



## The Passion Paradigm: Professional Adherence to and Consequences of the Ideology of “Do What You Love”

Lindsay J. DePalma<sup>1</sup>

---

*If changes to the material structures of work have ushered us into a “new economy,” cultural scholars assume that there must also be changes to ideological structures of work. Extant scholarship on precarious professionals and on the role of emotions in 21<sup>st</sup>-century work find that passion may be an important cultural component of white-collar work in the new economy. Using data from engineers, nurses, and graphic designers who work in either less precarious or more precarious contexts, this paper contributes the first emic definition of work passion as the experiences of attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance. Because I find overwhelming adherence and conceptual consistency among professionals in my sample, I argue that the pursuit of work passion constitutes a coherent ideology of work, which I call the passion paradigm. I argue that the passion paradigm is compatible with and protects structures of work in the new economy because its logic of hyper individualism motivates workers to work hard and work well as a practice of self-care, shifting the locus of critique further away from institutions and more toward the self. Adherence to and institutionalization of the passion paradigm may have myriad consequences, opening up broad areas of future research.*

---

**KEYWORDS:** culture; do what you love; new economy; passion; precarity; work.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, sociologists have documented broad changes in the economy, in organizations of work, and in the relationships between employers and their employees. The changes have been so significant that scholars often describe their research as investigations of the “changing nature of work” or the “new economy” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Davis 2016; Hollister 2011; Kalleberg 2009; Sennett 1998). One widely researched change has been the rise of unprecedented professional precarity, characterized by career trajectories that are more unpredictable, unstable, and insecure (Hollister 2011; Kunda and Ailon 2006; Orange 2003), compared to the postwar model of work (Barley and Kunda 2004; Davis 2016; Gershon 2017).

There has been an enormous amount of scholarship on the structural causes and consequences of this precarity. Commonly cited causes include globalization, the growth of technology and global competition, legal deregulation, and a shift from a manufacturing-based to an information or knowledge-based economy (Davis 2016; Kalleberg 2011). For many scholars, a primary consequence is what Beck (1992) called risk society: a society in which risk is increasingly taken from the state or other social institutions and transferred to the individual. Though there is some debate, the general consensus is that the changing nature of work is bad for profes-

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, University of California San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, MC# 0533, La Jolla, CA 92093-0533, USA; e-mail: [Ldepalma@ucsd.edu](mailto:Ldepalma@ucsd.edu)

sionals (Barley and Kunda 2006). Scholars recognize that precarious professionals are not a monolithic group and that experiences of non-standard work vary, but there is nevertheless widespread worry about how professionals who “can no longer rely on employers to provide a career” (Hollister 2011: 316) will cope with structural insecurity (Sennett 1998; Vallas 2015).

This consensus has been mostly generated via the perspective of “new structuralism” (Vallas and Prenner 2012). Structuralists tend to minimize or neglect the role of culture and agency in lieu of emphasizing how structures either enable or constrain individuals. From this perspective, myriad problems in the new economy are primarily structural in nature, as are the solutions. But a structural perspective is not the only one to take and doing so constitutes a “serious limitation” in understanding “discursive shifts” that shape “the way workers think about and experience the employment relationship” (Vallas and Prenner 2012: 338). To fully understand the shape and experience of work, scholars must also take a cultural perspective. Cultural scholars assume that if changes to the material structures of work have ushered us into a new economy, there must also be changes to the ideological or cultural structures of work (Kunda and Ailon 2006). This is the perspective I take in the present analysis. By doing so, I answer the call for more research on the “cultural or ideological frames...used to legitimate the new forms of employment” (Vallas 2015: 464) and, by attending to individual perceptions, I help “bring the worker back in” to our understanding of work in the new economy (Kalleberg 2009: 14).

Extant research that investigates professional cultures of work in the new economy generally focuses on professionals who are “emblematic of the experience of precarity” (Gill and Pratt 2008), namely white-collar contractors or entrepreneurs in creative, cultural, immaterial, affective, or knowledge work. One concept that has peppered this literature over the last two decades is the “deep attachment, affective bindings,” and ideas of “self-expression and self-actualization” that McRobbie (2016) describes as “passionate work” (Gill and Pratt 2008: 15).

Because scholars have found that love of the work—what I will henceforth refer to as work passion—often characterizes the culture of work for precarious professionals (Chia 2019; Duffy 2016; Ross 2000), it is possible that the pursuit and experience of work passion constitutes a broad ideology motivating work and controlling professionals in the new economy. In fact, recent scholarship does suggest that passion “is a primary cultural schema adjudicating labor market rewards” in the new economy (Rao and Tobias Neely 2019: 10) and that work passion is an “increasingly hegemonic...cultural script and normative ideal” within professional and managerial classes (Weeks 2017), which diffused from creative market niches into economic centers of production (Ross 2000; Chia 2019).

However, because these data cluster on objectively precarious professionals, whether work passion is only central for particular forms of precarious work or a broad ideology of work for professionals in the new economy remains an empirical question. Furthermore, though this scholarship suggests that passion is a hegemonic ideology with far-reaching implications for well-being, stratification, and inequalities, both what it means to professionals and how it is used to shape the experience of work are still quite poorly understood.

This research is the first to empirically analyze how professionals in diverse occupations and with varied levels of precarity actually conceptualize and use work passion. Understanding how professionals conceptualize the experience and pursuit of work passion is a critical step both for interpreting how the culture of passion “works” and for analyzing its roles in structures of inequality in the labor market; for we must understand how culture works in the lives of those who adhere to it to effectively critique and amend it (Illouz 2008: 4). Using comparative data from 74 interviews with engineers, graphic designers, and nurses who are working in either less or more precarious positions, I make two contributions. First, I contribute an emic definition of work passion as the emotional experiences of *attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance*. Second, by showing how adherence to an ideology which prioritizes the pursuit of work passion prevails among both more and less precarious professionals, transcending structural variation, I make an empirical contribution to understanding cultures of professional work in the new economy. I call this culture or ideology the *passion paradigm*.

I argue that the passion paradigm works in the new economy because it both motivates professionals to perform excellent work and controls professionals by obstructing systemic critiques of work. The distinct power of the passion paradigm is its deep individualism, which convinces adherents that that which ultimately serves and preserves structures of work is of primary service to the self. A culture of work which exults and combines individual attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance produces a resilient worker who is committed to the pursuit of happiness in work via perfected self-knowledge, rendering dissatisfaction at work matters of individual failure or individual-institution mismatch, rather than matters of structural failure. These data help reveal the processes through which the ideology of work passion obscures systemic causes of work-related strife and keeps individuals fixated on their own life biographies. Having detailed understandings of the discourses and rationales that undergird the passion paradigm will be necessary for understanding why adherence yields different effects, for waging effective critiques, and for cultivating new cultures of work which have a chance of supporting the construction of more equitable and sustainable structures of work.

## CULTURAL STRUCTURES OF WORK IN THE NEW ECONOMY

From a cultural perspective, it is not just material structures that determine the relational, affective, and material experiences of work, it is also ideological or cultural structures (Boltanski et al. 2005; Neff et al. 2005; Vallas and Hill 2018; Vallas and Prener 2012). Following history, if changes to the material structures of work have ushered us into a new economy, cultural scholars assume that there must also be changes to the cultural structures of work (Kunda and Ailon 2006; Sennett 1998). Scholars investigating emergent cultural structures of work are generally concerned with three interrelated things: (1) How culture operates as an independent variable shaping material structures of work; (2) How culture enables the psychological, emotional, and identity work that shape perceptions of work and helps individuals cope

in the new economy; (3) How culture legitimates or protects precarious work arrangements and/or controls workers in the new economy.

