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‘I’m my own boss...’: Active intermediation and ‘entrepreneurial’ worker agency in the Australian gig-economy

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Abstract

Platform firms in the gig-economy are disrupting work as a social practice, production systems and recasting capital-labour relations. This qualitative study examines worker agency in the Australian food-delivery sector; a segment where platforms actively intermediate both product and labour markets. Within this sector, worker agency poses a potential challenge to platform-organisations; however this study reveals how these platforms' work organisation and market regulation constrain agency potential. Shaped by the work's spatio-temporal features, organisational fixes and institutional context, it is shown how food-delivery workers, transiently attached to the labour market, predominantly engage in 'entrepreneurial agency' – a low-level agency expression aimed at materially improving individual conditions and aligning with, rather than challenging, platforms' business models.

Keywords

Labour agency, labour market intermediation, gig-economy, migrant workers

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Introduction

Work in the digitally enabled gig-economy has unique spatio-temporalities due to its ‘on demand’ nature – often requiring short turnarounds between the offer and performance of work. Gig-work, despite great variety in type and location (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018), has shared characteristics. This includes the work organisation used by work platforms (henceforth platforms); these modern-day labour intermediaries offer short-term, one-off jobs (‘gigs’) to workers who themselves provide some of the means of production (e.g. a car or bicycle) and are commonly remunerated on the basis of piece rates (Stewart and Stanford, 2017). Gig-work is facilitated through platforms’ digital ecosystems which are underpinned by matching-technology (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018; Peticca-Harris et al., 2018; Stewart and Stanford, 2017), with algorithmic management often used to exercise varied levels of control over task allocation and performance (Cherry, 2016; Rosenblat, 2019). The gig-economy has expanded across high- (Goods et al., 2019) and low-wage economies (Ford and Honan, 2019), reshaping industries as diverse as photography and transportation. The gig-economy’s growth can be viewed as a neoliberalisation of work (Zwick, 2018), with work increasingly governed by market rather than social regulation (Peck, 1996).

This paper, invoking labour geography, investigates whether workers can fashion favourable geographies to create ‘labour’s spatial fix’, that is, the ‘active mak[ing] of the geography of capitalism . . . [to] facilitate their social reproduction and hence survival’ (Herod, 1997: 15). The idea of labour’s spatial fix, and how agency might be deployed in pursuit of it, remains under-theorised and under-empiricised in informal and low paid work (Strauss, 2020). Based on a qualitative case study including interviews with workers engaged by two on-demand food-delivery platforms operational in Australian cities, we show how the work organisation of these platforms enables and constrains particular forms of agency within these services and how workers exercise agency in response to these arrangements.

Platforms’ business models represent a reshaping of capitalism and work within it (Srnicek, 2017b; Veen et al., 2019). As a distinct form of capital, platforms have benefited from a large influx of surplus capital into the technology sector (Srnicek, 2017a), often through the speculative activities of venture capitalists. Using technology to create digital marketplaces, platforms use technology to blur distinctions between employment, independent contracting and enterprise. Effectively, gig-work is a novel extension of non-standard work, in particular, temporary staffing work facilitated by labour market intermediaries. Although platforms portray themselves as passive intermediaries between workers, end-users and other parties this underplays the frequently active role they play in shaping economic landscapes and the social relations which exist within them (Rosenblat, 2019). Food-delivery platforms, for instance, are in the business of making markets, coordinating heterogeneous actors including customers, restaurants and workers to allow for the purchase of delivered meals (Richardson, 2019). Platforms, however, differ from temporary staffing firms in *how* they make markets as platforms intermediate both product *and* labour markets through their digital infrastructures. Mirroring the historical expansion of temporary staffing (Peck et al., 2005), platforms are simultaneously creating and shaping the markets they intermediate, acting as ‘active intermediaries’ (Attoh et al., 2019; Rosenblat, 2019). Garnering much scrutiny within economic geography in the 2000s (Wills, 2009), labour market intermediaries sell labour effort to clients by creating triangular employment relationships (see Figure 1). Clients can thus access (for a price) a scalable workforce while avoiding the (ongoing) costs and risks of direct employment (Coe et al., 2007). Similar to

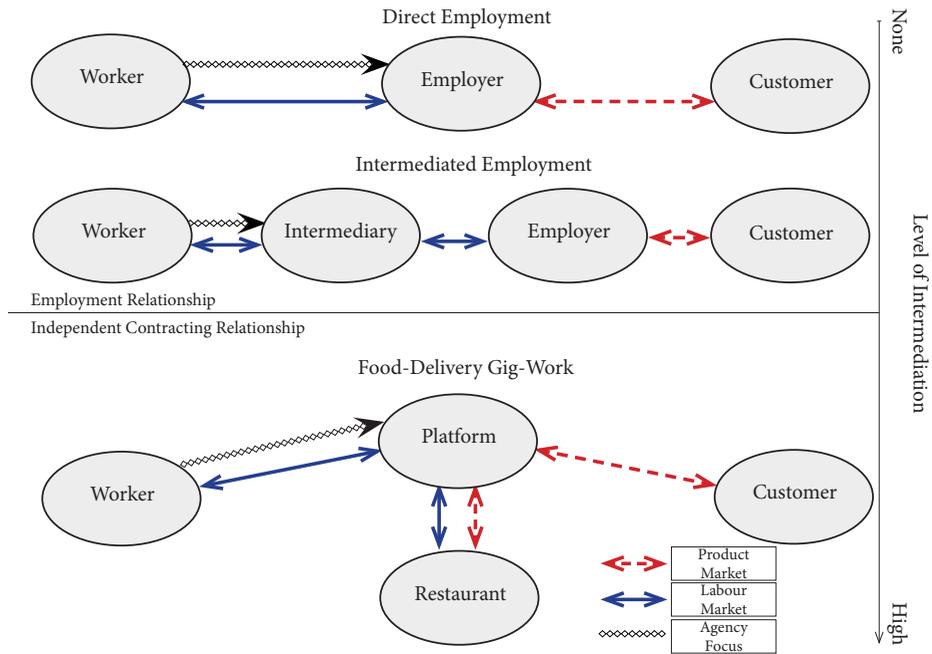


Figure 1. Intermediated labour and product markets.

