Dilemma Work: Problem-Solving Multiple Work Roles Into One Work Life

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Abstract
Scholars have observed workers combining multiple work roles to earn a living to cope with the vicissitudes of the labor market. In studies of creative labor markets, this trend of workers broadening of their skills is termed “occupational generalism”. Previous scholarship has focused on the structural factors that push and pull workers into generalizing and combining multiple work roles. But we lack an understanding of the subjective experience of work as a generalist. I introduce the concept of dilemma work: a form of problem-solving wherein workers who have generalized their work portfolios, attempt to rationalize their professional practices to overcome conflicts that arise from occupying multiple work roles. Drawing on in-depth interviews with professional writers who also freelance as book reviewers, I find that these generalists use three dilemma work strategies: anchoring another role to guide action in the current one; incorporating multiple roles under a higher role or purpose; and compartmentalizing roles in order to act exclusively within a single identity. I propose the

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I’m primarily a novelist and a writer, and then
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In their introduction to a Work and Occupations special issue on artistic careers, Lingo and Tepper (2013) remark on artistic workers’ growing tendency to invest in “broad competencies, rather than discipline-specific skills” (341). This trend has been termed occupational generalism (Cornfield, 2015; Frenette & Dowd, 2018; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009). The opening quotes, for instance, come from professional writers who have taken up multiple types of writing because it is increasingly difficult to make a living from one form of writing alone (Childress, 2017; Menger, 2014).

However, the imperative to broaden skills repertoires is not unique to writing, nor to the art world more broadly. It is a common response to an uncertain and casual employment environment (Cawsey et al., 1995; Kalleberg, 2009). Scholars have examined the combining of work roles as instances of “portfolio careers” (Bridgstock, 2005; Throsby & Zednik, 2011), “polyoccupationalism” (Henaut & Lena, 2019), and “plural careerism” (Caza et al., 2018). Such work has advanced our understanding of the factors that prompt individuals to combine multiple jobs, and the consequences of doing so. But there has been considerably less focus on generalists’ subjective experience. What it is really like to combine multiple jobs into a single work practice?

With this study, I offer an interpretivist perspective on the experience of those who perform multiple work roles. I start from the observation that we cannot assume experiences based on the objective or external
features of work itself. Understanding the structural conditions that lead people to take on multiple jobs, and their specific configurations (e.g., hours, pay, etc.) is crucial to painting an empirical portrait of the large and growing cohort for whom portfolio work is a lived reality (Lale, 2015; see also Hipple, 2010). However, this perspective cannot adequately capture generalists’ lived experience and emotional life (Sandberg, 2000). To attain such a view, I anchor my analysis in the perspectives and experiences of workers themselves as they go about doing multiple forms of work.

Many studies have detailed the consequences of occupying multiple roles. Particularly relevant here are those that speak to the social-psychological consequences, such as work–family conflicts resulting from the clash between paid and unpaid roles (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Nomaguchi, 2009; Schieman et al., 2009). A related stream shows how occupying multiple occupational roles, in particular, can lead to stress and other negative outcomes for workers’ wellbeing (Bamberry, 2012; Bouwhuis et al., 2018; Boyd et al., 2016; Bruns & Pilkauskas, 2019; Sliter & Boyd, 2014). Workers who generalize may also be viewed as less competent than specialists, which subjects them to legitimacy penalties, and may also create struggles with norms around authenticity (Caza et al., 2018; Stokes, 2021; Zuckerman, 2005). While valuable, these studies still tell us relatively little about how occupying multiple roles influences the way individuals approach their work, or their experience of carrying it out.

I analyze individuals who hold multiple jobs—more specifically, those who have expanded their work portfolio to include additional roles (i.e., occupational generalists). Within that focus, my specific unit of analysis is those moments of tension or dilemma when individuals’ understanding and experience of one work role is influenced by the backdrop of their broader work portfolio. Specifically, I ask, how do portfolio workers respond to dilemmas arising from the roles within their portfolios?

I argue that as individuals carry out the tasks of one work role, other work roles may impinge on their work performance, creating an occupational dilemma. And dealing with dilemmas of this type imposes a burden of dilemma work: a form of problem-solving wherein workers attempt to rationalize their professional practices to overcome conflicts that arise from occupying multiple work roles. As I will show, the combination of multiple work roles is both the source of work dilemmas and potentially also a means to resolve them.
Empirically, I examine a specific group of occupational generalists: individuals who have extended their work portfolio to include the work of book reviewing. Book reviewers are typically hired on a freelance, single-assignment basis by news publications. In other words, book reviewing is rarely a full-time job, but instead is taken on by those who make the rest of their living through a combination of teaching, journalism, writing novels, professorships and other types of work. I consider how these generalists experience the influence of their other occupational roles on their practices as reviewers.

My data are drawn from in-depth interviews with 40 reviewers for leading outlets including The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and The Washington Post. The interviews reveal pivotal moments when reviewers encounter dilemmas about how to represent their evaluations of the books. These dilemmas specifically originate from the other roles in their work portfolios. As well as documenting these tensions, I reveal three strategies that reviewers use to resolve them: anchoring, incorporating, and compartmentalizing. I argue that these strategies can help us understand the lived experience of people who combine multiple work roles of any type.

The article begins with a review of literature on occupational generalism and related research, and an argument for deeper research into the subjective experience of portfolio workers. I also offer an extended definition of dilemma work. Next, I set out the unique strengths of book reviewing as a case for examining occupational generalism and dilemma work. In the findings section, I describe the moments where tensions between reviewers’ different roles are most likely to arise, and the three strategies respondents used to resolve them: anchoring, incorporating, and compartmentalizing. Next, in the discussion, I expand upon the details of these three strategies and argue for the generalizability of my findings. Finally, in the conclusion, I offer ideas for future research and practical implications for how understanding dilemma work can enrich our understanding of the experience and challenges facing the growing army of portfolio workers.

**Literature Review**

**Occupational Generalism**

“Occupational generalism” refers to the increasing tendency among artistic workers to invest in “broad competencies, rather than discipline-specific skills” (Cornfield, 2015; Frenette & Dowd, 2018;
Lingo & Tepper, 2013, p. 341; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009). This term has primarily been used to describe the process through which workers in the arts generalize and broaden out their competencies. However, this pattern of workers pursuing transferrable skills and multiple types of work can also be found in many other sectors.

A canonical example of occupational generalism in the arts comes from Baker and Faulkner’s (1991) study of the film industry. Focusing on the rise of blockbusters, the authors trace the rise of the specialist producer, and describe how the previously separate roles of producer, director, and screenwriter came to be combined in patterned ways. Specifically, the director and screenwriter roles came to be held by a single individual known as an “artistic hyphenate.” The authors argue that this represents an adaptive response to a growing separation between artistic (directing, screenwriting) and economic (producing) interests and incentives. We might also observe that individuals on the “artistic” side of filmmaking generalized their skills so they could take on roles as both directors and screenwriters.

More recent examples of occupational generalism can be found among performing musicians, for whom both work and income can be inconsistent. One way for musicians to keep the wolf from the door is by developing additional skills and taking on multiple jobs. Specifically, jazz musicians who broaden their repertoire to encompass multiple genres (known as “aesthetic generalism”) are more likely to find gigs, and also command greater earnings than specialists (Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009; see also Cornfield, 2015). The additional opportunities for income allow them to mitigate the risks inherent to their artistic careers. The idea is that more skills lead to more work and more opportunities. However, enacting multiple roles can also lead to legitimacy discounts when generalists are seen as less competent in their core role. This effect is encapsulated by the folk wisdom “jack of all trades, master of none” (Stokes, 2021; Zuckerman, 2003).

Similarly, the “portfolio career” model is characterized by workers combining multiple sources of income (Throsby & Hollister, 2003; Throsby & Zednik, 2011) and developing broad and transferable skills to maximize employment opportunities (Cawsey et al., 1995; Morrison & Hall, 2002). However, the motivation is not so much financial necessity as the desire for a self-directed and value-driven career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 1996). That is, portfolio workers may generalize because they want to develop new skills, or pursue activities that are not enabled by their primary jobs (Conway & Kimmel, 1998, 2001; Panos et al., 2014). Thus, portfolio workers can include those who
extend their skills outside of a single field—like the salaried accountant who “moonlights” by selling handmade wedding wares on Etsy.

