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Editorial Note

## Folded Valuations?

Claes-Fredrik Helgesson

### Cringing valuation practices

In a recently aired episode of the TV series *Black Mirror* we are invited into the world of Lacie.<sup>1</sup> In the typical style of *Black Mirror*, we are invited into a social reality quite similar to our own, but with certain technologies somewhat enhanced. In the world of Lacie every social interaction, however insignificant, involves the activity of immediately rating one another on a scale from 1 to 5. This significantly modifies most people's behaviour: they make great, and sometimes cringing, efforts to appear likeable so as to attract high ratings and improve their overall score. For instance, Lacie's brief encounter with Jack working at the coffee shop is performed with mutual smiles and pleasantries to then end with reciprocated ratings. We further soon learn that the overall score is far from a mere matter of vanity. Your score carries weight for job opportunities, in social life, and where you can live.<sup>2</sup> In short, the score is highly consequential. No wonder that Lacie puts a lot of effort into improving her 4.2 score, including having sessions with a modern analyst/therapist about how to quickly bump up her numbers.

I would like to take the opportunity in this editorial note to reflect on the folding of different valuation practices. With the notion of folds and folding I want to denote both the instance where a valuation

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<sup>1</sup> 'Nosedive', episode 1 season 3, first aired 21 October 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The wide use of such a score has striking resonance with the 'citizen score card' developed in China as described by Julian Jürgenmeyer and Karoline Krenn in their contribution to this issue (Jürgenmeyer and Krenn 2016).

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practice is feeding and impinging on another valuation practice and the practices that achieve such interrelations between valuation practices.<sup>3</sup> In the story about Lacie her worthiness as a co-worker or tenant was influenced by how she was rated even by the total strangers she briefly encountered. The particular folds between valuation practices in Lacie's world are naturally highly stylised to fit a 60-minute storyline. In our own world they are far more varied, insidious, and (at least sometimes) sophisticated. How do different valuation practices influence and feed one another? With what means and efforts are such foldings brought about and with what consequences? What do we find if we look into the nooks and crannies of a conglomeration of interrelated valuation practices?

I would like to engage with these questions by profiting from my vantage point as co-Editor-in-Chief for a small academic journal. Just as David Pontille and Didier Torny (2014) recently talked about journal peer review as involving several different tests, I want to examine the multiple valuations related to scholarly journal publishing and in particular how they require us to think about how these valuation practices are folded into one another. We have in previous editorial notes written about valuations of scholarly publishing, but then typically focusing on one valuation practice in particular, such as the assessment of manuscripts as simultaneously work and valuation (Helgesson and Muniesa 2014), or reflecting on the precarious status of being a new and fledgling journal (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013). My attention in this editorial note is directed towards the folding of valuation practices into one another.

### **An inventory of valuation practices**

Let's begin by making a provisional inventory of valuation practices directly or indirectly related to the making of a scholarly journal. One way to do this is to identify the valuation practices that centre on the various entities involved in scholarly journal publishing: manuscripts, authors, reviewers, editors, articles, readers, journals, publishers/funders, etc.

Manuscripts are intimately tied in to *the editorial process* where one or several editors assess them and further involve reviewers in this extended task. While the manuscript is the main object of valuation in the editorial process, other entities such as reviewers, author(s), and editor(s) are also regularly subject to assessment in the editorial process. Who would be able and available to review this manuscript? What revisions might be within the capacity and interests of this

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<sup>3</sup> The way valuation practices may impinge on one another resonates with what Jürgenmeyer and Krenn in this issue call 'the feedback loops of valuation regimes' (Jürgenmeyer and Krenn 2016).

particular author to achieve? Are the editors really giving my manuscript their full attention? Hence, the editorial process is in itself a highly extended and multifaceted valuation practice (see also Hirschauer 2010, 2014; Pontille and Torny 2014).

Another set of valuation practices centre around individual published articles. Published articles are assessed as they are read, discussed, criticised, praised, put on syllabus, and so on. In short, they become more or less valuable parts of the never-ending stream of conversations that makes up the core of the scholarly trade. One particular kind of valuation practice that tries to embrace and assess the social life and status of an article is the counting of citations. Instead of asking how to directly assess the worthiness of a given text, these practices home in on how many times a particular article has been cited by others. This has, in its turn, created many discussions about how to properly perform that counting and how well it represents other assessments of an article. Some journals furthermore participate in promulgating assessments of published articles. This can be done by providing lists of articles ‘most cited’ or ‘most read’. (The latter is most often operationalised by using the proxy of downloads, which anyone who has a reading backlog would recognise as stretching what counts as reading.) In all, several valuation practices are tied to published articles, and some are far more metricised than others.

Journals are themselves the object of several valuations. Some take the indistinct form of gauging a journal’s reputation among peers, normally glancing at particularly good (or bad) articles they have published and the esteem of published authors, editors, board members, and so on. Other valuations are more formalised, such as the one performed prior to including a journal in an index such as that maintained by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Similar processes are performed for entering more excluding lists and rankings such as the ABS list maintained by the Chartered Association of Business Schools, which ranks journals in disciplines related to business schools.<sup>4</sup> There are furthermore metrics like rejection rate and impact factor, which measure impact as the average number of citations for articles published in that journal during the two preceding years. Journals are in addition assessed as part of their efforts to acquire necessary funding. *Valuation Studies*, for instance, is currently supported by the Swedish Research Council following review of an application. One would guess that commercial publishing houses do some kind of return-on-investment assessment of their many journals. I could go on. Even this tiny sample illustrates the variety of settings in which academic journals are assessed. This glance at journals as

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<sup>4</sup> For a study of the creation of three other lists in the social sciences and humanities, see Pontille and Torny (2010).

objects of valuation furthermore exemplifies a particular folding of assessments in that the assessment of a journal's impact factor is created by folding the assessment of articles in terms of citations.

Then we have the scholars. They appear in multiple roles in the area of scholarly journal publishing; they are authors, editors, reviewers, and readers. Scholars craft their curriculum vitae (CV), a written 'course of life', to display who they are, and other scholars use them as part of assessing applications for jobs, grants, and so on. A CV regularly documents several matters related to journal publishing such as articles published, reviewer assignments fulfilled, and possible editorial positions. Other assessments of scholars focus entirely on their capacities as authors and might in its crudest metric be expressed as a single integer of an h-index per examined author (the higher the h-index the better). Not only does the assessment of scholars partly rely on matters produced by journals, the converse is also true in that journals rely on the assessment of scholars for their operations. This includes editorial assessments of suitable reviewers and whether a particular proposer of a special issue proposal makes it worthy of a closer look. There is, however, a surprising lack of assessments of readers. I have yet to come across a CV listing 'Good articles read'. Even in the UK, where the academic title 'Reader' is used, it seems to be awarded based on the candidate's ability to publish rather than for being a particularly talented reader. Leaving this slight digression aside, there is, as most readers of this editorial are certainly aware, an impressive and sometimes even brutal set of ways in which scholars are assessed in relation to scholarly journal publishing.<sup>5</sup>

If all these different objects of valuation could only be voices in a massive choir sharing their experiences; the likely cacophony would be in many keys, but still worthy of attention. Listening carefully, we would discern a disrespected manuscript lamenting, in a minor key, how it got caught in a spiteful triumvirate of two contradictory reviewers and a directionless editor. Simultaneously we would hear another manuscript providing an uncontrollable chant of joy after having finally got out of a seemingly endless cycle of 'revise and resubmit'. A journal might howl about how impact factor measurements are completely ignoring whether it has a recognisable and worthy editorial scope or not, whereas another journal yodels about the merits of a particular rank where it happens to be in the top tier. Another possible set of voices would belong to reviewers who close to the deadline reprimand themselves for ever having accepted to review the manuscript they have only just now begun to read. A set of articles would contribute a complex cycle in many ways: some articles croon about their strange experience of increasingly being cited

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<sup>5</sup> Scholarly life, it seems to me, is an area begging to be examined in ways similar to the contribution by Henrik Fürst in this issue who has examined how aspiring fiction writers handle rejections (Fürst 2016).

without being read while others chant about how it is to be read repeatedly without ever being cited. In the background there is a massive choir of articles humming about their ambiguous status of having been published only to be neither cited nor read. (We would need to listen carefully to hear them at all.) Bringing in the authors, editors, and readers for the chorus adds further to the cacophony, singing as they do to their hearts content about worthwhile reads, valuable contributions, h-indices, impact factors, and so on. It would be a massively loud, motley, and impressive choir.

What I have provided here is a very provisional inventory of valuation practices. Most academics could presumably add specific valuation practices I have failed to mention or indeed provide stories that would add more voices to the above imagined choir of experiences. My objective was not to be exhaustive, but to quickly establish that there is indeed a large and diverse set of valuation practices at play that are directly or indirectly related to the making of a scholarly journal. There are many objects assessed, many entities involved, and these valuation practices produce a rich variety of outcomes and experiences. Some are highly public, like citation counts, whereas others are carefully kept within narrow circles, such as the editorial decision letters and reviewer assessments. Moreover, these valuation practices are interrelated in complex ways. It is useful to think of these interrelations as ‘foldings’.

### **The folding of valuation practices**

I have already briefly indicated some foldings in the large conglomerate of valuation practices related to scholarly journal publishing. That these foldings exist is not surprising, since an interrelation between valuation practices is often part of their design. One example is how the counting of citations of a published article is folded into the impact assessment of the journal publishing the article as well as into assessments of its authors. Yet, there is reason to give the possible foldings of valuation practices more attention and to go beyond the most obvious interrelations. I will do this by first looking at two more subtle foldings, and then reflecting on the characterisation of different foldings and their consequences.

A few years ago the blog ‘The Scholarly Kitchen’ ran a blog post about the rapidly growing impact factor of the journal *Cell Transplantation* (Davis 2012). In 2006, this journal had had an impact factor of 3.482 and in 2010 it was 6.204, enough of an increase to be remarked upon. The post identified two other journals as especially prone to cite articles published in *Cell Transplantation*. In fact, two review articles in two other journals alone contributed 541 citations to articles published in *Cell Transplantation* in 2008 and 2009, and were hence included in the calculation of the 2010 impact factor for *Cell*

*Transplantation*. Incidentally, the blog post added, a majority of the authors of these two review articles were members of the editorial board of *Cell Transplantation*. The blog post noted that this had continued. In addition, the journal *Cell Transplantation* had itself published a similar review article in 2010 that heavily cited articles in another journal. This article was co-authored by the editor-in-chief and a co-editor of the journal ‘receiving’ these citations. The blog post thus drew the contours of what it called a ‘citation cartel’, which is more difficult to detect than the practice of citing other articles in the same journal.

The ease to which members of an editorial board were able to use a cartel of journals to influence their journal’s impact factor concerns me greatly because the cost to do so is very low, the rewards are astonishingly high, it is difficult to detect, and the practice can be facilitated very easily by overlapping editorial boards or through cooperative agreements between them. What’s more, editors can protect these “reviews” from peer review if they are labeled as “editorial material,” as some are. It’s the perfect strategy for gaming the system. (Davis 2012)

Setting aside the judgemental notion of ‘gaming the system’, this is clearly another example of the complex foldings of valuation practices in scholarly journal publishing. Editors can in addition be authors and as such they might find it worthwhile to cite some articles published in the journal they are editing. Such activity not only adds lines to their individual CVs, but further increases citations to articles and may in this way add to the impact factor of the journal they edit. Finally, as the above quote indicates, it can be done in a way that circumvents the peer review process, for instance, by calling it editorial material (just as this editorial note).

The other folding I would like to mention concerns the practice of reviewing. In most circumstances it would be wrong to consider reviewers as decision makers over what gets published in a journal. That task is the chore of editors. Yet reviewers can of course through their reviews influence the judgements and decisions editors make. Imagine a situation where a reviewer reads a manuscript that is not terribly promising and, to add insult to injury, cites several of the reviewer’s own works. Favourably, one should add. While this hardly compensates for the manuscript’s shortcomings in the eye of the reviewer, it certainly may add a dimension to the practice of reviewing. What if the manuscript could be sufficiently improved to be acceptable for publication? In this age of personalised metrics, a reviewer might not only ponder how such a publication could reflect on his or her own scholarship, but in addition reflect on what it would mean for improving the reviewer’s own h-index—another folding, possibly present at times, but not in a visible way. Let us call this an example of a ‘torn reviewer situation’.



The ‘citation cartel’ and the ‘torn reviewer situation’ are examples of subtle foldings between valuation practices in scholarly publishing. They highlight how different valuation practices exemplified in the inventory above may be folded into one another in less visible ways. The practice of reviewing might come to involve reflections about the reviewer’s h-index, and an author’s citing of an article might involve considerations about the impact factor of a journal. In a recent article in *Nature* Mario Biagioli (2016) mentions a few other similar instances of interrelated valuation practices, such as the ‘review and citation ring’ where favourable fake reviews are traded for citations of the reviewer’s works. Biagioli further stresses that such ‘cheats in the citation game’ are enabled by the audit culture of universities, in love as they are with impact factors, citation statistics, and so on. One could restate this as a case where certain already highly folded valuation practices, such as those cherished by audit hungry universities, apparently stimulate further foldings of valuation practices.

It is striking how the examples of ‘citation cartels’, ‘torn reviewer situations’, and ‘review and citation rings’ share an element of being considered less legitimate. This would be indicated by how they attract labels such as gaming, cheating, and self-seeking. The ease with which we recognise certain foldings as legitimate, and others as less legitimate, is an important topic in its own right. An author publishing an article would rarely be considered as ‘gaming the system’, even though it clearly adds a new line to the author’s CV. Repeated self-citation, would, on the other hand, easily attract such a derogatory labelling.<sup>6</sup> Hence, there is an interesting dynamic here as to characterising the folding of valuation practices as proper or improper, legitimate or illegitimate. Instead of taking such characterisations as representing intrinsic qualities of specific foldings, an analytic approach here would be to consider the declaration of such characterisations as part of the politics of the folding of valuation practices. The presence of such a categorical characterisation is, in my view, a clear indication of the importance of a detailed examination of how valuation practices are folded into one another. In a detailed examination of foldings, it would only be prudent to include an investigation of how certain foldings come to be considered as proper while others come to be considered as improper.

There are perhaps further analytical possibilities to be had from taking seriously all the diverse foldings of valuation practices related to scholarly journal publishing. It might, for instance, provide a vantage point for examining research excellence as a practical achievement. It might, furthermore, provide a way to examine how the Matthew

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<sup>6</sup> Guilty as charged? I do understand that the self-citations in this editorial note may attract such harsh judgements.

effects in science (Merton 1968) are brought about without evoking psychosocial mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> Among other things, Merton pointed to how publications by known scholars might be more recognised. As an indicator he suggested a look at “citation indexes to find whether in multiple discoveries by scientists of markedly unequal rank it is indeed the case that work published by the scientists of higher rank is the more promptly and more widely cited.” (Merton 1968: 60) Attention to the folding of valuation practices would suggest examining citation indexes as part of the folded valuation practices that can produce Matthew effects, rather than seeing them as only providing possible indicators of such effects.

One prominent theme in the study of valuation practices in various settings has been to examine how their configuration participates in shaping the enactment and negotiation of different values. The many valuation practices involved in scholarly publishing provide fertile grounds for examining this, be it the editorial process or the calculation of h-index. What I have briefly explored here is the folding of several valuation practices in scholarly journal publishing. Just as each valuation practice is wrought with the enactment and negotiation of different values, so are the foldings. Hence, the study of valuations as a social practice can fruitfully address the enactment and negotiation of values that come from the very folding of valuation practices on to one another.

### **The black mirror of folded valuation practices**

This editorial note has provided a brief reflection on what you see when you look into a black mirror of folded valuation practices. The reflection might not only be dark, although dark hues are certainly present. With the notion of folds and folding I wanted to address instances where one valuation practice is feeding and impinging on another valuation practice and the activities that achieve such interrelations between valuation practices. Addressing the folding of valuation practices invites looking at a complexity of interrelations and activities that escapes our view when we focus on a singular valuation practice.<sup>8</sup> Looking into the nooks and crannies of a conglomeration of interrelated valuation practices further provides a

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<sup>7</sup> The Matthew effect in science is to denote that already better recognised researchers are more likely to gain further recognition than are less well-known researchers, even if the latter's work is similar. Merton evoked psychosocial mechanisms for explaining this, such as that successful scientists tried harder since more became expected of them.

<sup>8</sup> A related theme is how new valuations practices or devices need to relate to folded valuations already in place, as described by Amalie Martinus Hauge (2016) in this issue. Moreover, the contribution in this issue by Erwin Dekker on exemplars further reminds us that judgement devices indeed in themselves can be multidimensional and folded (Dekker 2016).

glimpse of a politics beyond the singular valuation practice; this is the politics of how valuation practices are folded on to one another, and how these folds are characterised.

The folding of valuations can, it seems, be a politics of high stakes. This is furthermore at the same time as the folding of valuations can lack an identifiable centre or well-defined locus of accountability. When looking into the black mirror of folded valuation practices we see no singular valuation practice, no singular individual, responsible for sealing the fate of Lacie. The fate of Lacie was all achieved by folds.

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## Exemplary Goods: Exemplars as Judgment Devices

Erwin Dekker

### Abstract

In this article the notion of exemplars is developed to study valuation processes. It argues that exemplary goods are an important ‘judgment device’ on markets of singular goods, which has so far been ignored in the literature. The article draws on Hannah Arendt’s theory of exemplars, as well as literature from the philosophy of science and psychology to construct the new concept. Exemplars are particular goods that become focal points in markets that facilitate the mutual coordination of consumers and producers. From these exemplars norms of quality emerge which are otherwise hard or impossible to explicate. These exemplars and the norms of quality which emerge from them help shape the expectations of both producers and consumers with regard to new goods that are introduced to the market. Two illustrative cases, on classic literature and hip-hop music, are presented to demonstrate the relevance of the concept.

Key words: valuation; exemplars; economy of qualities; cultural economics; singular goods; classification

We frequently reason from particular to particular, from one unique instance to another. LeBron James is an excellent basketball player, but not as good as Michael Jordan. The recent Woody Allen movie is nice, but not as good as *Annie Hall* or *Manhattan*. Wealth inequality is almost as high as it was during the Belle Époque. This type of reasoning is important not just in everyday speech; but when we analyze business models the use of exemplary case studies is a recurring theme. We want our organization to run like the best out there. ‘Harvard on the Maas’ is the current aspiration here in Rotterdam. In science too, particular exemplars are important as an

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inspiration and guide to what good science is. Does an economist want to be an economist like Adam Smith or like Paul Samuelson? a sociologist like Max Weber or Talcott Parsons? This paper argues that exemplars are an important judgment device in markets for singular goods (Karpik 2010). These exemplary goods are not average examples, or representative of the wide variation out there, but they are able to capture the typical, the exemplary.

Market coordination is traditionally believed to occur via changes in prices and quantity. In a set of articles Hayek (1937, 1945) demonstrated that the power of markets is to coordinate a variety of individual economic plans via adjustments to market prices and quantities, a process which lies at the heart of supply-and-demand dynamics. Central to this process is the use of knowledge that is dispersed throughout society. Hayek, and economists after him, however, has largely neglected how quality coordination can occur. This project has recently been taken up by Lucien Karpik (2010). He argues that in markets for singular goods—goods which are all different from one another such as movies, medical services or dining experiences—such coordination via price and quantity is of limited importance. According to him quality coordination is, in line with Hayek, of great importance in such markets (see also White 2002). To study quality coordination Karpik develops four economic coordination regimes, which are institutional arrangements that structure the dispersion of knowledge in different markets for singular goods (Karpik 2010). Within these economic coordination regimes, he identifies different judgment devices, which act as signposts for consumers. Karpik broadly uses this notion to include advertising, reviews, rankings and networks. Sometimes these judgment devices are developed by producers or consumers, but often mediators are important actors in this coordination process. Without wishing to contest the importance of Karpik's judgment devices, we focus here on a different type of judgment device, the exemplary good. The exemplary good is (one of the) currently prominent goods, which acts as reference or focal point for the identification of the relevant qualities of a particular type of good for consumers.

To develop the concept of exemplars, and exemplary goods, we will build on Hannah Arendt's theory of judgment. Her theory is, like Karpik's, concerned with the tension between the general and the particular. Karpik calls these goods singularities, to emphasize their uniqueness, but he recognizes that to be understood they have to be related and commensurated to existing goods. Arendt argues that the exemplary mode of reasoning is of special importance when we judge the particular in light of the general, but without wanting to give up the uniqueness of the particular. This is typically the case for cultural goods as has been demonstrated in the various contributions of Nathalie Heinich (2005; for an English introduction see Danko 2008).

So while products are unique, they are in fact compared, contrasted and related to these exemplars (“if you liked the *West Wing* TV-series, you will love the *House of Cards*”). This can lead to somewhat paradoxical claims, as we will see in one of the illustrative case studies of novels below (“a genius as singular as Robert Walser, Bruno Schulz or Joseph Roth”). We will demonstrate that the goods bought and sold in markets for singular goods often oscillate between the two poles of ‘commodification and commensuration’ on the one hand and ‘singularization’ on the other (Kopytoff 1986).

