critical perspective, these strategies and logics can be viewed as mechanisms through which harmful practices persist in cultural production despite any stigma critical interpretations impose on the industry.
This analysis suggests that eliminating problematic media content and unethical production practices means going beyond simply raising awareness about such issues. Certainly, lessons in media literary and cultural sensitivity can benefit some cultural producers, including some workers described in this study who did not second-guess the ethics of the images they were creating. However, reality TV producers are not “bad people” who lack morals. Rather, the broader industrial context in which production companies must operate puts great commercial pressures on workers to create certain content and follow particular production procedures. Given how nimble workers are at ignoring, justifying, and rationalizing actions that others deem immoral, educating workers can only go so far and more structural solutions must take over, such as opening up new distribution channels for reality TV that support a broader variety of creative voices.

Finally, this study encourages future analyses of cultural production as dirty work, particularly in fields not traditionally seen as dirty. Reality TV is certainly not the only form of cultural production that is frequently subject to moral condemnation. Traditional moral sentiments, which look down on gratuitous sex and violence, remain strong in contemporary culture. Thus workers who create sexual entertainment, including exotic dancing and pornography, as well as those who create violent media, from horror movies to video games like Mortal Kombat in which players graphically kill one another, likely employ some of the same micro-interactional strategies I have described in this study to cleanse themselves of moral judgment. However, this study also points to the influence of concerns typically raised by Marxist-inspired critical scholarship, such as perpetuating harmful stereotypes and exploiting workers, in addition to traditional mores, as sources of moral stain in cultural production.
This suggests that cultural producers who are not traditionally subjects of moral condemnation also face criticisms and must find ways to rid themselves of taint. Hollywood filmmaking and the high fashion industry, for example, are generally seen as glamorous and cool. The Academy Awards and fashion week are prestigious events filled with celebrities, socialites, and cultural elites, where cultural producers are praised for their aesthetic achievements. However, academically inspired critical reactions to cultural industries are increasingly common in ordinary discourse (see Schwarz 2016). When the 2016 Oscar nominees were announced, the Academy was disparaged in various mainstream media for not nominating racial minorities (Begley 2016; Hogan 2016; Lang 2016). The popular website BuzzFeed—known for creating viral content from cat videos to political news stories—is replete with articles skewering problematic cultural representations in various media. Prior to New Years 2016, they posted an article listing “19 Times Pop Culture Was Embarrassingly Offensive in 2015” that as of March 2016 had been viewed over 825,000 times (Gant 2015). The offenses included:

- When [luxury fashion brand] Dsquared2 got “inspired” by Native American culture and presented the “Dsquaw” collection. Squaw: an offensive term referencing a Native American woman or wife.
- When [high fashion brand] Valentino debuted its “primitive, tribal, spiritual, yet regal” spring ‘16 collection to portray “wild Africa.” Because nothing says Africa like lots and lots of white girls rockin’ cornrows and bone jewelry!
- When [fashion magazine] Elle Canada put everyone on the new dashiki trend, except dashikis aren’t new or an “it-item.”
- When [high fashion brand] Givenchy fused Latina culture into its “Victorian Cholas”–inspired fall collection.
The list ended with a summary statement: “If there’s one lesson to take away in the new year, it’s STOP USING YOUR PRIVILEGE TO BE DOUCHEY!” As such critiques become increasingly popular, cultural industry workers in more elite fields might feel increasing pressure to manage the meaning of their moral shortcomings like the reality TV workers I have described.

*Dispelling the Taint of Dirty Work*

While this study contributes to existing literature by bringing scholarship on dirty work into dialogue with research on cultural industries, it also has implications for understanding work and occupations more broadly. The concept of dirty work can be applied to a variety of work roles. Aside from reality TV, workers in various occupations are stigmatized for being morally questionable, including sex workers, bill collectors, casino managers, and corporate lawyers. Furthermore, in addition to moral taint, workers can also be stigmatized for doing socially or physically tainted work (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Hughes 1958). Physically tainted occupations are ones in which workers are in direct contact with physical dirt or work under noxious conditions (garbage collectors, butchers, miners, dentists, proctologists, etc.). Socially tainted occupations are ones in which workers regularly encounter other people who are stigmatized (prison guard, AIDS clinician, social worker, etc.) or in which workers appear to have a servile relationship to others (shoe shiner, maid, customer service operator, etc.). Finally, while the dirty work performed in some occupations might be more readily apparent than in others, as Hughes argues, “Dirty work of some kind is found in all occupations. It is hard to imagine an occupation in which one does not appear, in retain repeated contingencies, to be practically compelled to play a role of which he thinks he ought to be a little ashamed” (1958: 50). Whether due to moral, physical, or social taint,
people in a variety of occupations develop strategies for protecting their selves and identities against the shame and degradation of performing stigmatized work.