Bridgstock (2005) observes that artistic workers are prototypical of the portfolio career model, since self-direction and expanding skills to broaden opportunities have long been a reality for them (Caves, 2000; Frenette & Dowd, 2018; Menger, 1999). However, these features are far from unique to the arts sector (Beckhusen, 2019; Lale, 2015; Lingo & Tepper, 2013). According to the Current Population Survey, 6.8 million workers in the United States held multiple jobs in 2013. The reasons given were dominated by pecuniary concerns, including earning more money to meet economic needs (38.1 percent) or paying off debt (25.6 percent) (Lale, 2015; see also, Hipple, 2010). Yet, 17.6% of multiple jobholders reported pursuing secondary jobs for enjoyment (Lale, 2015). Hence, even outside the arts labor market, workers are motivated to combine multiple jobs for non-economic reasons, such as pleasure or learning (Caza et al., 2018; Mallon, 1999).

Taken together, studies clearly show that many workers are making their living by combining multiple work roles, for both economic and non-economic reasons—although the balance between these factors varies. However, we cannot infer the experience of portfolio workers solely from the factors that push or pull them into a multi-job career. Research points to emergent benefits that are incidental to the initial motive for combining roles. Frenette et al., (2018), for instance, find that taking on multiple jobs can increase overall work satisfaction. Drawing on SNAAP data on art-school alumni in the United States, the authors find that compared to specialists, artists who expanded their practice to include multiple artistic forms and disciplines reported greater satisfaction with multiple aspects of their current work, including greater opportunity for creative expression.

Workers who generalize may also enjoy greater control over their work. Consider, for instance, musicians who broaden their skills so they can also produce their own recordings and publish their own work (i.e. what Nash(1970 [1955]) called “role versatility”) (Thomson, 2013). Similarly, artists who take on teaching jobs achieve creative independence in their artistic practice (Gerber, 2017, p. 45). Similar findings are reported for workers in non-artistic fields, such as Caza et al.’s (2018) study of plural careerists, who report that occupying very different work roles can enhance creativity. As one of the authors’ respondents explained, occupying multiple, relatively dissimilar jobs sharpened up their skill in terms of generating creative ideas for clients: “‘The work with children’s business education sometimes sparks an idea for
a client; or a freelance piece might give me an idea for a dentistry client”’ (p. 729).

Scholars have also precisely captured the heterogeneity among those who take multiple jobs. For instance, people vary in terms of the specific conditions that propel them to undertake multiple jobs, and the economic and noneconomic “rewards” they draw from these arrangements. Yet, surprisingly, we know relatively little about the subjective experience of these workers (Vallas & Christin, 2018) or the consequences of portfolio working for how they actually perform their work.

**Encountering Dilemmas at Work**

One point of entry into the study of portfolio workers’ experience is through moments of conflict or tension. When tensions arise between their work roles, workers must decide how to reconcile or prioritize them, which forces them to confront the value—or values—associated with each one. Even within a single job, new responsibilities can create tensions between new and existing duties. Such “moments of clarity” foreshadow the tensions between multiple roles experienced by portfolio workers.

For instance, van de Ruit and Bosk (2020) write about the evolution of the public safety officer role in surgical departments in the USA. The authors explain that due to regulatory changes, data analysts who previously extracted safety information from patient charts were newly tasked with investigating and reporting on safety errors. This caused tensions, since they effectively had to police surgeons who were of higher organizational rank. Analysts thus faced professional risks such as the possibility of retribution in the workplace. One practical way that they found to address these power imbalances was through strategic use of the impersonality and authority of documentation records. More relevant to our interests, individual analysts reconciled their expanded dual roles by combining them under the wider mission of “safety.”

Subramanian and Suquet (2018) look at how the rationalizations of the customer complaint process at a French bank expanded the responsibilities of complaint specialists. Specifically, customer complaints that were not resolved by bank clerks would now be escalated to the specialists’ own department, meaning they were functionally reliant on non-specialists to perform their own work. However, this change was complicated by the fact that the specialists were on the same hierarchical level as the non-specialists, which created tensions when attempting
to “manage sideways.” The specialists were not the bosses of the non-specialists, but neither were they their equals.

So, how did the specialists apprehend their new position? First, many expressed ambivalence about the surveillance element of their role, and even denied that it was part of their job. As the authors note, “Specialists go to great lengths to deny that surveillance is an integral part of their interactions with non-specialists” (Subramanian & Suquet, 2018, p. 63). Instead, they “frame” their roles in technocratic terms, by saying they are just sorting out technical details. They maintain that they are not there to take sides, calling on a shared sense of the objective standards of acceptable professional behavior. Additionally, others adopt the stance of a helpful colleague, trying to guide their fellow workers towards higher standards of professional behavior. Here, we see a work-role dilemma being rationalized through a combination of reframing and outright dismissal.

O’Mahoney (2011) studies the experience of people working in the UK consulting industry, which is witnessing growing ethical individualization. While new ethical codes of practice have been implemented in many consultancies, the responsibility for ethical action is not being maintained via organizational or industry-level mechanisms, but placed on the shoulders of individual consultants. In the absence of professional support or institutional guidance, ethical issues are framed in individual terms, such as how a consultant feels about a particular behavior. One might expect that consultants would feel a sense of freedom at their autonomy, but the author finds that adding ethical dimensions to their work merely generates deep anxiety and insecurity. For instance, even though a consultant’s line manager may be recommending unethical behavior, it is still the consultant’s own choice whether to comply. This shows us that adding incompatible or challenging tasks to a role can mean real angst for the worker.

Overall, past studies suggest that performing newly expanded work tasks at once is far from a straightforward experience. When workers must combine new and different and responsibilities, even within a single job, dilemmas and conflicts often arise, obliging the workers themselves to devise creative solutions to deal with them. Yet, the lessons from these studies are limited by the fact that they emerge from studies of delimited specific phenomena (e.g., lateral management or individualization). And there is little theorizing about how people navigate and interpret the combination of different roles—whether more generally, or within a broader portfolio career.
We would benefit from a more general examination of how workers subjectively experience the combination of work roles—and, more specifically, how workers who take multiple jobs understand and reconcile these different roles. That is the purpose of this paper, with a focus on how holding multiple work roles affects work-related meaning-making and the experience of work—and even can guide action at work.

**Introducing Dilemma Work**

My purpose is to examine the subjective experience of occupational generalism, with a particular sensitivity towards how holding multiple jobs may influence workers’ enactment of their work. To do so, I attend to those times when individuals understand their other roles as relevant to the one they currently fulfil, and how they reconcile the different parts of their work portfolio in practice.

Such interconnections are most visible in moments of uncertainty: that is, when workers are trying to solve problems and must draw on cultural resources to resolve them. In such moments of uncertainty, or when future action is not “settled,” multiple logics for action are made manifest and are up for grabs (Swidler, 1986). The heart of my proposed analytical approach is the investigation of such moments of uncertainty, when values, identities, or other aspects of one’s work repertoire, and the “seams” between them, are made visible. I refer to such moments as *dilemmas*.

A dilemma is a situation where one must choose between two options, neither of which is particularly desirable or advantageous. Here, I focus on the dilemmas that portfolio workers encounter when their enactment of one of their work roles is perceived as being in conflict with the identity or values of another.

Solving such problems demands a specific form of labor, which I refer to as *dilemma work*. Dilemma work is more than merely choosing between two or more undesirable options. Rather, it is a form of problem-solving, because its mechanics involve individuals creatively recombining the identities and values associated with their multiple work roles. Only by doing so can they devise a rationalization for how to proceed despite the quandary in which they find themselves.

**Methods**

**Setting**

I explore dilemma work through a case study of book reviewers as an example of occupational generalists. Many book reviewers are
professional writers or journalists who have expanded their work port-
folios to include reviewing.

