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**Behind the Sony Scandal:  
The role of talent agencies in perpetuating inequality**

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**Behind the Sony Scandal:  
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**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **Behind the Sony Scandal: The role of talent agencies in perpetuating inequality**

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Abstract: Hollywood talent agencies are powerful organizations that act as gatekeepers to the industry and structure the labor market for actors, directors, and writers. This thesis applies Rosabeth Moss Kanter's work on tokenization, Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations, and R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to understand the organizational structures and narratives of success that privilege white men in talent agencies. Through interviews conducted with talent agents, I found that these organizations are defined by men's monopoly of powerful positions, professional networks exclusive to men, a patrimonial system of mentorship, and discourses that prize certain masculine performances and disparage femininity. This thesis illuminates the exclusionary organizational structures and discourses operating within talent agencies that may help explain the white male domination of these spaces.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Hollywood is an industry dominated by white men. White men disproportionately fill almost every role and earn more than women working in film and television.

Inequality in Hollywood has become difficult to ignore. The Sony cyber-attack spurred national outrage in 2014, when racist, sexist emails between studio executives emerged and a major disparity in pay between Jennifer Lawrence and Amy Adams and their male costars came to light. Since then, major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, published dozens of articles delving into the systemic inequality operating in Hollywood. Women actors, including Cate Blanchett, Viola Davis, and Patricia Arquette used award ceremony stages to address gender and racial inequality in the industry. Hashtags trending on Twitter like #FilmHerStory and #OscarsSoWhite called out Hollywood for the white male domination that pervades the industry. And in October 2015, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission opened an investigation to address allegations of gender discrimination against women directors.

The national discussion of gender inequality in Hollywood has focused primarily on the experiences of women filmmakers, studio executives, and actors. Although these are important areas of the industry to study, one major, influential, and central system of organizations has remained hidden from view: talent agencies. Talent agencies are involved in every major film and television project in Hollywood. A few elite talent agencies represent and procure employment for the large majority of working writers, directors, and actors in Hollywood (Hunt and Ramon, 2015; Friend 2005). Along with

fulfilling a brokerage role, elite agencies also actively shape and segment the labor market in ways that substantially advantage their clients, making representation a key factor in success (see Bielby & Bielby 1999).

Through their central role in Hollywood, talent agencies play a huge part in determining what content gets made. As one *Variety* writer explains, “With the agencies often serving as gatekeepers into the entertainment business, their profile and world view are critical in shaping the films [and] TV shows...that Hollywood brings to the world” (Rainey 2016). Though very few published articles explore inequality in talent agencies, estimates of the percentage of women talent agents in film and television departments range between 15 and 40 percent (Hunt & Rose 2012; Sun 2015). In this industry, where elite agencies occupy central and powerful positions within the industry, it is important to ask why there are so few women agents working in Hollywood. This study seeks to understand the organizational structures and discourses utilized in these spaces that create disadvantages for women and justify the perpetuation of male domination of talent agencies.

In this chapter, I begin by situating this project theoretically. Next, I give a brief history of talent agents to contextualize their important role within Hollywood. Following that, I outline my research questions and methodology. Finally, I provide a roadmap for the organization of this thesis.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This project draws on multiple theoretical perspectives in order to examine the ways in which white male domination operates within Hollywood talent agencies. These theoretical frameworks provide tools that help conceptualize how organizations perpetuate the subordination of women. Kanter's work on skewed sex ratios within organizations provides conceptual tools to use when studying industries dominated by men. Acker's theory of gendered organizations provides a valuable framework to consider how organizations themselves, and in this specific case talent agencies, are built on and around assumptions about gender. Connell's theorizing about masculinities, and particularly her concept of hegemonic masculinity, helps to frame, analyze, and deconstruct the ways in which the gendered and racialized performances and discourses operating within talent agencies work to justify the continuation of white male domination. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of these theoretical approaches and in the following chapter, I will use these perspectives to organize my findings.

## **TOKENIZATION**

Drawing from a study of women working at a large industrial corporation in the 1970's, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) theorizes about how the proportion of socially different individuals in a group shapes interactions. Kanter categorizes four different group types that exist on a continuum of social homogeneity: uniform, skewed, tilted, and balanced. Uniform groups contain only one significant social type, skewed groups

contain a large predominance of one type over another, tilted groups have a less extreme ratio than skewed groups but are not quite balanced, and balanced groups are described as having almost a 50:50 typological ratio. Though Kanter's conceptualization of "social type" may be oversimplified, her theorization of the tokenization of individuals can be useful in understanding some of the gendered dynamics operating in male-dominated industries.

Kanter explains that in skewed groups, the numerically dominant individuals control the group and its culture. Kanter labels those who are not members of the dominant group as "tokens." She explains that in this skewed group context, tokens are perceived and treated as representatives of their outsider social identity, rather than as individuals. For example, a woman working in engineering would be thought of as a "woman-engineer," a man working in nursing would be considered a "male-nurse," and a Black man working in medicine would be labeled a "Black physician." Within skewed groups, Kanter argues that three dynamics of tokenism work to perpetuate the power of the dominant group. First, the heightened visibility of tokens generates performance pressures, where tokens' presence is always noticed, but their achievements are either not acknowledged or regarded with contempt. Next, polarization or exaggeration of the token's attributes in contrast to those of the dominants makes the dominants more aware of what they have in common, and at the same time threatens that commonality. In Kanter's case study, this was most apparent when men spoke about sexual conquests, sports, and sales in ways that were exclusive to women and reinforced the bonds between men. Lastly, as tokens assimilate into the group, the dominants force them into

stereotypical roles in order to preserve their generalizations of these social categories. In summary, “the token stands out vividly, group culture is dramatized, boundaries become highlighted, and token roles are larger-than-life caricatures” (1977, p. 985).

Kanter’s work on tokenization provides a useful way of understanding the damaging experiences of subordinate groups in spaces controlled by dominant groups. Because talent agencies are skewed workplace contexts, Kanter’s explanation of tokens’ heightened visibility, polarization, and imposed stereotypes helps frame how individuals who are not white, heterosexual men may experience working in these spaces. This theoretical approach also explains why employing a few members of a subordinate group will not necessarily make a workplace inclusive. Throwing a few women into a talent agency without changing the structures of power or addressing the discourses and assumptions built into the job will not make the space more inclusive, and will likely be damaging to women.

## GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS

In her iconic article, Joan Acker (1990) argues that organizational structure is gendered. Acker is critical of other scholars, including Kanter, for being “trapped within the constraints of definitions of the theoretical domain that cast organizations as gender neutral and asexual” (p. 144). She poses the question, if organizations are gender neutral, how then, do we explain continued gender segregation and the reproduction of gendered identity of jobs and occupations? Acker explains that to describe an organization as gendered means “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and

emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). Acker maintains that there are five primary ways in which organizations are gendered: (1) division by gender wherein men fill the roles with power; (2) the construction of symbols that reinforce this division; (3) interactions between and within genders that enact dominance; (4) production of gendered identities within the organization; and (5) the creation of social structures. Acker also argues that the concept of “a job” is gendered in a way that assumes maleness. “A job” is an abstract, bodiless concept until a human worker fills it, who exists only for the work. A man is the closest fit for this concept, as he is assumed to have a wife at home to take care of his personal needs so he can focus only on work. Thus, organizations themselves are created and maintained in ways that contain assumptions about the gender of workers.

Acker’s approach pushes scholars to examine the gendered assumptions that are built into and maintained through organizations. Instead of considering organizations as neutral, Acker understands them to be gendered sites where inequality is sustained. Acker argues that sexuality, emotions, and procreation are absent from organizational logic, which reinforces the public/private division and justifies the exclusion of women. This approach framed my examination of how talent agencies, as organizations, incorporate unequal assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, and wealth. By conceptualizing inequality as being grounded in the structures of organizations, this framework aided in my analysis of how inequality persists in these spaces.

## HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

R.W. Connell's theorization of a hierarchy of masculinities has pushed gender scholars to consider that not all men are equally dominant. Connell's work builds on Kanter and Acker's theories of gender inequality by providing a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of different kinds of men and masculinities. In her work, Connell argues that multiple forms of masculinities are arranged hierarchically, with hegemonic masculinity situated at the top. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity is defined in relation to femininity and other subordinate forms of masculinity, and thus can be a useful concept in theorizing about the dominance of particular men over women and other men. In the United States, whiteness and heterosexuality have allowed certain men access to dominant forms of masculinity, while other men enact subordinate forms of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is not actually enacted by the majority of men. Rather, it embodies "the currently most honored way of being a man" and ideologically justifies or legitimates the global subordination of women and other men (2005, p. 832).

Connell argues that although few men may actually embody hegemony, all men gain from it, as they all benefit from a "patriarchal dividend" that results from the subordination of women (2005, p. 79). Though the extent to which men have access to this dividend varies, Connell argues that men have increased access to prestige, authority, and material assets. According to Connell, men who do not embody hegemonic forms of

masculinity but still benefit from the hegemony are enacting a complicit masculinity. Men who do not have access to hegemony can be thought of as participating in a subordinate form of masculinity. Connell conceptualizes force as a part of male dominance that reveals the imperfections of this gender system. Connell explains that if this gender system was legitimate, then force and violence would not be necessary in order to maintain it. Instead of defining hegemony in terms of violence, she defines it as the “ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (2005, p. 832). Connell also argues that because hegemonic masculinity is a relationally constructed prescribed way of being, it is necessary subject to change.

