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‘There’s a lot of luck involved’: Sustaining hope labour amid workplace inequality and precarity as a creative worker

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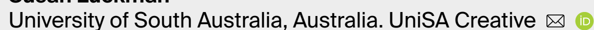

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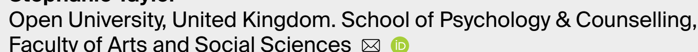

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ENG **Abstract:** The challenges of building and sustaining a creative career are well-established, as is the degree to which opportunities are either opened or foreclosed through the complex intersectionality of inequalities. Yet creative aspirants persist in pursuing creative work, sustaining themselves through survival strategies variously theorised as ‘hope labour’ and ‘aspirational labour’. Drawing upon data from an arts mentoring programme, this article explores how ideas of ‘luck’, ‘chance’ and ‘opportunity’ are implicated within such labour as sense-making resources for managing difficulties and justifying persistence in the face of precarity. It argues that the take up of these resources can function as a valuable discursive tool that also contributes to an enabling ‘repertoire of shared myths’ which sustains the career work of artists and many creative workers.
Keywords: Luck; hope labour; creative career; discursive resources; arts mentoring

ES “Hay mucha suerte involucrada”: Mantener la esperanza laboral en medio de la desigualdad y la precariedad en el lugar de trabajo como trabajador creativo

Resumen: Los desafíos de construir y sostener una carrera creativa están bien establecidos, al igual que el grado en que las oportunidades se abren o se excluyen a través de la compleja interseccionalidad de las desigualdades. Sin embargo, los aspirantes creativos persisten en realizar un trabajo creativo, sosteniéndose a sí mismos a través de estrategias de supervivencia teorizadas de diversas formas como “trabajo de esperanza” y “trabajo de aspiración”. Basándose en datos de un programa de tutoría artística, este artículo explora cómo las ideas de “suerte”, “ocasión” y “oportunidad” están implicadas en dicho trabajo como recursos que dan sentido a la gestión de las dificultades y a la justificación de la perseverancia frente a la precariedad. Sostiene que la utilización de estos recursos puede funcionar como una valiosa herramienta discursiva que también contribuye a un “repertorio de mitos compartidos” habilitador que sustenta la carrera profesional de los artistas y de muchos trabajadores creativos.
Palabras clave: Suerte; esperanza de trabajo; carrera creativa; recursos discursivos; tutoría artística

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The discursive work of de-personalising failure. 5. Discussion: ‘Making one’s own luck’: Balancing neoliberal reality, self-belief and community. 6. Conclusion. 7. References.

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1. Introduction

The challenges of building and sustaining a creative career given the precarity of much contemporary employment are now well-established, and with it the ways in which new work identities are emerging, or being demanded, to negotiate increasingly unstable work trajectories (Gill 2002, 2010; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Taylor and Luckman, 2018; McRobbie, 2016). Drawing upon data from semi-structured interviews with participants in a formalised creative mentoring programme, this article explores how artists and other cultural and creative workers mobilise ideas of ‘luck’ as part of the ‘hope labour’ (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013; Alacovska, 2018; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021) which many workers engage in as a necessary survival strategy in an increasingly fragmented and unequal employment ecosystem. Successful, or at least financially sustainable, creative careers are not achievable through effort and positivity alone. Therefore, we will argue, the rhetorical evocation of ideas connected to ‘luck’ and ‘chance’ evidence shared social understandings or ‘discursive resources’ (Taylor, 2015) that are taken up by the creative workers as part of their larger project of making sense of the difficulties and dilemmas they face. In their ongoing justifications, to themselves and others, for persisting in such a career despite its difficulties, the creative workers cite various possibilities, including a future breakthrough that will be the eventual reward for continuing effort – the ‘big break’ (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). This ‘discursive work’ is not necessarily self-deluding. Rather, it follows from the associations of the creative with the unexpected, ‘extra-rational’ and even Romantic (McRobbie, 1998), which are now established as part of the wider discourses around creative work and careers and their supposed contrast with the regularities and mundane predictability of ‘ordinary’ work (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). It is a noted aspect of discursive work as theorised in critical discursive psychology (e.g. Taylor, 2015; Wetherell, 1998) that such resources remain available to be variously and selectively taken up. The resources persist alongside the seeming contradictions of a realistic understanding of the barriers to career entry, such as the intersectionalities of privilege that make entry smoother for some than others. Thus this article will examine the particular functions that luck and associated notions perform for participants, including as part of ‘hope labour’.

