Qualitative research on a case study of Uber

Abstract

As various social and economic forces have emerged, they have led to changes in how work is organized. For example, Uber as a platform business model, has reorganized social and labor relations in workplaces. Thus, there is a need to increase understanding on how to reflect this newly emerging employment context when researchers conduct an empirical research.

In this paper, I explained how I conducted a pilot version of qualitative research by using participant observations and interviews in the Uber context. I explored what aspects of research methods in the Uber context can be different from the traditional qualitative research methods, and specifically focused on how traditional qualitative methods can be meaningfully applied in the case of the emerging Uber phenomenon.

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Introduction

During the last few years, Uber has become popular as successfully expanding its business. (Calo and Rosenblat, 2017). However, Uber has sparked controversy with regard to its employment issues because Uber drivers are regarded as independent contractors. With this classification, the common criticism on the labor side is that this unstable employment practice increases workers' precarity in the context of the traditional capitalist conflict between capital and labor (Bolotnikova, 2017). In this Uber context, it is questionable whether Uber drivers' employment classification can still fall within the extension of precarity under capitalistic managerial controls; thus, this employment classification represents a critical issue that can cause serious changes in how contingent work is organized (Healy, Nicholson, and Pekarek, 2017). Alternatively, Uber could suggest new form of labor and social relationships by reorganizing its labor process (Mokyr, Vickers, and Ziebarth, 2015).

Unlike traditional employment relations, the reason for Uber's situation can be suggested as a new form of organizing work is because the company uses a platform that "provides the infrastructure and rules for a market place that brings together producers and consumers" (Alstyne, Parker, and Choudary, 2016). Uber's platform allows workers to enjoy the benefits of flexible working hours and promotes their autonomous participation in their work. Moreover, platform technology provides convenient services for customers while replacing the existing transportation system.

For this ongoing discussion, I have been studying how Uber's managerial controls affect its labor process by applying an existing labor process theory in a theoretical way. However, I realized that this theoretical approach should be examined from the perspective of real Uber drivers. Currently, few studies empirical studies have examined Uber employees' perception as this is an emerging phenomenon in the current economy. In this situation, I conducted a pilot version of qualitative research using participant observations and interviews; my methods will be explained in this paper. This paper specifically focuses on how qualitative methods can be meaningfully applied in the case of the emerging Uber phenomenon, so the audience of this paper is academic scholars who are specifically interested in collecting data on Uber phenomenon or employment issues in the other platform economy.

Brief Review of Labor Process Theory Literature

In this section, I will briefly explain how my theoretical work is situated in existing literature on labor process theory (LPT). Using this theoretical framing, the Uber case can be understood as an extended case for reconstructing the existing labor process theory (Burawoy, 1998). I specifically applied labor process theory to the Uber phenomenon because this theory illuminates the labor process, which is where production starts. As long as the capitalistic logic – input for production is composed of capital and labor forces – is meaningful in the current economy, illuminating labor, the minimum unit of the analysis of the production, will lead me to conceptualize Uber's employment relations.

The labor process theory has been developed to explain capitalistic social relations over production, specifically by illuminating conflict interests between managerial power and workers, based on structural and deterministic view on Marxism (Spencer, 2000). The debate on LPT was first sparked by Braverman (1974), whose research context focused on manufacturing

in the 1960s. In this context, Braverman criticized that Taylorism justifies managerial controls over the labor process to legitimately reorganize workforce alignments and reinforce managerial surveillance of the workforces. According to Braverman (1974), these managerial controls cause a separation of conception and execution for work and ultimately yield the deskilling and degradation of labor.

Braverman's (1974) study on managerial controls has been extended in many ways. Specifically, Edward (1979) explained how managerial controls have been systemically implemented by identifying three components of "direction, evaluation, and discipline". In my theoretical paper, I adopted Edwards' control framing to explain Uber's managerial controls in a systemic way. For example, Uber drivers need to follow the application's "direction" to meet customers' requirements, so they need to respond to the application to decide where to go and when they should work. In addition, all of Uber drivers' activities are "monitored and evaluated" through the application. Specifically, their performances are evaluated by customers' ratings, which affect drivers' reputations. In terms of reinforcing "discipline", Uber drivers need to maintain a high acceptance rate for giving rides (85% to 90%), manage their cars themselves, and follow the given directions to prevent their deactivation from the Uber application (Eisenbrey and Mishel 2016; Rosenblat, 2016). Ultimately, Uber's platform can be interpreted as a tool for managerial controls that are not different from the traditional exploitative labor relations as well as even more sophisticated version of panopticon through the application's monitoring of the labor process.

