

Cultural Honours and Career Promotions: Re-conceptualizing Prizes in the Field of Cultural Production

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Despite their implications for careers, cultural goods and honours in the field of cultural production have rarely been examined as career events by culture researchers. More typically, cultural prizes are examined as they relate to the process of cultural valorization or are used to construct samples of venerated cultural products or producers for subsequent analysis. However, embedding cultural goods and distinctions in the career trajectories of cultural producers provides important neglected context. The example of the Academy Awards, the equivalent of a promotion in film acting, demonstrates the usefulness of the perspective. The research concludes that previously understood gendered age disparities are linked to earlier life course events, social networks, and structural factors that govern access to the career track. Implications for cultural policy are discussed.

Keywords: Gender; Film Acting; Labour Markets; Cultural Products; Academy Awards; Hollywood

Introduction

The field of cultural production has been fertile ground for investigation as a collection of labour markets. Aspects of cultural labour have been examined in the film industry (Blair, 2001), eighteenth-century German music careers (Abbott & Hrycak, 1990), Hollywood screenwriting and television writing careers (Bielby & Bielby, 1992, 1996) and American newspaper publishing (Carroll, 1984), to name but a few. In contrast, the *products* of the labour in cultural labour markets—art, film, music, plays, literature—have received somewhat more attention from cultural studies and the sociology of culture. In sociology, this body of research has provided insight into audience

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taste cultures (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005), cross-national differences in literary interpretation (Griswold, 1987), collective memory and artistic renown (Lang & Lang, 1988) and processes by which cultural goods are venerated (Corse & Griffin, 1997). It is somewhat less clear what place in the literature awards for cultural forms should hold. Prizes for cultural goods are clearly part of the process of cultural valorization, and they bear relation to the careers of creative artists, as well.

Some awards are more immediately conceptualized in the context of careers than others. Given the explicit importance of scholarly publication to academic careers, for example, it is not remarkable that social scientists have examined the pinnacle of achievement in scientific advancement, the Nobel Prize, as a career promotion, embedded such that it results from earlier labour and affects future efforts, such as the rate and quality of scholarly productivity (Inhaber & Przednowek, 1976; Zuckerman, 1967, 1968). In marked contrast, prizes in the field of cultural production have largely escaped similar conceptualization. Instead, these awards are typically used to create samples of cultural goods or creative producers for examination, for such purposes as understanding the representation of gender and race in acclaimed children's books (Pescosolido, Grauerholz & Milkie, 1997; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada & Ross, 1972) or illuminating sex differences in film role quality (Simonton, 2004). A perception that some cultural products are assessed on the basis of relatively subjective criteria may obscure their importance as career promotions (Street, 2005).

Regardless of the merit of debates over the subjectivity of prize-awarding processes, cultural prizes function to ordinally rank cultural goods by elevating some above others. In that these prizes categorically distinguish cultural products from each other, they consequently prompt analysis of both the process and the outcome. When cultural prizes are examined as cultural goods themselves, they provide a snapshot of the characteristics of the venerated at a given point in time, which lends insight into the concomitant selection process (Allen & Lincoln, 2004). However, this method is necessarily restricted from drawing firm conclusions about the creative artists themselves because the award is examined in cross-section and divorced from the context of the career in which it is entrenched. Such an approach has the effect, as Maume (1999) points out in his research on career promotion, of obscuring the sorting processes that generate the outcome.

The present research empirically demonstrates the theoretical and empirical value of conceptualizing prizes for cultural products as career promotions. Specifically, the article applies this conceptualization to one prize, the American Academy Award nomination for film acting, an honour that has direct implications for actors' careers (Lincoln & Allen, 2004), but which has been examined primarily as a cultural product thus far (Gilberg & Hines, 2000; Levy, 1990a, 1990b; Markson & Taylor, 1993). Conceptualizing the Award as a promotion in the framework of acting careers effectively roots the award in the course of the careers of these cultural producers. The article demonstrates how the extant 'cultural product' perspective has contributed to a persistent age gap discovered between male and female Academy Award nominees, then uses event history analysis to provide career context to these gendered age disparities. The results of these analyses point to new avenues of inquiry for research on sex differences in the careers of cultural producers. The

article concludes with a discussion of the implications for cultural policy and suggests future directions for research on creative labour generally.

