



# Dynamics of Virtual Work

## Working Paper Series

Number 1

### **Identity and Self-Organization in Unstructured Work**

by Vili Lehdonvirta and Paul Mezier

## The Dynamics of Virtual Work

COST Action IS 1202, *The Dynamics of Virtual Work*, is an international interdisciplinary research network on the transformation of work in the Internet Age, supported by COST (European Co-operation in Science and Technology) within the Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health Domain. Chaired by Ursula Huws, Professor of Labour and Globalisation at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK, the Action is managed by a committee of representatives from 30 participating COST countries. Further information about the Action can be found at

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ICTs have had a major impact on the content and location of work. Digitisation of information has transformed labour processes whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. But ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with consumption and co-creation of services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work. Because of the gender division of labour, this affects women and men differently.

The changing geography of virtual work and the emergence of new value-generating virtual activities have major implications for economic development, skills and innovation policies. However these are poorly understood because they have been studied in a highly fragmentary way by isolated researchers.

This Action will distil knowledge to enable policymakers to separate facts from hype and develop effective strategies to generate new employment and economic development in Europe. It will bring together experts in the fields of communications, innovation, management, digital media, creative industries, technology, employment, economics, sociology, geography, gender studies and cultural studies to consolidate theory, map this emerging field, support early stage researchers and develop new research agendas.

This Working Paper is one of a series published by the Action in pursuit of these aims.

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# Identity and Self-Organization in Unstructured Work

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## **Abstract**

Work and careers are becoming increasingly market-based, entrepreneurial, and precarious – in a word, unstructured. This presents challenges to organization theory, which is largely predicated on the structures of post-WW2 Western corporate working life. In particular, notions of identity in organization theory are founded on imagined and actual positions in organizational structures, such as firms, teams and supervisor relationships. The purpose of this paper is to modernize organization theory in this regard, by putting forward a model of identity in unstructured work. This is achieved by widening the theoretical foundations of identity to include contemporary sociological literature that theorises identity through narrative rather than structure, and by conducting an empirical study of ‘microwork’, an extreme example of today’s unstructured working arrangements. Through interviews and observation, we examine the identity challenges that this highly unstructured form of low-status online work poses to workers, and the coping strategies that workers develop. The resulting model consists of three identity processes: *evading* the question of identity, *constructing* a positive occupational identity by casting fluidity as freedom, and *networking* with other workers to form self-organized structures that provide identity.

## Introduction

Identity is a central concept in social and organization theory, because it links the inner self with external social formations. The nature of this link and how it is constructed and maintained is the subject of many theories emphasizing different aspects of the self and the outside world. Organization theorists have focused on the links between the self and the structures of 20th-century working life: occupations (Van Maanen & Barley 1984, Trice 1993), organizations (Dutton et al. 1994, Mael & Ashforth 1992, Riketta 2005, Foreman & Whetten 2002), teams (Riketta & van Dick 2005) and supervisor relationships (Sluss & Ashforth 2007). They have shown that the degree to which individuals identify with these structures and with the roles that these structures afford is a crucial predictor of many organizational and individual outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behaviours (Kramer 1991, Dutton et al. 1994, van Knippenberg and van Schie 2000) and job satisfaction (Ashforth & Mael 1989, Holstein & Gubrium 2000). Identity is thus a theoretically as well as practically important concept.

However, the nature of working life is changing, and theories of identity in organization research must change with it (Walsh et al. 2006, Malone 2004). On one front, the structures of 20th-century working life are slowly disintegrating. Employment relationships are becoming unstable, job tenures are becoming shorter, and the number of self-employed people is increasing (Hollister 2011). Corporate career ladders are breaking down, changing occupations mid-career is becoming more common, and careers are becoming increasingly boundaryless (Arthur 1994, Arthur & Rousseau 1996). Temporary, part-time, remote, mobile, “networked” and other nonstandard work arrangements are increasing (Connelly & Gallagher 2004, Huws 2003, Rainie & Wellman 2012), and the boundaries between work and leisure time are becoming blurred (Gregg 2011). In a word, working life is becoming increasingly unstructured. Not surprisingly, people caught in these changes find it harder to identify with the standard structures of working life, such as organizations (Kalleberg 2000, Kalleberg et al. 2000, Van Dyne & Ang 1998).

On another front, the scope of working life that is of interest to organization and management theorists is expanding, to areas where the standard structures have never been the norm. Scholars are becoming interested in female workers, disadvantaged workers and other relatively neglected worker groups (Broadbridge & Simpson 2012, Lee & Holin 2011). They are increasingly interested in working life outside advanced industrialized countries, in the distant links of global supply chains and in the so-called “bottom of the pyramid” (Walsh et al. 2006, Prahalad 2005, Hart 2005). Scholars are also becoming interested in new technology-mediated “forms of organizing” that often emphasize fluidity at the expense of structure (Zammuto et al. 2007, Faraj & Johnson 2011, Faraj et al. 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to put forward a theory of identity in unstructured work: work that is detached from organizational structures as well as from recognized unaffiliated occupations like freelance journalists and graphic designers. Examples of such work are found particularly in the lower rungs of the contingent workforce: among the numerous temps and self-employed contractors who juggle stopgap roles in an economy that constantly reinvents itself through creative destruction. They are also found at the edges of global supply chains and digital production networks. How do these workers reconcile precarious and constantly mutating work with the need for a stable and esteem-enhancing identity (Tajfel & Turner 1986)? What are the social and organizational implications of the coping strategies and identities that they develop? We approach these questions through an extreme case: a qualitative study of people engaged in remote *microwork*, a type of low-level information processing work organized in a highly distributed and market-based fashion.

Previous research addressing identity in contingent and other nonstandard work paints a picture of complex and dynamic behaviours, as people navigate the cross-pressures of temporary attachments, long-term uncertainty, and blended workforces consisting of both contingent and standard workers (Pink 2001, Zuboff & Maxim 2002, Jordan 2003, Huws 2003, Tietze 2005, Ashford et al. 2007). The case of microwork cuts through much of this complexity, offering what is in some ways an idealized account of work disembedded from conventional organizational and social structures. We examine the strategies that these highly unstructured online workers use to construct and maintain positive self-definitions and cope with the lack of social recognition for their ad-hoc occupations. We also observe them filling social voids through *self-organization*: formation of peer groups and online communities that facilitate self-categorization, communal identity work and work culture formation. We posit that the patterns so clearly observable in this extreme case are also latent in less extreme cases that fit under the broader categories of contingent and nonstandard work.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly review the existing approaches to identity in organization theory, highlighting the ways in which they are tightly coupled with the standard structures of 20th-century Western working life. Next we show how and where these structures are gradually disintegrating, by reviewing organizational and sociological literature on increasing job instability and the growing prevalence of “nonstandard” work. This structural disintegration creates a need for new approaches to identity at work, and we argue that microwork is a particularly attractive empirical setting for theory building in this area. In the subsequent empirical part of the paper, we present findings from a qualitative study of microwork platforms, microworkers, and workers’ online groups. We make sense of the findings using fundamental theories of identity and group processes, including narrative identity theory, which thus far has received little attention in organization theory. At relevant junctures we also compare unstructured workers with stigmatized workers, whose identity and group processes have received more attention in organizational and sociological literature. At the conclusion of the empirical part we put forward a model of identity processes in unstructured work, and finish the paper by reflecting on its social and organizational implications and contrasts to earlier research.

## **Structure and identity in organization theory**

### **Social identity and role identity**

Most notions of identity in organization theory draw on one of two distinct literatures in the social sciences: social identity approach initiated by British social psychologists Tajfel and Turner, and role identity theory rooted in the ideas of early American sociologist G. H. Mead. What follows is a brief review of their most salient features and uses in organization theory, in which we seek to show that identity in organization theory is very much premised on what we have termed as the 20th-century structures of working life.

The social identity approach initiated by Tajfel and Turner consists of social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and their various elaborations in the field of social psychology. In this approach, an individual’s self-concept is seen as a combination of personal attributes and perceived memberships in social groups or categories (Tajfel & Turner 1986). Two fundamental tenets are that social behaviour varies along a continuum between interpersonal behaviour and intergroup behaviour and that individuals strive for a positive self-concept. One possible consequence from these tenets is that individuals favor those perceived as fellow group members over those perceived as outsiders, in order to enhance their group’s status and thus their own self-concept (Tajfel & Turner 1976). Work in this literature focuses on questions such as how group memberships are cognitively construed and

made salient (self-categorization theory), how individuals select between intergroup and interpersonal behaviours, and what specific forms intergroup behaviours can take (social identity theory).

Role identity theory (Stryker 1980, Burke 1991, Stryker & Burke 2000) is situated in the sociological tradition of symbolic interaction, rooted in the works of G. H. Mead. According to this theory, an individual's self-concept is negotiated in interactions with other people, and these interactions take place in the context of positions that individuals occupy in social structures, such as social networks and relationships (Stryker 1980: structural symbolic interaction). Expectations attached to specific positions in social structures are termed social roles (Stryker & Burke 2000). When individuals internalize these expectations, they become identities, known as role identities. As in the social identity approach, individuals can have as many identities as they have memberships in distinct groups or networks; a key research question is which identity is salient in a given situation. A clear difference to the social identity approach is that role identity is linked to actualized membership positions rather than perceived (or imagined) memberships. Although there is some tendency to see these two approaches as mutually exclusive, Stryker bridges them by positing that "cognitive identification with a category is both precursor to and consequence of [actual] involvement in social networks representative of the category" (Stryker 2008, p. 24). Both approaches show how individual identity is linked to social structures.

