

Researching precarious, virtual and clandestine labour

Methodological and ethical challenges

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ABSTRACT

Introducing this volume, this article reflects on recent changes that brought to the editors' attention the need for this special issue on the methodological and ethical challenges facing those who research precarious, virtual and clandestine labour in the 21st century. An exponential spread of algorithmically managed platform labour, just-in-time working, micro-work, teleworking and other trends associated with digitalisation has converged with traditional patterns of work in the informal economy, including clandestine practices, such as the use of child labour, trafficked labour and slave labour, to create a dynamically shifting labour market that cannot be captured by traditional means using existing indicators. Simultaneously, digitalisation has introduced the possibility of new research methods, raising new ethical challenges, as well as stimulating the adaptation of older forms of ethnographic research including participant observation and action research. It discusses the articles in this issue, suggesting that they form the basis of an ongoing debate.

KEY WORDS

Research ethics, action research, survey methodology, digital research methods, participant observation, ethnography

Introduction

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century it is clear that the standard 20th-century normative model of employment does not capture the realities of work for the majority of the world's population (ILO, 2015). An exponential spread of algorithmically managed platform labour, just-in-time working, micro-work, teleworking and other trends associated with digitalisation has converged with traditional patterns of work in the informal economy, including clandestine practices, such as the use of child labour, trafficked labour and slave labour, to create a dynamically shifting labour market that cannot be captured by traditional means.

As well as posing new questions for policy-makers, this development creates major conceptual, methodological and ethical challenges for researchers.

New researchers entering the field may find themselves in a poorly charted and confusing territory, with few clear ground-rules about how to proceed. Many traditional approaches no longer seem fit for purpose while new ones may be difficult to validate. Furthermore, in a rapidly changing context, researchers may be under pressure from policy-makers, news media or universities anxious to cash in on their 'impact', to produce results quickly, allowing insufficient time for the double-checking of results and careful peer review. This pressure mitigates against extended studies where significant amounts of quantitative and qualitative work can be done with the aim of one supporting the other. Researchers thus find themselves caught between the need to respond quickly to changes in the real world and the need to address the ways in which these changes challenge the concepts and practices that have hitherto made up the bedrock of their scholarly approaches. How can they avoid sacrificing depth to topicality? And what pitfalls might they encounter in designing new research strategies in this volatile environment?

To give just one example of a new conceptual challenge: these developments raise fundamental questions about how work should even be defined. Should the definition be limited to paid labour carried out within a relationship of employment or self-employment, or should it be extended to include unpaid labour? Should it refer to the worker's main occupation or source of earnings, or should it be extended to the multitude of other practices that worker might deploy to ensure an income? Such questions are complicated by the fact that scholars researching changes in work come from very different theoretical backgrounds and academic traditions. Concepts that may seem obvious, say, to an economic geographer or a labour sociologist or an economist, might be challenging to someone with a background in organisational studies, communications studies, development studies or psychology. Other lenses, such as that of gender studies, might introduce additional perspectives.

To the extent that all of these disciplines rely, to some extent, on empirical data, there are points of convergence as well as tensions among them.

In relation to quantitative research, for example, definitional questions raise problems of measurement. Official statistics drawing on administrative data or labour force surveys based on capturing formally declared employment miss an ever-growing proportion of the workforce. Similarly, there may be an increasing mismatch between the occupational and sectoral categories used in national statistics and the changing realities of the new corporate landscape based on new business models, and the

increasing fluidity of labour markets in which skill requirements change with every technological innovation.

Similarly, qualitative researchers face new challenges. Tried-and-tested methodologies such as company case studies are inadequate for gaining access to workers who are not known to traditional gatekeepers such as HR managers or recognised trade union representatives. Even when workers can be identified, it may be difficult to use traditional interview methods, for example if they are migrant workers who do not speak the languages used by researchers.

Recent years have seen a burgeoning of research that has attempted to come to grips with these challenges, from a variety of different disciplinary perspectives and using a wide range of methodologies. Scholars researching non-standard work have developed a range of innovative methodologies to get round some of these problems. For example, in quantitative research, innovative analyses of big data (Kassi & Lehdonvirta, 2018; Tubaro, Le Ludec & Casilli, 2020) and experimental population surveys (Huws, Spencer & Coates, 2019; Pesole et al., 2018) have studied prevalence and trends in platform work. However, such experimental studies leave a number of questions open, such as how to establish representativeness. In some cases, they may also raise ethical questions related to data security and confidentiality.

Other researchers have drawn from a range of ethnographic and action research traditions to investigate the qualitative aspects of non-standard work, including the use of participant observation and workers' enquiries (Hoffman, 2018; Somekh, 2005; Katta, Howson & Graham, 2020). Some of these qualitative research approaches overlap with others developed outside the academy, such as accounts by journalists, industrial chaplains or researchers who have gone undercover to report on poor working conditions (Ehrenreich, 2002; Chan, Selden & Ngai, 2020). These methods also raise ethical questions, such as those relating to obtaining informed consent, guaranteeing the anonymity of informants and avoiding harm to vulnerable research subjects (Dench, Huws & Iphofen, 2004).