The second aspect of exemplars that we will highlight is the plural notion of quality they enable. In any category we will find multiple exemplars, which represent different particular instances of the good or the desirable. The traditional economic manner of studying the prices (and hence the valuation) of differentiated goods is to study the shadow prices of their individual characteristics. But, so argues Karpik, the characteristics of say a Bordeaux wine cannot be split up, its qualities are interdependent (Karpik 2010: 24–26). Splitting up a product into separable characteristics might work for airbags added to a car, but matters are not as simple for an added flavor element to a wine or an additional brushstroke to a painting. The fact that such goods can be good in multiple, interdependent dimensions and that these are interdependent is called multidimensionality by Karpik. But, while he recognizes that this leads to a wide variety of combinations that can be valued, his theory does not really allow us to deal with this plural notion of quality. The judgment devices which Karpik refers to, such as rankings or charts, ultimately presume a single notion of quality. This is different for the labels, appellations and signifiers that Karpik associates with the authenticity regime, but even they refer to somewhat broader categories with associated standards of quality. Exemplars on the other hand provide a way of maintaining a variety of quality “standards,” through particular combinations of qualities, that more general judgment devices have trouble dealing with.

Finally exemplars are used across different economic coordination regimes. They serve an important role as reference points in graded category structures. The gradedness of categories means that some examples of a species or kind are a better example of that category than others. A robin is a more typical bird than the penguin or the ostrich. Exemplary goods are typically identified, precisely because they are a very good (or the best) fit. They embody a combination of qualities, which might be hard to make explicit, but which can be discovered through the interpretation of these exemplary goods.

Arendt’s theory, as well as other contributions to thinking about exemplars, will be discussed in Section 1. In Section 2 we will develop the notion of exemplars as a judgment device. Sections 3 and 4 contain illustrative case studies, or vignettes, which demonstrate the empirical

usefulness of this concept. Section 5 concludes with suggestions for further work in this direction.

### **Exemplary Validity**

Although exemplars have a long tradition, for example in the Christian tradition of portraying the life of saints as exemplary lives, they have received little systematic attention in the study of valuation. The exception is Hannah Arendt's theory of judgment, in which exemplars occupy a prominent place. Arendt's magnum opus was to be a two-volume work on the life of the mind. The theory of judging—in which she develops the theory of exemplary validity—followed the two other aspects of the life of the mind: thinking and willing. Judging would come closest to the *vita activa*, of which Arendt originally believed judging to be a part. Arendt (1982: 76) argues in the lectures on Kant's philosophy that the specific difficulty of judging is: "the faculty of thinking the particular." Pure thinking for Arendt is thinking in the general, it is thinking in rules, laws and regularities. Judging on the other hand is to consider the particular in light of the universal, but to keep in mind the uniqueness of the particular. This difficulty is even greater when, and here she quotes Kant: "the particular be given for which the general has to be found." So she argues that if we are dealing with unique occurrences, such as in history, we have to consider those occurrences in light of the general, but keeping in mind that individual occurrences can never be completely subsumed under any generality. There are also a great many cases for which a generality has not yet been found, and in that case we can, by definition, only compare certain particulars to other particulars.

The type of reasoning called for in such cases is different from two well-known other modes of reasoning. The deductive mode of reasoning starts from a universal law and then deduces what is true of the particular as in the time tested: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, and therefore Socrates is mortal. The other type of reasoning, prominent in the social sciences, is inferential reasoning which observes many particulars to arrive at "empirical regularities" which at some stage would preferably be formulated as universal laws. Inferential reasoning has been perfected with the development of statistics over the past century and a half or so and deductive reasoning has been perfected with the help of axiomatic mathematical reasoning, but exemplary reasoning is usually discarded as "mere anecdotal evidence."

The exemplary mode of reasoning is explained by Hannah Arendt by way of a table. One could have in mind a list of characteristics to which every table must conform to qualify as a table. If we then meet an object we can determine whether it fits the requirements: a flat top surface placed on a number of legs, etc. (deduction). Second, one could compare this particular object to the many tables one has seen in one's



life, and by inferential judgment decide whether this too is a table. Or, Arendt (1982: 77) argues, one could “think of some table as the example of how tables actually should be: the exemplary table. This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined.”

Exemplary reasoning allows us to maintain both the singularity and the generality. Through exemplars we get to know the qualities or the characteristics that exemplify what it means to be beautiful or moving. Or as Arendt (1982) puts it: “The example is the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or general rule [...] If we say of somebody that he is good, we have in the back of our minds the example of Saint Francis or Jesus of Nazareth.” She could have added that it is frequently very difficult to make explicit what the general rule is that is “contained” in these exemplars.

Arendt adds another important insight to her theory. Exemplars, she argues, can only take on this meaning of exemplifying the good or the courageous when they are widely known within a particular community. This is in fact what she argues about Napoleon Bonaparte:

In the context of French history I can talk about Napoleon Bonaparte as a particular man; but the moment I speak about Bonapartism I have made an example of him. The validity of this example will be restricted to those who possess the particular experience of Napoleon, either as his contemporaries or as the heirs to this particular historical tradition. (Arendt 1982: 84–85)

The historical episode of the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte thus comes to stand for something more general, which nonetheless is hard to describe or define in the abstract or the general. Arendt argues that most concepts in the historical and political sciences—should we add the social?—have an exemplary nature, they cannot be exhaustively defined or delimited, but they derive their meaning from specific examples, or exemplars.

At this point of her theory Arendt comes close to Weber’s theory of ideal types. By shifting from Napoleon Bonaparte as a particular ruler to Bonapartism as an idealized type of rule, Arendt, in, Weber’s language, accentuates some typical features. As Weber argues: “we construct the concept ‘city economy’ not as an average of the economic structures actually existing in all the cities observed but as an ideal-type” (Weber 1904 [1949]: 90). By doing so we create an “ideal” or a “mental image,” that is not actually observed. That is not, however, how we will use the notion of exemplar in this article; for us it remains an actual and particular instance—although the act of interpretation of this instance will highlight certain features of that particular instance.

The emphasis on the particular is also what we find in the psychological literature on exemplars. In psychology the notion of exemplars has been used to study the cognitive formation of categories

and thus links up directly with Arendt's emphasis on learning about characteristics of concepts (Mervis and Rosch 1981). The original contributions on this subject emphasize the heuristic nature of exemplars, which minimize cognitive effort and maximize cognitive content (Rosch 1978).

One of the most robust and important findings in this literature is that categories have a graded structure (Barsalou 1985).<sup>1</sup> That means that not every member is an equally good example of a particular category. Some instances or examples are considered typical or exemplary of a category. A typical example of this finding is that that "robins" are consistently considered to be exemplary birds, but penguins far less so. Such exemplars are learned faster by children, and play a crucial role in category formation (Lynch et al. 2000). Typically it is believed that exemplars possess this function because they represent a "central tendency." But more recent studies have distinguished between a typical (central) instance and an exemplary instance. These sometimes overlap, but particularly when a notion of goodness is involved the exemplary tends to be close to some ideal, and thus far from the typical (Burnett et al. 2005). This finding will be of particular relevance in our consideration of the qualities of cultural goods in the next section. These studies further demonstrate that exemplars are more likely to be close to some ideal when expertise is involved, another issue of particular relevance for cultural goods.

The emphasis on learning and tacit knowledge in Arendt's account of exemplars is also present in Thomas Kuhn's writings on the subject. Kuhn discusses exemplars as having great importance in learning what a paradigm consists of. He argues that exemplars are of crucial importance for *understanding* in science, and he suggests that through the use of exemplars we learn knowledge that can frequently not be reduced to explicit general rules (Kuhn 1970: 194). While Arendt's analysis restricts itself to the human sciences, Kuhn makes clear that exemplars are equally important for understanding in the natural sciences.

### **Exemplars as Judgment Devices**

The importance of classification and qualification have long been recognized by economic sociologists as being central to the valuation of goods (DiMaggio 1987). Michel Callon and colleagues (Callon et al. 2002: 199) in their work on "the economy of qualities" argue, for example, that: "All quality is obtained at the end of a process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market." But sometimes such

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the early authors on exemplars noted the connection with family resemblances as described by Wittgenstein (Rosch and Mervis 1975).

qualification is difficult, or the categories are graded in complex ways; in such cases qualification is ambiguous or only a first step in the evaluation of quality. In such cases other judgment devices are likely to emerge (Musselin and Paradeise 2005: 93).

Particularly in markets for singular goods, that is, goods which are all unique in non-trivial ways, we expect a variety of judgment devices to emerge, to facilitate the process of valuation. Such markets are characterized by an “infinite variety” of goods, such as books or movies (Caves 2000: 6). For these types of goods what constitutes quality is almost without exception contested. Some goods are particulars for which the general still has to be found, to use the Kantian expression. Even if generalities are found, e.g. when we believe that character development is important for novels, how much or what type of character development we would like to see is contested. More importantly still, efforts to explicate what would count and what would not count as character development are bound to fail due to the open-ended character of such concepts. Third, as Karpik notes, the qualities of these goods are interdependent so great character development in an otherwise failed novel will be of little value. This is where exemplars are important; they provide particular instances in which we find the quality of character development, in combination with other qualities, “in action” or “exemplified.”

The notion of judgment devices emphasizes processes of coordination. Producers and consumers do not naturally exchange or find each other. Markets for singular goods, as well as many more standardized goods, are full of mediators, middlemen, judgment devices and norms which facilitate this exchange. Exemplary goods are one example of this mediating process. Traditional economic models pay little attention to this process of coordination and mediation. But in the Austrian tradition, of which Hayek is the most important exponent, processes of coordination are always center stage and the relevant knowledge has to be discovered. This is true for prices, which allow market calculation to take place, but also true for judgment, or what Hayek calls the knowledge of time and place (Hayek 1945). This means that for him an essential part of the competitive market process is the discovery and use of knowledge: “Competition is essentially a process of the formation of opinion: by spreading information, it creates that unity and coherence of the economic system which we presuppose when we think of it as one market” (Hayek 1948: 106). It is at this point that the economic sociology of Callon and Karpik meets the economics of Hayek.

Existing exemplary goods allow us to interpret new goods that come on the market. It is in this sense that exemplars help coordinate markets. Meaning is a category frequently neglected—or should we say taken for granted—in economic theorizing, but exemplars and their accepted interpretations are guides for interpretation of new

goods. In the cultural economic as well as the broader economic literature the concepts of experience and credence goods have been developed, both of which stress the uncertainty associated with the consumption of differentiated goods. Traditional solutions to this issue stress the role of information, but not that of interpretation (and valuation). A recent paper by Earl and Potts (2013), however, goes some way to exploring the notion of consumption capabilities and the capacity to appreciate “newness” (see also Hutter 2011). Earl and Potts note the importance of previous points of reference, and the relation between new products and the existing set of consumption capabilities (which are an outcome of previous consumption). They, however, accept the information and pattern recognition framework that lies at the basis of modern microeconomic theory instead of emphasizing the importance of interpretation as emphasized in Arendt’s theory of exemplary validity and Karpik’s theory of judgment devices.

Arendt and Karpik both recognize that new goods (or situations) need be interpreted in relation to other particulars. There are no generally applicable rules and the (e)valuation of a new unique product is thus always an interpretive act, it requires judgment. In particular it requires a judgment about the commonalities it shares with other unique products, and thus also about what is a relevant comparison in the first place. We might easily agree that the Harry Potter novels are an outstanding success on the market, but to guide future action on markets they have to be interpreted. What makes these books successful? Which of their qualities are valued by consumers? Or in other words what is exemplary about these books?

Sometimes this judgment is rather passive on the side of the consumer, because as Barbara H. Smith (1983) observes in a different context: “Not only are the objects we encounter always to some extent pre-interpreted and pre-classified for us by our particular cultures and languages, but also pre-evaluated, bearing the marks and signs of their prior valuing and evaluations by our fellow creatures.” How she continues is just as illuminating:

Indeed, pre-classification is itself a form of pre-evaluation, for the labels or category names under which we encounter objects not only, as was suggested earlier, foreground certain of their possible functions but also operate as signs—in effect, as culturally certified endorsements—of their more or less effective performance of those functions. (Smith 1983: 23)

In terms of exemplars, producers might guide the consumer with phrases like “from the makers of.” Those pre-classifications, labels, category names and valuations are part of what Karpik calls judgment devices.

In many other situations the judgment process will be more active, a point recognized by Karpik, in his distinction between four economic coordination regimes. In some regimes such as the mega-regime, most of the coordination is done before the product comes to market, and the agency of the consumer is limited. In other regimes there is more scope, or sometimes need, for interpretation by the consumer. The example of wines that Karpik (2010) studies in detail would be one example, where there is a combination of pre-classification and space for independent judgment by the consumer. Both Smith and Karpik, like many other scholars, are however primarily interested in the classification and qualification systems that exist one level above goods (see also Beckert and Musselin 2013). They are less attentive to the relations between goods, from one particular to the next.

It is even inherent in the definition of judgment devices that they are “tools to differentiate the quality of products” (Beckert 2012: 122). So strictly speaking one might argue exemplars cannot be such a “device” at all. But, if we think of particular categories, we soon realize that they are frequently defined by some exemplary good within that category. Think of recent products such as the tablet, or the smartphone, which have come to be defined by exemplary models. Or of categories which still bear the name of the first exemplary good. More importantly, we typically find that a shared intersubjective interpretation of exemplars will emerge, and as such they become something more general than just a particular good. Exemplars are literally a judgment device, in the sense that drafts, prototypes or other ideas for final products within design processes will typically be judged against current exemplary products. They also help shape expectations of consumers and suppliers alike, about what to expect in new products or what the chances of success for a new product are. Harrison White (2002: 79) describes what producers strive for: “each maneuvers to become sufficiently akin to other actors to become recognizable as their peer.” But producers, as White points out, want to retain their individuality at the same time; the tension is very similar to that discussed above between maintaining individuality while being similar enough to be understood and recognized. That is why White talks about markets as networks. Within these networks exemplars can be thought of as the focal points.

In modern microeconomic theory we can find quite a few approaches in which the importance of such “focal points,” industry standards, or dominant designs are discussed. One can think of exemplars as providing guidance in this world of infinite variety. The notion of focal points was developed within game theory, especially in the work on strategic interaction by Schelling (1960). Sugden (1995), who expands those ideas, suggests that focal points are helpful to individuals who seek to coordinate their behavior. They will rely on particular points of coordination which are “prominent” or “salient.”

But as Sugden acknowledges it is hard to incorporate labels or examples into game theory, which treats all strategies as formally identical (only distinguished by numbers such as strategy 1, 2, etc.). That is different for the examples that Schelling originally provided, such as the coordination problem of where to meet if you have agreed to meet in New York but have not agreed a specific place. That problem is a cultural coordination problem, whose answer depends on cultural conventions (at the station? in front of the town hall? in the main street?). Such solutions depend on what Schelling (1960: 57–70) calls a “degree of prominence or conspicuousness” or later the “obvious.” Exemplars which gain prominence are precisely such prominent or obvious reference points.

We face a similar problem to that of coordinating on a meeting point, when we face the infinite variety of say novels or movies. It is therefore only to be expected that focal points emerge. Such focal points exemplify what a genre or subgenre is and they provide a shared starting point for conversations, interpretations and valuations of a genre (“if you want to see a science-fiction movie you should start with say *ET*, or *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Star Wars*”). More recently French economic sociologists who call their approach “economics of convention” have started to analyze how certain standards or conventions come to be established within markets or organizations. As explained by Levy (2002), in contrast to game theorists they do engage in the interpretation of conventions as they emerge within existing markets, and how such conventions shape reciprocal expectations about the behavior of others (see also Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2005). One of the central questions in this approach is how such conventions emerge and how they remain in place. One would expect that particular early examples of a good, early exemplars, help shape such conventions.

A final field in which exemplars have received attention is on the border between marketing and economics. Marketing scholars as well as economic sociologists have pointed to the importance of classifications and qualifications of goods. Some scholars have pointed to the importance of exemplars in the formation of new market categories (Rosa et al. 1999; Navis and Glynn 2010; Jones et al. 2012). Others have demonstrated that products or organizations that are difficult to classify or compare to an exemplar suffer an “illegitimacy discount,” resulting in a lower valuation of the good (Zuckerman 1999; Carroll and Swaminathan 2000).

We will illustrate the role of exemplars as a judgment device with two cases-studies that are presented here not primarily for their inherent interest, but rather as illustrations of the empirical usefulness of the concept of exemplary goods. They demonstrate how we can operationalize the concept, and how it can help us understand the way in which exemplars become focal points, and shape the mutual coordination process between consumers and producers.

## Marketing Forgotten Classics

The magazine *New York Review of Books* (NYRB) has been publishing a series of books since 1999 under the label “NYRB Classics.” The series, just as the magazine, is aimed at a serious readership, individuals who read widely and frequently, who know their way around the established literary canon, and who are interested in exploring world literature. The series primarily consists of books that have not previously been translated into English. The majority of the books was originally published in the twentieth century (85 percent) with another 10 percent of them from the nineteenth century (NYRB website). We have analyzed the extent to which exemplars are used in the descriptions of these 344 books provided on the website of the “NYRB Classics.” This material consists of two parts: the description of the book as provided by the editor(s) of the classics series; and as a collection of typically three to five excerpts from reviews (by external parties) of the books.

One might argue that this material is far from neutral since it is meant to promote the book rather than to evaluate it. That is absolutely true. The material is not neutral, and the review excerpts are undoubtedly picked to make the book look good. However, this is not a problem for the purpose at hand, since the very reason for using exemplars is to coordinate the expectations of both the producers (the publisher in this case) and the consumers. The description provided on the website is a mixture of information about the book and praise for the book (a mix of the descriptive and the evaluative; see Kjellberg et al. (2013)). It is not unusual for publishers to request authors (or their agents) to position their manuscript in relation to other works on the market. As such the material is well suited to get insight into what sort of qualities are praised when considering this type of book.

The books in this series range in genre from novels to short stories and from science and history to essays and criticism. One would expect different exemplars to emerge within these genres, so we will restrict ourselves here primarily to novels and short stories, categories for which we have sufficient observations. An exemplar is counted as such when a book or an author in the NYRB series is compared or contrasted to a book or an author being described, or when he or she is mentioned as a literary heir to that author (for examples see below). What has not been included are famous reviewers (frequently themselves authors) who recommend the book and are included in the description (for example “Thomas Mann loved these stories”).

The first thing we notice is the enormous variety of exemplars used in the total population of 344 books. No less than 339 exemplary authors or their works are mentioned to compare and contrast these books (out of these 108 are mentioned in at least two separate book descriptions). Aside from the comparison to other author’s work we

find references to works by the same author in 34 descriptions (10 percent). Another 44 descriptions (13 percent) contain references to the work of non-literary artists, ranging from Disney to Steven Spielberg, from Edward Hopper to Paul Klee, and from Beethoven to Miles Davis.

There are, however, also clear focal points, points of reference that are invoked more frequently than others. In Table 1 we have collected the authors that were mentioned at least five times in unique descriptions of books published in the series. It was necessary to exclude references to an author's own oeuvre, because some authors were published frequently in the NYRB Classics, notably Kingsley Amis, Georges Simenon and Patrick Leigh Fermor which would skew the results. Henry James is clearly *the* exemplary author. He is mentioned in 6.1 percent of the descriptions of novels and collections of short stories published in the series. Table 1 shows the results for the entire population of NYRB Classics as well as a more restricted population of novels and short stories only. The results show clearly that the great majority of references (90 percent) to these authors is made in the description of novels and short stories (the genres in which these authors, with the exception of Shakespeare, excelled).

	All books		Novels and shorts only	
Henry James	16	5 %	15	6 %
Leo Tolstoy	11	3 %	8	3 %
Charles Dickens	10	3 %	9	4 %
Fyodor Dostoyevsky	9	3 %	8	3 %
Anton Chekhov	8	2 %	8	3 %
Franz Kafka	8	2 %	8	3 %
Thomas Mann	8	2 %	7	3 %
Vladimir Nabokov	8	2 %	8	3 %
Patricia Highsmith	7	2 %	7	3 %
James Joyce	7	2 %	7	3 %
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	6	2 %	6	3 %
Jane Austen	5	2 %	4	2 %
Samuel Beckett	5	2 %	5	2 %
Jorge Luis Borges	5	2 %	5	2 %
Edgar Allan Poe	5	2 %	5	2 %
Marcel Proust	5	2 %	3	1 %
William Shakespeare	5	2 %	4	2 %
Alexander Solzhenitsyn	5	2 %	4	2 %
Mark Twain	5	2 %	3	1 %
Evelyn Waugh	5	2 %	5	2 %

**Table 1:** Most mentioned authors in descriptions of separate books

Note: The table lists the number of "mentions" and the percentages of descriptions in which they are mentioned. Source: author's own calculation



From these basic findings we can start to ask more sophisticated questions. What are the determinants of the invocation of the exemplar? Are exemplars used when the cultural distance is large, or when it is smaller? Are female exemplars more frequently invoked for books by female authors? Our purpose here is merely to demonstrate the general importance of exemplars, but it should be clear that these illustrative results could easily be expanded.

One could also analyze the way in which these exemplars are used, which would lead to a more qualitative analysis. Do reviewers use exemplars to praise particular qualities, or do they instead compare books as a whole? Are exemplars primarily used to contrast or to compare? And what are the qualities which are associated with particular exemplars? Are there negative exemplars?

