



# The Emergence of the On-Demand Economy and Its Significance for Workers

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*The Emergence of the On-Demand Economy and Its Significance for Workers*

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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### Abstract

This dissertation examines the emergence of the on-demand economy and its significance for workers, taking Uber Technologies as the primary empirical case. I ask three questions involving the social processes underlying the (1) emergence of Uber, (2) how Uber drivers evaluate their work experiences, and (3) how committed drivers re-organize their lives around on-demand work. I integrate concepts from literatures on emergence, organizations, and culture within a “pragmatist” framework, and collect and analyze data from mainly news accounts of Uber’s interactions (2009-2017) as well as interviews (2015-2017) I conducted with 62 drivers in the Greater Boston area (Massachusetts).

I make the following findings. First, Uber’s emergence centered on two inter-related processes: (1) Uber’s ecology was poised to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model given labor-market developments, political vulnerabilities, and technological advancements; and (2) Uber’s mode of action (e.g. legal claim-making, mobilizing support) allowed it to rapidly gain market share and legitimacy. These findings provide new ways of explaining and predicting the kinds of innovations that emerge in different social-ecologies.

Second, behavioral differences between drivers’ work-evaluations depended on cultural configurations, (e.g. personal-norms), problem-situations (e.g. income shocks), and knowledge-activation mechanisms. For example, drivers with U.S.-based college degrees tended to feel “out of place” with Uber, partly due to personal career-norms acquired through formal-education. Yet, college-educated immigrant drivers’ personal-career norms were attenuated by various factors (e.g. degree-inequivalency, networks), resulting in greater commitment to Uber. Other findings involved the effects

of negative prior labor market experiences and acutely-experienced problem-situations. Key implications include new ways of understanding worker behavior (e.g. job-switching).

Third, the structural properties of on-demand work generate distinct modes of creative action among drivers, described as “projective” and “responsive” creativity. Regarding projective creativity, many drivers experienced, for the first time, a strong sense of financial self-efficacy and “freedom” that impelled them to concrete steps toward personal projects (e.g. entrepreneurship, familial problem-solving). Regarding responsive creativity, Uber’s work-structure (e.g. pricing) triggered various behavioral changes (e.g. reduced weekend partying) in workers. These findings improve our understanding of human “agency” and social-selection, and help us rethink the relationship between changing work-relations, social inequality, and human freedom.

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## Acknowledgments

In starting to write this, it quickly struck me that reflecting on personal influences can almost instinctively become an exercise in what C. Wright Mill's described as the "sociological imagination," which involves cultivating an awareness of the relationship between one's biography and the history of one's social interactions. This style of reflection reminds us how socially contingent even the most purposeful of human projects are, and also provides a moral impetus for being grateful to circumstance and responsible to others; but I decidedly curbed such thinking lest it detract, in any way, from the feeling of specialness and love I feel toward the persons who have been where they have been and done what they have done in the mass of my experience.

First and foremost, my mother Hana Nachawati. I have had a long-running inside joke with my mother that if she had not had me, she almost certainly would have become a global pop-artist sensation. She treats this routine with much more levity than I do; I think she almost certainly could have been so, given her charm, tastes, and of course, her beautiful voice, among other talents. It slightly assuages my guilt that she doesn't in the slightest view this as a sacrifice. Instead, through her intelligence, fun-lovingness, sharp sense of humor, and kindness, she has accomplished the most wonderful things without stardom. Among the smallest of these has been the largest for me: being a steadfast source of love, wisdom, and resilience that will continue to inspire anything of worth that I do.

As much as I try to avoid the notion of "intellectual heroes," no person comes closer to having been one for me than my father Said Elfakhani. Given this dissertation draws on the pragmatist tradition, it's fitting to note that my father is a "pragmatist" of the best kind, although like a good pragmatist, he wouldn't care to talk much about it, but I will. Working full-time at his father's restaurant while attending night-classes during adolescence and later becoming an academic, he has always viewed his intellectual pursuits as inextricable from everyday human affairs. The many times he has described

to me the satisfaction he has gotten from owning and managing a business that treated its workers with respect and dignity left me with a deep appreciation for how capital-labor relations can, in practice, take myriad forms, and that recognizing this indeterminism is indeed part of the process of mustering the human power needed to *make* the social relations within which we are embedded work for all of us. Wary of formalisms but cognizant of the importance of working assumptions, my father has always been guided by a set of values that have impelled him toward improving the things around him and leading by example rather than through exhortation, much less force. Rarely would he formally espouse theories, values, and other preconceived categories without explicitly specifying the contexts within which they're relevant, unless it was patently useful to do so. One such instance was his relating to me when I was 20 his strong belief in selecting into situations that would allow him to cultivate the wants and dislikes he *wanted* to have, and urging me to recognize a somewhat paradoxical sequence of thought and action involving recognizing human frailty in order to more fully realize human freedoms and powers. Seldom have I lived up to this, but when I have, it has been with his example in mind. Indeed, my father and mother, I believe, cultivated in each other the kinds of wants they wanted to have.

As I grow older, I am becoming sappier about the fact that the only people with whom I will have shared experiences from toddler years to old age will be my siblings. I continually marvel at my sister, Manal, who completed her PhD several years more efficiently than I, all while raising three children. She has been an unwavering emotional support to me during all trying times. Her warm concern and active presence creates a special feeling of self-assurance and strength that only she can give. Mohamad, my older brother, introduced me to sociology and unbeknownst to him, has motivated me by example more, and for longer, than anyone else in my life. In moments of introspection I often, somewhat begrudgingly, realize how many things I have done simply to impress him. He is also the most empathetic, genuine, and insightful person I know, who, no doubt partly due to his training in psychiatry, has taught me so much about the human mind, persuasion, courage, and perseverance. My

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No single piece of academic work shaped my understanding of "habit," "creativity," and culture more than my advisor Orlando Patterson's (2014) *ARS* piece "Making Sense of Culture." The culture literature is about as eclectic in concepts as any literature, and for a long-time I grappled with finding a unifying perspective that elucidated *what* cultures are and *how* they become implicated in action, in ways that captured both group-level processes and concrete micro-interactional mechanisms. Reading Orlando's piece was a kind of rare intellectual epiphany for me that helped me better understand related and more distant literatures. It's also certainly the most cited paper in this dissertation.

Among the great sociologists of our time, William Julius Wilson is largely why I wanted to join Harvard's sociology department. Bill got me excited about the potential of academics to impact social policy through their work, and the importance of thinking about social positions as overlaid with material and cultural structures. He has also been a staunch supporter and engaging interlocutor through the years, having mentored me for my qualifying paper, oral defense, prospective defense, and my dissertation defense. I was deeply fortunate to have a dissertation committee comprised of scholars whose personal fascinations with addressing empirical paradoxes created a certain exuberance around particular parts of my dissertation.

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## Chapter One – Introduction

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the emergence of the on-demand economy and its significance for workers.

The “on-demand economy” involves digital platform-marketplaces that intermediate between buyers and sellers of rapidly-provided services (e.g. transportation, food delivery); the case of Uber

Technologies Inc. (henceforth Uber) and its workers is taken as the primary empirical representation of it. This introductory part of this (introductory) chapter is organized into three sections: (1) a brief statement about how this dissertation’s empirical and theoretical motivations converge; (2) a dissertation “roadmap,” which summarizes the core argument of each chapter; and (3) a roadmap to *this* introductory chapter, which describes the practical significance of the on-demand economy and overviews the social-organization of on-demand work.

### Empirical and Theoretical Connections

There is substantial overlap between my empirical and theoretical motivations. I ask three empirical questions (chapters three to five) involving the social processes underlying the (1) emergence of the on-demand economy (chapter three), (2) how Uber drivers evaluate their experiences with on-demand work (chapter four), and (3) the ways in which more committed Uber drivers re-organize their lives (e.g. personal aspirations) around the on-demand work they perform (chapter five). I address these questions using theoretical tools based largely on the American pragmatist tradition (chapter two), which can be viewed as having both a philosophical position involving certain epistemological and ontological assumptions as well as certain substantive insights about social action, change, and order. Substantively, some of the core pragmatist foci involve (1) “problem-situations” (e.g. their emergence and influence on action), (2) “habits” (e.g. their use in routine problem-solving and maintaining personal order), and (3) “creativity” (e.g. exercised when habits fail). Indeed, each of my three empirical questions connects to at

least one of these substantive foci; chapter three provides an illustration of the *emergence of problem-situations* (tied to the on-demand economy), chapter four makes causal inferences about the *effects of habits* on coping with on-demand work, and chapter five makes descriptive inferences about the different *kinds of creativity* implicated in the everyday actions of on-demand workers. By putting to use core pragmatist philosophical (e.g. viewing theories as “instruments” and making inferences about continuous, processual transactions) and substantive principles, I aim to contribute to the contemporary resurgence of pragmatist sociology by refining and developing some of its core concepts (e.g. redefining habit as cultural knowledge, distinguishing between modes of creative action).

### **Dissertation Roadmap**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters: this first chapter establishes the significance of the on-demand economy and provides a general overview of the social-organization of on-demand work; the second chapter establishes my theoretical framework, based on the pragmatist tradition, and engages with alternative theoretical frameworks; chapters three to five address three empirical questions, respectively; and chapter six provides concluding remarks. Below is a summary of each of these chapters’ core contributions.