While book reviewers are a particular case of occupational general-
ism, my broader theoretical goal is to introduce and typologize the new
concept of dilemma work, which I argue has broader relevance.

Book reviewing is an ideal setting to study portfolio working, for
several reasons. First, it is a highly uncertain and informally organized
field. Although I refer to “book reviewers,” there are very few full-time
employees bearing such a job title. The declining fortunes and shifting
organizational structure of newspapers—the traditional organizational
basis of arts reviewing—have made them increasingly reliant on free-
lance reviewers rather than in-house staff. The National Arts
Journalism Program reveals that arts-related articles featuring staff
bylines fell from 51.6% in 1998 to 45.8% in 2003, representing a
drop of almost 6% in just five years. In other words, book reviewing
in North America is not a full-time job. This precarity and unpredict-
ability is a key reason why reviewing is usually a side job, rather than a
primary means of employment, for those who undertake it. Thus, book
reviewing nearly always forms part of a portfolio career, rather than
being a full-time role in itself.

Moreover, book reviewing is accessible to people from a wide range
of other professions with a writing slant, including fiction writing, jour-
nalism, and teaching. Thus, the task of book reviewing is combined
with many other roles, in many different configurations. Indeed, each
respondent in my study had a different profile in terms of the roles they
fulfilled, and the proportions in which they fulfilled them.

In terms of book reviewers dealing with dilemma work, the key
observation is that they work alone, independently, and without super-
vision. Once they have been commissioned to write a review, they are
expected to read the book, evaluate it, and write up their review without
further input from the editor. Apart from informal support they may
seek from friends or fellow writers, they complete this task alone.
Thus, they must resolve any tensions and dilemmas between their var-
ious roles without any outside help.

This arrangement gives reviewers an intriguing blend of power and
powerlessness. They have power in the sense that they have full discre-
tion over the approach that they take and the content of the review they
produce. However, they are powerless in the sense that they lack much
of the social and professional support that might be available to them in
their other roles, such as teaching or journalism.
Data Collection and Analysis

To explore how fiction reviewers approach the dilemmas in their work, I interviewed 40 fiction reviewers who had published a review in at least one of three influential American review outlets.\textsuperscript{3} One of the challenges I faced was how to construct a sample of an occupational group when there are no formal criteria or regulations for determining its members. I began by generating a list of names of everyone who had published at least one fiction review in one of three major national newspapers in 2007. While I do not identify these journals in order to protect the anonymity of my respondents, each one was selected based on a combination of criteria that included comparable circulation figures (the selected newspapers had among the highest), readership demographics, and a reputation for arts/culture reviewing.

After deleting duplicates, I was left with over 1000 names, from which I began random sampling. Although I used only three publications to generate my initial population, all my informants had reviewed for multiple publications, including the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, and others. The majority of interviews were conducted in 2010-2011.\textsuperscript{4}

In keeping with the freelance structure of reviewing, of the 40 people in my sample, only 11 could be described as having held a full-time position related to book reviewing, whether as book-section editors or columnists, at any point in their careers. Instead, most respondents made a living through other professional activities and wrote occasional reviews, with varying frequency, on the side. For instance, many critics reported some combination of work as freelance journalists, creative-writing teachers, academics, and—of course—authors. Of the 40, 15 worked in colleges or universities as professors, with most of those holding adjunct or temporary positions. Just five respondents had not authored their own books; the rest had published over 160 works of fiction and non-fiction between them.

The goal of the interviews was to understand how book reviewers undertake the task of reviewing fiction, and the social factors that influence how they do this work, including their engagement in other activities. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I then analyzed the interviews and traced critics' subjective thoughts and feelings through the review process from assignment to publication. I next performed a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) involving a broad and inductive reading of the data to uncover themes regarding
when and how critics drew upon, or made reference to, other identities at different phases of the review process. The results are reported below.

Findings

The Origins and Contours of the Book Reviewer’s Dilemma

Where do the dilemmas of book reviewing come from? To answer this, we should first consider why so many book reviewers are professional writers or journalists who have expanded their work portfolios to include reviewing. The answer relates to certain organizational factors of journalism in general, and the unique understanding of “competency” within book reviewing in particular (Chong, 2020).

Regarding organizational factors, recall that there is a move towards hiring freelancers to write reviews rather than relying on full-time or in-house writers. On the competency side, editors are looking for people who can write efficiently in a short form, and yet have relatively specialized knowledge about literary topics (i.e., particular genres, authors, or topics). This drives review editors to search for a pool of labor that is highly specialized, yet remain casually employed.

A practical response to the challenges of hiring book reviewers, then, is to invite people from other work roles who are seen as having complementary skillsets. Often, this leads editors to individuals who engage in professional writing, but are also very familiar with particular topics or types of literature. This typically includes journalists, English professors, novelists, and creative writing teachers who are willing to take on occasional writing jobs (i.e., book reviewing).

While this may be a very efficient recruitment strategy, it is not without its complications. Specifically, when soliciting professional writers for their technical skills and competencies, one may also inherit their professional experiences and attachments—which may inform their enactment of their duties (as critics) in unexpected and unintended ways.

Consider, for example, the case of individuals who identify primarily as novelists, but also take on the additional work role of freelance book reviewer. They are primarily recruited to write a review because of their insight into the craft of fiction, their faculties as critics, and their ability to express their opinions in a cogent and perhaps entertaining way. At the same time, as we will see, some bring their lived experience of how difficult it is to write a book. That sensibility informs how they make sense of their obligation and actions as a critic, in ways that a
non-author could never fully understand. Thus, we see the seeds of a dilemma: the tension between the professional responsibilities of the critic and social-emotional empathy for the writer, which must somehow be resolved in order for the reviewer role to be performed.

Or consider an alternative hypothetical scenario: when a reviewer is recruited for their familiarity with a particular genre—say, literary thrillers. They are likely to be an avid reader of this sub-genre, which is why they are considered to have the required knowledge to evaluate a given work. However, their very commitment to the genre complicates their feelings about giving a negative review of a book, even if it is warranted. They are torn between their desire to legitimate the literary thriller genre, and to promote authors within it, on the one hand, and on the other to demonstrate their deep knowledge and sophistication with an informed and balanced review. Again, we see the beginnings of a dilemma between genre advocate and the reviewer’s duty to be honest with their readers.

The point is that critics are recruited from the ranks of those who are known to be professional writers and have a history with books in some way, shape, or form. While this makes sense, especially when thinking about the lack of formalized qualifications to write a book review, I suggest that when people take on multiple roles, there may be moments of unintentional or unforeseen influence between those roles—outside of the mere technical skills and knowledge that the reviewer brings to their task (e.g., drawing on their journalist or professor role to inform their critical work).

I find that the tensions between roles are strongest when reviewers are faced with the need to write a negative review. Most critics report that writing a positive review is a relatively unproblematic and even enjoyable experience. They enjoy reading a good book; they get to share that enthusiasm in a review; and they unproblematically serve the reading public by guiding them towards a book they might like to read. The author, meanwhile, is likely delighted to receive a positive review. Everybody wins. Moreover, the critic feels no tension between the roles of writer and reviewer.

A negative review, however, throws a harsh light on the interpolation of the reviewer’s other roles, and poses a unique set of professional challenges. Writing a highly critical review has its upside, as polemical reviews tend to garner a lot of publicity. However, the downsides can be significant. Specifically, critics must weigh up a range of potential consequences when deciding exactly how they render a negative judgment. For example, if they are too cavalier in their condemnation, they may
be judged as too harsh and invite future professional retribution. Alternatively, if a critic is too timid in her criticism of a book, she might attract accusations of being dishonest, lacking critical acumen, or having poor taste.

Critics must also balance a range of social risks, particularly when writing negative reviews. They are concerned about the emotional impact of delivering such a devastating verdict on a writer’s work. This is made more poignant by the fact that many reviewers are themselves authors who have felt the sting of a negative review. Overall, writing a negative review poses many more problems and dilemmas than writing a positive one.

So how do reviewers weigh the duty of their task (e.g., reporting on the quality of a book) against the social and emotional stakes (e.g., social repercussions, negative affect, and publicity)? How do they balance perceived harm to others (i.e., the author, and also readers) and potential harm to themselves?