We will undertake a qualitative analysis in section 4, but we will demonstrate here some of the ways in which these exemplars are used. As an example we will take the references to the work of Dostoyevski (eight in total). They are: “[Carpenter] surpasses even Gorki and Dostoyevski in depicting the despair”; “A Dostoyevskian tale of crime punishment, and the pursuit of ever-elusive redemption”; “Balzac’s many literary inheritors from Dostoyevsky and Henry James to Marcel Proust”; “A handful of authors have portrayed the human condition of prison life with the indelible stamp of authenticity Dostoyevsky, Solzhenitsyn and Genet are among them”; “No one has written so well on prison life, since Dostoyevsky”; “Bernanos is, like Dostoyevsky, something of a sensualist of the soul”; “a sort of distaff *Notes from the Underground*”; “a lacerating exposition of the logic of identity that looks backward to Dostoyevsky, forward to Simenon.” The final reference only comes across if we quote it more extensively:

These stories [by Krzhizhanovsky] represent strong entries in two different traditions of Russian literature: firstly, the unhinged, feverishly experimental universe [...] secondly, the grand woe of Dostoyevsky, in which is expressed the physic trauma of a frozen country so frequently torn asunder by ideology.

These references show that Dostoyevsky is not just referred to, but his work is actively engaged with by the descriptions and reviews. They highlight different qualities of his work: the authenticity, the depiction of prison life, the search for redemption, the exploration of identity and his analysis of ideology. In the final quote, the work of Dostoyevsky is referred to as something more general, like a tradition; it then becomes more than a particular.

To evaluate the quality of a book the reviewers and the description draw on an enormous register of qualities from a long-standing (western) tradition. The results in this small study are undoubtedly influenced by the vastness of the literary landscape and the fact that these descriptions are targeted at an insider audience. But there is no

inherent reason to expect that expert-consumers in other fields are not able to handle such a multifaceted notion of quality as well.

The tension between commensurability and incommensurability, or commonalities and singularization, is repeatedly evident. Take for example the following two references. In the description of Gyula Krúdy's *Sunflower* the author is described as "a genius as singular as Robert Walser, Bruno Schulz or Joseph Roth," while J. G. Farrell's novel *The Siege of Krishnapur* is described in one of the review excerpts as "a masterpiece as unclassifiable as Guiseppe Lampedusa's novel 'The Leopard' or Penelope Fitzgerald's novel 'The Blue Flower.'" The singularity of these novels becomes a quality in and of itself it seems, and to emphasize this singularity, ironically, they are made commensurable to other highly original novels. Another striking example is to be found in the description of the later-to-be bestseller *Stoner* by John Williams which the review excerpt describes as: "an anti-Gatsby." Here the comparison is made to do two things at once; first contrast the allure of Fitzgerald's classic to the restraint of *Stoner* and second put the two books in the same league.

Exemplars are clearly used, by the editors of this series, to shape the expectations of potential consumers. They provide an accessible (at least for expert-consumers) interpretation of the qualities of the new good that is introduced to the market. The exemplars are reference points, and the new goods are positioned in relation to these focal points, and so the quality uncertainty associated with experience goods is reduced. This uncertainty is particularly present if there is no repeated consumption of the good as is the case in markets for singularities (although it is of course possible to read a novel multiple times).

What is less clear from this brief case study is the extent to which these "classics" are selected by the publisher for their relation to goods that are better known by their readership. It is not unimaginable that the selection process involves the positioning of these forgotten books in relation to better known exemplars and that the evaluation of them by the editors is based on their relation to these exemplars. This would be further evidence of the role of exemplars in the quality coordination process.

### **The Making of a Classic Rap Album: *Illmatic***

In this section we will focus on an argument put forward about what constitutes a classic hip-hop album. The debate about what makes a hip-hop album a classic flared up after the release of the widely acclaimed release of *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* by Kendrick Lamar. The album, to name but one of its many accolades, was voted best album of the year 2012 on the prestigious Pitchfork music website. Within the debate over the classic status of Lamar's new album a particularly cogent analysis was put forward by rap critic Andrew Nosenitsky

(2012). He sums up his argument as follows: “When many people call *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* a classic, part of what they are unconsciously measuring is its *Illmatic*-ness.”

*Illmatic* is the career-defining album of hip-hop artist Nas from 1994. The album is said to capture the sound of the gritty New York streets of the early 1990s with Nas’s vivid metaphors and introspective lyrics over dark beats provided by some of the best hip-hop producers of the time. *Illmatic* has a playtime of just under 40 minutes and contains just ten songs—or nine if we exclude the intro—and is frequently praised for its cohesiveness. As Nosnitsky (2012) argues in his essay: “Nas does a few specific things almost perfectly on the record, while selectively sidestepping a lot of the other things that great rap songs and albums can do and have done.” In other words Nosnitsky argues that *Illmatic* is in some ways an untypical hip-hop album.

Hip-hop, a genre that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was initially primarily party music. The early gatherings were street parties with electricity illegally tapped from the streetlights. The DJ was the main attraction, and the MC (who would later become the rapper) was secondary. Initially these DJs relied on specific parts of disco records (the breaks) but later also released their own songs. This meant that singles were much more important than albums. As Nosnitsky points out in his analysis, in the early 1980s when hip-hop came to the fore it was completely dominated by singles, and many of the major artists from that period never even released an album. That slowly changed during the 1980s when record labels were in search of saleable products and the message in the music became more important. When artists such as Run-DMC, Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions started to release albums they consisted of the major singles (which had frequently been released before) while the rest of the album was filled with DJ songs or mega-mixes. That changed around 1990 when artists and groups consciously set about making cohesive albums that would live longer than the singles which typically disappeared after the radio stations stopped playing them.

Groups such as De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest created albums that were clearly intended to be consumed as wholes, and that sometimes lacked more radio-friendly tracks that could be used as singles. As Nosnitsky (2012) argues about this trend:

This was apparent by the release of Nas' 1994 debut, *Illmatic*. If it wasn't the first classic-by-design, it was certainly the most visible (and probably still is). Nas was a highly-buzzed-about serious young rapper making a very serious rap album about his very serious world.

The standard by which hip-hop was valued started to change. The exemplary act was no longer the combination of a DJ with his MCs,

but it was increasingly the individual rapper with a team of music producers behind him. This was visible in discussions about crucial terms such as the MC, the essence of which had been to “move the crowd” (emphasizing the live element) as one artist had famously proclaimed in the 1980s. In the 1990s the MC became the rapper, whose most important asset were his increasingly complex lyrics and flow—the term used to capture how rhythmically the rhymes are delivered—as recorded on record. Nas might be said to be the pinnacle of this development. The magazine *The Source*, which at the time of the release of *Illmatic* was the most respected magazine covering hip-hop: “called it ‘one of the best hip-hop albums I have ever heard’ and gave it the magazine's perfect five mic rating.” That same issue of the magazine contained an article which detailed the story of “the building a hip-hop classic” and which labelled Nas the second coming. During this process *Illmatic* slowly became the exemplar by which future hip-hop albums came to be measured, or as Nosnitsky (2012) puts it: “The legend of *Illmatic* has snowballed in the years since, to where it's no longer just a rap classic, but the rap classic by which all rap classics are measured.”

*Illmatic* became the exemplary hip-hop *album*. Seasoned hip-hop critic Elliot Wilson (2012) also appraises the Kendrick Lamar album by qualities associated with *Illmatic*: “it is a full body of work, not just a bunch of records thrown together.” And there are similarities between the Kendrick Lamar album and Nas's classic album as Nosnitsky acknowledges: “heavy imagery, coming-of-age introspection.” But *Illmatic* is a narrow exemplar to measure classic status by he argues: “*Illmatic* is almost never fun or funny, and it's generally more personal than political. It produced no major hits and today its songs don't exactly work as party starters in any room where listeners aren't already familiar with them.” It is not that humor, politics and party music are not part of hip-hop—in fact the latter two more or less defined the genre during the 1980s—but that to be considered a classic an album should not contain too much of either. The argument by Nosnitsky is thus two-sided. On the one hand he shows what the exemplary validity of *Illmatic* has done for the subsequent reception of hip-hop albums, for how they are interpreted and valued. On the other hand he hopes to challenge this rather narrow standard by offering alternative exemplars: the party-oriented music of the early 1980s, the political music of the late eighties and the less cohesive and more ephemeral mix-tapes which came to dominate much of hip-hop in the internet-age.

Nosnitsky takes his argument one step further, beyond the reception of Kendrick Lamar's album. He extends his analysis to show how *Illmatic* has also served as the exemplary model of how to *make* a great hip-hop album. He argues that many hip-hop artists have increasingly left singles or more playful tracks off their album to better

fit the standard set by Nas's classic album. The trend, as Nosnitsky (2012) argues, is most visible in the career of Jay-Z:

His consensus Serious Rap Classics—*Reasonable Doubt* and *The Blueprint*—are definite classics-by-design, all relatively sensitive and somber and focused and 'honest', but they figure strangely into his catalog. Jay's a more adaptable rapper than Nas, so this sort of singularity doesn't necessarily suit him best. Certainly not from a commercial perspective—well-received but scattershot and single-oriented affairs like *Vol. 3 [...] Life and Times of S. Carter* or *The Blueprint 3* have had far greater [commercial] success than his canonical classics.

The trend is also visible in repeated attempts by hip-hop artists to create classic albums by collaborating with one (or a few) producers to produce a cohesive album, rather than relying on a wide variety of producers and sounds, the more common approach.

That mold, if you like, fits certain artists better than others. To some it will feel like a constraint, and that is the effect of *Illmatic* that Nosnitsky emphasizes. There is another effect, however, because exemplars also help shape the production of future albums. In other words they enable as well as constrain artists wanting to make a (classic) hip-hop album. These constraints and possibilities are never absolute. Nosnitsky might be somewhat exaggerating the power of *Illmatic* as an exemplar, for no art (or entertainment) form is completely dominated by just one exemplar. Competing exemplars in hip-hop emerged regionally as for example in the albums of Dr. Dre which came to define the West-Coast sound and The Geto Boys, Outkast and UGK whose work would set the standard for the southern hip-hop sound. One could also think of the more recent singles-dominated albums by 50 Cent and Eminem, which maintained a balance between commercial success and critical acclaim. In that sense Kendrick Lamar's album, despite being from the West Coast, is indeed best compared with the example set by Nas. It shares the musical cohesiveness, the serious introspective content, and a lack of crossover singles with Nas's exemplary album.

Admittedly this study relies heavily on the analysis of one insightful critic, but from the considerations it nonetheless becomes clear what a qualitative study of exemplars might entail and the insights into the reception as well as the production of new products it might generate. The story of the emergence of *Illmatic* as a classic hip-hop album that comes to shape future productions also bears striking similarities with the emergence of the biopic genre in film, as described insightfully by Rick Altman (1999: 44). He demonstrates how a particular interpretation of a film, shaped by the reinterpretation of the exemplar after the release of subsequent films, comes to shape what a specific type of film is supposed to look like. Retrospectively this is called the biopic, but at the time of the initial success, it is far from clear, as Altman shows, what qualities of the film created its success. This line

of reasoning is further corroborated by some of White's case studies (White 2002; see especially his discussion of Scottish knitwear).

### **Discussion: Studying Exemplars in Markets**

In this article we have argued that exemplary goods are an important, yet overlooked, judgment device on markets. The paper offers a way to conceptualize exemplary goods, and demonstrates how the concept can be empirically operationalized to provide insight into the way in which meaning is coordinated on markets. The particular strength of exemplary goods as judgment devices lies in the way they are able to negotiate the tension between the general and the specific. Exemplars are particular goods, but they are interpreted to possess a combination of qualities which teaches us something about the desired qualities of a certain type of good. Other goods, perceived to be of the same type, are in turn compared, related and contrasted to these exemplary goods, which can be thought of as focal points for coordination on meaning and quality.

The illustrative case studies have highlighted important aspects of the use of exemplars. First, they demonstrate the coordination process in which current goods are positioned in relation to existing goods. Second, they demonstrate how the use of exemplars is important in advertising and critical discussion in the mediating process between consumers and producers. The case study of the marketing of books highlights how exemplars shape the expectations of consumers, and act as focal points in the communication between producer and consumer. The case study of the rap album demonstrates that particular important exemplars might significantly shape relevant notions of quality on a market or genre, and might hence influence the nature of later production. It also highlights the important mediating role of critics who interpret exemplars.

The case studies highlight moreover that the process of qualification and rating which has been made central in the valuation process of singular goods by Karpik and others misses important aspects. The use of exemplars does not rely on general categories or uniform ratings, but rather on the comparison of particulars. It does not rely on qualification within general categories, but rather on association or dissociation of particular goods. Exemplars moreover allow for a multiplicity of qualities in the valuation of singular goods, and do not rely on a single standard in the way that ratings do.

This article has not dealt with the way in which certain goods become exemplars, a question of great importance. It has simply assumed that there exist several or just one exemplary goods within a market. To develop the notion of exemplars further this should definitely be explored. Once certain goods are identified as exemplary they might shape the way in which markets develop, and create a certain path-dependency.

The most important aspect economically is undoubtedly the study of how exemplars coexist and compete. That competition is a multifaceted process. Current incumbents might benefit from an intimate knowledge of the existing exemplars and how to interpret these. New entrants might be seeking to “break the mold” and attempt to establish alternative exemplars. Various exemplars however can exist next to one another, and shape the overall market structure or particular niche markets, as the illustrative case of the book series suggests.

Sociologically we might be interested in the way in which different intermediaries have the power to select and interpret the qualities of exemplary goods. Intermediaries as well as institutional and state actors might have power to select exemplary goods, or to (re)interpret exemplary goods in a particular way. But hopefully such concerns will not be separated from each other along older disciplinary lines, because they are all part of the way in which products are valued, and priced on markets.

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# The Organizational Valuation of Valuation Devices. Putting Lean whiteboard management to work in a hospital department

Amalie Martinus Hauge

## Abstract

This paper is about the interplay between multiple modes of valuation. The paper engages with the question of how a valuation device intersects with the working values of an organization. While the many studies of valuation practices have drawn attention to the pervasive effects of valuation devices, only a few studies have taken into account the fact that many spaces, including organizations, are already filled with practices and ideas that constitute what is valuable. Revisiting classical organization theory, this paper shows that organizations comprise multiple, more—or less—integrated modes of valuation. Empirically, the paper draws on an ethnographic study of Lean management at a children's hospital, which is presented through analytical snapshots. The paper suggests that an organizational turn is relevant for valuation studies, as this first allows an analytical expansion to include less 'devised' valuations, contributes to the ongoing culture vs. device debate offering an alternative to the causal analysis of devices and effects without making the 'ineffable culture' what makes or breaks the causality.

Key words: modes of valuation; organizational turn; organization theory; health care; Lean management; snapshots

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## **Introduction: Bringing Devices to Work**

As part of a general tendency within the public sector, quantitative evaluations and performance measurements have proliferated in hospitals. Where quantification and numeric evaluation some years ago existed mainly in the context of the evidence-based medicine movement (Sjögren 2008, 368-383; Timmermans and Berg 2003), today, calculations and quantitative accountability are integrated in a number of hospital tasks. These include everything from quality work (Madsen 2015; Zuiderent-Jerak and Berg 2010) and patient involvement (Bech 2012) to management and coordination (Sjögren 2008). The increasing employment of tools of valuation has brought about new circumstances for the hospital: with the new measurements come new professional roles (Madsen 2015), new administrative tasks and new expenditures, to name a few. The increased use of quantitative tools of assessment has created an intensive focus on the importance of being able to measure the effects of efforts, but the interesting question is whether they have also played a part in changing what is regarded as important and valuable at the hospital.

The proliferation of tools of evaluation and quantitative assessments has sparked the emerging field of valuation studies (Kornberger and others 2015; Orlikowski and Scott 2013). Scholars engaged in a number of diverse fields (Lamont 2012) have shown how the introduction of valuation devices has had pervasive performative effects on the field, for example, how university rankings affect university management (Espeland and Sauder 2007), how fish quotas change a fish market (Holm and Nielsen 2007) or how shopping carts affect shopping choices (Cochoy 2008). By unfolding the sociotechnical arrangements of these devices, the studies show how the act of measuring, ranking or rating not only affects how the value of something is established but also affects what is considered valuable—or what ‘counts’ (Dussauge et al. 2015). In this way the constitutive effects of valuation devices have been heavily accounted for, leaving the impression that the introduction of a new device will almost inevitably have dramatic consequences.

Few studies of valuation have provided alternatives to the almost causal narratives produced about the effects of valuation devices (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Fourcade 2011; Zuiderent-Jerak and van Egmond 2015). One of these is provided by Fourcade (2011). In her analysis of how we ascribe monetary value to an intangible thing such as nature, she argues that the answer to ‘how’ we do it is not enough; we should also ask ‘why’, which leads her to argue that national ‘logics’ or perhaps ‘culture’ encapsulates and frames how devices work (Fourcade 2011: 1770). Relatedly, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) argue that people give worth to things based on a ‘political metaphysics’ of orders of worth. For both Fourcade (2011) and Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), the consequences of valuation

devices therefore need to be found *outside* of those devices, in the ‘cultural repertoires’ in which such devices are situated. Although these authors present such a move as an important step for the study of valuations and justifications, other authors fear that this may lead to a rather traditional culture vs. materiality leapfrog discussions about what drives history (Zuiderent-Jerak and van Egmond 2015).

In this paper, I aim to contribute to studies of valuations and particularly the culture/device debate with an organizational perspective built on classical organization theory (see, for example, Simon 1964; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Barnard 1968 [1938]; Mintzberg 1979). Drawing on an ethnographic study of the use of Lean in healthcare, and more specifically the use of the Lean valuation tool ‘whiteboard management’ and how this is put to work in a department of neonatology of a children’s hospital, I engage with the question of how a valuation device intersects with the working values of an organization. Through empirical analysis, I argue that valuation devices are rarely put to work in value-free realities waiting to be sorted and hierarchized. Taking inspiration from classical organization theory, I show that organizations are already filled with ideas about what is valuable, implicitly defined in the work of the organizational members. Depending on the tasks organizational members conduct, they assess the value of things with different ‘grammars’. The paper suggests that an organizational turn in the study of valuations provides a valuable contribution to the culture/device debate, as it offers an alternative to the sometimes overly causal analysis of devices and effects, without making the ‘ineffable culture’ (Fourcade 2011: 1770; Zuiderent-Jerak and van Egmond 2015: 51) what makes or breaks the causality.

### **Theoretical Framework: Modes of Valuation**

With the purpose of investigating how the valuation device of whiteboard management intersects with the working values of hospital organization, I employ the concept of *modes of valuation*. I use this composed concept similarly to Stark (2011) as a particular manner of assessing and attributing the value of something; but I develop it further by attaching four dimensions: A particular grammar of assessment, and a particular goal, task and time configuration, which will be presented in this section.

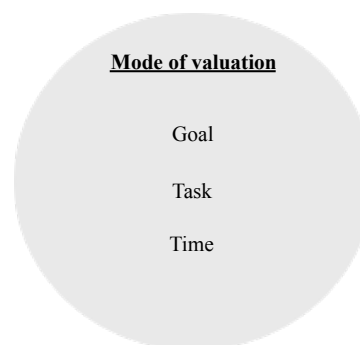
Valuation can productively be defined as ‘any social practice where the value or values of something is established, assessed, negotiated, provoked, maintained, constructed and/or contested’ (Doganova et al. 2014: 87) including ‘judging, improving, appreciating, and lots of other activities’ (Heuts and Mol 2013: 141). While this is a rather broad definition, the dominant tendency is to study valuation performed in connection with a particular *device* in the sense of a

specific socio-technical assemblage with a relatively unambiguous ‘interface’, such as a particular ranking (Espeland and Sauder 2007), set of guidelines (van Loon and Bal 2014), rating (Rona-Tas and Hiss 2011; Pénét 2015) or model (Cabantous and Dupont-Courtade 2015). Similarly, I began the ethnographic study of whiteboard management in the department of neonatology by investigating the question ‘what does the whiteboard do here?’ expecting to do a study on how the whiteboard’s program of ‘optimizing’ value would have intended and unintended effects on the enactment of value in the department.

With time, however, it became clear that it was not only the valuation installed by the whiteboard that was interesting; the hospital’s valuation of the whiteboard was equally relevant for investigation. Among other things, some nurses never attended because they could not leave their patients and some doctors again and again contested what the whiteboard manager suggested. To understand this, it was pertinent to develop an alternative to the dominant analytical strategy of studies of valuation that could grasp what happens as a valuation device intersects with the working values of an organization. The aim was to specify not only the device’s means of working and its effects but also its relationship to prevailing tools and practices of valuation at play in the organization. For this purpose, I developed the concept of modes of valuation, drawing both on Stark (2011) and other lines of theory.

I conceptualize modes of valuations as consisting of four dimensions: Grammar of assessment, goal, task, and time, as depicted in Figure 1. Two of these are based on classical organization theory (goal and task) and two on a broader sociological/philosophical tradition (grammar of assessment and time). The idea is that these dimensions define a particular manner of assessing value—meaning that what is valuable is dependent on the mode enacted.