Part 1: The Film Acting Labour Market

In part due to the visibility of its employees and the asserted effects of its cultural products on societies, film acting attracts substantial popular and scholarly attention. Particular scrutiny is given to inequities steeped in ascribed characteristics—sex, race and age. For example, the annual casting data report of the Screen Actors Guild, the labour union that represents 120,000 film and television actors in the United States, details disproportionate representation of whites, men and actors under the age of 40 (Screen Actors Guild, 2004). Specifically, although women and men comprise roughly equivalent proportions in the US population, 63 per cent of all television and theatrical roles went to men in 2004 (the figure was 62 per cent in 2003). Thirty-nine per cent of the male roles went to men over the age of 40, a figure commensurate with the proportion of men older than 40 (40.3 per cent; US Bureau of the Census, 2000). In contrast, 44.4 per cent of American women are over the age of 40, yet 71 per cent of female roles went to women younger than 40 (Screen Actors Guild, 2004). Thus, American women appear on screen less than would be expected by their proportionate representation in the population and older women are considerably more disadvantaged than older men.

Research finds that representations hold psychological and social implications for children's self-appraisals (Milkie, 1999) and the impact on audiences in terms of modelling appropriate gender roles (Signorielli, 1989) and setting expectations for romantic relationships (Wexman, 1993). However, actors' physical characteristics also have measurable effects on their acting careers. For example, both ageing and being female have negative effects on film acting careers in terms of the number and type of roles that actors receive. Specifically, these characteristics have a demonstrable interaction that negatively impacts women's film acting careers more than men's careers, both in terms of the number of roles received and actors' ranking in the credits of those films (Lincoln & Allen, 2004).

Despite the inequities in on-screen representation, some prizes for film are more equitably distributed. Specifically, many film acting awards, including the Golden Globe Awards, Cannes Film Festival Awards, BAFTA film awards and Academy Awards, employ a sex-segregated award system to honour women and men equally. Indeed, while awards for film production are imparted to persons engaged in all stages of the film-making process, it is only for acting that women and men are rewarded separately; by design, neither sex can be excluded from the above-mentioned honours. It is to this type of award that this research turns.

Part 2: Cultural Products and Career Promotions

For the purposes of this article, the American Academy Award bestowed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is the focus of the analysis. The

Academy Awards are one of the most prominent sex-segregated status distinctions in film acting.¹ Each year, 20 actors are nominated for the best acting performances in the previous year's films. Men and women are equally represented—five women and five men are nominated in each of the respective leading and supporting role categories. A nomination is analogous to a career promotion. Specifically, promotions, as they are characteristically conceived, are granted by peers or superiors and typically are marked by an increase in salary, greater peer recognition and increased responsibilities. Correspondingly, an Academy Award nomination is designated by the actors' branch of the Academy and voted upon by the entire Academy membership. Moreover, research demonstrates that for both men and women, a nomination has a significant positive impact on the number of film roles an actor subsequently receives and the actor's billing in the credits of those films (Lincoln & Allen, 2004), both of which generate higher earnings (Levy, 1990a).

Despite a sex-segregated award system that ensures equal representation of men and women, research on Academy Award recipients has found that women tend to be significantly younger than men when nominated (Gilberg & Hines, 2000; Levy, 1990a, 1990b; Markson & Taylor, 1993).² The age gap varies from decade to decade, from as little as two years in the 1930s and 1960s to nine years in the 1970s (Markson & Taylor, 1993). Within any given year, the age difference is often much greater (Figure 1). Since first conferred in 1929, male nominees for both leading and supporting roles have indeed been, on average, older than women that year, though the age disparity fluctuates substantially.

The consistent annual age gap and the subsequent cultural discourse have prompted at least two competing interpretations. The more prominent explanation is that the Academy discriminates against older women, given that it is primarily youthful and attractive women who are rewarded with nominations. A lesser account suggests that it is younger men who experience age discrimination, as men tend to be older than women when they earn the achievement. The conclusion of gendered age discrimination and the implications for careers of nomination necessitates reframing the Awards as an integrated part of acting careers. To date, however, research on sex differences relating to the Awards has examined nominations only as an outcome of a cultural product—films. Specifically, research has compared the average age of male nominees (or winners) with that of the corresponding female nominees (or winners) in a given historical period, typically a decade or more. Aggregating nominees by the period in which they were nominated has the consequence of equating contenders who are in different stages of their careers. For example, the cultural product approach draws comparisons between Michael Caine's fifth nomination, at 66 years of age, in 1999 for *The Cider House Rules*, to Samantha Morton's first nomination that same year for *Sweet and Lowdown*, when she was 22. As women's acting careers tend to end when they are younger than men (Lehman 1941; Lincoln & Allen, 2004), the cultural product approach to Academy Award nominees yields a snapshot of the venerated comprised consistently of older men and significantly younger women. The understanding of their careers, however, is considerably less perspicuous.

