

Working for too little: The choice to “create”

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Abstract

The current work is one of a handful to present an individual’s unique motivation for creative expression as an additional element for utility function inclusion. We posit that creative expression should be particularly important for employment and job choice decisions, and, therefore, focus the empirical portion of this work on examining how individuals identify in “artistic” versus other types of professions. Specifically, we examine how job-identification varies based upon employment status, and how individuals choose to transition more or less readily from artistic professions relative to other professions and depending upon the business cycle. Our approach is unique in our focus on both gender and time period to allow for important differences in creative motivation. We employ various data sources to substantiate our analysis, however, the present version of this analysis focuses on the United States Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation group (CPS-MORG) files. Our results provide additional evidence for the need to consider individual creative expression when designing future analyses of utility, and particularly in relation to sectoral employment decisions.

Introduction & Motivation

While a number of studies have shown that artists experience lower average income and higher income variability (see, e.g., Alper & Wassall (2006) for a review of the literature) the “artistic” occupation has not shrunk over the last decades (Menger, 2006).

A few explanations were brought forward to try to explain the observed particularities of the artists’ labor market (Bryant & Throsby, 2006). For example, some pay particular attention to the role of and sources of artists’ excess supply through winner-take-all models, risk-loving attitudes, or including creative effort in an optimization decision problem (Rangers, 2000; Bryant & Throsby, 2006). These models focus mainly on the decision to enter an artistic occupation.

Our paper pays particular attention to artistic occupation in- and out-migration to investigate whether artists behave similarly to individuals in other occupations when it comes to transitions. Our study is in line with previous work who focused on five-year occupation mobility, we look at transitions over shorter time frames in order to more easily observe occupational choice reactions to external shocks.

Smith (2000), using the 1970 US Census, and Alper and Wassall (1998), using the 1988 National Science Foundation’s National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG), document people transition in and out of artistic occupations. Both suggest that about 25-30 percent of artists had transitioned to a non-artist occupation within a five-year period. About a third of leavers had joined professional occupations. While many exit artistic occupation, there is significant inflow as well. Alper and Wassall (1998) find that a third of the artists observed in 1993 were not in 1988.

Our period of analysis covers periods of expansions as well as contractions (e.g., the Great Recession) which makes it particularly attractive to study the impact of changing economic conditions on occupation choice.

Methods and Materials

We employed the Current Population Survey Merged Outgoing Rotation Groups (CPS-MORG) for 1990-2018. Individuals within the same household were matched by their gender, race, and age to establish pairs of observations to compare over time. We then grouped individuals into professions based upon eighteen 1980 or twenty-three 2010 occupational codes, and changes in occupation for a particular individual over the time period were noted. Individuals were further categorized as being employed or unemployed. Finally, we created additional measures of (1) prestige in the stated profession as a factor scoring of earnings and educational attainment of individuals in that profession as of that year, and (2) the number of individuals in the individual’s stated profession group.

Our summary statistics examined the fraction of each category of occupations—whether 1980 or 2010 groupings—that fell into the employed or unemployed grouping relative to the total number of individuals in the sample.

Our regression analysis examined the linearized regressions for the likelihood of switching occupations as a function of the prestige of the profession, the number of individuals in the profession in a polynomial up to the fourth degree, earnings per week, a Boolean for the year, and one for whether it was the period of the Great Recession (2008-2012), as well as “one” of the occupations. We varied whether we examined the switching “into” or “out of” a profession as the category of interest. We additionally stratified regressions by gender. We focused our attention on the coefficients and t-statistics associated with each of the occupation variables in each separate regression.

Results

Our summary statistics were very informative, showing that a consistent 2% of individuals chose to be categorized as artists throughout the data. This was true both for the 1980 and the 2010 occupation coded sections of the data. It was additionally invariant to whether individuals were employed or unemployed. For the other 1980 groupings, the only other occupation that was invariant to the employment choice was social services. In the 2010 groupings, there were several occupations that were considered invariant from this data—such as health support services, protective services, and science. Unfortunately, because the categories were slightly changed over time, it is difficult to compare the changes between years for the other groups. We note as a caveat the possibility that the similarity over time in only our measure of artists could be an artifact of changes in occupation codes over time. We do not, however, believe that the 1980 internal invariance to employment status reflects this issue.

Our preliminary results from regressions indicated that the coefficient on the “artist” occupational choice had a higher magnitude than that for most other variables. This was true for both switching into and switching out of a profession. We take this as evidence that movement into artistic professions is more fluid, with individuals being both more likely to switch in, all else equal, and more likely to switch out.

Conclusions

Ours is the first analysis to examine the stability of the artistic identity in the context of both economic factors and in relation to other possible occupational decisions. Our preliminary results provide evidence for the greater relative stability of artistic expression as an “identity” as compared to other professions. Regressions lead us to believe that this may be because of the greater ability of individuals to transition both into and out of working as an artist at greater rates as compared to other professions, slightly modifying our priors that artists would be entirely unresponsive to economic fluctuations.

Table 1: Employed and Unemployed by Profession

	1980 groups				2000 groups			
	unemp	emp	%unemp	%emp	unemp	emp	%unemp	%emp
artist	784	21,142	0.02	0.02	923	22,199	0.02	0.02
sales	5,695	144,589	0.12	0.12	4,626	113,645	0.12	0.12
support	6,553	187,844	0.13	0.15	5,399	143,905	0.15	0.15
farming fishing	1,961	38,489	0.04	0.03	743	8,279	0.02	0.01
transportation	2,785	51,759	0.06	0.04	3,696	64,569	0.10	0.07
education	980	65,747	0.02	0.05	1,765	70,810	0.05	0.07
computers & math	233	12,841	0.00	0.01	750	29,511	0.02	0.03
architecture & engineering	437	20,569	0.01	0.02	575	23,139	0.02	0.02
social services	268	13,012	0.01	0.01	412	19,549	0.01	0.02
health	345	39,735	0.01	0.03	824	64,357	0.02	0.07
science	149	9,772	0.00	0.01	223	11,644	0.01	0.01
management	3,793	177,930	0.08	0.15	2,573	135,249	0.07	0.14
cleaning	4,486	42,672	0.09	0.03	2,465	40,081	0.07	0.04
legal	68	9,381	0.00	0.01	205	14,590	0.01	0.02
crafts & construction	11,738	207,289	0.24	0.17	4,729	56,241	0.13	0.06
technical	1,010	40,797	0.02	0.03	843	23,105	0.02	0.02
service	8,294	158,392	0.17	0.13	1,306	38,401	0.04	0.04
					1,669	37,090	0.05	0.04
					712	22,401	0.02	0.02
					3,554	68,027	0.10	0.07
					1,388	52,064	0.04	0.05
					3,190	48,900	0.09	0.05

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