With ‘grammar of assessment’ I draw on the post-structuralist ideas of grammar in relation to subjectivity and discourse (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Foucault 1988; Lyotard 1993; Owen 1995: 489–506) and, similarly to Barley (1986: 83–84), use the concept to denote the principles and elements that constitute a particular ‘frame’ of valuation. In contrast to how Boltanski and Thévenot use the term grammar (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Thévenot 2007, 2015), namely to describe a collectively shared framework of modes of justification on which persons can draw in situations of dispute (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999), I refer to the particular assessment system used by a specific mode of valuation.



**Figure 1.** Grammar of assessment. Source: Author’s illustration

Concretely, this is constituted by the metrics, categories and reference points applied to assess the value of something and to prioritize between different choices. I use the notion of grammar rather than valuemeter (Latour and Lépinay 2009: 135; Zuiderent-Jerak et al. 2015: 119–135, esp. 135) or valorimeter (Latour and Callon 1997) to signify a system that is not exclusively based on a numeric measurement, as ‘meter’ suggests, but can also contain forms of assessment that are not based on numbers.

The notion of ‘goal’ is a classical element of organization theory (see, for example, Simon 1964; Schein 1965; Barnard 1968 [1938]) that generally refers to that toward which is aspired: For the whiteboard manager, this could be better results related to a particular Lean effort. The notion of ‘task’ is another classical element from organization theory generally referring to the actual piece of work that is conducted. In the hospital context, it can, for example, be to administer eye drops.

The ‘time’ dimension is inspired by some of the works by the Russian literary Mikhail Mikhajlovitj Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1937). Bakhtin uses the term ‘chronotope’ (literally time–space) to point to the interconnectedness of temporality and spatiality in literature. In this context, I use this idea (but only the time element of the concept) to connect temporality to modes of valuation with the purpose of showing that the way time works is contingent on what mode you are in. In this way, the time dimension is also similar to Lawrence and Lorsch’s notion of ‘time orientation’, which they argue is defined by the ‘definitive feedback of the relevant subenvironment’ (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967: 8). Thus, a mode can, for example, be oriented toward the ‘acute’ in the immediate now or toward a more distant, plannable future.

I understand modes of valuation as dynamic and situated in concrete practices, constituting what counts as valuable. Modes of valuation are not necessarily defined by particular professions or persons; rather, actors can engage in different modes. For example, I see doctors as enacting one mode when they perform acute procedures and another when they discuss administrative issues. Modes of valuation are thus an approach to exploring how a valuation device intersects with the working values of an organization, as it allows for multiple and coexisting answers to how things come to count.

### **Organization theory’s relevance to studying multiple modes of valuation**

The conceptualization of modes of valuation is closely related to the idea that organizations are usually already ‘filled spaces’ (Vikkelsø 2010). A new valuation device will therefore typically have to compete with other valuations and find its place in the organizational order

defined not only by devices with orderly interfaces but also by valuations that are not announced, not published and do not necessarily rest upon complicated numeric calculations but happen as part of the mundane conduct of the daily work in the organization. In organization studies, the integration and coordination between different subdivisions, professions or roles toward an organization's common goal is a classical theme. In valuation studies, however, the coexistence of and dynamics between different valuations is an aspect that so far has received only limited attention. In this paper I explore the value of drawing on organization theory to capture such dynamics.

Around the 1960s, organization scholars began to see organizations as open systems whose structure was contingent on the organizations' task environment(s) (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Scott 1981; Thompson 2007 [1967]). Complex task environments were reflected in differentiated organizations with various subsystems, which made coordination and integration a major managerial challenge and research focus. A good example of dealing with this is "Differentiation and Integration in Complex Organizations" (1967) by Lawrence and Lorsch. They understand integration as "the process of achieving unity of effort among the various subsystems in the accomplishment of the organization's task" (1967: 4) and argue that in differentiated organizations, integrative devices or personnel functions that work to integrate the different subsystems are necessary to achieving unity of effort. Such integrative devices must have six characteristics to be effective: (1) the device must have an intermediate position to the "subsystems" it aims to integrate; (2) the influence of the integrator must derive from technical competences; (3) the integrators must perceive rewards as related to the organization's total performance; (4) the integrators must have high influence throughout the organization; (5) the influence must be on a requisite level; (6) there must be a developed means of conflict resolution (1967: 44-46). In the discussion, I will explore how this perspective is relevant to investigating the challenges that can emerge when multiple modes of valuation coexist.

### **Methodology: Constructing Empirical Snapshots**

The ethnography on which this paper is based was conducted at the main hospital in Denmark. For this paper, I chose to focus specifically on the use of whiteboard management in the department of neonatology. This department is one of the most highly specialized departments of neonatology in Scandinavia, treating premature children; children with congenital malformations, heart diseases, neurological disorders, surgical illnesses; and children below the age of two with need for intensive care. This department was among the first in Denmark to work with Lean and whiteboard management. Their initiative to use Lean and whiteboard management was voluntary and



has not been problem free, but it has generated educational experiences for themselves and other departments embarking on the use of Lean. I chose to focus on whiteboard management in the neonatology department because it constituted an elaborate exemplary answer to the question of how a valuation device intersects with the working values of an organization. Here, I was able to investigate how whiteboard management intersects with the values that are already at play and what organizational consequences this has.

For approximately one year, I explored the practice of whiteboard management at the hospital, and for three months, I focused specifically on the department of neonatology. In the empirical study, I relied on complementary sources of information. Most importantly, I observed the weekly meetings that took place every Tuesday at 9:05. Second, I shadowed doctors and nurses in the department and had walking talks with them about Lean and whiteboard management. Third, I conducted 11 one-hour-long qualitative interviews with central actors in the department, including the clinical managers (3), the Lean manager (1), head physicians with different roles (4), nurses of different ranks (2) and one secretary. Fourth, I gathered documents related to the department's Lean work and took photos during my observations, which I used as reference points during the interviews.

I have presented the findings of the study as analytical "snapshots" (Running 1997): Detailed descriptions with the purpose of conveying a distilled flavor of what is going on in the department. The snapshots are not identical to my observations, yet they allow for a more accurate description of the atmosphere and the tensions in the department than would a few citations or long, less edited field note extracts. Additionally, the snapshot format matches my interests in exploring modes of valuations, as it makes it possible to juxtapose different examples of how things are made valuable.

### **Analysis: Introducing the Valuation Device Whiteboard Management**

In 2011, the clinical management board decided to apply Lean to free more resources for research and other core activities. Among other things, the department employed a Lean manager (a nurse with training as a Lean consultant) who, in collaboration with the quality coordinators and the clinical management team, has conducted weekly whiteboard meetings ever since. However, what was supposed to be a common strategy of enhancing value and creating flow almost immediately became a highly contested activity in the department of neonatology. In the following, I unfold the activity of doing whiteboard management. Whiteboard management is a carefully orchestrated activity, where the elements on the whiteboard as well as the articulation work by the meeting conductor are meticulously

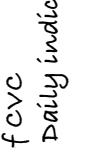

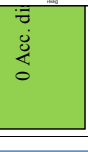

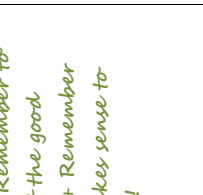
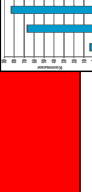
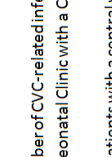


NEONATAL UNIT	Strategy and goal	Results	Action plans	Status
<p>Goal management and continuous improvements (Kaizen)</p> 	<p><b>KPI: Reduce the mortality for premature children</b>                      Goal: 25% reduction</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b>                      Reduce the number of and increase the interval between CVC-related infections among all patients in the clinic with a CVC</p> <p><b>Indicator:</b>                      The number of patients with a central venous catheter (CLC, LL or UVL) with positive bloodculture results</p>	<p>No results</p>	<p>See below:</p> <p>- Acc. Discontinuation of CVC</p> <p>- Daily indications</p>	<p>Common whiteboard meeting                      Tuesdays 9.05-9.20 in the conference room</p> 
<p>Just do it</p> <p>Pass on</p>	<p><b>KPI: Reduce the mortality for premature children</b>                      Goal: 95%</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b>                      Reduce the number of CVC-related infections among all patients in the Neonatal Clinic with a CVC</p> <p><b>Indicator:</b>                      The number of patients with a central venous catheter (CLC, LL or UVL) where the CVC has been accidentally discontinued (AD)</p>	<p>Week 7</p> <p>0 Acc. di</p> 	<p>The definition of an accidental removal of a CVC is: 1) It was not prescribed by a physician 2) It slipped out unintentionally.</p>	
<p>Priority</p> 	<p><b>KPI: Reduce the mortality for premature children</b>                      Goal: 1 AD/6 weeks</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b>                      Reduce the number of CVC-related infections among all patients in the Neonatal Clinic with a CVC</p> <p><b>Indicator:</b>                      The number of patients with a central venous catheter (CLC, LL or UVL) where the daily assessment of the indication of CVC is documented in ICP</p>	<p>25 %</p> 	<p>11/2-15: Remember to talk about the good episodes. + Remember why it makes sense to check this!</p>	
<p>New suggestions</p> 	<p>18/2: To enhance interest and dialogue at whiteboard meetings</p>		<p>25/2: Suggestions</p> <p>Make visible the dialogue and action taken at team meetings</p>	

Figure 2. The department of neonatology's whiteboard. Source: Author's visualization of the department of neonatology's whiteboard

choreographed. In a neighboring department, I witnessed how a Lean consultant coached a future whiteboard meeting conductor on how to perform whiteboard management:

The whiteboard must be alive! Update the numbers every week; no one is interested in old numbers. It attracts attention when you focus on the core tasks. As an example this can be re-operations. They attract people! [...] And never put up a red result [on the whiteboard] without relating an “action” to it. Also: There has to be a whiteboard conductor. One who leads the meeting. Another should be appointed writer. You cannot write when you lead! The amount of people should make it possible for everybody to hear. If there are too many people, then you should conduct meetings in different fora.

The citation shows that whiteboard management relies on a combination of two central mechanisms that respectively aim to (1) bring the organization to the whiteboard; (2) bring the whiteboard to the organization. The first mechanism involves the creation of a specified space in front of the whiteboard where people stand close together at a certain time with a certain frequency. It is not that the department does not have meetings already: Among others, there are morning conferences in the different teams (there are three specialized teams in the department), among the different professional groups (nurses, physicians and secretaries) and among different cross-functional groups (the quality board, etc.). However, the whiteboard meetings in the hallway are different in the sense that they seek to gather department staff across the different sections to coordinate activities toward shared goals.

The second mechanism involves the translation of the common goals into particular tasks, which are systematically monitored against key performance indicators (KPI) and adjusted if the objective is not achieved. This mechanism is about linking the activities at the whiteboard meetings to the work done in the department, which is what I call “bringing the whiteboard to the organization.” In the following, I will present the details of the whiteboard.

The department of neonatology’s whiteboard (Figure 2,) sits between the entrance to one of the hallways and the elevator housing. The basis of the whiteboard is columns and rows marked by colored adhesive tape, attached plastic folders and headlines written with permanent marker. From left to right the board reads as follows: The first column is for suggestions. These can be formulated by members of the department on post-its and placed on the bottom of the column. In conversation facilitated by the Lean manager, the suggestions are prioritized using the depicted coordinates system, which shows that suggestions that require “low effort” but deliver “big effects” are best.

The next column contains the objectives on which the department is currently focusing. On this whiteboard projection, three objectives are on the board, which all relate to the KPIs “to reduce the mortality rate

for premature children.” In addition to these three, a fourth handwritten objective is to “enhance interest and dialogue at meetings.” According to the Lean consultants, all staff in the department should be able to relate to and affect the objectives on the board, even though their specific tasks differ. To find an objective that fits this format is no easy task: “Even at Novo Nordisk they spend as long as three months developing the right objective,” a Lean consultant says to calm down another clinical director, who is frustrated that her department’s whiteboard meetings do not go as planned. This difficulty is also reflected in the department of neonatology, as we see in this extract from a workshop on the department’s strategy day:

Department Director (DD): We need to make our KPI more concrete.

Head Physician 1 (HD 1): We only measure infections in relation to the KPI.

HD 2: We have to have a higher time resolution! We need to translate the work flows of the big out-patient departments to our context. Think in processes.

DD: We should use the meetings to create a flow [...] not just the data, but also the meetings. That makes sense.

Head nurse (HN): Yes, but we also have to find it important. It should be meaningful!

Section nurse: Yes. But what can it be?

HD 1: Take mortality—what we can monitor easily?

HD 4: We could take weight fluctuations as an indicator of the fluid balance?

Senior HD: It is important that we don’t guess. We have to do it evidence-based.

HD 4: Sure sure—it was just a suggestion—something like that!

HD 2: What about something with blood sugar fluctuations?

DD: We need to remember the multidisciplinary—the objective must be something that we can all relate to (transcription extract).

In this case, the department’s quality group continues the complicated process of developing an objective that lives up to the criteria of having the right time resolution (HD 2), being important and meaningful (HN), being evidence-based (senior HD) as well as relatable for all department members (DD).

The third column on the whiteboard is for results. As the Lean consultant states above, the results must be updated every week before the meetings in order for the participants to be able to see if their

actions of the current week have made a difference. This demand increases the complexity of deciding on an objective, as the data about the objective have to be compatible with the whiteboard meetings' weekly frequency. If an objective is achieved, the result is printed on green paper. If not, the paper is red. The fourth column is for "actions." Participants have to come up with actions if a goal is not achieved. When conducting the meeting, the whiteboard manager goes through the results, and in announcing a red result, she will ask the participants in the meeting to come up with suggestions on how to achieve a better result next week. For example, as part of the discussion related to the red result (row three) about how to improve registrations of catheter assessments, a head physician suggested "sharing stories in which it made a difference to make the registration" (suggestion noted in row three, column four). The last column indicates the status of the goal using the PDSA-circle (is the effort Planned, Done, Studied and Acted upon?). The principal goal of the whiteboard is thus to work toward the KPIs by engaging participants in turning the red results green.

### **Bringing the Organization to the Board**

The logic of whiteboard management is that as long as the objectives on the board are important to members of the department, they will participate in the meetings. However, this was not the case in the department of neonatology. In fact, participation became a source of great frustration in the department, for some because they wanted more participants, for others because they did not see the point of participating and for others because they could not participate and felt left out. In spite of the meetings' mandatory status, the amount of participants at the meetings varied extensively, and not infrequently the meetings were cancelled. In this section, I look into the mechanism of bringing the organization to the whiteboard by analyzing how varying importance is attributed to the whiteboard meetings depending on the mode of valuation enacted.

#### **Mode 1: The Lean manager gathers participants**

It is 9 a.m. The Lean manager enters the hallways of the department of neonatology to remind people that the weekly whiteboard meeting is beginning in five minutes. The atmosphere in the hallways is characterized by brightly lit effectivity, emphasized by the dim quiet oozing from under the doors of the patient rooms. A phone is ringing; a nurse is fetching medicine with fast and experienced movements; two young physicians are looking at some scans speaking in low voices; a newborn is transported to the operating theatre under piles of machinery, and the first visitors are searching for the button that opens the automatic doors. Two head physicians concentrated on their conversation pass by with their eyes fixed on the papers in one physician's hand. The Lean manager continues down the hallway and looks into the small windows or the

half-open doors of each patient room to assess whether the situation allows for her to enter and inform staff about the forthcoming meeting. In the hallway she makes eye contact with a nurse head of section and taps her wrist watch. “Oh yes. Two minutes,” says the nurse head of section and continues in the other direction. Returning to the whiteboard from her round in the department, the Lean manager goes through the numbers one last time with the nurse responsible for quality to make sure that everything is updated and ready for the meeting. They hope that many physicians and the clinical director will participate, as the most burning issue requires the physicians to take action. At 9:05 she looks at the clock above the door, tightens her lips and bids the first arrivers welcome.

### **Mode 2: A head physician and a nurse are attending to critical patients**

The morning conference is over and head physician Jane is walking down the hall to the changing room. It will be a busy day, according to the clinical director, who ended the conference by proclaiming that they must discharge as many patients as possible to make room for those that will arrive. A nurse stops Jane in the hallway and wants a consultation about a patient. Jane says she will come back as soon as she is in her uniform. The nurse goes back into the room behind the reception preparing for the consultation by reading the patient’s records over again. She waits for longer than expected. A colleague comes running frantically looking for something. “Have you seen Omar’s file?! It is urgent!” After a frantic search, they find the file and the colleague calls Omar’s parents, who have slept at home tonight. After the conversation she hangs up and says “that is the worst of messages; to tell parents that they need to come as fast as they can.” After a while, head physician Jane comes to get the nurse: “Omar’s heart stopped so I had to run in there right away—now, let’s talk.” After the consultation, head physician Jane continues toward her next patient, Albert. On her way, she meets the specialized nephrologist, and while walking, they discuss what to do about Albert’s, sudden, critical fluid retention. In the hallway, she passes the Lean manager. However, by the pace of her walk, her waving coat and the firm grip around the file in her hand, everybody knows that head physician Jane has more urgent things to see to.

### **Mode 3: A nurse is caring for baby Emily**

In the patient rooms, the light is dim and movements are slow paced. Sleep-deprived parents are rising from their beds, and some are having breakfast. Nurse Mary converses with the parents in familiar terms about how the night went and admires a mother’s knitting project. The baby cribs with home-made nametags and teddy bears testify to the length of some families’ stay in the department. Mechanic, monotone sounds from a ventilator and a dialysis machine mixed with the frequent offset of alarms are a constant reminder of the gravity of the families’ situations. Seemingly asleep, baby Emily lies on her back in a white crib with adjustable height and wheels for transportation. Nurse Mary leaves the room to fetch the eye drops. On her way to the room-sized medicine cabinet, she meets a colleague and asks how “her little friend” is doing. All the nurses refer to their primary patient as their little friend. “Stable, but waiting for a new brain scan,” the colleague says. As Mary returns to Emily’s room, she passes the Lean manager, and they quickly catch each other’s eyes. In the patient room, Emily’s father looks up from his phone to see who entered the room, then looks down again. For the fourth time this morning, Mary applies the hand sanitizer from the container next to the door, and asks if either of the parents would like to put the

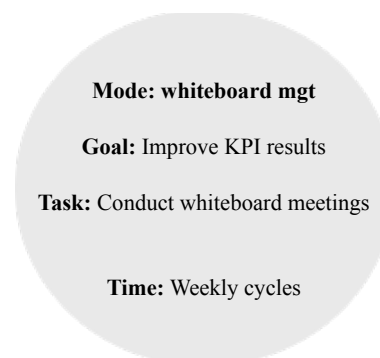
drops into Emily's eyes. The mother shakes her head. Mary doesn't go to the whiteboard meeting that day.

#### Mode 4: A head physician is preparing for the whiteboard meeting

Head physician Dan met earlier than he had to today, because he wanted to get some paperwork done. In addition to the ordinary work, Dan is the manager of the "transportation team," which is available 24/7 if other hospitals in Denmark need to have a child transferred to Hospital H. He is also part of the team responsible for the medical apparatus and utensils. The department has recently changed suppliers for the bandages used to hold catheters in place. Today, Dan is interested in how his colleagues—especially the nurses—have experienced the new bandages, which are cheaper and, according to a new study, just as good as the old ones. He hopes they will share some experiences at the whiteboard meeting. He is also interested in the follow-up to the discussion about whether or not the attending physician on night shift should take on a new area of responsibility: To create an overview of the patient situation and hand it over to the day shift. He thinks it is unreasonable to put more duties on the night shift, and he has planned to stand up against this idea, even if the Lean manager and head nurse are still behind it. He prints out some information about the new bandages before he gets up and taps his front pocket to see if his notepad and pen are in place. He reminds his younger colleague using the computer next to him about the meeting. Having walked the short distance to the whiteboard, he looks at the updated numbers one by one. The clinical director arrives and the head physician asks what the director thinks about the idea of adding more areas of responsibility to the already burdened night shift attendants. Then the Lean manager says "welcome" and they quietly finish off their conversation to focus on the Lean manager from their position in the back of the crowd.

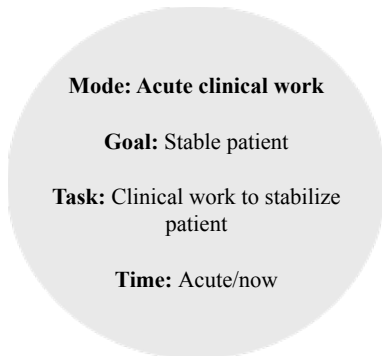
### Juxtaposing Snapshots: Multiple Versions of the Value of Participating in Whiteboard Management

The four snapshots (Figures 3–6) portray particular modes of valuation. It is clear that the value of participating in the whiteboard meetings is assessed in different ways and with different results. Depending on the task, time and goal orientation of each mode, a certain "grammar" is enacted through which the value of participating in whiteboard meetings is assessed: In the first snapshot, the Lean manager sets out to remind nurses and physicians to participate in the meeting. In the practice of whiteboard management, participation in whiteboard meetings is conceived of as very valuable: Whiteboard management is the means of working toward the KPIs of the department. In the snapshot, we see how the whiteboard manager performs an ongoing assessment of the possibility of almost every colleague she meets participating in the meeting. While the



**Figure 3.** Grammar of whiteboard management. Source: Author's own work.

Lean manager enacts a mode where it is highly valuable to get participants to the Lean meetings, she is not submerged in the mode to the extent that she does not also recognize that there are other modes at play in the department in which participation is not assessed as valuable or possible.



