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Ethnographic Methods with Limited Access: Assessing Quality of Work in Hard to Reach Jobs

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the use of ethnographic methods is detailed and discussed in relation to workplace contexts with access challenges, i.e. where the context makes it difficult for research to be conducted. The existence of these challenges points towards potential un- or under-researched instances of work quality, which are particularly worthy of academic research. In particular, the chapter focuses on the growth of the gig economy and platform capitalism, as noted by Srnicek (2017) in his discussion of "lean" platform companies that attempt to minimise costs and appear attractive to venture capital. This has opened up new frontiers of work that require attention in terms of the cases themselves, as well as presenting new methodological challenges for interested researchers.

The research discussed in this chapter focuses upon a company that organises its workforce as self-employed independent contractors and manages them predominantly via a smartphone. It is therefore typical of this mode of platform company, eschewing the traditional features of an employer. To use Graham and Woodcock's (2018, 242) terms, the platform brings together "the supply of, and demand for, labour" via a digital platform. In the case study here, the platform involves "the use of location-based apps requiring workers to be in a specific location", so the work is "geographically sticky" (Graham and Woodcock, 2018, 245). We refer to the company that is the subject of the research here as "the
Platform", maintaining its anonymity at this stage. In this chapter, the research seeks to go beyond the customer interface app of the company to understand the organisation and experience of the work from the perspective of the workers themselves. It is here that the method of ethnography is presented as particularly suitable for the task.

The chapter begins with a discussion of ethnographic methods. We take as a starting point Bryman's (2008, 402) definition of ethnography as a type of qualitative research in which the ethnographer "immerses him- or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and the fieldworker, and asking questions". The chapter then considers the ways in which this approach requires translation into these new work contexts.

This is followed by a critical discussion of the methodological problems this entails, particularly considering the questions of research validity and ability to generalise. The high points of workplace ethnography are then surveyed, providing a route into the use of this method in contemporary research. The main section of the chapter follows, providing a practical account of the method in an ongoing research project. This entails discussing the challenges that have been encountered, reflecting back on these methodological issues. The final part of the chapter discusses the implications of these methodological debates for the study of work quality.

THE METHOD

One of the primary challenges when researching the "quality" of work – particularly in a heterogeneous, geographically dispersed workplace such as the one present in the Platform under investigation in this chapter – is the need to address the idiosyncratic nature of the perception of "quality". These understandings can be tempered by a range of factors which, in turn raise a series of challenges to the ethnographer with regards to positionality in the field and critical reflexivity.

These range from the motivations and expectations of the work on behalf of the individual to the racialised, gendered and broadly embodied experiences encountered in the undertaking of labour. This is something that is further explored regarding the authors' own positionality below.

Whilst the researcher can only truly inhabit one perspective on the quality of work, ethnography – particularly in hard to reach workplaces – provides a methodological mode of engagement capable of bringing multiple experiences into conversation with each other. The inherent multi-modality allows for a range of approaches to be incorporated into the research, and in so doing creates a space for pluralistic accounts to emerge organically (see: Brewer, 2000; Herbert, 2000). This, in turn, is generative of challenges to the positivistic accounts provided by the Platform in terms of fairness, raising questions regarding the uniformity of the work as administered by the "same" – and therefore even-handed – machine learning algorithm.

In order to bring this diverse range of voices to the fore, ethnographers must establish strategies to make the research process as accessible to as many people as possible. Consideration must be given to the mode of entry researchers make into the workplace so as not to limit or homogenise the participants present in the study. Often, workplaces are hard to reach because management prevent access by researchers, either actively or passively.

Another alternative, which could have been followed in the case of the authors' research, would be facilitating access through the gatekeeper of a trade union (for the significance of gatekeepers, see: Monohan and Fisher, 2015; and Reeves, 2010). However, it was decided to initially enter the workplace away from this organisation in order to generate organic interactions and broad networks of participants that may or may not be involved in organised action against the Platform.