Connell’s conceptualization of a hierarchy of masculinities provides a way of theorizing about certain men’s dominance over other men. Her work helps to explain how masculinity is constructed and performed in Hollywood talent agencies and how this privileges certain kinds of men, while disadvantaging other men and all women. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is helpful in explaining why the masculinities enacted by white, heterosexual, wealthy men talent agents sustains the white male dominance of these spaces.

#### TOKENIZATION, GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS, AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Kanter, Acker, and Connell’s work provide ways of understanding the white male domination of Hollywood talent agencies. Kanter theorizes about the ways in which token groups are disadvantaged in spaces dominated by another powerful group. Acker critiques Kanter for her neglect of institutionalized organizational structures and pushes



scholars to consider how organizations themselves are gendered (and racialized, and sexualized). Connell's concept of a hierarchy of masculinities introduces nuance to Kanter and Acker's work by acknowledging that men are not all equally dominant. Collectively, these theoretical approaches aid in my analysis of women talent agents' experiences, how the structures of these organizations perpetuate inequality, and why certain kinds of men and masculine performances are more highly valued within the context of Hollywood talent agencies.

## **HISTORY OF TALENT AGENCIES IN HOLLYWOOD**

In this section, I provide a brief history of talent agencies in order to contextualize their power and influence in Hollywood. Talent agents rose along with the studio system in the United States during the late 1920's and early 1930's (Kemper 2010). The studio system emerged in the 1920's, when a series of acquisitions resulted in five to eight companies controlling the production, distribution, and exhibition of films (Kemper 2010). The studios managed their own talent (actors, writers, directors), employing them under long-term contracts (Balio 1993). Scouting and managing talent was expensive and led to major conflicts of interest during negotiations, where the studios could prioritize their own financial interests over the talent's (Kemper 2010). Talent agents emerged as a solution to this problem, fulfilling an important brokerage role between talent and studios. Studios no longer had to scout and manage talent, and talent was able to earn more and benefit from their agent's professional network and knowledge of the industry.

After WWII, the increase in the cost of production, the decline in box office receipts, the Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948, and the increased popularity of television resulted in the studio systems' deterioration (Kemper 2010). Smaller companies began to produce films, depending on the studios for space, financing, marketing, and distribution (Bielby & Bielby 1999). Talent agencies transformed from relatively small organizations to large corporate companies (Kemper 2010). In the 1950's, William Morris Agency strategically implemented television packaging and in the 1980's, Creative Artists Agency began packaging film projects as well (Bielby & Bielby 1999). Packaging involves a talent agency bundling together a combination of a writer, director, producer, and actor(s) client and selling the film or television project as a package to networks or studios. Instead of collecting 10% commission for each client involved, the agency instead receives a packaging fee, which can be hugely profitable. In television, this packaging fee typically includes 3% of the license fee once each episode is produced, another 3% if the project becomes profitable, and 10% of the back-end profits if the show is syndicated (Bielby & Bielby 1999; Polone 2015). Packaging provided talent agencies with the opportunity to fill a brokerage *and* producer role. As a result, agencies that participated in packaging earned huge amounts of money through the associated fees and amassed a new level of power in shaping the market.

Hollywood talent agencies are powerful organizations at the center of the industry. In 2005, the "top five" agencies at the time represented 70% of the working entertainers in Hollywood (Friend 2005). Talent agencies act as a funneling system for entry into the industry, vetting individuals for careers in Hollywood. Many individuals

working in entry-level positions at talent agencies are aspiring directors, writers, actors, producers, and studio executives using their time at these fast-paced organizations to gain experience and credibility. For example, an aspiring writer may work for an agent who represents writers so that after a year or two at the agency, he/she can go work as a writer's assistant for one of these clients. Working at a talent agency teaches new-comers how Hollywood operates. Thus, not only are these organizations representing the majority of talent and shaping the market, they are also socializing future generations in Hollywood.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Scholars who study Hollywood have documented the gender gap in pay (Bielby & Bielby 1992; 1996), demonstrated the underrepresentation of women and minorities in Hollywood (Hunt et al. 2014; Lauzen 2014; Lauzen 2015a; Lauzen 2015b), and established the importance of elite agency representation for artists' careers (Bielby & Bielby 1999). The existing literature reveals a pathway of gender and racial inequality operating in Hollywood, where elite talent agencies are primarily composed of white men, who then predominately represent white men, who then enjoy higher rates of employment and earnings than everyone else. This project fills a gap that precedes this pathway by examining the mechanisms that result in the white male domination of elite talent agencies. This thesis investigates the following research questions: (1) How do the organizational structures and discourses of these elite agencies create advantages for

white men? (2) How do these structures and discourses form systems of disadvantage for everyone else?

## **METHODS**

This project is based on in-depth interviews I conducted during the summer and fall of 2015 with 18 talent agents who represent actors in Hollywood. In-depth interviewing allowed me to learn about talent agent's career trajectories, professional networks, and relationships with mentors from their own perspectives. Their responses can shed light on the gendered structures of power operating in these organizations.

Prior to conducting this research, I worked at an elite talent agency in Los Angeles, CA. The agents I worked for represented directors, writers, producers, and actors. This experience gave me access to this population. I began recruiting by requesting interviews with talent agents I worked with during my year in Los Angeles. I also contacted assistants I knew at talent agencies to request an interview with their bosses. I obtained other interviewees by snowballing out from these initial contacts. In an informal poll with three assistants and four talent agents I know, the assistants estimated that their bosses receive between 200-400 emails per day and the agents estimated that they receive between 300-500 emails per day. Even with a personal referral, it was a small miracle that these talent agents saw, read, and responded positively to my initial email requesting an interview. I interviewed talent agents who worked at four of the top five talent agencies. During the course of their careers, the respondents had combined work experience at 13 talent agencies, including top-tier, mid-size, and small boutique

agencies. To maintain my respondents' anonymity, I will identify these companies by number.

Respondents' agency work experience ranged from 8 months to 25 years. The respondents were between the ages of 25 and 50 (median age of 34). Sixteen of the interviewees identified as men and two as women. When I asked for respondents' race, one agent identified as Latin American, one as white, Italian, and Irish, four as white and Jewish, and the remaining 12 as white. When I asked for respondents' religion, half of the 18 talent agents identified as Jewish. All of my respondents had bachelor's degrees and two had MBA's. Ten of my respondents were married and eight reported to be single. Half of the respondents had children and the other half did not. All 18 agents worked in Los Angeles, CA and all but four of my respondents earned \$76,000 or more annually, with eight earning \$500,000 or more. This demographic information is outlined in Table 1, below.

My shortest interview lasted 16 minutes and the longest ran for over an hour and a half. A typical interview lasted 40 minutes. From the initial conversations about this project that I had with previous bosses and others in the industry, I knew that asking for more than 30 minutes in my initial request would result in very few interviews. Most of my interviewees gave me more than 30 minutes, but some did not. I conducted seven of the interviews in-person in Los Angeles and conducted the remaining 11 over the phone during the fall. Interviews covered the following topics: decisions to become talent agents, promotion structures, building client lists, relationships with mentors and respected colleagues, development of professional networks, and necessary traits to being

a successful agent. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded following the method of grounded theory described by Charmaz (2006). All respondents and individuals mentioned in interviews were assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

## **THESIS OUTLINE**

In Chapter Two, I examine current research about gender inequality in the workplace. In addition to situating this project within the broader literature, I also specifically review research on gender inequality in the film and television industry. In Chapter Three, I present my findings based on the interviews I conducted with talent agents. I use Acker and Connell's theoretical frameworks to organize my findings into three sections that help explain the male domination operating within talent agencies: (1) men in positions of authority; (2) gendered networks and patrimonial mentorship; and (3) discourses about femininity and masculinity. Finally, in Chapter Four, I situate this project within the broader literature about gender and work and discuss directions for future research.

**TABLE 1: RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Income Range</b>	<b>Time as agent</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>
<b>Ted</b>	1	Male	46	White	Catholic	BA	\$500K or more	20 years	Married	2
<b>David</b>	1	Male	43	White/Jewish	Jewish	BA	\$500K or more	17 years	Married	1
<b>Nicole</b>	1	Female	30	White/Jewish	Jewish	BA	\$76-100K	3 years	Single	0
<b>Mark</b>	1	Male	50	White/Jewish	Jewish	BA	\$500K or more	25 years	Married	2
<b>Lisa</b>	1	Female	47	White/Italian/Irish	Unknown	BA	\$500K or more	22 years	Married	2
<b>Brad</b>	2	Male	26	White	Catholic	BA	\$75K and below	8 months	Single	0
<b>Aaron</b>	3	Male	25	White/Jewish	Jewish	BA	\$101-150K	8 months	Single	0
<b>Chris</b>	1	Male	34	White	Jewish	BA	\$500K or more	10 years	Single	0
<b>Matt</b>	4	Male	28	White	Agnostic	BA	\$75K and below	1 year	Single	0
<b>Adam</b>	2	Male	34	White	Jewish	BA	\$301-500K	8 years	Married	3
<b>James</b>	1	Male	32	White	None	BA	\$151-200K	4.5 years	Single	0
<b>Gabriel</b>	4	Male	46	Latin American	None	MBA	\$201-250K	12 years	Married	0
<b>Paul</b>	4	Male	50	White	Jewish	BA	\$500K or more	20 years	Married	3
<b>Stephen</b>	4	Male	34	White	None	BA	\$76-100K	4 years	Single	0
<b>Peter</b>	2	Male	44	White	Jewish	BA	\$301-500K	17 years	Married	2
<b>Scott</b>	1	Male	45	White	Episcopalian	BA	\$500K or more	16 years	Married	3
<b>Brandon</b>	4	Male	30	White	Catholic	BA	\$75K and below	2.5 years	Single	0
<b>Eric</b>	3	Male	34	White	Jewish	MBA	\$75K and below	4 years	Married	1

## CHAPTER 2: GENDER AND WORK IN THE NEW ECONOMY

This project contributes to an extensive and rich body of work that examines the persistence of gender inequality. In this chapter, I provide a review of literature and situate this project within the ongoing sociological conversation about gender and work. In the first part of this chapter, I outline how sociologists understand the reproduction of gender inequality. In the second half, I review literature that examines gender inequality within the film and television industry. Throughout the chapter, I explain how this project contributes to the existing literature on the film and television industry and more broadly, gender and work.