Out of the two identity literatures outlined above, the concept most frequently adopted to empirical organization research is identification in the Tajfelian sense of a measurable quantity of experienced affinity or oneness with a social group, category or relationship. This is known as the focus of identification (Van Knippenberg & van Schie (2000). For example, organization theorists have measured employees' identification with their teams (Riketta & van Dick 2005), with their supervisor relationships (Sluss & Ashforth 2007), and with the organizations they belong to (Dutton et al. 1994, Mael & Ashforth 1992, Riketta 2005). These measurements are then frequently used as independent variables to explain individual and organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviour, and organizational commitment (Chattopadhyay & George 2001, Foreman & Whetten 2002). Scholars of organization also sometimes use the interactionist concept of role identity, in order to examine topics such as employees juggling work and family (Powell & Greenhaus 2010) and employees returning from international assignments (Kraimer et al. 2012). Both social identity theory and role identity theory together are used to theorize the behaviour of company directors (Hillman et al. 2008, Withers et al. 2012) and the socialization of newcomers into teams and organizations (Ibarra 1999, Sluss et al. 2012). These studies have shown that the concept of identity as a bridge between the internal self and the external social world is crucial for understanding work and organizational life. However, they frame identity as a question of experienced or actual positions in teams, organizations, hierarchies and occupations – the standard structures of 20th-century working life.

## **The rise of unstructured work**

While identity theory in organization studies continues to be premised on 20th-century structures, real work is arguably becoming increasingly unstructured. This claim rests on two observations. The first observation is that the traditional structures of Western working life are disintegrating or at least loosening their grip. The second observation is that the subject matter of organization theory is expanding to non-Western contexts and to alternative forms of organizing, in which similar structures may never have been present in the first place. Both observations are detailed below.

The standard structures of Western working life, on which much of organization theory is predicated, correspond loosely with typical employment arrangements in a 1950s American or Western

European company (Ashford et al. 2007). They are characterized by fixed working hours spent at the company's site, alongside colleagues, under a supervisor, in expectation of a career in the company's service (Shamir 1992). However, empirical data from the United States and Europe shows that such traditional employment relationships have been slowly declining for several decades (Hollister 2011, Ashford et al. 2007). About 1 in 9 workers in the United States are self-employed (Hipple 2010), and an increasing portion of work is contracted through outsourcing and staffing agencies (Davis-Blake & Broschak 2009). In many occupations, work sites have been partially or fully replaced by telework and mobile work (Huws 2003, Cooper & Kurland 2002), and most recently, by "networked" work (Rainie & Wellman 2012). The pervasive adoption of information and communication technologies has also contributed to a blurring of boundaries between work and leisure time (Gregg 2011), so that 45 percent of employed Americans now report doing at least some work from home, and 18 percent do job-related tasks at home almost daily (Madden & Jones 2008).

One way to summarize these changes is to say that workers are increasingly detached from organizational structures (Ashford et al. 2007). They are administratively detached from organizations' formal membership structures; they are physically detached from sites of work and from colleagues and supervisors; and they are temporally detached and desynchronized from each others' and the organization's daily and seasonal cycles and life courses (Pfeffer & Baron 1988).

To the extent that workers still do remain attached to organizational structures, evidence shows that this attachment has generally speaking become more precarious and transient. Job tenures have grown shorter and switching occupations mid-career has become more frequent (Hollister 2011). Temporary, part-time and contingent work arrangements have in many occupations increased (Connelly & Gallagher 2004). Work is increasingly project based, organizations more fluid and team structures temporary and virtual rather than fixed (Gregg 2011, Rainie & Wellman 2012). Careers have become more entrepreneurial and boundaryless, as individuals hop between organizations and cultivate their personal labor market value (Arthur 1994, Arthur & Rousseau 1996). These changes are not as rapid as is sometimes thought, nor are they uniform across time and space, but the overall trend in Western economies is evident (Hollister 2011). We can therefore say that even though workers may temporarily be attached to organizational structures and specific occupations, over time their careers appear increasingly unpredictable and thus unstructured.

In a global and historical context, our model of standard structures of working life is of course not a standard at all, but a peculiar feature of affluent post-World War 2 economies (Ashford et al. 2007). In the developing world, subsistence farming and microentrepreneurship, rather than stable employment in a corporation, continue to be the norm (World Bank 2012). In recent years, the 'bottom of the pyramid' (BoP) discourse has expanded the scope of interest in management studies to people living in extreme poverty (Prahalad 2005, Hart 2005). The poor are mostly conceived of as consumers with needs, but increasingly also as potential suppliers, workers, and entrepreneurs (Karnani 2007, Seelos & Mair 2007, Graham & Mann 2013). Walsh, Meyer, and Schoonhoven (2006) argue that organization theory needs a similarly global outlook. This includes paying more attention to the diversity of organizational forms around the globe, including tiny, short-lived, and informal organizations.

Another domain where the subject matter of organization theory is expanding beyond 20th-century structures is the Internet. Scholars are moving beyond examining the implications of new information and communication technologies to existing organizations, and instead starting to ask what kinds of new "forms of organizing" these technologies afford (Zammuto et al. 2007). In particular, organization scholars have begun to examine online communities (Faraj & Johnson 2011), user innovation (Baldwin & von Hippel 2011), and mass collaboration (Faraj et al. 2011). All these new forms of organizing emphasize fluidity over structure.

Even as working life becomes increasingly unstructured, there is every reason to expect that identity, as the link between the internal and the external world, will remain a crucial concept in understanding it. But notions of identity premised on 20th-century structures are of limited use in realizing this understanding. When scholars use these notions to examine workers such as contractors, freelancers, and temps, the best they can do is to ask to what extent and under what circumstances do these workers still identify with the organizational structures that they are so tenuously connected with (Chattopadhyay & George 2001, George & Chattopadhyay 2005, Stamper & Masterson 2002). The unsurprising finding is that such workers often do not feel part of the organizations that employ them (Allan & Sienko 1998, Rock & Pratt, 2002, Wiesenfeld et al. 1999) and that they are significantly less likely to identify with organizational structures than standard workers are (McLean Parks et al. 1998, Nollen & Axel 1996, Kalleberg 2000).

Another shortcoming in the dominant approaches to identity in organization theory is that they tend to zero in on work and identity in the present, whereas career trajectories span over time and organizational boundaries. By conceiving of identity as a matter of roles and memberships in the present, the theories provide few means to account for ways in which past experiences and future expectations might shape identity. Such means could explain why two persons occupying comparable structural positions can nevertheless have divergent organizational identities, for example. This shortcoming carries over to methodology: most existing studies produce snapshot pictures of experienced identification at a particular point in time, with little attempt to shed light on the intertemporal dynamics of identity construction. To account for the increasingly turbulent intertemporal dynamics of working life, and to capture the identity experiences of workers who are increasingly unstructured, a fresh approach to identity is needed.

## Identity as process rather than position

The disintegration of structures is not a problem unique to organization theory. The disintegration of traditional social structures and their replacement with markets, individualism and institutionalized uncertainty is a frequent theme in contemporary sociology (e.g., Bauman 2000, Beck 2009, Beck et al. 1994, Giddens 1990, Rainie & Wellman 2012). Sociological analyses of identity have noted that the anonymity of urban living, constant physical as well as social movement, the proliferation of life choices, and the frenzied and sometimes contradictory demands of contemporary life make it difficult for individuals to hold onto fixed identity positions in the manner they would have done in a traditional society (Bauman 2000, Featherstone 1995, Giddens 1990). At the same time, individuals have more need than ever for a strong self-concept, in order to make sense of their place in a world that traditional customs, beliefs, and social structures no longer signpost (Beck et al. 1994, Giddens 1991). Identity thus becomes a problem that one must constantly work on: a “reflexive project of the self” (Giddens 1991).

### Narrative identity

The dominant metaphor used to theorize the project of the self is *narrative identity*: a coherent yet continuously revised internal self-biography, into which past life events and imagined futures are woven (Giddens 1991, Holstein & Gubrium 2000, McAdams & McLean 2013). Narrative identity is theorized similarly in both sociological and psychological literature. In this paper, we draw mainly on the sociological perspective, particularly on Giddens (1990, 1991). For a review of the recent psychological literature on narrative identity, see McAdams and McLean (2013). Narrative identity theory builds on many older influences in psychology, sociology and philosophy (Davenport 2012),



but as a distinct theory it is relatively new, and has yet to find its way into the mainstream of organization theory.

A consistent self-narrative is psychologically important, because it allows individuals to see continuity and meaning in their lives and experiences (Giddens 1991). By also incorporating expected future trajectories as natural extensions of the narrative, individuals ‘bracket out’ inherent risks, uncertainties, and undesirable scenarios that would result in paralysis were they allowed to occupy the mind. This allows the individual to achieve a state of ontological security and take risks, which is a prerequisite to functioning in a fundamentally insecure world. As in the social identity approach, it is assumed that individuals strive for a positive self-concept, which acts as a basis for self-esteem. Consequently, the self-narrative must generally present the protagonist’s actions in a positive light, or otherwise attempt to justify or rationalize them.

Although the self-narrative is a subjective interpretation of one’s life and future, it cannot be wholly fictitious. One reason for this is that individuals’ capacity for self-deceit is limited. Another reason is that self-narratives are not merely for the self. Identities are brought out in social situations and parts of them are performed together, so they must be sufficiently compelling to others. Significant life events, such as getting a new job, must therefore be integrated into the narrative. Difficult life events may be laborious to integrate. Very difficult events, such as losing one’s job or ending up in a stigmatized occupation, may be impossible to integrate into the existing narrative in a plausible way. This can lead to identity crisis, or the abandonment of one’s old narrative and the eventual redrafting of a new narrative that can better accommodate the facts.