First, scholars who study culture as an independent variable that shapes both work and workers have found that changes in culture precipitated and enabled the growth of temporary work (Hatton 2011), that long hours with no expectation of company loyalty came from the imposition of wall street culture on the broader economy (Ho 2009), and that the pervasive rejection of smothered individuality, bland work cultures, and oppressive bureaucracy came from the dissemination of tech culture (Pink 2001; Ross 2003). Second, scholars who study how culture shapes individual perceptions and expectations have found that professionals in the new economy recalibrate their conception of work from necessity to opportunity (Cabanas and Illouz 2017), learn to leverage their social skills and capital (Barley and Kunda 2006), and focus on developing their identity, sustaining their relationships, and maintaining their emotional health (Ashford et al. 2018; Petriglieri et al. 2019).

The third approach to studying cultural structures of work—and the one that sociologists take most often—focuses on how culture legitimates or protects precarious work arrangements and/or controls workers. Scholars in this vein explain how ideology or culture obscures power relations enough to motivate productive work, even in exploitative circumstances (Blair-Loy 2003; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). This Marxist approach presumes that coercion lives at the center of the employment relationship and that ideologies of work make workers complicit in exploitation and inequality, and ultimately the perpetuation of capitalistic relations (Burawoy 1979; Endrissat et al. 2015; Weeks 2017). Scholars have found that culture has the power to overcome or mask negative working conditions in “bad” jobs that are still considered “cool” (Neff et al. 2005; Ocejo 2017), hide the costs of bottomless work, risk, and no ownership with the promise of more invigorating work (Ross 2003), and subsume demands for pay, better hours, and social security under pleasure or other immaterial benefits (Chia 2019; Gill 2010; Sandoval 2018). This critical approach demonstrates how ideologies of work serve as a lubricant for smooth capitalism.

Because ideology is critical to the justification and protection of existing structures of work, when structures of work change, so must ideology (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). The adaptation of ideology over the last century was famously outlined by Barley and Kunda (1992) who argued that patterned expansions and contractions in the economy correspond with vacillations between rational and normative rhetoric of control. In a follow-up article, Kunda and Ailon (2006) argued that the new economy broke the pattern and a new rhetoric emerged to drive worker devotion: market rationalism. Market rationalism breaks from normative rhetoric because it is stripped of normative and moral prescriptions and also breaks from rational rhetoric by replacing the “carrot” of membership and security with employability (Kunda and Ailon 2006: 211–214). The rational self-reliance and entrepreneurial risk taking that characterize the ideologies of “business of one” or “the flexible ideal” (Lane 2011), “self as business” (Gershon 2017), or “personal branding” (Vallas and Hill 2018) are consistent with the rhetoric of market rationalism. However, there is evidence that without affective and normative prescriptions these ideologies are insufficient for controlling workers and that there is therefore a new ideological surge “waiting in the wings” (Kunda and Ailon 2006: 216).

## DO WHAT YOU LOVE AND WORK PASSION

One potential ideology motivating and controlling workers in the new economy is the dictum to do what you love (DWYL). This sentiment has grown steadily for decades,<sup>2</sup> but fully emerged amid celebration of the new tech economy (Muirhead 2004: 41). In his famous 2005 commencement speech entitled “How to Live Before you Die,” Apple’s Steve Jobs told listeners: “The only way to do great work is to love what you do. . . Don’t Settle.” In the years that followed, DWYL exploded into popular culture. Self-help books flooded the market using titles such as *Use all of your Interests, Passions, and Hobbies to Create the Career of Your Dreams* and *Connecting Who You Are with What You’ll Love to Do*. In 2011, the Harvard Business Review (2011) opened an article, “It’s common wisdom these days that you should follow your passion.”

DWYL rhetoric represents the latest surge in a normative work ethic that prioritizes the intrinsic rewards of more pleasurable work. Synthesizing popular and managerial texts in which the mantra is promoted, Sandoval (2018) described DWYL as “the epitome of. . . the desire for self-fulfillment and pleasure”—linking pleasurable work to the alleged benefits of work quality: individual happiness and well-being (115). The sentiment of DWYL is inextricably linked to the “deep attachment, affective bindings” and ideas of “self-expression and self-actualization” that McRobbie (2016) described as “passionate work” (Gill and Pratt 2008: 15), what I call work passion.

The specific study of work passion is relatively new. It began in positive psychology, which argues that happiness yields success (rather than the inverse), so individuals should prioritize happiness. This is also a central tenet of DWYL. Psychology’s etic definition of work passion is work that is significant, liked, and that one invests time in (Vallerand and Houliort 2003: 757). The relevant insight from psychology is that individuals can experience passion as obsessive or harmonious, with opposite effects. With this dual understanding of passion, Vallerand and Houliort (2003) argue that whether passion yields individual benefits such as motivation and well-being depends on what type of passion one has. The causes of these disparate effects, however, remain unknown.

In sociology, there are only a few studies that center on work passion as the object of analysis (Chia 2019; Duffy 2017; Rao and Tobias Neely 2019; Sandoval 2018; Weeks 2017). The concept of work passion, however, has peppered literature on the cultures of work among structurally precarious professionals for the last two decades. This literature studies professionals who are unemployed (Gershon 2017; Sharone 2013), professionals in precarious industries (Ho 2009; Lane 2011; Neff 2012; McRobbie 2016; Ross 2003), or professionals in precarious roles (Barley and Kunda 2006; Pink 2001). Because the concept of work passion has been almost exclusively identified by scholars studying precarious individuals, industries, or roles, it has been assumed to be a particular characteristic of structurally precarious work (as opposed to professional work more broadly) used to help individuals justify or reframe its negative effects.

<sup>2</sup> See Vallas and Prener 2012 for a historical snapshot of the rise of the “culture of enterprise.”

Passion has been identified as a “relatively stable” feature of cultural work (Gill and Pratt 2008; Gill 2010), part of a congealed set of norms in the creative economy (McRobbie 2016), and linked to a narrative of self-realization in personal branding discourses among precarious professionals (Vallas and Hill 2018). Work passion energizes engagement in digital gaming (Chia 2019), undergirds expectations of enjoyable work for “No-Collar” professionals in Silicon Alley (Ross 2003), offers cultural legitimacy to downwardly socially mobile craftsmen (Ocejo 2017), and justifies insecurity, low pay, and long hours in new media labor (Ross 2000) and fashion (Arvidsson et al. 2010). In her work on female bloggers, Duffy (2016) argued that the passionate rhetoric of aspirational labor successfully “romanticized work in a moment when its conditions and affordances are even more precarious, unstable, flexible – and *unromantic*” (454). Hence, the promises of getting paid to do what you love infuse hope and motivation into aspirational labor, obscuring the fact that most bloggers will never be paid for doing what they love (Duffy 2016).

Like psychologists, sociologists also observe the complexity of work passion. Chia (2019) argued that the logical inconsistencies of passion are due to ideological ambiguities left in the wake of the collapse of old models of work. The contradictory experience of work passion has elsewhere been described as trade-offs between pleasure and pain (McRobbie 2016), a conflicted relationship of work and pleasure (Sandoval 2018), and managing agony and ecstasy (Petriglieri et al. 2019). Despite its documented nuance and relevance among precarious professionals in the new economy, sociological research centered on work passion is only just emerging.

The little existing sociological scholarship on the specific ideology of passion takes a critical approach. Weeks (2017) argued that the familiar tropes of love and happiness in DWYL “tap into what is imagined as a vast reservoir of will and energy,” which “employers can use to leverage that energy into productive activity” (41). Love’s power to depoliticize is centered in obstructing power relations, privatizing the experience of work, and convincing individuals that failure to comply is an individual defect. Most recently, Rao and Tobias Neely (2019) argued that “the passion schema” has emerged as a sign of commitment to work in the new economy, and that it plays an important role in sorting individuals, hiring and promotion, and assigning value to labor. This inchoate body of work posits that work passion is an “increasingly hegemonic...cultural script and normative ideal” within professional classes (Weeks 2017), which operates as emotional capital of consequence to workplace stratification and inequalities (Rao and Tobias Neely 2019).

