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Workers inquiry and the experience of work: Using ethnographic accounts of the gig economy

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Abstract

There has been much discussion about the so-called “gig economy” and how platforms are drastically changing the nature of contemporary work. There is plenty of emerging evidence about the negative outcomes of for workers, with work that is precarious, low paid, and lacking individual or collective voice. Geographically-tethered platforms like Uber and Deliveroo require workers to be in particular places to complete the work, albeit mediated via online platform and app. This work is material, interacting with the city and customers in reconfigured ways. What is missing from much of the debate on the gig economy is the perspective of the worker on these platforms. Too often, close attention is paid only to the digital infrastructure, particularly the role of algorithms. Less is understood about how workers make sense of, interact with, and resist these new conditions of work. While there have been accounts of resistance taking place across Europe in delivery platforms, these have tended to take a broader analytical lens, rather than focusing on the specific practices being experimented with. In this chapter, the author presents a reflection on the experiences of joint writing with workers in the gig economy. This involves analysing attempts to use methods of co-research inspired by the workers’ inquiry method, building on previous accounts (see Woodcock, 2017; Waters and Woodcock, 2017; Aslam and Woodcock, 2020). The chapter considers how research that puts the workers perspective at the forefront, can be placed within a critical dialogue with the researcher. The chapter is intended as a corrective to much of the abstract academic research on the “gig economy.” As such it is both an empirical and methodological intervention – presenting an account of this work from the perspective of a worker themselves, while also arguing that it is from this perspective that the work can not only be critically analysed but also transformed.

Biography

Dr Jamie Woodcock is a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Gig Economy*, *Marx at the Arcade*, and *Working The Phones*, studies inspired by the workers' inquiry. His current research involves developing this method in co-research projects with Deliveroo drivers and other digital workers in the so-called gig economy. He is on the editorial boards of *Historical Materialism* and *Notes from Below*. His research focuses on digital labour, the sociology of work, the gig economy, resistance, and videogames

Introduction

The gig economy and platform work have become increasingly popular topics of research – as well as public discourse – in recent years. This is due, in part, to the highly visible nature of these new

forms of work. Rather than having to delve too far into the ‘hidden abode’ of work (Marx, 1976: 279), many gig workers can be found delivering food, providing transport, or waiting outside across the city. The drastic changes of work that food delivery and private hire transport can be experienced through the customer experience and the fleeting interactions with workers. This, as Ticona and Mateescu (2018) have noted, risks an overemphasis on these visible and male-dominated forms of gig work – with relatively little attention paid to the historically hidden care and domestic work that is increasingly being mediated by platforms.

Despite the initial claims that these workers were atomised through digital platform technologies and therefore likely to be “unorganisable”, it is relatively easy to access these workers. This has led to a proliferation of journalistic and academic research – with no need to negotiate with traditional gatekeepers of the workplace for access. However, despite this increased access, the voices of workers in the gig economy have remained notably absent in many accounts. There is a tendency towards emphasizing the new technological methods of control and surveillance – as well as the well-worn claims about the coming automation of work. However, as I have argued elsewhere, there are a range of preconditions that shape the gig economy. This includes technology, but also social factors, and political economy, as well as combinations of each (Woodcock and Graham, 2019).

This chapter reflects on a three-year project of co-research with workers in the gig economy. It started in London with Deliveroo workers, just before the strikes in August 2016. Over the following years, it has grown to include Uber drivers in London, as well as stints of fieldwork with platform workers in South Africa and India. The original intention of this chapter was present another co-written piece in the experience of the gig economy. However, co-writing is a complicated and unpredictable process. The current group of workers with which I am spending most of my time are engaged in other more immediate concerns – following on from recently co-authoring a piece with one of them (Aslam and Woodcock, 2020). This has meant rather than producing an account with a worker, this chapter is better placed to reflect on the process, drawing out lessons both about working in the gig economy and the role of researchers within this.