Narrative identity theory thus complements rather than replaces structural approaches to identity. Imagined and actual group memberships and positions in social networks can be conceived of as life episodes. The narrative traces a temporal trajectory through these episodes, and makes sense of transitions from one role to another.

A key point in narrative identity theory is focusing on the process and its dynamics rather than on the outcome. “[A] person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor — important though this is — in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*” (Giddens 1991, p. 54). The capacity to keep a particular narrative going depends on the outcomes of interactions with others, as interactionist role identity theory posits. But it also depends on the social and cultural context, which can afford certain narratives better while precluding others (Holstein & Gubrium 2000). And it also crucially depends on the sheer work and ingenuity that the person puts into maintaining the narrative and integrating their life facts with it – the *identity work* that they perform.

## **Identity work**

The notion of identity work in sociology and social psychology predates narrative identity theory. Whereas narrative identity provides an overall organizing metaphor for understanding identity as a process rather than as a position, the notion of identity work calls attention to the concrete behaviours that the process consists of. In this sense, narrative identity can be seen as a theoretical extension of identity work. This relationship is easy to see if we compare Giddens’ (1991) notion of narrative identity with Snow and Anderson’s frequently cited definition of identity work as “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (1987, p. 1348).

Identity work can take many forms. On an abstract level, identity work consists of meaning-making activities such as signifying, labeling and defining (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996, Miller & Major 2000). In concrete terms, these meaning-making activities can take such forms as procuring

and arranging physical settings and props, arranging one's personal appearance, keeping company with certain individuals and groups, and perhaps most importantly, verbally constructing and asserting personal identities (Snow & Anderson 1987). Identity work can be communal, in which case it involves the creation of identities as widely understood signs with conventions for their use, or individual, in which case it is more about the use of such signs and conventions as part of interaction to create images of one's self (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996). Particularly when we look at studies of identity work performed as part of interaction, the approach draws heavily on the classic studies of Goffman (1961, 1963a, 1963b). But referring to these activities as *work* rather than performance calls attention to the fact that they are done with a specific effect or purpose in mind, and can face difficulty and resistance from others.

In performing identity work, individuals draw on various strategies (Snow & Anderson 1987, Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996, Kreiner et al. 2006a, Pratt et al. 2006). For example, a typical strategy is selective association, that is, actions and speech aimed at portraying oneself as part of a group that possesses desired identity characteristics. Less explicitly recognized in the literature but still present is the fact that identity workers also draw on various *resources* available to them. For example, to implement the selective association strategy, a person might draw on material resources, such as the group's physical insignia, social resources, such as knowing some members of the group, and discursive resources, such as words and expressions associated with the group.

Scholars of work and organization have used and refined the tools and concepts of identity work to study identity formation in stigmatized or "dirty" occupations (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner 1999, Kreiner et al. 2006a, Lee & Holin 2011, Grandy & Mavin 2012). Compared to conventional occupations, the role identities that are on offer to workers in stigmatized occupations are not conducive to maintaining positive self-concepts, so identity work is necessary. The studies describe strategies and resources that workers draw on, both communally and individually, to either evade the negative connotations of their occupations, or to turn the stigma into a positive resource that defines the community as a social category and knits it together. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) collect findings into an integrated theoretical model of identity construction in stigmatized occupations. Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006b) also examine identity work strategies used to balance between personal needs and a non-stigmatized but otherwise demanding occupational role identity.

However, theories of identity work in stigmatized and demanding occupations are highly premised on entrenched structures: they pertain to recognized occupations and roles, like striptease dancers and priests, to which stark meanings and expectations are attached. The very notion of stigma signifies a structural opposition. Missing from the literature are dynamic theories of identity in highly unstructured work, or work that exists outside such occupational structures: temporary occupations that emerge and disappear at the whim of market forces, never to be recognized as social categories; stopgap roles in constantly mutating structures to which neither positive nor negative expectations have time to adhere.

## **Microwork: an extreme case**

By microwork, we refer to work consisting of the remote completion of small digital tasks, such as transcribing a snippet of hand-written text, classifying an image, categorizing the sentiment expressed in a comment, rating the relevancy of a search engine result, or selecting the most representative frame in a video clip (Lehdonvirta & Ernkvis 2011, Kittur et al. 2013). The oldest and most well-known website ('microwork platform') on which individuals can find such work is Amazon Mechanical Turk ('MTurk'), operated by the Seattle-based e-commerce giant Amazon.

MTurk started as a way for Amazon to source workers for its own needs, but evolved into an open marketplace where any U.S.-based employer can post small digital tasks for the site's users to complete. There are currently over 300,000 such tasks listed on the site. Each completed task earns the worker-user a small remuneration, typically ranging from a few cents to a dollar or two. MTurk's goal is to provide human labor as a flexible on-demand service (Irani, forthcoming). It is the labor equivalent of cloud computing: cloud labor.

MTurk is the primary source of income for some people (Ipeirotis 2010, Ross et al. 2010), yet work on MTurk lacks almost all of the signs and trappings of "standard work". There are no physical work sites, working hours, or other behavioral controls. There are no persistent duties or responsibilities, and no temporal commitments between the worker and the employer, beyond the seconds or minutes it takes to complete a task. There are no titles, recognizable supervisors or even colleagues, as interactions necessary for the completion of a task are anonymized and mediated by algorithms. The entire relationship consists of market-based transactions mediated by a digital platform. In other words, work on MTurk is extremely detached in the sense of Ashford et al. (2007): administratively detached from organizations' formal membership structures; physically detached from sites of work and from colleagues and supervisors; and temporally detached and desynchronized from their daily and seasonal cycles and life courses. Other microwork platforms have different characteristics and sometimes lesser levels of detachment, as we will describe later. But relative to standard work, detachment from physical, temporal, and administrative structures remains online microwork's defining feature.

Since microwork represents an extreme case of organizational and occupational detachment, it is a highly attractive context for developing theory on unstructured work – the challenges and processes of identity in the absence of structure can be expected to be especially salient in microwork. Given the lack of existing theory that would offer a plausible account of identity in unstructured work, the task at hand is one of inductive theory building rather than deductive theory testing. Given that the phenomenon of interest involves complex social processes that are not readily described using existing quantitative measures, an appropriate methodological approach is a case study approach utilizing rich qualitative data (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, Gephart 2004). In the remainder of this paper, we use a rich qualitative study of microwork to put forward a model of identity in unstructured work that builds on structural as well as processual approaches to identity. Our overall research strategy consists of successive rounds of data collection followed by qualitative analysis and inductive theory building. These steps are described in detail below.

## **Data collection**

Our initial data consisted of field notes from participating in MTurk in the role of a worker and as an employer, of workers' discussions captured from one partially closed online community, and of messages exchanged with workers within that community. We gained access to the community by explaining our research plans to the participants. This was followed by a second round of data collection consisting of a series of interviews with managers of microwork platforms (N=4) and of microworkers themselves (N=25), and by another round of capturing worker discussions from additional online communities revealed in the interviews. Finally, six and twelve months after the initial interviews, follow-up interviews were conducted with two workers to answer questions that emerged during the analysis and to obtain a sense of change over time.

Since the purpose of our study is theory building rather than theory testing, we used information-oriented rather than probabilistic sampling (Patton 1990, Palys 2008). The overall choice of microworkers as research subjects was motivated by their extreme position along the central dimension of interest, namely organizational detachment. Within this population, we wanted to

sample microworkers and other data sources so as to obtain a wide degree of variation along secondary dimensions, namely geographic context, sociodemographic background and type of microwork platform. As a result, we recruited our interviewees through three different platforms that offer microwork to workers: *MTurk*, *MobileWorks* and *CloudFactory*. *MTurk*'s workers are located mainly in the United States and to a lesser extent in India and elsewhere (Ipeirotis 2010, Ross et al. 2010). *MobileWorks* ('MW') is a startup company based in the Silicon Valley. MW serves workers in various countries, including the Philippines. *CloudFactory* ('CF') is a social enterprise based in Kathmandu, Nepal, and most of its workers come from that area. We contacted all three companies. MW and CF agreed to provide us with interview access to their managers and workers. *MTurk* did not respond, so we recruited *MTurk* worker interviewees through the worker-run online community in which we participated.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face (two managers), via teleconferencing (two managers and two workers), and via text-based instant messaging (IM) channels, the same channels used by the workers in their internal communications (23 workers). A total of approximately 60 hours of interviews were conducted. IM interviewing is not a typical data collection method in organization research. Its pros and cons are weighed in Kazmer and Xie (2008) and Brabham (2010). The chief concern is that affective and contextual data may be lost in text-only conversation as compared to face-to-face conversation. But experienced IM users express some affective data through written conventions. As experienced IM interviewers, we believe we were able to interpret such conventions reasonably well. Moreover, because of the online disinhibition effect, IM interviewees can actually be expected to be more frank about sensitive issues than oral interviewees (Suler 2004). Another advantage of IM interviewing that we experienced in this study is that by obfuscating physical identity cues, the medium helped us overcome the perceived social distance between us, the Western academic researchers, and the interviewees, many of whom were from relatively underprivileged backgrounds. The main weakness of IM data collection in this study was that for contextual data, such as information on the interviewee's physical location and working space, we had to rely entirely on the interviewees' own descriptions.