Together, emergent research on work passion suggests that it is an increasingly prevalent and consequential source of ideological motivation and control in the new economy, and that it is still quite poorly understood. In this article, I offer two central contributions. First, by contributing the first in-depth analysis of how professionals perceive and use work passion as an ideological tool to understand and navigate work, I answer the call for research to “more explicitly examine how passion is understood, perceived, and defined in workplaces” (Rao and Tobias Neely 2019: 10). Second, this is the first empirical study of professional work passion which compares a diverse sample of more and less precarious professionals in three disparate occupations. As a result, I move beyond the extant literature’s empirical focus on labor in creative, cultural, or contract knowledge work, answering the call to

investigate broad “cultural or ideological frames. . . used to legitimate the new forms of employment” in today’s economy (Vallas 2015: 464).

## METHODS

To analyze the ideologies of professional work in the new economy, I conducted 74 semi-structured interviews with college-educated professionals, aged 30–40. The decision to interview college-educated individuals was based on research showing that postsecondary education is positively associated with intrinsic orientations to work. Intrinsic orientations refer to “the degree of importance individuals attach to the rewarding nature of job tasks themselves” (Johnson and Mortimer 2011: 1241). Data have long shown that socioeconomic origin is positively associated with intrinsic rewards; however, scholars have also found that academic abilities have the same effect as socioeconomic status (Johnson 2002), perhaps because modern institutions of higher education are where values of self-expression are strengthened and intrinsic motivations are reinforced (Charles 2011; Johnson and Mortimer 2011). Sampling individuals who have gone to college therefore ensures that respondents have been exposed to intrinsic orientations, such as the notion that they should do what they love. This exposure is also more likely given the age bracket; respondents were deliberating and making career choices at the turn of the century when heroes of the new economy were being popularly lauded. Additional benefits of delimiting the age are that respondents grew up within similar cultural contexts and are likely in similar life stages.

I interviewed nearly equal numbers of professionals in three occupations: engineering (mechanical, civil, and structural), graphic design, and nursing, with equal numbers in each occupation working in more and less precarious positions, and equal numbers of men and women. The number one requirement for occupation selection was that professionals in each field have the option to work in more or less precarious institutional contexts. Select types of engineers, graphic designers, and nurses have the option to work in institutions which are more traditional, bureaucratic, secure, and hierarchal, or in institutions which are more non-standard, flexible, insecure, and flat. This design allowed me to analyze how institutional precarity shapes conceptions of work, minimizing the effects of occupation variation. I also chose these occupations because they vary in job tasks, skill sets, conception of work (creative, lucrative, meaningful), gender representation, and institutional contexts. This occupationally diverse research design departs from the extant literature’s singular emphasis on precarious professionals (e.g., contract engineers) or precarious industries (e.g., creatives), which is critical to an investigation of a broad work ethic in the new economy.

Following the literature, I designated contractors, freelancers, consultants, and entrepreneurs as more precarious. Prior to the interview, each respondent filled out a survey which was designed to measure objective and subjective levels of precarity. These data (summarized in Table I) confirm that those I designated as more precarious are in fact more precarious along expected indicators compared to their counterparts in more

**Table I.** Summary Statistics Comparing Economy Types

	Less Precarious (organization)	More Precarious (market)	Everyone
Percent			
Have quit	64	63	63%
Have lost a job	15	20	18%
Long-term goals (>5 yr)	68	56	62%
If yes, anxious about goals	67	71	68%
Offered health insurance	95	54	76%
Work part of identity	97	91	95%
Want work as part of id.	78	73	76%
Offered retirement benefits	92	66	79%
If yes, offered match 401K	100	90	96%
Have unpredictable income	3	51	26%
Represented by union	31	20	26%
Required to maintain skills	95	100	97%
Mean/SD			
Likely that work will disappear	1.56 (.88)	1.74 (.95)	1.65 (.91)
Fear job loss	2.08 (1.4)	2.00 (1.2)	2.04 (1.3)
Unmet financial needs	2.15 (.93)	1.91 (.97)	2.04 (.95)
Employee feels disloyal	1.69 (.66)	1.85 (1.1)	1.77 (.87)
Company feels disloyal	2.28 (1.1)	1.88 (.95)	2.10 (1.02)
Freq. working from home	1.26 (.44)	2.14 (1.31)	1.68 (1.05)
Job autonomy	3.10 (0.75)	3.14 (1.12)	3.12 (.94)
Feel job easy to replace	2.68 (.70)	2.96 (.58)	2.81 (.66)
Feel skills are transferable	3.32 (.71)	3.65 (.49)	3.48 (.63)
Help on diff. projects	2.41 (.78)	2.23 (.84)	2.32 (.81)
Total Interviewed	39	35	74

*Note:* Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Some indicators have missing values; max is 7.

traditional contexts. These indicators include insurance benefits, retirement benefits, union representation, and income predictability.

It is worth noting that to compare professionals in the same occupation I sacrificed a starker comparison between professionals in positions that are further from one another on the spectrum of precarity. In addition, I intentionally use the terms *more precarious* and *less precarious* to indicate my position that a comparison between precarious and non-precarious professionals is flawed. Following scholars who have challenged the categorical or homogeneous classifications of precarity (Gill and Pratt 2008; Glavin et al. 2019; Ocejo 2017), I imagine precarity as a nuanced spectrum. I recognize, for instance, that professionals who opt into more precarious roles may experience precarity differently than those who did not. These assumptions make comparative analytical claims less clean, but I argue they are more representative of the heterogeneous ways that professionals perceive and experience precarity.



In total, I conducted 74 semi-structured in person interviews lasting 90–120 minutes. All respondents work in urban southern California and have at least 5 years of experience in their profession. Recruitment materials informed respondents that the project was about how individuals think and make decisions about work. I filled my quota sample through snowball sampling, relying on multiple starting points in each cell, and multiple recruitment strategies. For example, I searched “Civil Engineering Firms in Southern California” and emailed publicly available contacts or typed my recruitment message into a contact box, I reached out to local faculty to see if they could refer me to professionals in the field, and I reached out to local organizations to find out who did their graphic design work. These strategies facilitated a heterogeneous sample. Every respondent was asked for a referral, though few did. The maximum number of co-workers I interviewed was two.

Every interview was audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and coded using N-VIVO software. Data were coded through a reciprocal and iterative process of deduction and induction. Deductive codes were driven by the interview guide and based on theoretical interests and inductive codes were based on emergent patterns. For example, I began with a deductive node titled “prioritize passion” for those who chose passion in the multiple-choice question (presented in the findings). As I analyzed the data, I had to inductively create a metanode for passion, where I coded all respondent references to passion. As I parsed through the nuanced discussions, I divided respondent references to passion into multiple inductive nodes, including “definitions of passion,” which bloated into several sub-nodes before I could see four discourses which pattern how respondents talked about work passion: attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance. Survey data were collected via Qualtrics and were analyzed using SPSS. Nominal answers in the qualitative data were also coded and included in quantitative analyses (e.g., Have you ever quit a professional job? Do you believe in a calling? Do you think people should be passionate about their work?). I increased reliability by working with a research assistant on this task.

Finally, it is worth noting the limitations of these data. Despite the occupational, gender, and precarity diversity in the sample, its areas of homogeneity limit generalizability. These data are from professionals living in urban Southern California; they may not be representative of those in rural areas or contexts in which employment options are limited. Comparisons between first and non-first generation, white and non-white, and immigrant and non-immigrants in the sample show comparable adherence to the passion paradigm, however given the small *n* future research is necessary to analyze how race, class, and migration status affect adherence to the passion paradigm.<sup>3</sup> It is also unknown whether findings apply to older professionals or will still apply in later stages of life. Future research on passion would also benefit from longitudinal data.