The chapter starts with a theoretical and methodological introduction on workers’ inquiry, which guides my research practice – with alternative title of: why do research anyway? This provides an opportunity to motivate workers’ inquiry, while also establishing the foundations for what will follow. The next part critically examines the current research on the gig economy – noting the focuses and findings so far. This is then placed into conversation with the findings from the co-research that I have been involved in, drawing out both similarities and differences. The next section critically reflects on the process of co-research – focusing on drawing out lessons. The final part offers some early conclusions on the gig economy, as well as suggesting future research.

Workers’ Inquiry – or why do research anyway?

Whenever I explain what my own work involves – not always in the back of Ubers – I shorten it to say: “my work is researching work.” This is met with a range of responses: sometimes a lack of interest (an important reminder to researchers that while our topic may be the most important thing to us, other people may not care at all), feigning interest (“oh sounds interesting”), a joke about academia (the best involving some kind of comment about how that can be “real” work), or spark the start of a conversation about how work is changing. However, my work being about researching

work is only one part of the story. Social research has the challenge of involving the researcher being a part of what they are trying to understand. There is no chemistry set of workers and capital that can be objectively experimented with. Instead, researchers interested in work have to make sense of their own work in relation to the work they are researching. This means understanding how their own paid work relies upon other people's work – both the work that supports theirs, as well as that of their "subjects." Research on work has the potential to be extractive, making a career out of writing about other people's work. This is a point that will be returned to in later sections.

Work is not an equal relationship. At its core, the capitalist work relationship involves the buying and selling of people's time. There is, of course, a whole range of unpaid work and labour that capital relies upon. However, just as capital could not function without unpaid work, paid work remains a key part of capitalism. This buying and selling of time involves a fundamental indeterminacy between the interests of the buyer and sellers (Marx, 1976). These different interests are also an issue of standpoint: either for those who have nothing else to sell but their own labour power or the owners of the means of production – between workers and capital (Tronti, 2019). Researching work means researching this relationship, one that involves social and material relations, along with a history of struggle and conflict. This also involves understanding shifts that have taken place, including, for example, the rise of digital labour (Casilli, 2017). This means research on work involves taking a side. If someone refuses to take a side (or you do not know which side you, or they, have taken) then it is more than likely supporting the status quo and capital.

Researchers can have a contradictory role in universities under capitalism. If they teach, their role is to train and then sort future workers – often at a high cost and debt for students. This may free up time for research or it might be funded by research councils or other bodies. In the former, there is more freedom to choose what to research, while the latter comes with both explicit shaping of what research will be funded, but both are subject to implicit, but strong, pressures about what to research. Research (particularly in the UK with Research Excellence Framework or REF) is subjected to anonymous peer-review (with all the problems associated with that) and often expected to generate impact (or: acceptable forms of value). The material pressures on early career academic means they may be closer in conditions to gig economy workers (although still quite far from) than previous generations of academics. This is certainly not the case for senior academics who increasingly take on direct managerial responsibilities. However, this is not to say that early career academics will take the workers side – they may see themselves as future professor/managers in the university and not publish research that would undermine that.

As I will argue throughout the chapter, I have attempted to take the side of workers throughout my research through the use of inquiry. The approach of workers' inquiry has a long history (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013; Woodcock, 2014), although there are lengthy gaps in its use. While Marx originally proposed an inquiry in 1880, it was only seriously taken up again after the Second World War by the *Johnson-Forest Tendency* in the USA and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France (van der Linden, 1997). One of the most compelling examples is *The American Worker* (Romano and Stone, 1946). This piece, co-written with a factory worker, was part of the group 'learning to seek out in the daily life of the workers in the factory the expression of their instinctive striving towards their liberation' (Glaberman, 1947: 1). This was followed up by *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (Denby 1989), detailing the life of a black worker moving from the south in the USA to work in car factories, as well as *A Women's Place* (Brant and Santori, 1953) on the struggle over housework. As

Haider and Mohandesi (2013) have argued, this went beyond Marx's postal survey, opening up inquiry as a process to allow 'workers to raise their own unique voice, express themselves in their own language.' This is then later developed from the 1960s onwards in Italy, through a tradition that became known as *Operaismo* or Workerists. In these cases, the methods became part of the initial understanding of how work was changing, but also tied specifically to political organising. Gigi Roggero (2010: 4) has argued, 'Alquati' – one of the formative theorists of Workerism – 'taught us that the problem is to grasp the truth, not to describe it. For the capacity to anticipate a tendency is not an intellectual artifice but the compass of the militant and the condition for the possibility of organization.'

