In the Shadow of the First Big Break
The Existential Dimension of Aspiring Writers’ Careers

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There are more aspiring artists than available positions for artists in artistic labor markets. For fiction writers, the publication of a first book often means getting the first big break in their literary career and entering the literary world as a published author. However, few writers succeed in their aspiration to become published. This article draws on interviews with 59 writers in Sweden, to explore the tension resulting from the passing of time while aspiring for, but not having, the first big break. The aspiration among writers is an orientation towards attempting to publicly communicate their fiction writing through a published book. Interruptions to the aspiration can create existential dilemmas of unfulfilled aspirations. The unfulfillment of the aspiration may be existentially responded to through “urgency” or “floating”, where the writer actively pushes for success or loses the aspiration. The article addresses aspiration in situations where artists’ chances for success are uncertain and are decided by gatekeepers. The theoretical framework developed is useful for understanding aspiration over time vis-a-vis existential dimensions of artistic careers which do not conform to an aspired for, ideal career.

Keywords: Aspiration, artistic career, aspiring artist, existential floating, existential urgency, literary career, uncertainty.

I. Introduction

There are more aspiring artists than available positions for artists in artistic labor markets (Menger, 1999, 2014). The oversupply of creative laborers and their work is due to factors such as artists’ passion for creative work and realizing the values of freedom and autonomy through creative

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work (McRobbie, 2016). Writers may aspire to have their manuscript acquired and published by a publishing house, while their chances of achieving this aspiration are slim and uncertain. For fiction writers, the publication of a first book often means getting the first big break in their literary career and entering the literary world as a published author. In Sweden, the typical age to make such a fiction debut is 32. It is common that these writers have been writing fiction and aspiring to become published for a long time. Being an aspiring writer means having an orientation towards attempting to publicly communicate one’s fiction writing through a published book and becoming a published writer. Interruptions to the aspiration possibly create existential dilemmas of unfulfilled aspirations. The present article asks how writers existentially respond to the tension involved in the unfulfilled aspirations of not achieving what they want to be in the light of the passing of time. The article, therefore, addresses aspiration in situations where artists’ chances for success are uncertain and decided by gatekeepers, and it develops an empirically grounded conceptualization of existential dimensions of aspirations in careers.

Aspiring writers’ careers have often been overlooked in career research. Instead, already published authors and their published works are usually studied (see e.g. De Nooy, 1991; Ekelund/Börjesson, 2002, 2005; Janssen, 1998; Van Dijk, 1999; Van Rees/Vermunt, 1996). Nevertheless, a growing interest in aspiring artists’ careers has emerged, such as the study of aspiring visual artists (Fine, 2017; Gerber, 2017; Lindström, 2018), aspiring jazz musicians (Buscatto, 2018; Nylander, 2014), aspiring country music songwriters and singer-songwriters (Skaggs, 2019), aspiring rappers (Lee, 2016), and aspiring writers (Lois/Gregson, 2019; Fürst, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b).

Research into artistic careers frequently studies success rates in terms of reception (Janssen, 1998) or discusses the economic and quality uncertainty in careers (Anheier/Gerhards, 1991; Menger, 1999, 2014). Research has also considered the existential dimension of careers in how artists handle their emotions related to their failure to continue their career. Lindström (2018; see also Alacovska, 2019; Fürst, 2016, 2017:71; Lois/Gregson, 2019:71-72), for instance, shows how discourses of hope, luck, and trust in a career are of importance to continue with a career that has a slim chance of success. Ye (2018) suggests that faith is another motivation to continue in such careers. Lois and Gregson (2019) have in a similar context introduced the idea of emotional capital, or to have the right emotional reactions to an evolving career, as a precondition for continued

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1 The statistics are based on material collected from the Swedish trade magazine Svensk Bokhandel, which regularly publishes information about new authors making their fiction debut. Between the years 1997 and 2014, 813 fiction debuts were announced in this magazine. Out of these 813 authors, it has been possible to collect information about the age when making a fiction debut for 807 authors (see also FÜRST H., 2019a).
aspiration. The present article contributes to the study of careers, aspiration, and existential dimensions of aspirations and career.

The article presents an empirically grounded conceptual model that systematically integrates an existential dimension of unfulfilled aspirations into the study of artistic careers. The unfulfillment of the aspiration may be responded to through existential urgency (Lee, 2016), where the writer actively pushes for success with renewed energy, or by existential floating (Bron, 2000), where the writer instead loses the aspiration. In the article, these previously disconnected concepts are integrated into an analytical and theoretical framework for understanding the aspiration as time passes vis-à-vis existential dimensions of artistic careers that do not conform to aspired for careers.