In addition to explaining managerial controls, the LPT has been developed to explain how these managerial controls have been sustained by workers' consent. According to Burawoy (1978), managerial controls not only directly exert power over the workers' labor process, but

also try to instill entrepreneur ideology into workers to obscure and secure how the surplus value is created and distributed. Under this control, the entrepreneurial ideology becomes a managerial tool for controlling individual workers' labor subjectivity. This ideological framing makes workers voluntarily consent to the obscured labor process and contribute to letting management secure the surplus value, thereby ultimately leading to management achieving hegemonic controls (Burawoy, 1978; Knight and willmott, 1989). I applied this concept in my theoretical paper to explain Uber drivers' labor subjectivity. In the case of Uber, the management side emphasizes the free will of drivers, who can voluntarily log into the application to work according to their own demands for work, thereby allowing drivers to get flexible working hours. However, Uber drivers' working schedules are in fact determined by customers' demand, rather than drivers' demand; therefore, it is possible to infer that the benefit of working hour flexibility is drivers' ideological myth. Additionally, considering drivers' economic status with high income volatility, their need to earn not their willingness to participate in Uber's work, seems to be the necessary factor (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). In this sense, drivers' employment status as an independent contractor can be justified by the ideology of entrepreneurship (Commbs, et al., 1992).

However, I realized that this conceptualization of Uber's managerial controls and drivers' labor subjectivities based on the labor process theory needs to be examined in an empirical way. Even if I can assume what drivers' identities are, it is important to recognize that this conceptualization must be hypothetical. Additionally, my studies might not properly capture the actual labor process of Uber work as this is a new form of organizing work that has historically not existed. In this research context, I realized that I need to increase my understanding of the

Uber phenomenon by observing the Uber site and listening to Uber drivers' opinions on their work.

Methods: Research Design and Findings

(1) Defining research sites and research subjects in order to apply qualitative methods

In terms of defining the research "site", I narrowed my research site to Uber drivers' "workplaces" which are each individual driver's private car, where the first economic transactions arise. My research subjects are Uber drivers who are independent contractors, as the purpose of the study is to explore Uber drivers' employment relations.

To meaningfully observe this site, capture individuals' identities, and interpret data from drivers' workplaces and working process, I particularly paid attention to how the qualitative methods – participant observations and interviews – can be appropriately applied to represent the research site and subjects in this Uber case study. I specifically focused on three factors: how participant observations can be methodologically meaningful in a non-traditional research site like Uber's individualized drivers' workplaces and flexible working times; how platform technologies, which mediate Uber drivers' employment relations, can affect the research site across the physical and virtual workplace and can reconstruct drivers' social relations over the labor process; and how Uber drivers perceive their labor process and their own employment status.

I concluded that both participant observations and interviews were meaningful methods in my study. Participant observations allowed me to understand "a rich experiential context" and be "aware of incongruous or unexplained facts" related to Uber's work (Becker and Geer, 1957). Additionally, interviewees gave me opportunities to understand emerging Uber work that has not

previously existed by exploring individual Uber drivers' "interior experiences" (Weiss, 1994). During my data collection, these two methods complemented each other, resulting in meaningfully interpretation.

(2) Observing Uber workplaces: Participant observations as a qualitative method

Participant observation is a method for "investigating rich and complex experiences and activities of human being and the meaning of their existence" to collect data for ethnographic studies (Jorgensen, 2015). In this research, I adopted participant observation as my research method. To do so, I became an Uber customer to observe Uber drivers and their workplaces. **I took an Uber 15 times and described the experiences in my field notes**. These field notes represent my observations of Uber drivers' working process, their responses to the Uber application and customers, and how the Uber application works, from the perspective of an Uber customer.

Even if there were other possible options available for observing how Uber drivers work – (e.g., searching online temporary workers' forum, visiting Uber's physical offices), – becoming an Uber customer was the most appropriate way to enter the "natural social setting" in which the Uber service initially emerges in order to learn how Uber drivers make sense in their language (Emerson, part1, 2001). Thus, my field work involved taking Uber trips to visit each driver's car, and my role in the field was an Uber customer. In the field, I focused on the place where the economic transaction -paying and giving rides- occurred by being a customer; I was able to interact with Uber drivers in this process.