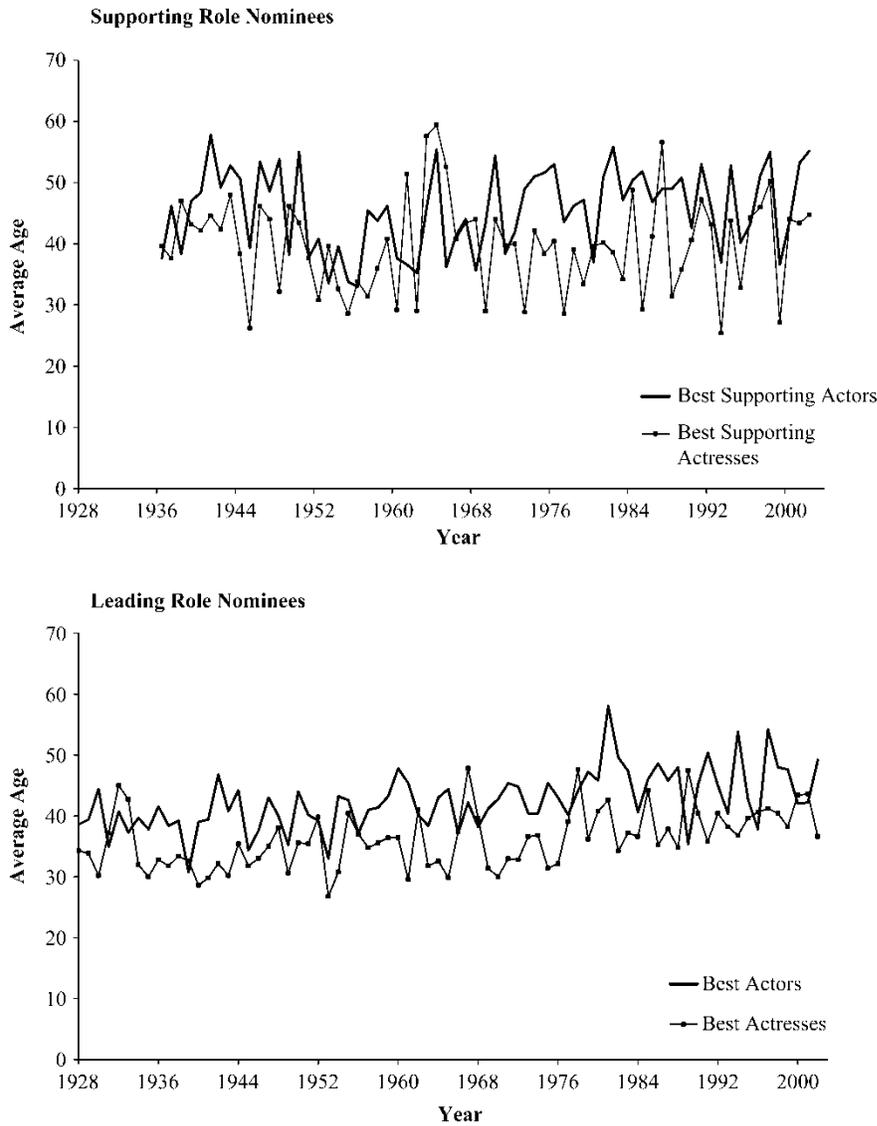


Figure 1 Average Age of Nominees for Leading and Supporting Role Academy Award Nominations, 1928–2002

Clearly, aggregating honours by the year or decade in which they were bestowed obscures the underlying careers. To examine cultural prizes as career promotions, nominations must be conceptualized as ordered and cumulative. Specifically, the most appropriate method of determining whether women are indeed nominated for an Academy Award at younger ages than men is to compare only ‘synchronous’ nominations. By evaluating only first-time nominees against each other, second nominations against second nominations, and so forth, Academy Award nominations are

effectively resituated in career trajectories. This approach has the benefit of producing unbiased mean nomination ages by excluding more senior nominees from comparisons with junior stars.