There are two key developments that can be identified here. The first is the method of co-writing as both co-production of knowledge and organising, initiated by the *Johnson-Forest Tendency*. The second is the development of the concept of class composition in Italy. This involves a focus on the experience of workers, developing it into an analysis of the way that capital attempts to 'incorporate the working class within itself as simply labour power', while the 'working class affirms itself as an independent class-for-itself only through struggles which rupture capital's self reproduction' (Clever, 1979: 66). Class composition provides a framework through which these individual inquiries can be analysed, as well as generalised into a wider account.

Following *Operaismo*, there have been some individual projects, like the call centre inquiry by Kolinko (2002), but there exists another gap until the wave of recent inquiries starting in the 2010s. For my own research, this started with call centres (Woodcock, 2017), videogame workers (Woodcock, 2019), and the gig workers discussed later. This involves taken up the project of co-research as part of workers' inquiry, connecting the process of knowledge construction to organising with workers.

In particular, the projects discussed in this chapter have been guided by my involvement in the journal *Notes from Below*, which has taken up the method and developed it into a contemporary method and analysis of class composition. For *Notes from Below* (2018) means projects that focus on understanding class composition as:

a material relation with three parts: the first is the organisation of labour-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organisation of the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition)

The pieces of co-research discussed in the chapter were attempts to make sense of the changing class composition in different kinds of gig work. This starts with the experience of the labour process and work (technical composition), exploring how workers related to each other and society (social composition), and experimenting with forms of resistance and organising (political composition). In these two examples, the co-research involves an adaptation of the 'full fountain pen' method, in which 'intellectuals would be paired with workers ... they would listen as the workers recounted their story, write them down on their behalf, and then have these workers revise the written documents as they saw fit' (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013).

In summary, workers' inquiry is not just another way to do research, but rather a way to use research as part of an organising project. It is therefore an explicitly partisan approach, not only interested in finding out (in this case) about platform work in the gig economy, but supporting workers to transform their conditions. Workers experiences are therefore not an interesting

addition or an insight, but a core part of the co-research process. After all, without workers and their experience there can be no organising in the gig economy.

Researching the gig economy

The gig economy has become an increasingly fashionable topic of research. As of the 22nd of January 2020, Google scholar lists 13,300 articles on the “gig economy” – that is more articles than there are words in this chapter. However, (and without actually having read all of these articles) there are some general trends in the literature than can be observed.

The early research in the gig economy had a tendency to be overly optimistic, particularly when the term ‘sharing economy’ was still popular (cf Sundararajan, 2017). This led to early critiques that attempted to place the so-called sharing economy within longer trends of capital accumulation and exploitation (Slee, 2015). Research in the computer sciences (and particularly HCI – Human Computer Interaction) focused on crowdwork much earlier than the broader sociology of work literature. For example, Amazon Mechanical Turk became an important site of research (Gupta et al., 2014; Hara et al., 2018), with attempts to begin categorising the kinds of work being done online (Holts, 2013), and even attempts at forms of collaborative or co-research connected with organising, particularly Turkopticon (Irani and Silberman, 2013; Irani, 2015) and Dynamo (Saleh et al., 2015).