### **Chapter Two — A Pragmatist Framework for Understanding Nonstandard Work Relations**

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used throughout this dissertation, with the goal of (1) illustrating how the pragmatist perspectives is more useful (given my empirical questions) than theoretical alternatives that have been applied to understanding nonstandard work relations, and (2) engaging with sociological pragmatism and proposing theoretical refinements to it. Regarding “non-pragmatist” theoretical alternatives, I examine three perspectives based on Marxian macro-structuralist historicism (e.g. Standing 2011), the “Cornell School” (e.g. Hyman 2016) and Beck’s (1992; 2000) “individualization” thesis. After summarizing these perspectives and identifying some of their useful insights—such as Marxian insights into the growth of a structurally dislocated pool of labor that has

“poised” (Padgett and Powell 2012) the United States to Uber’s emergence (relevant to chapter three) or Beck’s (1999) concept of “biographical breakdown” (relevant to chapter four)—I proceed to argue that, on the whole, these perspectives are mired in conceptual noise and self-contradiction. They are either tautological and hence leave little to be discovered (e.g. historicists), riddled with conceptual inconsistencies (e.g. Beck’s individualization thesis), or biased toward cases and processes particularly likely to bear out their conclusions and hence, only social “harms” are identified as being associated with nonstandard work (e.g. Cornell school). I use this critique to segue into the second part of the chapter which argues that sociological pragmatism offers a useful corrective to these approaches, capturing the processes they forefront and avoiding their noise. I develop this argument in two sections. In the first, I note that while contemporary pragmatism provides useful substantive insights into different kinds of social processes, it has fallen short of fulfilling pragmatism’s potential for four reasons: (1) ontological assumptions that are excessively restrictive and epistemological assumptions that are inconsistent with pragmatist instrumentalism; (2) vague conceptualizations of “habit” and “creativity”; (3) narrow understandings of culture in exclusively semiotic terms; and (4) conflation of power with domination. In the second section, I re-conceptualize and synthesize various pragmatist analytic categories (e.g. habit, creativity, “context,” problem-situations) in order to gain greater theoretical leverage over empirical problems involving social-emergence and social action. For example, I subsume the concept of “habit” within a typology of embodied cultural knowledge (i.e. declarative, procedural, and evaluative knowledge) and the construct of “cultural configurations” based on Patterson (2014), understand “creativity” as grounded in cultural knowledge rather than as representing an alternate end of a habit-creativity continuum (see Gross 2009), and define the “context” of human problem-solving on the basis of a stylized conception of Abbott’s (2016) “ecological” understanding of social structure. Beyond being usefully applicable to my empirical problems, this conceptual and synthetic work contributes to the pragmatist program by providing insights into processes of emergence, personal order, social-selection,



among others, and more generally, into the mutually social-constructive processes that inhere to actor-ecological transactions. For example, these tools are applied to show how ecologies can be “poised” (Padgett and Powell 2012) to social-emergence (relevant to chapter three), how different kinds of “habits” (e.g. personal norms; see Schwartz 1977) and knowledge-activation processes (Andersen et al. 2007 in Patterson 2014) can shape how actors evaluate their experiences (e.g. their sense of personal order; relevant to chapter four), as well as how particular kinds of creative action (i.e. “projective creativity”) can result in flows of action that alter the kinds of problem-situations into which actors will tend to select (relevant to chapter five).

### **Chapter Three — Taking the State for a Ride: The Emergence of the On-Demand Economy**

In chapter three, I examine the social-emergence of the on-demand organizational model by focusing on the case of Uber, founded in the United States in March 2009. A broader aim of this chapter is to establish the point that inasmuch as pragmatists are interested in understanding how cultural configurations (e.g. habits) change over the course of actor-ecological interactions, then pragmatists’ (rightful) insistence on viewing human preferences and beliefs as endogenous to problem-situations (e.g. Whitford 2002) is incomplete without also attending to how and why problem-situations emerge; that is, not theorizing how ecologies (e.g. on-demand economy) emerge is tantamount to not theorizing the social-construction of human preferences, beliefs, and psychological constraints. With respect to the substance of the chapter, I find that Uber’s emergence unfolded over a process of mutual social-construction between organizational entrepreneurs and their social-ecology. In order to understand these entrepreneurial-ecological interactions, I focus on two transactional (reciprocal) processes: (1) how particular sets of ecological properties (e.g. alienated workers, political vulnerabilities, technology) *poised* the United States to the emergence of Uber’s on-demand organizational model, and (2) how Uber’s particular social actions (e.g. rhetoric, undermining of opponents, mobilizing consumer support, as well as blitzkrieg, prophylactic, and “Janus-like” tactics)—what I call its “mode of claim-making” or its

“repertoire of contention” (Tilly 1985, 1996)—successfully resulted in the genesis and reproduction of its organizational model. On the basis of Padgett’s and Powell’s work, I develop the concept of “poisedness,” which they view as “the next research frontier” (2012: 26). After overviewing their framework, I argue that, among other limitations, it under-theorizes the ways in which power relations and cultural processes are implicated in an ecology’s poisedness to innovation. Partly to rectify this, I establish a pragmatist marriage between their framework and the social-movement literature—specifically work on dynamics of contention (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tarrow and Tilly 2006) and resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977)—based on the ontological primacy that both approaches give to continuous, mutually-constructive transactions between actors and ecologies. This theoretical synthesis captures the ways in which a broad range of “resources” (e.g. “alienated workers,” technology), power relations (e.g. political vulnerabilities, claim-making) and cultural processes (e.g. valorized popular support) inhere to the poisedness of an ecology to innovation. After demonstrating the poisedness of Uber’s ecology to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model, I show that the most critical dimension to Uber’s survival and growth has centered on it having been successful in making various political-legal claims, particularly regarding the legal-classification of its “driver-partners” as “independent contractors.” I describe this success as a function of the contentious interactions between Uber and its opponents (e.g. city-officials, taxicab lobbyists). These successful interactions were structured by both Uber’s repertoire (i.e. its mode of claim-making)—described as involving blitzkrieg, prophylactic, and Janus-like tactics (i.e. two-faced pugnacity and ingratiating)—and the social-ecology within which it was embedded. I offer several case-illustrations of the deployment of this repertoire. This analysis gives “poisedness” richer meaning by describing it as *poisedness to Uber’s successful claim-making*. Just as poisedness is understood in this relational sense, so too is Uber’s repertoire, which is described as having been altered processually through Uber’s ecological interactions, particularly since early 2015. In discussing these findings, I also (1) highlight the link

between poisedness and ecologies' organization of work and consumer politics, (2) emphasize the mutual-construction of Uber and its ecology by making two inferences about the social mechanisms (Gross 2009) through which Uber transformed its ecology and through which Uber was transformed by its ecology, and (3) specify some directions for future research about ecological poisedness, emphasizing that "poisedness" is a *relational* concept, arguing that research on poisedness and innovations should be guided by historically-concrete, middle-range propositions, and suggesting cross-national research that deepens our understanding of the relationship between an ecology's consumer politics and its poisedness to particular types of innovation.

#### **Chapter Four — Social-situational Displacement and Personal (Dis)order among On-Demand Workers**

This chapter examines the causal relationship between habits and coping with on-demand work.

Specifically, I ask: how do Uber drivers' cultural configurations and problem-situations shape how they evaluate their experience working in the on-demand economy? Drivers' evaluations of their experiences bear directly on how often they work with Uber, how long they plan to continue to do so, the subtle costs and benefits they notice (and do not notice) and care about, among other outcomes. I note that the importance of understanding the coping experiences of Uber drivers is heightened by two recent developments: (1) the privatization of household risk—or what Hacker (2006) has termed "the great risk shift"—has generated various kinds of "instabilities" (instantiated below) which necessitate understanding how actors are coping with shifts in personal circumstances (e.g. new problem-situations like job loss); and (2) the rising proportion of workers who have been displaced from more mainstream, traditional employment into more fringe, nonstandard work necessitates a better understanding of these workers, many of whom have college-degrees, are coping as service-providers in on-demand economy. Theoretically, I build on the pragmatist framework outlined in chapter two to develop a clearer conception of "habit" that connects group-level processes (e.g. class, immigration) and concrete micro-sociological mechanisms, on the basis of Patterson's (2014) concept of cultural configurations and

Andersen et al.'s (2007) knowledge-activation mechanisms (cited in Patterson 2014). This theoretical approach provides a useful intermediation between two versions of relational sociology, the first of which—arguably best represented by Bourdieu (1984; 2000)—focuses on highly structural group-level processes while obscuring within-group (e.g. within-class) behavioral differences (see chapter one), and the second of which—arguably represented by Collins (2005)—focuses on micro-interactional dynamics while obscuring the ways in which, in Fine's (2005: 1288) words, "the meso-level concept of the group is the glue that connects action and organization. I make three main findings. First, I illustrate how "personal career-norms" (see chapter two and Patterson 2014) tend to impel some college-educated drivers to want to escape from on-demand work and find more mainstream work instead; yet I also show how the effect of these personal career-norms can be attenuated by knowledge-applicability and – accessibility mechanisms involving labor market institutions (i.e. credential-equivalency rules), familial commitments, and friendship networks. Second, I illustrate how acute problem-situations (e.g. negative income shocks) trigger segments of drivers to shift into *goal-focused* cultural configurations which rendered them inattentive to the subtle costs and benefits of driving with Uber. Third, I illustrate how for many drivers, whether or not they find substantial value in driving for Uber depends considerably on their *beliefs* about the labor market and their *skill* at interacting with riders. With respect to beliefs about the labor market, while overall nearly all drivers valued Uber's pecuniary benefits (e.g. wages), a particular subset of drivers *especially* valued Uber's non-pecuniary benefits, specifically the relative autonomy it provides (e.g. control over work hours, no direct boss). These drivers typically had strenuous labor market histories, often having experienced rentier practices within the taxicab and limousine industry (see chapter one). This was especially the case with immigrants who typically had extensive exposure to exploitative and/or severe labor market conditions in their countries-of-origin as well as often in the U.S. With respect to conversational scripts, I offer very preliminary evidence that drivers who lack the conversational scripts necessary for enjoyable conversations with riders tend to

increasingly disfavor driving for Uber. Finally, I conclude by making inferences about three social mechanisms based on Gross (2009)—identifying their internal sequential logics and specifying empirical and theoretical implications and qualifications—and identifying promising lines of future research.

