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Musicians, their relationships, and their wellbeing: Creative labour, relational work

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ABSTRACT

Evidence points towards the key role that networks of both formal and informal relationships play in musicians' careers. Alongside this, these careers have in recent decades become increasingly understood as engendering emotional stressors around mental health and wellbeing. However, what is the relationship between these two phenomena? In other words, what is the affective impact on musicians' mental health of maintaining, understanding and negotiating the most proximate relationships in their lives? This paper seeks to answer this by employing the conceptual architecture of relational work, focusing in particular on the experiences of 'mismatches', to interpret insights from semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight musicians working in the United Kingdom. The findings suggest that the relational work of 'matching' relationships to appropriate understandings and methods of transactional exchange is enormously complex for musicians given that their economic relationships often *are* intimate personal relationships, and vice versa, leading to frequent 'mismatches' in musicians' methods of relationship management which can be upsetting or emotionally destabilising. This is revealed by exploring the overlapping and interconnected forms of relational work employed by musicians amongst both their family and their musical colleagues. The findings contribute towards scholars adopting an affective frame of analysis towards practices of relational work, an emerging body of work primarily from Eastern Europe applying relational work analysis towards musicians, and more broadly researchers interested in understanding the psychosocial causes of mental ill-health amongst musicians.

1. Introduction

It has long been understood that the development of musical careers is reliant on a musicians' network of relationships, a truism encapsulated by the music industry maxim 'it's not what you know, it's who you know'. The acquisition, cultivation, maximisation, maintenance and transubstantiation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is key for the career progression of professional musicians. Evidence points towards the crucial role played by informal networking as a 'soft skill' (Wetson, 2020), formalised forms of professional networking (Everts et al., 2021) – labelled by Dobson (2011) as 'professional sociability' or Coulson (2012) as 'active networking' - strategic relationships with cultural intermediaries (Musgrave, 2017), and 'informal social networks' (Barleet et al., 2020:45), such as friendships amongst other musicians (Dowd & Pinheiro, 2013). These networks are understood in this literature as critical for accessing jobs, booking gigs, collaborating with other musicians, and securing the assistance of industry players who can

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help advance a musicians' career, such as managers or publicists. This management of social capital has been captured in the conceptualisation of musicians as independent creative or cultural entrepreneurs, individually responsible for what Scott (2012) calls the 'mobilisation' of forms of capital within networks which have been seen to have strong gender biases across a range of genres including jazz (Buscatto, 2007), indie rock (Cohen, 1997), drum and bass (Toppin, 2021), other forms of electronic music (Gavanas & Reitsamer, 2013), and classical music (Scharff, 2015). However, other relationships matter in the careers of musicians too, notably familial ones. Findings suggest a positive correlation between musical career success and systems of social support (Zwaan et al., 2009), as well as the key role played by families both emotionally in terms of encouraging ambitions of career musicianship (Vaag et al., 2014) and financially in terms of things like paying for music lessons (Bull, 2019). As such, literature points to a range of relationships, both formalised and informal, as being crucial in the careers of musicians.

This paper draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty-eight musicians in the United Kingdom, from a range of genres, seeking forms of subjectively defined 'success' (see Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009), to explore the relational work undertaken as they negotiate the demands and tensions of their most proximate relationships. In doing so, this paper aims to offer empirical insight into specific cultural and psychosocial emotional triggers in the lives of musicians and the impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, by examining musicians' practices of relational work. Building on work on musicians' career development (Everts et al., 2022), the focus of analysis here is the affective dimension of musicians' relational work, in particular their self-reported feelings of anxiety and depression and their experiences of wellbeing, as they build their creative careers. Thus, this paper examines how relational work is *experienced* by looking at the careers of musicians. The complexity and emotional impact of musicians' relational work is revealed by exploring how it takes place amongst two sets of inter-related relationships in the musicians' lives, each of which were seen to be vital for their career development: their family/partners, and their professional music colleagues.

The findings highlight that the definition and demarcation of the function of relationships – or 'matching' - central to Zelizer's (2000, 2005, 2011, 2012) conceptualisation of relational work is complicated by the fact that musicians' economic relationships often *are* intimate personal relationships, and vice versa. Findings suggest that the boundary work of 'matching' relationships to appropriate understandings and forms of transactional exchange is enormously complex for musicians, leading to 'mismatches' in musicians' methods of relationship management which can be upsetting or emotionally destabilising. This occurs in both the highlighted spheres of musicians' relational activities and was demonstrated in interviews. Firstly, in family life, musicians experienced mismatches in expectations between parties driven by the necessity for periods of financial support and subsequent indebtedness which, for some, engendered feelings of guilt and shame. Secondly, in their professional lives, musicians experienced mismatches in *definitions* of relationships. These misreadings of the boundaries between friendships and colleagues engendered feelings of depression and anger amongst some interviewees when those whom musicians thought of as friends – or even family – disappeared when their perceived utility was diminished. By focusing on musicians' experiences of relational mismatches, this paper heeds Bandelj's (2020: 263) call that "relational analysts would be well served to scrutinize…relational work's consequences for…(mis)matches".

The findings herein contribute towards three areas of study. In this first instance, this study offers a new perspective for theorists adopting an *affective* prism of analysis towards practices of relational work (Mears, 2015; Stivers & Berman, 2020). Secondly, a small body of literature employs the concept of relational work in the study of musicians and musical labour (Alacovska, 2018; Barna, 2022), towards which the tensions and elucidation of the concept of 'mismatches' in this paper shines new empirical light. Finally, the paper contributes towards an emerging interest in the psychosocial causes of mental ill-health amongst musicians (Gross & Musgrave, 2017, 2020; Loveday et al., 2022), highlighting here the relational causes of anxiety and depression in musicians' lives. Whilst financial precarity (Berg et al., 2022) or performance anxiety (Kenny, 2011; Kenny et al., 2004; van Kemenade et al., 1995), for instance, are well-known emotional triggers in the working careers of musicians, this paper draws attention to the more nuanced nature of relationship management and the subsequent relational work necessitated, as offering particular sources of tension in the management of relational (mis)matches.