platforms (Peticca-Harris et al., 2018), labour market intermediaries employ a rent-seeking business model, accumulating by extracting a portion of workers' incomes while providing flexibility for end-users (Coe et al., 2007). Workers in these temporary staffing arrangements find comparative labour market advantage in their willingness to accept lower incomes, placing downward pressure on intermediated *and* non-intermediated labour markets (Coe et al., 2009).

Where temporary staffing firms typically engage workers as employees (Coe et al., 2009) and operate within existing labour regulations, platforms' business models '[leap] ahead of regulations and workers' (Srnicek, 2017a: 257). Most platforms rely on contractual arrangements with workers to avoid employment-related costs and shift economic risks onto workers (Cherry, 2016). In Australia, workers can be engaged either as employees, eligible for labour law protections including access to the 'national employment standards', or independent contractors, where the relationship is characterised as between businesses and as such these minimum standards do not apply. The state applies a multi-factor test to determine the appropriateness of classifications (Stewart and Stanford, 2017). The contractor classification, however, constrains platforms' ability to directly control labour (Veen et al., 2019). Platforms, therefore, rely on inter-worker competition (Peck, 1996) and deploy 'process' fixes (Silver, 2003) to secure labour effort and to shape supply and demand in the labour market. Platforms' pursuit of independent contracting relationships can be viewed as a response to the social regulation of employment, where they engage deliberate organisational strategies to either outpace regulations or create regulatory vacuums (Srnicek, 2017b). Platforms proclaim that independent contracting relationships are fundamental to their business models (e.g. Deliveroo, 2018; Uber, 2018) and reflect the nature of labour-capital relationship – the latter is, however, disputed in legal proceedings around the

world (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). While increasing scholarly attention has been paid to platforms' attempts to control labour, make markets and engage workers as contractors, limited attention has been paid to labour's exercise of agency in response.

Within capitalist socio-economic relations, including the gig-economy, the relationship between labour agency and production systems is dialectical, with labour regimes reflecting capital's responses to prior expressions of labour agency (Cumbers et al., 2008). To date, others have prioritised capital's role in shaping the gig-economy (e.g. Srnicek, 2017b: 1), which means that labour's actions and choices in shaping the gig-economy have been under-considered. To remedy this, we turn to labour geography. Labour geography is a project within critical geography which outlines how workers' actions are both produced by and productive of economic space, with workers' territorial and relational position within economic space shaping how production occurs and the unevenness of economic space (Herod, 1997; Pattenden, 2016). Fundamental to workers' ability to shape space is the choices that workers make and how they express agency (Strauss, 2020). Responding to calls within labour geography for empirical studies that advance agency understanding to 'the maximum extent' (Castree, 2007: 858), this paper contributes to a literature that considers labour agency in a way that is sensitive to workers' position in particular labour regimes (e.g. Padmanabhan, 2012; Warren, 2019).

By advancing understandings of worker agency, informed by labour geography (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Peck, 2018), we contribute to analyses of labour's responses to the gig-economy and how these responses, in turn, shape both labour and capital's spatial fixes. Building on Aĝar and Böhms' (2018) notion of the socio-spatial fix, the circumstance where capital and labour's spatial desires coincide, we consider how individual workers, shaped by their labour market context, engage in agency. Based on qualitative interviews with food-delivery workers operating in Australia, we unveil how food-delivery platforms constrain labour agency as well as seek to reshape understandings of agency itself. Revealing how these workers, in the Australian context, mainly engage in individualised expressions of agency which reinforce, rather than test, capital's accumulation, we challenge existing notions of labour and capital's spatial fixes being in opposition to each other (Strauss, 2020). The paper makes three contributions. First, we extend explorations of how labour agency is expressed on the basis of the characteristics workers bring to the labour market (building on Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Second, we introduce a new categorisation of 'entrepreneurial' agency and in doing so explore the contradictory relationships between the worker, other workers and platforms within app-based food-delivery services, highlighting how labour agency in this segment of the gig-economy is sustaining platform-capitalism (Srnicek, 2017b). Third, we contribute to emerging scholarship which emphasises the importance of time and timing of worker agency (Coe, 2013).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we set out the context of app-based food-delivery work in the Australian gig-economy. We then position this work in relation to labour agency scholarship, followed by our research methods. Subsequently, we consider why the independent contractor status and labour market positionality of workers is significant in the Australian context, before discussing the wider importance of these findings. Finally, we delineate the limitations of the study and set out avenues for future research.

Context of app-based delivery work in Australia

The Australian labour market has, since the turn of the 20th century, been characterised by state intervention and relatively high protections for labour, supported by trade

protectionism, restricted immigration and an extensive welfare system (Macintyre and Isaac, 2004). Neoliberal reforms since the 1990s increasingly deregulated and decentralised the industrial relations system reducing institutional protections for organised labour and encouraging individual employment relationships (Cooper and Ellem, 2008). Coupled with increasingly market-regulated migration regimes, including temporary migration (van den Broek et al., 2019), there has been a profound shift in labour market institutions, contributing to a fragmentation of work while increasing the prominence of market-mechanisms in rulemaking.