A key finding of the study is that combining multiple roles is itself a source of work dilemmas for critics. From this, it follows that we cannot predict what dilemmas might arise from looking at the technical competencies of the work roles in themselves. Instead, we must attend to the lived experience of those who carry them out. I find that the nature of the dilemma itself points the way to its solution. The problem can only be solved at the level at which it was created. In other words, the reviewer does not resolve their dilemma through mere technical competency, but by creative reassembling and reframing the values and identities associated with their different work roles in ways to help them rationalize their approach to writing negative reviews.

The next section reviews the three strategies that reviewers use to resolve their role dilemmas.

**How Reviewers Resolve the Dilemmas of Their Role**

I found that reviewers used three main approaches to pick their way through the treacherous terrain of writing a negative review. These are anchoring, incorporating, and compartmentalization. Through these three strategies, reviewers resolve dilemmas created by tensions between their different work roles.

**Anchoring.** The first strategy involves critics using one of their other work identities as an anchor for problem-solving the dilemmas inherent in writing a negative review.
Book reviewing is a highly non-routine, non-codified form of labor. Many aspects of the role—in terms of both reaching judgments and recording them in writing—are at the discretion of reviewers themselves, which can leave them unsure how to proceed. As the following examples demonstrate, when faced with some of the uncertainties inherent to the reviewing process, some reviewers imported values from another of their occupations to guide their actions in the here-and-now.

The first example concerns a book reviewer who uses his occasional work as a journalist to guide his approach to writing a negative review. I ask him to describe his working life. “Okay, I’m mostly a writer,” he replies. “I’m a novelist and a short story writer. I’ve published four books, and I occasionally write book reviews, as well as essays and occasional journalism, but mostly—I spend most of my days working on fiction.” Such a portfolio of writing work is typical of my respondents.

I ask him to recall a time when he had to write a negative review, and what that experience was like. He begins by expressing his dismay: “You know, I wasn’t happy about it. I try not to think about the author, [because] I know it really is pretty disheartening to get a negative review, especially in The New York Times, which is such a prominent publication.” He speaks from personal experience as an author who has received his fair share of negative reviews. Many other respondents also express a sense of regret over the hurt caused by a negative review—particularly those who have received bad reviews themselves.

A common dilemma facing author-critics, then, is whether to “pull their punches” and give a book a kinder review than it deserves, in order to spare the author further pain. This critic pivots towards his professional experience as a journalist to resolve this dilemma and steel himself for the unpalatable—indeed, “painful”—task of forthright criticism.

First, he justifies being frank with his criticism through reference to fairness and integrity. “If I’m going to be fair to the writers who do great books, I’ve got to be negative toward the writers who don’t do great books. So I feel there is some amount of integrity involved. I just feel crummy.” Fairness and integrity are core to the self-image of the journalistic profession (Schudson, 2001; Ward, 2015). While the critic may still feel “crummy” writing a negative review, his decision to be plain in his criticism is buttressed by these appeals to core journalistic values. Since dilemmas often have no satisfactory resolution, this is his least-worst option.

Second, this critic decenters the evaluative function of book reviews, and instead positions them as pieces of journalistic writing. “The most
interesting thing about a book isn’t that [I] think that it’s good or bad,” he insists. Instead, “As a journalist, you’ve really got to find the news value.” Arguing that evaluation is not the core of his task as a reviewer, he appeals to the journalistic value of keeping oneself out of the story (Schudson, 2001).

There is precedent for regarding book reviews as cultural journalism (Chong, 2019). However, it is noteworthy that when this critic first describes his occupational background, he identifies primarily as a novelist and short story writer, not a journalist, and concludes by reiterating that he spends most of his days on fiction. He only pivots towards his professional experience as a journalist to provide an anchor and justification for writing a negative review.

Concretely, this shift allows the critic to admit that writing a particular negative review is “a real struggle” for him, because of the devastation a bad review can cause to an author. But at the same time, he prioritizes reader entertainment over author ego. “My main interest in writing a review is writing an interesting article,” he says. “I’m a journalist, and I don’t care whether people read a book or not. I want them to read my article.”

While he may express regret over the hurt caused by a negative review, a hurt he is acutely aware of because of his own experience as an author, the journalist in him is equally if not more worried about writing an article that is “totally bland.” “You have to tell people what you think,” he adds. “There was actually a line in there, which was actually a pretty good line, but I kind of wince when I think about it now.” Here, he refers to his struggles over how to frame his criticisms about the book. He had to tell people what he thought (his evaluation), and wanted to make his case in an entertaining way (“a pretty good line”). Today, he feels regret at the pain he may have caused, and that makes him wince. But overall, his actions can be viewed as faithful to the journalistic values that he uses as a conceptual anchor to frame his work as a book reviewer.

Overall, this critic struggles to balance three factors: negative but warranted criticism, “news value” or reader appeal, and the feelings of the author. While he recalls a “good line” from his review with satisfaction, he knows that this was also a bad line, in the sense that it probably hurt the author. Caught in a dilemma between loyalty to his fellow writer and the values of “fairness” and “integrity,” he ultimately calls on his journalistic identity as an anchor to resolve the dilemma and justify his writing of a negative review.
Another critic uses a similar strategy to resolve this dilemma. This middle-aged reviewer identifies as “first and foremost a writer,” but also works as an assistant professor at a university in the southern United States, and previously edited a literary journal. Once again, we see an individual who makes a living from combining multiple work roles, one of which is book reviewing. Unlike the previous reviewer, though, this critic uses his work role as a writer as an anchor to resolve the dilemmas of writing a negative review.

At the time of our interview, the critic had published two books and was working on his third. His approach to reviewing is very much anchored in his role as author, in terms of how he makes sense of both phases of his work, evaluation and writing the review. For instance, when I ask him about writing negative reviews, his first response is to reflect on his own experience as an author. “I’ve been on the receiving end of some extremely convoluted [reviews], you know, reviews that are positive and negative at once, and you’re just like, ‘Huh?’” Having been unsure how to interpret feedback that he found incoherent, he is committed to being very clear in his own reviews. He then continues:

So I’m reading [a book] and I’m thinking, “Fuck,” you know, “It’s really good.” But is it really? Or am I just wanting it to be good because then I don’t have to have this moral conundrum of, “Am I responsible for harming some writer’s career?” You know, do I want to dish something out that I, myself, would be totally loath to be on the receiving end of?

Here, we see that the reviewer draws on his own experience of receiving reviews to contextualize his own approach. Additionally, he anticipates the future dilemma of potentially having to write a negative review, and he wishes to avoid it. So although he strives for clarity in his own reviews, he still brings his own experience of being reviewed to his evaluation of others’ work.

Recalling an instance when he could not avoid writing a negative review, the same reviewer again relies on his anchor identity as an author to make sense of conflict. “I thought, ‘Gee, [author] is [religion] like me, and about my age,’” he recalls. “Am I being—you know, like, am I competing with him? Do I feel threatened by him?” In the previous example, the critic referred to his writing identity to work out whether he was trying to convince himself that he liked a book in order to avoid writing a negative review. Here, he draws on the same identity to ask
himself whether he disliked a book in order to ensure it necessitated a negative review, because of his perceived relationship with the author.

However, while this reviewer’s identity as a writer is the source of his dilemma over negative reviews, it is also the signpost showing him how to resolve it. Specifically, he reports that he chose to “mask the conflicts” he was feeling and write a rose-tinted review. “In the end, I don’t think I took any shots at him,” he admits. “Which was probably a cop-out on my part.” But the reviewer rationalizes his coping out, and even partially excuses it, as part of the “karmic deal” of writing a review, and identifying as “a writer first and a critic second.” Specifically, this reviewer chose to “play nice” and skew his review positively even though, in hindsight, he recognizes it was a “cop-out.” But more than that, he uses his writing identity as the primary lens through which to view his work as a reviewer, including the dilemmas he faces and how to resolve them.