2. Theoretical framework: Relational work and relational (mis)matches

The management of strategic, market-based relationships and private, intimate relationships in the context of people's economic lives (such as the kind of career development for musicians considered herein) has been conceptualised as 'relational work' (Zelizer, 2000, 2005, 2011, 2012). Moving beyond theoretical approaches which saw marketized relationships in the economy and intimate relationships seen in society as analytically distinct spheres of activity and morality, the relational work approach instead sees these areas as mutually constitutive. For Zelizer (2005), relational work relies on seeking a "good match" between the nature of an individuals' social relationships, the ways in which financial transactions take place, and the method of exchange i.e. "searching for appropriate *match*es amongst distinctive categories of social ties, economic transactions, and media of exchange" (Bandelj et al., 2017:6, emphasis added). Thus, relational work sees labour practices as being driven by the quest for 'relational matches' (Zelizer, 2012: 151) between our personal relationships (friends, family, colleagues), what kinds of financial transactions are appropriate (bartering, gift giving, wage labour) and what methods of exchange are suitable (money, favours). Identifying and *defining* relationships in order to create these matches is key. Zelizer (2005: 32) calls this the "differentiating [of] their multiple social ties" i.e. understanding when one relationship is, for example, a friend or colleague, and then deciding what type and method of payment is a good match for transactions in that relational context.

The role of emotions are core to relational work given that the requisite 'matching' is reliant on - and representative of - the emotional dynamics of those undertaking the work, imbuing it with that which Bandelj (2009: 347) calls "emotional embeddedness". However, a handful of sociological studies have adopted an affective lens of analysis to explore the *emotional impacts* and experiences of undertaking relational work. Stivers and Berman (2020), for example, examined relational work within families vis-à-vis expectations

surrounding student loan debt. Their work reveals the impact of mismatches in expectations between parents and children regarding economic obligations towards one another. Examples included the level of parental contribution towards the childs' education, how much of this was considered a debt owed back to the parent and how much was a gift, and when economic circumstances (loss of job, or arrival of child for example) might impact the paying back of the debt, necessitating renegotiation or heightening ambiguity. These "mismatched expectations" (ibid: 6) often resulted in stressors on relationships manifesting in feelings of stress and/or anxiety. Likewise, the impact of relational mismatches are highlighted in research undertaken by Mears (2015) looking at unpaid women in VIP nightclubs, where dancing, drinking and even flirting with men in this field of action was considered acceptable because they were *not* being paid by nightclub promoters. However, even the offer of payment shattered the "symbolic boundary separating them from the lower status sex worker" (ibid: 1116), resulting in deep offence and relationship breakdown.

Whilst economic sociology has led the way in examinations of relational work in fields as diverse as leadership in education (Helstad & Moller, 2013), metal manufacturing (Whitford, 2012), and hunting (Cederholm & Sjohom, 2021) a small body of literature has emerged within the *cultural* field (see Wherry (2018) and Montanari et al. (2016)). This is perhaps what Bandelj (2020) is referring to when she notes the emergence of a 'cultural economic sociology'. Research on artistic relational work by Hair (2021) amongst fine artists, for instance, highlights painters employing 'blurring practices' to redefine the boundaries of relationships, presenting online crowdfunding campaigns on Patreon as friendship to support artistic creation, rather than financial backing or investment.

More specifically, an even narrower body of work has examined the careers of musicians from the perspective of relational work. Work by Alacovska (2018) in a post-socialist context (Macedonia and Albania) highlights relationship management within the apparent informality of 'the music industry' as a form of informal governance. Her work illustrates how musicians act as exemplary agents to explore the operation of relational work given the ways in which, for this group of precarious creative workers, "informal, interpersonal efforts at attending to meaningful social relations become the basis for the accomplishment of economic activities" (ibid: 1565). Findings point towards an inverse relationship between social and spatial relational closeness and financial recompense, suggesting that, for example, musicians would charge those whom they demark as friends lower prices for gigs than those whom they did not. It also reveals an affective dimension of relational mismatching similar to that seen in Mears (2015), describing a case study musician who was given a large 500 Euro tip which was perceived to be a relational mismatch which "crossed a symbolic boundary into morally contestable realm of sexual exchange" (Alacovska, 2018: 1577), engendering feelings of distress. Work by Barna (2022) on musicians in Hungary explores the relational and emotional labour of *doing* relational work, revealing Alacovska's inverse oppositional dynamic to instead be more closely entwined, as social and financial relationships are shown to be meshed and blended together in the lives of the female musicians interviewed. Moral economies of trust, gratitude, support, and care were revealed to co-exist within patriarchal music industry power structures, necessitating women undertaking close relational work to appropriately define and signal the definitions of relationships when engaged in practices of networking given the often sexually burdensome and inappropriate nature of some of these exchanges.

Whilst the lives of cultural workers (including musicians) is increasingly being explored using the prism of relational work - which indeed is a particularly useful construct to do so given that as Alacovska (2018: 1572) notes "relational work conditions all informal creative labour practices" - little has taken as its explicit focus the *affective impact* of this work, nor centred the analysis on the consequences of mismatches. In addition, it is prescient to apply an affective lens to the study of musicians' relational work to better understand the emotional dynamics of creative careers which have increasingly come to be understood as possessing psychosocial working features - in particular the ways in which they manage their relationships - which have been seen to negatively impact the wellbeing of musicians. For example, both Detari et al. (2020) and Vaag et al. (2014) illustrate the often traumatic and disruptive impact musical careers can have on family life, with extended time spent away touring and the total absorption in creative practice demanded by this kind of work, with relationship breakdown too revealed in the work of Kenny et al. (2012). In this respect, evidence points towards relationships acting both as key for career progression and simultaneously a source of stress and anxiety in the lives of musicians. However, this has not been conceptualised within a theoretical architecture. This paper seeks to address this.