‘On demand’ platform-work, including food-delivery work, has been a growing labour market development in Australia; a national labour market survey found that 13.1% of respondents had previously worked, or were working, through a digital platform (McDonald et al., 2019). The platforms considered in this study, Deliveroo and Uber Eats, have experienced significant growth since market entry, with Deliveroo reporting 6500 active couriers (Deliveroo, 2019) and Uber around 80,000 partners across its ridesharing and food-delivery services (Uber, 2018). In Australia food-delivery platforms classify workers as independent contractors, thereby circumventing labour protections (Goods et al., 2019). This preference for contractor rather than employment relationships reflect elements of the organisational fix (Silver, 2003) and allows platforms to sidestep direct employment (De Stefano, 2016).

Food-delivery platforms act as ‘double’ market makers, seeking to match restaurants that sell food (and drinks) with consumers while also facilitating the transport of such goods from restaurant to consumer. Platforms are effectively ‘job creators’ who seek to increase their returns, as did temporary staffing firms before them, by ‘transforming markets, rather than simply capturing extant markets’ (Peck et al., 2005: 11). This represents an extension of traditional labour market intermediation into product and labour markets. Double market making can involve triangular relations, such as in ride-hailing, where the product is the labour. In app-based food-delivery, however, it is a quadrangular relationship, as depicted in Figure 1. To accumulate, food-delivery platforms need to simultaneously make and coordinate (a) a product market, intermediating between consumers and restaurants; and (b) a labour market, matching labour supply with the demand generated by product markets. The nature of the product market makes the work ‘stubbornly local’ (Coe et al., 2007: 506) and subject to hyper-local availability of workers (Peck and Theodore, 2001) as the quality of the product degrades as soon as it is produced (i.e. hot food gets cold, cold food gets warm). The novelty of work organisation in app-based food-delivery arises from the organisational and technological fixes used. These fixes place the workforce outside the realms of *any* organisation, providing temporal and spatial flexibility by allowing workers to decide the times and locations at which they await their ‘pieces’. Yet, concurrently, labour is tightly controlled and managed through the digital ecosystems and algorithmic management (Peticca-Harris et al., 2018; Veen et al., 2019; Rosenblat, 2019).

Coordinating quadrangular relationships between restaurants, consumers, workers and platforms, in a time- and space-sensitive manner, means that app-based food-delivery services are subject to specific spatio-temporal challenges. For instance, workers do not necessarily deliver for the same restaurant nor, for that matter, platform. To overcome such challenges, and sustain capital accumulation, platforms must therefore create a spatial fix (Harvey, 1982) which facilitates provision of a quickly degrading product while ensuring actors are able to make two markets (Richardson, 2019).

Consequently, these services are offered in areas with spatio-temporal proximity between supply and demand in both product and labour markets. Once the product is ordered, platforms need to solicit potential labour power from labour markets. Through

technological fixes, behavioural nudging and reliance on market pressures, food-delivery platforms are able to concoct a scalable workforce that can meet consumer demand (Rosenblat, 2019; Srnicek, 2017b). In order to receive deliveries, workers make themselves 'available' through mobile phone applications created and curated by the platforms – signalling their willingness to sell their labour. Platforms then utilise algorithms as a managerial tool to allocate deliveries ('pieces'), which workers can accept or reject (Veen et al., 2019). Workers' contractor classification ensures that platforms do not compensate workers for their idle time. While in theory workers have the ability to restrict their availability or exit the industry if the idle time becomes too great, Australia's labour market is characterised by persistent under- and unemployment, growing precarity and increasing availability of temporary migrant labour (Oliver and Yu, 2019; van den Broek et al., 2019), meaning such actions are less likely. It is within this context that we explore worker agency.

Conceptualising labour agency

Labour agency, defined as 'both the intention and practice of taking action for one's own self-interests and the interests of others' (Rogaly, 2009: 1975), is expressed in response to production relations under capitalism. Labour agency simultaneously shapes how labour is integrated into production processes and economic space itself (Herod, 2001). The concept of labour agency is fundamental to labour geography, as it is both the deliberate choices of workers, and their effects, which allow workers to shape the geographies of capitalism (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011; Herod, 1997). While frequently invoked, labour agency remains under-empiricised and under-theorised within labour geography (Castree, 2007; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Strauss, 2020). The concept, however, has seen greater attention within sociology and industrial relations (Burawoy, 1979; Scott, 1987). Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011: 257) capture the imprecision of its use, stating agency 'can be informal or formal, individual or collective, spontaneous or goal directed, sporadic or sustained, and it can operate on different scales'.

Labour agency can be conceptualised in different ways, including classifications based on intended outcomes (Katz, 2004), institutional constraints (Cumbers et al., 2016), spatiality (Herod, 2001) and relations to social reproduction (Padmanabhan, 2012). We use Katz's (2004) classification of *resistance*, *resilience* and *reworking* as a starting point for categorising labour agency, which can be expressed in the spheres of production and social reproduction (Warren, 2019). Resistance, the least prevalent form, describes attempts by labour to transcend capitalist social relations across both spheres (Cumbers et al., 2016). Reworking involves attempts to improve workers' conditions, both at and outside of work, while operating within existing social relations (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Resilience, the lowest level of agency, consists of small acts of coping under often adverse socio-economic circumstances (Warren, 2019). These acts are necessary in order for workers to sustain themselves; however, these acts can also reinforce the trajectory of capitalist socio-spatial relations which created these adverse circumstances in the first place (Katz, 2004; Scott, 1987; Warren, 2019).