In the initial stage of my participant observation, I specifically considered how becoming a "customer" would suggest different implications in terms of researchers' participant

observations, in contexts where traditional organization researchers have become a "worker" to participate at a research site. Traditionally, organization scholars studying employment relations have become "workers" by adopting ethnographies as their research methods for studying "individuals and groups constitute" and "to interpret organizations and societies on a daily interactional basis" in workplaces (Schwartzman, 1993). For example, Burawoy (1979), a scholar who led the developments of labor process theory, became a worker and a community member in a piece-rate machine shop in the 1960s to get experiences and study how workers' subjectivity becomes subordinated to managerial controls. At that time, researchers might be involved in a more natural setting to observe the field and interact with research subjects by becoming a "worker". However, in the case of Uber drivers, if I participated in the field as a driver (worker), I would not have seen nor been involved with other workers on their labor process, because the Uber workplace is individual drivers' private cars. The only way that I could observe the drivers' labor process was by becoming a customer. Even if my role as a customer did not enable me to experience the work itself, receiving the drivers' service allowed me to observe the field. This shows that my field relations – becoming a customer to observe a driver – can have a distinctive meaning when compared to other ethnographies in employment studies in terms of generating different researcher – research subject tensions.

My fieldwork role was not confined to the role as the Uber customer. In addition to the role as the Uber customer, my other social characteristics (e.g., race, gender, age, and immigrant status) might be positioned in the research context. I became a part of the complex field relations with these backgrounds, consciously or unconsciously (Emerson, Part2, 2001). With regard to this research positionality and field relations, some interesting moments emerged. For example, becoming familiar with the Uber application as a customer allowed me to observe that the

application malfunctioned with some patterns, such as inaccurate and slow GPS. Even if the patterns were not solid, this same patterned working process allowed me to describe Uber drivers' frustration with this problematic situation and increase my general understanding of the inherent difficulties in Uber's labor process. Additionally, many of immigrant Uber drivers talked to me and sympathized with me, probably because I'm Asian and an international student. Therefore, my personal background as a field researcher might be helpful for collecting some specific information on Uber drivers. Through these conversations, I discovered that many Uber drivers are immigrants and are not native English speakers. These moments helped me to build interview questions to create codes for analysis.

During this field work, I realized that my descriptions in the field notes were inevitably based on subjective experiences, even if my goal was observing the given situation in the most natural way. Therefore, I admitted that my observations have inevitable ethnographical limitations and recognized the importance of handling data from the field (Coffey, 1999; Van Maanen, 1979). To address this concern, I established some rules for writing field notes. In the case of interactions in the field, I engaged in conversations if Uber drivers talked to me first; otherwise, I just took trips and I did not talk to them to preserve the nature of the field setting. Additionally, I tried to write field notes in a descriptive way and divide the objective description from my reflexive understanding. These rules helped me to be more sensitive to and perceptive about the situations, rather than controlling or eliminating certain conditions (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

In addition to contemplating on my field roles, I considered how the irregularity of Uber drivers' working places and their flexible working schedules can affect researchers' observations, when the observation context is compared to the traditional working context. In the

case of Uber drivers, each individual driver's car is the workplace, so there is no specific fixed working place like factories or offices, which have been considered as the typical workplaces. With regard to drivers' irregular scheduling, their working schedules are decided by their willingness to work and customers' demand for rides, so their working time is different from the standard 9 to 5 working hours. The drivers' working schedules are not consistent for 8 hours per a day; and they are mixed with the drivers' private time. These irregularities in workplaces and times imply that my participation site during Uber trips might not only represent the drivers' labor process, but also encompass independent contractors' distinctive characteristics, which are ambiguous boundaries of time and space in the work.

This ambiguity in the boundaries of space and time brought me to a methodological question of how researchers can adopt a meaning of the "site", which is importantly contextualized in ethnographies (or field works, in a narrow term). At my Uber site, which I defined as each driver's private car, I needed to observe multiple sites, not a fixed single site, because it was almost impossible to encounter the same Uber drivers when I called for an Uber as a customer during my 15 times trips. My inevitable choice to visit multiple sites was a different approach from the traditional ethnographical approach in that traditional researchers have observed a clearly bounded site with continuity and consistency in terms of representing working places and working times (Candea, 2007). Nevertheless, my observation of multiple sites generated some patterns (e.g., many drivers are immigrants, males, non-white) that could potentially become meaningful findings. Thus, my observations were methodologically meaningful in that the ethnographical "site" could be regarded as "temporal constitute" (Dalsgarrd, 2013), and this temporal site can be meaningfully interpreted in the "individualized working context" (Schatzki, 2005). My approach can also be similarly applied to some

organization studies that require considerations of these ambiguous boundaries of space and time in social relations (Cohen, 2010), such as studies on independent contractors' working environments.