2. Literature review: Precarity, inequality and hope labour

As the articles in this special edition testify, irregular employment is becoming increasingly normalised across all work sectors. But for intertwined reasons both structural (such as fixed-term contracts based on delivery of a self-contained product such as a film, book or game title) and situational (the substantial pool of people seeking to get into various fields of creative work, and willing to engage in unpaid and under-paid work to do so), creative work has long been subject to workplace precarity. This is a sector where self-employment, contract and freelance work are far more common than traditional, full-time secure employment. Certainly, since the late 1990s, across the Global North we have witnessed the rise of what has been referred to as portfolio work or ‘slashie’ work practices. Portfolio or slashie work involves simultaneously working on a variety of projects in different places of employment (or self-employment); in this way, the ‘individual becomes his or her own enterprise, sometimes presiding over two separate companies at the one time’ (McRobbie, 2016: 20). Tepper (2002) similarly observes that many who work in the creative industries have multitrack portfolio careers. Hall describes this process as the protean career: ‘a

career that is driven by the person, not the organization, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and environment change' (1996: 8).

The associations of the creative industries with the arts contribute to the perceived desirability of creative work, despite its challenges, that have long meant that there are more aspirants than available job opportunities. Against this backdrop of demand, the cultural and creative industries are a highly charged reputation economy whereby 'wherever you go, whomever you meet, represents a work opportunity … "life is a pitch"' (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015b: 10). Creative workers are therefore under pressure to monitor not only success, but the appearance of success. In the neoliberal marketplace these aspects combine, with the consequence that creative workers have been particularly exposed to wider workforce trends, especially increased job insecurity. More people trying to enter a space than there are chairs at the table, coupled with what is frequently an informal jobs market without the checks and balances of formal recruitment processes (McRobbie, 1998; Taylor and Luckman, 2018), alas leads all too often to exploitative selection practices and, with them, the potential for existing inequalities to be exacerbated. These informal and often difficult barriers mean that the dominant group replicates itself through a process of 'homophily' (Umphress et al., 2007; Koppman, 2016; Leung, Gill and Randle, 2015; Wreyford, 2015) where insiders see 'people like themselves as the most trustworthy and competent' (Jones and Pringle, 2015: 39). One importance consequence is that not all creative workers are in equally precarious situations. Scholars acknowledge the degree to which opportunities are either opened or foreclosed through the complex intersectionality of inequalities (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020; Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015a; Morgan and Nelligan, 2015). So while individual experiences will vary, the reality is that structural barriers based on class, race, gender, sexuality and care-giving responsibilities, among other personal circumstances, as well as the intersections of these, operate to make the entry pathways into artistic and creative work more difficult for some than others (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015a; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012). For example, the spaces for informal networking – such as pubs and even strip clubs – can form challenging environments for women (and others), and the requirement for 'compulsory sociality' (Gregg, 2011) after already long working days poses problems for everyone with caring responsibilities and socio-economic disadvantages (Leung, Gill and Randle, 2015: 56–57). All things considered, it is now widely established that, as McRobbie has written, a

> defining feature of new cultural work is that its 'time and space' dynamics, coupled with self-employment, short-term project work and hence an individualised outlook, all contribute to a marked absence of workplace politics in terms of democratic procedures, equal opportunities, anti-discrimination policies and so on. (2016: 23)

Yet despite these challenging realities, people persist in their dream of pursuing paid creative work, motivated in no small part by the dream if not the reality of being 'paid to do what you love'. Scholars have coined a 'medley of half-neologisms' (Duffy, 2015: 444) to refer to the resultant blurring of the boundaries between self-chosen activities and supposed career areas, including 'passionate labour (Postigo, 2009), hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), venture labour (Neff, 2012) and playbour (Kücklich, 2005; Duffy, 2015: 444). To this list media theorist Duffy adds her own concept of 'aspirational labour': 'productive activities that … participants believe has the potential to pay off in terms of future economic capital and professional opportunities' (Duffy, 2015: 453). This proliferation of terminologies evidences a recurring finding from research on creative workers, namely, that their persistence in pursuing a creative career is sustained through beliefs, assumptions, and extra-ordinary expectations. The idea of the 'big break' (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), or of being 'discovered', has a long history in multiple cultural and creative industries such as modelling/fashion and music, and extends into emergent media roles: 'the structure of work in these two industries [new media and fashion modelling] – as in all cultural industries – is built upon workers being motivated by the promise of one Big Job being right around the corner' (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005: 319).

Investigating the emergence of new forms of social media entrepreneurialism, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) explore how some forms of free labour operate as an investment that will

potentially realise opportunities for employment. There are strong parallels between Duffy's 'aspirational labour' and their definition of 'hope labour' as 'un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013: 9). Hope labour has become an influential analytical lens through which scholars have sought to make sense of the marketplace for cultural and creative work, and the personal motivations of artists and other creative workers. In Kuehn and Corrigan's account, 'hope'

> involves the projection into the future of a better, more challenging, or different state of being … The autonomy, mastery, and connectedness of socially recognized self-realization provided for compelling experiences, and marked their primary motivation for participating in social production; however, they hoped they could one day be compensated for the same or related work. (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013: 17)

While not blaming their research participants for engaging in such activity with the expectation of future paid employment, they observe that in their sample's social media sphere 'hope laborers undermine the very labor market that they aspire to enter by continually supplying it with individuals who are willing to work for nothing' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013: 20).