### **Chapter Five — Projective and Responsive Creativity among On-Demand Workers**

This chapter develops an analytic framework for conceptualizing human “creativity” and applies it to understanding some of the kinds of creative actions exhibited by Uber drivers. Specifically, I ask: in what ways do more committed Uber drivers re-organize their lives (e.g. personal aspirations) around the work they perform, given the structural properties of on-demand work (e.g. wage dynamics, work-hours, rules)? In contrast with chapter four—which aimed to make *causal* inferences about the relationship between habits, problem-situations, and how drivers evaluate their experiences coping with on-demand work—this chapter makes mainly *descriptive* inferences about social processes underlying creative modes of action. I note that creativity in contemporary sociology (including pragmatism) is often viewed either in negative terms as “not habit” (assuming habit-creativity continuum) *or* as a generic descriptor for how actors behave when their habits fail. In contrast, this chapter takes it on assumption that creativity is guided by habit (i.e. cultural configurations; e.g. values direct creative pursuits); further, it illustrates how it can be useful to treat actions that are observed in situations of “normal functioning” (i.e. in which habits are *not failing*) as *creative*. Consistent with pragmatist instrumentalism and a strong aversion to reifying a habit-creativity continuum, I argue that the question is not about specifying *when* creativity occurs or declaring that creativity is ubiquitous—which would strip the concept of any kind of useful meaning—but rather how we can use the concept of creativity to understand micro-level *change* (or *novelty*), which is quite often an unintended consequence of everyday action, as discussed in this chapter’s concluding section. That is, the analytic *instrument* of “creative action” is most usefully invoked when our empirical interest involves understanding behavioral *change*. On this basis, I construct three analytical categories (*slack, responsive, projective*) corresponding to different modes of creative

action. I argue that while the behavioral-economics perspective that creativity is enabled by the *absence* of scarce resources (i.e. enough slack for creativity) is useful in its generality and the hypotheses it yields, it is relevant to only the most *extreme* forms of material deprivation. The construct of responsive creativity captures how actors use various kinds of resources to maintain (or reconcile) their interests or goals in the face of new or enduring (often extreme) problem-situations (anticipated or unanticipated) which disrupt or constrain their interests or goals in some way; yet, it does not capture the ways in which creative action can be oriented to projecting one's values onto their experiences and practices to the effect of actors selecting into particular kinds of problem-situations (e.g. generating familial commitments). The third construct of projective creativity captures these processes. Projective creative action is as heterogeneous as cultural configurations are, with different actors having different aspirations and projects (e.g. entrepreneurial, consumption, familial); further, I emphasize that different work-structures will vary in both the extent and the ways in which they elicit projective creativity, noting that Uber's work-structure (e.g. autonomy, wage-predictability/"guarantee-ability") is expected to be particularly conducive to projective creativity. I make three main findings. First, I describe a common pattern of drivers experiencing, for the first time, due to Uber's work-structure, a feeling of financial self-efficacy tied to gaining control over their finances (e.g. debt) and accumulating wealth (e.g. car-ownership). This financial self-efficacy impelled these drivers to take concrete steps toward realizing some of their personal aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurship, major consumption). Second, I describe how Uber drivers with families commonly used Uber to realize familial aspirations involving strengthening relationships with children, improving spousal coordination and communication, and starting a family, in ways that were otherwise cumbersome prior to their having joined Uber. In the third and final section, I illustrate how the work-structure of driving with Uber (e.g. prohibition against smoking in vehicles, dynamic pricing system, rating systems) triggered various behavioral responses among drivers (e.g. reduced alcohol consumption, reduced weekend partying, attentiveness to customer ratings). In

discussing these findings, I make descriptive inferences about the social processes underlying projective and responsive creativity. Specifically, I identify a social mechanism underlying projective creativity which is organized around the concept of “specified attainability” (Winship 2015). I identify a simpler mechanism underlying responsive creativity based on how work-structure constraints can trigger behavioral changes. Finally, I discuss some “conceptual frontiers” for future research involving how (1) the construct of projective creativity adds clarity to the sometimes-muddled concept of human agency by capturing how actors select into problem-situations, (2) responsive and projective creativity can add causal-structure to Peirce’s semiotics, (3) responsive creativity can trigger emotional achievement to the effect of shaping practices and forming new values, and (4) novelty—and hence micro-level social change—is quite often generated as an unintended consequence of creative action.

### **Chapter Six — Conclusion: The On-Demand Economy’s Social Reverberations**

In this concluding chapter, I reflect the on-demand economy’s significance for contemporary social relations, particularly what it means for workers in the United States. I structure these reflections around the question of whether the on-demand economy is best interpreted as, in Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) terms, an “innovation” or an “invention,” a pair of constructs which help conceptualize the social significance of novel organizational forms and differ mainly in “the degree to which [the novelty] reverberates out to alter the interacting system of which it is a part” (5). All inventions are innovations, but only some innovations are inventions. After briefly describing why Uber clearly meets the “threshold” of being an innovation, I note that the crucial question, to be broadly approached in the chapter, is to what extent has the on-demand economy generated historical discontinuities in “how things are done”, i.e. is it an innovation *that has cascaded into an invention*? The chapter is divided into two sections. Given that the dissertation’s findings connect most directly to workers’ experiences, I devote the bulk of the chapter to the first section which reflects on the relationship between the on-demand economy, changing work-relations, and social inequality. I argue that with respect to

“restructuring the biographies” (Padgett and Powell 2012) of workers, the on-demand economy is usefully understood as an invention. This section also discusses the on-demand economy’s normative implications for social inequality. The second section offers some remarks about broader social reverberations often associated with the on-demand economy, and mainly argues that very few of these reverberations can be usefully understood as rooted in the on-demand economy.

### **Roadmap to this Introductory Chapter**

This current introductory chapter is organized into two parts: (1) establishes the significance of the on-demand economy; and (2) provides a general overview of the social-organization of on-demand work. In the first part, beyond serving to introduce the reader to the on-demand economy, I aim to broadly signify the practical importance of understanding Uber and on-demand work in two sections which (1) highlight the social reverberations generated by Uber’s emergence (broadly relates to chapter three) and (2) overview the normative<sup>1</sup> significance of investigating the social experiences of Uber drivers (broadly relates to chapters four and five). In the second part of this chapter (i.e. general overview of the social-organization of on-demand work), I (1) highlight some of Uber’s key social dependencies (e.g. supply-side worker-networks) which figure prominently in my account of Uber’s emergence in chapter three, and (2) describe the intra-organizational position (i.e. relation to management and riders) and social characteristics of Uber drivers, both of which are central to understanding variations in Uber drivers’ social actions (i.e. coping behaviors, creative practices; chapters four and five).

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ON-DEMAND ECONOMY: EMERGENCE, COPING WITH DISPLACEMENT, AND CREATIVE ACTION**

This section provides a general overview of the practical significance of the on-demand economy in two parts which highlight: (1) the social reverberations generated by Uber’s emergence and (2) the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term “normative” here more in the philosophical sense relating to questions of “oughtness,” as in normative ethics. Of course, “normative” can also be used as an adjective for “norms” which certainly shape questions of oughtness, but my use of the term is more moralistic.



normative significance of investigating the social experiences of Uber drivers. Overall, it intends to establish, in quite general terms, the *practical* significance and relevance of my empirical questions (chapters three to five). The first section (i.e. Uber's reverberations) connects more directly to chapter three (i.e. Uber's emergence) and the second section (i.e. normative significance of workers' experiences) connects more directly to chapters four (i.e. workers' coping) and five (i.e. workers' creativity).

I proceed as follows. In the first part, I depict Uber as the main purveyor of the on-demand economy and describe its importance in terms of its implications for contemporary social life on four different levels, namely (1) as a corporation, and with respect to its impact on (2) industry, (3) government, and (4) public discourse. In the second part, in two steps, (1) I argue that across-the-board normative characterizations of nonstandard work (e.g. "precarious economy" (Standing 2011; Hyman 2016) are empirically *thin* given the substantial variation in the growth patterns and "functional" characteristics of different categories of nonstandard work (i.e. "nature" of work), as well as the mixed evidence about changes in job quality since the 1970s, and (2) I proceed to outline three particular benefits of studying Uber drivers, specifying two normative aspects of Uber drivers' experiences that I focus on in chapters four and five (i.e. coping with social-situational displacement into on-demand work and engaging in creative action). Beyond the general importance of studying Uber and the social experiences of its drivers, a key takeaway of this section is that an effective empirical approach to studying Uber needs to be built on an understanding of the *particular* social processes that underlie the social-organization of work in the on-demand economy (e.g. intra-organizational relational dynamics); this is precisely the foundation the second part of this introductory chapter aims to establish.

### **Uber as Purveyor of the On-Demand Economy: Emergence and Social Reverberations**

Few organizations have figured as saliently into contemporary social life—for individuals (e.g. workers, consumers), social-organizations (e.g. legal, industrial), and public discourse—in so few years as has

Uber, a ride-sourcing platform-marketplace in the on-demand economy. Uber is a digital, platform-marketplace that relies on a distributed network of drivers (“suppliers”) to provide passengers (“consumers”) with nearly immediate access to private or shared transportation. On the supply-side of the market, drivers use their personal (non-commercial) vehicles to service the passengers with whom they connect via a specialized mobile application (“Uber Partner”). On the demand side, riders (i.e. passengers) access a separate mobile application (“Uber”) to connect with the service-providing drivers. As a corporation, in addition to marketing to both sides of the market, Uber processes the payments, tracks trips for customer safety and data collection, optimizes routes, adjusts prices to balance supply and demand, and maintains a mutual rating system, among other intermediary services. Workers retain fares minus a fee adjustment, which has variably been either a “transaction cut”—usually between 20-30% of the fare—or a fixed fee per mile travelled, with exact quantities varying by city-market and across drivers. Uber has also extended services beyond its core product, including a food delivery service (UberEats), a service that generates customer traffic for businesses (UberCentral), etc.

In this section, I provide a brief outline of the social significance of Uber’s emergence within the on-demand economy. Chapter three aims to explain the emergence of the on-demand economy by focusing on the case of Uber; this section broadly orients the reader to why such an effort—that is, explaining Uber’s emergence—is important. To that end, I overview Uber’s pervasiveness on a number of different levels: (1) corporate, (2) industry (e.g. taxicab industry, “uberization”), (3) government, and (4) public discourse.