These findings would also be strengthened by data at the micro interactional level and the mezzo organizational level. Though data at the individual level are fantastic for understanding how individuals construct meaning and coherence in their own lives, they are limited in their ability to discern how the passion paradigm trans-

<sup>3</sup> The sample was 65% white, 18% first- or second-generation immigrant, 26% first-generation college graduate, 41% married, 26% parents, and 50% self-identified female (over-sampling engineers and under-sampling nurses).

lates into interpersonal behavior and institutionalized inequalities. Future research would benefit from analyzing how adherence to the passion paradigm mediates interactions at work, and how the codification of the passion paradigm in work policies, management practices, or organizational cultures creates stratification or inequalities at work.

## FINDINGS

### *Adherence to the Passion Paradigm*

I find that the rhetoric of work passion has tremendous resonance with professionals, superseding the structural variation in my sample. Though I found small variation in the prioritization and expression of work passion (as seen in Table II), respondents in the central axes of comparison (gender, occupation, level of precarity) still shared overwhelming adherence to the passion paradigm. As a result, the findings are organized around similarity rather than difference.<sup>4</sup> I argue that this coherent set of beliefs about work passion congeal as an ideological work ethic, which both motivates and depoliticizes professional work in the new economy; I refer to this ideology as the passion paradigm. The findings will begin with indicators showing overwhelming adherence to the passion paradigm, followed by an emic definition of work passion, and end with the passion paradigm as a deeply individualistic ideological work ethic in the new economy. For simplicity, less precarious individuals are denoted *organization* (they work in an organization) and more precarious professionals are denoted *market* (they work in the open market).

I present four central indicators of adherence to the passion paradigm: most respondents believe college graduates should prioritize work passion, believe the pursuit of passion best characterizes their personal orientation toward work, believe professionals should be passionate about their work, and believe it is possible for all professionals to be passionate (Table II, in bold).

The first indicator of adherence to the passion paradigm was a multiple-choice question that I presented to respondents about mid-way through our interview. The question read: I think the average college graduate should prioritize work that: (A) He/she is good at (talent), (B) He/she is passionate about (passion), or (C) Work that is high paying (pay). As Table II shows, 77% of the professionals in my sample unequivocally answered passion, with no group falling beneath 68%. This 77% does not include those that could not choose between passion and talent (7%) nor those who chose talent or pay but added caveats like, “while you’re trying to figure out what you’re passionate about have a high paying job.” Among those who did not choose passion, 65% included this or a similar caveat indicating passion as the ultimate objective. Of those who chose talent or pay without caveat, 47% are employed in the market, 71% are male, and 88% chose talent.

The second indicator in Table II was the final question in the interview guide which asked respondents to consider four quotes and choose the one that best

<sup>4</sup> Though I emphasize similarity, I do not mean to imply that there are not nuanced differences between groups, occupations, and contexts in adherence to and expression of passion. I argue that these findings will help scholars to better discern these differences in future research.

Table II. Indicators of Adherence to the Passion Paradigm

	Male	Female	Engineer	Graphic Designer	Nurse	Less Precarious (organization)	More Precarious (market)	Sample Total
Answer to the question: I think the average college graduate should prioritize work that: A) He/she is good at (talent); B) He/she is passionate about (passion); C) Work that is high paying (pay)								
<b>Passion</b>								
Talent	68%	87%	75%	71%	85%	77%	77%	77%
Pay	19%	8%	8%	21%	12%	13%	14%	14%
Cannot prioritize	5%	0%	4%	0%	4%	3%	3%	3%
	8%	5%	13%	8%	0%	8%	6%	7%
Answer to the question: Which of these four quotes best represents your beliefs about work? (Quotes were selected to indicate four orientations to work: calling/ meaningful, passion/fulfillment, balance/job, and purpose/renown)								
<b>Passion</b>								
Calling	51%	38%	54%	50%	31%	41%	49%	45%
Balance	14%	30%	13%	21%	31%	23%	20%	22%
Purpose	24%	14%	25%	8%	23%	21%	17%	19%
Think all professional workers <i>should be</i> passionate about their work	11%	19%	8%	21%	15%	15%	14%	15%
Think all professional workers <i>can be</i> passionate about their work	94%	90%	100%	80%	95%	94%	90%	92%
	86%	89%	95%	83%	85%	86%	89%	87%

Note: N = 74.  
A few totals are 101% due to rounding up at .5 or above.

describes their beliefs about work. These quotes were selected to indicate four orientations to work—calling/meaningful, passion/fulfillment, balance/job, and purpose/renown, which were teased apart as respondents discussed what they liked and disliked about each quote. Because interviewing allows the benefit of conversation, the precision of each quote was not as important as prompting respondents to reflect on various orientations to or cultures of work. This method was adapted from Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) who used paragraph descriptions in their analysis of jobs, careers, and callings. Like Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), I found that most respondents chose their top choice easily, even while agreeing with alternative quotes in part or in full.

As Table II shows, 45% of respondents chose the famous quote by Steve Jobs, urging graduates to follow their passion. Though there is variation within the sample, passion was chosen most often in every group. Work as a calling was the second choice for the overall sample, earning 22% of the total votes. But calling was not the second choice for males or engineers, when they are isolated. Many respondents specifically identified adherence with the following section of Jobs' quote:

Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.

There are three things in the excerpt which respondents consistently described as tenets of their beliefs about passion. A brief discussion of these will help explain the third and fourth indicators.

First, adherents of the passion paradigm speak of the pursuit of passion as rational. They believe that if professionals are expected to devote so much of their lives to work, they might as well be passionate about it. A market nurse named Brooke was blunt while explaining why she chose passion in the multiple-choice question: "Because if you don't love what you do, there's no point." When I asked her what she meant she replied, "Why be unhappy for the rest of your life? Even if it's something you're really good at and you hate it, well you shouldn't be doing it."

Second, in addition to believing that work passion yields happiness which ought not be forfeited during one's working hours, adherents believe that if they feel passionately about their work they are doing better work, and believe that if their coworkers are passionate about their work they, too, are doing better work. The dual beliefs that the pursuit of work passion is a rational pursuit of happiness and that work passion produces better work helps explain why 92% of respondents said that college-educated professionals *should* be passionate about their work (third indicator, Table II). A market engineer named Urania explained that when she said, "if you're passionate about [work] you're better at it," she meant that she thinks passion begets a "better work ethic." Without passion, she told me, "you might let deadlines slip, you might not bring you're 'A' game to the task at hand." Compared to individuals with less passion, respondents described passionate workers as more invested, more inspired, more devoted, more likely to work longer, more capable of pushing through, and more dedicated to progress.

Respondents often explained that work passion produces better work because passionate workers are motivated to exceed. From the perspective of the employer,

they help move the company forward. From the perspective of co-workers, they help alleviate the workload. A market graphic designer named Farah explained that work passion “drives you...to try to go beyond what you’re currently at, exceed [company] expectations or exceed your own expectations.” According to respondents, passionate workers are “probably paying closer attention,” “going to go over something a few more times,” and producing “more refined work,” which has more to do with their motivation to do good work or their ability to persevere, rather than their raw talent.

The final tenet of the passion paradigm represented in the quote by Steve Jobs and highlighted by so many of my respondents is agency: “Don’t settle.” The vast majority (87%) of respondents believe that all college-educated professionals can be passionate about their work (fourth indicator, Table II).<sup>5</sup> Even more staggering, 78% of respondents believe that everyone can do what they love, regardless of education.<sup>6</sup> They do not believe that it is easy—to love what you do may require a great deal of introspection, time, risk, or courage—but 87% of respondents believe that their college-educated peers have the power to do it.

The result of an economic context in which the structural conditions of precarity for some professionals have yielded a culture of precarity for most is an ethos of uncertainty where individuals in an organization must be prepared for movement and individuals in the market must rise to the challenge of acculturating to risk. As critics of the new economy predict, professionals feel devoid of a clear one-size-fits-all model for moving through their careers, both practically and ideologically. For adherents to the passion paradigm, the passion paradigm offers a legible ideology of work that is compatible with the precarious new economy. It dictates loyalty to one’s self as a rational, achievable, and secure pursuit.