This special issue aims to bring together contributions from some of this scholarship, with a double target. First, it seeks to help researchers new to the field, especially PhD students and early career researchers, to come to grips with the practicalities of research design, including selecting appropriate methodologies while being aware of their limitations. Secondly, it is intended to encourage reflection on the ethics of the various approaches and methods currently being adopted in research on precarious labour. In particular, taking account of the extreme vulnerability of many precarious workers, it hopes to stimulate reflection on ways in which even the most well-intentioned research might inadvertently lead to social harm, and how this can be avoided.

Compared with other special issues of this journal, this one is unusually reflexive, as well as being highly diverse in its contents. Two of the editors (Spencer and Huws) have also acted as co-contributors and in one case (Wolfson et al.) the article was incapable of being fully anonymised and was therefore subjected to an open review process, contrary to our normal practice. The editorial process has itself provoked considerable discussion amongst the editors, the outcomes of which we have tried to communicate honestly and openly.

We begin with a cross-cutting article by Eleni Kampouri that looks at the issue of gender in the study of platform work, whether quantitative or qualitative. This raises important theoretical as well as methodological issues. She demonstrates that many common themes

in the study of platform work, such as hypotheses that ‘uberisation’ is singularly new and disruptive, are rooted in a relatively narrow base of research that has focused primarily on masculinised platforms in the global North, and thus failed to take account of many continuities with other forms of work, much of it traditionally done by women, that is racialised and informalised and has always fallen outside the scope of normative Fordist models. Drawing on extensive analysis of existing research in the field, she makes useful and practical suggestions for new directions that would enable it to be ‘gendered’.

This is followed by two articles that discuss innovative approaches to the quantification and measurement of new forms of work. Neil H. Spencer, Dag S. Syrdal, Matthew Coates and Ursula Huws discuss the issue of bias in online surveys. Finding a representative sample is a notorious problem in research on platform workers and other precarious workers, with a widespread recognition that trying to access them via the platforms they work for is likely to produce various biases. The online survey method is increasingly seen as the least bad option for identifying a genuinely random sample in the face of restricted budgets, but might this also bring its own biases? This article reports on an experiment designed to test this by asking the same questions using the alternative survey modes of face-to-face and telephone interviews. In doing so, it makes a useful addition to the general literature on survey methods in the digital age.

Maxime Cornet, Clément Le Ludec, Elinor Wahal and Mandie Joulin report on an innovative approach to designing a mixed-methods approach for inspecting working conditions in ‘crowd work’ through organisational systems. Their approach involves combining the macro level (the market structure revealed through a multiple correspondence analysis) and the micro level (using detailed case studies of targeted platforms based on desk research). Like Kampouri, they expose in the process some of the limitations of studying platform workers by focusing on a few well-known platforms and extrapolating from them. By placing them in the context of a larger ecosystem of firms that employ workers to carry out ‘crowd work’, they point the way to more nuanced and empirically informed future research pathways.

The next piece, by Funda Ustek Şpilda, Kelle Howson, Hannah Johnston, Alessio Bertolini, Patrick Feuerstein, Louise Bezuidenhout, Oğuz Alyanak and Mark Graham draws on a large and rich body of research on platform work carried out by the Fairwork team at the Oxford Internet Institute. It discusses a range of different ways of gaining access to platform workers and the methodological and ethical pitfalls associated with them. Most usefully, it proposes practical measures that can be taken to minimise ethical risks.

Jing Hiah, in the next article, draws on her own qualitative research among Chinese entrepreneurs in the Netherlands and Romania to illustrate not only the complexity of the ethical dilemmas facing researchers but also the need for local contextualisation in order to identify what is, or is not, a ‘sensitive’ issue. In her research, she found strong national variations in whether clandestine practices and race/ethnicity were considered sensitive topics. In the Netherlands, due to active enforcement of clandestine practices in the migrant and ethnic minority economy, these practices were a sensitive topic of inquiry. In Romania, by contrast, clandestine practices were not treated as sensitive subject matter as these were normalised by research participants and broader Romanian society, due to a lack of active enforcement and criminalisation. Hiah further discusses the ways in which stigmas related to race and ethnicity in relation to clandestine and informal practices can

strongly shape access to and rapport with research respondents, and reflects on the advantages and disadvantages of a researcher's 'insider' status.

This discussion resonates with broader debates about the positionality of the researcher in ethnographic research, debates that have acquired a new topicality in the current context, where various forms of participant observation have become an increasingly common way to research platform workers, sometimes raising problematic ethical questions, especially when the situation being observed is one of active struggle, in which the researcher's role may not be clearly defined.

The final contribution to this special issue takes the form of a dialogue between two researchers who have been involved in action research with workers for some time – Ursula Huws, the editor of this journal, and Todd Wolfson – reflecting on the many pitfalls facing the researcher who wishes to combine serious scientific research with a respect for the integrity of the workers and concerns for their privacy and safety. This discussion covers some of the same ground as the article from the Fairwork team but places it in a broader context, not just the half-century in which Huws has been carrying out such research but also the longer historical period during which many of the methods that are now commonplace in social research were formed. In doing so, it points out that many of these methods were forged outside the academy, by researchers with a commitment to social justice, who may often have been considered partisan, but who were also anxious to provide empirical evidence that was as objective and impartial as possible in order to convince policy-makers and the general public of the importance of their cause.