The interviews were semi-structured. Worker interviews included questions and follow-up questions on sociodemographic background, family, local community, daily life, occupational history, current occupation and microwork activity, working conditions and practices, relationships with other workers, future plans and self-identity. Certain questions were designed to elicit narratives that would show how interviewees posit connections between events and episodes in their lives (more on our narrative research strategy below). Manager interviews were more open-ended, and included questions about the company and its worker pool, as well as questions about the manager's impressions of the worker's working conditions, identities and relationships, for purposes of modest triangulation with workers' responses.

**Table 1. Workers' sociodemographic characteristics**

	<i>whole sample</i> <i>N=25</i>	United States <i>N=9</i>	Philippines <i>N=9</i>	Nepal and India <i>N=7</i>
age	30.8 (s.d. 9.8)	39.2 (s.d. 11.3)	28.1 (s.d. 1.8)	22.9 (s.d. 2.8)
sex	15f / 10m	7f / 2m	6f / 3m	2f / 5m
education	1 graduate degree, 6 college degree, 4 college dropout,	1 graduate degree, 2 college degree, 3 college dropout,	3 college degree, 1 college dropout, 5 high school or less	1 college degree, 6 college student

	7 college student, 7 high school or less	1 college student, 2 high school or less		
household	12 living with parents, 4 with partner, 5 with partner and children, 1 single parent, 1 shared apt, 2 single household	1 living with parents, 3 with partner, 4 with partner and children, 1 shared apt	4 living with parents, 1 with partner, 1 with partner and children, 1 single parent, 2 single household	7 living with parents

The overall sociodemographic characteristics of the worker sample and the country subsamples are presented in Table 1. The country subsamples have very different sociodemographic profiles. Our American workers are older, predominantly female and living with a partner; Filipino workers are in their late twenties; and Nepalese and Indian workers are primarily college students living with their parents. Table 2 shows how microwork relates to the workers' socioeconomic circumstances. The Nepalese and Indian workers mainly depend on their parents for their subsistence and use microwork to earn additional income. The Filipino workers are 'precarious', by which we mean that they cobble together their living from microwork or a combination of microwork and other precarious income sources. The American workers are a mix of precarious, housewives dependent on their partners, and salary earners who do microwork as a hobby as much as to earn additional income. Overall, the majority of our interviewees are precarious to whom microwork earnings are economically important. Earlier studies of participants in similar paid crowdsourcing sites suggest that participation is economically important to some participants, while some participate simply to have fun and to interact with other people (Brabham 2008, Brabham 2010, Ipeirotis 2010). Although our workers come from different countries and socioeconomic backgrounds, most of them clearly represent the more serious type of online worker.

**Table 2. Microworker types and income from microwork**

	<i>whole sample</i> N=25	United States N=9	Philippines N=9	Nepal and India N=7
type of microworker	14 precarious, 9 dependant, 2 casual	4 precarious, 3 dependant, 2 casual	9 precarious	1 precarious, 6 dependant
typical weekly microwork income	\$90.67 (s.d. 62.99)	\$88.29 (s.d. 60.51)	\$125.00 (s.d. 85.05)	\$60.50 (s.d. 34.10)
record weekly microwork income	\$136.57 (s.d. 127.57)	\$183.00 (s.d. 178.20)	\$174.00 (s.d. 130.88)	\$62.00 (s.d. 33.01)

*Note: Type of microworker was coded as follows: 'precarious' earns their primary income from microwork or a combination of microwork and other online, temporary and part-time jobs; 'dependant' depends on their partner or caretaker for subsistence and earns additional income from microwork; 'casual' has a well-paid primary job and earns additional income from microwork. Since microwork income can vary significantly from one week to another, interviewees were asked to estimate their 'typical' and 'all-time record' weekly microwork earnings; shown are the averages of the responses.*

## Data analysis

While we did not adopt any brand name research strategy wholesale, our approach to data analysis and theory building can be summed up as a combination of a narrative analysis approach with aspects of a grounded theory approach.

Narrative analysis refers to a research strategy that is “sensitive to the sense of temporal sequence that people, as providers of accounts [...] detect in their lives and surrounding episodes and inject into their accounts” (Bryman 2008, p. 582). Narratives that posit connections between episodes reveal how the person seeks to construct meaning to those episodes (Miller 2000). A key insight in narrative analysis is that stories are usually told with a purpose in mind. A narrative should therefore be viewed in terms of the functions that it serves for its teller rather than in terms of its strict factual content (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). Narrative analysis is a natural companion to the theoretical perspective of narrative identity, since the latter is concerned with how people construct biographical narratives for the purpose of supporting a positive self-concept.

Narrative analyses can be divided into two broad categories: analyses that focus on the content and structure of stories, and analyses that focus on how the story is conveyed in terms of performance and rhetorical devices (Phoenix et al. 2010). This study falls within the former category. Microworkers’ interview transcripts were coded and categorized according to how they positioned microwork within their biographical narratives, particularly in terms of how the interviewees related their present microwork to their past experiences and imagined futures. This was facilitated by our interview protocol, which included questions and follow-up questions designed to elicit such narratives. The categories were generated through a process of iterative code comparison, combination and re-evaluation, as popularized by grounded theory approaches (Strauss & Corbin 1990, Charmaz 2006).

Our narrative analysis yielded a framework for understanding how episodes of unstructured work could be woven into biographical narratives. To gain a better sense of how unstructured work was constructed as an episode in the first place, we conducted a more open-ended coding of excerpts from the transcripts and notes that included all statements directly or indirectly dealing with microwork. Through selective comparison, combination and re-evaluation, these yielded the categories presented in the findings. We were familiar with the categories of identity work developed in the earlier literature, and many of the same categories were identified in this data. At the same time, we also identified some categories apparently peculiar to unstructured work.

Narrative analysis and grounded theory complement each other well. Grounded theory provides a clear methodology for generating concepts and categories from data, but as it focuses on individual excerpts, it is criticized for fragmenting the data and losing the meanings embedded in the data’s structure (Bryman 2008). In contrast, narrative analysis lacks rigorously defined processes, but focuses explicitly on structure and relationships between data parts. The results of our analyses are presented in the form of concepts, categories, and narrative that puts forward relationships between the concepts and the categories. We also present some quantitative results in the form of code occurrences by subsample, but no statistical generalizations are attempted from this sample. The quantitative results are presented as illustrative and corroborative of the findings rather than as their source.

## Results: identity processes in microwork

Our microworker interviewees did not identify with their detached and transitory employers or clients, the firms that provided them work. Many MTurk workers had “favorite” employers, favored thanks to paying well, providing stimulating tasks, or generally dealing in a fair way. But this favor did not seem to amount to experiences of belonging or membership, perhaps because workers were well aware that the distant working relationship that they enjoyed could end without notice, and often did.

Another potential target for self-categorization in microwork is the platform that mediates between the worker and the employer. Interviewees did not identify with the MTurk platform, in part because in some conflict situations they felt that the platform sided with the employers’ interests rather than with their own. Interviewees expressed more identification with the MW platform, and the highest levels of identification with the CF platform. The latter in particular made efforts to furnish the relationship with features of standard employment, in the form of job titles and a degree of regularity in earnings opportunities as opposed to earnings that fluctuate freely based on demand. But relative to what could be expected of standard employees in a firm, microworkers’ identification with the organizations closest to them was weak; a finding that mirrors earlier research on contingent workers’ identification with employers and intermediaries (e.g., Nollen & Axel 1996, Allan & Sienko 1998, McLean Parks et al. 1998, Wiesenfeld et al. 1999, Rock & Pratt 2002).

How, then, do microworkers cope with the question of identity and work? Our study revealed answers to this question on many levels: ideological and practical, individual and communal, momentary and intertemporal. We begin by examining what could be termed a baseline approach: evading the question of identity altogether.

### Coping with fluidity via evasion

The many difficulties of relating unstructured work activities into esteem-enhancing self-narratives can be avoided altogether, if one can make their involvement in such activities less salient, by concealing or masking it. We identified three basic evasive identity strategies, labeled as *distancing*, *selective association* and *video gaming*.

The *distancing* strategy consists of identity work aimed at dissociating one’s self from microwork and other microworkers. Distancing is a basic individual and interpersonal strategy used by people in situations that present a problem for their identity, such as homelessness (Snow & Anderson 1987), occupational stigma (Tracy & Scott 2006), or ‘women’s’ housework chores done by a man (Goffman 1963b). The distancing work performed by our microworkers included identity talk, such as asserting that microwork was just a temporary phase or only one of their occupations (cf. Goffman 1963b: role distancing), drawing distinctions between themselves and other microworkers (cf. Snow & Anderson 1987: categorical associative distancing), and complaining about microwork platforms and employers (cf. Snow & Anderson 1987: institutional distancing). In two cases, distancing work moreover included daily routines and physical arrangements designed to conceal microwork activities from others living in the same household, to limit the occupation’s salience in daily social interactions. At least some form of distancing was practiced by 64 percent of the sample workers.

The *selective association* strategy is likewise similar to strategies used by people in stigmatized occupations. Selective associators perform identity work designed to position themselves under the umbrella of a recognized category, such as a well-regarded occupation or organization. In stigmatized work this is done to hide negative meanings associated with one’s actual occupation

(Ashforth & Kreiner 1999), whereas in microwork it allowed informants to project an occupational identity with much less effort than would be required to explain the actual nature of their work.

“I say that I am independent contractor for Amazon. If they ask what that is, I’ll explain further, but most people just say, ‘oh, okay.’” [M, 29]

Our workers drew on occupational titles and brand names as discursive resources to position themselves as something akin to regular workers. These included such titles as “freelancer”, “contractor” and “writer”, and functions like “research” and “e-commerce”: categories are recognizable yet sufficiently broad to accommodate the facts of many microworkers’ activities. The constraint in this strategy is that sustaining it requires discursive resources, the availability of which varies between cultural contexts, as well as skills in negotiating the boundaries of the chosen categories, which not every worker possesses. Selective association was used by 20 percent of our workers.