3. Methodology

The findings presented below are taken from a study which examined musicians' subjective understandings of the links between their working lives, and their mental health and emotional wellbeing. In December 2017, thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted. These took place with twenty-eight musicians from across the United Kingdom, as well as one music manager and one major record label executive both based in London. Interviewees were drawn from a range of genres and career stages encompassing early career musicians performing in pubs and clubs and releasing music independently, to Grammy and BRIT award-nominated musicians signed to major record labels, enjoying critical acclaim, some for several decades. Of the twenty-eight musicians, there was an even gender split amongst respondents, and even though ethnicity was not central in the analysis over a quarter were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Interviewees were a combination of respondents to an earlier survey on mental health and the music industry which received 2211 responses – the largest ever study on the subject at the time (Gross & Musgrave, 2016) - but also included some from wider professional networks who had heard about the research and expressed an interest in participating, suggesting certainly some degree of self-selection bias.

Participants were not asked to talk about whether or not they felt their musical labour (or aspects of it) had harmed their mental health/wellbeing so as not to lead answers. Instead, eight broad questions were asked concerning: the nature of their creative labour (the best things about being a musician, the worst things, level of income earned, genre), their experiences (if any) with mental ill-health, their current living situation, and two questions on relationships in their lives (both in person and online via social media). Time was afforded to digress based on areas of interest in participants' answers. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded

employing a grounded theory approach informed by Glaser (1978, 1992) to identify themes for analysis. Thirty-two initial categories emerged, with the predominant themes being anxiety, financial insecurity, competition, burnout, pressure to deliver, and pressure in personal relationships, amongst others. Comparative analysis and synthesis of codes led to findings which examined the relationship between musicians' mental health and wellbeing through three prisms; the economic demands of their work, how musical work achieves cultural value and acclaim, and finally, the impact of these processes on musicians' relationships. The findings below are taken from this third analytical section of the project which explored how musicians manage and experience the different relationships in their lives, and the emotional impact of their methods of relationship management. For the purposes of this new paper, findings have been re-analysed via a relational work approach to reinterpret and reconceptualise the insights offered by interviewees and present new findings. These findings will be presented as follows based on two identified spheres of musicians' relationships where relational mismatches were prevalent in the analysis: first, music making and family life, and secondly, musicians' professional relationships.

4. Findings

4.1. Music making and family life

4.1.1. Support, dependence and guilt

As per other studies (e.g. Sloboda & Howe, 1992; Morgan & Wood, 2014: 68), family support was found to be key to the career development of interviewees. For some this occurred emotionally in the form of encouragement, whilst others emphasised the material and financial support provided by parents or partners. Often, it was a combination of both. One jazz musician from Birmingham explained that he attributed much of his standard of living to the income of his partner, suggesting: "my girlfriend [has] kept me in this lovely house that I could never afford" (Interview 5). These support structures were viewed by many as a privilege which this musician, for example, acknowledged and expressed gratitude for. However, a dialectic emerged in interviews where this reliance was coded in both positive and negative terms, whereby *dependence* or reliance on this familial support was conceptualised by some as a failure, particularly for early career musicians who were especially reliant on this financial support. For example, a musician from Newcastle stated: "at the grand old age of nearly 26 I'm still living with my parents… I'm yet to kind of, grow up… I'm often told, "when are you going to grow up and get a real job?" (Interview 26). This challenge of how musical work, and the seriousness of it, was perceived by friends, family and others came up often, with musicians suggesting that the financial precarity of their creative labour meant that it might not be viewed as 'serious' or 'proper' work, and that therefore by extension, the financial payments of others required to support this musicianship might be thought of (even if unfairly) as loaded or even offered begrudgingly. Indeed, how music is or is not understood as work has been suggested to vary based on status (Frith, 2016: 111); a status in this instance referring to a cultural hierarchy of status in a music industry defined, persistently so, as a superstar economy (Coelho & Mendes, 2019; Rosen, 1981). These findings were echoed by an artist from Manchester who said in our interview; "I believe [music is] not considered a proper job, unless you're in the top ten per cent: you're a star. And I think that has a major impact on confidence and self-esteem" (Interview 9). That is, given that music thought of as employment is well understood to be precarious and often poorly recompensed (indeed, for Abbing (2004) this is the *nature* of the arts) relying on intimate personal relationships to finance it produces an indebtedness that can transcend fiscal accounting alone. Instead, this debt takes on an additional moral dimension – a debt of gratitude – whereby musicians become what Card (1988: 116) in their work on gratitude and obligation call a "moral bookkeeper", with deep impacts on a musicians' self-esteem if and when it becomes unclear how to 'repay' these debts.

This indebtedness necessitates relational work on the part of musicians in the form of negotiating expectations with partners or close family members, and findings in this area were highly gendered vis-à-vis their impacts on male musicians. The link between financial precarity, dependence and self-esteem – and the subsequent relational work necessitated - was captured perhaps most powerfully by a producer interviewed from London who articulated the links between his musical work, his family, and feelings of guilt. He said: "Every fucking year we go on holiday and [my girlfriend] ends up like paying for it and then I end up paying her back. It just adds to the stress" (Interview 18). As per the musician from Newcastle who was 'still' living at home, there was a sense that payments of this kind were beyond what could reasonably be expected given the type of work being undertaken. In addition, he suggested that his girlfriend often had to pay rent for them both during periods where he earned little money. He said in our interview: "it got to the point where she just finally like flipped out and was like, 'the fuck is going on, bruv? Because you haven't given me any rent in like 3 months'! And I'm like, "I'm fucking trying here, I'm trying my fucking hardest." (Interview 18). On the one hand therefore, their feelings of guilt stemmed from the financial indebtedness experienced as girlfriends or family members supported musicianship economically. However, this also took place on a deeper level of self-esteem and even understandings of masculinity, when this producer suggested: "I don't want to be this person who's, like, the dude who's 24 and is scrounging off his girlfriend… Maybe I might want to have a kid at some point, and I don't want to be their deadbeat Dad" (Interview 18). Here, we can see debts of obligation between career musicians and their partners which can be typified by guilt, shame and anxiety particularly for men. What this musician owed his partner was more than money, but a life that he felt he ought to be able to deliver via his musical work, but at the time of our interview he could not, and indeed he could not even envisage given the precarious reality of his career. He went on to describe feeling heartbroken at a recent conversation with his girlfriend:

> "I'm not really sure if I want to have kids, and most of that is down to like: I'm fucking broke, and I don't see a situation in my immediate future where I'm not going to be broke. And then [my girlfriend] was like: "I'd always planned on working really hard until like 30 or 31, and then I was, like, going to look after the kids, but I guess that's not happening anymore." And I was like, "fuck." That was a bad one." (Interview 18)

This interviewees' comments and anxieties reflect patterns seen in studies on conceptions of masculinity and heteronormative expectations, and the way these can come to harm men when they are perceived, either by themselves or by others, as not 'providing'. Work by Krämer (2016: 227) on representations of 'Deadbeat Dads' in 1980s America similarly highlights the relationship between fatherhood, debt and guilt, where "narratives of owing somebody something economically as well as morally" – much like the musicians here - were seen to prevail in the media of the era. For male interviewees, this desire to achieve a traditional conceptualisation of heterosexual 'breadwinner masculinity' (Hanlon, 2012) clashed with a career trajectory which was both highly time-consuming and very poorly paid, particularly in its early stages. In this respect, these musicians shared many of the experiences of those in the work of McDowell (2020: 981) on precarious employment amongst working class men in provincial England, who "reported feelings of resignation or quiet despair about not being able to achieve what they regarded as an acceptable version of masculinity". For the interviewed musicians however, their work necessitates, as per work by Dobrow and Heller (2015), a level of self-belief in ones' own ability combined with seeing musicianship as akin to a religious calling, and thus managing this tension was a source of real anxiety as they had to both believe in themselves, yet feel they were letting down those they love.

4.1.2. Family and relational work: expectational mismatches

As suggested, Zelizer (2005, 2012) conceptualises relational work as necessitating the management and matching of expectations, and the challenges presented when there are mismatches between parties. What we can see taking place in the family lives of the musicians interviewed were instances of expectational mismatches. Much of this relates to the equivocal ways that success was understood and conceptualised by interviewees. The success of musical work is often judged in non-financial terms and is ambiguously defined (Hughes et al., 2013; Letts, 2013). The musicians interviewed often couched success in ways which were not economic, for example hearing people walking down the street singing their lyrics (Interview 4). At the same time, the *work* required to *be* a musician requires financing and supporting, and as seen here this task often falls to their closest family members. However, this support requires the enactment of relational work – of sophisticated negotiation and definitions around transactions – in order to manage expectations vis-à-vis which familial investments are financial debts to be repaid, and which are assumed to be debts of gratitude. Alongside this, musicians and their families need to understand which debts are which, and how (or indeed if) these are to be repaid. In this respect, as per Stivers and Berman (2020: 3), "relational work is *work*, putting stress on relationships, showing up in the form of strong emotion", and as per Card (1988: 15), mismatches in how debts of obligation can or should be 'settled' "can have serious consequences for interpersonal relationships".

These family members, and the instances of relational mismatching seen here, are analogous to those described by Barna (2022: 122) as 'amateur helpers' who themselves, in her study, were seen to provide emotional labour in their quest to help build and develop the careers of the musicians, and where there are often "immaterial returns". In her study too, we see mention of the tensions which emerged as the lack of *material* rewards for this help could engender feelings of what is described as "mutual resentment" (ibid). Indeed, musical work, as opposed to other kinds of work, is particularly interesting here; unlike the college students in the work of Stivers and Berman (2020) who hope to go on to earn money to repay their financial debts, musical careers are far less certain with data suggesting much poorer financial outcomes in general (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021), thus presenting high risks in the consequences for relational work. Interestingly, whilst studies of relational work are often gendered, revealing the emotional labour of women undertaking practices of this work, the finding from this thematic section reveals the impact of these mismatches on men. That is, the burdens that the men interviewed experienced in assuming relational work reflect tensions around heteronormative conceptions of work and family life – the desire to provide as a 'breadwinner' – and the extent to which musicianship can, for some, undermine and disrupt this. The women interviewed did not articulate similar feelings of guilt and dependency.

There was also a second form of expectation mismatch, this time more frequently occurring amongst more established musicians, which could engender feelings of guilt revealed in interviews, which related to expectations around time management. Much of this stemmed from trying to maintain a work-life balance and the health and wellbeing impacts of this on musicians and those around them. Indeed, this was seen in the work of Barleet et al. (2020): 65) on musicians in Australia to be "one of the most significant challenges [musicians face]". In our interviews, a musicians' musical lives were often described as competing with, and for, the attention of family life. This conflict took place as the love and deep involvement with musicianship necessitated a kind of obsessive passion for musical production – akin to McRobbie's (2016) notion of a romantic attachment to work - which could impact on their private lives, thus complicating the performance of relational work. A folk musician from Glasgow spoke of their musical career as being "a great friendship" (Interview 16), but one which competed for the focus of other relationships, while another suggest that a musical career "doesn't leave me with much of a life" (Interview 9) in terms of wider relationships. Another interview featured the following exchange:

> Interviewer: Could you say in one sentence what's the worst thing about this job in your experience?
>
> Interviewee 4: There are two things. Knowing your value and also the effect it can have on partners because in relationships it is like having another partner. There's a third person in your relationship.
>
> Interviewer: In your family life you mean? The impact?
>
> Interviewee 4: Yes. The impact on your family life.

Much like research by Detari et al. (2020) and Vaag et al. (2014), musical work was often framed in interviews as *competing* with, even in some cases harming, other relationships, and that this conflict could come to harm the wellbeing of musicians. Indeed, work on the 'Psychosocial Stressors in the Lives of Great Jazz Musicians' notes, forcefully, that this element of musical work "had a devastating

effect on their family lives" and was an "enduring stressor" (Patalano, 1997: 93). A highly celebrated DJ from Manchester spoke of needing to move to London, the development of a longer-term music career, and the impact of this on her family, in the following terms:

> "That was the first time I actually felt any major stress about doing the job that I did because I had to make a choice between my job, my work life and my family, and I chose work over my family… It is a source of anxiety because you need to be able to do your job… In later years it became apparent that I would always have to make these decisions and would regularly have to make these decisions where my work came before my family" (Interview 8).

