

RESEARCH STATEMENT

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My research interests center on the future of work, with an emphasis on the disruptions and other changes to the nature of work that have recently been brought about through technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship. My overarching concern has been for what the people experiencing this future – be it while bringing about or receiving this future – have been evaluating as worthy enough about what exists to be preserved and not be lost. I specifically have investigated the consequences for whether people embrace the future that is coming about and what the future ends up looking like. I have mostly examined these issues of late while studying artificial intelligence (AI) as an emerging technology at work, where curiosity about the future and what it will entail has exploded. AI, in being able to autonomously carry out work once thought to be beyond machine capability, has been threatening what is considered to be distinctively human about work, as well as portending the automation of the human claim to work generally. I have been looking at what people confronting this technology have valued as human about work and how they have been broadly navigating what might happen to this humanness amid the rise of AI, such as how they have attempted to preserve their claim to work and survive. I have drawn on theoretical lenses from across the social sciences – primarily organization studies, the sociology of work and occupations, and scholarship on technology – and have mainly utilized ethnographic and interviewing methods, where I have attempted to get as close as I can to the coalface of the future of work.

In what follows, I elaborate on a selection of the various projects that I have been working on, as an outgrowth of my chosen research interests, theoretical lenses, and methods. These projects include my job market paper, a few other projects in the review process or pre-submission and in-progress, and a project that has been setting up my future research agenda.

Job Market Paper

My job market paper is entitled “Soul: Humanness as occupational distinctiveness in an age of artificial intelligence” (to be submitted to the *American Sociological Review*). A central premise of scholarship on occupations has been that exclusive control over expertise is crucial to occupational survival. The literature specifically has theorized that expertise is what gives occupation members a claim to work and thus a reason-for-being in societal division of labor, without which occupations have risked dying. However, the advances that we have seen in AI have begun to compromise this exclusive control over expertise, able as AI has been to learn from data and induce out occupational expertise that once was thought to be beyond the capability of technologies.

This then begs the question, how exactly have occupation members been able to construct a claim to work in society and continue to compete to survive, when they lose exclusive control over their expertise to AI?

I interviewed 40 members of the occupation of music composition, which has prominently been losing exclusive control over the expertise of writing music to AI. Composers focused on the idea of their souls, or the sacred inner human essences that they imagined as being within them, as their occupational distinctiveness against the technology. They specifically shared how soul made them worth a claim to work by distinguishing them, in making them different from and even better than AI. In terms of being different, the composers I interviewed talked about how they had souls within them as human beings that they could infuse into their music, which AI as a different species could not have. And in terms of being better, the composers argued that soul in music, as they uniquely could achieve, made for this work being

intentional, natural, and moving, in ways that set it apart from what AI could achieve through music. In such ways, composers went beyond the loss of exclusive control over their occupational expertise by appealing to soul, as their distinctiveness and what could give them a claim to work in society.

My main contribution is in pushing scholarship toward an emphasis on distinctiveness, as a disambiguation of what expertise does for occupations. Distinctiveness can accommodate the idea that occupations may highlight other aspects of themselves as necessary, including soul and humanness generally, to compete for a claim to work and to survive.

Selected Ongoing Projects

My other research projects similarly have been exploring how the future of work has been unfolding, a selection of which I include here. I go through the papers that I currently have in the review process and then go on to discuss a few papers that are pre-submission and in-progress.

In the Review Process

I have two papers that are currently going through the review process. One of these is my paper “Constitutive, if contrary: On hiving off the dirty work of the occupation to artificial intelligence” (Revise and Resubmit at *Administrative Science Quarterly*). In explaining why dirty work is something that people from occupations themselves have hived off, the literature has emphasized that people have seen the work as so lacking in status as to be profane and even contrary to their occupations. But how is it, then, that such attempts at automating away or otherwise hiving off the dirty work of a given occupation can end up compromising the occupation’s survival? In this study, I witnessed such dynamics around the hiving off of dirty work in the occupation of music composition. I was ethnographically immersed in a startup of composers developing an AI that ended up hiving off the work through automation. I also interviewed composers unaffiliated with the startup. I confirmed that people in the startup and beyond saw this work as dirty and even contrary to the occupation, as was central to how those in the startup justified hiving off the work. However, those within the startup also gestured toward another side to this work. And through my interviews with composers unaffiliated with the startup, I gained a window into the fact that the work specifically was constitutive of the occupation as an opportunity structure, or a ladder by which people could get into the occupation, come to make a career and life, and grab on when they stumbled or fell. As such, the startup ended up proverbially kicking a ladder within the occupation, compromising the survival of the occupation by hiving off work that composers significantly relied on. My primary contribution is to scholarship on dirty work. My study supplements the literature’s emphasis on status and on the extent to which the work is contrary to the occupation or not, revealing an understanding of this work as constitutive of the occupation. Dirty work is more multisided than has largely been theorized, wherein hiving off this work can even compromise the survival of the occupation.