**Figure 4.** Grammar of acute clinical work.

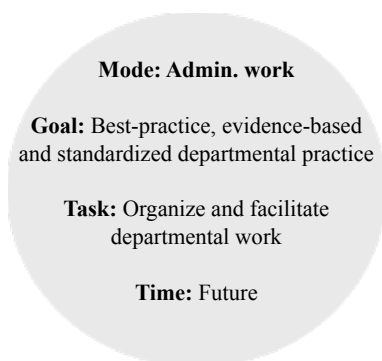
Source: Author's own work.

In the second snapshot, the head physician is too busy with acute clinical work to attend the whiteboard meeting. For her, in Room 5 it is valuable to find a solution to Albert's critical fluid retention and to keep Omar in Room 2 stable until his parents arrive. There is thus clearly misaligned time orientation. This is clear to the Lean manager, who does not try to remind her of the meeting.

The third snapshot portrays how participation in whiteboard meetings is prioritized in the practice of nursing. Here it becomes almost impossible to participate—and also almost unnecessary. In the mode of nursing, nurses often have to be physically present in patients' rooms all the time. If you go to the bathroom, you ask a colleague to attend to your patient. When caring for less intensive patients, nurses are able to participate in the meetings, but it is not necessarily seen as more important than talking to families or giving eye drops. Accordingly, attending the whiteboard meetings is not purposely avoided, but neither is it conceived of as necessary to conducting the main task of caring for the patient.



**Figure 5.** Grammar of nursing  
 Source: Author's own work.



**Figure 6.** Grammar of administrative work. Source: Author's own work.

In the fourth snapshot, we follow a physician preparing for the whiteboard meeting. Similar to the head physician attending to Omar's cardiac arrest, he takes care of many acute problematics during the day. However, due to his extra responsibilities, he is also enrolled in tasks that require an overview and a more longitudinal perspective of the depart-



ment, for example, to know if remedies are used properly or if orders or regulations need modification. In the mode of solving such tasks, time orientations are more aligned and Lean is regarded a useful tool, although with the remark that Lean should not be used “too insistently.” In the words of another physician with organizational responsibilities, it is important to use Lean with a sense of humor; otherwise, people will be fed up with hearing about the wonders of Lean. In this mode of planning and coordinating, he believes that Lean and the whiteboard meetings are useful tools (only) to the extent that they do not exclude, disunite or upset people in the department. If so, they are at risk of dismantling the planning and coordinating qualities of Lean whiteboard management, which are the qualities he finds valuable.

In order for whiteboard management to work as intended, the department members enacting the modes of valuation presented here are among those who must be “brought to the board” for whiteboard management to work. This section has given some insights into why this is a challenge in the department. However, to bring people to the board is not enough for the whiteboard to work: actions decided upon during the whiteboard meetings must also be carried out in the department.

### Bringing the Whiteboard to the Organization

To investigate the challenges of bringing the decisions from the whiteboard meeting to the department, I focus in on a concrete objective on the whiteboard, namely the objective of improving adherence to the rule of daily assessment of the relevance of the patients’ central venous catheters (CVCs). This is depicted in Figure 7, which zooms in on this particular goal on the whiteboard. For the sake of simplicity, I adopt the department’s own nickname for this objective: “The indication”.

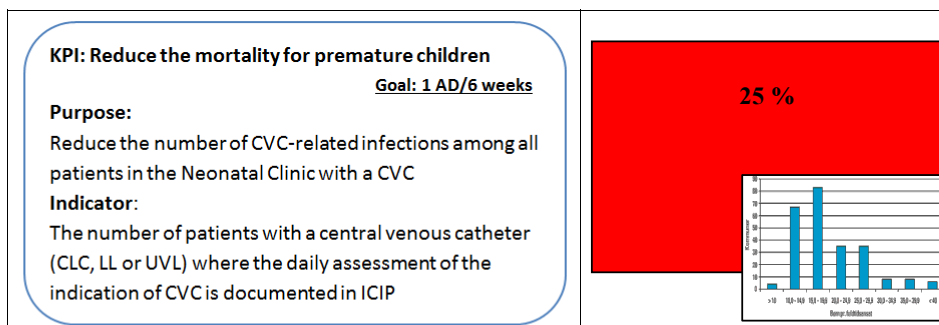


Figure 7. A whiteboard objective. Source: A zoomed in image of Figure 2

Let me provide further detail: CVCs are inserted into the veins of a patient to administer medications and fluids, obtain blood tests and/or

measure central venous pressure. While in most cases CVCs are of utmost importance, CVCs also entail an increased risk of the patient getting an infection. This risk increases with the period during which the CVC is inserted. Thus, the purpose of daily assessing the continued relevance of the CVC is to make sure that only those patients who need a CVC have one and that the CVCs are always removed as soon as possible. The means of measuring whether the assessment is taking place is to ask doctors to tick a box in the electronic hospital record ICIP (IntelliVue Clinical Information Portfolio) when they have performed the assessment. The department quality board counts and compares the number of ticks to the overall number of patients with CVCs. The percentage of assessed CVCs is printed on a sheet of paper and placed on the whiteboard. While department members support the KPI of reducing the mortality rate, the task of making the indication creates tension in the department week after week.

The following is an example of the challenges related to the implementation of the indication. At a Lean whiteboard meeting in February 2014, the result of the week's indications is yet again printed on a red sheet of paper, showing the same result as the previous weeks; that the objective is not achieved. The head physician, who is also part of the quality board, reads aloud what the whiteboard already states: Physicians have indicated that they have assessed the relevance of the CVC in only approximately 25 percent of cases. This is significantly below the declared goal of 85 percent. The atmosphere in the meeting is tense, and it is clear that the indication is not regarded as equally important by all members of the department. Different valuations of the indication are reflected in the following statements:

- 1. Head physician with administrative responsibilities:** I think the problem stems from the fact that the box to be ticked is located in a place in ICIP where no one operates. However, now that the fluid ordinations are also going to be there, all of a sudden it will be a process that makes sense.
- 2. Clinical director:** I think we have to reconsider one more time. We have to remember that it is not the tick itself that improves the child's situation. What is important is that we don't have catheters inserted longer than necessary. So we must reflect: Is this worth spending so many resources and so much time on this registration? Is this how we secure the best treatment for patients?
- 3. Head physician, quality board:** The indication of the CVCs is a thing that simply **MUST** be registered. Not that I am too good at it myself, but it **MUST** be done. It is one of the few things we have evidence to support. The longer they are inserted, the greater the risk of catheter infections. They need to be removed as soon as they can.
- 4. Head Nurse:** There is anarchy here: Why keep spreading doubt—"is it really necessary and is it a good parameter?"—Why not say: This **IS** the way [of achieving a reduced mortality rate]. We **HAVE** to do it. It is what we have decided

in the clinical council and on the quality board, and now we SIMPLY have to do it.

**5. Nurse from section with typically non-intensive patients:** On the other hand I think that when we do rounds, it has become something we remember and talk a little about like “So the child gets this and that [through the catheter ]” So we do talk more about it than if we never focused on it.

The statements show the dissonant assessments of the value of making the indication. In the first statement by the head physician, the lack of indications in ICIP is categorized as a practical problem: His anticipation is that when doctors get an additional task in ICIP, they will make the indication. In the mode of administrative work, he regards the indications as a valuable means of getting an overview and of reaching the objective of 85 percent. In the second statement, the clinical director shifts the premises of the question and asks if spending time on making indications is *how we secure the best treatment for patients*. In this question he mobilizes the mode of acute clinical work: With the limited time we have, which is more important, treating children or making—and discussing—computer clicks? Assessed with this grammar, the value of making indications is doubtful. In the third statement, a head physician who is also on the quality board, argues in contrast that it is not good enough to omit the indication and only make the assessment. He assesses the relevance of the tick on the basis of international literature on how to decrease the mortality rate. On this basis, the indication as a means of making sure that the CVCs are removed as soon as they can be is *one of the few things we have evidence to support* and thus very valuable. This doctor is thus much more aligned with the mode of whiteboard management both in terms of goal and time orientation: CLC assessments *must* be indicated every day.

The fourth statement by the head nurse is also in support of making the indication. In alignment with the mode of whiteboard management, she argues that many arguments and reflections have preceded the decision of making the indication a whiteboard objective, and now it is a matter of doing as has been decided: Make the tick in ICIP. *Spreading doubt* about the relevance of the indication is time poorly spent and undermining the department’s ability to reach its goal. In her statement is also a trace of an historical dispute in the department, where nurses have tried to implement new initiatives and doctors have declined to adhere to them. In working to solve the task of improving the organization and quality of the department’s work, she firmly insists on bringing the whiteboard to the organization; doctors should make the indication. It is a decision they have participated in making, it is evidence-based and it is a means of reaching the goal of decreasing the mortality rate. The fifth and last

statement by the nurse claiming that they do in fact talk more about it shows that making the assessment can be aligned with the time orientation of nursing: It can be a part of “doing rounds” which the doctors and nurses do together every day. On the other hand, it is something that they “talk little about,” not something of utmost value when nursing. Additionally, nurses are not authorized to make the indication themselves, and for nurses, taking care of intensive patients and therefore not participating in whiteboard meetings, the focus on the CVC assessments is not necessarily known. While not regarded as a hindrance in the mode of nursing, neither is the indication of particular value in accomplishing tasks related to nursing.

While it has been decided to put the objective of improving the number of indications on the whiteboard, it is clearly a challenge to bring decisions from the whiteboard to the department. None of the modes of valuation reflected in the statements presented here is misaligned with the *goal* of making the indications: To reduce the mortality rate. However, as translated by the whiteboard, this goal becomes achievable only through conducting a certain task—to make the tick. To make the tick, department members have to change the way they normally do rounds by extending the time and attention given to the CVCs and, more problematically, the time spent on the computer. Consequently, the indication loses value in comparison to what department members could otherwise spend time on. As a head physician tells me in an interview: “It is as though focus on the whiteboard makes important aspects of the job secondary. The whiteboard meetings are the only mandatory meetings in the department, and all we talk about is quality and cleaning and stuff like that. We don’t talk about patients and treatment. Not at all!”

In this case the practice of whiteboard management molds the department’s goal and links it to a certain task and to a certain temporal configuration, which makes it misaligned with some modes of valuation in the department. In this way, whiteboard management both adds to the organizational misalignments of the department and magnifies its historical conflicts. Thus, whiteboard management fails to commensurate the modes of valuation in the department toward a united goal, but rather comes to increase the complexity of its coordination problems.

### **Discussion: Organizing Multiple Modes of Valuation**

Having engaged with the case of Lean whiteboard management at the department of neonatology, I have illustrated how it may look when a valuation device intersects with the working values of an organization. On a more general level, this analysis allowed me to explore why it is useful to study valuation practices or devices in the “filled spaces” that organizations constitute. To further elaborate on the relevance of an

organizational perspective to valuation studies, I will show how Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1967) study of the role of integrative devices in achieving unity in an organization has something to offer in investigating the dynamics between coexisting valuations. I will do this by discussing whiteboard management as coming to act as an integrative device and highlight some of the challenges it faces in this endeavor. Lawrence and Lorsch argue that integrative devices must have an intermediate position to the subsystems they seek to integrate. Their study showed that organizations experience the most difficulty in obtaining an intermediate positioning in terms of (1) time orientation and (2) goal orientation. In what follows, I will briefly discuss, first, the challenges related to the time orientations of the whiteboard in comparison with other modes of valuation, and second, challenges related to the goal orientation of whiteboard management in comparison with other of the department of neonatology’s analyzed modes.

By exploring the organizational valuations of whiteboard meetings with the theoretical framework of modes of valuation, we saw—among other things—how the time orientations of the different modes played a substantial role in shaping the grammar of what was valuable in the particular mode. This is summarized in Figure 8.

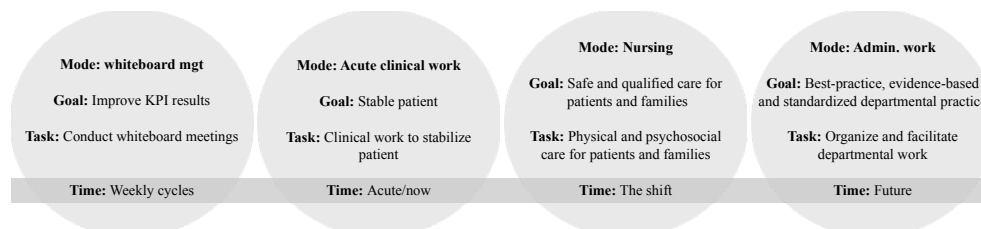


Figure 8. Comparing modes of valuation. Source: Author’s own work.

Whiteboard management as a mode of valuation has a weekly time orientation. Feedback is provided every Tuesday when the results are printed on red or green paper. In the mode of acute clinical work, the primary feedback is instant—although clinical work done in acute situations may show results later on as well. In the mode of nursing, the main time orientation is the shift: The nurses conduct the plan of the shift as decided on in the morning conference (in the case of the day shifts), and they care for the patient to whom they are assigned for the duration of the shift. In the mode of administrative work, the time orientation is mainly toward the future: How can the department improve its statistics this year compared to last year; what can we do to solve the problem that too few nurses have intensive care training, etc.? Feedback for these types of issue varies but is generally more future-bound than other practices in the department. This time

orientation of whiteboard management differs from the time orientation of, in particular, acute clinical work, but also from that of nursing. When the objectives and actions defined at the whiteboard meetings are temporally configured in a way too different from these modes, the argument based on Lawrence and Lorsch's article would be that it complicates integration because organizational members may not find feedback in other temporal structures equally valuable.

In terms of goal orientation, the goal of whiteboard management is to improve the department's KPI results: To decrease the mortality rate for premature children. This goal is not so far from the goals of "stable patient," "safe and qualified care" or "best practice" associated with the other modes of valuation in the department. However, as this goal is translated into the task of making ticks in ICIP to indicate the continued relevance of the patients' CVCs, it seems to create significant challenges in terms of integrating the different modes toward this goal. When this task is assessed through the grammar of, for example, acute clinical work, it is not necessarily aligned with the goal of decreasing the mortality rate of premature children. Physicians or nurses enacting the mode of acute clinical work may not always find it meaningful to spend time on opening ICIP and making indications. This underscores a central observation: While the goal of whiteboard management is relatively aligned with the goals in the other modes of valuation in the department, its link between goal and task is less intermediary to the other modes. In fact, whiteboard management is the only mode of valuation in which the practice is a means of achieving the goal. This explains some of the difficulties of bringing the organization to the whiteboard.

In spite of these challenges, whiteboard management manages to optimize certain things. When department members from different teams and professions get together and talk about their work, a number of ambiguities and tensions between different ways of doing things emerge. For example, at one meeting it turned out that two teams measured the placement of a CVC in different ways. This made it difficult to assess whether the CVC was placed correctly, because it was impossible to know if a difference in the measured position of the CVC was as a consequence of different measurement practices or an indication that the CVC was slipping out and needed replacement or adjustment.

While trying to work as an integrative device—or phrased more in the spirit of Lean—offering itself as a means of streamlining the department's work toward the common goal, whiteboard management rather comes to enact an *additional* mode of valuation. Whiteboard management becomes its own practice with a particular time orientation and a particular link between goal and task, and as such comes to *add* to the number of modes that need to be integrated in order to make the department work as a coordinated entity. Rather

than making the department “lean” in the mundane sense of the word, whiteboard management comes to increase the organizational complexity of the department. The effects of working with Lean whiteboard management in the department are not that the entire department’s view of what is valuable changes. The effects may unexpectedly turn out to be increased complexity rather than streamlined unity.

### **Conclusion and Implications: When Valuations Intersect**

When a valuation device is put to work in an organization, its effects are likely to deviate from how it was designed. In the organizational arrangement the device intersects with other modes of valuation, enacting different ideas about what is valuable or important. Thus, the course of a valuation device is not defined only by the design of the device but also by how it is itself valued by the prevailing or coexisting modes of valuation. When a mode of valuation (a grammar of assessment, a task, goal, and/or time orientation) enacted by a device deviates from existing modes, a consequence can be that the device is ignored or distorted. It can also result in new and unintended effects co-created in the intersection between the modes of valuation, as the example of diverging measurement practices shows. To expand the understanding of valuation devices regarding their impact, this paper has shown that an organizational turn in valuation studies is a productive way forward. Such a turn has (at least) two related implications for further studies of valuation.

First, an organizational turn would constitute an alternative to the dominant analytical approach of investigating the performative effects of a particular device without looking at the “scene” in which the device is put to work. To be able to analyze the scene, I have shown how strategies and learning points from organization theory are highly useful, as they offer a focus and vocabulary with which to engage and explore this scene. Furthermore, it implies a more symmetrical approach about which valuations to study. Currently, studies of valuation tend to prefer to study the most highly “devised” modes of valuation. While these often provide neat interfaces and numeric figures that perhaps make them more appealing to address in analysis, it does not mean that they are necessarily more influential or relevant on the empirical scene than others. In this paper, this is illustrated by the fact that even when Lean whiteboard management comes with numbers, managers, meetings, resources and political backing, it does not make the doctors make the indication or show up to a meeting if they find other things more valuable.

Second, an organizational turn would be a way of pushing forward the culture vs. device leapfrog debate of valuation studies (Zuiderent-

Jerak and van Egmond 2015: 45–73). The current debate is split between those who give primacy to culture or almost metaphysical orders (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Fourcade 2011: 1721–1777) and those who give primacy to particular devices (Callon 2007: 311–357). An organizational turn as presented in this paper provides the possibility of taking in that with which the device interacts in a way that is practice-oriented and material. Rather than conceptualizing what is outside of devices as Culture with a capital C, this paper suggests that—in organizational arrangements—“it” may be approached as practices enacting valuations: Conduction of a task, striving after a goal and a particular time orientation amounts to a particular grammar through which the value of something is assessed. In this way, studies of valuation would gain a supplement to the approaches that (over)emphasize the agency of devices (Zuiderent-Jerak and van Egmond 2015: 45–73, esp. 50) while maintaining an interest in concrete, empirical practices where “the value or values of something are established, assessed, negotiated, provoked, maintained, constructed and/or contested” (Doganova et al. 2014: 87–96, esp. 87).

While this paper argues that an organizational turn is highly relevant for valuation studies, this does not imply the view that organization theory should uncritically be “added” to valuation studies. The combination also points to some of the areas to which organization theory has devoted less attention. This includes the role of devices—or technology—in relation to organizational goals. When technology is addressed in organization studies, with few exceptions (see, for example, Orlikowski and Scott 2013), this is mostly by interpretative approaches such as sense making or institutional theory, which typically do not address the “agential” qualities of technology. The contingency school (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967: 1–47; Thompson 2001 [1967]) perhaps most directly addressed technology’s influence on organizational goals. They emphasized the way in which exogenous or “environmental fluctuations” (Thompson 2001 [1967]: 278) could “distort” the rational goal-achievement of technologies. Yet, even if it operated with a “bounded rationality” (Simon 1957; Thompson 2015 [1967]), meaning that the organization cannot comprehend all “possible sources of variation” (ibid.: 364), the contingency school did not address the agential role of technology in creating these “distortions” or in even establishing the goals.

Organization theory in general thus has something to learn from the way valuation studies address valuation devices. Devices in valuation studies are much less solid and more “mutable” and “mutating” than in organization theory. Rather than asking how well a means (technology) serves to achieve a goal, valuation studies would ask how a goal is established and what role technology plays in this establishment, not assuming that the goal preceded or is separable from the technology. One of the sources of inspiration for valuation



studies, Latour, and his co-author Venn (2002) argue that “technologies never truly appear in the form of means” (2002: 248). Using the example of a hammer, Latour and Venn show how time and space is folded (referring to Deleuze 1993) into the hammer, making it an “end” of an historical and material development process at the same time as a “means” of a handyman. This makes it impossible to say that the hammer merely “fulfills a function.” Rather, Latour and Venn say, the hammer alters the man who holds it in his hand making him envisage a “flux of new possibilities.” An example of this from this paper is when it becomes a whiteboard goal to “enhance interest and dialogue at the whiteboard meeting.” What was before a means (whiteboard meeting) of reaching a goal (decreased mortality rate), becomes a goal in itself due to the alterations installed in relation to the technology. From this way of approaching the role of technologies in many studies of valuation practices, organization theory could learn how elements of grammars of assessment, such as specific practices of goal, task and time, may become enacted differently and enter this flux of new possibilities.