Further to this, challenges facing the ethnographer in hard to reach workplaces are the negotiations of identity management (see: Atkinson, 1997; Hammersly and Atkinson, 2007; Wolf, 1991) and fluctuating (c)overt research approaches (Lugosi, 2006; Spicker, 2011). This tension arises as a result of remaining "covert" to the Platform providing the work, whilst attempting to operate in an "overt" manner with participants and workers. The process is further complicated by the fragmented and ephemeral nature of a workforce dispersed across a city with irregular working times and shift patterns (Adler, 1993). The ethnographer's challenge here is to be able to remain in the field long enough to develop and maintain long-standing, trusting, relationships which remain personalised, despite potentially long periods of time without face-to-face interaction. Throughout the ethnographic process, "working" and "researching" identities overlap and merge as the demands of the labour process and of the study interfere with each other in a manner that is co-constructive, rather than disruptive of the broader research aims and interests.

A critical advantage of this long-term engagement with the field-site and participants is the position it grants researchers to witness the continual changes taking place at the Platform, and the result on working lives. The Platform under scrutiny in this research is symptomatic of other gig economy platforms in its ability to rapidly usher in changes to the architecture of the workplace (the user interface, the algorithm underpinning the labour process, and unilateral contract changes with staff, to name a few). Whilst this implies that any research findings are time sensitive and rapidly outdated – especially in the context of the slow-moving academic publishing cycle – researchers are able to capture data at a range of scales. Snapshots of specific events come into concert with broader experiences of work endured over long periods of time, and patterns of organisational changes. This ability to observe patterns of change and their impacts on work lives speaks to the worrying trends of precaritisation and "gigification" being experienced across multiple sectors of the economy (Scholz, 2016; Graham and Woodcock, 2018).

The approach outlined here requires a deep engagement between the researcher and subject, along with a blurring of the lines between the two. This can create challenges for the exit from fieldwork, as noted by Woodcock (2017), when he was fired from the call centre which formed the focus of the research, as well as the extent to which the researcher can – or indeed should – intervene in the workplace. This raises important questions about maintaining a robust methodology for this kind of research, along with a series of challenges for representativeness and generalisability for the research output.

RESEARCH VALIDITY

A major methodological concern associated with ethnographic research relates to validity and generalisability. The issue here is how a model of engaged practice can maintain levels of methodological rigour necessary for academic research. However, rather than seeing the engaged nature as a problem, it is possible to conceive of this as a unique strength of this approach. Michael Burawoy (1998, 5) discusses a reflexive form of ethnography that focuses on "engagement" rather than "detachment" as a method of generating knowledge. This methodological argument does not shy away from subjectivity during research, but rather seeks to critically embrace it as part of the method. It is therefore possible to conceive of some major differences here in comparison to a more positivistic approach. The "4Rs" approach detailed by Katz (1983) requires a guard against "reactivity" and not intervening; "reliability" involves ensuring robust methods of case selection; "replicability" means that repeated studies should lead to the same result; and "representativeness" requires the inference of results from the sample to the whole. However, an engaged ethnographic method, such as that detailed by Burawoy (1998), violates these rather than taking them as a guide.

These differences do not mean rejecting a robust approach for the method. Instead, it starts as a form of reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This embraces the importance of context – something that has always been core to the concerns of ethnography – to engage with a threefold dialogue: between the researcher and subject, between the process in the local context and those beyond it, and as part of a broader dialogue with theory (Burawoy, 1998). The challenge with conducting these dialogues is that they rely upon a reflexive process, which means the researcher must develop a critical understanding of how their own positionality acts as an intervention within the research.

In the case discussed here, we both have particular subject positions that affect our research. We are both young – albeit one younger than the other – white men with high levels of education. We are early career researchers at British universities, which confers particular levels of status and legitimacy. Our careers are tied to our abilities to conduct research on the subject of work, but our livelihoods are tied to this, rather than the job – which is the case for our participants – whether or not we may be doing the job ourselves temporarily. This means that intervening within the platform job holds much lesser risk to ourselves than the participants, whilst our time doing fieldwork is not the same as the lived reality of those we study.