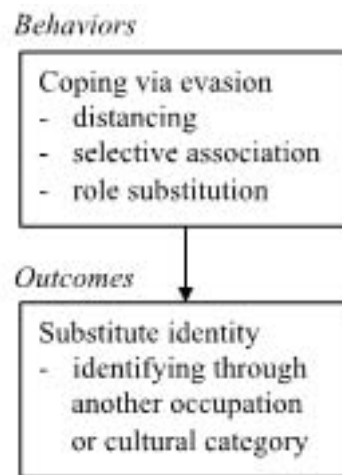
The third strategy, *video gaming*, can be described as a role substitution strategy (Goffman 1963b). People using this strategy painted their microwork activities as a game rather than as work.

“I think of mTurk like a video game. It is a boring one, but pays real money. [...] In a video game, there are quests/missions you go for. On mTurk, there are qualifications you earn. You level up on video games. On mTurk you complete hits (100, 500, 1000, etc.) [and] you gain access to more HITs. On games you earn new equipment or powers or achievement points. On mTurk you earn money or bonuses.” [M, 26]

It would not be surprising to find someone who uses MTurk for entertainment comparing it to a video game. However, the worker who supplied the above quote was not using MTurk to kill time. He studied at a college, cared for his young child two days a week, delivered pizza, and used MTurk to earn 15-20 percent of his income. He described MTurk as boring and said that his primary motivation for using it was money. Clearly he was not using it for its entertainment value. Thinking of microwork as a video game was perhaps a motivational strategy for him: a form of ‘gamification’ (Deterding et al. 2011). But our analysis suggests that this framing was about more than just motivation. Video gaming, once a stigmatized hobby, is now a mainstream cultural activity. Over half of U.S. adults play digital games of some kind, more than go to the cinema (Lenhart et al. 2008). Games and gaming are popular discussion topics in media, schools and workplaces, and the games that people play are easily interpreted as part of their identity (Raesses 2006, Lehdonvirta & Räsänen 2011). In this cultural context, a microworker is likely to find that ‘gaming’ is a more esteem-enhancing and presentable way of framing one’s online activity than ‘unskilled online work’. Framing microwork as a game can thus be an identity strategy as much as it is a motivational strategy, as seemed to be the case here. This identity strategy was used to varying degrees by 12 percent of our sample workers.



Figure 1. Coping via evasion



Overall, 76 percent of the sample used at least one evasive strategy to cope with the question of identity in highly unstructured work. These behaviours and their outcomes are summarized in Figure 1. This prevalence of evasion and the resulting substitute identities supports the notion that identity is highly problematic for unstructured workers. But our data also reveals a wealth of more constructive identity strategies, to which we proceed next.

### Constructing unstructured activities as an occupation

A logical alternative to coping with the identity implications of unstructured work via evasion is to view the activities as an occupation that can be identified with (cf. Snow & Anderson 1987: embracement). Any activity is open to a multitude of interpretations that present it in different lights, and in the context of work, these interpretations and the belief systems that form their basis are sometimes called occupational ideologies (Dressel & Petersen 1982). Occupational ideologies provide answers to such questions as what does the occupation do, why does it matter, how does it relate to other occupations, and how does it relate to the larger society (Dressel & Petersen 1982, Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

Given that people strive to maintain positive self-narratives, occupational ideologies are often self-serving. For example, workers in stigmatized occupations construct flattering occupational ideologies by reframing, recalibrating and refocusing attention away from the negative meanings associated with their work and toward the positive features of their work (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Unstructured workers face a somewhat different problem: instead of facing a wall of negative meanings attached to their work, they may find themselves in a vacuum devoid of prior conceptions pertaining to their work. Constructing an occupational ideology becomes not so much a matter of recalibration, but of building from scratch.

Answering such fundamental questions as what does the occupation do may not be straightforward for an unstructured worker. We found that in microwork, tasks were sometimes quite incomprehensible, not in the sense that the worker couldn't complete the task, but in the sense that it was difficult for the worker to understand what possible larger end the task might be contributing toward. For example, a task might ask the worker to mark animals appearing in a video frame, or order a set of words based on the emotions they invoke. After completing a series of such tasks, the worker might never hear from the employer again. In other words, microwork was often culturally decontextualized and socially disembodied, and thus hard to relate to the larger society.

Even when working with more relatable tasks, workers may find that the lack of continuity from one moment to the next presents problems for developing stable definitions of what the occupation does. Most people in our sample simply did whatever tasks were on offer, or seemed to yield the highest earnings at that particular moment. One moment they might be extracting purchased items from shopping receipts, the next moment labeling facial features. What tomorrow might bring most workers had little idea of.

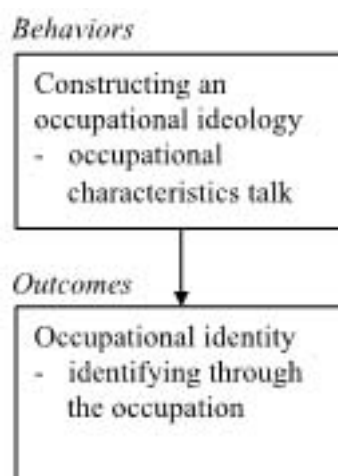
Microworkers were nevertheless able to identify certain recurring characteristics in their work: flexibility, variety and earnings. They spent significant effort in explaining these characteristics and how they positively distinguished microwork from other occupations. We labeled this type of identity talk as *occupational characteristics talk*, and observed three varieties, labeled as *freedom talk*, *variety talk* and *earnings talk*. In other words, rather than attempting to define their occupation through the content of the work or through its societal meaning, which were elusive, workers defined it through a set of more abstract attributes. In the work design literature such attributes are known as work characteristics or occupational characteristics (Morgeson & Humphrey 2006).

The most common type of occupational characteristics talk was freedom talk, in which the worker emphasized their freedom to decide when and where to work. This was practiced by 56 percent of our workers. The freedoms of microwork were often favorably contrasted with conditions at “regular workplaces”.

“I like that I get to work on my own terms. If I want to go lay down and take a 15-minute nap, or watch a program for 30 minutes, I can do so. And then I immediately go right back to work again. A boss in a regular workplace would never allow that. You can’t put your head down to nap on your desk even during your lunch break, that would be frowned on. You could get fired for that.” [F, 40]

In *variety talk*, a worker talked about the high variability of the work content, and how it made the work interesting and prevented boredom. This was practiced by 12 percent of the sample. Again, favorable contrasts were drawn to “average office jobs” that would “bore [the worker] to tears” [F, 44]. In *earnings talk*, the worker highlighted their actual or potential earnings from microwork as way of justifying it as a legitimate job. One third of the sample practiced this.

**Figure 2. Constructing an occupational ideology**



Overall, 80 percent of our workers used at least one of the three types of occupational characteristics talk to distinguish their microwork activities as a legitimate occupation with favorable qualities.

Notable differences between subsamples were not observed. Distinguishing their activities as a distinct, in some aspects even enviable occupation allowed workers to assume occupational identities, that is, to see themselves as belonging to a category defined by an occupation (Van Maanen & Barley 1984). This process is summarized in Figure 2. Interviewees referring to themselves using such terms as “online worker” or “turker” also evidenced the existence of occupational identities.

### Seeking social validation

In our interviews, there was a slight tendency among workers to use either the constructive approach to identity or the evasive approach described earlier (Pearson’s  $r$ : -0.23). But the approaches were far from mutually exclusive, so that most workers used both of these seemingly contradictory approaches during the course of the interviews. This multiplicity can be explained by the notion that individuals must maintain different identities for different audiences.

Some audiences are more sympathetic to a story than others. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggest that stigmatized workers’ occupational ideologies are mainly intended to be shared among the workers themselves and with receptive audiences such as family and friends. With outsiders who might challenge the ideology and thus undermine the self-narrative, stigmatized workers must deal with more carefully, limiting the extent to which the ideology is exposed and developing techniques to deal with possible challenges (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999, Grandy & Mavin 2012). In the same way, we can posit that unstructured workers maintain certain narratives among themselves, and prepare other narratives for outside consumption.

**Table 3. Perceived support and acceptance for microwork from family and friends**

	<i>whole sample</i> <i>N=25</i>	United States <i>N=9</i>	Philippines <i>N=9</i>	Nepal and India <i>N=7</i>
enjoys acceptance and support	40 %	22 %	44 %	57 %
lacks acceptance and support	44 %	78 %	22 %	29 %

Obtaining social validation certainly seemed to be a problem for microworkers. The problem they faced was not so much that of negative perceptions, but of no perceptions at all: what they do may not be recognized as an occupation, or it may not even be recognized as work. This lack of recognition was not limited to distant outsiders, but also occurred among family members and friends. Table 3 shows that suffering from a perceived lack of support and acceptance from family and friends was a common problem particularly within the U.S. subsample. One long-time U.S. microworker expressed her frustration as follows:

“It only bothers me when I’m told it’s not ‘real work’. If I were writing in an office it would be considered real, but since I do it at my desk at home my husband doesn’t view it as ‘real’ – he sees it on the same level as playing mindless computer games” [F, 41].

Similar sentiments have been expressed by game laborers who earn a living from harvesting and selling virtual items, but find that people close to them don’t recognize their occupation (Lee & Holin 2011, Lehdonvirta & Ernkvist 2011). This lack of basic social validation is particularly disruptive to self-narratives when it occurs among those whom the worker interacts with daily.