### **Uber as a Corporation**

As a private corporation, Uber was founded in 2009 in San Francisco, spread nationally in 2011 and internationally in 2012, gained dominance in most major U.S. cities by 2014, and today it is operating in 573 cities in 75 countries<sup>2</sup> and is competing aggressively for market share in India, South-East Asia, and

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<sup>2</sup> In September 2016, it was operating in around 400 cities and 70 countries.

other massive markets.<sup>3</sup> Its most recent valuation—based on fund-raising terms with venture capitalists—is undisclosed; but as of December 2016, its valuation was estimated to be at \$68bn,<sup>4</sup> which makes it arguably<sup>5</sup> the highest-valued private company in the U.S. For relative proportionality, the only other US company in recent years to cross the \$50bn valuation in as short a period is Facebook, Inc. As for its financials, it has raised an estimated \$15 billion<sup>6</sup> from private markets (Sorkin 2016). It reportedly currently has about \$7 billion in cash and \$2.3 billion in credit access (Newcomer 2017). Its global gross revenue (i.e. total bookings) was roughly \$0.4 billion in 2013, \$3 billion in 2014, \$8.5 billion in 2015, and \$20 billion in 2016; it had \$6.5 billion in revenue in 2016, which represents (crudely) Uber’s fee for transactions. For the month of March 2016, it was estimated that Uber completed 169 million ride-transactions globally, of which around 50 million were in the U.S. (Newcomer 2016c), giving it by far the majority U.S. market share<sup>7</sup>. Yet Uber is still unprofitable; estimates are that its net profit loss in the first

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<sup>3</sup> Part of this rapid growth can be attributed to Uber’s aggressive marketing (Hook 2016; Constine 2016) as well as its innovative business practices, including launching services for food delivery (Carson 2016), motorbike services in India (Russell 2016), catering to Chinese global travelers (Hook 2016), partnering with Toyota on Autolease deals (Buhr 2016), arranging for businesses to pay for the rides of their customers (Etherington 2016), recent plans to launch a on-platform content marketplace to entertain passengers on their rides, set to launch in April 2017 (Lunden and Russell 2017a), etc. It should be noted though that competition has been fierce in nearly every market. For example, Uber’s rival in China, Didi, has raised billions of dollars from Apple and other investors (Clover and Thompson 2016), driving Uber to enormous financial loss (Hook 2016), with the dynamic ultimately having resulted in Didi’s acquisition of Uber China (Newcomer and Wang 2016). Uber has also faced steep competition in South East Asia (Bland 2016) and the Middle East, often resulting in price cuts that drivers vigorously protest (Finn 2017). Within the US, beyond old rivals like Lyft, even Google has experimented with a new ride-sharing service in San Francisco (Nicas 2016). It is also the plaintiff in a lawsuit waged by Waymo (Alphabet Inc.’s self-driving company; Alphabet is Google’s parent company) (Lashinsky 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See La Monica (2017). It should be emphasized that Uber’s valuation is highly contested, with quite wide-ranging estimates. In comparison, big automakers like Ford, General Motors, and Tesla have market capitalization of around \$55bn, \$52bn, and \$29bn respectively. Although regular reports estimate that while Uber’s growth has been rapid, its net financial loss for 2016 may be near \$3 billion (Newcomer 2016b).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, such determinations about private-company valuations are uncertain, precisely because private companies disclose much less financial information. Yet, among US technology company, Uber is the clearly the highest valued, the second being Airbnb at roughly \$30 billion. Globally, Xiaomi is estimated to be valued roughly \$45 billion.

<sup>6</sup> Roughly \$13 billion of this is equity-based and \$2b billion is credit-based.

<sup>7</sup> Estimates vary widely, but hover around 85 percent of the US on-demand ride-sourcing market.

three quarters of 2015 were \$1.7 billion (\$1.2 billion in revenue during that period; Newcomer and Huet 2016); in 2016 its losses were around \$2.8 billion<sup>8</sup> (see Newcomer 2017). However, with respect to its U.S. operations, Uber did report an operational profit (excluding taxes, interest, etc.) as of February 2016. In August 2016, Uber reported to its investors that it has between 84-87% market share within the on-demand ride-sourcing market.

For the month of July 2016, Uber had 15.8 million “monthly active users” (i.e. riders) in the U.S., and of all U.S. smartphone users who used any mobile application, 8.4 percent of them used Uber at least once. As for U.S. drivers<sup>9</sup>, using Uber-provided administrative data, Hall and Krueger<sup>10</sup> (2015) reported that in December 2014, Uber had 162,037 monthly active<sup>11</sup> drivers. In November 2015, Uber reported having around 400,000 monthly active U.S. drivers (Uber Newsroom 2015b<sup>12</sup>). Uber’s global gross bookings have more than doubled since then, yet much of this growth has been outside the United States. If we take a conservative estimate of 500,000 U.S. drivers on an average month in 2016, then Uber drivers represented roughly 0.3 percent of the U.S. workforce in that year (BLS 2017)<sup>13</sup>. Within Boston, which is the research setting for this dissertation, Angrist<sup>14</sup> (2017) estimates roughly

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<sup>8</sup> This excludes financials tied to Uber’s china operation, which Uber sold in July 2016 to its Chinese rival Didi Chuxing in exchange for an 18 percent stake in Didi Chuxing.

<sup>9</sup> It reported having 1.1 million drivers globally in November 2015 (Uber Newsroom 2015b).

<sup>10</sup> Hall and Krueger (2015) were provided by Uber administrative level data in 2014. Their study uses the most reliable data available but is outdated at this point; yet, its descriptive characteristics of Uber drivers is quite useful and is examined below. They estimate that between October and December 2014, Uber’s drivers collectively received \$656.8 million in payments from Uber.

<sup>11</sup> They define an Uber drive as “active” if they completed four or more trips in December 2014.

<sup>12</sup> It reported having 1.1 million drivers globally (November 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Carson (2015) states that by October 2015, 327,000 individuals were monthly-active drivers on the Uber Partner platform, but provides no documented evidence of this estimate.

<sup>14</sup> This estimate is based on administrative data from Uber, and was relayed during a workshop presentation in the Harvard Department of Economics, Labor Workshop, on April 5, 2017.

20,000 Uber drivers. Uber reported that its U.S. drivers earned around \$3.5 billion in 2015. Considering other on-demand workers, Farrell and Greig (2016b) demonstrated that “platform workers” (i.e. Uber drivers and others) are rapidly growing (170% year-to-year growth as of September 2015), and Hathaway and Muro (2016) note that this growth is concentrated in metropolitan areas.

### **Industry: Disruption of the Taxicab Industry and Uberization**

Uber started rapidly gaining market share and public salience in 2012, after it launched its low-price product “UberX”; since then, it has (1) effectively disrupted the taxicab industry (Romburgh 2015<sup>15</sup>; Gray 2016; Megaw 2016) and (2) triggered what has been called the “Uber for X” phenomenon (or “uberization”), i.e. the adoption of on-demand organizational models by startups in myriad service areas.<sup>16</sup>

Taxi medallions—which are licenses to operate taxicabs (typically leased to drivers for a fee<sup>17</sup>) and whose supply is fixed by city governments (e.g. 1825 medallions in Boston, 13,400 in New York City)—have plummeted in value in most cities. Prior to Uber’s launch in Boston in 2012, a medallion’s price was roughly \$700,000 (Adams 2017); as of March 27, 2017, they are being sold for around \$100,000 (see DriverZoo 2017). The decline is continuing; in NYC, taxi medallions lost roughly 75% of

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<sup>15</sup> As of early 2015, Uber was estimated to be at least three times the size of the entire taxi industry in San Francisco (Bomburgh 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Much of media coverage about the on-demand economy spread after the publication of *The Economists’ “There an App for That”* in early 2015. Publications have reveled with proclamations about the on-demand economy’s growth (Hackett 2016) and its broader social significance (Wladawsky-Berger 2015). These have included proclamations that the on-demand economy is spawning innovation (Contreras 2016) as with its cutting-edge work on self-driving cars (Chafkin 2016; Buhr and Dickey 2017), that its dramatically shaping cities in Asia (Tomer 2016), as well as impassioned defenses for the “Uber-ization of Everything” (Patel 2016). It has also arguably contributed to a growing “business literature” about the unique challenges and growth prospects of “membership-based” business which include much of the on-demand economy (see Baxter 2015). An especially interesting blog is titled the *The Rideshare Guy* and contains thousands of posts offering advice to drivers about how to make the best of their “mini-business” as Uber drivers. There has also been skepticism about “uberisation,” that Uber’s model does not translate to other services (Madden 2016; Manjoo 2016; Valenti 2016) and that Uber’s future has been overhyped (Davis and Asher-Schapiro 2016; Kunkle 2016).

<sup>17</sup> That is, medallion-owners are typically able to lease those medallions out to drivers, typically for around \$70-\$100 in cities like New York City and Boston. Medallions are metal plaques, typically affixed to the rear of taxicabs.

their market value between April 2014 and October 2016<sup>18</sup>. As argued in chapter three, the taxicab industry's antiquated regulations and rentier practices contributed to the "poisedness" (Padgett and Powell 2012) of Uber's ecology to Uber's emergence and its industry-disruptive effects.