Thus, reviewers approach the problem-solving required in dilemma work by anchoring their decision-making in the values associated with a particular identity from their broader work portfolio. The first reviewer refers to his identity as a journalist, and the second to his identity as “first and foremost” a writer. However, both use the same underlying strategy: in the absence of any other guiding principles, they anchor another identity from their work portfolios when problem-solving as part of dilemma work. This cardinal identity serves as the lodestar to guide their sensemaking and actions as reviewers in the face of uncertainty.

**Incorporation.** The second approach taken by reviewers to resolve dilemmas was to incorporate their other professional roles with the role of reviewer. In the anchoring strategy, reviewers give primacy to a single identity and import it wholesale to resolve the dilemmas of reviewing. With incorporation, however, reviewers reconcile the values of an alternative professional role with those of book reviewing, and fuse them into a new relational identity by identifying commonalities in the values associated with different roles. Thus, these different roles are made complementary under the banner of an overarching mission.

The strategy is illustrated by a respondent whose work life is divided between teaching and writing. “I am a teacher and writer,” he says. “As a teacher, I often spend time in the classroom discussing literature... As a writer, I do a variety of things. I write fiction. I write non-fiction and, within non-fiction, I write essays, book reviews,
and other forms of, I guess, opinion expression." Thus, book reviewing is just one type of writing from which this respondent makes his living.

Like all reviewers, he has to write positive, negative, and mixed reviews. But unlike previous respondents, he exhibits no guilt or anxiety over writing a negative review. "Does one get a bad feeling after giving a bad review?" he ponders. "No, certainly no more than [after] giving a good review to a bad book. I think, in the end, book reviewing is about honesty—honesty with yourself, and honesty with others."

At first sight, this critic’s response would seem to be an outlier in terms of his very clear-headed view. He prioritizes honesty above all, and therefore it seems he has no real dilemma work to do—for him, honesty is the best policy, regardless of the situation. Seeing his approach, we might conclude that the previous two reviewers were merely fretful, or over-thinking it. However, in fact, this reviewer is acutely aware of the professional and ethical dilemmas that critics face when writing a review. "I come from a [foreign] country, where book reviewing was always tarnished by friendship and camaraderie, [and] you would never really know whether the book was good," he explains. "You would know exactly who was having drinks with whom."

Hence, while he may be relatively untroubled by writing positive or negative reviews when they are warranted, he is aware that doing so can raise moral and professional dilemmas. His ostensibly even-handed approach to reviewing is itself a conscious and principled reaction to what he sees as the failures of the critics in his country of birth. He does not deny that reviewing dilemmas exist, or that they can conjure feelings of insecurity or anxiety in other reviewers, but he comes to those dilemmas from a very different place.

The reviewer goes on to contrast the "tarnished" state of reviewing in his homeland with reference to democracy and the marketplace of ideas, evoking notions of the Habermasian public sphere. "One of the important elements of a democracy is that we debate ideas, in the open," he explains. "That the discussion of ideas is just as important a marketplace as the marketplace of merchandise." Such comments give a sense of why the reviewer feels no compunction about negatively reviewing a bad book: he understands his book reviews as part of his broader contribution to the marketplace of ideas. For instance, he comments about how proud he has been to write negative reviews of books that many other critics publicly praised:

When big books are published... by a big publisher, I might be critical because I think that the big publisher simply went for the easy novel, the
one that is going to sell more copies rather than a more complicated and demanding author or novel. I will criticize that in public.

For instance, some years ago, for *The Washington Post*, I did a critical review of a [foreign] author who had written a novel [and] I was very critical. Other people praised the book. I thought the book was lousy. There are other [foreign] writers that could be published by a big publishing house, but this book was sexy. It had violence, lunacy and so on, and I guess the editor thought this was going to attract readers. I don’t know whether it did or not, but I was critical. Other people were not.

Here, the reviewer contextualizes his negative reviews of specific books with broader criticisms of what he sees as the lazy commercial logic of publishers and the “groupthink” of the critical consensus. He emphasizes both the publicness of his critique and the independence of his thought: “others” did not criticize a book, but he did. Hence, his negative reviews are folded into his role as an outspoken public critic—not just of books, but of the politics of publishing and reviewing in the English-speaking world. In other words, he casts himself as stepping over the interpersonal politics that evoke so much guilt for other reviewers, and focuses instead on the organizational dynamics of publishing and his role as a public commentator—or, to use his own words, his work in “opinion expression” and as “an intellectual.”

This critic is not alone. Other reviewers also say that when they review books negatively there is usually some larger message, or some fault in the system that they are trying to correct or comment on (even if it is only that people write too many nice reviews). These critics use incorporation to resolve their dilemma over writing negative reviews by folding in their reviewing role with another one of their work roles. In contrast to the anchoring strategy, however, the reviewer role is not superseded by another; rather, the two roles are viewed as compatible or mutually complementary, forming part of a larger mission.

This distinction is echoed in the example of another reviewer who identifies primarily as a writer. “I am primarily a fiction and non-fiction writer; a book writer,” she says. However, rather than letting the writer role dictate how she resolves reviewing dilemmas, she incorporates her writer identity into her reviewing practice. For instance, she suggests that her artistic work as an author is what qualifies her to be a reviewer: “I believe I’ve been given the books that I have been given because the editors [. . .] think that I’ll have some interesting perspective, from an artistic point of view, on the material.” When I ask this reviewer to
recount her experiences of writing negative reviews, she first says that she tends to give “mixed” reviews. When she does write a more negative review, she reveals, “[T]o be totally honest, it’s the hardest thing I do, and I don’t really enjoy it that much.”

Part of the reason is the social and professional risk involved in writing a negative review, as discussed above. “It’s putting your professional, sort of . . . your reputation and also your relationships with other writers, on the line, by writing negatively about a book.” To mitigate this risk of harm to herself through writing a negative review, the reviewer treads carefully, avoiding “brash negative statements about the book itself.” In dissecting a book, she views herself as diligently fair to the author; in particular, she emphasizes specific passages in her reviews, always being mindful that “every writer is good at some things, and every writer is not so good at other things.” To her mind, she offers a scrupulously balanced aesthetic evaluation of the book, which follows from her perception that it is her artistic skills as an author that qualify her to be a reviewer in the first place.

For this reviewer, this technical dissection offers lessons about the craft of writing, which she then brings back to her own writing practice. And this is why she works as a reviewer, even though she finds writing negative reviews difficult and even unenjoyable:

[Reviewing] is very difficult. I do find it extremely time-consuming. There isn’t a whole lot of reward for it, and especially if it’s a negative review. That said, I think it helps me to hone my own criteria, my own way of looking at fiction, by doing this, because it’s extremely important that you believe in the assertions you’re making and that you’re willing to stand behind them.

In this example, we see that this reviewer chooses to continue to put her professional reputation and relationship with other writers on the line because it supports her writing career in a broader sense. Reviewing, whether positive or negative, is instructive because the roles of writer and reviewer form part of a harmonious whole. The competencies and sensitivities of the artist are suitable qualification to work as a reviewer; conversely, reviewing helps the writer develop—even if it does bring some risk.

Many reviewers also state that they do reviewing because it helps to keep their names “in circulation” within the literary community between novels. Hence, while the novelist and reviewer roles remain
distinct, they complement and support each other, coming together to further the individual’s broader mission to “become a better writer.”

**Compartmentalization.** The third strategy that respondents use to approach their dilemma work is by compartmentalizing their various work roles. In this approach, individuals bracket the values and identity commitments of their other roles, and work within the parameters of one identity exclusively—in this case, that of a reviewer. They temporarily put on “blinders,” so to speak. The critics who employ this strategy recognize the dilemmas presented by reviewing, but choose to close off their awareness of the tensions between their multiple roles and proceed as though reviewing was their sole profession and responsibility.

One illustrative example is a reviewer who, like many respondents, describes her career as atypical: “There are a lot of things that go into what I do [for a living].” She also engages in freelance journalism and writes books (at the time we spoke, she was working on her second). But unlike the previous examples, when describing her approach to reviewing, she refers to her role as a critic to the exclusion of any other role. For instance, when I ask her how she feels about writing negative reviews, she singularly situates her approach vis-à-vis well-known reviewers:

I’ve talked about this before [with] Ron Charles, a lot of times . . . I know our colleague, Michael Dirda, doesn’t review books—he doesn’t write critical, negative reviews. It’s just his policy. I don’t mind doing that. I also don’t mind criticizing a book . . . I’ve been fortunate enough to get feedback on reviews, and I know that I’ve been successful sometimes in doing that.