Writing more recently, Mackenzie and McKinlay (2021: 1842) similarly define hope labour as 'unpaid or undercompensated labour undertaken in the present, with the hope that future work may follow'. They present findings from a 2017 study of freelancers in creative, digital and IT sectors in the North of England where they found a high proportion of workers regularly carrying out unpaid work. Like Kuehn and Corrigan (2013), Mackenzie and McKinlay found that this 'free labour' was rationalised as developing competencies that would therefore bring a return in the future, reaffirming the old story that 'cultural workers must exchange unpaid and under-compensated work for meaning, self-determination and autonomy' (2021: 1850). Mackenzie and McKinlay link hope labour to free labour undertaken by necessity in conditions of austerity. Unpaid work was also justified as valuable because it is creative and would help the self and others. Thus, hope labour is also linked to 'human capital in a project of the self' (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021: 1851). It is additionally justified economically as contributing to reputation building and the development of a professional identity, for instance through time spent presenting oneself online.

Mackenzie and McKinlay cite examples from cultural and creative employment to illustrate deregulated work linked to neoliberalism but, importantly, they argue that cultural work is 'a site of struggle, mediated through a confusing mixture of opportunity and uncertainty, where responsibilities become individualised yet "hope" also manifests in care for self-worth, duty to others, and a sense of artistic community and social responsibility' (2021: 1842). Although they propose that aspects of the 'creative', 'cultural' and 'artistic' have been absorbed into neoliberal discourses (see also Scharff, 2015, they explore discursive 'strategies' through which cultural and creative workers resist total government as neoliberal subjects. Mackenzie and McKinlay suggest hope labour is a 'resource' for cultural workers that 'obscures the exploitative realities' of their work, yet 'is animated by desires for creative and personal fulfilment that both combine and contrast with the imperatives of market rationalities' (2021: 1842). It also involves 'an ambivalent mixture of competitive, conflicting and contradictory relations to self in the constitution of entrepreneurial subjectivity' (2021: 1843). This rejection of total neoliberal subjectification parallels Kuehn and Corrigan's (2013) reading, but Mackenzie and McKinlay's discursive approach renders more complex and visible the agency of workers in ongoing negotiations of meaning and rationalisation. A point particularly relevant to our study is that Mackenzie and McKinlay situate hope labour not only within commercial relationships of neoliberal exploitation, but also within alternative economic practices of care, reciprocity and community: 'Cultural workers make sense of their labour through discourses of selfless responsibility to others, sacrificing economic return to follow one's dream, and the necessities of practising creativity and self-care' (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021: 1845). There is also a tension between the artistic and the economic. The artistic is prioritised, but with the hope that creative labour will eventually receive an appropriate economic return. Sustaining hope labour therefore requires workers to manage the inevitable tensions between competing

discourses and logics, including re-turning 'labour into human capital', labour into experience and reputation, labour into reciprocity and care and labour as risk strategy, as well as 'aligning artistic ideals of creativity and autonomy with entrepreneurial subjectivity' (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021: 1857). Ultimately the creative worker is an 'ambivalent' figure that 'both confirms and disrupts the neoliberal subject' (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021: 1856).

In another account of hope labour, Alacovska (2018) challenges the view that hope among creative workers is false consciousness and instead discusses what might be called hope practices or small forms of optimism or appreciation. She associates hope with practices like bartering and other forms of engagement with other people that improve the ongoing quality of a difficult life. Again, there is an emphasis on the mobilisation of competing, seemingly contradictory discourses in the ongoing management of difficulties, and an account of creative work as involving more than a simple illusory view of a positive future. Drawing upon research into the experience of creative workers operating in emerging post-socialist cultural economies, Alacovska identifies nostalgia as a kind of reverse hope in that it is associated with a belief that more positive conditions are possible, even if only because they existed in the past. Like Mackenzie and McKinlay, Alacovska questions an idealised image of 'the creative' as all good in contrast to variously specified all-bad work, whether creative work or other work. Bilton, Eikhof and Gilmore (2021) make a similar argument. These accounts therefore engage realistically with the ongoing, everyday experience of artists and other creative workers; 'the meaningful, daily struggles of creative workers rather than on their grandiose fantasies and utopian desires of good, autonomous, and well-paid future creative jobs' (Alacovska, 2018: 43). Our research is conducted, albeit in a different context, against this backdrop of precarious career trajectories marked by complex expectations and aspirations, by hope as well as anticipated difficulties.