The seventy-fifth awards ceremony held in 2003 for films released in 2002 demonstrates how a career promotion approach addresses the problems cited above. In that year, the average age of the ten female nominees was 39.5, compared to 52.2 for men, a difference of 12.7 years. Many of that year's nominees, however, were no strangers to the Awards ceremony—that year, Meryl Streep earned her thirteenth nomination, Jack Nicholson his twelfth, Paul Newman his eighth and Michael Caine his sixth. As these actors are at different stages of their careers and, reasonably, more likely to be older than first-time nominees, it is logical to exclude them from comparisons with one- or two-time nominees. Four women (Salma Hayek, Diane Lane, Queen Latifah and Catherine Zeta-Jones) and three men (Adrien Brody, Chris Cooper and John C. Reilly) earned their first nominations in 2003. Of these first-time nominees, the average age of the women at nomination was 34.5, compared to 39.0 for the men. Thus, the comparison of synchronous nominees reduced the age gap substantially. However, the resulting age gap of 4.5 years, while smaller, is still sizeable. At this point, a final consideration must be introduced to address this disparity.

The failure to fully eliminate age differences results from the common use of age as a proxy for experience (Mincer, 1974; Simonton, 1997). Lincoln and Allen (2004) found that female stars have historically been an average of six years younger than male stars at the beginning of their acting careers. As this general pattern holds true for Academy Award nominees (3.52 year age difference, two-sample *t*-test, $n = 803$, two-tailed test, significant at $p < .001$), part of the age disparity between male and female nominees is explained by differences in age at the start of their acting careers. To return to the example from the 2003 ceremony, the four female first-time nominees experienced an average duration of 13.5 years from first film to first nomination, while the three male first-time nominees earned their nominations an average of 13.7 years into their acting careers. Accordingly, the four-and-a-half year disparity in the age at first nomination of these nominees is effectively controlled when the age at which the nominees began their acting careers is considered. Thus, despite the actual age difference, first-time nominees of both sexes were nominated at approximately the same point in their acting careers that year. Indeed, Figure 2 demonstrates the similarity of men and women's duration to first nomination over the entire 77 years of the Awards. Thus, a consideration of the duration between an actor's first film and first nomination appears to largely address the gendered disparity found in actors' ages at nomination.

To test this conceptual approach explicitly, the analysis relies upon event history analysis to explore actors' career trajectories sequentially from their first film appearance to first leading or supporting role nomination to determine whether women receive the Awards earlier in their careers than men. By measuring the duration of actors' careers prior to receipt of an Academy Award nomination, this research controls for age disparities between actors at the start of their acting careers. For actors who have received multiple nominations, the analysis also examines the duration to