It is both theoretically and methodologically difficult to distinguish between identity work aimed primarily at the self and identity work aimed more toward others, but clearly at least some of the evasive strategies described earlier were employed more as a way of coping with outside expectations than of attending to one's self-image. The findings thus suggest that at least some microworkers consider themselves microworkers by occupation, while at the same time using evasive strategies to navigate lingering expectations structured by old occupational categories and roles.

The split between stories for the self and stories for others in some cases resulted in a self-conception that we labeled as *unsung hero*. The *unsung hero* resigns to a realization that other people will not understand their work. Instead of trying to explain its true nature, they use evasion to conceal it from those around them. In their internal self-narratives, *unsung heroes* romanticize the lack of outside recognition, similarly to how people in stigmatized occupations turn outsiders' contempt into a source of strength (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

“I don't talk about [microwork] much with others because when I first tried to explain it they thought I was kind of nuts [...] So I just say I write articles and spend my earnings on my groceries and am satisfied that at least I know what I'm doing.” [F, 41]

## Self-organizing online

In standard work, workers' identities draw not only on activities and characteristics of the work, but also very importantly on the social structures of the workplace. In particular, many identity-related functions are fulfilled by teams or work groups. They facilitate self-categorization and role socialization, act as the basic unit of communal identity work, and foster work culture formation. Yet nonstandard workers are often physically, temporally and/or administratively detached from other workers, hindering or preventing group formation (Ashford et al. 2007). Microwork again serves as an extreme example: the only sign of the existence of other workers in MTurk is the fact that tasks gradually disappear from the market. Any collaboration or coordination of workers' efforts is managed algorithmically, with no opportunity for human-to-human communication.

Algorithms divide workers, but algorithms can also unite them. Literature on nonstandard work suggests that disconnected workers can use the Internet as a means of re-establishing links and forming occupational communities (Kunda et al. 2002). While online communities as a general form of organizing are attracting interest in organizational literature (Faraj & Johnson 2011, Faraj et al. 2011), the specific notion of Internet-mediated occupational communities, their formation and their functions, remains unstudied (Ashford et al. 2007). It is known that for some people, online communities offer a potent source of identification experiences, even rivaling conventional formations such as family and workplace (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen 2011). Does online self-organization substitute for the missing workplace in 21st-century workers' identity processes?

Among the microworkers that we studied, self-organization through online networks was commonplace. All of our microworkers participated in an online community or group for microworkers, or maintained regular contact with other microworkers through online channels in a less structured fashion. Different paths led to the emergence of these formations. One online community, founded in 2008, was a prominent gathering place for American MTurk workers. Our workers said they found the site by chance: through a search engine when looking for microworking tips, from an online article on microwork, and even due to being mentioned as an answer option in a survey study directed at microworkers. The MTurk platform itself made no mention of this site, but thanks to the way search engine algorithms and website links work, the site seemed to have benefited from a virtuous circle of attention. Over the years, various splinter groups had left the community to

start new community sites, so that the original site’s active membership was now measured in the hundreds, while other communities reported active memberships in the thousands. Workers who had met each other through these sites had also started more private chat channels consisting of a dozen or fewer active participants.

**Table 4. Online self-organization among microworkers**

	MTurk	MW	CF
Communication technologies used	online forum software, chat channels (IRC)	official web chat, instant messaging software	private Facebook groups, physical meetings
Organizational structures created	community with formal membership hierarchy, informal communities and groups	informal networks	five-member teams with appointed team leader

In contrast to MTurk, the MW and CF platforms provided official support for worker-to-worker communication. MW provided a built-in real-time text chat channel that workers could use to talk to each other and to any of the platform’s managers who happened to be present. MW’s Filipino workers also complemented this official chat with personal instant messaging software, through which they kept in touch with online workers working on different platforms, who were often friends and relatives. CF went furthest in facilitating worker-to-worker communication, as it asked workers to organize into virtual teams of five members. Each team was asked to use their own private Facebook group and even physical get-togethers to keep in touch. In this aspect, CF’s workforce resembled a conventional team-based organization, except that the actual work was still strictly individual; the team structure was created for fostering identity and professional ethics. Unlike MW’s Filipino workers, CF’s Nepalese workers did not have personal networks of online laborers extending beyond the platform.

“I get what social support I need for turking from chatting with other turkers online” [M, 32].

The communication technologies used and the organizational structures created as microworkers self-organized online are summarized in Table 4. The self-organized structures were for the most part maintained ostensibly for instrumental information exchange purposes. But as the excerpt above suggests, they were also used for identity related purposes that in a conventional workplace would be met by work groups or professional networks. An exception was MW’s official web chat, which our data suggests was used mostly for instrumental purposes. A likely reason is that the chat could be accessed by MW’s managers, in front of whom workers would probably not feel comfortable processing their sometimes defiant identities. In the following section, we will describe the identity functions of the self-organized structures in more detail.

## Communal identity work and the emergence of subcultures<sup>1</sup>

In their online groups, microworkers continued the occupational characteristics talk that we had seen in the interviews, talking to each other about the freedom, variety and earnings of microwork. Consistent with this ideology, some participants were sharing their daily or weekly earnings figures in a competitive manner. Participants also complained about unfair employers and platforms, but evasive identity talk was otherwise sparse. Notably to our purposes, participants also went beyond occupational characteristics talk and engaged in identity work that focused on defining the individual microworker. We identified two categories of such identity work and labeled these as *defining ideals* and *setting boundaries*.

By defining ideals, we mean talk, debate, and demonstration that seek to establish how a good worker should conduct themselves. This took several forms. One form was the sharing and evaluation of “best practices”: ways of navigating work platforms, completing tasks, dealing with employers, dealing with friends and family, organizing one’s daily life, and thinking about career and development as a microworker. Another form was the sharing and evaluation of technological tools used to improve one’s performance: browser plugins, utility programs, web apps and even smartphone apps that help in task search, scheduling, access, and attention management. A third form was the sharing and evaluation of names of employers seen as good and desirable. All these communal judgments were at the same time valuable practical information for the worker, but also expressed ideal behaviours that would be met with approval by the community.

The other category that was observed, setting boundaries, consists of talk, debate, and demonstration that seek to establish how a worker ought not to conduct themselves. This, too, took several forms. One form was admonishments against doing tasks that were seen as unethical, such as producing fraudulent product reviews. Another form was admonishments against behaviours seen as causing harm to other microworkers. Examples of such behaviours included accepting tasks that yield earnings below a minimum wage, and “hogging” good tasks using software add-ons. There was much disagreement and debate over the details of these boundaries.

No worker could say that they fulfilled all the ideals and always stayed within the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, but these norms nevertheless performed at least two important identity-related functions. First, simply displaying awareness of these norms was enough to win a worker acceptance from their peers. In other words, the norms constituted a central part of the cultural capital of the emergent occupational culture (Trice & Beyer 1993) of microworkers. Second, the disagreements and differences in opinion about the norms constituted fault lines along which subgroups and subcultures could emerge within the MTurk microworker culture. For example, a major dividing point was whether valuable information on good tasks should be kept within the community or shared publicly. The leader of the original MTurk workers’ community strongly espoused the former position, with the consequence that those favoring the latter position left and formed a new community. Similar deep divisions emerged over other issues as well.

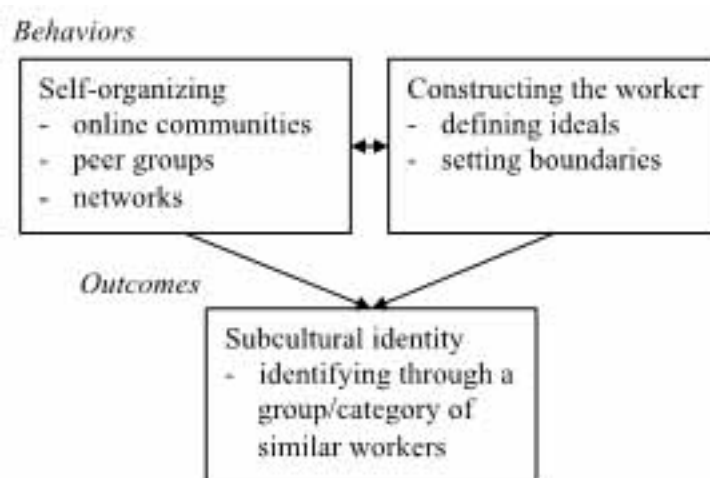
The number and depth of the internal divisions within microworker culture can be contrasted with the cohesive work cultures of stigmatized workers. Although stigmatized workers are also known to draw favorable social comparisons against others to support their own self-esteem, the comparisons

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<sup>1</sup> Methodological note: Our observations on communal identity work and the emergence of subcultures are drawn from two partially open online communities catering primarily to MTurk’s workers, and from the worker interviews, in which interviewees were asked to talk about their interactions with other microworkers. We did not seek access to the workers’ private chat channels, instant messaging conversations, or Facebook groups. The detailed findings in this section thus chiefly pertain to MTurk’s workers, though nothing directly contradictory was observed among MW’s or CF’s workers.

are drawn against other salient occupational groups, or against salient subgroups of the same occupation distinguished by different tasks, work sites or levels of experience (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). Among workers in similar circumstances, stigmatized work culture is typically characterized by strength and unity (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999). In contrast, among MTurk's microworkers, deep divisions could be observed among workers sharing exactly the same tasks and seeming to possess similar levels of experience. A possible explanation that can be offered is that stigmatized workers derive unity from outsiders' contempt (Forsyth 1990, Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996), whereas highly unstructured workers receive little more than indifference from outsiders, leading them instead to rally around positions in internal squabbles to satisfy the desire for group identity. This led to the kind of dynamics depicted in Figure 3: mutually reflexive self-organizing and identity work behaviours giving rise to a topography of subcultural identities.