Unlike her fellow critics, this reviewer makes no reference to her own experience as an author to make sense of her approach to reviewing. Instead, she presents her approach as being informed by her conversations with established and highly regarded critics in the field, who she intimates have themselves struggled with dilemmas about writing negative reviews. And I can confirm at least part of her story, as Ron Charles, book editor for the *Washington Post*, was interviewed for this project, has publicly confirmed his participation, and did indeed express a keen awareness of some of the dilemmas I describe.

Unlike Charles, however, this critic references the problem-solving aspect of book reviewing as something that she enjoys, and even says she has received positive feedback from authors she has criticized. Why does she think this has been her experience?
First, she describes feeling “pretty good” about writing a negative review because of the rigor that she feels she brings to her evaluations (i.e., the first phase of the review process):

I feel fine about writing the critical comments because I always read the entire book. I don’t know how everybody else works, but my process is to read the book through once, and then to take a second pass before I write the review. So I know that I’m not cheating the author.

The critic’s dual reading strategy ensures that her professional judgments are on solid evaluative grounds. Again, the vast majority of critics mentioned this dual reading strategy as part of their process, but this one chose to cite it as a reason why she feels okay about writing critical reviews. Without suggesting that other critics are not being diligent in the first phase of their review process, we see a recourse to the technicalities of reviewing and a sense of due process that seems to ground this critic’s sense of responsibility and obligation, and thereby minimize the negative affect of writing critical reviews.

Second, the critic explains that she feels okay writing bad reviews because of the intention behind her criticism. Specifically, she frames her criticism (and by extension, her role as a critic) as one of helping others:

Interviewer: When you have to write these negative comments, how do you feel about that?
Respondent: I always feel pretty good, actually, because as I said, I’m never trying to just do a hatchet job on someone. I’m never trying to just cut them down to size or anything like that. I’m always trying to think about, “Would this criticism help this writer? Would this criticism help the reader perhaps understand why the middle chapters are great?”

This reviewer feels absolved of writing a negative review by her good intentions. Again, this alludes to her awareness that there are people who write negative reviews, for some of the complicated reasons her colleagues revealed above. Moreover, we see a particular duty or value being put forward regarding the role of book reviews: specifically, to help the writer, and to help the reader.

This critic’s résumé also includes teaching, writing, and freelance magazine journalism, all of which her peers call upon to contextualize
and make sense of their practices and steer their dilemma work. In sharp distinction to the other critics we have met, however, she doesn’t bring up any of these other work roles when describing her work as a reviewer. Instead, she compartmentalizes her procedures and experience as a critic from her experiences as an author or journalist. As such, while she is aware of the complications presented by writing negative reviews, she does not report experiencing these dilemmas in the same way as many of her peers.

Another example comes from a critic who has authored four books, but also privileges his reviewer roles to the exclusion of any others, when engaged in a review assignment. Similar to the previous reviewer, he describes a sense of ease when tasked with writing a negative review. “Negative reviews are sometimes the easiest reviews to write,” he opines, because he has a lot to say if he passionately feels that the book is bad. Like the previous reviewer, he also relies on a technocratic, “due process” view of his reviewing to explain his neutral feeling towards negative reviews. “I neither like nor dislike writing [a negative review],” he states. “I write the review that presents itself, you know? I read a book, I have the response to the book, and then I have to write honestly about my response to it.” However, ironically, such a mechanistic approach to book reviewing takes significant personal effort. The critic explains that he aims to block out the social politics and tensions that accompany reviewing. For instance, he says that he tries not to “think of [the] audience,” because reviewing has “got to be private between me and the book, because I need the space to be able to honestly explore what I think about the book.” This is an active choice and a conscious effort, rather than something that just happens naturally. The reviewer uses a strategy of compartmentalization to protect himself against feeling conflicted or “complicated.”

But is compartmentalization only open to those who already have status privilege in the field? In this and the previous example, we have seen the dilemma-work strategies of well-established individuals. Could it perhaps be that only such well-established critics can “afford” to compartmentalize and ignore the dilemmas of reviewing?

In the next example, we meet a reviewer who also takes the compartmentalization approach, but is considerably less established and well-known in the publishing world. Like a previous respondent, he describes his life as having “two facets”: his work as a college creative writing tutor and his other main professional activity as a fiction writer. At the time of our interview, he had written many short stories and published four books, which he describes as “disposable as lettuce.”
Most are no longer in print. Part of the reason for his more marginal status is that he operates in a very specific genre—not literary fiction, which is the highest status genre. Additionally, while he would like to review books outside his niche, and has asked editors to give him general fiction titles to review, none have been forthcoming so far.

Since this reviewer focuses on a particular genre, his community of readers and writers is necessarily smaller and more concentrated. Hence, we might assume that the pressures to “play nice,” or the potential tensions between the writer and reviewer roles, would be felt especially acutely. For example, poetry is a tiny subfield within publishing, and notoriously rife with conflict and interpersonal politics, because everyone knows everybody else. However, despite this expectation, I find that this reviewer is more relaxed than most about the prospect of writing negative reviews.

Interviewer: How did you feel about writing a negative review like that?
Respondent: It doesn’t bother me a great deal. After all, it’s only my opinion.

Uncharacteristically of the many reviewers I interviewed, this critic appears nonchalant, or at least not greatly perturbed, by writing a negative review. This partly results from him downplaying the significance of his judgment—just like the previous, high-status reviewer.

The reviewer faces the dilemma of knowing that writing a negative review can inflict pain and disappointment on the author—a position he has been in himself. But he compartmentalizes his experiences as an author and focuses instead on his function as a critic, which is to evaluate the book (which he sees as merely “a product”).

I don’t feel any constraint. I want to be fair, you know, because [writing] takes a lot of time, and nobody invests in writing a novel without some kind of aspiration to achieve something. You don’t want to insult that aspiration, which should be encouraged, but in the end, you’re evaluating the success of a product.

A review can be many things to many people. We have seen a journalist position his reviews as “entertaining” articles, and another reviewer emphasize how theirs can be “helpful” documents for writers to improve their future work. This critic frames his reviewing as a neutral evaluation of a consumer product that people might want to buy.
Furthermore, he feels free ("no constraint") to be direct with his negative evaluations, because his is only one opinion among many:

You are only one among a multitude of voices, too...I think you’re insulated by the fact that yours is one among many voices commenting on the books. I think that gives you a certain freedom.

By compartmentalizing his role in terms of the goals he should achieve (e.g., the values he should act on) as well as the scope of influence he has (in terms of the wider reception of a book), this reviewer succeeds in making his work fairly straightforward, with a relatively small amount of dilemma work. His case also shows that the compartmentalization strategy was not exclusive to high-status individuals in the literary field.

With the compartmentalizing strategy, reviewers insulate their reviewer role from their other identities, and any potential tensions that may result from them. As the examples above show, compartmentalization can take on slightly different shades. It can involve reviewers completely shutting out the concerns of their other identities, or it can involve narrowly focusing on the impact of their opinions as a critic, playing down their individual contribution to the overall consensus or reputation of a book. Both procedures rely on rationalized perspectives of reviewing, albeit in one of two ways: a view of reviewing as a purely technical activity, or the reviewer as merely a “cog in the machine.” However, both variants display an entrenchment in the critic role to the exclusion of other considerations as a strategy for moving beyond the dilemmas inherent to writing reviews.

Discussion

As work becomes increasingly casualized, workers are facing increasing pressure and incentive to broaden their skills and even combine multiple work roles to earn a living (Cawsey et al., 1995; Kalleberg, 2009). Work scholars have made considerable inroads into understanding the structural factors that lead people to take on multiple jobs—however, we still lack an interpretive account of how working multiple jobs actually feels. The present analysis probes the subjective experience of occupational generalism using book critics as a case study, highlighting dilemma work as an underappreciated dimension of the subjective experience of people who combine multiple forms of work.