Application of a reflexive approach leads to a different method of generalisation from the individual case. When examining a particular case with an engaged ethnographic approach, while also taking into account the researchers' own subject position, it is not possible to directly generalise from the findings. Burawoy (1998) argues that the fourth "R", "representativeness" (Katz, 1983), can instead be addressed through "reconstruction". This is a different method through which a move can be made from the specific to a generality. Instead of attempting to infer through the data, it involves finding a way to iterate upon theory, searching "not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory" (Burawoy, 1998, 16). Reconstruction in this context means contributing to the reconstruction theory, developing from an understanding that "each part contains within it the

essential principles of the whole" (Burawoy 1979, xv). In the case of work, and particularly work that is difficult to access, these specificities provide an important way to reflect upon work more generally.

HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHIES OF WORK

There is a long history of ethnographies of work in sociology. For example, in the 1970s, there were a range of studies that sought to understand the labour process through engaged research. Huw Beynon's (1973) Working for Ford began as a more traditional form of sociological research, but became more ethnographic as Beynon diverged from this path through participant observation and relationships with key informants. It tells the story of the Ford factory, often in the words of the workers, along with the resistance and strike action. Anna Pollert's (1981) study, Girls, Wives, Factory Lives, involved observation in a Bristol tobacco factory and engaged with the role of gender in the workplace. In a similar vein, Ruth Cavendish's (1982) Women on the Line addressed the experience of women working in factories through the author working in the factory herself.

Perhaps the most famous examples of this academic approach can be found in Michael Burawoy's studies of work in which he used the "extended case method". These involved ethnographic methods, as Burawoy himself worked in the case studies, engaging actively in the workplace. The first examined copper mines in Zambia, combining an analysis of class and race in this context (Burawoy, 1972). The second, and perhaps most famous, is Manufacturing Consent (Burawoy, 1979). This book was in part a response to Braverman's (1999) seminal text, instead drawing upon Gramsci (1971) to understand the role of consent on the assembly line. The third examined the differences in the political regimes within production under capitalism and state socialism, drawing on and comparing two workplace ethnographies (Burawoy, 1985). The fourth developed these themes through two case studies of heavy industry in Hungary, developing an understanding of these processes under state socialism (Burawoy and Lukás, 1994).

Since these moments of workplace investigation, there has been a decline in the use of the method. There used to be a lively tradition of research involving the "primary material of academic researchers, firsthand accounts marshalled by journalists and autobiographical testimonies of workers themselves" (Taylor et al., 2009, 7). However, "multiple factors combined to arrest the proliferation of these ethnographic accounts" (Taylor et al., 2009, 8). This includes the political and economic shifts from the 1980s, including: the relative decline of manufacturing (within which many of these studies were conducted); the weakening of trade unions (which were a route to accessing many workplaces); the absence of open workplace struggles (making this appear a less interesting area of research); and the growth of the service sector, which although providing a potentially important new area of research, was distant from the focus of many academics.

These previous experiences of workplace ethnography have been revisited and revived along with the growth of a new method of investigating the workplace: the workers' inquiry. This is one way to "put labour back in" to the analysis, with a particular focus on ways to "'see' resistance", called for by Thompson and Ackroyd (1995, 629). There have been special issues in Viewpoint Magazine (cf. Woodcock, 2013), Ephemera (cf. Woodcock, 2014) and Notes from Below (cf. Notes from Below, 2018). This has opened up a series of debates about how to conduct research on work, the relationship between research and the researched, and what an engaged research method means in this context. Examples of these new kinds of ethnography can be found with the Kolinko (2002) collective inquiry into call centres.

REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE OF USING THE METHOD TO CONDUCT RESEARCH INTO THE QUALITY OF WORKING LIVES

In the authors' own research, access presented a significant barrier to ethnographic research of the Platform. In one sense, the Platform's digital "on-boarding" systems – the frictionless process in which people sign-up online without a CV, and with minimal interview and training – means there are very few barriers to entry to secure a job. This is particularly the case for people who are young, male and have ready access to the technologies the job requires – itself a site of privilege and limiting factor for some. However, the covert nature of the research, and complex contractual arrangements, required the authors to negotiate parallel legal frameworks of the Platform and of their universities. For one, the ethical review process took six months, and rather than resulting in a scrutiny of the ethics of research, was more centrally focused on the legal perspective. There was a sustained involvement of the college's solicitors; clear statements had to be made about the division of accountability and the responsibilities (or lack thereof) of the college, should legal action be taken by the Platform. One author remarks in a diary entry: "the larger ethics process feels as if it has left the ethics out of the process. Now, instead, it is a purely legal one . . ." For researchers involved in the precarious labour relations of workers, it is essential that despite concerns over litigation, protection of the participants' identity is privileged.