Career researchers have regularly made a distinction between an actual and an ideal career (see e.g. Thornborrow/Brown, 2009; Lindström, 2016; Mathieu, 2012), or artists’ sense of where their career has been, is now, and is heading, and where they should be in their career. The distinction is fruitful for studying existential dimensions of unfulfilled aspirations in careers. Existential states may come from the tension between the actual career, where one is in the career, and the ideal career, where one should be in the career. The present article investigates the culturally laden narratives and the meanings attached by the artists to the gap between the actual career and the aspiration for an ideal career. This focus brings attention to the interruptions, responses, and reflections on the interruption of an aspiration to achieve publication.

The aspiration to achieve publication is invested with meaning. For some, the attempt to achieve the goal of the aspiration is also to achieve a calling. Not being able to achieve publication would then be a denial of fulfilling a calling. The present article also extends research on unfulfilled callings. Berg, Grant, and Johnson (2010) show the way people cope with failing with a calling in constructing a new career path, e.g. by turning the calling into a hobby. Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2017) show how people who perceive their work as a calling, prepare for and handle retirement through negotiation of the existential meaning of their work as a calling. Lois and Gregson’s (2019) research on romance writers follows Thornborrow and Brown’s (2009) work on how people are disciplined into a notion of idealized identity and also narrativize their identity. Lois and Gregson (2019) show that the narrative of fiction writing as a calling is a way of managing contingency and uncertainty in a career and pursuing an aspiration.

In the study presented here, the focus is adjusted to the existential dimension of the unfulfilled aspiration to achieve publication in a career, rather than becoming a published writer as a calling. The article explores the existential dilemmas that arise from interruptions to this aspiration: the gulf between what could have been and what is happening or might happen in the career. Creating an integrated theoretical framework makes it
possible to understand an existential dimension in the lives of aspiring artists, and the conditions of aspiration that cut across the creative industries and of aspiration as a human condition more broadly.

II. Method

The analysis draws on 47 interviews with 59 fiction writers in Sweden\(^1\). Most writers were interviewed individually, while some writing group members were interviewed together in their writing group. The writers had different arcs in their literary careers, and (1) were aspiring, (2) had aspirred, or (3) contemplated aspiring to publish a first fiction book. Among the interviewed writers, 25 were unpublished and 34 had published a first book. At the time of the interviews, in 2013 and 2014, the writers were between the age of 19 and 75 years. The sampling strategy attempted to bring as much variation into the material as possible in terms of aspirations and careers (Becker, 1998). The variation made it possible to conceptualize phases of careers and compare responses to different career paths.

This article aims to describe and analyze the way writers’ experience and make sense of their career. Taking the interviewees’ accounts at face value risks creating illusory coherence and directedness in people’s lives (Bourdieu, 2000). Nevertheless, an assumption in this article is that at the very heart of writers’ way of understanding and experiencing their career is the fact that people create coherence and directedness in their careers by stories. Careers are experienced as stories and people attach meanings gained from these experiences to their careers, and these can be discursively accessed through interviews.

The coding of the transcribed material was done in cycles. Saldaña (2013) distinguishes between two cycles in coding: first-cycle coding and second-cycle coding. The initial coding procedure meant asking questions of the transcribed material: «What is going on here?» as well as making comparisons between text elements, between text elements and codes and between codes (GlaserStrauss, 1967 :101-116). The coding became informed by a broad coding strategy, where different phases of literary careers were identified, compared, and coded.

The second-cycle coding focused on artistic aspiration, the actual and desired career, and the passing of time. Writers’ careers were understood as narrative patterns, where the aim was to identify and analyze positions, actions, and meanings in different parts of the career, both in attempts to be published and dealing with tensions relating to their aspiration. With this focus in mind, the second-cycle coding drew on empirical phenomenology (Aspers, 2009), using received theory to develop empirically grounded conceptualizations. Hence, during the second-cycle coding, the

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\(^1\) These interviews are a subsample of interviews with 119 persons in different positions in the literary world (see FÜRST H., 2017).
codes from the first-cycle were returned to and all codes and material were read again using existing concepts pertaining to aspiration, career, and existential responses to unfulfilled aspirations. Existing codes were compared to and linked to the theoretical constructs. The aim was to refine theoretical constructs from the existing theory. This coding procedure has been called elaborate coding (Auerbach/Silverstein, 2003:104). During the second cycle, the theoretical constructs of existential urgency and existential floating were related to the codes covering empirical material. The theoretical foundation for these concepts is elaborated upon below.