For research on Lean management, this conclusion provides an alternative to the typical conclusions of implementation studies. Often, scholars describe the implementation of Lean in hospitals as failing due to “barriers” or lack of dedication (Brandao de Souza 2009: 121; Edwards and Nielsen 2011; Radnor 2011: 89–90; Radnor et al. 2012: 364–371). These studies’ conclusions rest on the idea that Lean as a policy or design holds the correct or most valuable solution, and that practice distorts or ruins this solution. In this paper, I have aimed at shedding new light by approaching the hospital department as a filled space where multiple modes of valuation are at play, each with sensible ideas about what is valuable. In showing how Lean whiteboard management competes with other modes of valuation about how to organize the department’s work, it becomes clear how the course of a device (or a policy) is shaped by its intersection with prevailing modes of valuation. This implies the relevance for hospital managers or Lean consultants of developing valuation devices close to practice, as this is where the organizational valuation of new devices takes place. Additionally, the organizational perspective to valuation implies that implementation of Lean is not mainly approached as a question of overcoming barriers to optimize value, but rather of how to organize Lean in relative alignment with what is constituted as valuable in the existing modes of valuation of the hospital.

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# Handling Rejection as Failure: Aspiring Writers Getting the Rejection Slip

Henrik Fürst

## Abstract

Included in the definition of being an aspiring person is the risk of failure. Aspiring fiction writers are no exception. This article shows that the role of aspiring fiction writer involves managing three issues: the hope of being published, rejection by a publisher, and the perception of the rejection as a failure. Drawing on 47 interviews with fiction writers who have attempted to become first-time writers, the analysis shows that aspiring writers' responses to rejection are related to accepting and dismissing responsibility for having failed and admitting or dismissing the rejection as a perceived failure. Based on these findings, the article presents procedures associated with four main approaches to dealing with failure: conceding, excusing, justifying, and refusing. This conceptual framework for understanding failure contributes to a theoretical understanding of evaluation and valuation processes and their consequences and to empirical studies of rejection as career failure; it also systematizes and extends Goffman's work on cooling out strategies.

Key words: cooling out strategy; cultural worker; culture of success; evaluation and valuation; failure; rejection

## Introduction

People with aspirations attempting to succeed regularly fail, and such failures are often linked to a rejection. Career termination due to rejection in sports (Ball 1976; Butt and Molnar 2009) and university education (Clark 1960) are but two examples of failing in the course of pursuing career aspirations. A particularly exposed category includes people who aspire to succeed in the cultural industries, where many try but most fail (Menger 1999, 2014; Mathieu 2012; McRobbie 2016). The aspirants end up having to manage the tension between the aspiration to succeed and the perceived failure of a rejection. The current article studies the consequences of evaluation

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and being evaluated by examining how aspiring fiction writers deal with tensions involved in hoping to be published and being rejected by a publishing house.

There is a huge difference between the number of people who aspire to be a first-time published fiction writer and those who actually become one. Every year, the largest publishing houses in Sweden for fiction debuts receive a couple of thousand manuscripts but publish fewer than ten debut fiction books.<sup>1</sup> The 152 publishing houses in Sweden that announced fiction debuts between 1997 and 2014 published a combined average of 44 per year. This means that there are many failed attempts and a few successful ones in becoming a first-time published fiction writer in Sweden.

In addition, only 1 percent of the debut fiction books published between 1997 and 2014 were first picked up by a literary agency and then sold to a publishing house. This contrasts starkly with the situation in the United States and the United Kingdom, where getting published through a literary agency is common (Thompson 2012: 71–74). In Sweden, the most common publication route is for writers to send their manuscript directly to publishing houses. Publishing houses sometimes offer information on their websites about whether they accept unsolicited manuscripts from writers. They may also provide information on what they want, for example stating that they are only interested in poetry. Some publishing houses also indicate, in various ways, that they receive large numbers of manuscripts. When publishers have assessed a manuscript and decided to reject it, they usually send a rejection slip directly to the writer, which means that the writer needs to deal with the consequences of being assessed.

The tensions these rejections create for aspiring writers in Sweden can be understood in relation to individualism and, more specifically, living in a culture that is imbued with notions of success. Cultures of success are produced by the value of self-realization and a reliance on the belief that anyone can make it (Meizel 2009). In individualized cultures, success is not necessarily regarded as determined by structural opportunities and constraints (Menger 1999, 2014; Abbott 2005: 310). Rather, equal access is assumed, and people are encouraged to attempt to succeed in their aspirations (Merton 1938: 680; Clark 1960). While the continuation of the social system depends on individual efforts to succeed, contradictions to the idea that anyone can succeed are dealt with by adapting people to failure (Clark 1960). In the case of fiction writers, many people have spent a long time pursuing their aspirations and preparing their manuscripts, while publishers' answers are usually a direct and definite "yes" or "no." Thus, aspiring writers who have been emotionally and socially charged to succeed at getting published may perceive publishers' rejections as failures.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures represent fiction debuts presented between 1997 and 2014 in the Swedish publishing industry trade magazine *Svensk Bokhandel*.



Publishers act as gatekeepers to the publishing market: they determine which aspiring writers will succeed and which will fail (Hirsch 1972; Coser 1975; Coser et al. 1982). Being admitted or denied entry is the objective side of artistic success and failure. But there is also a subjective side concerned with writers' experience of these assessments and the meanings they assign them. For many rejected writers, the felt experience of being assessed requires adapting to having failed.

Goffman (1952) has described this subjective side of failure in his research on how victims of confidence tricks adapt to failure. Like aspiring writers in cultures of success, the victims (or marks) are led to believe that they will earn a fast buck by carrying out some illicit task. However, they often end up failing and, as a consequence, lose their money. The game is rigged; con men plan the marks' failures from the outset. Goffman describes the last step in the game as adapting the mark to the failure through a process of "cooling the mark out" and thereby enabling marks to rationalize their failure. Goffman extends the metaphor of "cooling the mark out" to job transitions, marriage proposals, and many other phenomena. As Goffman shows, people in these situations have not necessarily been tricked. Similarly, publishers are seldom tricking writers when they reject a manuscript. Nevertheless, the culture offers a variety of "cooling out" strategies to rejected writers who perceive their rejection as failure, and writers use these strategies to handle their failure.

The present study analyzes how people deal with the consequences of being evaluated and rejected in an aspiration. For rejected writers, these consequences include having to manage the tension between having hoped to be published and being rejected. I introduce responsibility for and admitting or dismissing the perceived failure as key to understanding the cooling out strategies that writers use to deal with this tension. As my analysis shows, writers use four types of strategies to adapt to rejection: excusing, justifying, conceding, and denying failure.

## **Previous Research**

Cultural industries attract people who want to engage in cultural work for the sake of joy, glamour, and creativity, but which often feature emotionally demanding working conditions and poor economic compensation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008; Skov 2012; Hesmondhalgh 2013: 253–257; Conor et al. 2015; McRobbie 2016). Failure is a hidden reality of being a cultural worker (McRobbie 2016: 56) but is rarely studied. Unlike the few studies of creative failure that currently exist this article links the experience of failure to the creative person's process of adapting or failing to adapt to it. I develop a framework for studying how cultural workers deal with the regular

occurrence of being rejected and seeing such rejection as failure. I focus on aspiring writers as an example of cultural workers who are especially prone to fail. Coping with failure is a major part of creative work, and understanding this process sheds light on a major consequence of winner-takes-all markets, in which many fail and must deal with not being among the chosen few.

The present study also extends the research on evaluation and valuation. Studies of evaluation and valuation usually investigate value assessment and creation (Beckert and Aspers 2011; Lamont 2012; Zuckerman 2012; Helgesson and Muniesa 2013; Vatin 2013), for example, of fine wines, films, literary works, and music (Karpik 2010) and of design school applicants and their work (Strandvad 2014). The present study begins after the value of the person and the manuscript has already been established and sheds light on the often overlooked consequences of these practices.

No research has yet investigated failure and adaption to failure among aspiring writers. However, scholars have studied cooling out failures related to other activities, such as sports (Ball 1976; Butt and Molnar 2009) and delays and waiting (Åkerström 1997; Sellerberg 2008). For instance, Ball (1976) shows that rejection and failure in sports are more easily cooled out when there are viable alternatives for the athletes. Others have studied cooling out among unpromising students (Clark 1960), terminated workers in outplacement programs (Miller and Robinson 2004), contestants in televised music competitions (van den Scott et al. 2015; Wei 2016), mothers of children with Down's syndrome (Thomas 2014), and men making advances on women in singles bars and nightclubs (Snow et al. 1991). In the latter case Snow et al. (1991) show that women use cooling out strategies to protect themselves and to let men down easily. These strategies include polite refusals, excuses, and jokes, and women use them both before and during unwanted advances. More persistent men are cooled out through defensive incivility, including callous rejections and self-evident justifications that clearly state the woman's lack of interest. Women use still other strategies to avoid unwanted advances in the first place; for example, they may indicate that they are in a committed relationship, or show a clear lack of interest through their body language, or by fleeing from the situation. Snow et al. (1991) show that cooling out strategies are implicitly linked to justifications and excuses; the present article elaborates this link.

This body of research focuses on expectations of and reactions to failure and on particular cooling out strategies. It shows that cooling out strategies are sometimes formalized in organizations (Clark 1960; Ball 1976; Åkerström 1997; Miller and Robinson 2004; Sellerberg 2008) and at other times, as in this article, are part of informal, re-occurring encounters between people or between people and organizations (Ball 1976; Snow et al. 1991; Butt and Molnar 2009;

Thomas 2014; van den Scott et al. 2015; Wei 2016). While some studies focus on those who are engaged in cooling out (Clark 1960; Snow et al. 1991; Åkerström 1997; Miller and Robinson 2004; Sellerberg 2008), this article joins those others that focus on those being cooled out (Ball 1976; Butt and Molnar 2009; Thomas 2014; van den Scott et al. 2015; Wei 2016).

This article develops and demonstrates a conceptual scheme that outlines four ways that people deal with failure. In doing so, it contributes to three fields of research. The first and main contribution is its focus on adaption to failure as a consequence of the assessment of people and their work under market-like conditions. Second, this study contributes to the work of Goffman (1952) and his proponents by systematizing his formulation of cooling out strategies and by introducing additional strategies and procedures highlighted by the case of aspiring writers. Third, the scheme also contributes to the study of creative work and actors dealing with failure in careers in the creative industries.

### **Four Ways of Dealing with Failure**

Objectively, the rejection of a manuscript is a failure: the publisher has clearly and explicitly rejected the manuscript. Subjectively, however, the writer may or may not perceive the rejection as a failure. Many writers have committed themselves to becoming published writers, and the publisher's rejection does not support this aspirational status (Goffman 1952: 452); the writer's expectations have not been fulfilled. Inconsistencies have appeared in the writer's course of action; these inconsistencies present a threat to the writer's face, and the writer may be embarrassed (Goffman 1967: 8-9; see also Ball 1976: 727) or ashamed. Shame shapes self-identity as people see themselves from the perspective of another and sense a lack of deference and a negative evaluation from the other (Cooley 1922: 184; Scheff 1990). However, shame is often unacknowledged and hidden in social interaction, which sometimes leads to a cycle of shame and anger (Scheff 1990). To be cooled out is to define the situation in a way that enables the person to handle the emotional impact of failure and its threat to a claimed self-identity.

From the perspective of a person cooling him- or herself out, four categories analytically distinguish cooling out strategies. The first two categories are excuses and justifications. Excuses and justifications are accounts used to deal with claims of having failed (Scott and Lyman 1968). Here, excuses and justifications are accounts that fiction writers use to cool themselves out and adapt to a perceived failure. As accounts, they are "employed whenever an action is subjected to evaluative inquiry" because the action is unanticipated or untoward

(Scott and Lyman 1968: 46; see also Austin 1956: 2)<sup>2</sup>—for example, when a manuscript is rejected and the rejection is perceived as a failure.

Excuses are accounts used when the person accepts the occurrence of failure but not responsibility for the failure (Austin 1956: 2; Scott and Lyman 1968: 47; Schönbach 1990: 79–80); excuses explain and rationalize the failure. An excuse is used to cool out a perceived failure by saying, for instance, that one has had a bad day, that one was not prepared, or that the failure was a clumsy mistake. Justifications are accounts used when the person dismisses the occurrence of failure but accepts responsibility for the failure (Austin 1956: 2; Scott and Lyman 1968: 47; Schönbach 1990: 80). For example, a writer might justify a rejection by claiming that it was an intended outcome.<sup>3</sup>

The second two types of cooling out strategies are concession and refusal of failure (Schönbach 1990: 78–80).<sup>4</sup> When conceding failure, the person accepts the occurrence of the failure and the responsibility for it (Schönbach 1990: 78). The writer is either cooled out and has fully adapted to the failure or has realized that there has been a failure but has not adapted to it. The strategies involved in conceding failure include concrete courses of action, such as making a new attempt. While excuses and justifications are oriented toward the failure, concessions are about leaving the rejection behind by orienting oneself toward the future. A refusal means that the person is dismissing both the occurrence of failure and responsibility for having failed (Schönbach 1990: 80). For example, a writer might perceive the rejection as a failure but at the same time be unable to comprehend having been rejected, and this might signal that the writer is in need of cooling out, for example by being angry with the publisher.

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<sup>2</sup> Schönbach (1990: 5) defines an account “as a special explanation: an account is an answer to an explicit or implicit question guided by a normative expectation.” The implicit question for writers failing to get published is, “Why did you get rejected?” and excuses and justifications are two types of answers to this question.

<sup>3</sup> Another example of justification is how people rationalize meat consumption and avoid feeling guilt when meat consumption is perceived as a failure. Piazza et al. (2015) have shown that people usually use four types of justification. Eating meat is nice, natural, necessary, and normal. Following the line of thought in this article, eating meat is a failure or something bad. The person claims responsibility for doing it, but denies that it is a failure or bad, since it is nice, natural, necessary, and normal.

<sup>4</sup> Austin (1956) studies the language used to convey excuses or justifications as speech acts dealing with failure. According to Austin, excuses and justifications are used when a person has been accused of having done something wrong. They are related to taking or not taking responsibility for the failure (Austin 1956: 2). No one directly tells writers that they have done something wrong, but they may perceive the rejection as a failure and use excuses and justifications as accounts for why their work was rejected; these excuses and justifications may question whether a failure really has occurred and what their own responsibility for the failure has been.

Thus cooling out strategies are directed at handling the failure either through accounts or by conceding them and creating new courses of action. Table 1 summarizes this conceptual scheme.<sup>5</sup> This scheme makes it easier to understand and refine the variety of cooling out strategies that researchers have already identified and to describe additional strategies that new research uncovers. Below, I use this scheme to analyze how fiction writers deal with the tension between hoping to succeed and failing.

	Accepting responsibility	Dismissing responsibility
Accepting the occurrence of failure	<b>1. Conceding</b> (Schönbach 1990: 78)	<b>2. Excusing</b> (Austin 1956: 2; Scott and Lyman 1968: 47; Schönbach 1990: 79–80)
Dismissing the occurrence of failure	<b>3. Justifying</b> (Austin 1956: 2; Scott and Lyman 1968: 47; Schönbach 1990: 80)	<b>4. Refusing</b> (Schönbach 1990: 80)

Table 1. Four ways of dealing with rejection as failure  
Source: author’s own illustration

## Data and Methods

To understand how writers deal with rejection, I conducted four group interviews and 43 individual interviews in various parts of Sweden during 2013 and 2014. I interviewed several types of writers: writers who were aspiring to become published, writers who had aspired to become published and had either succeeded or failed, and writers who had not (yet) oriented themselves toward being published.<sup>6</sup> I use pseudonyms for all writers to protect their anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> See Schönbach (1990: 188–195) for a full taxonomy of concession, excuse, justification, and refusal as reactions in the context of interactional conflict.

<sup>6</sup> I also conducted interviews with literary agents and publishers or people working at publishing houses. I asked publishers and literary agents about both the fiction debut books they had published and the manuscripts they had rejected. For instance, sometimes they had manuscripts already submitted on their desks that they could talk about. During these interviews, I also observed how the submitted manuscripts were handled in the office space. Agents and publishers talked about procedures and different types of rejections and selections, for example how they formulated rejection letters and contacted writers. However, the main focus of this analysis is the writers themselves and their ways of dealing with failure.

The first third of each interview consisted of open-ended questions about the interviewee's writing and orientation to becoming published. I then introduced a "career scheme template": a table with headings such as writing-school participation, literary mentors, writing projects, selections/rejections, and timescale. I checked for potential additional categories during the open-ended part of all the interviews and found no new categories after the first couple of interviews. I then asked the writer to fill out the template and talk about writing projects and selections and rejections of their work. Writers who had had such experiences then narrated what had happened before, during, and after a publishing house had selected or rejected their work. I developed a tentative conceptual scheme, resembling the one presented in this article, after the first seven interviews and used this scheme throughout the rest of the interviews, making it possible to both explore and develop the scheme.

I performed a first-cycle and a second-cycle coding (Saldaña 2013). The first coding cycle was to code and categorize the material into broadly different phases of a literary career. For the second-cycle coding, I used the theoretical outline of cooling out strategies; the outline focused on writers who had received a response from a publisher and the different roles involved in this process. I also analyzed the different scenarios of rejection and selection for publication. I then closely compared and analyzed the material and fitted it into the conceptual scheme. This way of developing existing theory in second-cycle coding is called elaborate coding, "where the goal is to refine theoretical constructs from a previous study" (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003: 104), leading to the use and elaboration of previous theoretical constructs and the development of new ones.<sup>7</sup> The conceptual scheme is thus both an analytic result and a conceptual model linked to existing research.

## Analysis

In what follows, I present my analysis of the phase after a publisher has rejected the writer's work. I focus on the strategies used by the writers themselves from their own perspective, since these are the most varied strategies in the material. Some writers used only one of these strategies, while others used several. Publishers and peers also sometimes offered cooling out strategies to failed aspiring writers; in these cases, I analyze the roles of these publishers and peers in relation to the writers' own perspective.

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<sup>7</sup> Some proponents of grounded theory have hinted at this type of coding procedure, in which the researcher is explicitly involved with existing theory and extant concepts (Strauss 1987: 306-311; Charmaz 2006: 64-65). A general procedure in grounded theory, however, involves using suggestive theoretical codes rather than explicitly extending existing theory (Charmaz 2006: 63-66).

### Conceding rejection as failure

Nowadays you can read your e-mail on your phone, and on my way home from work I saw the letter from the publishing house. I could not help myself, and I read it. It was a rejection. I went home, fixed a strong gin and tonic, and got drunk. That was my way of dealing with it. (Cecilia, aspiring writer)

Conceding failure happens when the writer has accepted that a failure has occurred and claims some or full responsibility for it. Writers who concede failure either are in need of cooling out or have already cooled out. As writers cool out, they may either withdraw from their aspiration or continue with it. If they are in need of cooling out, they have not coped with the failure, and their sense of pride has taken a blow. To concede failure, the writer might *offer or be offered a new status, turn sour, use synthetic methods, perform magic and ceremonies, blow out steam, or plan to make a new attempt*. When conceding the rejection as failure, the writers either involve themselves in rituals or give reasons why they should continue or not continue to pursue an aspiration to be published.

One way of dealing with the conceded failure is *to be offered or to offer oneself another status* or aspiration that is different from the one being rejected (Goffman 1952: 457; Clark 1960: 574-574; Ball 1976: 736; Thomas 2014: 293-295). One writer who had failed and initially had a hard time coping with the situation was offered a status as a writing teacher. The writer said, "It is common knowledge: 'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach'" (Anna, formerly an aspiring writer). The writer was then able to leave the situation of being a rejected aspiring writer and enter this new status as a teacher. At the same time as the writer's orientation shifted, she also came to accept the failure and her responsibility for it. For rejected writers, self-publishing can work in a similar way; in this case, writers offer themselves a status similar to the rejected status. In the words of Goffman, the writer can be understood to "gather about him the persons and facilities required to establish a status similar to the one he has lost, albeit in relation to different persons" (Goffman 1952: 459). A writer who had failed to be published by a publishing house for a number of years, said:

After two and half years, I had finally been rejected by all publishing houses. I felt that I was closing in to be published, but it gets harder and harder to be published through a publishing house as time goes on. I then decided to self-publish and started a journey to become a self-published writer. (Adam, published writer)

The writer then offered himself a new status and at the same time dealt with the failure of having been rejected by the publishing houses. These writers have conceded failure and are able to be cooled out by offering themselves a similar status, for example by becoming something else or by self-publishing. In so doing they soften the blow of being rejected and cope with having failed.

Writers who have conceded failure can also deal with the situation by *turning sour* (Goffman 1952: 45). The writer outwardly appears to have conceded the situation as a failed attempt but has not fully dealt with the failure. This is a way of keeping the chin up and cooling out while at the same time withdrawing from the effort of getting published. A writer and her peers had thought that she would be published, but she says that after her work was rejected, “I do not talk about my own writing these days, not many people know that I write. I usually tell people that I have stopped writing [and do other fulfilling things] and that doing that is as fulfilling as writing” (Anna, formerly an aspiring writer). She said that she does this to get away from the pressure to try again and the blow of having failed at a time when she still had a hard time coping with the failure.

To cool out, the person can *blow out steam* (Goffman 1952: 457; Thomas 2014: 289–290). One crime novel writer became very upset when publishers rejected one of her manuscripts:

Interviewer: Returning to the rejections from the publishing houses, what did you think about the rejection letters when you got them?