3. Approach and methods

The study we will discuss investigated an Australian programme in which creative practitioners variously sought to obtain guidance and support to 'break in' to or further develop creative careers as mentees, or to 'pay back' their own positive experiences of professional generosity through acting as mentors. This article critically analyses data from a three-year research-informed evaluation of a mentorship programme undertaken by an artist-run peak state-level support organisation, as well as its various mentorship programmes of the last decade. While the majority of the participants are visual or craft artists, the programme also included videographers, sound artists, installation specialists, photographers, illustrators and designers. Running alongside the mentorships and funded by the external body supporting the mentorship programme, the main aim of the independent research project is to examine the impact of mentorships on artistic careers over time. The key research questions which guided the study concerned the outcomes of previous mentorship programmes, and how the learnings from these could be incorporated into improving future programmes for both mentors and mentees. This research has filled an important gap in existing knowledge for, despite the centrality of mentorship – formal and informal – to the development of creative careers globally and across time, not to mention the significant financial and human resources invested in formal mentorship programmes globally, surprisingly little research has been undertaken into their conduct and efficacy.

Two primary data collection activities are involved in this research study: semi-structured interviews with mentees and mentors who have participated in both the current and previous (from 2000 to 2019) mentorship programmes run by the organisation, and a follow-up online survey of contemporary programme participants undertaken approximately 12 months after completion of their mentorship. Overall, 54 interviews were completed. The interviews were transcribed and coded thematically as a preliminary to a closer critical discursive analysis (Taylor, 2015; Wetherell, 1998). The focus of this article is on participants' references to 'luck', 'chance' and similar language in their discussions of how creative careers unfold. The sample includes 24 mentors and 30 mentees, but it is important to note that some participants have occupied both roles depending upon stage of career and/or practice or professional skills acquisition requirements. The roles

of mentee and mentor do not necessarily directly map onto age in predictable ways. The more relevant point is that to be a mentor is to have insider status within the creative field the mentee seeks to enhance their own access to and knowledge of. Of the research participants, 31 (mentors = 11, mentees = 20) identified as female, 22 (mentors = 12, mentees = 10) as male, and 1 (mentors = 0, mentees = 1) as non-binary. Most are located in the same metropolitan location as their mentor/mentee, but some partnerships were conducted across slightly greater distance, with one being international. In this Australian-based study, two of the 52 participants who answered the question identified as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin; four participants (all mentees) identified as having a disability.

4. Findings

Viewed as a whole, the study evidenced the practical value of a strongly scaffolded programme, particularly at the beginning and end stages of the formal mentorship. This is important not only for facilitating connections between mentors and mentees, but also for clarifying expectations, including by agreeing aims and targets that might stretch the mentee (and mentor) but not be too unrealistic. Good organisation contributes to establishing a trusting relationship, which most respondents consider essential in a successful mentoring partnership. The overwhelming majority of mentees found the experience 'valuable', with the majority finding it 'invaluable', even though what some of them gained from the programme is not what they had anticipated. Similarly, most mentees said that the mentorship would have career-long value and impacts, with many claiming that it is a pivotal point in their career. Participants, especially mentees, are extremely grateful for the access and support (financial, professional and personal) provided by the mentoring programme and thus their comments reflect a general feeling of positivity and gratitude. These claims largely confirm the findings of previous research on arts mentoring (Bacon, 2016; Bilton et al., 2021; Haugsevje et al., 2021; Hope et al., 2020; Naudin, 2018; Rupra and Janmohamed, 2019; Yoon, 2021).

However, this experience of opportunity inevitably arose against the larger backdrop of career precarity outlined in the previous sections. The main focus of our analysis, following a broadly discursive approach (e.g. Taylor, 2015, Wetherell, 1998) is on the less obvious gains and emotional or affective aspects of the mentees' experience that might be congruent with the kind of hope labour identified by Mackenzie and McKinlay, Alacovska and others already discussed. In the next section, we set out findings from our analysis in which participants drew on the resources of 'luck' and 'chance' and related language. We suggest that this discursive work functions as an aspect of the emotional labour that sustains hope and the participants' persistence in their uncertain careers.

4.1. 'Luck' as opportunity

One of the most obvious and immediate ways that participants took up 'luck' as a discursive resource is in relation to their very acceptance into this paid programme. In no small part, they drew parallels between being admitted into the mentorship programme and potential admission into the larger field, as a 'foot in the door', if not a 'big break'. This is evident in many of the participants' accounts:

> I'm very happy that I got the opportunity. It was really good. ... And at the same time, because of the connection that this created, that was created, this deeper development is kind of taking place. So that's great. So it is effectively, like I said, like a jumping platform, a launching platform to start something. Hopefully, touch wood, there's really this chance of that still going into that really rich place. (Male mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

More specific forms of access are also evoked, such as a desired professional step change:

> [I'm] mid-career, but it was really just a chance for me to expand my skills and knowledge in one particular area that I really knew I didn't have any idea about and I didn't want to do a course or just sort of do this formal education. I felt like I've got enough background skills that I can pick it up, but it would

> be great to have someone there to, kind of, really just ask questions of and get advice. (Mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

The impact of acceptance into the programme, and by a mentor, is arguably most profound for those who identify as early career professionals or, as the study phrased it in the multiple-choice options available to research participants, who are at a 'becoming established' stage of their career:

> I had quite a targeted goal, and a desire of what I really wanted to learn, and that is why it was so important that I'm able to work with [my mentor]. So, first off the bat, I want to say that I felt extremely lucky that he agreed to mentor me at all, because he really didn't have to. And he did make it clear that it's something that he gets approached relatively regularly for, and the majority of the time – almost all the time – has said no. And [he] was candid enough with me to share that it was the fact that I was so pure of heart in my quest for learning more about the ceramic form and how to better myself as a maker within that framework, and looking to have a really long relationship with clay is really what showed him my commitment, I think, as well as my creative resume that was behind me already. (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

This extract illustrates several different aspects of luck and opportunity that are taken up in the mentees' talk as resources for their own sense making and construction of career claims and potential success. Firstly, there is the luck that the well-established and respected mentor is willing to share his time and experience, with additional gratitude expressed here because of this mentor's stated reluctance to agree to such requests. Indeed, many mentees suggest that the biggest 'win' or opportunity of the programme is that such senior practitioners are open to investing time and energy in them and their career. In effect, the mentor's agreement to be involved amounted to permission to the mentee to take themselves seriously as a creative professional. This is especially significant given the relative absence of clear markers of professional recognition and progression in creative careers. The affirmation of the mentor's agreement could function as a marker of the mentee's specialness and stand-out qualities within a crowded field of aspirants. Many participants describe the sense of validation they felt when they are accepted by a chosen mentor:

> Well, I think the mentorship has done more for me than I could have ever imagined and it's really just given me that validation or the acknowledgement from a very prominent contemporary peer that I admire that my work is good. And it's really just as simple as that, actually having a chance to workshop some of those ideas and just getting that acknowledgement. … I think because we're all individual artists and we're always doubting and second guessing ourselves because we're pushing new boundaries and creating things that have never been seen before, so to have support with that or guidance with that, it's just – especially when you're working independently, not in a combined studio or workshop – that, yeah, is just amazing support. … I think it needed to be in the intimate engagement to actually have a holistic understanding of who I was and what I was doing – to validate that and then – and to give comment and understand that. Often we are misinterpreted as an artist because people don't have the opportunity all the time to engage you. (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

The above extract shows a second pattern from the interviews, namely references to the luck or opportunity of having a mentor who is willing to engage closely with the mentee's work, beyond a practical level. In the above extract, the interviewee initially discusses the value of the mentorship in terms of her work and working practices ('validation or the acknowledgement … that might work is good'; 'a change to workshop … ideas') but moved quickly to references to emotion and affect ('doubting and second guessing ourselves') as a part of the inevitable working experience of artists. She then expresses the contribution of the mentorship in highly personal terms: 'just amazing support … intimate engagement … a holistic understanding of who I was and what I was doing – to validate that'. The mentor, she claims, is able to 'understand that' or, in other words, to understand her, in contrast to the artist's more usual experience of being 'misinterpreted'. This account invokes well-established discourses of creative work, and especially art, in which the professional and the personal are conflated: to understand her work it is necessary to understand

her, because the two are inextricably linked, and the mentor took the trouble to engage and achieve this understanding.

Another strong pattern of references to feeling and emotion centred on confidence and the idea that an increase in confidence is one of the benefits conferred by acceptance into the programme, and by their mentor:

> So, the validation that came from this mentorship was really, really important for my confidence, sense of direction, purpose. (Male mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

> I think it had a really big impact as far, especially as far as just giving me some confidence in my practice, because it was really quite early days and that's the first professional thing I've done. But the confidence to, I guess approach places like that ... So it's the confidence, putting applications in and getting them accepted and just forming that relationship with them, the professional relationship with them as well, would be just as important, I think. (Female mentee, earlier programme)

> Well, I guess, it kind of evolved as the project took place. Really I was looking for support and professional development with my practice and after, well, during the mentorship it was very obvious from my mentor that it was confidence that I was really – that's really key to me moving forward with my practice, so that was really clearly identified to me through the mentorship. So it was great to actually have some support to give me confidence to move through with some of the work that I was in the process of. (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

Some mentees linked this confidence to a process in which, over the course of the mentorship, the mentee rose to the same status as the mentor, becoming their equal:

> I think it was very important not just through guidance and information in a very – no, it wasn't just about the transference of information, it was much more about, well equally as importantly about developing networks. But really, as a young emerging artist, it was incredibly positive in terms of the confidence that it helped me develop in being able to speak to – you know, initially a stranger, and have some confidence in what I was doing, and thinking that that was of interest to someone else, and also, an established practitioner. And so, there was all the, of course, trips and tricks types of transfer, but there was also, on a much more foundational level, I guess, development of mutual respect, which was incredibly important, because the dynamic of the mentorship, of the mentor really becoming a colleague and being, for myself being an emerging artist, being treated so that my interests and ideas and what I was wanting to do was just as valid as someone who was well into their career. And so, that kind of, that mutual, that respect that flowed back from the mentor was incredibly affirming. So, I think that, alongside just general guidance and having someone with much greater experience than myself to just listen to, as well as talk to, yeah, was I guess part of developing a strong foundation to ensure that my practice would continue was incredibly important. (Female mentee, earlier programme)

In this account, the initial relationship with the mentor as a 'stranger' and 'an established practitioner' subsequently develops through 'mutual respect' into 'the mentor really becoming a colleague'. Once again there are references to validation ('what I was wanting to do was just as valid as someone who was well into their career') and affirmation ('that respect that flowed back from the mentor was incredibly affirming'). As in previous accounts, this account is highly personal. More practical gains are presented as relatively unimportant ('all the ... trips and tricks types of transfer') compared to the 'more foundational' personal gains.

The following exchange between the interviewer and a mentee concisely summarises the narrative indicated in the previous extracts. The mentor contributes practical guidance, for example on deadlines, but the more important contribution, referred to in more detail even as the mentee attempts to limit personal disclosure, is that he helped her gain confidence and overcome self-doubt:

> A: And to have his feedback and just regularly someone to look over how it was developing and give you feedback is really, it helped to give you deadlines and to work towards. Alright, I've got to get this done to show him because he's coming next week and, and then it helped with, helped me be confident in what I was doing. And that was another thing I wrote in it was just developing, helping with confidence as an artist, which he did do because that can be quite, I don't know, what's the word, limiting, when they don't have a lot of confidence some, in some ways.

> Q: But he helped you develop that as an artist?

> A: Just, just to help get, stop self-doubt, not – I believe in my artwork, but I just felt like I wasn't, I don't know, won't go too much into, into my insecurities—
>
> Q: No, that's okay—
>
> A: But, but it was like, I believe in my own artwork but I didn't, wasn't sure if other people did, maybe. And it just felt good that he did and he was really, he just put this ground of confidence under me; right go from strength to strength. (Female mentee, earlier programme)

In summary, the extracts discussed in this section evidence some of the discursive work and potential reputational work accomplished by explicit references to 'luck'.

4.2. 'Luck' and gratitude

As demonstrated in the quotations above, the research participants on the whole express gratitude for the opportunities the mentorship provides, and for the efforts of their mentors. There is an interesting tension around being grateful because it implies both a positive response and a lack of formal entitlement. For instance, gratitude would not normally be expressed as a (sincere) response to wages that have been earned or anything else that has been legitimately and deservedly acquired, such as goods that have been paid for or attention that is warranted. The participants' expressions of gratitude suggest some lucky return beyond what they could expect from the programme, some additional benefit, perhaps recalling Mackenzie and McKinlay's reference to 'favours returned' (2021: 1842). At times there is even a suggestion that as a creative worker the speaker has special privilege or advantage of access to an artistic and creative career that transcends the experience of ordinary work and workers.

In the following extract, a participant expresses gratitude for an experience in the programme that exceeded her expectations:

> because I haven't had the experience working with a mentor like that before, I was also talking to lots of my artist friends who had done it or just about their experiences, and I think it sounded like we had quite – it was just natural, kind of natural kind of flow in our relationship. So maybe that, it was just lucky or meant to be or something, I don't know. (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

The following participant expresses a more general gratitude for the positive aspects of life in a creative occupation, including an appreciation of the opportunities to travel that their creative 'day job' afforded them:

> [I'm a] painter and ceramicist, and my main bread and butter in my business is travelling with my unique, creative workshops that I have kind of branded for myself that combines my teaching experience and my love of encouraging creativity in people, and supporting mental health practices through the visual arts. So I'm lucky enough to get to travel, in a non-COVID world, quite widely around Australia. But even this weekend, I'm able to run two back-to-back workshops in Mount Gambier in hand building ceramics. So, that's my main business, but I'm an exhibiting artist as well, and I've currently got a solo show on at ... [a regional art gallery], and I've just recently finished the other solo show. (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

The specialness of being creative became a bond between two artists in a circumstance when they are working with scientists, and the bond then produced positive outcomes in the project. The 'luck' here seems to be attached to several aspects of the experience:

> Yeah, and a bit of camaraderie because we were the two artists in with scientists and we were both new to them, so it's – I think it also put some of the staff at ease because they saw us and how we were together, that how safe it looked. I think it also helped us develop relationships with a lot of the staff at the [herbarium] too, and yeah, so it was just fantastic, it was really lucky. (Female mentee, earlier programme)

Coming as many of the interviews did during the peak impacts of COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns and closures, some of the instances of 'luck' discussed represent gratitude that things are not as bad as they could have been under the circumstances. This includes gratitude for

something that might normally be seen by a creative worker as a negative – namely, the need to balance the demands of a portfolio career to sustain a liveable income:

> They kind of just threw the installers, the casuals under a bus. Like they went and said, 'We're doing everything to support [you]', but they didn't. We just got an email telling us to go to Centrelink. So luckily I had my own business as well.... So they didn't put any of us on JobKeeper [the Australian government's emergency payment to workers who lost income due to lockdowns]. But luckily, because I had my own business, I was a sole trader business, I was able to get JobKeeper. So I got JobKeeper, I had to do JobSeeker [unemployment benefits] for a bit, then I got JobKeeper, then business was really good, so like, by the end of the year I was off JobKeeper. I was earning too much. I was back to where I was, you know? (Male mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

A powerful sense of gratitude permeates many of the especially female mentees' interview transcripts, perhaps following from the additional challenges faced by women in creative occupations (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015a). For them any positive experience of creative work, of opportunity or others going out of their way to in some fashion to assist them is rarely taken for granted; indeed they frequently emphasise their gratitude. One short section of dialogue with someone who is now an established and recognised artist themselves, who has been both a mentor and mentee in various programmes run by this and other organisations, serves to illustrate this:

> Q: And did you approach her [your mentor] to establish that relationship between the two of you?
>
> A: Yes, so, and we'd had lots of informal discussions over a few years, but when that mentorship application came up, I approached [name of mentor] and told her what I would like and she was very enthusiastic as well, so that was lucky for me.
>
> Q: How relevant do you think having a personal connection with a mentor is for the success of a mentorship programme, do you think?
>
> A: I think, look, I think it's really helpful, but I don't think it should be barring people from teaming up with a mentor as well. It might not be possible for some people to team up with a mentor, so to have that relationship before, especially since a lot of people do tend to work on their own a bit more, I think, and so I was just very lucky that I was able to have that access. (Female mentee, earlier programme)

Elsewhere in the interview the respondent reiterated both her luck to have the mentor she did – 'I think I was very lucky with that, with [name of mentor], having a mentor who does that is gold' (Female mentee, earlier programme) – and in having just 'snuck' into the programme to begin with:

> Q: What mentoring programme were you involved in?
>
> A: So the first one was in 2004, I think it was just – I can't remember what it was called but you had to be up to 30 years of age and I got in at, just at that age bracket, so that was lucky. And so I can't remember what it was called. I can get back to you on that one? (Female mentee, earlier programme)

Again here the confidence boost from having a respected mentor taking you seriously is evident. As previously discussed, the relative absence of formal markers of arrival, progression and success can render it difficult to identify as a professional artist proudly and confidently. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising to see not only creative aspirants but established artists presenting themselves as unusually lucky. It may be that, in the face of precarity, many artists have taken up a self-identification as a person who is not entitled, that is, as somehow unworthy of opportunity, fair dealing, understanding or genuine good luck. If so, it may feel like a surprise, bonus or piece of good luck when such opportunity or recognition does occur; being successful becomes just getting 'lucky'.

4.3. 'Luck' as 'chance': The discursive work of de-personalising failure

A further function of references to 'luck' in difficult circumstances can be to distance artists and other creative workers from failure or missed opportunities. When framed this way success becomes something achieved by chance, so failure does not reflect upon the artist or worker personally. As already noted, this kind of rationalising denies entitlement (for example, achievement

based on effort, talent, skill and experience), but in a tight labour market, and with decreasing pools of government funding, engaging discourses of luck and chance can become a mode of de-personalising the impacts of rejections in order to manage such difficulties and persist in a creative career. At some points in the interviews, this contradiction or dilemma is confronted, as in the following extract in which the speaker re-asserts the importance of effort and the necessary commitment, for instance, to doing the work of building a quality portfolio of outputs alongside developing a professional profile: 'because some people manage to luck into it, and I do admire that, although I would say, of course, the vast majority of artists really have to carve it out with genuine toil' (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme).