As for uberization, the "Uber for X" model has propagated to industries as wide-ranging as event-organizing (e.g. ShiftGigs), delivery of groceries, alcohol, and meals (e.g. Instacart, DeliveryHero, FoodPanda, DoorDash, Drizly, Spoonrocket, Caviar<sup>19</sup>), consultants (e.g. HourlyNerd), labor marketplaces for wide-ranging services (e.g. WayUp, Eden, Fiverr), storage (e.g. Omni), ecommerce (e.g. Deliv), tutoring (e.g. Quickhelp, Instaedu), massages (e.g. Soothe), home tasks (e.g. Taskrabbit, Handy), clothes-sharing (e.g. Dressboom), parking (e.g. Luxe), pet care (e.g. Instavet), shipping (e.g. Shyp, Cargomatic), sales force (e.g. Universal Avenue), etc. A company named Magic emerged in 2015 as the "Uber of everything," rapidly raising \$12 million at \$40 million within months of its founding (Crook 2015). The taxi industry has itself tried to "uberize" with the launch of platforms like Arro, Way2Ride, and RideLinQ (Hawkins 2015). Uber has paved the way for these companies in at least three ways: (1) demonstrating how transaction costs between buyers and sellers can be reduced through distributed networks of suppliers; (2) winning legislative battles that established the legality of its model in many cities; and (3) creating public buzz around the potential of the on-demand economy to improve social outcomes for cities (e.g. consumer surplus). Indeed, companies like Dispatch have begun to emerge aimed at helping traditional businesses incorporate elements of on-demand models into their organizations to defend

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<sup>18</sup> Cities regulate the taxi industry partly by ensuring that taxi drivers meet various requirements, including possessing a taxi license commonly signified by a "medallion" in many cities (e.g. NYC). In NYC they were first issued in 1937, and today, generally there are medallions for companies and medallions for individual taxi operators, priced differently. The market prices for each have dropped dramatically, largely driven by competition from Uber. In April 2014, NYC taxi medallions for individuals were priced at \$1,030,000 (prices for taxi corporations were \$1,320,000); by October 2016 they were priced at around \$250,000. This has led to the rise of personal and corporate bankruptcies among entities who have invested heavily in taxi medallions. However, it is important to be measured in the extent to which Uber is responsible for the difficult conditions taxi drivers face today, as financial distress among taxi drivers preceded Uber and should be understood in the broader context of rising economic insecurity.

<sup>19</sup> Many of these delivery services have focused on niche areas, like high-end restaurant food delivery (e.g. Caviar).

against the looming effects of “Uber for x” startups. Even large corporations like Amazon, Walmart, and many others<sup>20</sup> have either started working with independently contracted drivers to deliver goods or have partnered with Uber (and Lyft) for various organizational synergies (Vandeveldt 2016; Turner and Pettypiece 2016).

### **Government: Pushing the Legal-Policy Frontier**

Much of Uber’s emergence, as is argued in chapter three, has depended on political-legal disputes over the worker-classification of its drivers. Such “contentious politics” (Tilly and Tarrow 2006) have involved a wide range of actors, including city officials, taxicab owners, lobbyists and leasers/renters, Uber drivers, and activist citizens. Uber received its first Cease and Desist order as early as October 2010 in San Francisco just three months after its launch (it effectively ignored<sup>21</sup> it); hundreds of other court injunctions have followed, including a Cease and Desist order banning Uber from operating in New Orleans even *prior* to it having launched there (Riess 2014). Grievances center on claims that Uber has secured unfair competitive advantages by sheer force and legal gaming, to the effect that it has avoided “public fees” tied to licensing and payroll taxes which traditional ride-sourcing companies pay. Indeed, Uber’s market dominance in the ride-sourcing industry has critically hinged on the outcomes of legal and regulatory battles, rendering considerable uncertainty about the future of the on-demand

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<sup>20</sup> Numerous major retailers have recently launched on-demand services (often through partnerships), including McDonald’s, Starbucks (partnering with Postmates), Taco Bell (partnering with Doordash), Whole Foods and Target (partnering with Instacart), etc. Expedia acquired HomeAway partly to compete with Airbnb.

<sup>21</sup> After effectively ignoring the order, they issued a response which foreshadowed one aspect of their future strategy, i.e. publicly caricaturing regulatory bodies as out of touch with technology and its possibilities: “UberCab [Uber’s name at the time] is a first to market, cutting edge transportation technology and it must be recognized that the regulations from both city and state regulatory bodies have not been written with these innovations in mind. As such, we are happy to help educate the regulatory bodies on this new generation of technology and work closely with both agencies to ensure compliance and keep our service available for our truly Uber users and their drivers.” In the following years, Uber was routinely issued court injunctions (Howell 2015), ordinances advocated for by taxicab lobbyists (Wisniewski and Byrne 2016), car-impounds (Sadowski 2015), and faced other regulatory setbacks.

organizational model.<sup>22</sup> Largely due to Uber’s contentious growth<sup>23</sup> (described in chapter three), the legal and policy frontier that bounds the fast-growing digital economy<sup>24</sup> has rapidly expanded and taken shape; yet, knotty labor issues continue to be publicly debated and legally adjudicated, particularly around issues of worker-classification (Chriss 2016).

### **Public Discourse: Triggering Normative Sensibilities**

With respect to public discourse, Uber has triggered normative debates about the institutionalization of nonstandard work<sup>25</sup>, the conditions and experiences of on-demand workers, and broader questions about the on-demand economy’s significance for social inequality and the future of work. U.S.

Democratic Presidential Nominee Hillary Clinton explicitly addressed the issue in her first public outline of her economic plan in July 2015: “Many Americans are making extra money renting out a spare room, designing a website...even driving their own car. This on-demand or so called gig economy is creating

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<sup>22</sup> Uber has been on the losing side of numerous high-profile regulatory battles, including in Austin, Texas (Taylor 2016), Denmark (Petroff 2017), France (Dillet 2016; Thomson 2016), Germany (Scott 2016), Thailand (Peel 2016), Hungary (Byrne 2016), Taiwan (Clover 2016), and Thailand (Peel 2016). Yet, while market blockading has been substantial, much more common is slap-on-the-wrist penalties such as requirements for drivers to obtain special licenses in San Francisco (Dickey 2016), taxes on Uber to be used to subsidize the taxi industry in Massachusetts (Ingram 2016), and various financial penalties such as misleading customers over safety issues (Russell 2016). Typically, Uber has been able to mobilize political support and take advantage of “regulatory gray areas” to win legislative battles (Rayle and Flores 2016) by attempting to pay off legal opponents through lawsuit settlements (Rosenblatt 2017); this will be examined in detail in chapter three. It should be noted that recently, as of May 11, 2017, the Advocate General of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) issued a non-binding opinion that Uber should be classified as a transportation company subject to the same regulations as the taxicab industry (Kottasová 2017).

<sup>23</sup> This is perhaps best exemplified by a media leak regarding Uber’s “Greyball” operation, which was part of the VTOS program (“violation of terms of service”). Greyball was used to deceive political opponents to Uber (e.g. law enforcement authorities accumulating evidence on Uber’s practices) by populating fake content on the Uber applications operating on its opponents’ phones to derail their investigations. See Isaac 2017 for details. Note that as of May 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice launched a criminal investigation into Uber’s use of Greyball; Uber had seized using the program ever since the public learned of the program in March 2017 via the *New York Times* (Levine and Menn 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Several other on-demand companies (e.g. Postmates, Handy, Instacart) have also been embroiled in regulatory battles over their relationship with on-demand workers (Wogan 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Generally, it refers to types of work that deviate from “traditional,” full-time, stable employment, such as part-time work, independent contracting, temporary work, etc. While the research on on-demand work is scant, the broader literature on nonstandard work is well-developed (see Smith 1997, Kalleberg 2000, and Hollister 2011 for reviews).



exciting opportunities and unleashing innovation, but it's also raising hard questions about workplace protections and what a good job will look like in the future."<sup>26</sup> There have been multiple instances of public backlashes against Uber due to perceptions of its questionable practices, as in the "Delete Uber" campaign in January 2017, in which Uber was viewed as being unsympathetic to public opposition against U.S. President Trump's controversial immigration-restricting executive order<sup>27</sup>, resulting in Lyft (Uber's primary U.S. competitor<sup>28</sup>) surging to the "top 10" downloaded applications on Apple's platform within days (Perez 2017), as well as Uber CEO Travis Kalanick eventually stepping down from the President's Economic Advisory Council (Isaac 2017) to placate the public<sup>29</sup>.

More generally, Uber has been the subject of extensive public commentary and media coverage. This content has ranged from sensationalist titles like Steven Hill's *Raw Deal: How the 'Uber Economy' and Runaway Capitalism Are Screwing American Workers* (2015) to Sameer Patel's defense of the "uberization of everything" (Patel 2016), as well as more measured studies like Arun Sundararajan's (2016) *Crowd-Based Capitalism*. In between these often value-laden extremes, the bulk of published content has been more narrowly focused on the numerous protests and clashes among stakeholders in

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<sup>26</sup> More broadly, the on-demand economy—particularly companies like Uber and Lyft—have been the subject of criticism by Senator Elizabeth Warren and others, particularly from the American political left (Jopson 2016).

<sup>27</sup> US Executive Order 13769 temporarily restricted travel and immigration to the US from seven countries, suspending indefinitely Syrian refugees from US entry, and temporarily suspending the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, among other effects.

<sup>28</sup> Lyft has raised an estimated \$2.61 billion as of April 11, 2017 (Etherington 2017). \$1bn of this was raised in January 2016, \$500 million of which came from General Motors. See Newcomer (2016a). Uber has raised roughly six times more private capital. Uber's second major competitor in the US is Gett, which recently acquired Juno (Lunden 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Uber's branding in early 2017 has taken a significant hit. Even after the "Delete Uber" campaign, several incidents have riled the company, from whistle-blower employees citing rampant sexual harassment to the resignation of Uber President Jeff Jones, writing: "It is now clear, however, that the beliefs and approach to leadership that have guided my career are inconsistent with what I saw and experienced at Uber, and I can no longer continue as president of the ride-sharing business" (Swisher and Bhuiyan 2017).

cities worldwide<sup>30</sup> (see Rubin and Scott 2015), and flagrant incidents such as Uber purportedly tracking the movements of journalists (McCormick 2014) as well as celebrities and the former romantic partners of Uber employees (Hartmans 2016). Some of the negative commentary has touched on the on-demand economy's relation to inequality (Choudary 2016), weak background checks on drivers<sup>31</sup> (Taylor 2016), discrimination<sup>32</sup> against black riders (White 2016), job atomization (Evans 2016), crowding out positive alternatives (Taylor 2016; Baker 2016; Devore 2016), evading taxes and other regulations (Kocieniewski 2016), anti-union messaging<sup>33</sup> to workers (see Ghoshal 2017), and more than anything else, not classifying workers as "employees" to avoid substantial expenses<sup>34</sup> (Irwin 2016; Lawrence 2016; Levine and Somerville 2016). Some of the benefits cited involve value-creation for consumers (e.g. lower cost, speedy arrivals, safety due to trip-tracking), reducing traffic congestion (Bloomberg 2016), its potential for further job creation (Conda and Khanna 2016), and the relatively autonomous jobs it has created for

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<sup>30</sup> These protests have most typically been carried out by taxi drivers, but Uber drivers themselves have staged protests and strikes against Uber, such as during Superbowl 2016 (Buhr 2016). Settlements are often made but the critical issues always tend to hinge on whether Uber drivers will be classified as employees versus independent contractors, and on that, workers always lose (Lewis and Bhuiyan 2016; Isaac and Scheiber 2016).