III. Theory

A Chicago School of Sociology perspective to study careers informs the article. The perspective has a long history of being used to study and conceptualize artistic careers (see e.g. Barley, 1989; Mathieu, 2012:5-6). Early on when using this approach, Hughes (1958) made two important interventions into career research. First, Hughes (1958:63) formalized the study of careers by making a twofold view of a career, with an objective side, as a series of offices and positions, and a subjective side, as the experiences while having these offices and positions. A literary career would then be understood as a series of states, such as attending writing programs and getting published, and the experiences and meanings attached to these positions. Secondly, Hughes (1958:63) argued that researchers should not only study careers in professions and work-related experiences, but careers could also be studied in a broader sense. This suggests that the idea of artistic careers may include positions and experiences outside of work in organizations.

To be an aspiring writer is to be in a structural position of attempting to be published and get the position and identity of being a published author. To be in the structural position is to have an aspiration that may direct the course of an objective career. Attempts at achieving an objective career point are therefore laden with meaning and experiences. When people act on their aspirations in a consistent way and organize activities to achieve the goal of becoming published, they have become committed. Commitment is here understood as to be «engage[d] in consistent lines of activity» (Becker, 1960:33). The commitment is an investment in achieving the aspiration. An aspiration entails the initiation of an act through a social gesture and the social act is only made complete through a response creating a full interaction (Mead, 1934). This means that the aspiration is an orientation towards achieving a goal through the initiation of an interaction, which is complete only when the aspiration is reached in the form of a published book. When an aspiration, or an attempt to interact, is interrupted or unfulfilled, existential questions may arise and people may change their lines of activity. The commitment to the aspiration may thus be affected by these existential reflections.
Existential urgency and floating can be conceptualized as two existential responses to interrupted and unfulfilled aspirations. Jooyoung Lee (2016) has written about aspiring rappers and existential urgency. Some rappers realize they are getting older but are not, in the words of the rappers, “blowing up”, i.e. having their “big break” by being signed by a record label and becoming famous. They forcefully pursue their aspiration to succeed, as it might be their “last chance” of blowing up and gaining upward social mobility. From the perspective of this article, their actual careers are in tension with their ideal career. Their experiences of drifting away from potential success are interpreted through an existential dilemma of an unfulfilled aspiration. They become committed to their aspiration by being more fully engaged in activities that may lead to the realization of their aspiration. To pursue the career, and to close the gap between the actual and ideal, the artists try to control the course of their career.

Floating, here termed existential floating, was introduced by Agnieszka Bron (2002; Bron/Thunborg, 2017). Bron (2002) shows that people who are forced to leave their home-country experience existential floating. Their life trajectory is cut off, and they are in a situation where they lack direction, experiencing drifting and not in control of their circumstances. The life transition puts the sense of being part of the world and being an agential creator of the same world (Jackson, 1998:29) into question. From the perspective of this article, floating is the experience of an interrupted trajectory of an aspiration, where the career comes to a standstill. They are no longer committed to an aspiration as the aspiration is lost, and therefore they lack a sense of direction. They are still in a career, but no longer in control of it and do not attempt to take control of it. While existential urgency shows how people actively pursue an aspiration in the light of the tension between the actual and ideal career, the concept of floating shows that people whose actual and ideal careers diverge may also experience floating and may become passive. The stagnation of the career is in both cases construed as a lack of control of the career progression and thereby of the future, and the person either loses the aspiration or tries to (re)gain control of the career.

IV. Analysis

In this section, aspiration and publication as communication are introduced. Interruptions to the initiation to communicate are then presented. The analysis focuses on how the writers existentially respond to the tension involved in their unfulfilled aspirations of not achieving what they want to be in the light of the passing of time. Two responses to interruptions in aspirations are found: existential floating and existential urgency.
A. Aspiration and publication as communication

Aspiration among writers is an initiation to make an attempt to publicly communicate their fiction writing through a published book. To make such an attempt means that a person is aligned with the structural position in an objective career of being an aspiring writer. The position is imbued with the ambition to communicate to an unknown and potentially large audience of readers. Below, a writer elaborates on the idea of writing and aspiration as an attempt to engage in public communication:

Interviewer: You said, you want to become a legitimate writer?

Interviewee A: Yes, I want some confirmation that what I write is something that can be read or received. I mean, of the way you write, the writing is a wish for communication, or to extend yourself and get some response, so to speak. [By attempting to be published by a traditional publishing house.] I wanted to reach the stranger, or the one you do not know exists out there.

Interviewer: Why is it so important to reach the stranger?

Interviewee A: A very good question. I think there are two different parts, in part I think about myself as an author that has something of importance to say. I want many to hear what I have to say. And, on the other hand, another part, about your perception of the world. Who I am, what I experience, what I write, is possible to share with others, you share my perception, can you see what I see? You check yourself against the world, so to speak (Interviewee A).