### **THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO GENDER INEQUALITY AND WORK**

Social scientists have theorized extensively about how and why gender inequality at work persists. Human capital theorists conceptualize the labor market as a neutral and distinct sphere wherein individuals are assessed and rewarded for their skills, experience, and productivity. This theory relies on the presumption that all differences in pay are a result of a disparity in skills, and has been criticized by sociologists for ignoring the individual and institutional forms of discrimination that shape people's lives. Gender socialization theorists argue that boys and girls are socialized to have different and distinct preferences, interests, and ambitions, which then result in men and women training and applying for different kinds of jobs. Sociologists criticize this theory for emphasizing individual choice, neglecting the structures that contribute to inequality, and



insufficiently explaining why equally qualified men and women still end up in different jobs (Valian 1998).

Rather than attributing inequality to disparities in skill sets or socialization, gender scholars point to the complex interactional, structural, and cultural processes through which systems of inequality are maintained. Symbolic interactionists consider how masculinity and femininity are achieved through interaction, by “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). This conceptualization of the social construction of gender acknowledges that individual choices are made within a confined system defined by normative gender expectations. These expectations shape individual interaction as well as institutions, which are thus also gendered (Acker 1990). Sociologists have demonstrated many ways in which this gender inequality appears: the gender gap in pay and promotion (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015; Padavic and Reskin 2002), the devaluation of stereotypically female jobs, particularly care work (England 2005), the motherhood wage penalty (Budig and England 2001), and the rapid advancement of men in stereotypically female professions (Williams 1995). Although normative gender expectations do vary across time and space, traits associated with masculinity are always more highly valued.

Gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, and many other forms of identity interact in nuanced ways. An intersectional approach to research takes this nuance into account, focusing on the relational nature of oppression and power (Collins 2000; Choo, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Numerous sociologists have examined the ways in which gender, race, and sexuality collectively shape embodied experiences within workplaces. Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009) examined the way in which race and gender shape the

experiences of Black men in nursing, and found that while white male nurses were often mistaken for doctors and advanced quickly in the ranks (Williams 1995), Black male nurses were often mistaken for janitors or orderlies and subjected to discrimination and isolation. Catherine Connell (2012) interviewed gay and lesbian school teachers about their workplace experiences and found that they often must conform to heteronormative expectations and detract attention away from their sexuality while at work. Kristin Schilt (2011) studied transmen's experiences of transitioning in the workplace and discovered that despite their expectations of ridicule, they actually benefited at work. In particular, white, masculine-presenting transmen in certain kinds of jobs enjoyed increases in authority, recognition, and material rewards. In all of these cases, white, heterosexual, masculine men accumulate advantages, while everyone else is subjected to a complex system of oppression.

## **GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRY**

In the next part of this chapter, I review literature that examines inequality in the film and television industry. First, I demonstrate that women, and especially women of color, are underrepresented and/or represented in damaging ways throughout Hollywood. Next, I consider the characteristics that make this industry particularly prone to inequality and discuss how this context creates and sustains differential access to opportunity. Finally, I review Bielby and Bielby's important work that reveals the gender gap in pay for film and television writers working in Hollywood.

## THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN HOLLYWOOD

Women are underrepresented in nearly every role in the film and television industry. Women actors have historically played less diverse roles than men (Levy 1900) and comprise a small minority of the protagonists and speaking characters in American films and television (Lauzen 2015a; Lauzen 2014). Even when women actors are successful, they experience a more extreme age penalty than men, which severely limits their opportunities as they age (Lincoln & Allen 2004; Smith, Choueti and Pieper 2016). Women who are featured in film and television are more likely than men to be sexualized (Smith et al. 2016). This varies by race, where Latina women are most likely to be shown in sexualized attire or with some nudity, but white women are most likely to be referenced as attractive (Smith et al. 2016).

Women make up a very small percentage of those working behind the camera in Hollywood. Women comprised only 17% of the directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 domestic grossing films released in 2014 (Lauzen 2015b). The statistics are particularly skewed when it comes to directing. For every one major film directed by a woman between 2007-2014, 18 films were directed by men (Smith et al. 2015). This means that out of the 700 films made by 779 different directors during this time, only 28 were directed by women, the majority of whom were white (Smith et al. 2015). These trends hold true in television, although a little bit less pronounced (Smith et al. 2016). Both in front of and behind the camera, women are underrepresented and/or represented in damaging ways.

White men also disproportionately fill executive roles in Hollywood. In 2013, film studio heads in Hollywood were 94% white and 100% male and studio senior management was 92% white and 83% male (Hunt and Ramon 2015). Television networks have comparable gender and racial compositions (Hunt and Ramon 2015). Very few news sources have reported on the low percentage of women talent agents, but in one article, a reporter estimated the percentage of women at some talent agencies to be as low as 15% (Hunt and Rose 2012). The presidents and CEO's of all the major talent agencies in Hollywood are men. Agencies then disproportionately represent white men film directors, show creators, writers, and actors (Hunt and Ramon 2015). Thus, white men dominate almost every area of Hollywood.

Women, and especially women of color, are underrepresented as directors, producers, executive producers, editors, directors of photography, show creators, studio executives, actors playing leading (or even speaking) roles, and agents in Hollywood. When the vast majority of those starring and involved in making major films and television shows are white men, their voices and experiences are privileged.

#### HOLLYWOOD AS AN UNEQUAL AND GENDERED ENVIRONMENT

Researchers who study culture industries argue that there are certain characteristics of these industries that make them particularly prone to inequality (Bielby & Bielby 2002; Faulkner & Anderson 1987). In many ways, Hollywood resembles other volatile and precarious types of work, like the oil and gas, tech, and auto industries. Work in Hollywood is unpredictable, highly variant, and defined by ambiguity and risk

(Faulkner & Anderson 1987). This ambiguity and risk creates an environment in which hiring decisions are based on reputation and track record (Bielby and Bielby 1999). However, men and women have differential access to “good” reputations and work experience. Stephen Zafirau (2008) conducted an ethnography in a talent management firm in Los Angeles to study managers’ strategies in creating and maintaining successful reputations. Zafirau found that managers continually worked to demonstrate their competence and legitimacy as business partners, which was accomplished in highly gendered ways. Zafirau documented different institutionalized expectations of behavior for men and women talent representatives, where men managed their reputations through aggressive, go-getter performances, while women nurtured and formed close relationships with their clients. In the context of Hollywood, where Zafirau documented an emphasis on sports and frequent use of misogynistic language, the aggressive (i.e. masculine) performance of men representatives was more highly valued than the nurturing and relationship-based approach of women representatives. Unsurprisingly, the gender performance, and thus reputation work, undertaken by men representatives was more successful in this context.

Just as in many other industries, men and women’s social networks in Hollywood operate in ways that advantage men. Mark Lutter (2015) found that women actors with smaller, denser, cohesive networks faced significant career disadvantages, while women actors rooted in open, diverse networks faced a risk of career failure no different than men. Lutter argues that cohesive network structures disadvantaged women actors because these networks were likely to be characterized by “gender-homophilous information

flow, low-status identity networks, poor returns on mentorship, and, as a consequence, redundant and narrow information on future possible projects” (p. 333). Men actors did not face these disadvantages when embedded in cohesive networks. Lutter also found that women actors faced a higher chance of career failure when they worked on teams with predominately-male management or in male-dominated film genres. Women actors had to embed themselves in open and diverse networks, and, in contrast to men, could not have cohesive, gender-homophilous networks if they wanted to sustain their careers. Irena Grugulis and Drimitrinka Stoyanova (2012) similarly found that white, middle-class men working in the UK film and television industry were more likely to be embedded in networks that would provide access to high quality work (Grugulis & Stoyanova 2012). Women working in the film and television industry have fewer options for successful network structures and are less likely to gain access to high quality work through these networks.

In addition to reputation and social networks, a film or television actor’s list of previous credits plays a key role in gaining access to employment (Faulkner & Anderson 1987). The highly variant nature of the industry means that a career in film consists of a succession of short-term projects (Faulkner & Anderson 1987). Given this constant formation, dissolution, and re-formation of teams to create films, the skill and talent of personnel cannot be tested and developed through long-term employment. Rather, Faulkner & Anderson argue that in this industry, an individual’s previous credits are used as indicators of future success. However, the key questions not addressed in Faulkner & Anderson’s work are: *Who* is able to have a long list of credits? *Who* is afforded that

initial opportunity that will lead to more opportunity? As we know, white men receive more instrumental help from their social networks and are more likely to gain access to high-quality jobs, so white men disproportionately have access to the initial opportunities that then lead to more opportunities. In a recent *New York Times* article, writer Maureen Dowd (2015) explains this catch-22: “If they [women directors] don’t have experience, they can’t get hired, and if they can’t get hired, they can’t get experience.” Women, and especially women of color, are not given the initial opportunities necessary to have the track records required in order to gain future employment. This creates a system of cumulative advantage, whereby white men start in the lead, which then grows during the course of their careers.