### *The Definition of Work Passion*

Having established that a set of beliefs about work passion (the passion paradigm) have tremendous resonance across my sample, I now turn to developing an emic definition based on how professionals themselves understand it. Again, although I do find small variation between groups as sociologists of work, gender, and organizations would expect, this article focuses on the broad agreement between groups in service of detailing the passion paradigm as an ideological work ethic which promotes the normative and rational benefits of pursuing work passion.

I found four central patterns in how respondents described work passion. I summarize these patterns as the following characteristics: attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance. As with other dynamic concepts, these characteristics became apparent and were clarified in varied discussions throughout our interview, suggesting that individual facets of work passion are highlighted or become more salient in particular contexts or circumstances, and downplayed in others. While in a given context an individual might use the term “passion” to convey one or more

<sup>5</sup> Additional comparisons find that 84% of first-generation, 84% of non-white, and 77% of first- or second-generation immigrants believe that all college graduates can do what they love.

<sup>6</sup> There was more internal variation here: the lowest was 61% of non-white respondents, followed closely by 62% of respondents who are first- or second-generation immigrants.

aspects, as an ideology the passion paradigm relies on all four. This dynamism helps distinguish the passion paradigm from other prominent work ethics, such as a calling, in which individuals might feel attracted to their work or find it meaningful, but not enjoy it. As respondents told me, to feel attracted to one's work does not necessarily mean that someone is happy doing it. This distinction is important—it helps explain why respondents consider passion as distinct from a calling; for even though passion is associated with attraction, it is additionally associated with the prized experiences of agency and enjoyment.

Understanding the multifaceted ways professionals define work passion helps us understand how adherents use it in their daily lives, and how it works as a broad ideology of work. Understanding that professionals perceive work passion as attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance also illustrates how deeply individualistic the concept is, with an almost myopic emphasis on individual fit, happiness, and success. Coupled with other beliefs about work passion (encapsulated by the passion paradigm), this individualistic orientation is ultimately likely to protect structures of work in the new economy because it detracts from communal orientations and diminishes one's ability to see structural causes of mismatch, unhappiness, or failure.

### *Attraction*

Attraction refers to how respondents define work passion as an internal compulsion which is experienced as somewhat out of one's control, as if orchestrated by an external force. A market nurse named Darren told me, passion is “something that you feel drawn to, something that you're connected to, something that is almost innate. I feel like passion comes from within, and it's already built into something.” This feeling of innate connection led others to discuss passion with phrases like “something in the soul” or a “deep concern” for the work.

For some, the source of their attraction was known—a nurse whose niece has a rare disease or an engineer who comes from a long line of engineers. These individuals discussed their career choices as stemming from the conditions they were born into, or experiences early in life. For others, the source of their attraction is unknown. A market engineer named Udall talked about just feeling “drawn to something,” adding that someone might be able to identify what they are drawn to by thinking about what they have a desire to learn about. When the source of their attraction was unknown, respondents would say things like, “I just *always* liked. . .” or that they always felt an “overwhelming magnetic draw.” Darren, from above, used to be a financial planner. Although the money was good, he “hated every minute of it.” He soon quit to pursue nursing, citing “I was always drawn to science, I was always drawn to medicine. I like just being able to see people get better, being part of that process.” This element of work passion is what—although it is subject to change—seems to precede the work itself.

Attraction is the element that individuals search themselves for on their quest to find work that they love. As an organization graphic designer named Nick quipped, “how deep can you ever really love something that you weren't naturally attracted

to?” Attraction is the characteristic of work passion that brings an individual to their field of work to begin with, before they even know how much they will actually like it. It is the ideological component that makes an individual feel bound, creating, as a market engineer named Karmen told me, “a feeling that you *have to be*—that you *should be* doing something.”

On its own, the characteristic of attraction does not mean that individuals like the work or feel that the work produces their optimal happiness, it merely means that they care about it, or feel drawn to it. Brittany, an organization graphic designer, told me that her grandma always said that Brittany got the genes of her grandma’s sister, the artist in the family. She explained finding work that “feels natural” with a metaphor: “it’s like writing with your left hand if you’re right-handed. It doesn’t come naturally to you, but when you pick up the pen with your right hand it just flows.” An organization nurse named Bethany similarly asserted that she knows that she is doing the work she should be when her “whole body system just agrees with it. It’s like yes. Positive feelings, nothing negative, it’s like everything feels right, so this is what I’m supposed to be doing.” Work passion as attraction is about work that feels right, satisfying what respondents describe as their individual wiring.

### *Enjoyment*

Enjoyment refers to how respondents define work passion as liking or even loving their work. An organization graphic designer named Lisa told me that she defines work passion as “pure enjoyment.” She went on, “It’s just like, you’re working really hard at something that you—you’re doing it because you want to.” Distinct from the almost involuntary magnetism of attraction, enjoyment describes the pleasing emotional experience of intentional engagement with work that “fits.” Work passion as enjoyment means individuals look forward to going into work and feel gratified by it. As Shane, a market engineer, told me, passion means work is more than just 8am–5pm, more than a job. When one enjoys their work, they might “think about it 24/7” or “forget the time” while working. This creates conditions in which the line between work and home is blurred. Even if an individual is physically home, a market engineer named Urania represented how this blurring occurs when she used the following questions to define passion:

Are you excited to do it? Does it keep you up at night? Do you think about it when your husband’s talking to you about something you’re not interested in, you know, is it something that you’re thinking about all the time? Is it something that you’re thinking about when you don’t need to be?

Kyle, a market nurse, defined passion as the “heart” and the “zest and the zeal.” A market graphic designer named Uriah provided this example about working on material for a music event:

I am scouring the Internet for inspiration ideas, and I started coming up with something really good. While I’m working I get excited about it, and I keep having to stand up and walk around...and I feel this surge of emotion where I’m excited, excited about working but...there’s a hesitation to continue to chip away at it...oh is it done yet, it’s not done yet? This whole interplay, this dance that you have with the media, I feel like that’s passion. I think it’s an interplay between you and the work where you are somehow affected by it emotionally

and mentally and you're affected by the ability that you have to change it. When I say I'm passionate about it that means I really enjoy working on it.

The “interplay” or “dance” between an individual and their work is what others described as being fully engaged or engrossed in their task. This is what organizational scholars call flow.

Enjoyment captures how individuals describe work passion as transforming work into something that individuals want to do because they really like it—they are “stoked to go do [it].” It means that for the most part work feels energizing, not enervating. An organization engineer named Chris described that work passion produces “a bubbly feeling. . . that’s uplifting.” He recalled engineers he has worked with who exuded this characteristic of work passion: “The equations would literally speak to them,” he told me, “They could look at this long math equation and see not just letters and numbers but how to design a better functioning part. I would look at that equation and I could graph it and see a curve, but they would see opportunities.” He went on to describe work for these former co-workers as “natural,” enabling them to “rise to the occasion without even trying.” This ease of work is not necessarily a reflection of talent, but an expression that someone found their “niche” or “groove,” as Lisa, an organization graphic designer, quipped.

### *Motivation*

Motivation refers to how respondents define work passion as the motivation to thrive in work. They describe passion’s value as its power to animate growth, equating passion with “inspiration,” “focus,” “drive,” “purpose,” “hunger,” and “curiosity.” Passion as motivation is the stick-with-it-ness component. According to my respondents, work passion is the key ingredient of growth and longevity in any given job. As a market graphic designer named Nina described, passion makes you relentless, and you will keep going. “It’s like. . . a child learning to walk,” she told me, “they don’t stop walking because they fall so many times, right?” Her metaphor conveys a pervasive sentiment among my respondents that work passion means an individual will want to learn and develop.