This had led into broader debates about the novelty and effect of algorithms in society (Pasquale, 2015), as well as the role of algorithms in platform work (Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). In some accounts, this has been linked to the rise of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) or critiques of specific models of gig work like Uber (Scholz, 2017; Rosenblat, 2018). The growth of this kind of work has meant that there have been many attempts to map the gig economy (Huws and Joyce, 2016; Hunt and Machingura, 2016; Heeks, 2017; Ojanperä and Graham, 2018), but the voice of gig economy workers are often absent in these kinds of surveys. This mirrors some of the debates on automation of work, like Frey and Osborne (2017), that see changes in work as happening to workers, with little agency on their part. However, there is a growing critical literature that does feature voices of workers (Hill, 2017; Ravenelle, 2019), as well as some attempt to chart resistance (Wood et al., 2018), as well as using workers’ inquiry as a method (Cant, 2019). This chapter is an attempt to encourage more of the latter, centring workers voices and exploring the experiences of those actually working in the gig economy.

Findings from the co-research

I have been conducting research with Deliveroo and Uber workers, some of whom are part of the Couriers and Logistics and United Private Hire Drivers (UPHD) branches of the IWGB. This has been part of a longer engagement with the union, including the University of London branch (the first part of the union, mainly comprised of Latin American cleaners), as well as helping to establish the (Game Workers Unite (GWU) UK branch of workers in the videogames industry. While the latter two are not considered part of the gig economy, there are many similarities relating to issues like precarious work.

The two co-research projects focused on here are deliberately partisan. My engagement with these workers was through involvement with the union. Following the method of workers' inquiry, this has combined the research process with that of organising. In both these cases, this has meant following the lead of the workers involved - both of whom were already actively organising on their respective platforms.

This perspective also means that throughout the piece I refer to the co-authors as "workers." This is intended as a critique of the gig economy, as both of them were technically considered to be self-employed independent contractors. This is a legal loophole used to free platforms from the requirements of employment law and protection, including paying the minimum wage, holiday and sick pay, pensions, right to be in a union and bargain collectively, and protection from unfair dismissal. Neither of them felt that they were self-employed, rather they were campaigning for greater employment rights. In the UK, this is already possible under the intermediate "worker status", between employment and self-employment. Therefore, the use of "worker" is more than just a critique, but fits the identity and status that these workers felt they were.

This use of "worker" as a term is also part of the process of considering the broader ethics of research. The conventional process of research ethics were followed, including a continuous process of informed consent throughout the entire process; the co-writing ensuring they were not being misrepresented, as well as becoming an active part of the research process; considering my own positionality as a paid academic researcher with a relative position of power; providing anonymity and a pseudonym for the first worker, while ensuring the second worker who was named understand the risks of foregoing anonymity.

Further ethical considerations were made which are not often, if ever, part of the institutional process (Badger and Woodcock, 2019). The first involves using "worker" as part of taking a side against the public relations offensive that platforms have been pushing, whether in the media or courts (Woodcock and Graham, 2019). The second is carefully considering, with each worker, whether there are potential issues relating to making some processes or tactics visible. With Deliveroo, workers have often been keen to explain tactics used to ameliorate the worst aspects of their work - which if the platform discovered they would likely stop. This involves thinking critically about the politics of knowledge production - particularly for publications which are not stuck behind academic or publisher paywalls.

The third consideration is one that runs through both projects, as well as in my work more generally: what is the benefit for workers for participating in the research? For gig workers, who could be working rather than speaking to researchers, this is particularly pressing. While some people may enjoy the process of talking about their work or getting the opportunity to voice their opinions, too often they do not see the result, whether it is a paper they may not have access to or not. This is definitely not to say that workers cannot read or appreciate the outputs of academic research (see the literature chosen to be included by the Deliveroo worker), but rather that much academic output would be of little interest or use to workers who are organising. Instead, these projects also allow for a reflection on how work in the gig economy can be carried out in non-extractive ways, going beyond just ensuring that no harm is caused, whether direct or indirect, but to actually have a positive impact with gig workers.