In my paper “Inhabited futures: Loss as lived experience of the making of tomorrow” (Revise and Resubmit at *Journal of Management*), I build on an emerging literature around imagined futures and future-making, which has been investigating how the future is constructed at work and in organizations. A central premise of this literature, and particularly among those interested in the moralized side of futures, has been that futures that are abstractly aligned with existing values will be seen as desirable and will be realized and reified by the people receiving these futures. I then ask, how can a given future not come to be seen as desirable, even when it is made to be abstractly aligned with existing values? I witnessed such dynamics while examining a changing opera company. Though the newly-hired general director aligned his imagined future with the company’s existing values, such value alignment did not inspire attempts among workers at realizing and reifying this future, as the literature might expect. Rather, this future was met with resistance, as rooted in how the company’s workers concretely came to inhabit how the future

was realized through changes to their work. The workers specifically lived through the loss of a valued and even sacred part of their past. They lost the “aliveness” that they saw the work as once having had – as through the ethos that they had once fostered through their work, the depth of engagement that they had cultivated with their work, and the legacy that they had preserved via their work – and came to resist as a result. My findings’ main contribution to the literature is in expanding how we understand what makes a given future desirable. I supplement the literature’s emphasis on how people imagine the desirability of futures by highlighting how futures concretely come to be inhabited, revealing that the rise of the future entails lived experiences like loss that can impinge on this future’s desirability.

Pre-submission and In-Progress

There are also a few projects that I have been working on that are currently pre-submission and in-progress. I highlight two fully-drafted papers here that I have been working on with graduate student co-authors. The first is a conceptual piece with Ryan Zhou, entitled “Automation and deaths of despair: Unearthing the dark side of the future of work” (to be submitted to *Organization Science*). The paper revolves around troubling trends across the United States and the broader Western world. Scholars specifically have begun linking the increased automation of work with a rising rate of “deaths of despair.” These deaths have prominently been captured in the example of American blue-collar workers – mainly white, male, and between the prime-of-life ages of 45 and 54 – who have been despairing over their fading social and economic prospects and have been attempting suicide. These deaths have been an artifact of these workers’ broader fall from grace and marginalization over the past few decades, amid trends like automation compromising their relevance to the work that is their reason-for-being in organizations and society writ large. And given the prevalence of these deaths, scholars have begun to revisit an age-old question: how exactly is it that people, as in the workers of late experiencing automation, have been driven to attempt as self-destructive an act as suicide? In this paper, we synthesize the insights of suicidology to specify the causal pathway by which workers can end up attempting suicide in the shadow of the automation. Our model emphasizes that interpersonal needs deprivation through perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, coupled with hopelessness about both, are at the core of what causes people to ideate about and even attempt suicide. We further elaborate on the recursivity of our model and the factors that moderate between the existential threat of automation and its outcomes. Altogether, we reveal how workers are driven to attempt as self-destructive of acts as suicide.

Meanwhile, the second paper that I highlight is a conceptual piece with my graduate student Gabrielle Voiseux, entitled “Bringing the manager back in: Power, influence, and technologies at work” (to be submitted to *Organization Science*). We begin with the observation that scholarship on technology and work, in its enthusiasm to get as grounded a view into the coalface of the work itself, has tended to neglect the systems of power around the work and their influence on what may happen. We focus especially on the fact that managers have largely been overlooked by the literature and/or have often been in the background of study, with some scholarship going as far as to articulate how little influence managers may actually have on what happens to work in organizations as a result of technologies. By contrast, we in this paper centrally argue that managers may have more influence than has been theorized. We make this argument by drawing on the accounts of a classic but largely-forgotten literature: the Columbia school of sociology. We specifically synthesize its accounts around the four dimensions of work that managers influenced: the (1) technical, (2) cultural, (3) communal, and (4) societal. We then discuss the relevance of these dimensions today. We specifically bridge between the Columbia school’s focus on all this amid the rise of bureaucratic structure and today’s focus on the rise of AI, building on study that has argued that both fundamentally can be forms of technological rationalization. Specifically, both bureaucratic structure and AI potentially involve increasing efficiency by automating, or codifying

and formalizing, the work. As such, they have both been at the core of trends across organizations toward structuring the work in “rational” ways, which historically emphasized automation as a means of minimizing “irrationalities” – like unpredictability and variability – from humans like workers having the discretion to do the work as they wish. Our core contribution is in bringing the manager back into scholarship on technology and work, revealing their influence on how work is impacted by technologies.

Future Research Agenda

I also have been working on a few projects to set up my future research agenda. I focus here on a project that I have entitled “Marginalizing histories: Technological reemergence and the revival of a problematic past” (to be submitted to the *Administrative Science Quarterly*). I build on the explosion of interest that we have seen in reemerging technologies, or technologies that come back to life after having died. I specifically have been studying once-extinct musical instruments from 17th- and 18th-century Europe – like the harpsichord or the baroque violin – and how they have been brought back from the dead, by an international community of professional classical musicians who have variously referred to themselves as the “early music community” or the “historical performance movement.” This community has revived the instruments as a means of moving away from the longstanding tendency in classical music to perform everything as if it was written today, instead trying to perform authentically to how audiences of the time would have heard this music. Said otherwise, this community has centrally aimed at vivifying forgotten sound worlds of the past. And in immersing myself in this community, I have been drawing on my own experiences to ask about how musicians who identify as demographic minorities (e.g., based on gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and/or class) have made sense of reviving pasts that were largely built around marginalizing and even actively rooting out people like them. I have considered this question while spending 4+ years learning the baroque violin myself and acting as a participant-observer in early music ensembles across three urban centers for the community: Vancouver, Boston, and Paris. At the core of this project is my attempt not only at building out my longstanding interest in technologies, but also at considering how technologies like musical instruments can touch on deeper questions, about who belongs and how people might grapple with problematic pasts as they live into the present and future.