Passion as motivation is the primary explanation for why adherents to the passion paradigm believe passionate workers yield better work. While explaining why he believes individuals should be passionate about their work, a market nurse named Kyle told me about ER doctors who use the internet and open textbooks to learn about the disease process while performing a procedure. According to Kyle, it is passion that motivates these professionals to learn and build their practical expertise. Passion provides the “reason to look further into it to better yourself.” As an organization engineer named Olivia explained, “To be passionate about your work, I would think that you want to always continue to grow and to be better.” Passion as motivation is the characteristic that propels individuals forward, not only through time but also in skill.

Most respondents described passion as more sustaining and inspiring than money or talent. They described the relationship between work passion and good work linearly, whereas talent and money eventually plateau or may even become



parabolic in the cases of burn out, disengagement, or quitting. A market engineer named Odella told me that passion serves as the best motivation for good work because it is “internal.” She explained, “if things change, like for example the economy could go down,... that won’t affect your production or your contribution to what you’re doing. And it won’t affect how you see the work that you’re doing. If you’re passionate about it you can keep yourself motivated because you like doing what you’re doing and you want to continue to do it.” Rather than depending on external variables, which are out of one’s control, the emotional experience of work passion is internal. If one’s primary motivation for working hard and working well is internal, it is considered safer from the vicissitudes of the market. Even if the market remains stable, money’s ability to motivate may falter. In the long run therefore, work passion encourages continued devotion to a job well done.

### *Perseverance*

Lastly, perseverance refers to how respondents define work passion as an effective antidote to work’s inevitable un-pleasantries. I found this characteristic most surprising; I assumed that those who adhere to a DWYL mantra and promote the passion paradigm would sound particularly optimistic or idealistic about work. Instead, most respondents described work passion less as work that one spends their days laboring joyfully in, and more as a powerful emotional advantage to better endure the various hardships of work. They talked about the power of passion to protect them from or sustain them through unfavorable and sometimes even bleak work circumstances. A market nurse named Delia told me, “having a passion for [work] just helps you kind of get through, like wake up easier and get through the shifts;” a market engineer named Don told me that without it work “would be really hard and it would be really draining and it probably wouldn’t last very long;” an organization graphic designer named Kurt told me that without work passion, “I would be in a dire place right now emotionally.” The passion paradigm as an ideology of work implies that work is at times enervating, un-sustaining, and even ruinous for the human spirit. Respondents repeatedly described passion as a remedy. Without it, “you’ll get bored,” or “you’ll be unhappy.” Some aspects of work—the long hours, the bad manager, the annoying co-workers, and the below market pay—would not be worth it or tolerable if not for the existence of passion.

One aspect of work that respondents described as draining is the expectation of emotional engagement. Nico, an organization engineer, told me that he did not even *like* engineering when he first started but quickly realized that he needed to develop his passion. He told me:

I think it takes a very strong-willed person to do something every day that they’re not passionate about. It can lead into resentment and depression and feelings of neglect, so you have to love what you do. Nobody works those hours without feeling something. I think you have to find that passion or else it will eat you alive.

He added that he believes it is the same with every job. A market engineer named Diego shared a similar sentiment when he said passion “will get you through some tough nights.” When respondents talked about passion as perseverance, they

defined passion as an emotional crutch. Without it the hours, the inconsistencies, and the unsavory people would “eat [you] alive.”

The pervasive sentiment among adherents to the passion paradigm in my sample is that work is just that, *work*. Though 95% of respondents reported that most days they like or love their work, this does not mean that they *always* like their work. Respondents ventured that they like their jobs 50–70% of the day—describing a large percentage of their work as unpleasant, frustrating, boring, or unfulfilling. Kurt, an organization graphic designer, told me that at least 70% of the time he feels “great and capable;” he “enjoys” his work, and considers it “rewarding.” Nevertheless, he tells me that every job is going to have its “shit sandwich.”

Passion as perseverance confronts the idealistic notion that it is possible to “do what you love and never work a day in your life”—as the motivational saying goes. Rather than describing work passion as an ideal experience in which work no longer feels like work, most respondents were realistic about work always feeling like work. Though work passion does reflect better work, as the characteristics above describe, one reason why the passion paradigm works is because it sets the expectation that the experience of work passion is not the absence of work grievances; as an ideology of work, the passion paradigm does not deny the drudgery of work. Instead, adherents perceive that passion will equip them with a higher tolerance for the inevitable things they will not like about their work. It is this aspect of work passion, perhaps, that has the greatest potential for exploitation. Not only can organizations leverage work passion to squeeze more hours out of their employees, when employees perceive that a solution to poor working conditions is to rely on one’s passion, organizations are further absolved from structural critique and structural change.

### *The Passion Paradigm as an Ideology of Work in the New Economy*

The passion paradigm follows the logic that full-time work takes up a large portion of one’s life and that work absent of enjoyment is an egregious and unnecessary sacrifice. As a logical solution, work passion is proposed to enrich work hours and increase overall happiness. Workers are incentivized to take control of their own happiness, which the passion paradigm dictates must be individually tailored according to individual circumstances and predilections. The key is its insistence that everyone has the power to pursue work in which they feel attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance—each aspect fluctuating like a pulley system to accommodate the context. Adherents described their emotions as the engine which prompts or ceases movement. The result is a self-regulated workforce that shoulders the risks and emotional labor of job crafting, perspective shifting, and career changing as routes to a more enjoyable relationship to work.

Respondents demonstrated adherence to this logic by describing work as inevitable, work passion as a viable route to individual happiness, and unused individual agency as the largest barrier to work passion. Over and over again, respondents told me that their goal in life is to be happy and that work passion increases individual happiness. Consider Diego, a market engineer, who used the metaphor of a lightbulb to describe the dividends of work passion. “This person works in this freaking job,

[he] doesn't really shine," he began, "Imagine if you stuck that person in just the right socket and it's like boom, this is your self-actualized freaking awesomeness. It's just – it's tragic to think that that person won't ever find it. If you put the right person in the right place, I think they would just whew." After telling me that this kind of self-actualizing work is what he wants for everyone he told me about an exemplary archeologist that he works with:

*Diego:* He has a total beater of a car, has a small apartment, but the guy is freaking alive when he's talking about dinosaurs. Like alive. I was excited to meet him, he's very passionate about what he does. He's been there 12 years, and he's very well-liked. He doesn't get paid a lot, but he loves it, you know. I'm very happy for him.

*Interviewer:* What's the distinction between being passionate about something versus passionate about your work?

*Diego:* I think that magic can happen. You spend so much time at work, I think if you can marry the two, that's just gold. That's fantastic, because work is one of the few things that have to do whether we like it or not. Now imagine if you could line that up with something that you loved, oh my God, that would be—it's gold.

Olivia, an organization engineer, described the logic of the passion paradigm this way:

To hear that people don't like their job and they just continue to do it, that's really hard for me to understand because you live this life once, and I can't imagine not living it to the fullest and being happy. [Pick something you're passionate about.] You have to do something that you enjoy and that fills the void of a job. You have to have a job to provide for yourself, so in turn you need to find something you like.

The passion paradigm successfully reorients professionals to pursue work that they love as a service to themselves, and their individual happiness. When I asked Whitney, a market nurse, to clarify what she meant by describing work passion as a bonus she said, "It's a personal fulfillment, a personal satisfaction. I mean at the end of the day it leaves me happy and it leaves me wanting to come back and do more." Whitney, like others, emphasized that the central benefit of work passion is personal. The passion paradigm reframes good work as something that is individually motivated and individually gratifying, rather than externally expected, demanded, or rewarded.

Instead of working well as a point of religious ethic or working well because that is what an employee owes their organization as the other half of the social contract, adherents to the passion paradigm work hard and work well as a self-imposed practice of self-care and self-respect. This idea is exemplified well by Nina, a market graphic designer who, after working in organizations for 15 years, quit and started her own business following the sudden death of her husband. The biggest lesson she said she has learned in pursuing this dream is to "really take care of our health and our relationships and that balance." This balance, she proceeded to tell me,

is knowing when to let go and when to have the power, boldness, strength and energy and discipline to really pursue those things that really excite you and ignite your life because it's really going to ignite everything around you. Your joy for others, your joy that you give to your family, your kids... that thing is so contagious.