Once published, a book exists independently from its writer. The book is the medium of communication between a writer and a reader. The writing, therefore, has many embedded existential dimensions, such as attempting not only to reach a reader but also to be understood, to share a viewpoint. The medium of the book carries the potential of communicating to many unknown readers, thus for some writers, the idea of influencing people’s lives becomes a basis for writing. The writer is someone wanting to be acknowledged. Many people attempt to communicate, but only some get a response. It is common that the most rewarding experience for writers is to meet readers who have read and thought about what they have written. But to be published is also to make something public, which is inherent in the structural position of aspiring writers but not always fully realized until the book is printed. To publish a book is for authors to lose control over their texts and sometimes of the impression people might have of them:

Interviewer: How would you describe your journey after the publication?

Interviewee B: Like a roller-coaster. [...] I can tell you about the month after the book was published. I felt a tremendous amount of
anxiety, I could not even work. I was feeling so bad. I realized my book, that now was published, would be read in libraries. I became shit scared. Like stage fright. Horrible. I wanted to go across the country and bring every book back to me. It was at that level. I realized I could not do that. Then everything turned around. It was so fantastic. It was a man who had bought my book, he had listened to me during some presentations where I had talked about my book. I had said it was a book by a woman for women. That was something I used to say. ‘Why do you think men cannot buy it and read it?’ ‘Of course, you can’, I answered, ‘but I had only imagined women readers’. ‘I want a book’, he said. He was 75 years old. [...] Then I got a letter from him. It was the same week I felt so bad. He told me he had poured a cognac and read the book and had become totally engrossed in the story. He began drawing parallels to his own life. [...] He applauded what I had written. He thought it was exciting, to eavesdrop on us. [...] At the end of the letter, he wrote that he looked forward to my future books. Then it was like, people expect that I will write again. I had moved him that much that he wrote a letter to me. If there is one person who feels like this, then my writing must be of some importance. As I was reading the letter I was crying (Interviewee B).

The writer shows how the realization of the full communication can affect the person and give value to the work that has been created. To reach the stranger can be a frightening, but also a rewarding experience. But both are consequences of the publication as communication, where the aspiration is the first initiation toward communication, and the consummation and feedback close the communication circuit. While writers may have aspired for publication, it carries different meanings, especially if the person has inside knowledge about the publishing process. People who have friends or family who have published themselves usually know what to expect, and know what it means to be published in terms of potentially reaching an audience. For others who have been more isolated or have only read about the process, it might be harder to fully embrace phases of going from being an aspiring writer to a published writer:

Interviewee C: I became very happy when I was at some literary event in the middle of Sweden. I remember that I became very happy, I really thought it was a great literary reception because they had really read the book [...].

Interviewer: It is also possible to believe that getting accepted by a publishing house would be the most emotionally rewarding experience?

Interviewee C: I have thought about that. But I was so young when I was published. I did not really get it, what I actually was doing (Interviewee C).

The writer had aspired to become published but had not fully realized the competition he was up against, that he achieved success despite the
slim chances of doing so. Reaching the audience also made him realize what he had accomplished and what he had aspired to do from the very beginning. In most cases, to be accepted by a publishing house is met with joy or gratitude, because it is a sign of the writer’s aspiration becoming realized. This situation signals the asymmetrical power relation between authors and publishing houses (Coser/Kadushin/Powell, 1983). This situation is brought about by the belief that it is the publishing houses that choose manuscripts and authors, and not the other way around:

I think that you are supposed to be so extremely grateful that a publishing house wants to publish your book. It makes me quite upset. We would not have publishing houses if we did not have people who wrote manuscripts, so they should show some gratitude themselves (Interviewee D).

As gatekeepers, it is up to the publishing houses to decide the fate not only of the manuscript, but also of the writer, and whether the writers will achieve their aspiration to be published. For those who attempt to be published, but do not realize the aspiration, they need to handle having written manuscripts that never reach an audience. Writers can then have an emotional attachment to the experience of not being able to communicate themselves through a manuscript. A writer who thought that writing was an attempt to potentially be “in a dialog” or communication, but had been rejected several times said the following:

It is so miserable to have these manuscripts lying around; they will never become complete. I will not be able to communicate them. There is something sad about it all (Interviewee E).