Likewise, an established jazz musician described his work as necessitating "permanently living in different countries" for European touring commitments which were financially crucial for him to survive, and that this engendered extreme pressure on his family life: "when you're really busy you hardly see the family. That's when marital problems start" (Interview 5). Here, the musicians' experiences of their work chime with research by Kenny et al. (2012) and Kenny and Ackermann (2008) both of which highlight the negative impact on musicians' mental health from long periods spent away from family whilst travelling for their work. He went on to suggest that his unpredictable home life was a major cause of stress:

> Interviewer: Do you feel those things have affected your health?
>
> Interviewee 5: Oh yes they definitely did, yeah. Oh absolutely. They do now, affect my health. Yeah.

This work-related stress manifested both in feelings of anxiety and lack of sleep, but physically too for this musician in the form of chronic back pain. Likewise, a musician from Belfast suggested she "came probably as close to a breakdown as I think I've ever been [a few months prior]… I didn't have any days off that I could remember for years, and felt really guilty if I thought about having time off… That's been my biggest challenge… I work all the time and I find the life-work balance very difficult because I guess my work is life and life is work" (Interview 6).

The matrix of a musicians' relationships, therefore, and the undertaking and performing of relational work is multidimensional, but underpinned and contextualised by their *relationship with music-making itself*. One of the emotional challenges facing musicians, then, is how much time they feel they can reasonably give to two sets of relationships, both of which they have often heavily invested in terms of time and commitment, financial outlay, and emotional investment; their partners and families, and their music-making career. The complication is that often their partners/families are making the same types of investments in the musical career too, and as such the relational work involved in assessing who 'owes' what to who, is complex and often messy. Musicians owe it to their craft to fully commit, they might owe their partners money, or feel they owe them something more abstract and perhaps more meaningful such as a better life – a moral obligation rooted in sense of duty (Kant, 1948: 90-91). Likewise, partners/families may feel they are owed a return on their investment (either financial or emotional) in the musical career. All of these place great emotional burdens on musicians. Conversely, of course, this places great burdens in terms of time, finances, and emotions on the partners and families of musicians too. Their perspectives are often lost in accounts (including this one) which privilege the voices of musicians but where the voices of the others in their 'art world' – to use an inference from Howard Becker (1982) – are less amplified.

Within these findings we can see expectational mismatches occurring across the range of interviewees vis-à-vis their career stage and musical styles. Musicians from many genres spoke about the insecurity of their work and the impact this had on their relationships, with a high profile opera singer describing the emotional impact of insecurity as "really scary" (Interview 23), and a multi-platinum selling dance producer reflecting that "the lack of control…[is] a recipe for anxiety" (Interview 20). The interesting distinction in this context was this: many interviewees felt guilt in their relationships driven by indebtedness and obligation, but guilt was experienced by earlier career musicians over financial debts, whilst guilt was felt by musicians at more advanced stages of their career over *time*. This was captured by a music manger interviewee who said, referring to the musicians he worked with: "At the bottom the instability is not having any money; at the top it's not having any freedom" (Interview 29). Whatever the cause, both groups suffered challenges vis-à-vis relational work, expectational mismatches, subsequent feelings of debt and obligation, and the impact being a musician had on their partners and families.

4.2. Musicians' professional relationships

4.2.1. A second 'Family' and loss

The mismatches in career musicians' relational work can be seen too when examining the nature and operation of their professional relationships. Here, matching appropriate definitions to transactions, such as friendships with favours, or a live booking agent with commission, is complicated given a lack of clarity over the roles individuals fulfil in musicians' professional lives. In other words, for musicians it is not always clear when someone is a friend, and when someone is a colleague. For many interviewees, working together professionally with other musicians or wider professionals could lead to the formation and development of great friendships. As a hip-hop musician from Manchester suggested: "I've worked in teams, with groups, I've formed relationships… and that still goes on today. We're still great friends" (Interview 4). However, for other interviewees, the meshing together of professional and intimate relationships was much deeper and more embedded. For example, an indie musician from Belfast explained that: "All my friends are musicians… We all work together and that's how we socialise" (Interview 6). Thus, musicians' economic lives are often the basis of their private lives, and vice versa.

What strategies then do musicians employ in order to undertake relational work in such ambiguous social contexts? For one interviewee – a jazz singer from London - the answer was to utilise Zelizer's (2005) demarcation strategies to precisely define and

delineate her relationships, using terms such as 'family and friend' for one group, and 'musician friend' for another. She suggested: "when you make friends within the industry… everybody's aiming for something and it can be very cut-throat I think. So, I like to define where relationships sit for me. If it's family and friends, if it's a musician friend, I do keep it very different. Very separated" (Interview 7). This is akin to practices seen in work by Barleet et al. (2020): 72) where Australian musicians were seen to delineate between what they call 'money projects' and 'friend projects'. However, this rigid, boundary-drawing form of relational work was not common amongst interviewees, where instead more typical responses featured elements of negotiation and, often, misunderstanding.

The sense in which intimate relationships are economic relationships can be seen in an obvious way in the nature of musicians' relationships with band mates or their managers. For some interviewees, band mates were family members or long-term school friends, such as a musician from Birmingham who regularly performed with his sister (Interview 5). This could be seen too in the relational dynamics between musicians and their managers, with the latter often being old school friends (a well-understood phenomenon seen in the work of Baskerville and Baskerville (2018); Chaparro and Musgrave (2021) and Jones (2012)). These examples are perhaps the most obvious illustrations of where the blurring between who is a 'friend', and who is a 'colleague' can be seen. This particular dissolution of boundaries is typical of work in the creative industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011: 11), where it has been seen that informality is a central feature of this work (Alacovska, 2018); a feature which has been linked to abuses of power and sexual harassment in the absence of formalised regulation with terrible impacts on wellbeing, particularly for women (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). Indeed, this boundary blurring is further complicated for musicians given that what is work and what is leisure is not always clear, with even the concept of what constitutes being a 'professional' being seen in research to be subjective and not based on metrics which might be typical in other forms of work, such as being paid for example (Loveday et al., 2022). With managers too, definitions of roles and status as colleagues are not always clear. For example, a singer/songwriter from London shared his experience of this imprecision, stemming from the fact that whilst a musician technically employs a manager, the manager often makes many business decisions in the career of a musician, making the relational work involved in defining and understanding career transactions complex. In an interview, he said: "the dynamic of my team is odd. Like having a manger who I'm employing in a way but is technically sort of in charge of me… The dynamic is that he knows more about the industry and he is the one liaising with all the other people and I'm just hearing it filtered back through him, so he's got this sort of overarching control" (Interview 24).