Adherents described that finding the strength and discipline to pursue one's passion is ultimately about fighting for a life ignited, which will nourish the individual

first, before spilling over to nourish everything else. The cunning of the passion paradigm is convincing adherents that that which ultimately serves and preserves structures of work is of primary service to the self.

The passion paradigm encourages loyalty not to an organization—as in Blair-Loy's (2003) work devotion schema, and not even to a profession, but to one's self. Kurt, an organization graphic designer, explained that being passionate about one's work means one is being true to themselves—they are making sure they have something that “feels purposeful, the reason why...you get up in the morning.” In the new economy, the former social contract promising security and a clear path of advancement is gone. The passion paradigm provides a new north star. While the passion paradigm is similar to other normative and rational work ethics and cultures of work, the particularities of the structural context demand a supporting ideology with compatible particularities. In an economy in which individuals are supposed to behave like a business of one, cultivate personal brands, design non-linear career paths, and maintain their employability, the passion paradigm provides an adapted normative ethic that is just as flexible and individualistic.

Compatible with this economic context, the question of good work is more subjective. Adherents to the passion paradigm believe they are at their best when they are introspective. An organization nurse named Fiona told me: “I don't even have the definition [of good work]. I have this idea—almost like this spiritual connectedness. I don't have words to describe; it's more like a feeling.” Adherents are driven by their feelings—the emotions—of work passion, which they perceive as in their control. Dahlia, a market graphic designer, summarized, “You have to know how you want to feel every single day... it just boils down to understanding what your values are and what's important for you and then how to pick things that support that value system.” She went on to say that her sister worked so hard that she started having seizures. When I asked if she would ever be okay with her sister's grind she clarified, “If she was doing it for herself and not somebody else. When you grind it out for somebody else's business, somebody else's dream, you're not always rewarded at the end. You're always replaceable.” The insidious promise of the passion paradigm is the secure reward of self-satisfaction, which is deemed safe from the vicissitudes of the market.

Adherents therefore believe that problems with work are solved by turning inward to understand one's individual circumstances, needs, and capabilities and taking individual action. The passion paradigm espouses a striking level of individual responsibility and agency. Respondents did not imply that work passion is easy to achieve, but as the indicators from above show, they overwhelmingly believe that individuals have the power to fight for it. Even Lily, a market nurse stuck in her gig to maintain access to a specific heart doctor said,

If you're unhappy and you know how to change it, change it. You can tell someone to do that and that they can do it, but they need to have the same drive and dedication to make it happen. You can't just expect shit to be handed to you, hope for the best, hope the universe will provide—you have to work.

Diego, the market engineer from above, told me he used to hate math. He believes he fought hard to love his job, and that others can too. “I love the idea that

you can actually get what you want if you work toward it. I believe that so much. We have access to so much information it's just a matter of you sitting down and doing it." He concluded, "I think if you don't like what you're doing, you need to freaking change it. It's as simple as that. You're not a freaking tree content with whatever sunlight you can get, freaking move." The can-do attitude of the passion paradigm taps into the deep well of myths about opportunity and meritocracy in America. The prospect of reinvention and of a better life is empowering, however vague. "That optimistic sense...to not be forced into a certain lifestyle," Cody, an organization graphic designer, told me, "it's not necessarily that life is going to be better but it's just that like you have that freedom to try."

The passion paradigm finds compatibility with precarity with its allure of endless and better possibilities. This orientation to work is liberating, as Kurt, an organization graphic designer explained, "Because I'm constantly trying out who I am and what I enjoy and what's meaningful to me. It doesn't necessarily stay the same. I find things out along the way and I'm gauging whether something is valuable to me and that changes." Optimism about the future is enabled by the normalization of trial and error, which normalizes both trial (movement) and error (failures, poor fits, low seasons) as part of the unpredictable lifelong pursuit of work passion. This deep individualism ultimately thwarts systemic critique. The passion paradigm elevates self-knowledge as a route to happiness in work, rendering dissatisfaction at work matters of individual failure or individual-institution mismatch, rather than matters of institutional or structural failure.

## DISCUSSION

If changes to the material structures of work have ushered us into a new economy, cultural scholars assume that there must also be changes to the supporting ideological or cultural structures of work (Kunda and Ailon 2006). Scholarship on professionals who are considered vanguards of precarity, such as tech entrepreneurs or workers in new media industries (McRobbie 2016; Ross 2003), and emerging scholarship on the role of emotions in 21<sup>st</sup>-century work, find that passion may be an important component of white-collar work in the new economy (Rao and Tobias-Neely 2019).

In this article, I contribute the first emic definition of work passion based on how professionals themselves conceive of and use it. Respondents described work passion as the experiences of attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance. In addition, because I found overwhelming adherence to—and conceptual consistency around—the logic and benefits of pursuing passion among the 74 professionals I interviewed, across occupation, economy type, and gender, I argue that the passion paradigm constitutes a broad ideology of work in the new economy.

On the one hand, I demonstrate that the passion paradigm serves adherents because they perceive it as empowering. A central premise of the passion paradigm is that all individuals have at least some power to determine what their life will look like, depending on their individual values. It serves adherents as an ideological structure because it grants them clarity and reliability; Adherents are encouraged to look

to their personal emotions as a guide through their careers, imagining work as a malleable activity that can be manipulated to accommodate and support the life one most desires to live. Within a context of uncertainty, the passion paradigm enables adherents to act meaningfully and intentionally. Thus, it thrives in the new economy because it helps adherents replace trepidation about the future with confidence in one's unceasing power to shape one's life and optimism about the unexpected or surprising opportunities that await.

On the other hand, like other hegemonic ideologies of work, the passion paradigm also works in the new economy because it serves and protects the institution of work. It does this by deeply individualizing and thereby depoliticizing the experience of work for adherents while committing them to work hard and work well. While adherents narrowly focus on identifying and capitalizing on areas of *perceived* agency in the pursuit of crafting individualized careers, growth, and lifelong happiness, they avert their gaze from the structural sources of *deprived* agency, both individual and collective. The passion paradigm grants adherents power to pursue work in which they feel attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance, but it makes their perspective myopic; it stunts them from leveraging their perceived individual power for collective interests.

Taken together, the passion paradigm doubles down on both rational and normative rhetoric that happiness in work is a reasonable goal that is individually determined and achieved, via individual power. It promotes the notion that to love one's work is subjective and personal—the experience is unique and non-communal—just as it is to love another person. When love dwindles or is absent, it is an individual problem to fix (Weeks 2017). Workers' inability to locate structures to critique and the process of self-blame have been well documented (Ho 2009; Lane 2011; Sharone 2013). These phenomena are only exacerbated by the fractured relationship between institutions and individuals in the new economy, and an accompanying ideology like the passion paradigm which shifts the locus of critique even further away from institutions and more toward the self. By individualizing work, the passion paradigm helps transform the primary work relationship from a relationship between an individual and an organization into a relationship between an individual and their emotions. As a result, the passion paradigm finds compatibility with a structural context in which security of employment is no longer about loyalty to an organization (Barley and Kunda 2006; Gershon 2017), but about loyalty to one's self.

Moving forward, understanding nuanced beliefs about passion (as I have outlined here) will help scholars analyze the processes through which adherence to the passion paradigm both harms and helps workers and does so in different ways. For example, we know that work passion has dual psychological effects on worker well-being (Vallerand and Houliort 2003) and many sociologists have noted the experience of work passion as contradictory, describing it as pleasure and pain (McRobbie 2016) or promise and precariousness (Chia 2019); but we do not understand why. Knowing that professionals understand the definition of work passion and the passion paradigm as multifaceted could help explain the nuanced, unequal, and contradictory effects of passion. For example, the "obsessive passion" that leads to negative effects such as burnout (Vallerand and Houliort 2003) could be because of an over emphasis on passion as perseverance. It is also likely that organizations or

occupations value the components of passion differently, and that the components are gendered, racialized, and classed. It is only by understanding how adherence yields different effects that scholars and policymakers can create more equitable work.