This writer had both been aspiring to be published and writing fiction for a long time but also contemplated ending his aspiration to be published, only writing texts for friends and family. Hence, there is a difference between writing fiction and aspiring to be published. People may aspire to be published but do not write texts, and writers may also write texts without an aspiration to publish what they write. There are also writers who write and aspire to be published, and sometimes they move between the different positions. For some, the uncertainty about the status of the text and their own ambitions may be kept hidden. In another case, a writer who initially wrote fiction, without attempting to be published, eventually began aspiring to be published as well as writing a fiction manuscript:

Interviewer: From this second manuscript to the third manuscript, what made you realize that you wanted to be published?

Interviewee F: I started to think that I wanted to be a professional writer. Perhaps. Writing went from something that I enjoyed doing in my spare time, to something else. Perhaps, I also wanted to justify why I spent so much time writing (Interviewee F).
From the start, the writer enjoyed fiction writing and did not necessarily want it to be published. The aspiration came from a realization that to be legitimate in her writing activities she had to aspire to be published. The writer became attached to the structural position of an aspiring writer and a typical trajectory associated with writing: attempting to be published. Hence, the writer began relating to such an ideal writing career. To be able to talk about your writing, and be regarded as a legitimate or serious writer, you need to be published. The person only exists as a writer if there is an audience:

To be published meant that I could see myself as a person who writes. By being published you get another identity. I also take my writing more seriously now. It becomes easier to talk about your fiction writing. It is different from talking about writing as a hobby, ‘I write because it is fun’. There is not anything wrong with that, a lot of people [do that], and it is exciting to write. That my book is being published makes it into something different than that, for better or worse (Interviewee G).

A general belief is that anyone can write, but not everyone can write and be published, and become a “real writer” (Lois/Gregson, 2019). To be a serious writer is therefore associated with being legitimately published (Fürst, 2019b).

B. Existential floating – The stagnating literary career and possibly losing an aspiration

When an aspiration, or the initiation of an attempt to achieve a communication link to an audience through a published book, is interrupted or unfulfilled, existential questions may arise and the writer’s commitment may change. Existential floating is the experience of being at a standstill and out of control of one’s circumstances due to an interrupted trajectory of an aspiration. The literary career becomes stagnant and writers are no longer committed to the aspiration, lacking both orientation and direction in terms of future publication as a goal. Interruptions to the career may come from the career itself, such as rejections from publishing houses, or the interruptions may stem from the writer’s own biography.

Writers confront an existential dilemma if their writing is deemed to lack any meaning. The basic reason for writing and aspiring to be published is lost. As the reason for writing is lost, floating appears. The aspiration to be published and who the person is and wants to be are also lost. The situation produces an existential crisis:

[I received a long rejection letter from the publishing house and the anonymous reviewer]. The text ends with, ‘it may be heartless to ask, but you have to wonder, what the author actually wants to tell us with the manuscript’. Then I started looking through older rejection letters and started to compare them. The question is everywhere, what does the author really want to tell us. I got so stuck. After that,
I stopped submitting manuscripts to publishing houses. I do not know if I will ever do it again. I got stuck in these questions. No one had ever confronted me with them before. [...] It almost became a large existential question to me (Interviewee H).

The rejection letter implied a very different reading from the one the writer had intended. For the writer, it became frightening that someone could read the text in such a radically different way and continuing to aspire became associated with shame and anxiety. She was not good enough to become an author, she told me. The interruption in her aspiration was the consequence of the rejection letter. The rejection letter questioned the legitimacy of having such a text published. The text was not deemed appropriate for publication. The writer had aspired to be published for many years, and had attended prestigious writing programs. This meant that she was “supposed to be published” as her career trajectory pointed in that direction. The ideal career, however, diverged from the actual career, and the aspiration became interrupted by the existential dilemma of not being able to claim a position as a legitimate writer who could communicate to an audience through a published book.

For some writers, the ideal career of getting published is perceived as hubris. To be published is to make a mark in the world, to be deemed important and regarded as a serious author. Not being able to publish a novel would be a blow to a person who wants to be such an author, and the ideal career would not be fulfilled:

I had written this epic novel and it was rejected. It was very bitter to give up, this last time. I would probably never be able to get it published, which made me both very sad and almost put me in shock. It had felt like this was my destiny. I had felt so strongly that I would become a world-renowned author. I was wrong, I did not have it in me, and then I let it go. I believe that I have given up the bitterness, and just accepted the situation (Interviewee I).

The writer confronted a situation where he could not realize his aspiration to become published and be seen as a great novelist. Not being able to fulfill the expectations about the trajectory of one’s ideal career put the writer back. He no longer aspired to become published; he had tried and failed, and therefore lost orientation and direction in terms of his writing. For some time, the aspiration stagnated and so did his career.

Writers often report that at times they have a problem with writing, and are unable to complete texts. These difficulties have been described as writer’s block:

To write has been hard at times. This novel-writing project has been really tough since I was rejected. I have been blocked, somehow. There has not been much produced during these years (Interviewee J).
The person above had not been able to either write or aspire for publication and was in a state of floating.