<sup>31</sup> As the result of legislation in 2016, Massachusetts has become among the strictest states in enforcing background checks. Typically, Uber conducts its own background checks; but in Massachusetts, as of January 2017, the state began checking the records of drivers. It recently determined that 8,206 on-demand drivers (e.g. Uber, Lyft, other companies) of a total of 71,000 were ineligible to drive any longer, due to various infractions (e.g. crimes, driver-related offenses, etc.). See Vaccaro and Adams (2017) for details. Also, Uber (and Lyft) stopped operations in Austin, Texas in May 2016 as a result of requirements to include fingerprint tests in its background checks on drivers (McPhate 2017).

<sup>32</sup> There is also some recent, unpublished work by Christopher Knittel presented at Harvard-MIT's Economic Sociology Seminar on March 8, 2017, that finds more frequent cancellations against passengers with African American sounding names.

<sup>33</sup> Reports emerged in March 2017 of Uber forcing its drivers to listen to and read messages critical of unionization in Seattle (Abhimanyu 2017). This includes the Uber Partner application alerting drivers to episodes of the "Uber Seattle Partner Podcast" with regularly features content critical of unions. Uber claims the podcast was requested by drivers to keep them informed with updates on the Seattle collective bargaining ordinance. See Heller (2017) for details.

<sup>34</sup> One estimate based on US court papers indicated that, collectively, Uber drivers who worked for Uber in Massachusetts or California between 2009 and 2016 would be entitled to "\$730 million in expense reimbursements had they been [legally classified as] employees rather than contractors" (Levine and Somerville 2016).

American workers (Nowicki 2016), serving those with varied purposes (e.g. consumption-smoothing, career transitions, permanent work). These public debates tend to have strong normative overtones to the effect that evaluations of the on-demand economy’s “goods and harms” commonly transmute into various kinds of policy recommendations within the public discourse (Chriss 2016).

Concluding this section, while there are many ride-sourcing, platform-marketplaces today, Uber can generally be viewed as the purveyor of the on-demand economy and its social-organizational model. Since its founding eight years ago, Uber has become the highest valued private technology company in the U.S. and its reverberations have been felt in industries (e.g. taxicab industry, the “Uber for X” model), governments (e.g. pushing the legal-policy frontier around worker-classification) and public discourse (i.e. triggering normative sensibilities about the “good and bad” it creates). It is in this backdrop of Uber’s social reverberations that chapter three advances an explanatory account of Uber’s emergence. Inasmuch as Uber’s consequences are important, so are its processual antecedents.

In the next section, I dig deeper into the fact that Uber has arguably become the touchstone for energetic normative characterizations about the on-demand economy and “nonstandard work.” To advance this normative discourse, I (1) emphasize the importance of recognizing the distinct empirical attributes of different categories of nonstandard work and (2) provide several reasons for why focusing on Uber drivers in particular is useful, followed by a description of the normative angles I develop in chapters four and five.

### **The Normative Significance of Understanding the Social Experiences of Uber Drivers**

The emergence of the on-demand economy during the “Great Recession”—at a time when historical rises in economic insecurity<sup>35</sup> (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012) and employment instability were

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<sup>35</sup> “Economic insecurity” (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012) captures the degree to which individuals and groups are protected against—through their wealth, support networks, public insurance—adverse economic events (e.g. job loss, health costs, family dissolution). As Hacker (2006) argued in *The Great Risk Shift*, since the 1970s broad structural and institutional developments have resulted in the eroding of public and private support systems and the shifting of a variety of economic risks (e.g. costs associated with job loss and adverse health events) onto

especially severe (Farber 2008; Hollister 2011)—arguably heightened normative sensibilities to questions about the growth of “nonstandard” work (e.g. is the on-demand economy more freeing or shackling for workers?)<sup>36</sup>. These normative questions are important not only because they have engaged the public (as noted above) in ways that bear significance for legal-policy outcomes<sup>37</sup>, but because they tug at core human moral feelings about what work *should* mean and what work *does* mean in post-industrial economies.

On the assumption that these normative dimensions are inextricable from the social experiences of workers, in this section, I broadly develop the following argument: in order to make progress with normative questions about “nonstandard” work—which by the broadest definition<sup>38</sup>

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private workers and families. The concept of “economic insecurity” provides a helpful way of understanding the moving parts of a stratification system, and researchers (Hacker et al. 2011; Western et al. 2012) have argued that focusing on the dynamics surrounding *economic losses and buffers*— as opposed to static *levels of resources* as in the income inequality literature—has the advantage of providing a window into how inequality is *experienced*. However, it should be noted, that many have argued that studies revealing rising economic insecurity are fraught with measurement problems (Winship 2009). However, the rise of income volatility (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994; 2009) is less controversial.

<sup>36</sup> Farber (2008) examined data on the job durations of 876,063 workers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Displaced Workers Survey and found that declines in job tenure were particularly strong among men in the private sector. Evidence of short-term churning is weaker (Farber 2009), but short-term instability rates seemed to increase specifically among low-skilled men in the early 1980s. Focusing on employment transitions, Steward (2002) found that in the 1990s job switching increased (unclear if voluntary or involuntary) and employment-to-unemployment decreased due to economic growth. Kambourov and Manovskii (2008) showed that occupational switches have increased especially among young and private-sector workers. However, Cappelli (2001) has argued that only a small percentage (~10%) of private sector firms have ever been able to provide long-term employment to their workers, and that most firms have always had unstable employment, which counters the argument that declining long-term job tenure is a significant phenomenon.

<sup>37</sup> Normative and analytic categories are critical to shaping policy positions around new forms of work (cf. Chriss 2016 for what I interpret to be an instance of this). This can be connected, I argue, to a (limited) path-dependence in policy formulation that flows from the conceptual categories that are used to describe phenomena, to the effect that policy arguments about the on-demand economy tend to be propelled in bifurcated directions (Durkheim 1912), either organized, on the one hand, around *embracing* the “emergent reality” of on-demand work in order to reshape it for maximal benefit and minimal harm or, on the other hand, *contending* with it as a “deconstructable reality” to free up other positive potentialities it may be crowding out. Maintaining a critical perspective on analytical-normative interactions and avoiding categorical presuppositions that lead to tautological arguments (e.g. capital *always* exploits labor) is important to developing a useful perspective on these important questions and their implications for policy.

<sup>38</sup> See Polivka (1996) and US General Accounting Office (2015) for different definitions of nonstandard work.

includes part-time workers, independent contractors (e.g. Uber drivers), self-employed workers, on-call workers, contract company workers, day laborers, and agency or direct-hire temporary workers<sup>39</sup>—it is critical to recognize that the heterogeneity of the social-organizational processes (Baron and Biebley 1980) implicated in different categories of nonstandard work generate vastly different social experiences and normative outcomes<sup>40</sup>.

I proceed in two sections. First, I develop the above argument by emphasizing the empirical *thinness* of across-the-board normative characterizations of nonstandard work, particularly given the extent to which different categories of nonstandard work vary in their growth patterns and functional characteristics, as well as the mixed evidence about changes in “job quality” since the 1970s. Second, I provide several reasons for focusing on Uber drivers and then describe the particular normative angles I develop in chapters four and five, which center, respectively, on coping with social-situational displacement into on-demand work and engaging in creative action.

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<sup>39</sup> Independent contractors generally provide services to customers with whom they independently connect. Independent contractors perform a wide range of work, from unloading shipping containers at Wal-Mart to testing Google’s self-driving cars (roughly half of those who work for Alphabet Inc., Google’s parent company, are outsourced employees (Weber 2016). As for Uber drivers, they are legally considered “independent contractors,” but the fact that they depend on Uber, Inc. to connect with consumers strains the definition, which is precisely why many would argue that they are de facto employees classified as independent contractors. On-call workers engage in work in which they are often on “stand-by.” Contract company workers work for particular companies that contract the workers’ services out. Day labor involves work done on a per day or per hour basis. Agency temporary workers are paid directly by temporary help agencies.

<sup>40</sup> Normative and analytic categories are critical to shaping policy positions around new forms of work (cf. Chriss 2016 for what I interpret to be an instance of this). This can be connected, I argue, to a (limited) path-dependence in policy formulation that flows from the conceptual categories that are used to describe phenomena, to the effect that policy arguments about the on-demand economy tend to be propelled in bifurcated directions (Durkheim 1912), either organized, on the one hand, around *embracing* the “emergent reality” of on-demand work in order to reshape it for maximal benefit and minimal harm or, on the other hand, *contending* with it as a “deconstructable reality” to free up other positive potentialities it may be crowding out. Maintaining a critical perspective on analytical-normative interactions and avoiding categorical presuppositions that lead to tautological arguments (e.g. capital *always* exploits labor) is important to developing a useful perspective on these important questions and their implications for policy.