Whilst friends can be or become professional colleagues, this relationship can take place in the other direction too where professional colleagues come to be thought of as friends, or akin to family whom a musician might describe as 'loving'. A dance musician from London phrased this as: "my touring band, I love them, we are like a big family and I love being with them" (Interview 15). A classical musician described her violin teacher as being her "second Mum" (Interview 17). Whilst this relational closeness can yield great benefits related to trust and commitment, for an R&B singer from London the realisation that a number of relationships she had defined as deeply intimate – like family – were painfully seen to in fact have been more instrumental and marketized than she had thought. She explained that as she struggled to negotiate with lawyers over her recording and publishing deal, the people close to her (manager, those working at the record label, other musicians) were increasingly not replying to her messages and seemed to be backing away from her. She described, in a very emotional moment in our interview:

> For me it was a level of realisation that all of the people who I thought were like family, you know, as well as the people who were supposed to be working for me, that it's just a façade. Like, the moment… you're not up to their standards of what they feel is brilliant and acceptable, then they just let you go, and it's just coming to the realisation that: oh yeah they weren't my friends, they're just like people who try to make money off me singing. So, it's that realisation of being around people for however many years and realising that this industry has no friends, there's no such thing. A lot of that pain as well, of letting go of actual people I thought, you know, loved me and I loved them (Interview 22).

This extract highlights the complexity of musicians' relational work and the painful impact of relational mismatches. This musician spoke poignantly of her grief and 'pain' at losing people whom she considered more than professional colleagues, but as close friends as they stopped working with her. She described her feelings as being depression driven by the mismatch between her colleagues calculative and transactional conceptualisation of their relationship as work associates, clashing with her intimate and personal conceptualisation of their relationship as friends, and the difficultly when these two realities collided and were revealed to be "a façade". Later in the interviewee she articulated this as: "the level of like depression and anxiety I had was like a mourn [being in mourning] from the industry. 100%. I felt like I had just died" (Interview 22).

Other musicians, particularly those working in London within commercial music genres such as pop, shared similar experiences too, where their network of what they considered friends left them when they were no longer considered 'successful', such as the extract below by a singer from London once a recording deal which they had been offered fell through: "We had an infrastructure; we had a manager, a lawyer and… we were approached by a few other labels… The deal completely fell through and the record company withdrew their offer very suddenly… Our manager, once the deal fell through, she was like 'I can't manage you anymore', so our infrastructure just slowly dissipated, pretty much all at once. We lost our deal, we lost our lawyer, we lost our manager and we lost one band member" (Interview 3). This anger, hurt and frustration at the perceived transactional attitude of those working in record labels cropped up often, with another interviewee suggesting: "in major labels there's just such an attitude of: if stuff isn't going well, people start to slowly back away from projects… You can't get hold of your project manager. You can't get hold of your press person… Nothing's changed in a week but for them something has" (Interviewee 13). He went on to say that this led to feelings of fear: "having other friends who were in bands and artists, you kind of build this network up and then you notice that some of them were getting completely ignored by their labels or ruined… and that was worrying because you kind of go like, well actually we're all doomed… It fills you with dread" (ibid).

A pop producer from London shared a similar experience where Artist and Repertoire (A&R) – those broadly tasked with scouting

new talent but also forms of creative supervision and even career development (see Ward & Huber, 2018) - at major record labels would engage in what he considered performative friendship which musicians might interpret as genuine when the musician had something the A&R wanted, only to withdraw this later. In an interview he said: "If you've got something they need… they will literally act like your best friend and they will call you and they will text you and they will give you opportunities. They'll put you in writing sessions. But as soon as there's any kind of perception of the opposite of that they literally won't respond to an email, and that's when you can really feel worthless" (Interview 19). This description of feeling "worthless" came with a palpable sense of despondency in his voice. Another interviewee, a producer from London, had a similar experience with record label executives who he felt would pretend to be his friend and then later entirely ignore him, and the anger he felt at this. He said: 'It's mad because these people will fucking really be like, "Oh yeah, you're my best mate, blah." And they'll really manipulate you into this shit. Then, afterwards, they'll just be like, "nah, it's fine'" (Interview 18). Thus, whilst Zelizer's notion of relational work is dependant on effective boundary-drawing and the distinction of appropriate practices between distinct relational groups, this is often extremely complicated for musicians given the blurring of these boundaries in their lives.