Birgitta: I said, “Forget about the publishers! We can include the publishers in the next novel and kill them off.” (Birgitta, published writer)

By telling her peers that she would symbolically kill the publishers who had rejected her work, she was able to blow off some steam and accept her failure. While turning sour is about appearing to accept the failure, blowing off steam is about strongly showing that one has not accepted it. Both strategies are based on conceding the failure and responding to the blow in different ways. Blowing off steam is not a reactive strategy for responding to rejection, as, for example, is exploding with anger. Instead, blowing off steam is a proactive strategy that writers use to overcome the sting of failure.

Writers can also use *synthetic methods* to cool out from a failure they have conceded—for example, by drinking alcohol. One such example was given by Cecilia in the opening of this section, where she had got drunk after having read a rejection e-mail on her phone. She conceded her failure and did not find any excuses or justifications for it, and she dealt with it by attempting with the help of alcohol not to think about it.

Another way to overcome the failure is to perform *ceremonies* or, in Malinowski's (1954) words, *magic*. The writer who planned to symbolically kill off the publishers drew on the idea of magic in imagining such an endeavor. Another writer used a ceremony and magic more concretely; he said, “I invited my friends to a party and set the manuscript and the rejection letters on fire”. This symbolic act helped him “get over the rejection and get on with [his] life” (Simon, aspiring writer). Another writer told a similar story: “My literary



mentor ripped the rejection letters apart. [...] It was like a therapeutic intervention” (Anna, formerly an aspiring writer). These ceremonies and magic were meant to literally and symbolically destroy the sign of failure to enable the writers to overcome a situation they have conceded as a failure.

Peers may become involved as coolers when they hear about the rejected writers’ grievances concerning the rejection. Peers can console the writer by providing excuses, justifications, refusals, as well as concessions. In the excerpt below, a writer describes his peers as helping him concede the failure (see also Clark 1960: 575; Thomas 2014: 291-293):

Interviewer: Did you talk to anyone about these rejections?

Daniel: Yes. I talked to my wife and a few friends.

Interviewer: What did they say?

Daniel: My wife said that it must hurt, and I knew she really felt for me. Then I mentioned it to a friend in another context, and I felt like they understood my pain. It feels like not many people understand this kind of pain. (Daniel, published writer)

The writer’s partner and friends were able to console the writer and give him social support that helped him concede and adapt to his failure. Another rejected writer consulted the members of her writing group, who said, “Just do it again.” They were very supportive; “without them, I wouldn't have been published today. I wouldn't have managed to go on” (Emma, published writer). The writing group’s social support helped this writer cope with her failure by encouraging her to plan to *make a new attempt* (Goffman 1952: 457). In a similar fashion, publishers can act as coolers. Their main strategy as organizations is to *stall* (Goffman 1952: 458; see also Clark 1960: 575; Sellerberg 2008) by giving the impression in the rejection letter that they might be interested in publishing the rejected writer’s work in the future. This stalling strategy helps rejected writers cope with their failure by implicitly offering them a chance to try again.

### Excusing rejection as failure

Everyone gets rejection letters. (Jonas, published writer)

An excuse happens when the writer has accepted the occurrence of failure but does not claim full responsibility for having failed. In practice, this means having been rejected by a publisher but not accepting responsibility for the failure. Writers who excuse rejection may or may not be correct in their claim that the rejection was not

their responsibility. The writers I interviewed used the following strategies to excuse rejection: claiming *unclear evaluation criteria*; claiming *clear but wrong evaluation criteria*; and claiming that *everyone fails*. Excusing rejection as failure involves giving reasons why the manuscript was rejected.

Writers who claimed *unclear evaluation criteria* argued that publishers do not know what they are doing and are making mistakes when they select and reject manuscripts. One concrete excuse was to use exemplars of well-known writers who were first rejected and then became successful, published writers. In a group interview, four writers developed and used a strategy of unclear evaluation criteria to handle one of the participants' rejection:

Gerd: What if the publishing houses actually would do a different kind of assessments of your manuscript? One publishing house would like to publish it, and another would not like to publish it. Why would one response be worth more than the other?

Stina: The ambition is to have it published.

Gerd: The manuscript might be rejected by some publishing houses, but there may also be fifteen other publishing houses that would like to publish it, saying "How it is even possible that this manuscript was once rejected?"

Fanny: Wasn't it [Astrid Lindgren's book] *Pippi Longstocking* that got rejected? (Gerd: Yes, it was.) She sent it to one publisher who rejected it and then to another one who selected it.

Hanna: Yes, that is the case for most writers. Most writers get rejected by publishers. (Stina, Gerd, Fanny, and Hanna, aspiring writers)

The writers discuss the unclear evaluation criteria at publishing houses and make the case that well-known writers have initially been rejected. The rejection of *Pippi Longstocking* could also have been used as an example of "everyone fails" or "even the best writers fail". However, in the above quote, the illustrative rejection is used to present the uncertainty that prevails in the publishing market and the difficulty that this uncertainty causes for publishing houses in their search for "good" manuscripts. This interpretation makes the rejection of a writer's manuscript a case of unclear evaluation criteria. The writers use previous mistakes by publishers as an excuse for the current failure; the implicit argument is that the publishers have made a mistake. This strategy recalls Goffman's (1952: 456-457) discussion of people with similar status to the marks who are used to cool the mark out. Here, the writers use a published writer as an exemplar of similar status to the rejected writer. Through an act of imagination, the writers use a past situation as an excuse that makes it possible to deal with the

failure; they imagine that the rejection was wrong and that it might be part of a longer-term success story.

Other excuses concerning unclear evaluation criteria have to do with having the wrong timing and the fact that people read manuscripts differently. This means that the writer is not responsible for having failed because the rejection was just the result of a different reading of the manuscript, and the manuscript itself might still be good and publishable. The response to the failure may then be to say, “It’s their loss.” One writer expressed this sentiment:

Inger: I got a rejection where the publisher said I should read the greatest novelists of our time, and then I will learn how to write well. I became upset; I thought I was a really good writer [...]

Interviewer: Did you change your way of writing after this rejection?

Inger: No, actually, I did not. I do not want to be published because I write as the publishers want me to write. I write the things I feel like writing, and I have a uniqueness in my way of writing, like everyone else in my writing group. I value this uniqueness, and that is why I am part of a writing group. (Inger, published writer)

Inger knows she has failed but says that it is the publishing houses’ loss if they do not want to publish her texts. Self-publishing can work as a similar type of excuse to cool out the failure of having been rejected by a traditional publisher. The status denied by the traditional publisher is created by the writers themselves, sometimes with a sentiment of “I will show them”; that is, the writer will show the publishers that deciding not to publish their work was the wrong decision.

Another excuse is to say, as writer Hanna does above, that most writers are rejected or, as another writer said, “Everyone gets rejection letters” (Jonas, published writer). *Everyone fails* means not only that writers now famous have been rejected, but also that everyone who submits a manuscript has been rejected. This does not necessarily have to do with unclear evaluation criteria—it’s simply a claim that all writers fail, including this writer. The strategy is to remove the personal feeling of failure and instead talk about it as a general and common event. To be rejected is then at least not a personal failure; the responsibility is not on the shoulders of the individuals themselves. As an objective failure, a rejection is always a sign of having attempted to do something that failed. But individuals may not interpret objective failures as personal failures—they might even see them as personal successes.

Alternatively, the rejected individual might claim that the *evaluation criteria were clear but wrong*. One aspiring writer said, when asked how he had reacted when he was rejected, “Yes, of course,

you get a bit disappointed. You have expectations. As I said before, [for publishers] it might be about earning money quickly” (Karl, aspiring writer). Here, the writer excuses the failure by saying that the publishers might have only been interested in potential best-sellers. Another writer said, “[Publishers publish] things of inferior quality because the person who has written it is a bit famous. Then they just publish it” (Lars, published writer). This writer excuses the failure of rejection by claiming that publishers prefer work written by celebrities. In both cases, the evaluation criteria are clear—it is the potential best-seller or the manuscript written by a famous person that gets selected—but these criteria are leading publishers to select the wrong manuscripts. With this excuse, writers can cool out by claiming that the rejection was not a failure, since their manuscript might still be better (and more publishable) than the manuscripts getting published.

### Justifying the attempt and denying failure

I would not like to have been published and then forgotten. (Nils, formerly aspiring writer)

A justification is made when the person accepts the responsibility of having been rejected but denies that a failure has occurred. The writer accepts the rejection but at the same time argues that it was not a bad thing. The writers I interviewed justified their rejections by *defining the situation as a good attempt, hedging, relativizing, and reconstructing in hindsight*. Justifications offer reasons why being rejected is actually not a bad thing.

If the rejection letter deviated in any sense from the standard rejection letter, writers could use it to justify the rejection as not a real failure. The submission might have been *a good attempt*. The writer might then feel a new hope to be published one day, as expressed by this writer:

Interviewer: How did you know that [a large publishing house] was interested in your work?

Maud: I understood it when I read the rejection letter. I did not get the standard rejection. “We have read your manuscript. Thank you, but we are not interested in publishing your work.” They described the plot a bit and asked me to work on it some more. I worked on it some more and got a long letter with a review of my work. I was like “Wow, this is fun.” I thought that if I worked some more on this manuscript and sent it to a lot of publishing houses, it would be accepted someday. (Maud, published writer)

Writers interpret these kinds of rejection letters as rejections but not as total failures. They justify them by claiming responsibility for having failed but claiming that the failure was not bad. An objective failure has occurred, but the person does not perceive it as a subjective failure.

Another justification strategy is to claim that the submission was not a real attempt. This claim recalls Goffman's (1952: 461) notion of *hedging*, in which the person makes sure to avoid totally committing to achieving something. Writers may conceal their commitment to being published from others and even from themselves. When I asked a writer what his first thought was when his work was rejected, he said, "My first thought when I got the rejection letter was that it was one less rejection letter to think about" (Karl, published writer). The writer had from the outset contemplated the opportunity to self-publish but, despite this, had sent the manuscript to a traditional publisher. He justified the rejection as not really a bad thing because he had not expected the manuscript to be published by a traditional publisher anyway, and so the rejection was not that important or particularly bad. Although the writer contemplated and eventually decided to self-publish, he would still have preferred to be published by a publishing house. He said:

I dreamed about getting published by a publishing house, and when I finished my manuscript I just did like everyone else and submitted it to publishing houses, who rejected it. I then just continued by self-publishing it, making it possible for me to hold the printed book in my hands.

As I interpret the writer's responses, he was still committed to being published by a traditional publisher, but for the hedging to work as a justification of the failure, he had to avoid fully expressing this commitment.

*Relativization* is a way of using justification to distance oneself from a rejection. The writer can claim after a rejection that becoming published is not the only thing that is important in life (cf. Goffman 1952: 455). "I do not think my life will be a failure if I am not published," one writer said, "and that was an important insight [...] it is important to get distance and see that a person is more than his or her writing, there are other things you can do" (Anna, formerly aspiring writer). Here, the writer's formerly total commitment to becoming a first-time published fiction writer is not salient; she justifies the failure by stating that it is not particularly bad and thus protects herself by distancing herself from the commitment.

Rejections can also be turned around; an initial failure can be turned into a success. This is a form of *reconstructing in hindsight*, which is related to *eulogy work*. Eulogy work is a strategy for coping with failure and managing emotion and reputation when one has lost an esteemed status in public by claiming the loss was not really a bad thing (van den Scott et al. 2015). In contrast to eulogy work, reconstructing in hindsight is not done immediately or for public display, and the writer has not lost a status but instead has failed to claim an aspirational status. For example, rejected writers might engage in reconstructing in hindsight when another publishing house

publishes their work or if they rethink their priorities and what is important in life. They may even claim to be happy not to have been published, because the publication may have been a failure. As one writer said, “I would not like to have been published and then forgotten” (Nils, formerly aspiring writer). Another writer discussed the consequences of having been rejected and in hindsight reconstructed the meaning of her rejection:

If the manuscript of my novel had been published back then, I think it would have been uncomfortable for me today [...] I did not think about it then, but if it had been published then, everyone would have read a text that actually was quite a private matter. (Ulrika, formerly an aspiring writer)

Several years had passed since this writer’s work had been rejected. By the time of the interview, she had reconstructed the rejection in hindsight by turning her initial perception of it as a failure into a feeling of relief.

### **Refusing to see the rejection as a failure**

The writer who dismisses the failure and denies responsibility for it is unable to comprehend the situation as a failure and may eventually search for reasons why he or she failed. The writer may say, “I am right; they are wrong.” One writer told me, “I had previously published a [non-fiction book]. When I published it, [the publisher] said, ‘If you do anything more, something like fiction, I want to see it first.’ ‘You will see it first,’ I said.” She continued:

I was so angry when I was rejected [by the publisher]. I was furious. I was going out [for an event] in the evening, but I just wanted to knock someone to the ground.

Interviewer: Were you angry because you assumed you would be published?

Olga: Yes, because I was not that upset when I got rejections from the other publishing houses. When I got their rejections, it was not such a big deal. (Olga, published writer)

The writer had felt that the publisher had made an implicit promise to publish her work in the future, so when her manuscript was rejected, she could not comprehend it. The publisher was the one that did “not understand a thing”; the writer simply could not fail. This meant that the writer was getting “hot” and that conceding, excusing, or justifying the failure might cool her out. A writer who refuses a rejection is therefore not cooled out and has not adapted to the failure, while those deploying justifications, excuses, and concession are using strategies to adapt themselves to the failure. While some writers may fully adapt to a failure, others may never fully do so.

## **Discussion**

The writers I interviewed dealt with the failure of rejection in four main ways and by using a number of previously explored and not yet explored procedures. This conceptual framework systematizes Goffman's (1952) account of how people using cooling out strategies adapt to failure. It also brings additional perspective to the study of evaluation and valuations by linking their consequences to the experience of failure. Finally, this study contributes to research on careers in creative industries by linking experiences of failure to objective failures.

There is a lack of clear aesthetic standards for evaluating works of fiction (Anheier and Gerhards 1991a: 812-813, 1991b: 139-140; Janssen 2001: 340; Menger 2014: 4). The lack of clear aesthetic standards creates situations in which rejected writers cannot easily determine how publishers have assessed their manuscripts. Because of this uncertainty, writers attempt to make sense of what has happened and why their work has been rejected. They use excuses to find reasons for the rejection. Because the excuse makes it possible to imagine why the manuscript was rejected, the excuse transforms uncertainty into a resource for dealing with failure. For instance, rejected writers imagine and handle the failure by stating the excuse that publishers only select potential best-sellers or manuscripts written by celebrities. Rejected writers who refuse the rejection, on the other hand, are responding directly to the lack of clear evaluative criteria. They cannot imagine why their work was rejected; such a thing simply could not have happened. Justifications leave uncertainty aside and focus on the consequences of the rejection; they claim that in its consequences, the rejection was simply not that bad. Concessions attempt neither to grapple with the uncertainty nor to determine what could have happened. Instead, through concessions, rejected writers use rituals and strategies to overcome the failure and come up with reasons why they should or should not continue to pursue their aspiration to be published. A temporal sequence of adapting to failure appears: writers move from not comprehending the rejection (refusal), to focusing on why their work was rejected (excuses), to why, in its consequences, the rejection is not that bad (justification), to reorientation (concession). However, different strategies and sequences are in play; some people may use several different strategies at once, and the strategies used may depend on the situation and persons involved.

Because there are many aspiring writers who attempt to get published and whose work is rejected by a publishing house, the strategies and procedures presented here are commonly performed. Publishers' rejection slips are delivered privately to writers, and writers sometimes conceal the rejection. The consequences of assessment and rejection are not limited to aspiring writers, however, and can

sometimes be of a more public nature. An example that is structurally analogous to that of aspiring writers who have failed is aspiring singers who fail in reality television music competitions (e.g., *Idols/Superstar*). Thousands of aspiring singers participate in auditions to have their abilities assessed by a jury. They hope to succeed, but most end up failing (Meizel 2009: 485; Wei 2016). Participants who are rejected after the first round cool themselves out by justifying their failure, arguing that they are an unrecognized talent, and continuing to aspire to be recognized for their talents (Wei 2016). As cultures of success and evaluation and valuation play out, the stories of rejections and humiliation become part of the narrative plot and appeal of the program (Meizel 2009). The value lies in the public nature of the auditions and in what Garfinkel (1956) has called *status degradation ceremonies*, in which participants lose their claimed status in front of others. Participants save face by claiming in an exit ritual that what happened was actually good (van den Scott et al. 2015). There might be specific strategies for cooling out aspirants so that they maintain their identity and for destroying aspirants and their claimed identity after an assessment (Ball 1976: 727). In contrast to the aspiring writers' rejections, which are concealed, the program has created entertainment value from public evaluations and valuations (see also Muniesa and Helgesson 2013). Audiences are entertained by both failure and success, and the participants themselves might be mortified or in a state of celebration. Failure and success depend on each other in this context; a singer can only succeed if someone else fails and can only fail if someone else succeeds. While the failure, in this case, is a public event, the rejection from publishers is handled through the more private process of cooling out.

What happens when aspiring writers and singers attempt to succeed but continually fail? Another structurally analogous example is internet daters. Some internet daters hope to meet a romantic partner but end up failing in their aspiration to be matched with someone. In the face of recurring failures, daters may either learn to control their feelings of hope and failure (Fürst 2013) or be unable to control their feelings and thus be in need of cooling out (Snow et al. 1991).<sup>8</sup> The consequences of evaluation and valuation might then lead to a gradual emotional distancing from the situation of evaluation and valuation and the risk of rejection (Fürst 2013). This connects with existing and possible future research on the consequences of being assessed in other fields.

In education, for example, reactions to university rankings have intended and unintended consequences for the universities involved, and these universities come to adapt their practices to these rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Future research might explore the

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<sup>8</sup> It might, however, be possible to organize hope of success by instilling such an emotional climate within a group or organization (Fürst and Kümmel 2011).



consequences of other kinds of evaluation in education including, for example, rejections of articles, book proposals, and grant proposals and rejections from aspirational academic positions. This brief summary of research on the consequences of evaluation seems to hint at a larger and perhaps promising field within valuation studies in which the consequences of assessment and being assessed are studied.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that rejected writers manage the tension between having hoped to be published and being rejected by claiming responsibility and admitting or dismissing the perceived failure. The discussion showed the potential of studying the responses and strategies that people use to handle the intended and unintended consequences of evaluation.

A suggestion for further research is to extend this article's conceptual apparatus for understanding perceived failure to the study of success. Goffman (1952: 454) mainly analyzes adaption to failure but notes the possibility of promotion to a new status. Austin (1956) analyzes accusations of having failed, and Scott and Lyman (1968) study accounts of unanticipated or untoward actions; but it would be possible to study corresponding successes. Four different scenarios may arise that reverse the actions of conceding, excusing, justifying, and refusing. First, the success may be accepted (one has succeeded), and the person may claim responsibility for having succeeded; for example, the writer may fully adjust to having succeeded at getting published and accept the situation as such. Second, the success may also be accepted without any claim of responsibility; for example, the writer may attribute the success to someone else's actions and define it as not a real success. Third, the success may be refuted but the person may claim responsibility for having succeeded; for example, the writer may say that getting published was not the experience he or she had expected it to be. Fourth, the writer may not accept the success and may refrain from assuming responsibility for it, for example, by wanting to forget all about it. Future studies of success can empirically test and use this outline.

Another, more direct way to develop this research is to further analyze sequences of adaption to failure and success by following research procedures developed in social sequence analysis (Cornwell 2015). For example, researchers might examine how often and when people use different strategies or certain sequences of strategies and procedures (cf. Piazza et al. 2015), as well as how the different strategies are sequentially organized in talk (cf. Cerulo and Ruane 2014). Resulting patterns may indicate whether different social groups use similar or dissimilar strategies to cope with failure and success. Additional research would also be needed to understand when and

how actors come to act out one or another of the strategies after having been rejected or selected. Such research might identify which structural factors shape the labor markets of creative industries, who attempts to access the labor market and with what consequences, and how failure and success in this labor market are shaped by structural inequalities (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013; Oakley 2013; Gill 2014; Conor et al. 2015; Saha 2015; McRobbie 2016). The consequences for the identities of those who are rejected or selected could also be studied. For instance, those rejected may be considered to be non-persons or nobodies (Goffman 1963: 84); in this case, actors within the core of the literary world might behave with civil inattention in not recognizing the existence of the person. This could be contrasted to how a person becomes a “somebody” in the literary world and the consequences of evaluation and valuation of this identity. Such a study would investigate how people are identified and positioned by the identities that are produced and recognized within the literary world.

An individual’s commitment to an aspiration is presumably influenced by how he or she deals with the consequences of being the object of an assessment. This research is thus important not only for the study of careers in cultural industries (see Mathieu 2012), but also for the study of aspiration and commitment to becoming something in general. Failures and methods of dealing with failure tap into fundamental conditions of living as a social being.

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Conference note

## Classification Situations—A New Field of Research for Valuation Studies?

Julian Jürgenmeyer and Karoline Krenn

### Abstract

This conference note adds to recent discussions about the sociological implications of the spread of digital techniques for classifying market actors, specifically with regard to processes of social stratification. We first present some of the contributions to the conference “Classification Situations in Markets” and then discuss their implications for future research in general and the field of valuation studies in particular. We suggest three themes related to the conference that deserve further attention by students of valuation and related social processes: (a) the challenges posed by the rise of big data and algorithmic classifications to the study of classification and valuation; (b) the feedback loops of valuation regimes, in particular their consequences for conceptions of the self; and (c) the relation between classification situations and larger institutional settings, which implies a more explicitly comparative orientation.