Nevertheless, it is not only rejections that put writers into a state of floating, but also biographical events:

I suddenly got divorced. My life situation became tough. [To write and become published] was something that I did not have any desire to engage myself in (Interviewee E).

The biographical event puts a hold on all aspirations and the person cannot for some time pursue an already existing aspiration and trajectory toward a publication. For this writer, the floating experience may be temporary and lead to renewed aspiration, but it may also lead to a break with the idea of aspiring for publication:

I think [I stopped wanting to be published] when I found, yes, when I started [studying at university] and realized that this was what I wanted to do. Writing fiction became less and less important to me. I had found something else that was more rewarding, and more meaningful, and I prioritized that instead. [Fiction writing] was not worth the time I spent on it (Interviewee F).

To spend many years writing fiction, and attempting to be published, can lead to a feeling that it is “not worth the time”. Not having a breakthrough can lead to doubt about ever achieving publication and to a search for alternatives that can fill the void created by the unfulfilled aspiration.

C. Existential urgency: The intensification of aspiration and developing a literary career

Existential urgency is a response to an interrupted or unfulfilled aspiration. Urgency often occurs when the aspirant is growing older but not having a career breakthrough. The urgency shows in a strong commitment to an aspiration as the chance of breaking through seems to be slipping away. The writer attempts to control the course of their objective career in the light of the prospect of not achieving their aspiration.

The urgency to be published comes from the attempt to close a gap between an actual and an ideal career. As has become evident, the realization of becoming older and still aspiring to be published is a basis for becoming strongly committed to an aspiration. There are certain ways a career is supposed to unfold in terms of age and making your fiction debut. The link between age and making a debut is internalized by writers and is used to guide them in their aspiration and career:

Interviewee K: I did not realize it then, but I do now. When I think back on it now, I think ‘Yes, good try, but you are only 18 years old and of course, you will not be published’ (Interviewee K).

As previously stated, the fiction debut most regularly occurs when the author is 32 years old. As writers get a feeling for the typical career in
terms of age and fiction debut, it might cause them despair but also, as has been shown here, may create a full commitment to becoming published.

Becoming a parent can be a form of a biographical event interrupting an aspiration. The realization that a person’s life will change may create an intense commitment to achieving publication before it is “too late” and other commitments need to be prioritized:

It might appear arbitrary that I published a collection of poems as my debut fiction book. For some years, I had written both poetry and prose. I got anonymous reviews from the big publishing houses quite early, when I was 25 or 24 years old, or something. However, I did not dedicate myself to fiction writing, and then I had a child. I then realized that the fiction writing… that I did not have tons of time to do this, and that it was time to do it for real (Interviewee A).

The meaning of writing fiction and aspiring to be published changed for this writer. The writer had been close to publication before and believed that in order to be published she had to make a serious attempt to be published and push for it. It became a matter of some urgency as her biographical trajectory, involving being a parent, might interfere with her literary career and ambition to be published. The writer saw a connection between her aging in a literary career and getting published, she was getting older but had not been published. The existential dilemma of growing older thus not only creates floating but also urgency.

Another writer tells a similar story, as it was becoming a father that prompted him to act to realize his aspiration:

About seven years ago, when I had my first child and was on parental leave, I used these accumulated ideas and desires to write prose and a crime novel. I sat down and wrote, seven years ago. It came very easily to me over a lot of weekends. I sent the manuscript to a couple of publishing houses and got really nice feedback but in the end, I was rejected (Interviewee L).

For writers, it is often a matter of time and energy regarding whether they can pursue fiction writing and their aspiration to be published. Becoming a parent means spending time not only with a child but also with a book project. The biographical event made writers reflect upon what had passed, what the fiction writing and aspiration meant to them. This made them realize that they should push for publication, as they believed that they would not have that much time for writing fiction in the future. In other cases, it was the convergence of several circumstances that created some urgency in both writing and aspiration:

Interviewer: Why do you think you wrote fiction if you did not have this clear goal [with your writing]?

Interviewee M: I have always written texts. When I was a teenager, I wrote poems. But I have always written short stories, really, really
short stories. I always had the dream of being published. I have thought, only one book before I die, if only I can write one book. I mean, this huge dream. But I have never managed to write a long text. [...] I always got tired of my writing when I wrote novels. [...] [When I wrote this manuscript] I was so politically and emotionally engaged in this debate about racism and discrimination. It mirrored [the experiences of] my parents, their friends, I went around thinking quite a lot about questions of identity. It was very personal for me, this text, and I think that made me dedicated (Interviewee M).