My findings reveal that individuals confront dilemmas when engaging in the task of reviewer that stem from their other work roles. There
are multiple dilemmas, but the most prominent one concerns how, or whether, to write a negative review. As we saw, many reviewers are aware that writing a negative review carries risks, whether it be hurt feelings on the part of the author or professional consequences for reviewers themselves. Each reviewer grappled with the question of whether, on balance, they should inflict harm on themselves or on others. Both options involve risk, and neither is particularly desirable.

I define dilemma work as justificatory labor carried out by workers when faced with a tension or conflict between two or more of their work roles. How do workers bring their roles together and justify their chosen way forward? Two preconditions seem to be recognizing a quandary, and accepting that there are no good options. Once that realization has been reached, multiple roles provide the raw cultural material for crafting a solution. I identified three distinct ways in which respondents drew upon their multiple roles as resources to resolve the perceived dilemmas posed by writing a negative review.

The first strategy, anchoring, is when respondents ground or “anchor” their approach to a dilemma in their identities and commitments to another role in their portfolio. Specifically, they root their practice in another work role identity, and transpose the values from that role into their reviewing work, where it guides them or provides a model for how to approach the dilemma. For example, one author emphasized his sense of “solidarity” with the writer he was reviewing, while another pointed to his identity as a journalist and the value of “objectivity” when writing a negative review.

However, while the anchor strategy reflects the way respondents make sense of their actions, it is not necessarily predictive of their actual reviewing practice. For example, the critic who takes a writer-reviewer anchor strategy uses his own negative experience of bad reviews as justification for not inflicting the pain on another. But the reviewer who anchors his work in his identity as a journalist, and its incumbent association with honesty and objectivity, ends up being bluntly critical in his review.

The strategy of incorporation involves drawing on elements of other roles to guide the reviewer’s approach to the dilemma over writing a negative review. Unlike the anchoring strategy, it involves bringing the identities involved together into a blended whole. The reviewer refers to another work role, but combines it with their reviewer role by appealing to a higher overarching mission or value that encompasses both roles, and is served by them. The roles incorporated can be assigned different weightings, as with the respondents who view book reviewing and
teaching or writing as equal expressions of their identity as public intellectuals. Another means of incorporation is when the roles are seen as reciprocal—for instance, with the writer who feels qualified to review because of her work as a novelist, and who feels that her work as a reviewer improves her work as a novelist. Here, the overarching identity, encompassing both the novelist and reviewer roles, is that of an accomplished writer who is motivated to learn and improve. The foundation of the strategy is that the perceived stakes of the dilemma are somehow mitigated by serving some other purpose. Hence, respondents who use this approach to dilemma work seem to express less angst and worry than those who used the anchoring strategy.

Finally, the compartmentalization strategy involves bracketing off all the other roles one occupies outside of the reviewer role. Such boundaries serve to prevent external anxieties from affecting the reviewer’s task at hand—which can result in their reviews becoming harsher or more benign. To be clear, these individuals are fully aware of the dilemmas that present themselves when writing a negative review; however, the compartmentalization strategy means they make a conscious effort to focus only on their critic role. These reviewers identify solely with the critic role, and restrict their considerations to this role alone as they work.

A common practice among compartmentalizers is to emphasize the purity or good-faith nature of their intentions as reviewers, including their commitment to rational ideas of the fairness of the process. They maintain that they have no hidden agendas or axes to grind, and simply wish to focus on the book in front of them and give it a fair hearing. As a result, the respondents who practice compartmentalization expressed the least negative affect over writing negative reviews; for them, reviewing was reduced almost to a mechanical operation. In offering their technical evaluations, they downplay their critical judgment and suggest that they are merely performing a function. They also view the limits of their responsibilities in similar terms. While they do recognize social considerations, they effortfully purge them from their mindset so they can focus on reviewing alone.

One point of variance across these three dilemma-work strategies is in how painful the individuals initially perceive the dilemmas as being, as well as their emotional perspective on the outcomes of their reviews. For example, people who adopt the anchoring strategy tend to speak most about “pain” when confronted with writing a negative review. Through their anchoring, they first decide how to proceed, after which their emotional response is based on a sense that they are doing what is “right,” as
defined by the values encoded in their chosen anchor identity. In contrast, those who take a compartmentalized approach experience the least negative affect. Those who use the incorporation strategy, meanwhile, are more ambivalent than compartmentalizers, but they present themselves as less haunted than those who use anchoring.

Dilemma variation also depends on whether the goal of the review is ambiguous, or at least open to interpretation. Is the review a cultural report? A book summary? An “interesting article”? Or just another page in one’s own writing portfolio? Is it the evaluation that matters most—or is the review just another “vote” among many others? Those using anchoring tend to see the review as a message passing between two writers, or an independent piece of writing addressed to readers. Either way, the relationship with the reader is crucial, and the main focus is on risks. In the incorporation strategy, the purpose of reviewing pertains more to reviewers’ individual agendas as public intellectuals; reviews are public essays that emphasize content and critique. Reviewing can even be regarded as a platform for individual self-improvement or self-promotion; the focus seems to be more on gains. Finally, in the compartmentalization strategy, book reviews are stand-alone texts that take their place in a broader cultural context of literary criticism. It is, by far, the most depersonalized perspective: those who most commonly evoked this strategy were also those who identified themselves as simply parts of a larger literary evaluative apparatus.

I do not argue that any one of these three dilemma-work strategies is superior to another. Moreover, there is no reason why individuals should be permanently limited to using just one strategy. Rather, the strategies constitute a range of problem-solving approaches that are available for workers to use. When these strategies are used, the roles in a portfolio constitute a pool of cultural resources that workers can draw on in order to navigate the professional dilemmas that they face.

Limitations

This study and its findings have several limitations. The first is the specialized sample. Book reviewing is a unique type of work. It is increasingly casualized, with no formal qualifications and low rewards, and is usually carried out on a single-assignment basis. Moreover, the role itself is going through changes. Since most reviewers are not full-time critics, they are not solely dependent on reviewing for their livelihood. Therefore, the economic imperative of reviewing may be less pronounced, while the symbolic value may be greater.
Reviewing work is also highly ambiguous, in the sense that the goals of a review, or what it means to write one, are multivalent. Reviewing, as a task, is open to interpretation in a way that even other forms of writing are not. Therefore, reviewing may raise more dilemmas than other types of work, purely because it attracts a wider range of workers, all of whom bring different meanings to their work. Overall, this can result in different “packages” of dilemma solutions.

Second, I have only sampled those who have reviewed for elite publications—publications of high symbolic value, legitimacy, and influence. This might give reviewers’ dilemmas greater significance, because they know their reviews will be widely read. This relates to the idea that context might affect dilemma-work solutions, which I discuss below.

Another limitation is that reviewing is expressly evaluative. While other jobs may have evaluative components or “moments” (e.g., teaching), book reviewing is unique in that evaluation is its primary operation—even if individual reviewers may vary in how much importance they place on the evaluative function of their reviews. Evaluation signals the quality of a book to readers, and is referred to by publishing houses and the literary field more generally. Moreover, the evaluation is not a private report, but a very public judgment. All these features may make dilemmas more pointed for reviewers, or put them under greater pressure to justify their actions.

Also, the fact that the writer and reviewer roles are so closely linked, giving reviewers first-hand knowledge of what it’s like to have reviewing work “done to them,” is at the heart of many of their dilemmas. This link would probably not be present in other portfolio-work contexts where the roles are very different – for example, musicians might develop a lot of skills, but none of them have a direct impact on other musicians’ work. Though I argue this is what makes the case of book reviewing as an “extreme case” (Patton, 2007), uniquely ripe for studying dilemma work.