Inquiry at Deliveroo

The first co-research piece that will be focused on is “Far From Seamless: a Workers’ Inquiry at Deliveroo” (Waters and Woodcock, 2016) that I co-authored with a Deliveroo driver in London. It was published in Viewpoint Magazine – a militant research collective that features writing on workers’ inquiry and class composition. The article begins by charting the resistance and strikes in August 2016, outlining the key events and processes that were underway at the time. We then explained our method for writing the piece, which is worth quoting again here:

In this piece, we draw attention to the labor process at Deliveroo and what it is like to work on the platform. It has been collectively written between the Deliveroo driver Facility Waters (a pseudonym), and Jamie Woodcock, who is employed at a university where he researches work. We have experimented with different ways to collect and share information about working at Deliveroo. In particular, we have tried to peel back the black box, emphasising that work on Deliveroo is not seamless, but rather it takes place in specific geographic locations in the city ... we have collaboratively written on Google Docs and augmented our analysis with GPS technology and interactive maps. We encourage readers to explore the interactive map alongside the text.

This meant adapting the full fountain pen method into one mediated by an online app, writing together on google docs. This built upon a longer collaboration that Facility and I had, starting before the London Deliveroo strikes in 2016, which had also involved a series of interviews as well as organising together. The writing process itself moved in inconsistent bursts. When the shift work at Deliveroo allowed, Facility and I would meet to discuss the piece, adding notes and sometimes paragraphs to the googledoc. This provided the basis for both of us to then independently contribute to the document, pushing it forward to completion. The majority of the piece was written by Facility – including adding most of the literature – while towards the end of the writing process, my own involvement became more like an editor.

The article itself is split into two parts. The first covers the process of applying for Deliveroo and a typical day of work. This was intended to provide a narrative account of Facility’s experience, bringing up issues around contractual status, relationship to the company, as well as to other riders. The “A Day Riding for Deliveroo” section is written from their first-person perspective, introducing the material and geographical dimensions of the work. Throughout this section Facility uploaded pictures of their perspective – whether a dark kitchen in South London or the side entrance to a Nando’s that workers are supposed to use. These are interspersed with screen captures from their iPhone that illustrate what the interaction with the Deliveroo app looks like at various points.

The second part of the article moves onto the analysis of the technical composition of work at Deliveroo. This involves introducing the idea of an ‘illusion of freedom’ and the role of technology in the workplace. Part of this argument came from a long running discussion that we had about the role of data in the management of Deliveroo. Facility had noted that it would be great to know how much they cycled – or even have an idea of how well they performed in the various metrics. Deliveroo, of course, holds all this data, but refuses to share it with workers – unless when informing disciplinary procedures. Instead, Facility decided to self-track their routes around the city, producing a number of graphical representations as part of the article. This became a kind of counter-use of

metrics, seeking to uncover the exploitation of the platform, which then fed into a critique of the politics of knowledge.

The creation of data for the article led to Facility researching more about how to make sense of their work at Deliveroo. As Facility chose to end the piece:

A distance becomes absolute and binary, complete or incomplete, delivered or not delivered – the delivery as a commodity in itself, as something to be produced by one and consumed by another. However, the strikes reveal the fragility of this “perfection”; the movement from dots on screens to bodies in the streets simultaneously alters the visibility of the worker, removing them from the “God’s eye-view” of the commodity, whilst rupturing the seamless, hyperreal space of the city.

While it may have appeared that the academic would introduce the literature, instead Facility discovered a number of different analytical angles to unpick the technical composition of their own work. It is worth noting that Facility was also a recent sociology graduate and the literature is clearly inflected with this. However, this became linked to the worker organising that was taking place, opening up a space to debate the significance of the strikes, for example. Thus, the process of co-research is not only one of producing a co-written article, but of starting conversations and organising that go beyond the written word.

Inquiry at Uber

The second piece was co-written with an Uber driver and organiser, Yaseen Aslam: “A History of Uber Organising in the UK” (Aslam and Woodcock, 2020). The piece was commissioned as part of a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on worker writing, providing the opportunity (and a deadline) for Yaseen and I to write together, which we had discussed previously. I have known Yaseen since 2017 after he joined the IWGB, so following the co-research with Deliveroo drivers in the previous piece. Yaseen is the co-founder for UPHD (United Private Hire Drivers), that became a branch of the IWGB. He is the lead claimant against Uber in the landmark case for worker rights, alongside James Farrar. Yaseen has worked in the minicab industry since 2006 and joined Uber in 2013 when they first launched in London. He has been organizing drivers for the past 5 years.