The urge to communicate something, a special or important story, is a reason for becoming committed to an aspiration. The writer above argues that finding the right story, which made her emotionally and politically charged to comment on society, made her feel an urgency to become published. She had always felt a desire to be published, but it was only when several circumstances converged, that she made a strong push for publication. An urgent aspiration for publication means that the aspiration is prioritized. Another writer tells about her experiences of moving from the north of Sweden to Stockholm, where she took part in a creative writing program:

Interviewer: When did your dedication to fiction writing emerge?

Interviewee N: [...] I applied for this [writing course], and then it was like I took my fiction writing more seriously. Previously I had made a lot of music and writing was more of a non-serious thing on the side. [...] By the end of the course, I had begun something that could be a novel (Interviewee N).

The writer argues that she found a medium that suited her need to communicate. She believed she had become more able to communicate through writing than through her music. When she realized the situation, she became dedicated to her writing. In later interviews with her writing teachers, this situation of a strong commitment to writing and aspiration was confirmed. She participated in all classes and stood out from the rest of the writing group, as she was totally focused on writing and getting published. The course changed her prioritization and through the course, she realized that certain ends were available to her and that she could become published.

V. Conclusions

The article contributes to existing research by focusing on aspiring artists rather than established artists that are usually studied, and by directing attention to unfulfilled aspirations rather than unfulfilled callings. The article has shown how writers existentially respond to the tension involved in an unfulfilled aspiration. Existential dilemmas of unfulfilled aspirations arise from interruptions in aspirations and the tension between a writer’s actual and ideal career.
The writers’ existential response is either an experience of floating or urgency. Writers in the state of existential floating feel stuck and become passive in their aspiration and their career stagnates. The writer may lose their commitment to becoming published. The passing of time without a breakthrough may also lead to existential urgency. The existential urgency shows as a tendency to become strongly committed to prioritizing fiction writing and the strong aspiration to become published. In addition to these existential responses, previous research shows that the author also may be unperturbed by setbacks and struggles, and may be dedicated to pursuing a career (Fürst, 2017; Lindström, 2018; Ye, 2018). This persistence in a career may be a form of non-existential response to events in a career. The author is either not strongly committed to becoming published or does not perceive a strong deviation between the actual or hoped-for career in either the short or long term.

The expectations built into structural positions of the career are important for the existential responses to arise. The formation of a strong commitment is contingent on a history of previous successes prior to attempts at getting published (Fürst, 2018a). The passing of time, as well as aging and biographical events, can be viewed as a closing window of opportunity to be published and can result in a strengthened or weakened commitment to becoming published. Authors who see getting published as their primary activity and commitment, and sometimes even as a “calling”, and who are not able to fulfill the aspiration encounter an existential crisis. If a person moves from a stronger to weaker commitment, the experience is often that of floating, while the person who creates a stronger commitment is the person who experiences urgency. Writers who pursue getting published as a sideline activity and have a lower degree of commitment presumably do not encounter the same high tensions in their careers that come with the passing of time and not having a big break. The existential responses to events in literary careers, therefore, rely on the underlying commitment to becoming published.

Those who pursue a career in the arts, despite its uncertainties and risks of failure, often assume a preference for risk-taking (Menger, 2014). A strong commitment to achieving success entails taking a great risk of failing and having existential experiences of floating and urgency. The ability and preference for risk-taking and having a strong commitment depend on the readiness of the author to take risk, which is shaped for example by the position of the author in social structures (e.g. gender and class) and the person’s cultural, social, and economic resources (Friedman/O’Brien/Laurison, 2017). This ability to manage risk also involves having been socialized into appropriate emotional responses to the unfolding of a career (Lois/Gregson, 2019) and strategies for dealing with failure (Fürst, 2016; Skaggs, 2019).
To fully grasp the situation of those who do not get a break, those who manage to get a break should also be analyzed in the future. It is interesting to study those artists who become successful in a way that positively transgresses the ideal career, and on the other hand, those who follow ideal careers. These persons enter an existential situation where they at times need to explain having success or having a “surprise success” or “early success”. The successful break makes them aware of the existential situation of being a rarity with all the expectations associated with such a position. Hence, the article contributes to a sociology of success and failure (Fürst, 2017). The framework developed in this article and the suggested extensions to the framework should be useful for studying aspirations in situations where the chances for success are uncertain and decided by gatekeepers.