Key words: classification; sociology of algorithms; big data; credit scoring; stratification

On May 6, 2015, the Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio, signed into law the *Stop Credit Discrimination in Employment Act* which prohibits employers to make employment and promotion decisions on the basis of job applicants’ and current employees’ consumer credit histories. When the law went into effect on September 3, 2015, an accompanying city-wide outreach campaign was launched to educate New Yorkers about their new rights and responsibilities. Comprising

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training sessions, street outreach walks, and brochures in no less than nine languages, the campaign's most visible feature were the large-scale advertisements posted in subway stations across the city. In huge letters, their tagline read "You are more than your credit score" or, in the Spanish version, "Tú vales más que tu historial de crédito" – "You are *worth* more than your credit history." Why would someone's credit score serve as a yardstick of individual worth in the first place? The city's public counter-valuation points to the emergence of a valuation regime which exploits the ever more abundant digital traces of our everyday lives to algorithmically sort and slot people into classificatory schemes. Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy (2013) have suggested the succinct notion of "classification situations," a variation on the Weberian "class situation," to capture the far-reaching pervasiveness and consequences of this process.

Based on the tracking of past individual behavior and predictions of future outcomes, classification situations condition the access to economic and other resources, from health care and credit to employment and insurance. While this development is particularly pronounced in the United States, other parts of the world are already following suit or likely to do so. In this essay-cum-report, we want to add to this recent discussion about the sociological implications of the avalanche of digital numbers we are currently living through. In order to do so, we will first present some of the contributions to the conference "Classification Situations in Markets," held at Humboldt University of Berlin on June 17, 2015, and then discuss their implications for future research in general and the field of valuation studies in particular. We will suggest three themes related to the conference that deserve further attention by students of valuation and related social processes: (a) the challenges posed by the rise of big data and algorithmic classifications to the study of classification and valuation; (b) the feedback loops of valuation regimes, in particular their consequences for conceptions of the self; and (c) the relation between classification situations and larger institutional settings, which implies a more explicitly comparative orientation.

### **Classification Situations in Markets: New Technologies, New Inequalities?**

Borrowing its title from Fourcade and Healy's (2013) article, the conference sought to illuminate how this new regime and its classificatory logic shape market activities and outcomes, regulate economic behavior, and distribute life chances. The speakers addressed these issues from two angles: the first focused on different conceptual approaches to classification more generally, such as their coordinating functions in markets as conceived by the French Economics of Conventions school (Rainer Diaz-Bone, University of Lucerne), their interactional dimension (Andreas Pettenkofer, University of Erfurt), as



well as their relationship to value systems (Anne Kruger and Martin Reinhart, Humboldt University of Berlin). The second angle was decidedly more empirical and analyzed the relationship between the new data infrastructure and contemporary classification practices in markets. In the following, we concentrate on the latter approach.<sup>1</sup>

Marion Fourcade (University of California, Berkeley) further developed the original argument about classification situations in her keynote address “Seeing Like a Market.” Arguing that with the rise of actuarial algorithmic techniques, new classificatory regimes produce new forms of moralized inequality, Fourcade proposed a novel concept: *übercapital*. Extending the Bourdieusian inventory of capitals, *übercapital* is the product of individuals' trajectory and position in various scorings, categorizations, ratings, and gradings, and it is accumulated and operative across different social fields. The concept thus tries to capture the proliferation of algorithmic classifications in various settings of social life and their use in contexts for which they were not originally intended—as in the case of employers relying on credit scores to evaluate a job candidate against which the NYC *Stop Credit Discrimination* campaign is directed. With access to resources becoming increasingly dependent on *übercapital*, it becomes necessary, Fourcade contended, to orient one's behavior to the imperatives of the classifying principles: leave digital traces, go into debt and repay it, demonstrate your financial literacy, and so on. Being a citizen in the contemporary economy thus increasingly means being “traceable, tractable, and extractable,” as Fourcade put it. “Seeing like a market,” then, is seeing through the lens of scores, categories, and ratings that are based on individual behavior and produce stratifying outcomes. This perspective suggests understanding the unequal distribution of resources and life chances as the result of individual will rather than of structural conditions—and to make inequality, therefore, a moral phenomenon.

As the German prefix *über-* indicates, Fourcade and Healy regard the term as a form of meta-capital which transcends other forms. Its precise relation to the more traditional and usually analogue forms of capital, however, has not yet been fully elaborated. Does it, for instance, simply absorb economic capital—ultimately Bourdieu's own form of meta-capital (Bourdieu 1986)—or is there a more complex transformation process going on? Fourcade's likening of *übercapital* to the letter of introduction the traveling gentleman in early modern Europe carried with him to sustain his reputation even suggests that *übercapital* may just be the digitized form of symbolic capital. The

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<sup>1</sup> We deliberately restrict our coverage of the conference here in order to focus on our argument. Please note that all contributions will appear, with additional papers by Eve Chiapello, Simone Schiller-Merkens, Jason Pridmore, and others, in 2017 in a special issue of *Historical Social Research* (Krenn forthcoming).

concept would therefore benefit from a more explicit positioning in relation to Bourdieu's own forms of capital. Moreover, while Fourcade made a strong empirical case for the offline effects of online behavior, indeed for the entanglements of the analogue and the digital, these transformation dynamics also require further conceptual work.

One crucial aspect here is how *übercapital* matters differently in different fields. In the economic field, *übercapital* does seem to be of increasing relevance. But what role does it play in, say, the political or scientific fields? While digital metrics such as the *h*- or *i*-citation indices from Google Scholar and elsewhere undoubtedly have an increasing impact on academic careers, they still are essentially digital renderings of the already dominant forms of capital within the field. Seen from this perspective, we may wonder whether *übercapital* should be considered a new, digital *state* of capital, in addition to the embodied, institutionalized, and objectified states, rather than a new *form* of capital, in parallel to cultural, social, and economic capital.

Fourcade's co-author Kieran Healy (Duke University) further elaborated on the new regime of moralized classification backed by algorithmic techniques. Healy presented data on how classification situations arising from credit rating scores connect to more familiar stratification patterns, particularly to the categorical inequalities of race, class, and gender. Developed in response to the 1974 Equal Credit Opportunity Act, these scores were initially considered a solution to group-based discrimination because they promised to measure only actual individual behavior rather than categorical affiliation (Hyman 2011: ch. 6). In fact, today's proponents of data-based metrics of individual worth argue on exactly the same grounds: from their perspective, these tools "provide detailed information about individuals, thereby reducing the temptation for decision makers to rely on group-based stereotypes" (Strahilevitz 2012: 64). Healy, however, argued that credit scores in particular disguise the structural conditions of individual behavior. The reasons why, for instance, racial differences in adverse credit events continue to persist *across* income distribution simply disappear. Instead, individualized credit scores suggest that *all* economic behavior should be interpreted as the result of personal choice—and thus as indicator of individual moral worth. Fourcade and Healy's emphasis on the moral underpinnings of measurement devices and procedures laid open the inseparability of valuation regimes and their socio-technical mediators.

As both Fourcade and Healy adumbrated and the Stop Credit Discrimination campaign claims, the stratifying consequences of algorithmic classifications are exacerbated when they become relevant for access to other social contexts. With an empirical focus on credit ratings, Akos Rona-Tas (UC San Diego) suggested in his talk the notion of "off-label use" to conceptualize this phenomenon. Borrowing the concept from pharmaceutical practice, Rona-Tas defined the "off-label use" of credit ratings—be they individual,

corporate, or sovereign—as their use in contexts other than the one for which they were originally produced. A key role here is played by data brokers such as ChoicePoint or Datalogix who collect and analyze consumer data to resell it to interested companies (Mui 2011; Beckett 2014). Illustrating his argument with examples from the insurance and home rental markets as well as from hiring practices, Rona-Tas identified two potentially harmful effects of off-label use: error propagation and enhanced performativity, that is, the tendency of models to self-validate through their use in the very processes they purport to only describe (see MacKenzie 2006: 15–25). First, when errors occur either in the data collected or the models applied to create a credit rating, off-label use further proliferates them into new situations. Second, the performativity of credit ratings results from their predictive and prescriptive qualities: a previous rating affects the next one, such as when low ratings result in harder loan conditions which, in turn, increase the likelihood of default. If used in multiple contexts, this effect amplifies so that credit ratings exert even further-reaching effects on individuals' life chances. For example, Equifax, one of the three major credit bureaus, has been using employment data to produce credit scores which were then used by employers to make employment decisions. These multiple feedback loops result in what Rona-Tas calls *turboperformativity*. This has potentially disastrous consequences for individuals who thus come to be caught in a cascade of negative classifications.

While Fourcade, Healy, and Rona-Tas focused on the consequences of the algorithmic classifications of big data, Sebastian Seignani (Jena) focused on their production. He emphasized what differentiates the current avalanche of digital numbers from its analogue forerunner in the mid-nineteenth century (Hacking 1982, 1990): it is not so much the state but private corporations that started this avalanche. It therefore comes as no surprise that profit motives reign superior in the collecting and processing of data. Applying the Marxian concept of exploitation to the analysis of contemporary information markets, Seignani contended that the content generated by web 2.0 users is appropriated and turned into profits by the owners of digital property. This “exploitation 2.0” works on the basis of a surveillance structure which allows organizations to systematically trace, store, and classify the information people produce online, from their social networks and commercial transactions to their travel routes and health data. Hence, Seignani pointed to the blurring of the boundary between consumption and production, one of the key factors in the generation of classification situations (see, e.g., Thrift 2006). From this perspective, the prosumer becomes a paradigmatic figure of the contemporary digital economy (Ritzer 2015)—and epitomizes our complicity in the making of our own surveillance (Harcourt 2015).

## **Classifying and Valuing in a Digital Age. Some Perspectives for Further Research**

The conference contributions exposed the moral underpinnings of contemporary actuarial techniques and the stratification dynamics they unleash. Joining in the debate on the construction of quality and actors in markets (Beckert and Aspers 2011), they thus pointed out the futility of a clear-cut distinction between value and values. If this rescinding of “Parson’s Pact” (Stark 2009) is one of the constitutive elements in much of the recent interest in researching valuations, then classification situations provide ample material for the study of such processes, both opportunities and challenges. What are they?

There is, first, the practical authority of algorithms: their rules determine what we find on Google, which books are recommended on Amazon, and who will become our friend on Facebook. They determine how our medical prescription history matters for our access to health care, or whether seeking marriage counseling affects our creditworthiness (Duhigg 2009). Automated classifications thus increasingly constitute the basis of acts of valuation. But even more, in many contexts, valuation itself has become automated—it has become “mechanical” to use the term Theodor Porter (1995) has coined to describe a form of objectivity which differs from a discretionary, supposedly more subjective one in its insistence on automated rule-following. Indeed, many of the classificatory principles at the core of today’s regime were explicitly designed to counteract the often discriminatory decision-making processes based on subjective judgment (Hyman 2011: ch. 6). Be it in housing, credit, insurance, or labor markets, applicants are increasingly pre-screened by software programs evaluating their life online from shopping behavior and search engine queries to their social networks and gym payments (boyd et al. 2015; Pasquale 2015: 33f)—and if these scores fall below a certain threshold, applicants are automatically excluded from consideration.

This mechanizing poses a challenge to pragmatist approaches to studying valuation. With its emphasis on creativity and contingency in moments of valuation, their methodological situationism (see, e.g., Hutter and Stark 2015) does not seem fully able to capture these algorithmitized routines of contemporary practices. Moreover, as the example of Amazon recommendations shows, even when there are situational opportunities for contingent and creative valuations, these situations are fundamentally pre-shaped by the preceding algorithmic sorting of choices. Moments of valuation, in other words, do not occur randomly. Rather, they arise from a complex meshing of behavioral pattern recognition and commercial interests. What is needed, therefore, is an even more explicit focus on the technical details of the algorithms governing today’s classification and valuation practices. As Andrea Mennicken and Ebba Sjögren (2015) as well as others have

argued convincingly, critical accounting studies share many affinities with valuation studies. In their emphasis on the technical details of calculation and their “plasticity,” they dig deep into the production of accounting numbers before these start to travel and lose their transparency. The same perspective needs to be taken when looking at algorithms—opening the black boxes of algorithms provides the key to understanding the opaque workings of contemporary data-based stratification dynamics. Google, the credit scoring company FICO, and others’ secretive stance points to the politics of (in)visibility endemic to the “Black Box Society” (Pasquale 2015). A pronounced asymmetry is inscribed into it—while consumers are more and more approximating the (dystopian) ideal of a transparent citizen, the analytics by which usually private actors collect and process their digital traces remain opaque. More often than not, we simply do not know whether a certain Google query or the joining of a specific subreddit might affect our *übercapital*—and therefore our offline life chances. Bowker and Star (1999) have emphasized how invisibility increases the effectiveness of classifications from the perspective of the classifier. It is therefore not surprising that a program of critical algorithm studies faces huge obstacles. Most notably, the algorithm-producing companies are notoriously proprietary about their products. Arguably, getting access to the sites of algorithmic production might be one of the greatest challenges students of valuation face today.

As Rona-Tas showed in his talk on off-label use and the performativity of credit ratings, the feedback loops of algorithmic classifications and valuations constitute a second promising research object. In his analyses of the avalanche of printed numbers, Hacking (1982, 1990) suggests that the new classificatory schemes that emerged due to the availability of new population data “made up people.” By this, he means that classifications are not mere representations but rather interventions: they change how people understand themselves and act. And according to Hacking, it is the quantitative, putatively objective categories that exert the strongest effects: as he polemically asks, “who had more effect on class consciousness, Marx or the authors of the official reports which created the classifications into which people came to recognize themselves?” (Hacking 1990: 3). Could Hacking’s claim provide a useful guide for thinking about algorithmic classifications? Yes—and yet, at the same time, we need to be careful about not drawing premature historical parallels. One crucial difference certainly concerns the individualized nature of all types of scores as against the collectivizing categorizations of state censuses and similar enterprises. While we therefore might question whether something like a collective “classification consciousness” can possibly arise, the implicitly normative character of scores, ratings, and rankings makes them reactive (Espeland and Sauder 2007). The

emergence of new forms of credit expertise, from self-help groups<sup>2</sup> to advice books (see, e.g., Chen 2014) and counseling firms, indicates an increasing willingness to behavioral adjustments in order to comply with the assumed laws of *übercapital* accumulation.<sup>3</sup> By implication, scores, ratings, and rankings can be understood as tools that enable the “governing at a distance” (Miller and Rose 2008) of classified subjects.

We might go further and ask how the normative underpinnings of today's economy of classification affect not only people's behavior, but also their sense of self and assessments of individual moral worth (Lamont 2002). Again, credit scores provide a vivid example. In recent years, scholars have taken up Nietzsche's pointing out of the shared philological origins of the German terms for debt (*Schulden*) and guilt (*Schuld*) and have brought out the moral character of debt relationships (most prominently Graeber (2011) and Lazzarato (2012)). By virtue of their scientific aspirations, credit scores might add to this. If they bear not only on consumers' credit worthiness or capacity per se, but also—as the Fair Credit Reporting Act 1970 (§ 603) stipulates—on their “character, general reputation, personal characteristics, or mode of living,” is this reflected in the classified's conceptualizations of their own and others' moral worth? Do they accept the basic scoring principles as just and fair? Fourcade and Healy (2013) claim that credit scoring practices suggest an individualized worldview according to which individual classification situations are the outcome of free individual choice. Does this vision of a well-deserved inequality permeate even to those who score low, and what are its consequences? This question reaches further than the mere reactivity argument outlined above: whereas behavioral adjustments might just be a rational strategy to increase one's chances in markets, it concerns the justification of inequality and beliefs about the relation between social order and individual responsibility. Do the lower classified feel guilt (*Schuld*) because they are bad debtors (*Schuldner*) as certified by their credit score? Fourcade and Healy (2013: 565–569) provide some evidence that the declassified indeed accept the contemporary credit regime as normal and even fair. If this holds true in more systematic future studies, the question arises what steps they undertake to better themselves. Put differently, what are the technologies of the classified self?

In its most dystopian form, the big data dragnet in which classified subjects find themselves resembles a Foucauldian power/knowledge network—there is no outside. When Janet Vertesi (2014), a sociologist

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<sup>2</sup> FICO itself runs a forum for consumers to ask for advice on how to improve their credit score. The irony is of course that the information left in these forums is then fed back into the production of FICO scores. See <http://ficoforums.myfico.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Given the required resources (time, money, knowledge), we are likely to observe a further interlocking of class and classification situation as only certain groups will be able to adequately react to their classifications.

at Princeton, tried to leave no digital traces of her pregnancy by avoiding non-cash transactions and any leaking of the news to Facebook and similar websites, she soon had to realize that this was close to impossible. When her husband tried to buy Amazon gift cards in cash with which they wanted buy a stroller, the store reported this suspicious activity to the authorities—the attempt to opt out was sanctioned as potentially criminal behavior. A more promising counter-conduct might be the browser extension TrackMeNot which aims to undermine dataveillance by its own means. Developed by New York University (NYU) professor Helen Nissenbaum, TrackMeNot obfuscates actual web searches by sending so many randomized queries to search engines that it becomes considerably harder to create a consistent user profile from the data (Pasquale 2015: 53). The question whether in addition to such micro-resistances, a collective political effort is imaginable refers us back to the possibility of a “classification consciousness.” Could the explicitly individualizing nature of contemporary market classifications possibly make up not only people, but also *collective* actors?

As of yet, empirical research on classification situations remains focused almost exclusively on the United States (as does this essay). It is therefore imperative to expand our vision beyond the U.S. and learn more about the acceptance of algorithmic scorings, ratings, and rankings as valuation devices in other parts of the world. Is it that the U.S. is leading a development which sooner or later will also arrive in other parts of the world? Or will, for instance, stricter privacy laws in Europe reduce the salience of classification situations when compared to the U.S.? One key dimension here is certainly the state–market relation and its institutional varieties in different countries. In the U.S. new forms of state-market hybrids are emerging: so-called “fusion centers” bring together information collected by both government agencies and private actors and pertaining to security-related issues (Hoofnagle 2004). While the government faces stricter regulations as to what sorts of information it is legally allowed to *collect*, there are only few limits to what it can *buy* from private data brokers and subsequently process (Pasquale 2015: 21, 42–51). Thus, the American state is indeed more and more “seeing like a market.”

And so might the Chinese state in the future. According to several reports, a “citizen score card” is currently in planning which tracks to what degree citizens behave in compliance with “socialist values” such as patriotism, respect for the elderly, a strong work ethic, and avoiding extravagant consumption. Those with low scores run the risk of unemployment, ostracism, and reduced access to financial and government services (Creemers 2016). The state thus redefines citizenship as a scored identity—one of the fundamental political prerogatives is formulated in terms of the classificatory techniques initially developed in consumer markets. One expert in China's new

media and internet field labels this scoring system “Amazon's consumer tracking with an Orwellian political twist” (Obbema et al. 2015). It is enabled by what the Oxford-based China specialist Rogier Creemers calls a “symbiotic relationship” between government and big internet companies like Alibaba or Baidu, which surpasses by far those found in western countries (ibid.). According to Creemers, control over the information produced online is developing into a key power resource within the Chinese party-state—big data can be turned into huge political profits (Creemers 2016).

Another promising perspective in a comparative vein relates to how different cultures of quantification can explain the varying importance of classification situations. Building on Theodore Porter's (1995) argument that quantification is a technology of persuasion and that numbers allow communication across (social) distances, we deem it a worthwhile project to analyze in depth the relationship between elite structure, diversity, and the authority attributed to algorithmically determined classifications. Given that the American origins of credit scores in anti-discrimination legislation neatly fall into line with Porter's argument, we might wonder whether under different social and political circumstances, valuations by numbers could develop an equally compelling persuasive power or not. In his history of the French and American understandings of intelligence since the early nineteenth century, John Carson (2007) traces how the two republics developed different approaches to determining individual merit. While the U.S. gradually embraced standardized IQ testing as the prime device to evaluate talent, the more complex notion of intelligence in France gave rise to a valuation regime which granted considerable discretion to expert judgment. Could we write a similar history of algorithmically created scores, ratings, and rankings as “measures of merit”? In Fourcade and Healy's terms, how and why does the importance of *übercapital* vary across different national spaces?

## Conclusion

In this conference note, we tried to point out the consequences the contemporary avalanche of digital numbers and the emergence of “classification situations” have for valuation studies, in particular with regard to dynamics of social stratification. The rise of big data-driven algorithmic classifications, the feedback loops of valuation regimes, and the relation between classification situations and larger institutional settings ask for critical engagement and thorough inquiry.

While we may have overdramatized the radical novelty of a new algorithmic valuation regime, its political implications can hardly be underestimated. Its promise of indiscriminatory objectivity currently comes at the price of an obfuscating “Black Box Society” (Pasquale 2015). The *political* challenge at hand is therefore to make visible the algorithmic constitution of classifications and their uses. New York



City's Stop Credit Discrimination Campaign might represent a first step in this direction. We believe that research on classifications and valuations has an important contribution to make in this endeavor.

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