4.2.2. Colleagues and relational work: 'Boundary work' and blurring practices

The anxieties and experiences of depressive feelings felt by interviewees speaks perhaps to what we might think of mismatched transactions between parties. In other words, where one party in a relationship privileges one definition of the relationship (a friend), and the other party privileges something different (a colleague). Lainer-Vos (2013: 146) refers to this as the emergence of "conflicting principles of valuation". In the aforementioned research by Mears (2015: 1100), informed by Lamont and Molnár's (2002) work on boundaries, this conflict is mitigated via relational practices referred to as "boundary work"; essentially, accurately defining and classifying relationships. What we can see occurring amongst the musicians interviewed here, is different parties misreading the undertaking of this 'boundary work', and the affective consequences of this. For the quoted R&B singer from London, the acknowledgement of these conflicting valuations was extremely painful as she experienced those whom she thought were friends in fact seeing her as a colleague or a product, meaning she was: "letting go of actual people I thought, you know, loved me and I loved them" (Interview 22). This finding highlights difficulties in undertaking relational work, even perhaps failures, rooted in the mismatching of relationships to appropriate definitions in the context of an informal working environment. Indeed, this dynamic chimes with that in the work in Alacovska (2018: 1586) who suggests: "When the employment relation is framed as friendship, sanctioned by moral codes rather than labour law, the relational work sustaining the informal work contract obfuscates labour abuses and inequalities". We see this painfully revealed in the working lives of musicians above and the terrible impact it can come to have on their self-reported mental health and wellbeing. It appears therefore that amongst professional 'colleagues', musicians can struggle with the central practice of relational work - namely that of differentiation (Zelizer, 2005: 32) - given the preponderance of what were described as manipulative tactics which problematised this facet of relational work. It appears that, in fact, the relational work was being perhaps most effectively undertaken by the music industry workers instead of the musicians. The former had, drawing on the terminology of Mears (2015: 1115), sought to foster relationships based on 'horizontal friendship' in order to elicit favours which might be free or recompensed with cultural status or other markers of success, as opposed to 'hierarchical management' which might necessitate payment, and this ultimately came to emotionally harm the musicians interviewed.

In these examples, the music industry professionals were conceptualised by interviewees in similar terms to those in the work of Barna (2022: 117) whose research describes "an insincerity permeating the society of musicians and music industry workers", which can ultimately come to necessitate the emotional labour of "managing resentment" (ibid: 118). The resentment amongst interviewees in *this* study relates to the way musicians perceived a harmful, strategic and instrumental orientation to sociality on the part of those they considered friends. These strategies represented attempts by fellow music industry professionals at accomplishing relationality; *working* on relationships. This was a kind of sociality with intent (Bendelj, 2012), or what Wittel (2001) calls network sociality. Some of these friendships often may be real, but they are often too embodied with an economic career orientation, and demonstrates relational work - or what Fletcher (1999) calls relational practice - taking place outside of formalised business-structures (see Butler & Waldroop, 2004), but in more loosely-defined cultural practice too. That is, for musicians, relational mismatches with professionals can come to be affectively experienced as harmful when managerial utility is misconstrued as meaningful friendship.

These methods of cultivating what appear to be friendships act as what Lainer-Vos (2013: 45) describes as 'blurring practices'. Whilst Zelizer's conceptualisation of relational work privileges the boundary-drawing necessary to demarcate relationships and subsequent exchanges, blurring practices achieve, in the words of Bandelj (2020: 258), "a zone of indeterminacy… to keep the boundaries between formal and informal economic exchanges blurred". Thus, record company executives and even managers were framed as blurring the relational work involved in the demarcation of the relationship as either driven by friendship or driven by professional career advancement; the reality, the interviewees felt, was that often it was being presented as the former to engender the latter. This particular form of relational blurring is embedded in what Bourdieu (1998:317), outlining a particular psychological orientation of creative workers, described as an injunction to have an "interest in disinterestedness" i.e. needing to appear to be foregrounding friendship, when in fact career advancement is a principal motivating factor.

Thematically, these breakdowns in boundary work and characterisations of intent were seen to occur more acutely in specific genres and a specific subsection of interviewees; namely those involved in the more commercial arenas of popular music, all of whom were located in London. Here, record company executives, managers, and PR companies which were less prominent in the lives of interviewees working in, say, classical music, opera or even jazz – or in the lives of those living outside of London - featured heavily as sources of challenging boundary work, and sources of anxiety and even anger. As one interviewee, a major pop producer living in London, suggested: "the competition in the industry is so fierce, the revenues have shrunk, you can feel they literally *use* people. People in those buildings [the major record companies] will just use creative people in such a selfish and shallow way… They're so unreliable

and it's so fickle that you can't ever get a real good sense of where you are; of where you stand with them" (Interview 19). Indeed, this interviewee suggested that this in fact manifested in feelings of anger and resentfulness against people who had treated him this way, saying in our interview: "There are people now that I'm almost waiting to take revenge on… [When they want me] to feature on one of their tracks I'll just say: 'no'. You know what? I won't even reply to their email" (ibid). Likewise, another producer from London described relationships with record company colleagues in the following terms: "People are professional when they want something. But as soon as you want something from them, or you want them to hold up their end of the bargain or whatever, they just fucking ghost [vanish] or they turn into fucking scumbags. Mainly it's just they ignore you after they've got what they want" (Interview 18). However, as suggested these feelings of competing interests between colleagues and friends were not evenly distributed amongst respondents, with a folk singer from Cardiff, who had moved away from London, saying: "I feel mercifully removed from that kind of industry" (Interview 21).

5. Conclusion

The theoretical construct of relational work offers a rich interpretative mechanism to unpack and analyse the insights offered by the interviewees here into the emotional dynamics and impacts of their most proximate relationships. As suggested, the cultivation and management of a range of both formal and informal relationships is key to the career development of musicians, but what is revealed here is the affective impact of this relational work and the stresses and strains of relational mismatches experienced in the quest to pursue a musical career. The findings unpacked here reveal the affective experiences of relational work – particularly in instances of relational mismatches – in two spheres of musicians' relationships. Firstly, amongst close family and partners, mismatches in expectations over investments (both financial and otherwise) and the ambiguous definitions of these as debts (both pecuniary or otherwise) can cause distress and place strain on musicians' relationships. Relational work is required to articulate the definitions of debts, and instances of mismatches were seen to cause feelings of anxiety, guilt and even shame, with differences in the sources of guilt seen between early career musicians and those with more established careers. Secondly, amongst professional musical colleagues, definitional difficulties in demarking working and personal relationships were seen to engender feelings of hurt and depression when inaccuracies in relational work resulted in those whom musicians thought of as friends – and even close family – were revealed to have more instrumental intentions. Here, the musicians who were based in London and involved in the more commercially-orientated worlds of pop, rap or R&B experienced these feelings more acutely than interviewees from outside of London, or based in other musical scenes. Across all dimensions of musicians' relationships, relational work focused on definitions and demarcations is crucial, and this work can have deep and meaningful affective consequences for musicians mental health and wellbeing vis-à-vis how they feel about themselves, their careers and those around them.