The film and television industry is structured in ways that foster inequality. The ambiguity, high levels of risk, and volatility that are built into the industry create a working context in which subjectivity, reputation, social capital, and track record shape employment opportunity and decision-making. These defining characteristics of the industry create a reproducing cycle of advantage and disadvantage, whereby white men have access to a wider range of effective social network structures, their social networks are more likely to provide access to high-quality employment, their aggressive (i.e. masculine) reputation work is most effective, and because they look like the vast majority of decision-makers in Hollywood, they are more likely to gain initial employment opportunities that then lead to more and higher-quality opportunity. My work furthers the existing literature by examining how the organizational structures of talent agencies contribute to this cycle of inequality.

## PAY INEQUALITY AMONG TELEVISION AND FILM WRITERS

In their work during the 1990's, Bielby and Bielby investigated patterns of inequality between men and women television and film writers. Bielby and Bielby (1992) found that women television writers experienced a continuous disadvantage throughout their careers. Women television writers were paid less when they entered the industry, and this disadvantage remained constant – at about 70 cents for each \$1 earned by men – throughout their entire writing careers when compared to men writers of similar age and industry experience (Bielby & Bielby 1992). Bielby and Bielby (1996) also studied gender inequality in pay among film screenwriters and found that women experienced a system of cumulative disadvantage, where the gender gap in pay increased with more years of experience. They found that among screenwriters, the gender gap in earnings grew from a 20% difference within the first five years of entry into the industry, to a difference of 40% or more by the fifteenth year in the industry. Bielby and Bielby attributed this system of cumulative disadvantage to the confinement of women, and not men, screenwriters to a narrow range of genres. Bielby and Bielby concluded that the gender gap in earnings among writers was extreme in both television and film and was not eroding over time.

Bielby and Bielby (1999) also investigated the role talent agencies played in screenwriters' careers in Hollywood. The authors explain that a few core talent agencies fulfill a brokerage role in the film business, but have also become more involved in the production process through the introduction of packaging. Talent agencies' implementation of packaging allowed them to amass power in shaping the market. As a



result, Bielby and Bielby (1999) found that writers who were represented by a core agency were significantly more likely to find employment and earned substantially more than writers who were equally qualified but represented by non-core agencies. Bielby and Bielby (1999) found that core agencies primarily represented white men and that unsurprisingly, everyone else was less likely to be employed. When the researchers controlled for core agency representation and track record, racial minorities no longer faced a disadvantage and women's disadvantage was reduced by two thirds, though they do not interrogate the ways race and gender collectively shape these systems of disadvantage. This finding indicates how important it is to be represented by a core agency.

Bielby and Bielby's work reveals the gender gap in pay among television and film writers as well as the negative consequences mostly underrepresented groups face by lacking representation by core agencies. Knowing how important core agency representation can be for an artists' career, and knowing that the majority of agents and clientele at core agencies are men, this projects seeks to understand the structural barriers women face in becoming talent agents at these elite organizations.

Gender scholars understand inequality to be interactional, structural, and complex. Researchers who study the film and television industry have demonstrated how gender and race shape access to opportunity. This project extends the literature by examining how the organizations that act as gatekeepers for the industry reproduce inequality in Hollywood. In the following chapter, I introduce my findings and argue that the

organizational logics and narratives of success within talent agencies contain assumptions about gender, race, class, and sexuality.

### CHAPTER 3: INEQUALITY IN TALENT AGENCIES

Though often understood as neutral spaces, workplaces are constructed in ways that advantage and disadvantage certain groups of people. The structures, job requirements, and narratives of success in any given organization create systems of oppression and exclusion for underrepresented groups. In this chapter, I examine how Hollywood talent agencies are organized in ways that create opportunity for white, heterosexual, class-privileged men and form obstacles for everyone else. I use Kanter's conceptualization of tokenized groups, Acker's theory of gendered organizations, and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to understand the structures and discourses used to justify male domination in these spaces.

The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I examine men's monopoly of powerful positions within these organizations. Next, I consider the exclusively male professional networks and patrimonial systems of mentorship uncovered in my research, whereby junior-level men receive instrumental guidance and assistance from powerful men at the company. Last, I provide an analysis of the discourses that emerged throughout my interviews that valorize certain forms of masculinity and disparage femininity. These three findings contribute to a system of inequality in which (white) men are highly valued, mentored, and promoted, while women are tokenized, discredited, and isolated.

## **MEN'S MONOPOLY OF POWERFUL POSITIONS**

Men disproportionately hold positions of power in society in general, and in Hollywood in particular. In my interviews, almost every decision-maker described by a respondent was a man. My interviewees talked about men who acted as gatekeepers for entry-level hiring, men who determined who was accepted into training programs, and men who decided who was promoted to agent.

### **THE MAILROOM**

The mailroom is the primary entry point into a talent agency, and to the film and television industry more generally. Some of Hollywood's most powerful players started in a talent agency mailroom doing grunt work, which literally includes delivering mail. In a *Hollywood Reporter* article about up-and-comers in the industry who started in the mailroom, the writer advises readers to "Forget Harvard Business School. If you're looking to meet the next generation of Hollywood players, there's no better place to search than a talent agency mailroom" (THR Staff 2011). At every agency, an individual or small group of individuals manages the mailroom, imbued with power to make or influence entry-level hiring decisions. In my interviews, the person in charge of the mailroom was always described as a man. For example, Paul, a 50-year-old man who had been an agent for 20 years, talked about how he was hired at Agency #4:

The training program was run by a man named Steve...and Steve was sort of the gatekeeper to get into the agency, in the mailroom. And those were highly coveted positions and the interview process...really started with

Steve and you know if Steve thought there was something there, you were sitting down with other agents within that company to make sure you had the qualities that they were looking for.

Paul describes Steve as a key figure in the initial vetting process involved in hiring.

Steve's approval was needed in order for newcomers to gain access to the mailroom, and to the agency more generally. Patriarchal systems are maintained by the exclusion and subjugation of women by men. This is just the first example of decision-making roles occupied disproportionately by men within these spaces. As long as women do not fill decision-making roles within these organizations, a disparity in power remains.

#### TRAINING PROGRAMS AND PROMOTIONS

Talent agencies have developed internal training programs as part of the promotion process. The programs differ between agencies and can include a formal application, mandatory meetings with partners, and exams. At one agency, anyone hired into the mailroom automatically becomes a part of the training program. At another agency, hopefuls work as assistants for years before entering the program. Acceptance into the training program does not guarantee a promotion to the position of agent, which Lisa explained during our interview:

Well I mean, there's a training program of sorts...you get in the program, there's mentors, there's like some sense of if you do X, Y, and Z, you'll be in a pool of people that we'll look to potentially promote, right? I don't think there's a guarantee for anybody.

An individual agent or a small group of agents manage the training program at each agency, deciding who is accepted into the program. In my interviews, the person described as managing the training program was always a man. Adam, a 34-year-old man who had been an agent for eight years, talked about his experience in the training program:

They told me they wanted to promote me and the guy that I was actually working for was one of the people on the trainee program panel. He was one of the people that organized it and picked the people for it and everything like that.

If only men are deciding who gets into these programs, then only men are deciding who will be considered for promotion. This once again works to maintain an unequal system whereby men are given privilege and the means to sustain that privilege, while women are excluded and subjugated. The process by which men decide who will gain access to these training programs, and ultimately to promotions, extends the system of male advantage operating at talent agencies, where men hold the power to decide who is hired into the mailroom and from that pool of employees, who may be promoted.

#### DEPARTMENT HEADS, PARTNERS, AND PRESIDENTS

With one exception, the department heads discussed in my interviews were all men. Department heads are important figures at talent agencies - they run meetings, help determine annual bonuses, and influence promotion decisions. For example, Matt, a 28-year-old man who had been an agent for one year, told me about how he admired “Tim,

the guy who [is] one of the co-heads over at Agency #1.” James told me about how his previous male boss, who was the head of the department at the time, helped him make strategic decisions in order to be promoted. Aaron, a 25-year-old man who had been an agent for eight months, explained his career trajectory to me and said “I actually got really lucky, I was in the mailroom for...five days and the head of the department's desk opened and I convinced his assistant to let me interview...and he gave me the job on the spot.” Any time a department head was discussed in my interviews, he was described using male pronouns or male names.

In addition to determining promotions, respondents repeatedly told me that the department heads either decided or assisted in deciding the bonus amounts for agents in their department. Not one respondent had a concrete understanding of the criteria on which these bonuses were determined. They described the bonuses as ambiguous evaluations of each agent's value to the company

Men also filled the most powerful positions at the agencies as partners and presidents. For example, David, a 43-year-old man who had been an agent for 17 years, talked about a partner he admired:

The new company had formed from the Joe (partner) and Dale (partner) and Sean (partner) company and...he was probably 36 years old at the time and he was running the company with a group of guys, he was a managing partner, and he was in the center of a lot of interesting films getting made.

While explaining his own promotion process, James discussed the support he received from his previous boss and indicated the importance of physically sitting near an influential partner's office:

I aligned myself with the right people...Jay (department head) went to bat for me, made sure I got in the program...and by the way, it was nice we sat right next to...Roger's (partner) office, who makes all the decisions.