What general lessons does this study provide for understanding how workers in various occupations dispel the taint of doing dirty work? First, I have emphasized the importance of micro-interactional processes in shaping the meaning of stigmatized work. Previous studies have outlined particular logics and defensive tactics dirty workers use to normalize or dispel moral, physical, and social taint (Ashforth et al. 2007; Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, 2014; Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss 2006). Such scholars have certainly acknowledged that workers apply these logics and tactics in concert with or in response to co-workers, collaborators, and clients. For instance, Hughes describes how janitors blame building tenants for creating physical dirt and elevate their sense of self despite their contact with garbage by basking in the intimate knowledge they learn about tenants: “Janitors know about hidden love-affairs by bits of torn-up letter paper; of impending financial disaster or financial four-flushing by the presence of many unopened letters in the waste” (1958: 50-1). Ashforth et al. (2007) suggest that in organizations managers play significant roles in dispelling various forms of taint for their employees, since managers’ supervisory roles give them greater influence over the workplace compared to frontline workers. However, these studies have paid insufficient attention to exactly how such meaning making unfolds in situ.

This study suggests that particular situational contexts compel workers to actively manage the meaning of dirty work through micro-interaction. I have described how managers use distancing and evaluative tweaking as rhetorical strategies when they must direct their staff into doing dirty work that the working group agrees is reprehensible in order to accommodate commercial demands, and how workers manage their reputations when attempting to recruit prospective collaborators (prospective cast)
who may question their moral cleanliness. Interactional situations in which managers
must direct staff into doing dirty work and in which workers must recruit prospective
collaborators are likely to be times in which workers in other occupations also actively try
to dispel the physical, social, and moral stigma of their work.

Moreover, while previous scholars have described cognitive logics that normalize
dirty work and verbal articulations of those logics (Ashforth et al. 2007; Ashforth and
Kreiner 1999), in focusing my analysis on micro-interaction and relying on observational
data, I have described how taint can be dispelled through forms of self-presentation and
performance beyond talk. For instance, casting interns managed their emotions during
casting interviews, suppressing boredom and acting interested, in order to present
themselves as legitimate and trustworthy professionals. Prospective cast evaluated the
mediums through which workers communicated with them—Skype versus telephone
versus meeting face-to-face—in addition to the content of what workers said to them
when assessing workers’ moral character. Pinnacle employees dispelled the moral taint
of exploiting unpaid interns by employing logics that framed their relationships with
interns as mentorships and friendships. However, these meanings were not constructed
simply through individual speech acts, but rather through collectively engaging in a
variety of everyday experiences that helped workers build meaningful relationships.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of micro-interaction in shaping the
meaning of dirty work, this analysis has also pointed to the importance for scholars to
consider in whose eyes an occupation or particular work task seems dirty and for whom
workers must dispel the taint of their dirty work. At Pinnacle Productions, workers did
not generally consider creating stereotypical images of social groups or manipulating
reality to create drama to be morally problematic. They judged the quality of reality TV
based on the humor and entertainment value such shows could provide. In contrast,
workers at Sunshine Productions subscribed to a strong organizational culture that valued “real” reality TV, shows that minimized fakery and did not perpetuate unflattering media representations of marginalized social groups. Both companies submitted to commercial pressures that called on producers to develop new reality shows that were sensationalistic and manipulated reality for the sake of drama. However, while creating commercially viable content was not a significant source of consternation among Pinnacle employees, Sunshine workers saw this as dirty work, morally questionable in their own eyes. Thus, unlike Pinnacle employees, Sunshine workers were motivated to engage in identity work strategies of distancing and evaluative tweaking to regain their own self worth and repair how they saw themselves when catering to commercial demands. While Pinnacle workers did not feel the same pressure to cleanse themselves in their own eyes, they did have to dispel moral taint in the eyes of prospective cast. I have described how the means through which they dispelled this taint were impacted by prospective cast members’ status as industry outsiders; Workers had to rely on communicating with prospective cast remotely through media like Skype and prospective cast evaluated workers’ legitimacy and moral character using uncertain criteria because they were not privy to norms of work and professional presentation in the reality television industry. In sum, these findings suggest that the means through which the taint of dirty work is dispelled, and whether or not workers find it necessary to dispel any taint, varies according to the audience evaluating the dirtiness of an occupation.

While I have described how reality TV workers manage the meaning of morally dirty work, the idea that scholars should attend to issues of audience—in whose eyes work is seen as dirty—applies to other forms of dirty work in other occupations as well. For example, some people might find preparing raw meat to be physically dirty and disgusting, while others may not. Some restaurant chefs prefer cooking vegetarian
meals, while others might not only prefer cooking meat dishes but also enjoy butchering their own ingredients. Since it is likely these chefs differ in their level of physical disgust for handling raw meat, it is reasonable to expect that the frequency and circumstances under which they cleanse themselves of such physical taint also differ. Likewise, it is likely that chefs discuss any disgust they do feel over handling raw meat more candidly with other chefs than they would with customers who they must strive to impress. Thus, in general, understanding how workers dispel the taint of doing dirty work must begin with the premise that cleanliness and dirt lie in the eye of the beholder.
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