There are good reasons to believe that work passion exacerbates or reproduces systems of stratification and inequality which I cannot investigate with these data, but that should be explored in future research. As other scholars have suggested, adherence to the passion paradigm could deepen stratification in the labor market and adjudicate career opportunities and trajectories (Rao and Tobias Neely 2019), burden professionals with a new form of emotional labor (Gershon 2017), exacerbate exploitative, sexist, or racist working conditions or inequalities (Duffy 2016), justify low pay and long hours (Gill 2010), and lead to organizations ruthlessly extracting value from affective labor (Gill and Pratt 2008). In addition, the findings presented here can help scholars investigating new cultures of work understand how adherence to and the institutionalization of the passion paradigm varies by national, economic, cultural, organizational, or occupational context.

In conclusion, taking seriously the notion that culture both constrains and enables individuals, I encourage scholars to pursue how the institutionalization of passion could perpetuate unequal and oppressive capitalistic relations, as well as could motivate individuals to pursue organizational or structural changes that yield more equitable, enjoyable, and sustainable work. Returning to the three central themes in research on cultures of work, these data open up broad areas for future research on how adherence to the passion paradigm may operate as an independent variable shaping work, how adherence to the passion paradigm may help workers cope or adapt to work in the new economy, or how the passion paradigm is just another ideology in a long line of ideologies used to distract, delude, exploit, and stratify oppressed workers.

## REFERENCES

- Arvidsson, Adam, Malossi Giannino and Naro Serpica. 2010. "Passionate Work? Labour Conditions in the Milan Fashion Industry." *Journal for Cultural Research* 14: 3:295–309.
- Ashford, Susan, Brianna Caza, and Erin Reid. 2018. "From surviving to thriving in the gig economy: A research agenda for individuals in the new world of work." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 38: 23–41.
- Barley, Stephan and Gideon Kunda. 1992. "Design and Devotion: Surges of Rational and Normative Ideologies of Control in Managerial Discourse." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 37: 3: 363–399.
- Barley, Stephan and Gideon Kunda. 2004. *Gurus, Hired Guns and Warm Bodies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Barley, Stephan and Gideon Kunda. 2006. "Contracting: A new form of professional practice." *Academy of Management Perspective* 19: 1–19.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society*. London: Sage.
- Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2002. *Individualization*. London: Sage.
- Blair-Loy, Mary. 2003. *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*, Vol. Book, Whole. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1979. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cabanas, Edgar and Eva Illouz. 2017. "The Making of a "Happy Worker": Positive Psychology in Neoliberal Organizations." In Allison Pugh (ed.), *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self*: pp. 25–50. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Charles, Maria. 2011. "What Gender is Science?" *Contexts* 10: 2: 22–28.
- Chia, Aleena. 2019. "The Moral Calculus of Vocational Passion in Digital Gaming." *Television & New Media* 20: 8: 767–777.
- Davis, Gerald. 2016. *The Vanishing American Corporation: Navigating the Hazards of a New Economy*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2016. "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19: 4: 441–457.
- Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid To Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, And Aspirational Work*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Endrissat, Nada, Gazi Islam, and Claus Noppeney. 2015. "Enchanting Work: New Spirits of Service Work in an Organic Supermarket." *Organization Studies* 36: 11: 1555–1576.
- Gershon, Ilana. 2017. *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or don't find) Work Today*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gill, Rosalind and Andy Pratt. 2008. "In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25: 7–8: 1–30.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2010. "Life is a pitch": managing the self in new media work," In Mark Deuze (ed.), *Managing Media Work*. London: Sage.
- Glavin, Paul, Tomislav Filipovic, and Mark van der Maas. 2019. "Precarious versus Entrepreneurial Origins of the Recently Self-Employed: Work and Family Determinants of Canadians' Self-Employment Transitions." *Sociological Forum* 34: 386–408.
- Hatton, Erin. 2011. *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Harvard Business Review. 2011. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2011/04/dont-do-what-you-love>
- Ho, Karen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hollister, Matissa. 2011. "Employment Stability in the U.S. Labor Market: Rhetoric Versus Reality." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37: 305–324.
- Illouz, Eva. 2008. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and The Culture of Self-Help*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Johnson, Monica K. 2002. "Social Origins, Adolescent Experiences, and Work Value Trajectories during the Transition to Adulthood." *Social Forces* 80: 4: 1307–1341.
- Johnson, Monica K. and Jeylan T. Mortimer. 2011. "Origins and Outcomes of Judgments about Work." *Social Forces* 89: 4: 1239–1260.
- Kalleberg, Arne L. 2009. "Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition." *American Sociological Review* 74: 1–22.
- Kalleberg, Arne L. 2011. *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Kunda, Gideon and Galit Ailon. 2006. "Managers, Markets and Ideologies: Design and Devotion Revisited." In S. Ackroyd, Batt, R., Thompson, P. and Tolbert, P.S. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization*: pp. 200–219. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lane, Carrie. 2011. *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence and the New World of White Collar Unemployment*. Ithaca, New York: ILR Press.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2016. *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Muirhead, Russell. 2004. *Just Work*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Neff, Gina, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Sharon Zukin. 2005. "Entrepreneurial Labor among Cultural Producers: "Cool" Jobs in "Hot" Industries." *Social Semiotics* 15: 3: 307–334.
- Neff, Gina. 2012. *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ocejo, Richard E. 2017. *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Orrange, Robert M. 2003. "Individualism, Family Values, and the Professional Middle Class: In-Depth Interviews with Advanced Law and MBA Students." *The Sociological Quarterly* 44: 3: 451–480.
- Pink, Daniel. 2001. *Free Agent Nation: The Future of Working for Yourself*. N.Y., New York: Warner Business Books.
- Petriglieri, Gianpiero, Susan J. Ashford, and Amy Wrzesniewski. 2019. "Agony and Ecstasy in the Gig Economy: Cultivating Holding Environments for Precarious and Personalized Work Identities." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 64: 1: 124–170.
- Rao, Aliya Hamid and Megan Tobias Neely. 2019. "What's love got to do with it? Passion and inequality in white-collar work." *Sociology Compass*. 13: 12: e12744.
- Ross, Andrew. 2000. "The mental labour problem." *Social text* 18: 2: 7–34.
- Ross, Andrew. 2003. *No-collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.



- Sandoval, Marisol. 2018. "From Passionate Labour to Compassionate Work: Cultural Co-Ops, Do What You Love and Social Change." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21: 2: 113–129.
- Sennett, Richard. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Sharone, Ofer. 2013. "Why Do Unemployed Americans Blame Themselves While Israelis Blame the System?" *Social Forces* 91: 4: 1429–1450.
- Vallas, Steven. 2015. "Accounting for Precarity: Recent Studies of Labor Market Uncertainty." *Contemporary Sociology* 44: 4: 463–469.
- Vallas, Steven P. and Andrea L. Hill. 2018. "Reconfiguring Worker Subjectivity: Career Advice Literature and the "Branding of the Worker's Self." *Sociological Forum* 33: 2: 287–309.
- Vallas, Steven and Christopher Prener. 2012. "Dualism, Job Polarization, and the Social Construction of Precarious Work." *Work and Occupations*. 39: 4: 331–353.
- Vallerand, Robert and Nathalie Houliort. 2003. "Passion at work: Toward a new conceptualization," In Stephen W. Gilliland, Steiner, Dirk D. and Skarlicki, Daniel P. (eds.), *Emerging Perspectives on Values in Organizations*. CT, Greenwich Village: Information Age publishing.
- Weeks, Kathi. 2017. "Down with Love: Feminist Critique and the New Ideologies of Work." *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 45: 3/4: 37–58.
- Wrzesniewski, Amy, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz. 1997. "Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People's Relations to Their Work." *Journal of Research in Personality* 31: 21–33.