A final limitation is that I do not have direct empirical evidence that reviewers’ accounts are what “truly” guided their practices. While critics offered accounts of how they resolved their dilemmas, I could not directly observe, for instance, changes that they made to their prose as a result of the resolutions that they found. Their accounts may be saving face, or soothing their own consciences, or self-justification. However, the vividness of their descriptions, whether pressured or not, can be used as an empirical jumping-off point for theorizing general types of ways people conceptualize their multiple roles in a portfolio. Therefore, this study is still instructive for thinking generally about how people experience their multiple roles in general, and how they resolve dilemmas in particular.
Conclusion

In conclusion, I outline some of the research and practical implications of my findings. As I acknowledge above, book reviewing is an idiosyncratic sector—yet I believe many of the dynamics of dilemma work that I identify can be applied more widely. Anyone who has broadened their work portfolio to include multiple roles may experience dilemmas arising from perceived conflicts between them. My study provides a typology of responses geared towards resolving such dilemmas. My intention is that these general dynamics of dilemma work provide a useful vantage point from which to approach the subjective experience of occupational generalisms, and workers who combine multiple roles more generally. Below, I set out some of the benefits of this enhanced understanding for research and practice.

One way forward would be to deepen our understanding of what determines whether a worker will be inclined towards one strategy of dilemma work over another. There is reason to suspect that strategies will not all be equally distributed, since problem-solving can be influenced by personal characteristics. For instance, research by Lee et al. (2020) finds that workers’ approach to problem-solving is influenced by job-person characteristics including job tenure (time in the role) and role centrality. We might use these findings to hypothesize why some people are more likely to choose certain problem-solving variants over others.

Consider, hypothetically, the reviewer who chooses either anchoring or compartmentalization. At the heart of both strategies is prioritizing one role over others—the critic role in the case of compartmentalization, and (often) the author role in the case of anchoring. But how do job-personal characteristics influence who is more likely to identify strongly with their critic role? Perhaps those who have performed the reviewer role for a long time are more likely to feel comfortable with embracing the critic identity because of their familiarity and comfort with it. (Long tenure may not be continuous, since reviewing is a freelance occupation, but nevertheless reviewers will accumulate experience over time.)

Alternatively, perhaps those who are centrally embedded in the field as, say, authors, find they can more easily disregard certain identities with little risk. Consider, for instance, a very famous author who may feel no compunction about ignoring the feelings of their fellow writers and just focusing on doing the job of criticism—because they will be safe no matter what they write. Conversely, someone who is less
established may feel less sure of their position as an author, and play it safe accordingly, using their author identity as an anchor.\textsuperscript{8}

Beyond status, how is problem-solving influenced by contextual factors? Studies elsewhere have pointed to the role that organizational culture, norms, and the influence of hierarchical superiors can play in normalizing some forms of decision-making (Fligstein et al., 2017; Vaughan, 2004). The common thread to all these studies is that contingencies in the context can affect the attractiveness of viability of certain pathways. This raises the question of how much power managers have to shape norms, risks, and rewards. In my setting, some reviewers note that certain publications or editors have a particular “house style” that leans towards more “cranky” reviews. James Wood, for example, is identified as actively promoting “teardowns.” In such a context, the nature of dilemmas may be experienced differently. An authority figure, such as an editor, could encourage or discourage certain pathways—whether practically or symbolically—or incentivize certain pathways over others. These preliminary thoughts highlight how readily this typology could be extended to portfolio workers in other settings.

Another implication of this study is that we should attend to the subjective experience of occupational generalists, which has great depths that are not revealed by a strictly objectivist or external understanding of different work roles. For instance, the literature review included several studies of workers who see their jobs expanded with new responsibilities; and some of these findings dovetail with my own. Specifically, van de Ruit and Bosk’s (2020) public safety officers resolved the tensions arising from their new surveillance responsibilities by incorporating them into a larger identity under the banner of “safety.” Subramanian and Suquet’s (2018) bank-complaint managers engaged in a compartmentalization strategy by effectively denying the managerial component of their job, relying on a strictly technical definition of their work, and wrapping up their motives in benevolent intentions (e.g., acting as an “older brother” to those under their purview, rather than policing them).

If the concept of dilemma work is broadly generalizable, this sheds new light on how we should study the experience of holding multiple work roles. Another avenue for future research would be to examine how the typology proposed in this paper holds true in other types of work, both inside and beyond the artistic world. For example, how does it relate to casualized workers in other settings, occupational generalists, or people who take jobs in completely disparate fields (e.g., the teacher who also is an Uber driver) (Caza et al., 2018)? Through the lens
of dilemma work, we can consider the additional loads or risks being placed on these populations, and attend to their wellbeing.

Armed with an insight into dilemma work, employers can devise ways to minimize role conflicts or support particular forms of problem-solving, depending on their own preference or management style. When selecting freelancers or hiring staff, employers are not merely acquiring skills—they are also transplanting values that could create dilemmas. Workplaces could provide explicit guidance on how they want workers to value their pathways of action, or offer support with resolving dilemmas. Such dilemmas arise when the way forward is not clear, so better management can clarify which pathway is more favored, thus resolving the dilemma for the individual worker. That reduces their autonomy, in a sense—but as work becomes increasingly casualized, we may question whether we should add to the problems of “gig economy” workers by asking them to take on any further stress.

On a practical level, the idea of dilemma work suggests that occupational generalists undertake a type of moral labor that is qualitatively different from anything identified before. Previous research has established that workers who hold multiple jobs, or experience precarious work circumstances, face difficulties including increased stress, work–family conflict, and distress (Tausig, 1999; Wheaton et al., 2012) as a result of insecurity (Glavin & Schieman, 2014). These studies underscore the consequences of non-standard work in relation to respondents’ health and wellbeing. My study highlights that portfolio workers must also undertake a type of labor that has yet to be explored: dilemma work.

Overall, the concept of dilemma work offers us insights into one facet of the lived experience of occupational generalists who perform multiple work roles. Specifically, it sheds light on how the values and identities associated with certain roles can lead to dilemmas when enacting others, and how workers draw upon their multiple roles in creative ways to resolve those dilemmas. Hence, we get a peek into the experience of occupational generalists or portfolio workers. The overriding message of this study is that people do not just bring skills or expertise from their other jobs, but also their emotions, allegiances, values, and aspirations—and all these aspects can influence how they approach all of the work they do. No matter how many jobs people hold, they must still resolve them into just one life.

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Notes
1. Studies vary in terms of whether occupational generalism is the focus of the study, or explicitly referred to as such; yet the expansion of artists’ work roles is a common finding in case studies of artistic workers across many creative fields.
2. Note that Bechky (2006) usefully employs the concept of roles to study crew members on film sets; however, her focus is on the puzzle of how action gets coordinated in temporary organizations.
3. My focus is on reviews of newly published fiction, which typically appear in the review pages of general interest publications such as daily newspapers. The reason for this focus, as opposed to reviewing for more specialized literary journals, for example, is that this is the type of the reviewing that working writers most commonly take on as a secondary work activity.
4. In 2015, I reached out to a few interviewees to confirm the completeness of my understanding of the data.
5. Book reviewing is by no means a taken-for-granted activity or extension of a career as a novelist; however, a sizable proportion of fiction critics are themselves published novelists.
6. It is possible this respondent was merely name-dropping. But her primary focus on the critic role to the exclusion of all her other professional experiences extends beyond this one comment about her friendship networks.
7. This critic isn’t alone in receiving feedback on her reviews from authors. But she is peculiar in the number of positive examples of flattering feedback she can apparently recall. For instance, she describes a particular instance of writing a negative review and getting a positive response:

[T]here was a character that just wasn’t well-formed enough. I wrote the review and talked a great deal about [. . .] the problems that I had with the character. I got a message from [the author] a week or so later saying, “You know, this is incredible. Thank you so much. You’ve given me the gift of something I can work on, something that’s constructive.” I thought that was really amazing. So, for me, criticizing a book does not have to be destructive. I don’t think I’ve ever written a review that didn’t have some kind of—you know, something critical in it.
From this experience, the critic seems to have crystallized her philosophy that writing a negative review can be not merely “non-destructive,” but actively useful to the author; hence, it makes sense that she does not express the same anxieties as other reviewers when viewing the task through this frame.

8. The point has been made elsewhere that this idea coincides with the predictions of middle-status conformity.

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