**Figure 3. Self-organizing, identity work and subcultural identity**



Among MTurk's workers, subcultural and group identities were also bolstered by contrasts against 'scammers': anti-microworkers who were believed to prowl the same task marketplaces, but flaunt all ethical rules, seeking only to maximize their own short-term benefit at the expense of others.

"We call them scammers, because they're just trying to get money without actually answering the questions that the requesters are asking. [...] They don't write text, they'll type gibberish, or they'll have a script that randomly fills in checkboxes or radio buttons [...] Or they just randomly click on things until the form submits" [F, 26].

One worker racialized the scammer, believing that scammers hailed "especially from one particular country" [F, 40]. Whether or not the scammer corresponds with an actual empirical category of users was perhaps secondary; the scammer was primarily an effective discursive resource against which esteem-enhancing "good guy" microworker identities could be articulated.

As a final point on self-organization, our data suggests that different forms of self-organizing influenced the resulting identities in different ways. The original MTurk worker community was characterized by a remarkable degree of hierarchy and secretiveness, reminiscent of a medieval guild. Lucrative tasks, knowledge of good employers and to some extent also knowledge of useful software tools were guarded as valuable secrets. These arrangements were justified as necessary to prevent earnings opportunities from being subverted by scammers. Access to such secrets was limited to higher-level members. The criteria that one had to fulfill to advance to the higher levels

were secret: admittance was by invitation only. The consequences of this exclusivity were two-fold. On one hand, many frustrated neophytes left the community and joined alternative groups, as described earlier. On the other hand, those who persisted ended up expressing stronger microworker identities than those belonging to more informal communities.

“Earning full discussion board access was an important milestone in my turker identity” [F, 26].

## Weaving microwork into life trajectories

In our analysis, we have thus far covered a full range of microworkers’ identity work behaviours and self-organizing behaviours, and examined what kinds of identities these behaviours give rise to, from substitute identities and occupational identities to subcultural identities. Our final task is to attempt to situate these behaviours and outcomes in the bigger picture of the workers’ biographical self-narratives than span entire life trajectories. How do microworkers make sense of how they got into their highly fluid occupations? How do they see their future, given their precarious present? Of particular interest is how workers craft narratives that are on the whole esteem-enhancing, despite their present circumstances often being less than flattering.

Among the ways in which microworkers related their past to their present work, two consistent categories or patterns emerged. In one pattern, which we named *ending up in microwork*, workers emphasized a lack of agency in the transition from the past to their present work. A sudden injury, need to take care of a family member, or simply lack of other work almost unavoidably led the person to their present work. In a contrasting narrative pattern, which we named *choosing to microwork*, workers emphasized their own agency in the transition from the past to their present work. The person assessed various options available to them and made an informed decision, even if the options were constrained by such factors as being a caregiver to someone. Of the interviewees’ past-present narratives, 60 percent could be categorized as either choosing to microwork or ending up in microwork. The rest were ambivalent over the role of agency.

**Table 5. Microwork in past-present narratives, by country**

<i>narrative pattern</i>	United States <i>N</i> =9	Philippines <i>N</i> =9	Nepal and India <i>N</i> =7
choosing to microwork	33 %	44 %	29 %
ending up in microwork	55 %	11 %	0 %
ambivalent	11 %	44 %	71 %

Patterns were likewise identified in the ways in which microworkers related their present work to their personal future. In one pattern, which we named *getting out of microwork*, workers portrayed their present work as a hindrance to the fulfillment of their future selves, and envisioned leaving microwork. For example, one interviewee portrayed their dependence on time-consuming microwork as preventing them from applying for better-paying jobs. In another pattern, which we named *microwork as a springboard*, workers likewise envisioned leaving microwork, but portrayed it as an enabler rather than a hindrance. They described microwork as providing them with skills, experience, or money that would propel them towards their future selves. In a third pattern, which we named *continuing microwork*, workers saw their present work as being also part of their future. Of the interviewees’ present-future narratives, 84 percent were categorized under one of these three patterns. The rest were ambivalent over the role of microwork in the present-to-future transition.



**Table 6. Microwork in present-future narratives, by country**

<i>narrative pattern</i>	United States <i>N</i> =9	Philippines <i>N</i> =9	Nepal and India <i>N</i> =7
continuing microwork	44 %	33 %	0 %
getting out of microwork	33 %	11 %	0 %
microwork as a springboard	0 %	44 %	86 %
ambivalent	22 %	11 %	14 %

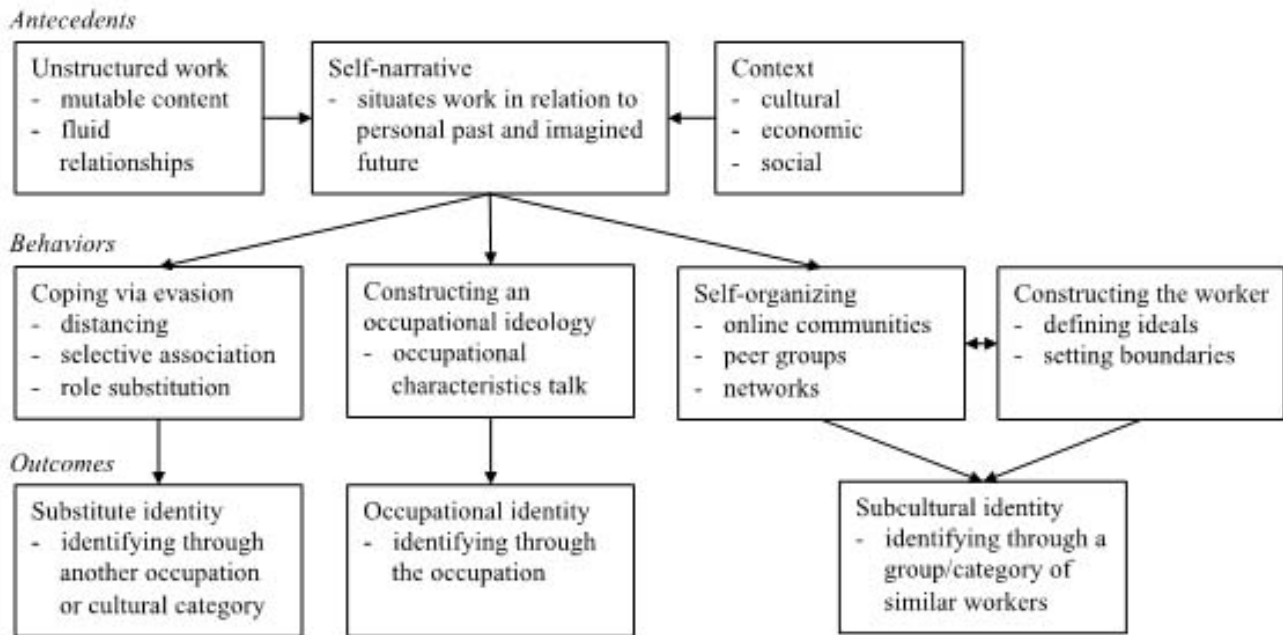
Workers naturally incorporated elements of their social, economic, and cultural contexts into their narratives. The kinds of contextual factors that impinged on the narratives varied between the country subsamples. American workers associated microwork with home-based work, which was seen as having a low status. The earnings they obtained from microwork were also not enough to properly subsist on. Most American interviewees accordingly portrayed themselves as having ended up in microwork inadvertently. The idea of microwork as a positive springboard to the future was not something that they could plausibly maintain. Among our Filipino interviewees, precarious work was the norm rather than the exception, and home-based online work was more widely known and recognized in their social networks. This may reflect the fact that companies have sourced remote work from English-speaking Filipinos to the U.S. market for over a decade. These factors seemed to afford our Filipino workers greater latitude in their microwork-related self-narratives, which were highly varied.

Among our interviewees in Nepal and India, home-based online work in general and microwork in particular were seen as new and lacking wider social recognition, and our interviewees' microwork earnings were only sufficient as supplementary income. However, microwork's associations with information technology and foreign countries seemed to allow the interviewees to nevertheless paint it as a springboard to the future to themselves and to their families. This was perhaps also helped by the fact that the Nepalese interviewees were college students, relatively elite in their country, and thus optimistic about the future in general. Tables 5 and 6 tabulate the narrative patterns observed by country subsample. These observations reflect the fact that the range of self-narratives that is possible and available to a person depends as much on the person's social, economic, and cultural contexts as it depends on biographical facts like the characteristics of the job (Holstein & Gubrium 2000).

Why does it matter what kind of biographical self-narratives workers construct? Narrative identity theory as well as our observations suggest that the identity work strategies that individuals adopt at present are afforded and constrained by how the present circumstances are framed in their biographical narratives. Those who see their present microwork as a choice they made in the past will be tempted to construct a flattering occupational ideology for it, and engage with other workers doing the same. In contrast, those who see themselves as drawn into microwork against their will may have to refrain from constructing positive occupational ideologies, in order to continue drawing on the perceived injustice as a source of self-esteem. Likewise may those who see their present reliance on microwork as an impediment to their future careers. They may, however, be able to find online networks of similarly situated people to commiserate with – subcultures of cynical as opposed to boosterish online workers. Those who see microwork as a springboard to a great future may not hesitate to adopt positive occupational ideologies, but they may be reluctant to engage online with workers who have been in the same occupation for years.