Within labour geography, labour agency is fundamental to the active role labour plays in reshaping the landscapes of capitalism (Herod, 1997). Individual and collective expressions of labour agency shape the geography of capitalism through the actions and interactions of workers, households, segments of capital, other workers, civil society and governments (Coe, 2013; Strauss, 2020). This occurs because particular workers, or groups of workers, pursue their own spatial visions that can intersect, sometimes for sustained periods, with the interests of capital and to the detriment of other workers (Ağar and Böhm, 2018; Harvey

and Williams, 1995). Despite an expansion in research on labour agency, labour's agency potential, globally, has diminished through the neoliberalisation of labour regimes, leading to 'worsening conditions and relative rewards for the majority of workers worldwide' (Coe, 2013: 279). Historically, (collective) agency was frequently considered through the actions of trade unions (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011), although there are some notable exceptions (e.g. Rogaly, 2009). In the context of declining union density and influence, union actions now represent an increasingly narrow tranche of agency. Agency, therefore, needs to be considered more widely.

Moving beyond the actions of trade unions, workers' agency potential is understood to be influenced by 'horizontal' factors, including gender, age, caste, migrant status and social network in making and constraining agency (Carswell and De Neve, 2013) and the interaction between workers' productive and reproductive obligations (Dutta, 2016). There have also been recent calls for understanding the difference between the agency potential of deliberate acts and that of the routine daily activities of workers, as both have the capacity to shape economic geography (Ağar and Böhm, 2018; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2018). Research on labour agency has expanded to consider the geographies of non-unionised workers, the influence of horizontal factors across and within various locations, scales and industries, and the many intersections, contradictions and conflicts which emerge as a result (Dutta, 2016; Hastings, 2016; Pattenden, 2016). Nevertheless, the emergence of the gig-economy has the potential to further diminish workers' agency potential and from a labour geography perspective remains under-researched.

Platforms' active intermediation of work in app-based food-delivery, coupled with workers' contractor classification, conceals the 'employer' (or 'job creator') almost totally from the focus of labour agency, as illustrated in Figure 1. Platforms' ability to simultaneously intermediate two markets means gig-work can be understood as a novel form of 'internal globalisation', where capital deploys strategies including outsourcing, lowering labour costs, deregulation of labour markets and allowing particular forms of migrant labour to diminish workers' agency potential in place (Cumbers et al., 2016). The 'gigification of work' invites questions about how the organisation of work in the gig-economy shapes workers' agency potential. Platforms' extension of labour market intermediation limits workers' agency potential by fragmenting workers from each other, reducing the practicality of trade unions and by creating a disjunction between workers and the 'job creator' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). This contractor classification, and its endorsement by the Australian state (*Pallage v Raiser Pacific Pty Ltd*, 2018), reflects the state's ability to reinforce power relationships at work (Bocking, 2018) and curtail workers' ability to assert agency either through enforcement of employee entitlements or finding other ways to challenge capital.

The agency potential of gig-economy workers is shaped by their labour market position, especially where labour markets are regulated by market forces rather than social processes (Peck, 1996). This occurs because the effects of labour agency are differentiated, depending on who those workers are, their relationships with other actors and how much influence they carry (Cumbers et al., 2008). One 'horizontal' factor particularly relevant to this case is workers' migrant status (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Migrants shape both agency potential and exercise by influencing both the supply of labour and the social regulation of work in place (Lier, 2007). Different categories of migrants (e.g. based on country of origin, skill set and migration status) have different positionalities in labour markets. Migrants, however, are generally placed at a disadvantage to 'local' workers (Datta et al., 2007; Waite, 2009). Temporary residency status further disadvantages migrants by inhibiting the ability to develop ongoing collective structures (Rogaly, 2009), placing these individuals at a

further disadvantage and increasing their exposure to the ‘whip’ of the market (Burawoy, 1983; Datta et al., 2007).

Finally, temporal factors are critical to understanding expressions of agency in gig-work. Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) explain that time shapes agency potential in two ways: the temporality of gains and the timing of agency. The latter considers when, and in which spatio-temporal circumstances, expressions of agency occur. Expressions of labour agency both in the past, and in different places, shape future expressions of agency (Barratt and Ellem, 2019). The former considers the term, or intended term, of employment. Workers in precarious jobs, or who are unlikely to remain in a workplace, are less likely to share in the rewards of successful expressions of reworking or resistance (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). This creates an incentive for ‘short-term’ workers to accept current arrangements. What, however, does the gig-economy as an extension of work intermediation, a new form of internal globalisation and a departure from socially protected work mean for individualised workers and how they express agency, and what are the consequences of these expressions for economic space?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2013) to examine app-based food-delivery work for two major platforms, Uber Eats and Deliveroo, in the Australian gig-economy. The lack of empirical studies examining worker experiences within the gig-economy, coupled with this paper’s focus on worker subjectivities, justifies the research’s exploratory approach. Data was collected in accordance with a university ethics protocol between January and July 2017. Workers were interviewed via street intercepts in two major cities, Perth and Melbourne, either at the work site while waiting for jobs or at a later date at the worker’s convenience. In addition, workers were recruited via online participant recruitment sampling using internet forums and snowball sampling techniques. Supplementing this interview data were the authors’ in situ observations as they visited different neighbourhoods ‘serviced’ by the platforms at different times of day and different days of the week. Interview data was coded thematically, considering the exercise of agency by workers, the spatio-temporality of the work, exit triggers and ‘fit’ of gig-work into workers’ wider lives.