Furthermore, the Platform's contractual positioning of workers as "Independent Contractors" (ICs) creates a unique situation for researchers to gain entry. Contractually, an IC does not have access to most employee/workers' rights as they are situated as self-employed, or as a separate business to the company for which they are providing services (De Stefano, 2016). Despite this legal status not reflecting the realities of the organisation of work, which has been noted in a number of court cases (Central Arbitration Committee, 2017), it is an important aspect to consider through fieldwork. This also blurs the standard access negotiations, as an IC (or a researcher undertaking IC work) is legally isolated from the firm – as such, re-creating the researcher as business. The below extract from the authors' field diary explores the frustrations and opportunities this creates:

If [The Platform] will happily use a legal/legislative loop-hole to classify workers as "Independent Contractors" (ICs) under a "Supplier Agreement" then if I am to use that same loop-hole to work for them as an IC – with no contractual ties to them, that must be contractually/legally fine. After all, if I am a business in my own right, with no obligations to a firm that equally has no obligations to me, then my access arrangements can ONLY be with myself.

That said, the ability of the Platform to rapidly bring about changes to their contracts and unilaterally require workers to accept them or leave renders the standard ethical review process of "clearing" ethics at only the start somewhat nonsensical. Instead, the researcher is required to continually re-assess the ethical and legal foundations of the research in a dynamic process that is unable to fit to the cyclical bureaucratic functioning of Ethical Review Committees. Looking forward, this chapter argues for a re-assessment of the ethical review process for those studying gig-economy work, as well as other fast evolving areas of labour market research, and to instead promote training and dynamic review, alongside close work
with legal counsel to ensure the responsible undertaking of research and protection of research data and participants.

The trust-based relationships that long-term research facilitates become of crucial significance when it is remembered that ICs can be dismissed with no notice, and without the due process afforded to regular employees. By working for a long period with participants, research projects are able to develop iteratively, and in collaboration with participants to best protect them. The Platform's hidden algorithm is capable of administering automatic terminations of contracts, and, as such, ethnographic methods have been developed and implemented in light of this reality. Contra to traditional methodological approaches, the authors seek to collect data with omissions and silences to protect the identities of participants in any research output. For example, the mapping of an

individual's movement across the city for an individual job has not been recorded, as their information can be used to digitally triangulate participants and terminate their contract with the Platform. However, the authors have instead built composite maps that showcase the nature of the work, without granting specific details that can be used to pinpoint an individual participant (see Waters and Woodcock, 2017). This technique has been developed in collaboration with participants, who better understand the firm's abilities, powers, and reach (Waters and Woodcock, 2017). The process has also been critical in exposing researchers to the surveillance capabilities of the workplace, which has, in turn, informed the continuing research and discussions at interview.

By shaping research methodologies to the individual participant and the broader organisational framework, the authors have been able to foreground the voice of the worker in the workplace. The glossy "app" and smooth interface which customers use veils much of the labour process, whilst stringent time targets and large geographical distances to traverse make it difficult for workers to discuss the conditions of their work with their colleagues. With this in mind, it is of even greater importance to showcase these perspectives – not only in academic output but, where possible, for audiences beyond academia. In so doing, it is also critical to showcase the plurality of voices and perspectives regarding the experience of work at the Platform. This is of particular significance to the study of "quality" of work, given the subjective and idiosyncratic nature of this work that this measure implies. Whilst for one participant it is considered "a shit job, but the best shit job I've ever had", for another it has "no redeeming features". Similarly, for some, it provides an opportunity to "get paid for doing my hobby". These perceptions are contingent on a combination of factors unique to each worker. If you are doing the job to earn "beer money" then your relationship to the work is very different from if you're trying to make rent and feed yourself/your dependants. Therefore in order to best represent the heterogeneous workforce, and their similarly heterogeneous impressions of the work, attempts at positivistic accounts must be abandoned. Instead, researchers should look to emphasise differences in opinion and situation that serve to make the work more demanding, complex and precarious for some, and less-so for others.