To what extent are the findings presented here unique to musicians? After all, all careers have stressors, and many features of musicians' working lives will be common not only in the creative industries, but also in the wider knowledge economy (including perhaps to researchers reading this), and indeed other forms of labour too. Shared experiences might include challenges maintaining a life/work balance, or difficulties delineating the boundaries between colleagues and friends (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). However, musicians are particularly interesting to explore these questions for a number of reasons. In the first instance, and this was indeed speculated by interviewees too, musicians may be notably adept at articulating the challenges of undertaking relational work given the reflexive nature of their artistic practice and injunction to be attuned to their own emotions and experiences to facilitate songwriting (Interview 19, Interview 21). Thus, they make distinctly insightful interviewees on this subject. Secondly, as per Alacovska (2018), musicians are apposite subjects to apply relational frames of analysis given that informal networks are, as seen herein too, the basis of their economic lives, offering a case study population of particularly intricate boundary blurring. Certainly, this is true in other creative careers too such as acting, for instance (Sparling, 2021). However, for Noone (2017), musicians' working lives have broad implications, acting as the 'canary in the coalmine' as exemplars of creative, reflexive, entrepreneurial workers aware of the importance of practices of self-branding and self-promotion which are increasingly demanded and desired in multiple sectors of the economy (Wee & Brooks, 2010). In this sense, musicians offer lessons, and perhaps predictive insights, for us all. As Morgan and Nelligan (2018:6) note: "More workers are now living like musicians".

It is important evaluate the conclusions we might reasonably draw from the data presented here and the limitations of the method adopted. In the first instance, as suggested, it is key to acknowledge a degree of self-selection bias amongst respondents given that the initial survey of this project was shared by a charity with an interest in supporting musicians with mental health challenges, and thus interviewees are likely to have foregrounded these experiences. Whilst a maximum variation approach to interview sampling was adopted in order to try and ensure diversity on the grounds of gender, genre, geography and career stage, one cannot meaningfully suggest that the findings are representative of all musicians. In addition, when undertaking re-analysis for this paper there were gaps in findings which were frustrating in their absence, but which represent fruitful areas for future research. Perhaps most notable was the need to better understand the lives and practices of relational work of those *around* the musician – those whose names are not on festival line-ups or in the charts, and whose contribution is often invisible. Indeed, revealing this would be salient to explore potential inequalities and class frames of analysis around *who* is supported and encouraged to be a musician and *in what ways*. Certainly, the referenced work by Anna Bull (2019) has done much to address this in the field of classical music. Expanding this to understand the family lives of musicians working in other genres such as those explored here would prove insightful.

Perhaps surprisingly, gender differences in how relational work was undertaken feature somewhat differently in this analysis than other studies referenced on this topic, insofar as the findings on family life highlighted *men's* gendered experiences of relational mismatches and the emotional burdens of heteronormativity. This is not to say that the women interviewed did not experience specific gendered challenges relating to more broadly-defined relationship management or in the navigation of informal networks. Far from it

in fact; women shared experiences rooted in misogyny and sexism ranging from being judged according to their age (Interview 17), appearance (Interviews 6, 13 & 22), and competence (13), as well as harrowing stories of sexual assault during their working careers at music events (Interview 8). These did not feature at all in the accounts of men and can be seen in the context of the wider research on this topic of which these interviews form part (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). However, the focus of analysis in this paper, heeding Bandelj's (2020: 263) call, has been specifically on 'mismatches', for which the analysis of interview data here revealed particular impacts based on gender (but principally for men), career stage, and commercial orientation.

Finally, it is important to conclude by noting that the use of terms such as anxiety or depression in this paper have been drawn upon based on interviewees self-reported definitions of these terms. Interviewees were not offering medical diagnoses of conditions, but were instead expressing their feelings of anxiety and depression based on a variety of intersecting factors in their lives, of which their methods of relational work represented just one area. Certainly, recent evidence suggests that musicians are highly emotional attuned and that self-reported feelings of mental ill-heath do strongly correlate with clinical diagnoses too (Loveday et al., 2022). In this respect, these findings should be understood as contributing towards a broader area of academic enquiry seeking to bring together a range of psychosocial and cultural emotional triggers in the lives of musicians which are understood as offering one explanatory mechanism vis-à-vis high reported rates of mental ill-health amongst this population (Musgrave, 2022). Understanding the careers of musicians holistically – economically, culturally, socially – in all their complicated nuance are key to better understanding the challenges of this form of creative work, and developing effective interventions going forward.

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Appendix: Interviewees and their demographics

number	occupation	genre	gender	location
1	Musician	Pop/ Soul	M	London
2	Singer/ Songwriter	Pop	F	London
3	Musician	Jazz/ Soul	F	London
4	Performer/ Producer	Hip hop	M	Manchester
5	Musician	Jazz	M	Birmingham
6	Musician	Indie/ Theatre	F	Belfast
7	Musician	Jazz	F	London
8	DJ	Dance	F	Manchester
9	Songwriter	Reggae/ Soul	F	Manchester
10	Singer/ Songwriter	Soul/ Dance	F	Bristol
11	Musician	Classical	F	London
12	Songwriter	Pop	F	London
13	Musician	Rock	M	London
14	Musician	Rock	M	Newcastle
15	Musician	Dance	M	London
16	Musician	Folk	M	Glasgow
17	Musician	Classical	F	Birmingham
18	Producer	Dubstep	M	London
19	Producer/ Songwriter	Pop	M	London
20	Producer	Dance	M	London
21	Musician	Folk	F	Cardiff
22	Musician	R&B	F	London
23	Singer	Opera	F	London
24	Singer/ Songwriter	Folk	M	London
25	Musician/ Educator	Jazz/ Pop/ Rock	M	Edinburgh
26	Musical Director	Musical Theatre	M	Newcastle
27	Producer/Rapper	Hip Hop/Spoken Word	M	Manchester
28	Musician	Pop/R&B	F	Manchester
29	Manager	Pop/Various	M	London
30	Major Record Label Executive	Various	M	London

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