It thus draws attention to the very fine balance that often has to be struck between engagement and disengagement, while pointing out the many ethical dilemmas that are raised – indeed, the extent to which action research could be described as a moral minefield.

As part of the process of open review, this article was shared in draft not only with a range of other academic researchers and ethicists but also with a number of workers who had been on the receiving end of action research. Two who agreed to be named responded with detailed comments which it was decided to add to the article to give a rounded and multidimensional view. To these were added the views of a worker who wished to remain anonymous.

This piece shows how important it is to fully understand the roots of social research. The authors' joint experience can be seen as research which implicates them in the kinds of political and social engagement that are vital to effective 'evidence-based action' whether in policy and/or professional research practice. Not many students of social research will go as far back as the references that are offered in the opening section. But they should. Historical research can throw up many surprises, for example that of coming across *The Origin of the Distinction in Ranks* (first appearing in 1771) by John Millar who was part of the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment. Millar developed a sophisticated explanation of the political and economic origins of social 'ranks' which had its historical roots in gender inequality and slavery. Both gender inequality and slavery seem then to have taken a back seat while further work on social inequality fell into a Marxist tradition of the study of social 'class' and 'rank' was seen as a somewhat archaic term and concept. It was instructive to read such an early account of both sex-based inequality and slavery described as 'ranks' – both of which have re-emerged in 'modern' form as important issues in social research – if they ever really 'went away'!

Also evidence that there is ‘nothing new under the sun’ are the methods of investigation: interviews, observation and participation alongside key recording methods such as diaries and including photography even in its early development.

More general lessons can be learned from some of the other contributions. Review by ethics and/or ‘science’ committees and peers is no guarantee of objectivity. Indeed there is an acknowledged danger of routinising questions about, say, consent processes, confidentiality and anonymity, rewards for engagement and covert/overt participative methods.

Innovative ways of working require innovative ways of engaging for research purposes. Thus, for example, there are many more ways of seeking consent than in written/witnessed formats and novice researchers need to know about them and, indeed, be allowed to suggest new alternatives as their experience grows.

Consequently, as the principal research methods become more or less formalised as part of professional training, it remains vital to be reminded of the evolutionary nature of research in practice as conducted by active researchers themselves. Thus, for example, CBPAR (community-based participative action research) can be seen to have been teased out of engagements which were tested for accuracy and effectiveness by research reports viewed and commented upon by peers. Questions such as: what IS a community? Which community is being targeted? How do communities overlap? Where do ‘interests’ lie? How participative can/should a researcher be? How ‘engaged’ in action can they be allowed to be while still retaining some degree of objective distance? How should their ‘products’ (actions, policies, publications) be evaluated? And, no less vital, what are the personal consequences – professional, emotional, economic – for the individual researcher?

Wolfson and Huws refer to the problems of accountability and responsibility which require managing the balance between the individual researcher and the promises to their subjects or participants and the research governance issues that concern their employing institution. One of the workers who responded to their conversation points out that this responsibility extends to the workers’ emotional well-being and mental health. The consequences of feeling let down by a trusted researcher can be devastating.

We often forget to consider the variety of views/perspectives across the research community – not just in terms of methodological preferences and/or skills, but, for want of a better term, ‘methodological ideologies’. Disagreements abound about what degree of engagement and action can be possible and/or permitted. However, the time pressures on academic researchers in contemporary universities mean that there are few spaces in which these disagreements can be explored, which might allow new best practices to emerge.

Some of these tensions may be resolved by establishing codes for professional standards – in ethical behaviour as well as methodological rigour. The ethical guidance for members of the UK Social Research Association offers one such example.¹ The problem with all such codes is related to how universal their underlying values and principles can be. For example, often indigenous peoples find such codes bear no relation to or explicit understanding of their cultures. Indeed, many marginal communities find that professional standards for research assume a ‘dominant hierarchy’ in which their marginality remains assumed and unchallenged (George, Macdonald & Tauri, 2020).

1 See: <https://the-sra.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/ethical%20guidelines%202003.pdf>

In any case there are too many problems with enforcing such codes by law or regulation or applying an appropriate level of sanctions. The most effective means for encouraging ethical research practices remains the cultivation of the ‘virtuous’ researcher. Good behaviour must become part of the moral compass of the individual practitioner. Researchers should not need to be told how to behave ‘properly’. They should possess the ability and inclination to assess the ethical implications of any proposed research engagement, discuss their planned actions with respected colleagues and be transparent about the challenges to be faced and, if they arise, dilemmas to be confronted. The restrictions imposed or requested by Institutional Review Boards and Research Ethics Committees are subject to the usual constraints of administration – ways around them can always be found, including paying lip service. But there can be no ‘ways around’ one’s own moral compass – or the informed feedback from trusted colleagues.

If nothing else, we hope that this special issue is not just of practical use to researchers but also provides food for thought and a stimulus to further discussion, dialogue with workers and the development of collegial good practices.

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