However, the "site" problem did not remain solely as temporal workplace and working time issues at the physical level of discussion. In the case of Uber, it was important to consider the meaning of the Uber application as a virtual workplace, as the application has a large impact on social relationships in Uber's labor process. After exploring how to consider this site's ontological implications from digital work practices (Horst and Miller 2012), I decided to observe and participate the driver's application when I took the Uber trips. In my participant observations, I confirmed that Uber drivers get directions from the application, as I previously suggested in the above literature review; they got customers' calls through the application and used Uber's GPS for trips. Such experiences seemed create their own distinctive virtual world for Uber drivers (Horst and Miller 2012). Furthermore, as a customer, my application is different from the drivers' application, so in the field I could only observe drivers' responses to their applications and interact with drivers by letting know them my pick-up location through the application message system.

My observations have some limitations too, in terms of not having the same experiences as Uber drivers. Even if my physical field have some limitation, this virtual field work can provide a meaningful digital ethnographic reflection (Duggan, 2017) for studying Uber drivers' sociocultural practices over their labor process. Throughout my observations and interactions, I realized that drivers' independency with regard to flexible workplaces and scheduling may be situated under the control of the application, considering the surge prices and customers' demands, as shown in the application. Based on this observation, I was able to ask my

interviewees application related questions to figure out how individual Uber drivers perceive the application technologies and how this can affect Uber's labor process.

In summary, my participant observation showed an aspect of relational ethnography in terms of "studying fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people" (Desmond, 2014), by newly interpreting the meaning of site and the flexible labor process with regard to time and space.

(3) Interviews: Understanding Uber drivers' employment status

After I observed the workplace, I **conducted two interviews and transcribed one interview**; the first interviewee (0001MA) was introduced by my academic advisor, and the second interviewee (0002DJ) was introduced by my colleague. Both interviewees are male students. Considering that I'm a PhD student and both interviewees were introduced by people in academia, I assumed that they understood the purpose of interviews to some extent. In the interview process, I used my interview guideline to ask some structured questions, but the conversation was open to interviewees, and many questions were based on my experiences during my participant observations.

Interviewees highlighted both common ideas and different experiences. Both interviewees said that most Uber drivers are immigrant. Moreover, they both commented that the Uber application's GPS is slow and has technical issues and that Uber requires emotional labor in terms of maintaining good customer relations and enduring stressful situations when the application malfunctions. Additionally, they do not see being an Uber driver as a part of their long-term careers and want creative jobs other than driving for Uber.

During the interview, I tried to ask about their perceptions toward their employment status in general, rather than specifically focusing on their Uber experiences. For example, instead of asking how the Uber application works, I asked about their attitudes and perceptions toward the effect of technologies on social relations such as being an Uber driver. This "reflexive" interview process illuminated each interviewee's employment history in a broad context (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2017), thereby providing me with holistic understanding of the dynamics between drivers' personal backgrounds and their identities.

For example, when I started by asking why they chose to become an Uber driver, interviewees told me their employment history. Both of had retail experience. The first interviewee (0001MA) also worked as a security guard for apartments. When I asked whether they would continue to do this (Uber or other) job and what they wanted to do in the future, interviewees told me that they do not want to work for Uber in the future. The first interviewee (0001MA) only planned to work for Uber until he graduated school next year; the second interviewee (0002DJ) said that he had just quit the Uber job because it was too stressful for him. For their desire job, both used the word "creative", and they wanted to have more creative jobs. However, interestingly, neither of them indicated the specific kind of jobs that they wanted. Their descriptions of their future job plans seemed abstract.

These similar answers from both interviewees suggest that being Uber driver can be considered "bad jobs" (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson, 2000), for some people (as in the case of my interviewees) in the context of labor market dualism. Both interviewees became Uber drivers because they needed a job, not because they preferred flexible working hours. Thus, Uber's entrepreneur framing, which emphasizes the benefits of flexible working hours and autonomous

participation, might be interpreted as managerial strategies, rather than revealing capitalistic struggles of contingent workers.

However, these two interviewees showed many different responses depending on their different personal backgrounds. In the case of 0001MA, he was an immigrant (he said that he is now a U.S. citizen) and is black; English is not his native language. He said that the Uber job was much better than other retail jobs or security guard positions because Uber jobs give him more flexibility (even if Uber jobs are also stressful for him). As a result, he worked for Uber for three years (even if he only wanted to keep the job until he graduated).