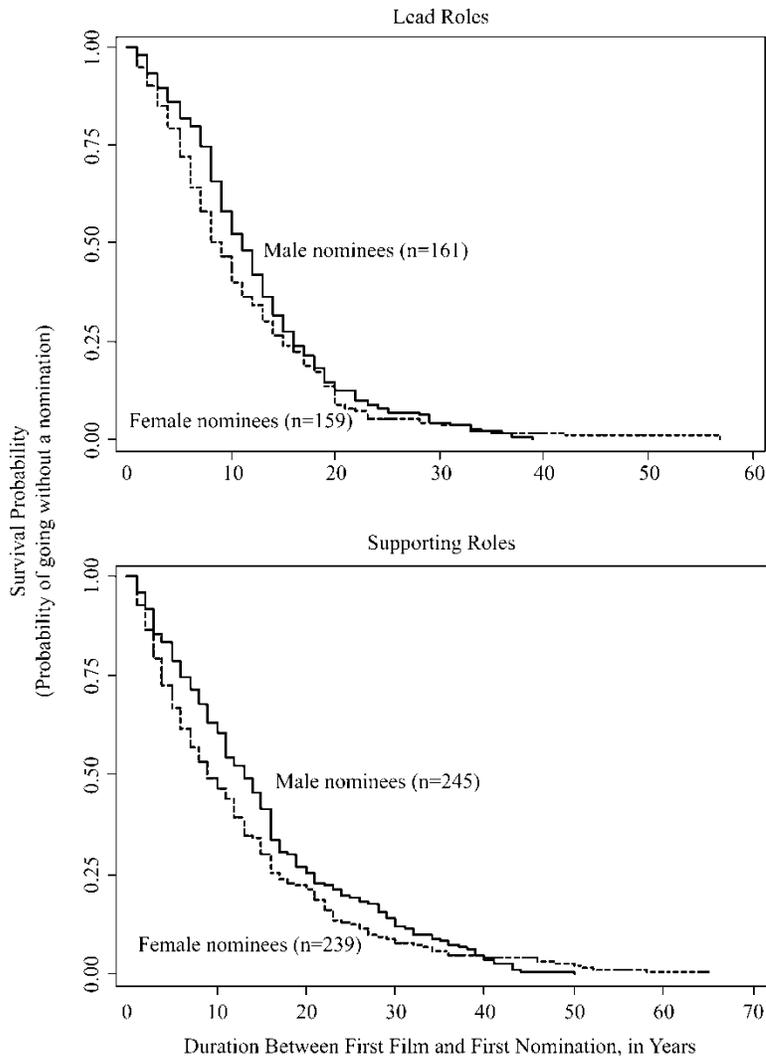


Figure 2 Survival of First-time Academy Award Nominees, 1929–2005

second and third nominations. In this way, the career durations of first-, second- and third-time nominees are compared only with each other, respectively.

Part 3: Data and Methods

The data comprise the population of all Academy Award nominees and winners from 1929 to 2005, during which the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences bestowed 1,446 Academy Award nominations upon 804 actors—406 men and 398 women—for the categories Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress.³ A list of all nominees in each acting category and each year of

nomination was obtained from the Academy Awards website (www.oscars.org). The birth years of the actors was corroborated by *The Film Encyclopedia* (Katz, 1998), the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), and AllMovie.com. These sources also provided the first year that each appeared in a credited role in a full-length feature film in any country, which was estimated to be the beginning of the acting career.⁴ The difference between the year of an actor's first film and his or her year of birth yielded the age at which actors first began their film acting careers. One actor's birth date was not available in any of the resources used and thus was eliminated from calculations for Figure 1. In addition, no racial comparisons are possible due to the small number of racial minorities who have ever been nominated.

Career data of the Academy Award nominees was calculated such that each nominee's career consists of a series of durations to each Academy Award nomination. The first duration covers the period from each actor's first film to first nomination. Thus, there were 3,433 person-years observed for actors whose first nomination was for a leading role and 6,005 person-years observed for supporting role nominees. The data were analysed using the Cox proportional hazard regression model. This modelling technique, often referred to as Cox regression, is a semi-parametric technique that is the most widely used survival analysis technique and considered to be very robust (Allison, 1995, pp. 111–112).⁵ Cox regression allows direct examination of the effects of categorical predictors on the baseline hazard—in this case, the 'hazard' is the receipt of an Academy Award nomination.

The Cox technique, developed in the study of health, assumes continuous exposure to the chance of the hazard. In this case, it is assumed that the chance of receiving an Academy Award nomination begins approximately at the time of an actor first appearing in a full-length feature film, the type of film for which nominations are made. In this case, the use of a technique such as ordinary least-squares regression to examine survival data is inappropriate because OLS assumes that the residuals are normally distributed. Indeed, the assumed normality of time to an event (in this case, an Oscar nomination) is simply not reasonable (Cleves, Gould & Gutierrez, 2002). However, the statistical results are largely similar if regression techniques are employed.

It must be noted that the purpose of the subsequent analysis is to demonstrate the utility of conceptualizing cultural prizes as career promotions. This article does so in the context of one well-studied award for film acting. The 'career promotion' approach is applied to the extant literature's claim obtained by the 'cultural product' methodological approach that female Academy Award nominees, as a group, are younger than male nominees, as a group. Consequently, no multivariate analyses using characteristics of the films or individuals are employed (cf. Fiorentine, 1987, p. 1120).