The format of the piece is similar to the first one, written in the first person of the worker. Yaseen had worked in the minicab industry since 2006 and started working for Uber when the Uber X service launched in 2013. He had taken extensive notes – some of which had been prepared for evidence in the legal challenges against Uber, while others to document and try and understand his own organising. In addition to the notes, we also spoke at length about his experiences, both in what would be more formal interviews, with audio recording, as well as many more informal discussions. The process of co-writing involved Yaseen sharing these notes, that I edited into a shorter piece, then co-editing the piece on googledocs. This was much closer to the ‘full fountain pen’ method, providing the support to a worker to tell their own story about work and organising.

One of the differences with this piece, is that Yaseen no longer works for Uber. As detailed in the piece, Yaseen came into conflict with Uber at many points, ultimately leading to his “deactivation” (or firing) from working for the platform. Given Yaseen is named in the legal case for worker status and has appeared in the media, there was no need to anonymise or use a pseudonym. While the

piece includes his personal experiences of driving for Uber, the focus is charting the history of organising. It is therefore not only co-writing with a worker, but a worker who has been organising. We agreed to write the piece as part of telling his story of organising, covering the successes as well as the mistakes. In the discussions we had beforehand, we both noted how many people have tried to tell the stories of the successes – as well as interviewing drivers about their bad conditions, then never returning to speak to them again. The theme of engagement with academics is one that Yaseen and I returned to many times during our discussion. As he concluded in the piece:

Throughout all of this I have learnt many lessons. When we first started organising people said we would never succeed, this included trade unionists, academics, and journalists. So few people believed in us or gave us the support we needed at the time. Instead people talked to us, got what they wanted, and left.

As research about the gig economy has become increasingly popular, so have gig economy workers become increasingly subjected to research.

Yet Yaseen's experience – and it is worth quoting the paragraph here – is one that needs to be repeated and amplified:

When I first started working for Uber, I had not even heard of the words “gig economy” or know what they meant. Uber claiming that I am self-employed with my own business and that drivers contract directly with customers to provide a driving service. I do not agree with this. Right from when I started working for Uber, I saw Uber as a company which offered a private hire service to customers and I worked for Uber as part of their service. However, Uber later claimed to be a ‘tech startup’ rather than ‘a labor company’ (Scholz 2017: 44), meaning that I supposedly had a driving business myself. My experience was that Uber had the commercial relationship with the customer, not me: the customer paid Uber, not me (drivers were not allowed to take cash as payment as all customers have to pay Uber electronically for their journey); Uber decided on the fare and cancellation penalties that customers paid, not me; the customer provided all their details to Uber and they had a policy of not giving drivers certain information about the customer. In addition, Uber paid me, including bonuses under various schemes, and Uber set the rules that we drivers had to follow. When changes were introduced, we just had to accept them.

The only editorial changes to make here were minor, as well as adding a citation to Scholz.

Another key theme that emerges from the paper is the importance of race and discrimination for Uber. This comes up across the examples of minicabs, Uber, Transport for London, the courts, and even unions like GMB. These are stories that are often missing from accounts of the gig economy, particularly when it is presented as a “new” phenomenon. Similar to the previous piece on Deliveroo, this piece is part of an ongoing organising campaign. This is both against institutional racism as well as Uber itself. The written piece provided the opportunity for Yaseen to tell his version events. As he explained:

When people look in from the outside they think that we the organisers are amazing, lucky, or have some sort of special characteristic - but this is not true: organisers are made. Organising at Uber has been a very bumpy ride. We have had to suffer mentally, financially, and our families have suffered too. That is the commitment that it has taken to organise at

Uber. This has meant taking on a billion-dollar company, confronting regulators, but also the small victories like helping a driver keep their license and livelihood. While we may lose a battle here and there, we will never lose the war. Our journey continues.