On the other hand, 0002DJ came from the East Coast, is white, and is a native English speaker. He said that retail jobs are much better than Uber jobs because he can easily find retail jobs, especially in Boston. He said that that he was always successful in retail jobs and had great recommendations from his previous retail employers. With regard to the Uber job, he did not want drive for Uber anymore, even if he still had not deleted the application from his phone.

These results from the interviews indicate that personal backgrounds – (e.g., immigrant status, race) – can be a potential theme that newly added to my research with regard to Uber drivers' employment status. Even with the small number of interviews conducted, this pattern visibly emerged to become a meaningful code for analysis. Additionally, my participant observations supported this pattern as many Uber drivers were immigrants. Again, it is hard to draw a generalization given the small number of interviews and a short period of observation in the Boston area, but this pattern can be developed as an extended case method to illuminate Uber drivers' working environment, their employment status, and their identities at work.

Implications as an Extended Case and Suggestions for Future Analysis (how to analyze given data)

The discussed methods and findings based on Uber trips are meaningful as "an extended case method" (Burawoy, 1998). In addition to my theoretical framing of Uber drivers using the labor process theory, this case study can provide an empirical evidence of this theoretical framing, which was confined to the hypothetical assumption on managerial controls in capitalistic productions and workers' labor subjectivity.

The case study does not just confirm to such the assumption, but also contributes to expanding the existing labor process theory. In this research, my views on interviewees and my experiences from the participant observations were embedded in the labor process theory, which served as a lens illuminating research subjects and providing a frame to understand certain patterns or relations of the research interests (Burawoy, 1998). By applying the labor process theory to understand Uber's employment relations, the newly interpreted methodological implications and emerging findings can "reconstruct" (Burawoy, 1991) the existing labor process theory with this Uber case, which has a different research context than the manufacturing area. Considering that the grounded theory cannot explain all empirical phenomena, especially the emerging Uber business, the theory can be complemented and evolved (Emerson, part1, 2001) by this case study.

In this sense, I can build more specific questions for future research, such as how individual workers position themselves in the contingent labor market (or in the case of Uber job market) based on their personal backgrounds. While general labor subjectivity studies have been conducted in the context of homogeneous personal backgrounds of specific jobs, the Uber case may provide some additional classifications on contingent work. For example, workers who are

situated in the contingent labor force can show stratification based on immigrant status or race. In this case, personal backgrounds – immigrant status and race – as a moderate variable can represent certain demographic characteristics of Uber drivers. Even if this idea is not a new theme in the labor market studies in general (Bell, Kwesiga, and Berry, 2010), it can be meaningful in this emerging Uber case provides another clue for labor stratification.

Even if this question is slightly different from the initial research question, it does not mean that it is an entirely new research context. This emerging theme can still be interpreted with questions about how Uber drivers perceive their employment status and their social relations over the Uber's labor process, as an extended case to enrich existing discussion on workers' subjectivity over the labor process by reconstructing the existing theory (Burawoy, 1991).

In addition to interpreting the emerging theme, it is important to consider how the researchers' interpretation of the phenomena can be politically correct. According to Emerson (2001, part1), relating in the field and writing about the field can raise ethical and political issues. Specifically, my concern is focused on writing and interpreting the relations between workers' subjectivity and their personal backgrounds. Even if it is an axiomatic truth that certain relations exist, defining the relations in an academic language may provide another preconception toward workers. Additionally, my judgements might be wrong, even if my "critical judgment" is supported by theoretical understanding (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2017) due to omitting some other significant contexts or conceptualizing the individuals' narratives with arbitrary interpretations. Nevertheless, I think such qualitative research on Uber's emerging employment relations should be conducted to understand empirical changes in new ways of organizing work by carefully listening to invisible workers' voices.

Conclusion

In this paper, I briefly explained how Uber can be framed with a labor process theory to explain where my research fits. And then, I introduced how I conducted a pilot version of my qualitative research by taking Uber trips and interviewing Uber drivers. I found out that studying Uber requires a different methodological approach to apply traditional qualitative research methods appropriately. This study as an extended case can contribute to developing the labor process theory with newly modified qualitative methodical implications and to increasing understandings of employment relations in the current economy.

At first, my initial goal was specifically exploring how Uber drivers perceive their labor process and employment status. However, in the process of conducting the qualitative research, I tried to observe the case of Uber in general, rather than answering the specific question of Uber drivers' identity. For this research, I examined how I could refine existing qualitative methods to apply in the case of Uber. Such a shift enabled me to determine that "methodological procedures are intricately linked with substantive findings" (Emerson, part2, 2001). I hope these finding can suggest some directions for qualitative researchers studying emerging platform business models.

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