Virtually every time a respondent talked about a partner, they were described as influential leaders and powerful decision-makers. Every partner discussed in my interviews was a man. A few of the top agencies have made a couple of women partners, but throughout my interviews, none of them were mentioned. Men are also the presidents or CEO's of every top talent agency in Hollywood. In my interviews, men were described as the ones vetting applicants for entry-level positions, managing the training programs, leading the departments, and running the companies. It is not a coincidence that men fill the large majority of influential roles at these companies. Without intervention, unequal systems reproduce themselves. The men in power at talent agencies hold these positions and pass them on to other men. This system provides men with cumulative advantages, while excluding women.

There was one notable exception. When I asked James how he was able to stand out and make it into the training program, he explained that in order to become a trainee, he and other hopefuls had to gain the support of one important woman at the company:

The most important person in the whole decision process was Sharon...If



you made a real connection with her, life is a lot easier. She was sort of the ghost whisperer to the four partners...If Sharon said I was good, Greg (president) or Henry (partner) wouldn't get in the way.

James reported that Sharon did not hold the title of “partner,” but reiterated that she was highly influential at the agency. Whether or not it is true, James related a story that circulated in the company to justify her influence: Sharon was the first person the four men founders hired after starting the agency. James clarified, “Was she really the first hire? Was she the first female hire? You know, the story is she's the first hire, it sounds good. Maybe it's true, maybe it's a couple of people removed.” Although James talks about Sharon as an important figure at the company, he describes her as only having power insofar as she is able to influence the partner’s decisions. Sharon may indeed be influential and important at the agency, but the fact that she either does not or is not known to have the title of partner demonstrates the limits of her power and influence. Thus, even when women are given some power, they are still restricted in the extent of their influence. Without equal representation in the decision-making positions at these organizations, the reproduction of male domination will persist.

## **NETWORKS AND MENTORING**

In addition to men filling the powerful positions at talent agencies, I also found that my respondents’ professional networks were exclusive to men and their mentoring relationships worked as patrimonial systems of power, where influential men passed their power on to future generations of men.

## EXCLUSIVE PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

The professional networks of the agents I interviewed were largely exclusive to women. When I asked respondents to tell me about another talent agent in the industry who they respected or admired, with two exceptions, men agents named only men. When I asked about mentors, all but one of the men respondents exclusively listed men as mentors. These mentors were very often department heads, partners, or presidents at these talent agencies. With one exception, all of the respondents who gave me referrals for other agents to interview were men and referred me to other men. With one exception, my male interviewees were all white and they referred me only to other white men. The one Latino-identifying male agent referred me to a woman, who then declined the interview. Within these companies, where men fill the positions of power, gender and race shape professional networks in ways that are exclusive to white men. This finding is consistent with previous research that points to the gendered and racialized nature of professional networks (McGuire 2002). In one study of the oil and gas industry, Christine Williams, Chandra Muller, and Kristine Kilanski (2012) found that the most powerful networks were almost exclusively male. Unsurprisingly then, the most powerful networks within talent agencies also consist of white men.

## PATRIMONIAL MENTORSHIP

A patrimonial system of power characterized the promotion structures at these companies, where men agents who aligned themselves with powerful men were fast-tracked to promotion. Neither of the women I interviewed described mentorship

relationships like this. Though none of my respondents followed what they described as the “traditional route” to promotion, they all categorized their career trajectories as exceptions to the rule. The “typical” track to promotion, as described by one of interviewees, includes the following steps:

Most people, you know, you're in the mailroom, then you're a floater, you work for a covering agent, then you work for a partner, then you join the agent trainee program, then you become a coordinator, and then you become an agent.

None of my respondents followed this exact path to promotion. Instead, my respondents repeatedly described a powerful male ally ensuring either acceptance into the training program or aiding in a promotion.

Scott, a 45-year-old man who had been an agent for 16 years, started out in the mailroom. He said that he strategically put himself in situations that would allow him to foster relationships with partners. For instance, Scott purposely delivered mail to the part of the building where the partners and president worked. He also volunteered to come in on weekends to help one of the partner’s assistants and as a result, developed a relationship with the partner. This relationship gave Scott the opportunity to work for another partner right out of the mailroom:

I got to know Tom (partner) and...that led to, later there was an opening on Kurt's (partner) desk...Tom called...and said do you want to be Kurt's assistant? And I said yeah and he said okay you're gonna interview with him tomorrow...I did, and got the job.

Scott's relationship with one male partner gave him access to other powerful man at the company, and in this case, to a coveted position working for a partner.

Gabriel worked for the president of the agency and explicitly discussed the importance of working for the "right person" in getting promoted:

I worked for Michael for about a year and...about six months into the year...one of the heads of the company...was looking for a third assistant and I remember thinking to myself...if you're working for the right person, you get promoted a lot quicker...If you worked for Rick (head of company) or Brett (partner) or someone like that, you were gonna get promoted.

In all of the cases above, a male partner or president helped the respondents become agents.

Assistants' allies and mentors at the company are their ticket to promotion. This creates an advantage for men working in these organizations, who can call on powerful male allies to aid in the promotion process. This finding is consistent with research indicating that women receive less instrumental help from their networks than men do (McGuire 2002). In Hollywood talent agencies, men who align themselves with a male department head, partner, or president are given a boost to accessing the title "agent."

Throughout my interviews with talent agents, I found that men fill positions of authority within these companies and men are given access to promotion through the assistance of other powerful men. This system reproduces itself, where men hold

power that they pass on to other men. In this context, men are better able to access opportunity and women continually face obstacles.

## **DISCOURSES ABOUT GENDER**

During my interviews with talent agents, specific discourses emerged that devalued femininity and privileged certain forms of masculinity. In this section, I use Acker's theory of gendered organizations and Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity to frame these discourses of gender.

### **FEMININITY**

In my interviews with talent agents, the descriptions of women and the discourses about femininity that emerged distinguish between men and women in ways that privilege men and demean women, working to legitimate the continued dominance of men in Hollywood. These discourses of femininity materialized in three ways: (1) men agents conceptualized women clients as helpless or gullible; (2) men agents described women clients as crazy or overly emotional; and (3) men agents, and the industry generally, tokenized and devalued women agents. These three patterns of behavior create an environment in which women are, at best, treated as tokens, or, at worst, discredited and minimized.

## *HELPLESS AND GULLIBLE WOMEN*

Several men agents described women actors as being helpless or gullible. When I asked Mark, a 50-year-old man who had been an agent for 25 years, how he built his client list, he recounted advice he received from a mentor early in his career:

I just signed a bunch of models that were funny...I wanted to represent women, not men, because I was married and...this mentor of mine told me that guys will want to go out with you...and meet girls and do all that. Girls just want a father figure or a big brother, somebody to take care of them....so I decided actresses was gonna be my thing.

Mark's mentor advised him to represent women because he believed they wanted their agent to be a "father figure" or "big brother," which would better suit Mark's married lifestyle. By describing women actors as needing a father figure or big brother, Mark and his mentor construct women as helpless and in need of paternal guidance.

Gabriel, a 46-year-old man who had been a talent agent for 12 years, also described sexist advice he received from a mentor, who was the head of the agency at the time:

One of the things that John (head of company) had told us...when we were being promoted is, he'd always sort of, for no real reason except the fact that he felt like females...made a lot more choices in their lives with influence from outside people than men. In other words, a girl could be dating a guy who might say you're the wrong agent. She could be married

to a guy who may not like you. Whereas, guys he felt were a lot more loyal. He kind of...tried to direct us towards representing guys.

The president of the company told Gabriel not to represent women because they were not loyal and did not make independent decisions. Again, women actors are described as helpless and in need of guidance. In this case, instead of encouraging Gabriel to fulfill the paternal role in these women's lives, his boss advised him against competing with other key, and primarily romantic, male influences. Though Mark was advised to represent women and Gabriel was advised to represent men, the reasoning behind both recommendations creates and reproduces images of women as helpless, easily influenced, and dependent on male guidance.

These conceptions of women as being helpless or in need of guidance play into stereotypes of white heterosexual femininity. These stereotypes are used to discredit women and justify white men's dominance over all others. These stereotypes rationalize the need for a white male talent agent to guide other's careers, justifying their disproportionate occupation of the role, particularly in powerful positions within the companies.

#### *CRAZY AND EMOTIONAL WOMEN*

In two separate interviews, respondents described women clients as crazy or overly emotional. Adam, who is 34 and had been a talent agent for eight years, talked about his interactions with clients when he was an assistant:

My boss, he also represented Sue Adler (actor)...she used to call me and be talking about spaceships and alien invasions and like...the craziest, she's the biggest kook.

Though Adam said he enjoyed his phone calls with this client, and perhaps she was eccentric, he nonetheless describes her as crazy and a kook. Men clients were never described this way in my interviews, despite some of them having negative reputations in the media.

James, a 32-year-old man who had been an agent for four and a half years before leaving the industry, talked about his women clients as being overly emotional:

Jenny's an emotional roller coaster, and I represented a lot of young girls, so a lot of my clients were like that...All these girls...they were all just...emotional roller coasters. A few of them were stable, jeez. That was a mistake on my end.

James *attributes* his clients' alleged emotional instability to the fact that they are young women. Although agents talked about men clients as being funny or eccentric, none of them were described as crazy or overly emotional.

These descriptions of women clients all play into prominent and historical stereotypes that paint women as hysterical and irrational, and create an environment in which women are discredited. These gendered stereotypes operate differently for white women and women of color. Two of the three young women James describes as "emotional rollercoasters" are Latina actresses, playing even more deeply into



gendered and racialized stereotypes of the “spicy Latina woman” who is unstable or overly emotional. These damaging gendered and racialized stereotypes marginalize Latina women, rendering them sexualized objects who are not to be taken seriously. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) theorized about the ways in which these kinds of controlling images have been used to disempower subordinate groups, especially Black women. Collins (2000) explains that these controlling images are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life (p. 69). In this case, the image of Latina women as irrational and unstable are used to justify the need for white men, who are understood as rational actors, to guide their careers.