Part 4: Results

A Cox proportional hazard model was employed to examine gender differences in the duration of the actors' careers from each actor's first film to the receipt of a nomination (or win) for a lead or supporting role. The first two rows of Table 1 present the resulting hazard ratios for first-time nominees. Hazard ratios are similar in

Table 1 Cox Proportional Hazard Model Estimates of the Effects of Sex on Duration Between an Actor's First Film and First Three Academy Award Nominations, 1928–2004

| | Lead | | Support | |
|-------------------|------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|
| First nomination | 1.18 | (<i>n</i> = 293) | 1.18 | (<i>n</i> = 427) |
| Winners | 1.34 | (<i>n</i> = 68) | 1.17 | (<i>n</i> = 83) |
| Second nomination | 1.05 | (<i>n</i> = 169) | 1.21 | (<i>n</i> = 117) |
| Winners | 0.88 | (<i>n</i> = 38) | 1.43 | (<i>n</i> = 24) |
| Third nomination | 1.06 | (<i>n</i> = 106) | 1.35 | (<i>n</i> = 41) |

Note: Hazard ratios are interpretable as odds ratio.

interpretation to odds ratios and can be understood as referring to two actors, one of each sex. A hazard ratio of less than 1.00 indicates that men earn the nomination sooner in their careers than women, while a hazard ratio of greater than 1.00 indicates that women enjoy the award sooner. Accordingly, a ratio of precisely 1.00 indicates equality between the sexes in duration to first nomination. For example, female Best Actress nominees earned their first nomination 18 per cent earlier in their careers than did first-time Best Actor nominees. Fully half of the first-time Best Actress nominees earned that nomination by the ninth year of their acting careers, while first-time Best Actor nominees reached that point an average of eleven years into their acting careers. Among winners, the duration of Best Actresses to nomination is 34 per cent shorter than male winners. However, neither of these values is statistically significant. Indeed, there is no significant sex difference in duration to first nomination or win over the entire eight decades that the Award has been bestowed.

The same analyses were conducted for two- and three-time nominees. To avoid incorporating any bias from the first nomination, the duration under consideration for two-time nominees was measured from actors' first film to second nomination, and correspondingly for the third nomination.⁶ Cox regression analysis finds no significant sex difference in duration to second and third nomination; two- and three-time nominees are nominated at approximately the same points in their acting careers. For the 60 second-nomination winners, there is no significant sex difference in duration to second win. However, as only 24 nominees have won a third nomination, no tests were conducted for winners of a third nomination due to sample size.

Discussion and Conclusion

Cultural goods, such as literature, film and music, are the result of creative efforts in cultural labour markets, but they and their attendant prizes generally have not received much scrutiny as career-relevant events. Rather, cultural goods and awards tend to be analysed through a methodology, which I term the 'cultural product' approach, that aggregates goods or awards by the time period in which they are granted so as to draw conclusions about aesthetics, consumption and processes of veneration. For some types of research question, however, this technique is inappropriate in that it

improperly compares asynchronous awards and interprets the characteristics of creative artists distinctly from the context of their careers.

To compensate for these limitations, the present research conceptualizes cultural prizes as events that occur within the context of creative artists' careers. The case of the Academy Award for film acting demonstrated the utility of taking such a 'career promotion' approach to cultural products and their prizes by providing evidence that no sex differences in career duration exist prior to nomination for the Award, as Gilberg and Hines (2000, p. 178) had speculated. Specifically, this analysis demonstrated that the gendered age disparity found among both leading and supporting-role nominees in much other research is largely an artefact of the sex differences in age at the beginning of career. In fact, as a group, women and men receive their first three nominations at comparable points in their careers. Accordingly, the results of this analysis confirm the value in examining cultural prizes within the framework of careers.

To the extent that the results of this research are generalizable, the findings suggest certain cultural policy implications. Specifically, prizes designated for younger creative producers, which typically are intended to compensate for a perceived advantage of senior artists, conflate age with career experience and thus inappropriately emphasize an artist's age as the basis for selecting honourees. Instead, the method of selection for such prizes should privilege artists whose careers have been relatively short prior to that point. Indeed, awards that acknowledge new talent nominally as the 'best new' creative artist in a particular field, such as the British Independent Film Award for Most Promising Newcomer, typically meet this expectation. However, the difficulty in determining the length of a career may lead some award committees to compromise by explicitly using age as a proxy for experience. In limiting nominations for the Turner Prize to artists under the age of 50, for example, the award committee specifically states its intention to shield newer artists from the competition of older, assumed more established artists who might otherwise receive the award for lifetime achievement (Tate Britain, 2006).