However, elsewhere, the resource of luck is frequently mobilised, as in the following example:

> And I think making it as an artist is something that – there could be thousands and – hundreds of thousands of great artists out there that are just as good as one another, but a select few actually make it. And it's kind of like a lucky straw, drawing a short straw or a long straw – you know what I mean? There's a lot [of] luck involved. (Female mentee, contemporary mentoring programme)

Similarly,

> If you can get it [government funding], if you can get it, it's a great incentive but, you know, it's such a tiny amount for a lot of hungry people. But I would call it more of a barrier because of the amount of time that you spend applying for that shit and then the actual amount you get any grants or funding is so far between. Yeah, and then fees in education and then all these things that are unsupported by governments now, yeah, it's pretty poor. And I would definitely at the end call it a barrier, unless you're one of the lucky few who gets an Oz Co [Australia Council] grant, in which case awesome. (Male mentor, contemporary mentoring programme)

That gratitude so actively expressed seemed especially prevalent among female mentees, which also suggests that the randomness of chance is one way to soften the blows of the intersectional inequality of opportunity in creative work outlined earlier.

5. Discussion: 'Making one's own luck': Balancing neoliberal reality, self-belief, and community

What clearly emerges in these interviews is the complex affective aspects of the labour involved in building a creative career. Far from a clear process of getting the right accreditation and then applying for work, what is evident here is the personal toll and the important role that hope, of necessity, must play in sustaining the work of generating luck, and thus opportunity. What this language also reveals is the well-established patterns of discursive work that make difficulties manageable, encompassing the experiences of both bad and good luck, of opportunities refused as well as accessed. But this discursive work is not undertaken naively, as false consciousness; rather it operates as a strategy that is part of the discourses of contemporary creative and artist work, and also implicated through them in the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism. Persistence in a creative career in the face of structural inequality and an over-subscribed employment landscape does indeed reflect an idealised entrepreneurial neoliberal self, publicly performing confidence culture and relentless positivity (Gill and Orgad, 2015; Orgad and Gill, 2022). But, like Mackenzie and McKinlay (2021) and Alacovska (2018), we see this labour as reflecting cultural work as a site of complex, and constant, negotiation, imbricated certainly in capitalist economic rationales, but importantly also in gift and alternative economies.

In this way, hope labour within more artistically oriented parts of the cultural and creative industries still operates in a context inflected with the legacy community values of the arts field, certainly more so than the emerging, competitive social media terrain of Kuehn and Corrigan's (2013) and Duffy's (2015) media workers. The artistic cultural field remains one where, as Banks has written, the desire to engage in ethical work remains a strong driver and shared ethos:

> Despite the primacy of an instrumental rationality, I suggest that contemporary capitalism is a sufficiently imperfect operation to accommodate a broad range of moral values that will potentially affect a diversity of outcomes at the level of practice (Willis, 1990). The intention here is to provide some

> empirical evidence of cultural entrepreneurs undertaking ethical work; that is, to show how they are self-consciously engaged in forms of practice that contain ideas about what is 'good' (and therefore 'bad'), exhibit moral ways of acting towards others and negotiate the balance between holding instrumental or non-instrumental values. (Banks, 2006: 461)

Banks further describes the 'blurring of boundaries between work and non-work' and therefore the 'conditions for the increased integration and overlap of hitherto separate realms of obligation (moral-political and contractual)' as a key enabler of 'forms of workplace identity that exhibit morally complex characteristics, some of which are translatable into socially useful actions' (Banks, 2006: 461). The frequently deeply affective one-to-one relationship of a structured mentor programme consequently operates as a hopeful affirmation of professional identity, and a signifier of acceptance into that professional community, consolidating 'an occupational identity that they have carefully and deliberately chosen' (Bain, 2005: 25). As Bain has written, creative workers operate within a field marked by 'the limited means of clearly distinguishing between professional and amateur, and the lack of recognition attributed to artistic labour as "real" work' which means that 'professional status comes largely from drawing on a repertoire of shared myths and stereotypes to help create an artistic identity and project it to others' (Bain, 2005: 25). It is in this context that luck, gratitude, opportunity and hope function as valuable discursive tools to sustain the enabling 'repertoire of shared myths' which sustains the work of artists and many creative workers.

6. Conclusion

As earlier stated, artists and creative workers are expected to personally bear the burden of (hopefully) achieving both success and, arguably more notably and powerfully, also the appearance of success. In other words, in the neoliberal economic marketplace they must narrate their own success or failure, despite the realities of unequal access to the creative employment field. A key part of this self-presentation is being able to justify oneself as a creative worker, being able to tell a plausible and persuasive career story, not just to others, but also, if it is to be sustained, to oneself. We argue that participating as a mentee, especially in a formal mentoring programme, is a way to 'make your own luck' at various moments along what is otherwise a relatively uncertain professional career trajectory. Additionally, becoming a mentor can function as an important marker of arrival, and mentors may also seek to create their own goodwill opportunities by making themselves available to undertake the role. Against this backdrop, the take up of resources of 'luck' and 'chance' are key discursive strategies to allow hope to (re-)enter aspiration, as something the creative career aspirant needs to 'make for themself' in order to eke out potential spaces for opportunity in the face of the structural barriers and precarity of artistic and creative work.

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