Though the interviewees were describing women clients in these excerpts, and not women colleagues, it is important to understand the cultural frameworks through which these men agents think and talk about women. These conceptualizations of white women and women of color are damaging and marginalizing. Describing women in these ways discredits them and minimizes their authority and expertise, creating an image of them as irrational and emotional as opposed to “passionate,” “sensitive,” or “eccentric,” as men are typically described in these same contexts. These images are then used to justify the subordination of these groups.

#### *TOKENIZED WOMEN COLLEAGUES*

In addition to the damaging stereotypes that emerged, in several interviews, respondents either tokenized women agents or described them as undervalued. At elite

talent agencies, a team of agents, rather than one individual, often work together to represent each client. Typically, one agent will take the lead and other agents will be put on the team for strategic reasons. When a relatively inexperienced agent tries to sign a new client, department heads or partners will often join the team to add prestige and influence. Sometimes, particularly in the case of women clients, a woman agent will be brought on to the team to add a “female presence.” For example, while describing the process of signing a woman actor client, James discussed the agents on her team:

Who was on the team? Me, Robert (partner), Dennis (agent)...and we felt like we needed a female presence, which was very smart at the time, so we brought on Tina (agent).

Though it is important to include women on client teams, their expertise in these cases is defined by their femaleness and their perspectives are limited to other women’s careers.

This inclusion of a “female presence” seems to embrace women as important team members, but I argue that these women are treated as tokens. In other words, men are not added to teams for their “male presence” or “male voice,” but rather for their power, influence, and experience. When James signed this young woman, he justified the decision to add a woman agent to the team because she would bring a “female presence,” rather than an expertise in anything else. Notice he did not feel the need to qualify their decision to add Robert or Dennis to this young woman’s team. This dynamic is consistent with Kanter’s conception of skewed groups, where tokens are treated as representatives of their outsider social identity, rather than as individuals. Women agents in these spaces

are not just “agents” and do not just bring skill to teams, but rather they are women agents who bring a “female presence.”

In addition, my respondents talked about women agents who they admired, but were undervalued in the industry. For example, when I asked Lisa, a 47-year-old woman who had been an agent for 22 years, to tell me about a colleague she admired, she told me about a hard-working woman agent who she felt was underestimated by her peers:

I respect and admire a woman at Agency #3 named Janet who I think has an incredible eye for talent. I think that she's constantly underestimated because people at other companies think they can take clients from her at any point, but she's one of those people who has managed to keep her clients because she is relentless and works herself like crazy.

Lisa explains that Janet is “constantly underestimated” by other agents who often try to poach her clients. As a result, Janet needs to be “relentless” and works “herself like crazy” in order to maintain her position as an agent.

In my interview with James, he also described a woman colleague who he felt was undervalued. James expressed his frustration with what he perceived to be his company's higher valuation of agents representing edgy and up-and-comer clients over agents representing perhaps less glamorous, but very lucrative clients. Within this context, James brought up Kelly, who he felt was not adequately appreciated:

That sucked too because Kelly, who would represent half the people on television making more money than God... We weren't talking about them... She was impressive, I love Kelly. Just wasn't sexy, you know.

Ryan's client roster was sexy, even though half the time they didn't make any fucking money.

Though James does not attribute this difference in valuation to gender, it is interesting to note that in this case, a man agent with a lower-earning client list had more prestige than a woman agent who brought a lot of money into the company. It is also worth noting here the sexual undercurrent present in this excerpt and throughout the industry. James is not describing the individual clients as sexual appealing, but rather the agent's entire roster as being "sexy." There are certain assumptions about race, class, sexuality, and gender built into these sexualized descriptions or phrases used in Hollywood. However, in both of these cases, women talent agents were described as undervalued or underestimated in a way that men agents were never talked about.

The sexist attitudes that emerged in my interviews rendered women at best, experts insofar as they brought a "female presence," and at worst, undervalued, unstable, disloyal, easily-influenced and in need of male guidance. My respondents did not talk about men in these ways.

## MASCULINITY

Throughout my interviews, the narratives of success and the abstract role of "talent agent" included assumptions of maleness, heterosexuality, and a certain performance of masculinity. I use Acker's conception of the assumed maleness of "jobs" and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to frame these discourses in order to understand how they reproduce systems of inequality.

## *MASCULINE PERFORMANCE*

Many of my male interviewees explained that the masculine performance of a talent agent has changed over time. In the past, my interviewees said talent agents were expected to be “sharks” or “killers,” aggressively advocating for their clients at all costs. Aaron described the contemporary way of performing as a talent agent:

I feel like the old days, the agent used to be kind of like this jerk, but I feel like that's not the case as much anymore. Now, it's kind of like this more well-rounded, well-traveled, knowing all sorts of things, it isn't just about crushing people on deals anymore. It's about being a good guy and having friends at all the different companies.

Other interviewees described additional important traits, like being “intelligent,” “well-mannered,” “charming” and a “people person.” In nearly half of my interviews, respondents discussed the importance of being a “good guy” in order to be successful.

Along with the emphasis on being a “good guy” assuming the maleness of the job, it also seems to be an attempt to combat the reputation, or as one interviewee described, the “bad stigma” talent agents have in Hollywood of being “jerks,” “assholes,” and “liars.” This reputation of talent agents is rooted in the history of Hollywood. Studio executives and producers were highly suspicious of talent agents and referred to their entrance into Hollywood during the 1930’s as the “talent agent problem.” Thus, talent agents have always been thwarting accusations of being dishonest or exploitative and have used a combination of assertiveness and charm to build their businesses. However, there does seem to be more of an emphasis on these other traits in today’s Hollywood.

This contemporary emphasis on being charming, sociable, intelligent, well-mannered, well-rounded, and well-traveled is only accessible for certain people, mostly well-educated, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual, white men.

Interestingly, my respondents also stressed the importance of expressing stereotypically masculine traits to be successful in their jobs. When I asked what some of the “must-have” traits were to be successful, agents very often listed being “aggressive” and “not taking no for an answer.” David explained, “you have to be protective...you have to be able to be forceful when you need to be.” Stephen told me it was important to “not take no for an answer” and explained that he was drawn to the job because he liked to “hustle” and enjoyed “being competitive.” James explained, “You gotta have some ruthlessness to you and you gotta have no fear...you just gotta be hungry, you gotta be aggressive, and...you gotta have thick skin.” Other interviewees listed “perseverance,” “tenacity,” “drive,” and “confidence” as important traits. Peter talked about the important balance between being liked and being aggressive, the tension that Hollywood talent agents have historically felt:

You have to...be really tough and be really aggressive...So it can be a...delicate balance. You don't want people to think you're also a pussy because they don't want their agent to be too nice, so you gotta walk that line to make sure people trust you and like you but you also have to make sure that people know that if you have to bring the hammer down, you can do that.

In Peter's response, he devalues the feminine and describes this dominant performance as necessary to success. He explains that he cannot be "too nice" or a "pussy," but must still maintain the balance between being well liked and trusted, and showing aggression when necessary.

Though of course women can be and are aggressive, they are read differently, often unfavorably, when they enact these masculine performances. In my interview with Nicole, a 30-year-old woman who had been an agent for three years, she describes this tension:

You can't be afraid to be aggressive. But you have to have a fine line, like you don't want to be that girl, like you don't wanna be so aggressive that they're like, walk away, because you want to negotiate, but you can't be afraid to be aggressive.

Nicole and Peter both discuss the balance between being aggressive and being a pleasant negotiator. However, Nicole specifically says it's important not to be "that girl" who is so aggressive that the other party walks away from the deal. I suspect that the threshold of aggression Nicole and Peter are each allowed to reach are very different, which Nicole points to in her explanation of not wanting to be "that girl." Thus, it would be more difficult for women to enact these behaviors that are built into the forms of hegemonic masculine performances necessary for success as a talent agent.

Nicole was also the only person I interviewed who emphasized the advantages of being physically attractive, a trait I suspect is more necessary for women than men in this

industry. While discussing her social skills, Nicole explained how her looks and intelligence have helped in her career:

You meet me and you're like "Oh she's cute and fun and she knows how to have a good time and she has some cool friends." And then you like sit down and have dinner with me and you're like "Fuck, like this girl went to an Ivy League school, she has a really strong point of view and a really strong sense of self" ...Like, wait a minute, she's actually serious and hard working... I'm the cool friend you want around, like, I'm pretty enough, but not so pretty that like, do you know what I'm saying?"

Nicole explains that people do not initially take her seriously or think that she is intelligent. Then, she brings up her physical looks to explain to me that she is just "pretty enough," but not threatening. None of the men I interviewed talked about not being taken seriously or their physical looks.

#### *MASCULINE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ROLE*

Along with the stereotypically masculine performances required as part of the job, the actual abstract role of a "talent agent" is constructed in a way that assumes maleness. Throughout my interviews, groups of talent agents were always referred to with male pronouns and explanations of signing strategies assumed the maleness, masculinity, and at times heterosexuality, of the agent.