In an effort to showcase these voices, researchers must be open to the engagement of a range of participants. One critical limitation to the work of the authors thus far is that of the language barrier that exists between some of the workers and the researchers. This dynamic is something that plays out in the workplace too, and is, in many respects, reflective of the working environment. Digital technologies deployed by the firm can often be translated on the workers' device, meaning that people can receive communications from the Platform – even if they can't reciprocate them with ease. However, communication between workers who speak different languages can become challenging and, as such, groups emerge that each
have different qualitative experiences of the work process. The result for the study can be that the researchers become isolated from parts of the workforce, whilst parts of the workforce simultaneously become isolated from the researcher – thus risking the creation of silences in the findings. This is something that, moving forward, the researchers will be looking to address through interaction with bi-lingual gatekeepers (something which itself needs to be problematised) – and urge those entering the field to consider these limitations also. Whilst this generates other power structures within the research (see Valero-Garcés, 1995) it does provide the
opportunity for a broader cross-section of workers to be given a voice in the study, whilst gatekeepers can be further involved through the snowball sampling strategy of recruiting participants.

DISCUSSION

This chapter has brought together a range of perspectives for conducting ethnographic research into a contemporary Platform at the forefront of changes in work. The malleability of ethnography is a

perfect fit for a close tailoring of research to the work process, and the development of methods that work within the confines of the workplace, rather than external to them. This is a contribution to the reinvigoration of methodologies like the workers' inquiry that promote worker-led, pluralistic accounts of working life, and subjective understandings of "quality". Whilst focusing on an intervention into one specific Platform, the chapter highlights the way in which long-term approaches can be applied to a range of gig economy firms for the continued development of engaged research. The rapidity with which these organisations change, particularly in light of the shifting legislative and market-driven structures they occupy, does not make rigorous academic research antithetical to developing these insights. Rather, it provides the perfect opportunity for the synthesis of short-term events with emergent patterns and broader organisational change that typify the lived experience of work on the Platform.

Looking forward, further attention needs to be given to developing understandings of critical reflexivity that actively makes researchers and readers aware of the ways in which researching the embodied experience of work impacts the data generated. By iteratively creating research designs in collaboration – or even co-constructed – with workers, we are enabled to greater protect the identities and livelihoods of those that contribute to our research, whilst developing rich research to convey their stories. Future research must also be receptive to the development of methodologies that engineer in silences and blind-spots in the data generated. The organisational reach of large platform companies can result in research having unintended afterlives that can impact heavily upon participants. As ethnographers, we must be aware of our duty of care in relation to the full and ethical protection of participants.

The engaged ethnographic approach outlined in this chapter has been demonstrated to provide key insights into the gig economy. As work has declined as an area of research interest, this leaves large sections of employment as under-researched. The proposed methodology presented here opens up avenues for future research, something that the authors' are keen to encourage. The key problem is negotiating the increasingly legalistic ethical review boards in universities, and this chapter is positioned as the beginning of a longer conversation about what kind of research is appropriate – and needed – to confront the changing nature of work and work quality in the contemporary economy. This means new and creative modes of ethnographic inquiry that work with and through ongoing workplace struggle.

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Annotated Further Reading

- Bloodworth, J. (2018) Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain. London: Atlantic Books.

For this narrative account, Bloodworth spent six months working in low-paid jobs across the UK, examining the realities of work today through numerous case studies.

- Woodcock, J. (2017) Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres. London: Pluto.

In Working the Phones, Woodcock went undercover in a London-based call centre for six months, focusing on control and resistance in this research site that has come to symbolise many of the changes in contemporary work.

- Biggs, J. (2015) All Day Long: A Portrait of Britain at Work. London: Serpent's Tail.

Biggs' draws on 32 interviews with workers in employment that has become typical post-2008 financial crisis, using these to create a portrait of modern work.