A total of 58 workers were interviewed over 42 interviews. In addition, the research team had multiple informal interactions with representatives from both platforms. Twenty-four per cent of workers engaged in ‘multi-apping’, where they worked simultaneously for both platforms, 49% worked exclusively for Uber Eats; and 27% worked exclusively for Deliveroo. The majority of workers (75%) rode bicycles, 20% used motorised scooters and the remaining 5% delivered via car. The sample was majority male (91%) and in Australia on a temporary basis (81%) including on international student or working holiday visas.

The tensions and contradictions of worker agency in the gig-economy

Our examination of labour agency within the Australian app-based food-delivery sector highlights two fundamental characteristics which constrain, shape and enable particular forms of agency. First, platforms’ organisational and process fixes shape and constrain the forms of agency available to workers, resulting in individual expressions of agency – which we characterise as ‘entrepreneurial agency’ – which aligns individual workers, as labour, with platforms while pitting workers against each other. Second, workers’ labour

market positionality is shown to reinforce these constraints, further limiting workers' agency potential and sustaining this labour market arrangement.

The features of gig-work: Shaping worker agency

In the Australian app-based food-delivery sector, and similarly in other comparable labour market contexts, gig-workers' contractor status profoundly shapes their agency potential. Contractors are self-employed, placed in market competition with each other, paid by the 'piece' and – distinct from other piecework arrangements – rely on the platforms, and indeed the algorithms the platforms deploy, for the allocation of each piece of work, a function of platforms' dual market making role (Richardson, 2019). Contractors' acts of resilience must be conceptualised differently from those of an employee. For instance, where Burawoy (1979) describes employees limiting their effort to improve their working life, food-delivery contractors must find ways to generate income and sustain themselves by finding better ways to be allocated, and then perform, 'pieces' of work. Critically, this economic reality is reinforced by many workers' self-conceptualisation shifting from a dependent employee to 'their own boss' or a micro-entrepreneur (Interviews 1, 6, 9, 17, 23, 26, 29, 32, 39) – a normative conceptualisation that platforms reinforced. This characterisation was, however, not universally accepted (Interviews 1, 31). Those who saw themselves as micro-entrepreneurs attempted to maximise their income by adopting an 'entrepreneurial' agency, which reinforced platforms' market making. Consequently, their expressions of agency reflected those of entrepreneurs seeking capital accumulation rather than employees seeking the redistribution of profit – reinforcing rather than challenging platforms' continued accumulation.

One strand of 'entrepreneurial' agency centred on worker attempts to increase their income by maximising 'piece' allocation. For example, 'multi-apping', working on multiple platforms simultaneously (i.e. Deliveroo *and* Uber Eats) or being 'logged in' to a platform simultaneously using multiple accounts. This limited, individual form of reworking increased workers' access to 'pieces', without materially challenging the platforms' operations. Almost a quarter of interviewees engaged in multi-apping, while others expressed an intention to (Interviews 2, 9, 16, 18, 23). Individual workers' earnings may increase by multi-apping, but this results in other workers missing out on these 'pieces'. Multi-apping also aligns with, and reinforces, the interests of the platforms. First, it provides platforms with access to a larger workforce (partially resolving the labour supply issue), sustaining their ability to make markets. Second, it gives credence to workers' independent contractor classification by reducing workers' dependency on any one platform, often a critical indicator of employment in Australia (Stewart and Stanford, 2017).

Another 'entrepreneurial' expression of agency was workers' willingness to invest in upgrading their mode of transport, for example from bicycle to scooter (Interviews 2, 13, 16, 17, 35). Workers, by using a scooter or car, could work faster and for longer, enhancing earning capacity. Asset upgrades are a form of resilience which sustains the platforms' ability to make both markets. The upgrades increase the reliability and speed of deliveries, expand the viable range between restaurants and customers and entice workers to provide labour supply for longer periods of time. Workers, additionally, will seek a return on their investment, an indirect self-pacification of labour. These findings contribute to an emerging focus within labour agency scholarship (Warren, 2019) which departs from the traditional focus on reworking and resistance, demonstrating how expressions of resilience need to be carefully identified and understood as facilitators but equally inhibitors of higher-levels of agency within the context of market regimes.

Platforms must overcome the spatio-temporal challenge of ensuring that there are sufficient workers across dispersed locations to meet demand. Platforms are rent-seekers and want to seek the greatest rent from the consumer, while paying workers the minimum for their labour effort. In practice, through the use of service fees, platforms charge workers for market access, thereby extracting another rent. To achieve a reliable supply of labour, platforms adopt a number of different labour strategies to ensure reliability of service (Richardson, 2019). Deliveroo, for example, provides a small cohort of workers with ‘shifts’ that guarantee them payment for a certain number of deliveries (whether performed or not) for specific times in locales of potential high demand. Uber Eats offers ‘boosts’, where each delivery in a particular area at a particular time is paid at least 110% of the base payment. The latter, however, does not guarantee the availability of ‘pieces’. For example, workers were encouraged by Uber Eats to work on New Year’s Eve, but when little work materialised one worker complained, ‘[workers] have wasted their evening. Instead of doing something [social], they’re earning no money’ (Interview 9). ‘Shifts’ and ‘boosts’ were temporary inducements to enhance labour supply. One worker explained ‘there used to be a lot of areas boost previously but not now’ (Interview 29). Platforms withdrew these incentives when labour supply outstripped product market demand – illustrating that the activation of labour effort in this segment of the gig-economy is partly realised through market despotism.