Respondents referred to groups of agents only using male pronouns. When I asked Matt what he found appealing or interesting about becoming a talent agent, he



explained, “The information that these guys had...it was really fascinating and that these guys...had their finger on the pulse.” When I asked Adam what makes a talent agent successful, he replied, “I look at the guys at Agency #1 that kind of started there...they're incredible agents and really skilled.” Stephen, a 34-year-old man who had been an agent for four years, explained that senior agents often sent “the younger guys” to sign unknown actors. Brandon discussed the structure of networking in the business, telling me “a lot of the younger guys at my company” network as a group. These are just some of the examples in which respondents referred to groups of agents as men. This pattern indicates that when my respondents thought about talent agents, they thought of them as men.

Respondents also made multiple references that assumed the maleness, and at times heterosexuality, of talent agents. Peter, a 44-year-old man who had been an agent for 17 years, explained the “it” quality many talent agents had who were good at signing clients:

The guy that can walk in a bar and pick up a girl in a bar that night when he first meets her has a certain personality...The guys that are good at one night stands are usually the best kind of signers...You come across in a way that they feel like you're a stud...you're gonna be my animal out there, you're the guy I really believe in that's gonna be the quarterback on the team.

Peter uses multiple masculine images when referring to talent agents. First, he assumes the maleness, masculinity and heterosexuality of an agent by likening

signing clients to “picking up a girl in a bar” and having sex with her that night. This assumption of male heterosexuality invisibilizes agents who are not heterosexual men. Peter also compares talent agents to studs, animals, and quarterbacks, all of which are highly masculinized symbols of virility, aggression, athleticism, and leadership.

Later in the interview, when discussing the opaqueness involved in annual bonuses, Peter told me that his friend used what he called the “Bob theory” to explain how bonuses were determined:

No one really knows for sure how you get paid or why...so, my friend has a Bob theory, the owners see you in the hallway and they go ah! Bob's worth \$400K.

The name of this theory relies entirely on the assumed maleness of those who occupy the role of “talent agent.” Peter’s friend did not name his theory the “Barbara” theory because the position of “talent agent” is constructed in a way that does not include women. When I asked Eric if he had a role model or mentor, he too made masculine references in his response:

I have...solid relationships with all the senior agents around me but I don't have like a godfather...or like...a Rabbi or whatever, someone who's really looking out for me.

Eric uses masculine images of a godfather and Rabbi to explain his relationships. These excerpts illuminate that agents conceptualize other talent agents, and especially mentors, as men (and Jewish men in particular).

Another way in which the role of “talent agent” is masculinized is through assumptions about family. In Acker’s work, she explains that “a job” is an abstract, bodiless concept until a human worker fills it, who exists only for the work. A white heterosexual man is the closest fit for this concept, as he is assumed to have a wife at home to take care of his personal needs so he can focus only on work. In many of my interviews, respondents repeatedly discussed the incompatibility of being a talent agent and having a romantic partner and children. For example, while discussing the value of talent agents, Matt told me “you’re only successful in this business if you allow yourself to be.” When I asked for clarification, he explained:

It’s just how hard you want everything. A lot of people make sacrifices. A lot of those guys that make that much money, some of them have families, other ones don’t. They live and die for this stuff.

Paul similarly explained how time-intensive being a talent agent can be, and referring to family, posed the question he asks himself, “I think sadly the harder and the more hours you work, the better you’ll do, so that’s when it becomes oh okay, what am I willing to give up in my other part of my life?” Both Matt and Paul discuss the relationship sacrifices that are involved in becoming an agent due to the 24/7 nature of the job. Many of my respondents pointed out that the really successful “guys” either did not have or were not very involved with their families. In this way, there is an assumption built into the job requirements that an individual will either choose not to have a family or will have a partner, and presumably a wife, at home taking care of the family.

In my interview with James, he talked about a previous mentor who he says was actually pushed out of the agency after committing too much time to his family:

The great ones, that's why Justin is Justin, and Rob is Rob...those guys live the business, Keith doesn't live the business...his family is first. And that was something that I learned very early on from Doug, who was my first boss when he got pushed out, because Doug was spending too much time with his family. And he would, he would do a great job representing great people and they didn't, it's not what it took to be a talent agent and the minute you take your foot off the gas, there's somebody coming in from behind you to take it from you.

James was explicit about the consequences of committing too much time to family while being a talent agent. He referred to a number of agents who decided to “put their families first” and were either pushed out or then put off-track to leadership positions. This poses a gendered dilemma, where women wanting to be talent agents in Hollywood must choose not to have children or to pay someone to care for them. Though stay-at-home fathers and other alternative family arrangements do exist, they are still relatively rare familial situations, so women do not have the same set of choices when considering parenthood as men do.

### *MASCULINIZED SYMBOLS OF SUCCESS*

Three masculinized symbols came up repeatedly in interviews that further supported this assumption of maleness: (1) suits; (2) watches; and (3) alcohol.

Respondents described wearing a suit to be an indication to others that they were talent agents. Gabriel recounted an injury he sustained while he was an assistant that forced him to wear sweatpants to work. Gabriel felt directionless at the company and while he was unable to wear a suit, he felt he had hit “rock bottom.” He explained, “If you're a guy and you're not in a suit, you just stand out like a sore thumb.” Years later, Gabriel was promoted to agent in a department that was not his first choice. Gabriel was unhappy in this department and brought up the topic of suits again during this part of our interview:

I actually went from the guy who looked the part to the guy having to work, there wasn't even a purpose for me in needing to wear a suit to work...it just wasn't what I wanted to do.

Gabriel explained that without a suit, he no longer “looked the part.” The purpose in wearing a suit, according to Gabriel, was to indicate membership to certain departments, in this case to the talent department. He did not like the department in which he was promoted to agent because it lacked prestige and did not match his interests, which was further demonstrated by his not needing to wear a suit. The suits talent agents wear are typically very expensive, and so in addition to being a masculinized symbol, these suits are also an important indicator of wealth.

In my interview with James, he bemoaned the high cost of keeping up appearances as a talent agent, which included expensive suits and watches:

You could never catch up because if you got a nice chunk of money, you probably racked up a credit card bill on a bunch of nice suits trying to keep up with the Joneses...Next thing you know, you're wearing \$10,000

watches. What the fuck you need a \$10,000 watch for? Because everybody else has a \$10,000 watch and everybody else in the staff meeting, doesn't really, talking about the fucking money, you're talking about the nice fucking Craig (previous department head) all he does is talk about his watches. You gotta have something to talk about, you gotta feel like you're part of the crew.

James touches on two important masculinized symbols here. First, he felt pressure to buy nice suits in order to fit in and look the part. Then, he describes expensive watches as excessive but important symbols of success as a talent agent. James explains that “everybody else,” including a previous head of his department, talks about expensive watches in their company meetings, demonstrating the extent to which these assumptions of masculinity and wealth are built into the formal organization of the agency. James also describes the pressure to buy costly watches and suits to be “part of the crew.”

Unless someone comes from a wealthy family, it seems incredibly difficult to look the part of a talent agent at the start of a career in this business. Given the relatively low salaries talent agencies pay assistants (\$25-30K), looking the part is only attainable for certain people. Even when James was earning an annual salary between \$151-200K, he was still struggling to keep up with his colleagues. The narratives of what constitutes success within these organizations are gender and class-specific, where external symbols of masculinity and wealth are necessary in order to be perceived by others as an agent.

Gabriel also recounted a story in which watches were highly symbolic. Gabriel spoke very highly of his previous boss, John Moore, who was the head of the talent agency. John was an iconic agent and Gabriel refers to the agents who had worked as assistants for John as the “Moore guys.” When one of the “Moore guys” was promoted to agent, John had a special tradition for them:

Every time we got promoted...he usually called all the agents that were in the building at the time, so I think when I got promoted there was probably like about 12 or maybe 8 Moore guys...he'd bring them all into his office and basically pulled out a Rolex and gives you a Rolex and says you're now an agent.

John specifically chose to give his mentees a Rolex when they were promoted to the role of talent agent. This gift is highly symbolic of the masculine assumption of the job. Did John ever have a woman assistant who was promoted to agent? If he did, did he give her a Rolex? I cannot answer those questions with my data, but the masculinized nature of a Rolex and Gabriel’s reference to the “Moore guys” leads me to interpret this exchange as highly gendered and exclusive to men. The gift of a Rolex assumes the maleness of John’s mentees and is a symbolic transfer of power and prestige.

The topic of alcohol also came up repeatedly in my interviews, particularly when I asked respondents how they built their professional networks. Scott described the film and television industry as being “very social” and explained that in order to build his network, he was “always going out and going to parties or going to drinks or going to dinners.” Eric, a 34-year-old man who had been an agent for four years, also told me that

in order to build relationships he often had “drinks and lunches and all that stuff with people.” When I asked James how he was able to build relationships, he replied, “You go out drinking.” James explained further:

If you can stay out later than the next guy and have a better time with that producer...get him to have one more drink to go home a little more happier, he's gonna take your call before he's gonna take the next guy and so maybe your client gets that job.

In addition to the assumptions of maleness in James’ answer, it is important to consider how the dynamic of these meals, and especially drinks, could be shaped by gender. James explained that if he was able to show a producer a good time, he might be more likely to take James’ call in the future. This part of the job, which is expected and encouraged, presents a dilemma for women who want to succeed as talent agents. Drinking alcohol has historically been associated with men and masculinity (Lemle and Mishkind 1998) and continues to be a marker of masculinity (Perarlta 2007; Iwamoto et al. 2011). A woman agent who drinks with a man in the industry must maintain her professional credibility while fostering a relationship with men over drinks, which may be a difficult balancing act granted social expectations of femininity and heterosexuality. When most of the decision-makers in Hollywood are men, women agents cannot opt out of drinks with men as part of their network building.