The challenges of co-research

The accounts presented here of the two pieces are intended to draw attention to the benefits of co-research – both in terms of the output created, as well as the ongoing relationships and campaigns. However, there are also important issues that arise when conducting projects like this. In this section, four of these will be considered: first, the form of the written output; then the process of producing it; the relationship between researcher and worker; and then a reflection on intervention.

The first challenge is the form that the co-research output takes. The research process is always broader and more widely ranging than the journal article outputs that usually accompany them. The tendency towards dividing findings into as many articles as possible - captured by the somewhat bleak joke of "Minimum Publishable Unit" - fragments research projects and limits the scope of claims being made. Similarly, co-writing the results of co-research, while hopefully not subjected to the same minimums, inevitably loses large parts of the process. Writing often deliberately (or even inadvertently) loses the nuances, the complexity, and the messiness of the experiences of work. Some aspects are deemed not worthy of writing down or cannot be easily expressed in the written form.

For the first piece with the Deliveroo worker, a non-academic, but still academic-related, publication was chosen. This allowed reflection on the theoretical influences of the project around workers inquiry, while also being a venue that published for free online. This was important for both of us, as it would mean that other Deliveroo workers could read it if they wanted to. This format also allowed experimentation with multimedia aspects, including the GPS tracking maps in multiple formats, including photographs. For the second piece, a peer reviewed academic journal was chosen. In this case, the article was commissioned and published alongside other piece of co-writing with workers and academics. While this venue has a more limited audience, given it is an academic publication, it fits within a broader collection.

These issues are connected to the second point: the process of writing. Both are short articles, the first at around 9,000 words and the second at 4,000 words. This meant that in both cases, there was much more that could have been said from the process of co-research, with the output only capturing a small aspect of it. When a piece is co-written, or edited, with an academic, this brings with it conventions and expectations of academic writing. Even with the best intentions, academics are shaped by the writing environment in which they spend the majority of their time. The choices about what is interesting or what an expected audience might want to read therefore shape the editing process, both what is included and what is left out. This also requires careful consideration of who the audience is expected to be for the output of co-research. For example, writing up the experiences of the gig economy is of current interest to many academics, as well as more general readership. However, given the writing is intended as part of a process of organising with workers, a non-academic readership among other workers is also an aim. This risks the final piece being caught between contrasting expectations, format, and style. For example, each of the pieces make reference to the academic literature (much more so with the Deliveroo piece, but also with the Uber

one too). While worker writing does not preclude the use of literature (which should not just be left to academics), much of the literature does not speak to the concerns or struggles of workers. There is therefore a careful balance to be made about attempting to pose an argument across both audiences.

This contradiction between academic and researcher audiences is also an important part of the third point: the differences between the research and subject. Academics, as university workers, are clearly in a different subject position to workers in the gig economy. While there has been an increase in precarity within universities in the previous decade, most academics have employment contracts, albeit increasingly in the short term, rather than permanent. I have worked at a range of institutions during the periods of co-research covered by both of the pieces. Like most academics, there is the pressure to publish, but neither of these pieces counted towards institutionally recognised publications. These were, in a way, supplemental to the forms of output needed to continue my own employment. As Yaseen noted, there is often an extractive relationship between researchers and workers in the gig economy, which is something to be particularly mindful of. Despite the reasons discussed above, both pieces required a process of continual reflection on how to ensure this was not reproduced. The workers inquiry approach is one of trying to break down the distinction between researcher and subject, but this does not mean that the power relationships between the two are not important. One way that I have sought to overcome this is to keep the dialogue going after the co-writing, as well as exploring what I can offer to workers from my position as an academic, including volunteering for the union.

Extending the co-research process beyond writing leads into the fourth issue: the problem of intervention. If the role of academic is limited to only reporting and analysing the gig economy, the kinds of intervention discussed in this chapter would be deemed inappropriate. However, the history of research on work is one of intervention, just often from the perspective of management. For example, Taylor's (1967) *Principles of Scientific Management* involved an explicit intervention, developing in the Taylorist management of work, seeking out new ways to control and motivate workers. The early Italian Workerists also found that workers could be suspicious of interventions of academics. For example, in Alquati's inquiry at the Olivetti factory, many workers 'cautious' about engaging, due to the 'contributions made by previous left sociologists to the intensifications of labour' in the factory (Wright 2002:54).