Complicating the matter empirically is that workers may be entertaining different narratives and thus different identity work behaviours based on who they are interacting with. The present data does not allow us to conclusively confirm or reject the detailed propositions put forward above, but the overall theoretical implication is clear: unstructured workers' choice of identity work strategy is influenced by their intertemporal self-narratives, which in turn are influenced by both biographical facts and contextual factors. These relationships, along with the relationships between identity work behaviours and outcomes discussed in earlier sections, are summarized in Figure 4: a model of identity processes in unstructured work.

Figure 4. Identity processes in unstructured work



## Discussion: Evade, construct, network

Our findings show that approaching identity as a matter of identification with the 20th-century structures of working life is unfruitful when the population in question consists of highly unstructured workers, such as microworkers. Neither the multitudes of ephemeral employers nor intermediates perceived as having divided loyalties inspire much self-categorization among workers. When actual involvement in employers' organizational social networks is slight or nonexistent, role identities will not be developed and internalized, or they will be too insubstantial and short-lived to support any level of self-esteem. Our findings point instead to three dynamic processes through which unstructured workers attempt to reconcile the fluidity and discontinuity of their work with the need for stable and esteem-enhancing identities: evading, constructing, and networking with other workers. These processes are not mutually exclusive, but their relative salience is influenced by how the worker frames their present work in their overall biographical self-narrative. In the remainder of this paper we will reflect on the organizational, social and research implications of this model.

### Evade

Coping with identity stress via evasion echoes Bauman's (2005) analysis of contingent workers who

have had to turn to substitute sources of identity development to make up for the loss of identity once provided by stable employment. Bauman points towards consumerism as a particularly prominent substitute identity source: that individuals identify through their consumption styles rather than through their work. Consumption styles as such were not salient in our findings, but we observed some workers framing their *work* as a consumption activity, namely as video gaming. In many ways, employers and platform designers encouraged such framings through their design choices. This suggests that organizations can use the ‘gamification’ of work not only as a behavioral motivation and control technique, but as a way to help unstructured workers to cope with identity stress. From a societal perspective, this blurring of boundaries between work and play identities raises other questions. Insofar as it helps workers cope with the lack of social recognition afforded to their work, it benefits workers. But insofar as it creates conditions where hard work might not be recognized as work at all, it carries a risk of exploitation of virtual labor (Fuchs 2010). Someone identified as a gamer has little license to ask for more pay, even if they game out of necessity rather than out of amusement.

That said, more informants sought substitute identities not from the world of consumption and play, but from working life. They sought to associate themselves with what stable structures remained around them, firms and recognized occupations, like someone in water would grab hold of rocks and islets, which themselves are eroding. Maintaining the hold requires skills and discursive resources. Organizations can help by giving unstructured workers something to hold onto, in the form of occupational titles and similar outward signs of employment, even when actual employment is withheld. The situation is somewhat similar to when unemployed professionals style themselves as “consultants” rather than face the social and psychological costs of explaining their actual situation (Price et al. 1998). This suggests an interesting research question for organization theorists: to what extent do changes in the cognitive structures of working life lag behind changes in actual structures? To what extent are the prevailing structures of Western working life, such as corporations, occupations and roles, just shells maintained for the purposes of appearances, while actual work is already being organized in other ways?

## Construct

The alternative to evading the question of identity is to construct an occupational identity. In highly unstructured work this is difficult, because the work lacks any consistent characteristics that would identify it. The only constant is change. We saw that microworkers had adopted an occupational ideology that elevates constant change and uncertainty to the status of a virtue, of freedom and variety, and thereby distinguishes microwork positively from other, more regimented occupations. On this virtue, an esteem-enhancing occupational identity could be founded. Organizations that make use of unstructured labor can promote this ideology to their advantage.

A microworker ideology that casts change and uncertainty as something desirable is analogous to the ideologies discussed by Neff (2012) under the notion of venture labor. As business risks are increasingly passed down the value chain onto individual workers, an ideology of entrepreneurship can be used to justify and make sense of the new situation: risk is the price one must pay for the chance to succeed. Venture laborers don’t encounter uncertainty, as uncertainty is something one passively suffers. Instead, venture laborers *take risks* on their own accord. But microworkers, like Neff’s dot-com era knowledge workers, are rarely in the position to benefit from the potential upside of the risk, which is captured by those higher up in the chain. Neff defines venture labor accordingly as “the explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by nonentrepreneurs” (Neff 2012, p. 16). In our study, the notion of overall biographical narratives in which the present must be situated helped to understand why some workers would construct entrepreneurial ideologies more readily than others.

Neff's venture labor acquiesces to its role in the value chain, but among microworkers we also found considerable overlap between the entrepreneurial ideologies and more defiant expressions, such as distancing talk. This combination of acquiescence and defiance can perhaps be compared with the occupational identities of 'freeters', young Japanese who cobble together a living from part-time service jobs (Goodman et al. 2012). They may see their alternative career paths as their own choice and romanticize its freedoms, but are not necessarily naïve when it comes to relationships with the transient employers. Freeters as well as the comparable European category of 'precariate' have on occasion emerged as vehicles of modest collective action and political mobilization. Could microworkers achieve the same?

## Network

An occupational identity is an abstract cognitive category rather than an actual group of people, but occupational identities can facilitate actual group formation. Through different paths, particularly on digital media, unstructured workers find others whom they identify as sharing the same occupation, and form groups, communities and networks. Within these formations, workers engage in communal identity work. This work strengthens the occupational ideology and the way the occupation is framed in relation to wider society. It also breeds subcultures, and generates structure into the online networks.

In principle, these networks could be used for organizing political mobilization and collective action, such as to bargain with employers. Some examples of collective action were observed. Irani and Silberman (2013) describe what is probably the most successful action or intervention to improve microworkers' position in relation to their employers. However, these actions are very modest in scale in relation to the estimated size of the micro-workforce, and especially if compared with examples of online collective action in other areas, such as global climate policy (Uldam 2013) and copyright reform (Breindl & Briatte 2013). Why is this? Our results suggest several possible answers. One is that the subcultural divisions that help maintain microworkers' social identities hinder the formation of a common class identity with a common voice. Another potential answer is that microworker networks are geographically dispersed communities of interest, whereas political influence is structured more along geographic lines. Next we examine this claim.

Unions and professional societies are traditionally organized around geographical areas and work sites that act as the physical nexus that brings workers together and makes horizontal communication possible. In highly unstructured work, physical links between workers, especially ones that persist over entire careers, are increasingly rare (in contrast to earlier virtual workers examined by e.g. Huws 2003). The online communities that we have seen stepping in to compensate for the lack of physical links are often perceived as "communities not of common location, but of common interest" (Licklider & Taylor 1968, quoted in Rheingold 2000, p. 9). This means that one traditional basis of group identity, geographical proximity, is eliminated. Instead, common interest, or occupational identity, is perhaps amplified. That being said, the perception of digital media as a boundaryless cyberspace, held by both users and early scholars, is somewhat inaccurate, as physical geography continues to structure online interactions in numerous ways (Dodge & Kitchin 2005, Graham 2013). In this study, we could see this in the fact that microworker communities consisted largely of a single nationality, and that one worker defined their microworker identity in part by contrasting it against an ethnically different antagonist.

Besides physical geography and national identity, many other factors structure the dissemination of and access to online networks in complex ways. Digital literacies, social capital, gender and racial identities are among the most frequently cited factors. In this study, we saw a glimpse of the complex ways in which mechanisms and structures built into Internet technologies directed workers to find

the original MTurk community site. In principle, there is no reason why this early community could not have become a general meeting place of all microworkers from around the world. But the logic of search keywords and browser language settings meant that CF's Nepalese or MW's Filipino workers were never directed there. Once group formation and thus group identity are no longer structured by physical proximity and positions in corporate structures, other architectures may become more influential in shaping them. In this case, information architectures were prominent.

## The persistence of unstructured work

Social and economic change has seen many occupations emerge and disappear over time. It might be claimed that microwork is simply another occupation in the early stages of solidifying as a social category circumscribed by structured expectations and relationships (Huws & Dahlmann 2010). If this were the case, then the identity problems identified in this study would be simple growing pains, and our model of limited applicability. As soon as the new occupation is established, we could revert back to approaching identity as a simple matter of identification with structures. But this is not the case: unstructured work is a persistent condition in today's economies, and our model a necessary starting point for theorizing its identity implications.

On an abstract level, the above claim rests on the observation that today's economies are characterized by globalization and technological change. In a liberalized global economy, work moves from place to place in pursuit of local comparative advantages, while the cycle of creative destruction constantly redefines what kind of work is needed. There is evidence that the resulting employment instability and occupational change tends to concentrate on some workers more than on others (Hollister 2011), in the extreme case creating a class of workers that live in a permanent state of temporariness. On a very concrete level, the persistent nature of unstructured work can be seen in the kinds of tasks that microworkers are hired to do. They are hired by startup entrepreneurs to act as manual solutions until the business case for developing an automated solution to a problem can be made. This role is reflected in Mechanical Turk's motto: "artificial artificial intelligence". They are moreover hired to train algorithms that are intended to replace human labor. In other words, they often work directly towards making themselves obsolete, only to be called back to work by the next turn of the innovation cycle.

Although some tasks and varieties of unstructured work might represent the early forms of future structured occupations, the above points suggest that there is a core of unstructured work that, because of its stopgap role in the innovation cycle, remains permanently in flux, its content and practices constantly redefined. The only constant in this core of unstructured work is change, and whoever takes up this work can be expected to find themselves detached not only from stable organizational structures, but also from a recognizable occupation in the sense of a history and specialized skills that develop over time. Evade, construct and network may be the generic processes that individuals caught in these circumstances use to cope with the question of identity.

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