‘Boosts’ are economic nudges used by Uber to influence worker behaviour (Rosenblat, 2019), which interviewees understood and responded to in various ways. While some viewed them as an encouragement to work at particular places and times (Interview 1, 37, 38, 39), many ‘entrepreneurially’ regarded them as an opportunity to increase earnings (Interviews 5, 7, 15, 26, 27). One form of resilience expressed by some workers was to ignore the boosts. Two workers (Interviews 37, 41) ignored platforms’ attempts to interfere with other parts of their lives. Others described the trade-off between working at locations and times that suited them, forgoing potentially increased earnings (Interview 9). Workers were, however, conscious that boosts merely represented the ‘opportunity’ for additional earnings but that in practice this was determined by actual consumer demand. To ensure reliability of service platforms need to shape the labour market behaviour of sufficient (not all) workers to outstrip product market demand.

In app-based delivery work, a critical area of agency is the choices workers made about ‘where’ and ‘when’ to wait to maximise job allocation (Interviews 12, 13, 26, 30) – underscoring the spatio-temporal sensitivities of the work. Locational choices were made based on asymmetrical information, with workers knowing less about demand and supply than the platforms, as highlighted in analyses of the nature of food-delivery markets more generally (Richardson, 2019). Thus, the decision to make oneself available for work was based upon multiple sources of information, including colleagues’ experiences (Interview 7), online forums (Interview 31) and the imperfect information provided by platforms (Interview 21). The allocation of ‘pieces’ was shaped by spatial and temporal factors including location (Interview 26), day of the week (Interviews 3, 4, 5), time of day (Interview 23) and other exogenous factors such as weather (Interview 13). Workers explained, for instance, that inclement weather increased product demand and reduced labour supply (Interview 3, 13, 17, 23, 25, 26, 29, 31, 32). Workers’ locational choices, while inefficient and based on asymmetrical information, reflect individual workers expressing locational agency through attempts to maximise their income and cope with these market relations. As workers’ commute between locations is unpaid, most interviewees expressed a preference for remaining in an area once they ‘logged in’ (Interview 5), only seeking better locations upon returning from a delivery if no new orders had been received (Interviews 7, 21). Hence, agency

expressions were the culmination of workers' 'entrepreneurial' interpretation of different work-related conditions and individual circumstances, meaning they remained uncertain about how effective these expressions would be.

Workers' ability to express agency in the labour process is actively constrained by the technological fixes deployed by food-delivery platforms. Smartphone technology is used to direct, surveil and monitor workers, shaping and constraining agency potential. Platforms can monitor workers' location in time and space (Interviews 6, 7, 32, 33) and through customer ratings (Interviews 25, 27, 33, 37), reducing workers' ability to express agency. Nonetheless, workers engaged in resilience to make the work more bearable. One Deliveroo rider, for instance, 'jail broke' his phone to manipulate his GPS location, allowing him to appear closer to the 'waiting zone' and be allocated his next order (Interview 9). This individual form of reworking enabled the individual to increase his earning by increased access to work, yet this activity is to the detriment of other workers rather than the platforms, who are still able to make markets.

The labour market positionality of 'gig' workers

The findings highlighted that workers' labour market positionality and the relatively low entry barriers to gig-work effectively curbed workers' agency potential. Interviewees (5, 6, 9, 39, 24, 34, 41) explained that they had little market power and enjoyed few, or poor, labour market alternatives, with other work frequently described as unviable or less desirable. One worker described how '[t]he main disadvantage [of this work] is that you're not paid very much at all' (Interview 31) and another, a migrant, exclaimed that 'we are slaves in your country' (Interview 8). Exacerbating workers' sense of precarity were experiences of labour market discrimination and underemployment (Interviews 12, 27, 34, 36, 38, 39). Indeed, the weakened labour market position, and lack of agency potential, led one worker to consider participation in this research as an expression of agency due to the limited options available to them:

I'm hoping [this] research would really expose certain sides of the industry. Most people do this job because they don't have many options in their life... no matter how quick you are – the pay is going to be around minimum to below minimum wage... I hope they will answer these interviews because it might reveal something. But most people do complain but they don't want to do anything about it (Interview 30).

This intersects with the activist tradition within labour geography where researchers are generally sympathetic to the workers that they study (Castree, 2007).

A majority of interviewees were temporary, non-citizen migrants, a group prone to occupy peripheral positions within labour markets (Datta et al., 2007). Interviewees (3, 4, 6, 12, 13, 17, 20, 24, 29, 30, 33) provided numerous accounts of how their visa status limited their ability to access better jobs. Workers, who were frequently on international student or working holiday visas, originated from countries including France, Brazil, Colombia, Malaysia, India and Nigeria. Depending on the applicable visa, Australian law places constraints upon workers, for example limiting international students' working rights to 40 hours per fortnight (Department of Home Affairs, 2019). This subsequently limits workers' ability to find jobs that match their skills, as employers 'are not going to hire someone who's only going to be able to work part-time... for a few months' (Interview 6). This creates a division in the Australian labour market between those who have full work rights and those who do not. The low entry barriers to gig-work help to explain the relatively

high representation of migrant workers in the Australian gig-economy (McDonald et al., 2019). In addition, some workers believed that their contractor classification allowed them to work hours in excess of their visa restrictions. This was based on the legally untested assumption that their payment by piece rather than hour abrogated their visa restrictions.

Workers' transient attachment to the Australian labour market, and gig-work in particular, curbed their desire to express agency beyond individual expressions of resilience, engaging only occasionally in reworking. Many interviewees (27 out of 58) explained that they had no long-term commitment to food-delivery work. This, in turn, limited their appetite for more radical forms of agency. The characteristics of gig-work suited their short-term outlook, with interviewees detailing clear and proximate exit intentions including: the ability to find a better job (Interviews 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 17, 24, 27, 32, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42), completion of studies (Interviews 25, 28, 29), expiration of visa (Interviews 3, 15) or other personal reasons (Interviews 7, 20). Hence, individuals were unlikely to benefit from longer-term, institutionalised gains that could be achieved through collective expressions of reworking or resistance. Workers' limited temporal attachment to this form of work is a significant point overlooked by studies that consider worker resistance in the gig-economy (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Moreover, platforms have the capacity to terminate workers without cause or even target those who exhibit forms of agency as the contractor classification places them outside the employment law protections against unfair dismissal.