The act of not intervening is also an intervention, as it supports the status quo. Burawoy (1998: 14), reflecting on his practices of workplace ethnography, argues that a reflexive approach to intervention means that it does not need to be minimised, but instead can benefit the research process and the participants. For example, he argues that

It is by mutual reaction that we discover the properties of the social order. Interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world. Institutions reveal much about themselves when under stress or in crisis, when they face the unexpected as well as the routine. Instead of the prohibition against reactivity, which can never be realized, reflexive science prescribes and takes advantage of intervention.

While the theory of intervention might be quite straightforward, the practical instances of intervention can be more complicated in terms of personal interrelationships. The academics role

involves a position of power, particularly in terms of access to formal knowledge, time, and resources. If inquiry places the workers experience at the forefront, this can then complicate the processes of intervention and debate. With Facility, we had developed a relationship of critical debate about Deliveroo – both the work involved and the organising. There were points of agreement and disagreement throughout the process of writing, but these were worked out through the co-writing. With the Uber driver, this process was harder to work through, as the co-writing involved more editing than negotiating, the process of disagreement was handled differently. Our collaborating involved more than the writing experience, instead taking place within the broader relationships of the union, with all the tactical and strategic disagreements this can often involve.

It is in this way that workers' inquiry can also be placed within the broader traditions of participatory action research, albeit one that often attempts to go further. This involves the aim 'to create participative communities of inquiry' and encourage 'a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or lesser extent as co-researchers' (Reason & Bradbury 2008:1). However, Paul Brook and Ralph Darlington (2013:240) have discussed the possibilities of developing an 'organic public sociology of work' from this starting point, but warn that 'the ebb and flow of struggle 'from below' obviously affects the opportunities.' However, as struggles in the gig economy are rising. The challenge here is finding ways to tie research to workers struggle, with all of the unpredictability that can entail. However, despite there still being many variables at play: 'one thing is clear for now, we need to stop talking about resistance as emerging in platform work! Resistance is clearly happening' (Cant and Woodcock, 2019).

Conclusions and future research

This chapter has been intended as a moment to reflect on co-research and co-writing – however, this time as a single-author. Over the past three years I have spent much of my time speaking to workers in the gig economy. This has included Deliveroo and Uber workers in London featured in this chapter, as well as platform workers in Bangalore, Cape Town and Johannesburg periods of fieldwork in 2018, and in the back of many Ubers, Lyfts, Bolts, and so on across the world.

The reflection here is an opportunity to consider how and why the experiences of workers are key to making sense of the new world of work – and particularly the gig economy. These two pieces show how research can be put into conversation with workers, uncovering their hidden and lived experiences. The co-writing experience is also one of providing support to workers to speak to their own experiences and introduce their voices to debates about the future of work. The use of workers' inquiry means that this is not just to produce a written output, but tying this to organising and resisting work. However, these examples of co-writing have also drawn attention to four methodological issues with co-research: first, what kinds of written outputs are appropriate; second, how to undertake the process of producing co-writing; third, how to effectively balance the relationship between the researcher and workers; and then also reflecting on what it means to make interventions.

These four issues underpin co-research. However, as the chapter has shown, this is not a short or quick process to engage with workers in this way. My own ethnographic research that provided the introductions to workers, built the trust upon which the relationships could be formed, and shaped

the nature of the possible interventions. These started over three years ago and have so far produced two written outputs, one of which was relatively short. In a similar timeframe, more conventional academic research would have led to many more articles (which in my case, I have published alongside these kinds of pieces). However, the strength of these kinds of co-written articles is the unique perspective of bringing workers into the debates on work. After all, workers are already experiencing these shifts in work and understand them on a day-to-day basis. What is clearly needed now is more attempts at co-research between researchers and workers, rethinking how research on work is undertaken and why.

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