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Structured Summary

Presentation: There are more aspiring artists than available positions for artists in artistic labor markets (Menger, 1999, 2014). The oversupply of creative laborers and their work is due to factors such as artists’ passion for creative work and realizing the values of freedom and autonomy through creative work (McRobbie, 2016). Writers may aspire to have their manuscript acquired and published by a publishing house, while their chances of achieving this aspiration are slim and uncertain. For fiction writers, the publication of a first book often means getting the first big break in their literary career and entering the literary world as a published author. In Sweden, the typical
age to make such a fiction debut is 32 (Fürst, 2019a). It is common that these writers have been writing fiction and aspiring to become published for a long time. Being an aspiring writer means having an orientation towards attempting to publicly communicate one’s fiction writing through a published book and becoming a published writer. Interruptions to the aspiration possibly create existential dilemmas of unfulfilled aspirations. The present article asks how writers existentially respond to the tension involved in the unfulfilled aspirations of not achieving what they want to be in the light of the passing of time. The article, therefore, addresses aspiration in situations where artists’ chances for success are uncertain and decided by gatekeepers, and it develops an empirically grounded conceptualization of existential dimensions of aspirations in careers.

**Method**: The analysis draws on 47 interviews with 59 fiction writers in Sweden. Most writers were interviewed individually, while some writing group members were interviewed together in their writing group. The writers had different arcs in their literary careers, and (1) were aspiring, (2) had aspired, or (3) contemplated aspiring to publish a first fiction book. Among the interviewed writers, 25 were unpublished and 34 had published a first book. At the time of the interviews, in 2013 and 2014, the writers were between the age of 19 and 75 years. The sampling strategy attempted to bring as much variation into the material as possible in terms of aspirations and careers (Becker, 1998). The variation made it possible to conceptualize phases of careers and compare responses to different career paths. This article aims to describe and analyze the way writers’ experience and make sense of their career. An assumption in this article is that at the very heart of writers’ way of understanding and experiencing their career is the fact that people create coherence and directedness in their careers by stories. Careers are experienced as stories and people attach meanings gained from these experiences to their careers, and these can be discursively accessed through interviews.

**Theory**: The article presents an empirically grounded conceptual model that systematically integrates an existential dimension of unfulfilled aspirations into the study of artistic careers. The unfulfillment of the aspiration may be responded to through existential urgency (Lee, 2016), where the writer actively pushes for success with renewed energy, or by existential floating (Bron, 2000), where the writer instead loses the aspiration. In the article, these previously disconnected concepts are integrated into an analytical and theoretical framework for understanding the aspiration as time passes vis-a-vis existential dimensions of artistic careers that do not conform to aspired for careers.

**Results**: The results show how writers existentially respond to the tension involved in an unfulfilled aspiration. Existential dilemmas of unfulfilled aspirations arise from interruptions in aspirations and the tension between a writer’s actual and ideal career. The writers’ existential response is either an experience of floating or urgency. Writers in the state of existential floating feel stuck and become passive in their aspiration and their career stagnates. The writer may lose their commitment to becoming published. The passing of time without a breakthrough may also lead to existential urgency. The existential urgency shows as a tendency to become strongly committed to prioritizing fiction writing and the strong aspiration to become published. In addition to these existential responses, previous research shows that the author also may be unperturbed by setbacks and struggles, and may be dedicated to pursuing a career (Fürst, 2017; Lindström, 2018; Ye, 2018). This persistence in a career may be a form of non-existential response to events in a career. The author is either not strongly committed to becoming published or does not perceive a strong deviation between the actual or hoped-for career in either the short or long term.
**Discussion:** The expectations built into structural positions of the career are important for the existential responses to arise. The formation of a strong commitment is contingent on a history of previous successes prior to attempts at getting published (Fürst, 2018a). The passing of time, as well as aging and biographical events, can be viewed as a closing window of opportunity to be published and can result in a strengthened or weakened commitment to becoming published. Authors who see getting published as their primary activity and commitment, and sometimes even as a “calling”, and who are not able to fulfill the aspiration encounter an existential crisis. If a person moves from a stronger to weaker commitment, the experience is often that of floating, while the person who creates a stronger commitment is the person who experiences urgency. Writers who pursue getting published as a sideline activity and have a lower degree of commitment presumably do not encounter the same high tensions in their careers that come with the passing of time and not having a big break. The existential responses to events in literary careers, therefore, rely on the underlying commitment to becoming published. Those who pursue a career in the arts, despite its uncertainties and risks of failure, often assume a preference for risk-taking (Menger, 2014). A strong commitment to achieving success entails taking a great risk of failing and having existential experiences of floating and urgency. Hence, the article contributes to a sociology of success and failure (Fürst, 2017). The framework developed in this article and the suggested extensions to the framework should be useful for studying aspirations in situations where the chances for success are uncertain and decided by gatekeepers.