Limited and uncertain income meant that workers found additional ways to sustain themselves and recharge their labour power. In particular, those who relied on food-delivery as their primary source of income described how their ultra-precarious position in the labour market was dependent on their conduct in the sphere of reproduction (Baglioni, 2017). Some explained how they relied on the earnings of other members of the household (Interviews 17, 38), while one participant described how he used a food charity to feed himself (Interview 15). Others sustained their reproduction by eating food provided by restaurants, often a gesture of goodwill or when orders were cancelled. In the extreme, workers reported that colleagues, rather than themselves, stole food from customers (Interviews 15, 41). All these actions, focused on the sphere of reproduction (Warren, 2019), helped workers to recharge their labour power and allowed for their continuance in gig-work. The above expressions of agency do not pose a fundamental threat to the business model of platforms and can be managed through existing organisational fixes, such as the deactivation of accounts.

Interviewees reported coping with gig-work by contextualising work within their life circumstances. Their temporary status meant downgrading their labour market expectations, with one worker explaining 'I'm happy, really happy doing this job... [but] I would probably not do it in France, because I think I can do much better' (Interview 7). Further, the limited period in which workers foresaw their engagement in this type of work was an important element of resilience, which allowed workers to accept or justify the poor working conditions in the short term. The willingness to accept these 'temporary' conditions for individual workers resulted in those same conditions enduring for those workers who replace them, effectively enabling the platforms access to a workforce in sufficient numbers to continue to act as a market maker.

Discussion

The digitally enabled gig-economy represents a hyper-precarious extension of prior forms of work-intermediation. Food-delivery platforms like Uber and Deliveroo engage workers as contractors rather than employees – discursively recasting workers' identities away from

employment to one of enterprise; portraying workers as the salespersons of their own labour. Extending the analysis of worker agency beyond successful (collective) worker actions (Castree, 2007), this case study advances understandings of labour agency by showing how workers' acceptance of an entrepreneurial mindset changes both the forms of agency they deploy and who this advantages. Platforms' recasting of workers as contractors fundamentally changes the regulation of work and evidences platforms' active intermediation of markets, as it helps them solve the broader challenge of double market making. Platforms' solutions centre upon constraining workers' agency potential and engaging workers with limited labour market power, extending the scope for market regulation of work.

Workers, especially those who accepted the discourse of micro-entrepreneurship, expressed 'entrepreneurial' forms of agency, aligning their personal interests, as labour, with capital in market competition and in opposition to the interests of other workers – that is, over class-based interests. These gig-workers' responses reflect Siemiatycki's claim (2012: 470) that 'in some circumstances, labour plays its part in shaping the geography of capitalism not by challenging capital but by complying with its imperatives'. The work arrangements adopted in this segment of the gig-economy have allowed platforms organisations, as a distinct quantum within contemporary capitalism (Srnicek, 2017b), to reshape the nature of capital-labour relations by engaging in a technologically enabled work intermediation which shifts economic work-related risk onto workers, thereby reinforcing, and even driving, precarity. In turn, this undermines workers' ability to sustain institutionalised gains and carve out decent jobs from the landscapes of capitalism.

Although platforms portray themselves as neutral 'market places', where labour can be bought by end-users requiring a specific service, app-based food-delivery platforms actively facilitate and coordinate the quadrangular relationship between end-users, restaurants, labour and the platform itself. Moreover, rather than passive intermediation, platforms play a critical role in the creation and regulation of both product and labour markets (i.e. 'double market' makers) and, in contrast to traditional labour market intermediation, can be viewed as active 'job creators'. While staffing agencies also frequently transform rather than capture extant labour markets (Peck et al., 2005), we contend that critical to agency potential is food-delivery app-based platforms' need to ensure the creation and coordination of the product market (i.e. the offering of the delivery service). The platforms' simultaneous activity across two markets creates particular spatio-temporalities that require on-demand labour in particular places at particular times in order to be able to create and extract value. Under these conditions of active market making and intermediation, the organisational fix of classifying workers as independent contractors undermines agency potential by legislatively placing labour outside of *any* organisational realms. It subjects workers to the whip of the market and places them in direct competition with each other – realising labour activation through market despotism (Burawoy, 1983). The technological fix, controlling labour through dehumanised management and rating systems, exacerbates these issues. We find the gig-economy to be creating new norms around workplace behaviour, including the 'entrepreneurial' mindset and the extension of workplace competition between workers. In short, changes in the 'labour geography' materially influence the ability of workers to express agency to create labour's spatial fix.

The nature of Australia's labour market, with high levels of temporary migrant workers and high un- and underemployment (Oliver and Yu, 2019), allows app-based platforms to deploy organisational and technological fixes which constrain and reorient worker agency. Collective agency is strongly discouraged, while 'entrepreneurial' expressions of individual agency are encouraged, allowing workers to materially improve their conditions in the spheres of production and reproduction – at least in the short term. In this context, workers

predominantly engage in individual low-level forms of resilience aimed at materially improving individual earning capacity, which aligns and reinforces rather than challenges the interests of capital. These acts are also often directly opposed to the interests of other workers, as attempts to increase individual earnings simultaneously prevents capital from having to raise the price of each piece and denies other workers access to those pieces, effectively reinforcing a negative-sum-game for workers. The stubbornly local nature of the work requires capital to fragment a workforce, which is situated contemporaneously in place, through labour market intermediation, applying contractor status and generating inter-worker competition. The bounded ability of app-based food-delivery workers to express agency is perhaps unsurprising, especially given that temporary staffing workers are already less likely than ‘regular’ workers to effectively express worker agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011), but raises a critical counterpoint to overly optimistic accounts (e.g. Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020) about how gig-workers, through collective agency expressions, can pose a threat to platforms’ ability to accumulate.