## **The Empirical Thinness of Across-the-Board Normative Characterizations of Nonstandard Work**

Nonstandard<sup>41</sup> work is often glibly viewed as the byproduct of the erosion<sup>42</sup> of “standard” work relations since roughly the late 1970s, which has included: the restructuring of workplace benefit programs that shift risk onto workers (e.g. replacement of pensions with defined contribution plans, and of workplace health insurance with health savings accounts; Stone and Arthurs 2013), declines in job tenure (Farber 2008; Hollister 2011), increases in job- (Steward 2002) and occupational-switching (Kambourov and Manovski 2008)<sup>43</sup>, etc. A common upshot of such undifferentiated associations between “nonstandard

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<sup>41</sup> Some of the strands of nonstandard research include: historical-institutional studies tracing the growth of “non-regular” work in Japan (one third the workforce in 2007; Imai 2010), the growth of precarious employment in China (Swidler 2012), cross-national comparisons of the effects of educational institutions on the likelihood of performing nonstandard work (de Vilhena 2015), studies showing how informal labor markets figure into development strategies (Ching and Kofman 2012), and economic-sociological arguments about how the temporary work industry changed collective understandings of workers’ roles in corporations (Hatton 2010), as well as how the business press has legitimated temporary work (Vallas and Prener 2012) and emergent rhetoric around personal responsibility in labor markets (Devault 2008); there is also substantial research on immigration and nonstandard work, with studies showing the disproportionate representation of college-educated immigrants in the nonstandard workforce (Gonzales 2013), the role of immigration law in shaping nonstandard work (Bohman and Lofstrom 2013), and studies of how immigrants navigate informal labor markets (Light 2006; Theodore et al. 2006; Hagan et al. 2011); finally, policy research on nonstandard work has centered on “flexicurity” policies (i.e. social protections for flexible work) which have been implemented especially in the Netherlands and Denmark (Haves 2011; Kalleberg 2011; Sallaz 2013), as well as work internal corporate policies oriented toward flexible work (Crouch 2000) and their consequences for workers (e.g. worker satisfaction; see Moen et al. 2016).

<sup>42</sup> From a macro-structural perspective the different forms of nonstandard work (on-demand work included) are all part of an inter-related set of historical processes. Following a two decade post-war period when long-term employment for white- and blue-collar workers was structurally supported and typical, the United States underwent widely documented economic-structural changes that altered employment dynamics (Farber 2008; Newman 2008; O’Rand 2010). The most important was a dramatic decline in stable, unionized manufacturing jobs and an increase in service-sector jobs which tended to be less stable (e.g. employees more substitutable). Second, increased global competition in the 1970s and the stagflation of the 1970s and 1980s created institutional pressures that enabled a range of practices that both weakened workers and created instability (or dynamism) in the labor market, including: corporate downsizing policies, deregulatory acts, the weakening of labor unions, layoffs associated with mergers and acquisitions, the shareholder revolution, etc. Third, technological growth shortened product cycles which may have contributed to greater job instability, both voluntary and involuntary. These and other factors have contributed to a long-term decline in long-term employment relations, although many have argued that the extent to which bureaucratized employment systems have been weakened in favor of more market-based arrangements is significantly overstated (McGovern et al. 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Farber (2008) examined data on the job durations of 876,063 workers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Displaced Workers Survey and found that declines in job tenure were particularly strong among men in the private sector. Evidence of short-term churning is weaker (Farber 2009), but short-term instability rates seemed to increase specifically among low-skilled men in the early 1980s. Focusing on employment transitions, Steward (2002) found that in the 1990s job switching increased (unclear if voluntary or involuntary) and employment-to-unemployment decreased due to economic growth. Kambourov and Manovskii (2008) showed that occupational

and standard work” are proclamations about historical disjunctures involving a “new economy” (e.g. Devault 2008; Kuttner 2013), “reflexive modernity” (Beck 1992; 2000), “disconnected capitalism” (Thompson 2013), “precarious economy” (Standing 2011; Hyman 2016), etc.<sup>44</sup> I examine the most relevant aspects of this work in chapter two, but on the whole, with few exceptions (see Cornell Industrial School; e.g. Donahue et al. 2007), much of this work imposes system-level assumptions (e.g. class-reproductive dynamics of capital accumulation and labor exploitation) that obscure important empirical complexities.

The thinness of normative generalizations about nonstandard work becomes especially evident on examining the extent to which different categories of nonstandard work vary in their share of total employment (or work) over time as well as in their functional characteristics. The growth patterns of certain categories of nonstandard work seem largely orthogonal to particular changes in “standard” work. For example, the proportion of part-time workers, which makes up the largest category of nonstandard work, has remained largely unchanged since the late 1970s, “with the exception of cyclical increases during recessions” (Bernhardt 2014). Self-employment levels are similarly unchanged since the early 2000s. Yet, for the period between 2005 and 2015, Katz and Krueger (2016) observed considerable growth in the share of total labor represented by various other types of nonstandard workers<sup>45</sup>, namely: contract firm workers (grew from 0.6 to 3.1 percent), on-call workers (1.7 to 2.6 percent), temporary help agency workers (0.9 to 1.6 percent), and independent contractors (6.9 to 8.4 percent). Indeed, they

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switches have increased especially among young and private-sector workers. However, Cappelli (2001) has argued that only a small percentage (~10%) of private sector firms have ever been able to provide long-term employment to their workers, and that most firms have always had unstable employment, which counters the argument that declining long-term job tenure is a significant phenomenon.

<sup>44</sup> These analytical categories (e.g. “precariat”) are usefully understood as categories of practice infused with normative overtones (Bourdieu 1977; 2000). For Bourdieu, these “normative undertones” cannot be separate from the hierarchical, competitive fields—academic or otherwise—within which they take shape.

<sup>45</sup> The US General Accounting Office (2015), conceptualizing nonstandard workers more expansively (e.g. including part-time workers), finds that nonstandard workers accounted for 35.3 percent of the workforce in 2006 and 40.4 percent by 2010.

noted that “all of the net employment growth in the U.S. economy from 2005 to 2015 appears to have occurred in [these] alternative work arrangements.”<sup>46</sup>

The key takeaway is that changes in different nonstandard work categories are much more usefully understood by focusing on the *particular* social-organizational dynamics that inhere to those work categories, rather than loosely defining those changes in terms of the erosion of standard work relations. One benefit of focusing on social-organizational dynamics is descriptively establishing variations in the “functional” characteristics of different categories of nonstandard work and how such variation contributes to explaining the tremendous heterogeneity of nonstandard workers. For example, in terms of formal-education, 22.8 percent of on-call workers and day laborers have at least a college degree versus 33.1 percent of all independent contractors (US GAO 2015) and 47.7 percent of Uber drivers (BSG 2015), with Uber drivers being one type of independent contractors. As discussed below in greater detail below in my description of the social-organization of work in the on-demand economy, four key functional characteristics of driving for Uber involve stability of full-time work-income, autonomy, low level of procedural skills required, and low “switching and setup” costs; these characteristics are critical to the educational heterogeneity of Uber’s workforce.

These normative characterizations are bound to be empirically muddled not only because categories of nonstandard work are so varied, but also because the evidence on changes in “job quality” since the 1970s is mixed. Reviewing Arne Kalleberg’s (2011) comprehensive treatment of the changing social-organization of work in *Good Jobs Bad Jobs*, Baron (2013: 150) remarks on the striking “absence of any straightforward trend in job satisfaction.” This is despite the strong evidence Kalleberg provides on rising job insecurity (“precarious employment situations”) and polarization of job rewards (e.g. earnings,

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<sup>46</sup> They use the term “alternative work arrangements,” but the work categories of reference are similar to the ones I am discussing. They note that Current Population Survey data shows that total employment increased by 9.1 million between 2005-2015. Based on a survey they conducted, they estimate that the number of workers employed in alternative arrangements increased by 9.4 million during this period.



control over work, time at work, etc.). Regarding overall trends in job satisfaction<sup>47</sup>, Kalleberg's analysis of Quality of Employment Surveys (1977-2006) revealed no significant changes; General Social Survey data (1972-2006) suggests a decline in job satisfaction largely driven by cohort replacement, which Kalleberg interprets as suggesting generational cultural shifts in expectations (i.e. "millennials" expecting work to yield greater satisfaction than prior generations) and preferences (e.g. rising preferences for job security and income<sup>48</sup>). Putting this interpretation aside, consistent with my earlier point, such overall trends in job satisfaction are not particularly useful given the enormous social-organizational heterogeneity in work. For example, as Kalleberg acknowledges, job satisfaction trends are tied to occupational categories; while declines in satisfaction can be observed in managerial, sales, and clerical occupations, satisfaction levels have held steady for blue collar workers and risen for professional and technical occupations in the 2000s. Thus, across-the-board normative characterizations are not likely to be useful; rather, the key to capturing "job quality" and "job satisfaction" begins with an understanding of the social-organizational dynamics of work (e.g. on-demand work), which is precisely what the latter part of this chapter provides.

### **Uber Drivers: (1) Coping with Social-situational Displacement and (2) Creative Capacities**

I conclude this section by (1) highlighting three main reasons I focus on on-demand workers, particularly Uber drivers, and (2) briefly remarking on the two normative aspects of Uber drivers' experiences that I focus on in chapters four and five.

#### ***Why Uber Drivers***

There are three substantive reasons to focus on Uber drivers' experiences: (1) size; (2) effects on Uber's trajectory; and (3) social-heterogeneity. First, on-demand workers represent an important share of the

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<sup>47</sup> Kalleberg (2011: 166) measures job satisfaction based on workers' "global [judgements] about their overall satisfaction with the job."

<sup>48</sup> His analysis shows that income and security have become stronger predictors of job satisfaction over time.

total growth in nonstandard work in recent years, and Uber drivers constitute the largest part of that group. Using the first nationally representative data on on-demand workers—based on a survey conducted in October and November 2015 (RAND-Princeton Contingent Worker Survey<sup>49</sup>) designed around the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Contingent Worker Survey (not conducted since 2005)—Katz and Krueger (2016) estimated that on-demand workers represented 0.5 percent of the U.S. workforce in 2015 (corresponding to 629,000 workers<sup>50</sup>). Given that independent contractors grew from 6.9 to 8.4 percent of the workforce between 2005 and 2015, then Katz’s and Krueger’s estimate would imply that on-demand workers represented roughly one-third of the growth of independent contractors during this period (also see Farrell and Greig 2016b<sup>51</sup>). On the importance of Uber in particular, Hathaway and Muro (2016) estimate that most of the growth in on-demand work has been generated by the ride-sourcing (e.g. Uber) and “rooms industry” (e.g. Airbnb), particularly the former<sup>52</sup>. How many U.S. on-demand workers are Uber drivers? As noted above, Hall and Krueger (2015) estimated 162,037 monthly active<sup>53</sup> U.S. drivers by the end of 2014. Uber reported that by November 2015, it had roughly 400,000 U.S. drivers (Uber Newsroom 2015b). Yet, Uber’s global gross bookings increased from \$8 billion in 2015 to \$20 billion in 2016; while much of this growth occurred outside the U.S., the number of current U.S.