In summary, throughout my interviews, respondents revealed the extent to which maleness is built into the construction of a talent agent. My interviewees stressed the



importance of stereotypically masculine traits for success, consistently used male pronouns when referring to groups of agents, used images of masculinity to explain signing strategies and mentoring relationships, and referred to masculinized symbols that were integrated into the every-day workings of a talent agency. Talent agents who are not men, and particularly not white, heterosexual, wealthy men, are not included in the hegemonic mold of what it takes to be a talent agent. In order to work as a talent agent, women in these spaces must tolerate their own invisibility and learn how to navigate the gendered dilemmas presented by the structures of networking and mentorship in these spaces. Ultimately, women talent agents must operate in a space where their gender identity and expression is in opposition to the conceptualization of the job.

Talent agencies are powerful organizations that act as gatekeepers, producers of content, and sites of professionalization. Elite agencies are situated in the center of the industry, touching every major project in Hollywood. However, these organizations have managed to remain invisible in the national conversation about inequality in the industry. This project has brought talent agencies into the spotlight in order to understand how they contribute to industry-wide systems of inequality.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The white male domination of Hollywood has largely been blamed on different sources, depending on the occupational group. Actors, directors, and writers in Hollywood blame studio executives, producers point the finger at financiers, and financiers claim that they base their decisions on audience preferences, particularly in the international market. Though all of these groups play a role in the maintenance of inequality, the system of advantage and disadvantage operating in the film and television industry is much bigger, more powerful, and perhaps most startling, still largely hidden from view. Where are the talent agencies, the gatekeepers of Hollywood, in the discussion of inequality? While they remain hidden, the structures of and the discourses used within talent agencies, and I suspect other major organizations in Hollywood, are organized in ways that privilege white men.

The purpose of this project was to understand why there are so few women working as talent agents in Hollywood. I examined the organizational logics and the discourses about gender that were discussed in my interviews to answer this question. Throughout my analysis, I strived to be attentive to the ways in which gender, race, wealth, and sexuality shaped how my respondents discussed their careers as talent agents. Using Kanter, Acker, and Connell's work to frame my findings, I argue that talent agencies are characterized by men's monopoly of powerful positions, gendered networks and patrimonial systems of mentorship, and discourses that valorize masculinity and disparage femininity. Collectively, my respondents described a workplace context in which some men agents openly harbor sexist attitudes about women and tokenize their

women colleagues, men fill the majority of decision-making positions within the organization, professional networks are exclusive to men, mentorship is most advantageous for men who align themselves with other powerful men, symbols of success are masculine, and the abstract role of “talent agent” is gendered in a way that assumes maleness and masculinity. This is the masculinized maze that must be navigated in order to become a talent agent in Hollywood.

### **SIGNS OF POTENTIAL CHANGE**

The #OscarsSoWhite hashtag began trending on Twitter this year when the Academy of Motion Pictures and Arts announced the overwhelmingly white list of 2016 Oscar nominees. Especially noteworthy was the list of only white actors and actresses nominated for lead or supporting roles for the second year in a row. Though the conversation about inequality in Hollywood was already underway, the list of 2016 Oscar nominees added fuel to the fire. Cheryl Boone Isaacs, The Academy of Motion Picture and Arts president, gave a speech at the award show in which she called on everyone working in Hollywood to “take responsibility” and “take action” to make the industry more inclusive.

In response to the public outrage over this year’s Oscar nominees, the Academy board unanimously voted on new rules that they claim will create a more diverse voting body. As of 2012, 94% of Academy members were white and 77% were men (Horn, Sperling & Smith 2012). Only 2% of Academy members were Black and another 2% were Latino (Horn et al. 2012). According to the Academy’s website, they aim to double

the number of “women and diverse members of the Academy by 2020” (“Academy Takes Historic,” 2016). The new rules stipulate that: (1) New members’ voting status will last 10 years and can be renewed if that member is still active in the industry at that time; (2) Members will only receive lifetime voting rights after 30 years or if they are nominated for or win an Oscar; and (3) Members who are no longer active will be given “emeritus” status, which will restrict them from voting on the Oscars (“Academy Takes Historic,” 2016). Because Academy membership used to last a lifetime, these rules are supposed to shift the membership to only those who are active in the industry. However, we know that predominately white men are active in the industry, so this new system does not actually provide more opportunities for other filmmakers, actors, and artists to gain access to this prestigious organization. The Academy also claims they have launched an “ambitious, global campaign to identify and recruit qualified new members who represent greater diversity,” though details about this campaign are not specified (“Academy Takes Historic,” 2016). Though it is of course encouraging that the Academy has swiftly attempted to implement policies to create a more diverse voting body, which could then shape the list of nominees and winners, I am not convinced these policies will make any difference.

Talent agencies responded to the #OscarsSoWhite discussion by defending their diversity programs. When a *Variety* reporter got in touch with agency partners at CAA, WME, UTA, and ICM, they unsurprisingly declined to provide demographic breakdowns for their companies, but insisted that diversity is important for their organizations (Rainey 2016). CAA pointed to their recruiting efforts at historically black and women’s colleges,

their “encouragement” of non-white writers to participate in writing programs, and their implementation of a program called “You’re Up,” which they say is designed to create more diversity in their executive ranks, although the only details about the program included bringing in guest speakers (Rainey 2016). The other major agencies point to similar programs, like “adopting underprivileged” schools in Los Angeles or mentorship programs. WME offers a “hardship financial supplement” to new entry-level employees to maintain their competitiveness with other industries, which may make those jobs more accessible to low or moderate-income college graduates. As we know, however, diversity initiatives can paradoxically reinforce gender inequality and male dominance by bolstering stereotypes, reinforcing gender differences, and providing women with unhelpful mentorship (Williams, Kilanski, & Muller 2014).

None of the agencies have spoken publicly about structured programs like affirmative action plans, diversity committees and taskforces, or diversity managers or departments, which we know can actually increase diversity among management positions (Kalev et al., 2006).

There have been a few promising signs of change in Hollywood. J.J. Abrams, a prominent producer, responsible for films like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, recently implemented a policy requiring that the gender and racial composition of the list of writers, directors, and actors submitted to his company must be in proportion to the demographics of the U.S. population. Ryan Murphy, another successful producer who created *American Horror Story* and *Glee*, has formed a foundation within his production company called Half, with the goal of increasing the diversity of his productions.

Murphy's annual goal for 2016 is to fill 50% of all director slots on his shows with "women or minority candidates, which he defines as people of color or members of the LGBTQ community" (Rose 2016).

These initiatives are formalized policies that are managed by an individual or committee, and thus are promising signs for increasing diversity in the television shows and films these production companies create (Kalev et al., 2006). J.J. Abrams and Ryan Murphy are both powerful men with influence, and these policies, if indeed implemented, may have the potential to serve as an example of how things can be done in Hollywood. Talent agencies could follow this model by creating diversity taskforces or committees that then require the representation of underrepresented groups within these organizations. With production companies beginning to require underrepresented directors, writers, and actors to be pitched by agents, talent agencies will need to implement strategies in order to deliver on these requirements, and continuing to promote predominately white men as agents cannot be one of those strategies.

## **PROJECT-BASED AND PRECARIOUS WORK**

Though the film and television industry is in some ways unique, it also just one example of the precarious, short-term project-based business model that is becoming more common in the United States. This model is sometimes referred to as the "Hollywood model" and is defined by the assembling of a team for a project, the completion of the project, and the subsequent disbandment of the team. As opposed to the longstanding corporate model, this project-based business model is "now used to build

bridges, design apps...start restaurants” and to develop new cosmetic products (Davidson 2015). As our economy makes a shift toward this model, it is important to understand the role gatekeepers play in creating employment opportunities. In this project, I examined the role talent agencies play in reproducing inequality in Hollywood. Similarly, future research should investigate the role gatekeepers, such as employment agencies or headhunters, play in creating systems of advantage and disadvantage in other industries.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations to my project that should be noted. My sample is relatively small, consisting of only 18 talent agents. Although I can provide insight into the ways talent agencies operate, I cannot make generalizations about all talent agents working in Hollywood. Follow up studies should focus on the experiences of the few women that work in the industry, as well as highlight the experiences of people of color. A second limitation stems from the fact that I could ask my interviewees about how they racially identified, but I could not know the racial identity of any of the individuals they spoke about in my interviews. For example, I did not know how the men in charge of the mailroom, training program, departments, or companies racially identify, so in that sense, it was at times difficult to analyze how race shapes who has power within these organizations. Lastly, my interviewees’ work schedules are packed, and their livelihoods depend on their daily productivity, so they were at times distracted or could only give me a limited amount of time. Though of course this is not ideal when conducting qualitative interviews, this is the only way the project could be done since participation did not

benefit their careers in any way. Future researchers should endeavor to embed themselves in the industry so as to convey more of the ethnographic context of agents' work lives.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this project, I sought to understand the organizational structures and discourses of Hollywood talent agencies that create disadvantages for women and justify the perpetuation of male domination. I used Kanter's conceptualization of tokenized groups, Acker's theory of gendered organizations, and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to consider women talent agents' experiences, how the structures of these organizations perpetuate inequality, and why certain kinds of men and masculine performances are more highly valued within this workplace context. I found that these organizations are defined by men's monopoly of powerful positions, gendered and exclusive professional networks, patrimonial systems of mentorship, and discourses that prize certain forms of masculinity and devalue femininity. Talent agencies are thus constructed in ways that allow certain men to accumulate advantage, while everyone else continually faces obstacles.



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