The lack of appetite of app-based delivery workers to engage in expressions of agency beyond individual resilience and the occasional reworking, underscores the need to consider agency potential in relation to workers’ economic and social contextual circumstances and their ‘horizontal’ characteristics (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). One particularly pertinent horizontal factor shaping agency in the app-based food-delivery segment of the Australian gig-economy was workers’ non-citizen status – with the majority of interviewees residing in Australia on temporary visas, such as international student visas. Australia has the second largest temporary migrant workforce in the world (OECD, 2019) whose vulnerability is exacerbated by their visa conditions and places them in peripheral positions in the labour market, with temporary migrant workers systemically subjected to exploitation including underpayment, ‘wage theft’ and, in the extreme, bonded labour (Clibborn and Wright, 2018; Wright and Clibborn, 2020). These workers’ frames of reference and expectations about working conditions and entitlements are often shaped by comparison with labour market conditions in their home countries, expectations about the host country and peer group experiences. This reveals why, in Australia, temporary migrant workers frequently tolerate, accept and even embrace working conditions below national minimum wages and standards (Clibborn, 2018).

State action, or inaction, as well as broader institutional settings are also critical contextual factors shaping the vulnerability of app-based ‘gig’-workers in Australia. The current migration framework’s market governance, for example, creates additional barriers to agency; for example, limiting workers’ capacity to engage in trade union membership and activity (van den Broek et al., 2019). Moreover, although labour inspectorates – the Fair Work Ombudsman in Australia – can initiate enforcement activities around app-based ‘gig’-work, complicating its task are platforms’ organisational fixes which commonly operate at the margins, rather than in clear breach, of existing regulations. The Fair Work Ombudsman, as an organisation, further faces resource restraints and ‘structural challenges to enforcing labour standards in the parts of the labour market where temporary migrants are concentrated’ (Wright and Clibborn, 2020: 18).

The role of unions, as an institutional actor and traditional mechanism for collective agency, are another pivotal factor explaining variegation in agency expressions across the app-based ‘gig’-economy. In the United Kingdom, the Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB), as a new union dedicated to enhancing the labour market position and plight of low paid migrants has, to an extent, been orchestrating and coordinating different forms of collective agency. Conversely, in the Australian context institutional legacies and associated inter-union demarcations and disputes have so far fractured Australian

unions' capacity to effectively respond to the growth in these precarious jobs, with their capacity further eroded by sustained government attacks on the union movement more broadly (Cooper and Ellem, 2008; Wright and Clibborn, 2020). As a result, Australian unions have predominantly focused on supporting individual app-based food-delivery workers' legal cases (Workplace Express, 2019) rather than mobilising and organising. Without being definitive, we suggest the combination of these institutional and horizontal factors explains the lack of collective agency in the Australian context.

Food-delivery workers' agency potential is fundamentally shaped by their precarity (Strauss, 2018), reflected in their desire to engage in more formal and socially protected labour markets. Their temporary and non-citizen status, however, hindered their ability to access state resources and social transfers. Precariousness is a differentiated phenomenon, comprising differing causes and effects across space and time (Coe, 2013), yet it is useful to describe individuals' and families' lived experience on the basis of their labour market position (Waite, 2009). Critically, in app-based food-delivery work, this precariousness constrained workers' agency potential to a level where their actions often reinforced the power of platform-organisations and perpetuated their marginality within labour markets. These workers earn income in a pocket of market-regulated employment relations within a broader institutional context where work is socially protected.

The ability of food-delivery platforms in Australia to carve out a pocket of labour market competition outside the realms of regulated employment protections brings to the fore the continued importance of the institutional context and its implications for labour agency. Operating in a high-wage country with strong employment protections, app-based food-delivery platforms have, through their organisational fix, produced intra-worker competition and individualisation which directly undermines workers' capacity and desire for collective expressions of agency. Platforms created these labour regimes, which are sustained, in part, by regulatory inaction and state institutions, which endorse 'entrepreneurial' forms of agency while discouraging more 'disruptive' forms of agency (Bocking, 2018). This follows the neoliberal turn that the Australian state has taken with respect to employment relations since the 1990s (Cooper and Ellem, 2008; Wright and Clibborn, 2020), creating a fertile ground for the mushrooming of the gig-economy. Indeed, Australia's receptiveness to the gig-economy is underscored by the performance of platforms: in 2017 Uber made an AUD\$4.4m profit in Australia despite global losses of AUD\$6bn (Bailey, 2018).

The findings of this paper are necessarily bound by the limitations of the research design, including the exploration of gig-workers in one sector of the gig-economy in one location. Further, by studying workers at a point in time in their workplace, we do not consider the actions of workers who have already exited this gig-work, the ease of exit in food-delivery exacerbating this blind spot. There is a need to go further, with more geographically focused research on the territorial variegation in the various forms of gig-work, its regulation and institutional responses to its emergence. Within labour agency, amid an expansion in fragmented and intermediated work, there is a need for deeper investigation into entrepreneurial agency, and what the gigification of work does to labour-capital interactions over time, across space and both inside and outside the 'gigosphere'.

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