Like other forms of job promotion (Long, Allison & McGinnis, 1993), this analysis suggests that time may be the single most significant component of the Academy Award nomination process. Rewardable talent may be primarily an achieved characteristic that results from acting experience. However, the time needed to gain experience is inextricably entangled with the development of social networks (Faulkner & Anderson, 1987). Certainly, the evidence from the present example hints that, at least for some, Academy Awards are not solely based upon screen acting experience. One hundred and eighteen actors, 47 men and 71 women, or nearly 15 per cent of all Academy Award nominees, received a nomination for a film made during the first year of their film acting careers. Seventy-two of these same actors have never been nominated again. One interpretation of this observation is that, at least for first-time nominees, a dynamic of strong scripts, consecrated directors and writers, or other factors may also be involved in the selection of Academy Award nominees (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Simonton, 2004). Presumably, however, to the extent to which Academy Award nominations represent acting ability, a second or third

nomination is more likely to reflect talent than the first nomination. Indeed, of the original 804 nominees, only 286 actors have ever received a second nomination, and fewer still have received a third nomination ($n = 147$). As a result, it may be that most actors take several years to establish themselves before receiving roles in strong films that are likely to garner Academy Award nominations, although the present research cannot parse this distinction.

Despite the finding of this research that approximate sex equality in career age exists among Academy Award nominees, attention must turn to the sex differences in chronological age that are present. Although overstated by the ‘cultural product’ approach, a sex difference in biological age does exist for first-, second- and third-time nominees. This disparity exists because female nominees, like female actors in general, begin their acting careers at younger ages than men. Thus, scholarly attention should be redirected to two areas: the conditions that shape the life course of creative artists prior to beginning cultural production careers, and the social network processes that influence their career trajectories. Indeed, is it easier for younger women to become employed in film than younger men? If so, is this due to greater (perceived) demand from a male audience? Or, from the perspective of supply, is it simply that women are younger than men when they make the decision to pursue acting careers? To the extent that youth is associated with attractiveness, particularly for women, how much of the age difference at career entry and exit is fostered by the industry? For example, Levy (1989) found that of top box-office stars, women were far more likely than men to have been fashion models prior to pursuing an acting career. It may be that links between the modelling and acting industries may facilitate women’s entry to film sooner than men. Moreover, the equality of the sexes at each of the first three synchronous nominations suggests that social networks may protect some women from the ‘double jeopardy’ ageing out that women actors otherwise experience as a group (Lincoln & Allen, 2004). These possibilities underscore the need to attend to the strength and gendered nature of social networks in procuring and preserving employment (Moore, 1990). By extension, these questions should be posed of the markets for all types of creative labour.

Notes

- [1] For the remainder of this article, the term ‘Academy Award’ will refer to the four acting awards (Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress) and exclude all other motion picture awards (Best Picture, Best Cinematography, Best Writing etc.).
- [2] This pattern is consistent with Lehman’s (1941) finding that women are consistently younger than men when they appear on the *Motion Picture Herald* Poll of top money-making actors or were deemed by *Photoplay Magazine* to have executed the best performance in a given month.
- [3] The numbers for each sex are not equal because slightly more men than women have been nominated only once. Additionally, between 1929 and 1935, the Awards consisted only of the Best Actor and Best Actress categories. In 1936, the Academy began to include categories for Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress.
- [4] Most actors have acting experience prior to film acting. Most of this experience is gained on the stage, the traditional form of acting, and some actors have parents who were actors, and thus may have been exposed to acting at very young ages, whether on-stage or in television

commercials. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to account for any acting experience prior to film acting.

- [5] I also estimated the models using the Weibull procedure, a parametric technique that assumes that survival times do follow a known theoretical distribution. Weibull regression, based on the Weibull distribution, does not require failure rates to remain constant. The results are very similar to those of the Cox regression—controlling for an actor’s age at which he or she first begins acting moderates the gender difference in age at first, second and third Academy Award nomination. (In this case, I chose not to use exponential regression because of that model’s assumption of random failure with constant probability, which assumes that the individuals studied do not age and are no more or less likely to fail late in the period of observation than they were at its start.) Results are available from the author upon request.
- [6] For this analysis, to be a winner of a second nomination does not imply that the first nomination was also won.

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