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<sup>49</sup> Measuring trends in the size of the nonstandard work population over time is difficult because the first large-scale survey of nonstandard workers, conducted as part of the Census’ Current Population Survey, occurred in 1995. Most of the rise in nonstandard work between 1995 and 2010 has occurred since 2005. See Bernhardt (2014) for an excellent review of measurement and other practical impediments to studying on-demand work.

<sup>50</sup> This is in between Harris and Krueger’s (2015) estimate at 0.4%, which was based on counts of Google searchers involving online intermediaries, and Farrell and Greig’s (2016a) estimate at 0.6%, which was based on bank deposit data associated with online work platforms.

<sup>51</sup> Farrell and Greig (2016b) found that while monthly year-over-year growth of workers in the “online (labor) platform economy” is declining (peaked at 450% in August 2014), it is still rapidly growing (170% year-to-year growth as of September 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Hathaway and Muro (2016) take advantage of a Census Bureau dataset on “nonemployer firms” that can be used to (crudely) identify workers earning income from online intermediaries like Uber.

<sup>53</sup> They define an Uber drive as “active” if they completed four or more trips in December 2014.

drivers is likely considerably higher. If we assume 500,000 drivers, then this represents roughly 0.3 percent of the employed US workers in 2016 (BLS 2017).

Second, given that Uber drivers are integral to Uber's service, to the extent that Uber drivers' actions can shape the trajectory of Uber (e.g. work dissatisfaction leading to collective organizing and unionization), then understanding their social experiences is important *because* Uber's social reverberations (as described above) are important.

Third, the above-noted "functional" characteristics of working for Uber (e.g. stable work-income, autonomy, low procedural skills required, low joining costs) have attracted a group of workers that exhibits a remarkably high degree of cultural heterogeneity. As described below, most categories of work tend to select for workers with relatively similar social backgrounds such as education (Hout 2012); this makes it difficult to gain insights into the matrix of material and cultural interactions that overlay any social position. Yet, heterogeneity among Uber drivers provides an opportunity to understand how normative outcomes are shaped by the varying intersections of work-situations and other group-level processes (e.g. class, culture).

### ***Normative Focus: Coping with Social-situational Displacement and Creative Capacities***

Finally, while the normative dimensions of driving for Uber can be understood in a variety of ways—including earnings and other material benefits, economic insecurity (e.g. protections against adverse events), work hours, autonomy, opportunities for solidarity-building among other workers, self-reported satisfaction, etc.—I focus on (1) how workers cope with social-situational displacement into on-demand work (chapter four) and (2) the ways in which drivers engage in various kinds of creativity. Both foci strongly dovetail with my theoretical interest of contributing to the development of a pragmatist action theory that is outlined in chapter two; further, both foci leverage the heterogeneous cultural configurations (Patterson 2014) of Uber drivers to reveal how *coping* and *creativity* are underpinned by cultural processes. To be clearer as to how these are *normative* considerations, chapter four's

examination of coping captures many of the dimensions just noted (e.g. economic insecurity, material benefits, job satisfaction), but it assumes that *work-structures* (or ecologies<sup>54</sup>) are not intrinsically “good” or “bad,” but rather, that “normativity” inheres to the particular *structural-interactions* that actors experience. Thus, by examining the social processes that underlie how Uber drivers cope with their social-situational displacement into on-demand work, I capture the normative dimensions of on-demand in more concrete, processual terms. Chapter five’s study of creativity follows a more singular line of analysis, on the assumption that the human capacity to exercise creativity constitutes an important normative dimension of social life. That is, work-structures that enable creative capacities, all else considered, are normatively more favorable than work-structures that suppress human creativity. Thus, in addition to clarifying different types of creativity—what I call “responsive,” “projective,” and “slack” creativity—chapter five examines the ways in which Uber drivers’ capacity for creative action is enabled or constrained in their social experiences.

Concluding this section, I have broadly outlined some of the key ways in which the on-demand economy represents an important set of social phenomena worthy of study. In the first part of this section, I established the social significance of Uber’s emergence within the on-demand economy, focusing on its social pervasiveness (e.g. on industries, government policy, public discourse). Chapter three provides an account of how Uber emerged to have had such social influence, based on a pragmatist synthesis of varied theoretical strands including Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) concept of “poisedness,” Tilly’s (1985, 1996) repertoires of contention, etc. In the second part of this section, I overviewed the normative significance of investigating the social experiences of on-demand workers, particularly Uber drivers. My central argument has been that normative characterizations of nonstandard work are most useful when they center on the particular (and varied) social-organizational

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<sup>54</sup> This is a concept I regularly use throughout the dissertation, mostly based on Abbott (2016)’s concept of “linked ecologies.” I describe the appeal of the concept, contrasting it with alternatives (e.g. “fields,” “structures,” “situations”) in chapter two.

dynamics that inhere to different categories of work. I followed this argument by highlighting the usefulness of studying Uber drivers—given their size, centrality to Uber’s core service and trajectory, and the theoretical leverage that can be created by their social heterogeneity—and specifying some of the normative dimensions I focus on in chapters four (i.e. coping with displacement into on-demand work) and five (i.e. creative action).

The next section applies this section’s main point by providing a general overview of the social-organization of work in the on-demand economy. This overview provides important “flares” to my three empirical chapters on emergence, coping with social-situational displacement, and creative practice, because they highlight some of the key social dynamics implicated in the on-demand economy. For example, in pointing to Uber’s dependence on its workers being classified as independent contractors, this next section “flares” the importance of political-legal processes in the on-demand economy’s emergence (chapter three). In pointing to the “cultural heterogeneity” of on-demand workers, it flares some of the processes that might account for how different Uber drivers cope differently in the on-demand economy (chapter four) and exhibit different kinds of creativity (chapter five).

## **A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL-ORGANIZATION OF ON-DEMAND WORK**

The on-demand economy can be conceptualized at various levels of generality. In the most general formulation, it is an exchange structure that relies on digital systems—mainly smartphone or web-based platform-marketplaces—to facilitate mutually beneficial interactions between actors. In a more technical (or mechanical) sense, it is a production-and-consumption system that uses particular resource inputs and value chains to create “economic value” (or surplus) that is distributed between producers and consumers. Finally, in a more “relational” conceptualization, it is a mode of production<sup>55</sup> constituted

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<sup>55</sup> While the concept of “mode of production” typically connotes a production relations that are dominant and pervasive (e.g. capitalist relations), the on-demand economy is being conceptualized as co-existing along other, more dominant modes of production. It is primarily given its emphasis on the inseparability of production processes from broader social-relational dynamics.

by a set of social relations between organizational-managers, workers, consumers, and other actors (e.g. regulators). For my purposes, this third conceptualization is most useful for two main reasons: (1) it puts into focus the primary ways in which the on-demand economy differs from other related exchange structures (e.g. “sharing economy”), which is especially important given the all-too-common conflation of the descriptor “on-demand” with other terms such as “collaborative,” “gig,” “1099<sup>56</sup>,” “gift,” “trust,” “peer,” “access,” “crowdsourcing,” and “sharing” economies, all of which describe digital *platform-marketplaces*, but differ fundamentally in their relational dynamics; and (2) it delimits our focus to questions pertaining to the social-relational dynamics<sup>57</sup> of the on-demand economy, thereby sharpening empirical focus. My broader goal is to ensure that subsequent empirical chapters (three to five) are built on a concrete understanding of the on-demand economy’s core social-relational processes.<sup>58</sup>

I proceed in two parts: (1) the first part highlights some of Uber’s key social dependencies (e.g. supply-side worker-networks) which figure prominently in my account of Uber’s emergence in chapter three; (2) the second describes drivers’ intra-organizational position (i.e. relation to management and riders) and social characteristics, both of which are central to understanding variations in Uber drivers’ social actions (i.e. coping behaviors and creative practices, examined in chapters four and five,

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<sup>56</sup> The “1099 economy” is a reference to the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) Form 1099-MISC which is used to report payments to independent contractors, as well as rental property income, interest and dividend income, and other miscellaneous income. The 1099 economy is a catch-all term that emphasizes the growth of independent contracting. It is a more accurate descriptor of on-demand work than most alternatives (e.g. sharing, gig, trust, peer, etc.).

<sup>57</sup> In as much as we aim to grasp social-relational dynamics, as social scientists, alternative conceptualizations are clearly less useful. For example, conceptualizing the on-demand economy in more technical terms may be useful for highlighting ways to optimize its operational/logistical processes, but this is of course not my interest.

<sup>58</sup> Other ways in which the on-demand organizational model is often viewed as distinct include (1) its heavy use of “big data” (e.g. traffic data), behavioral experiments on users, flexible pricing models (e.g. price discrimination), (2) its operating based on a principle of hyper-commoditization, i.e. generating economic value from underutilized capacities (e.g. slack resources like time, cars, etc.), (3) distinctive combinations of revenue streams (e.g. transaction “cuts,” mobile advertising, subscriptions), as well as (4) the diffusion of the on-demand organizational model to new service areas (often referred to as “uberization” or the “Uber for X” phenomenon), typically seeking to be acquired by an incumbent firm. My view is that these are important but they are not truly distinctive of the on-demand economy, as each of them is arguably operative in different exchange structures.

respectively). Specifically, the first section focuses on Uber's *strategic orientation* toward ensuring that its drivers are classified as independent contractors and that it rapidly achieves marketplace "liquidity"; this orientation defines Uber's organizational practices (e.g. its "repertoire of contention"; Tilly 1985, 1996), as examined in chapter three. In the second section, I first describe Uber drivers' intra-organizational position, focusing on their relation to management (e.g. power dynamics), and then describe what is known about Uber drivers' social characteristics, analytically outlining the "pull and push" factors that underlie Uber drivers' cultural heterogeneity and arguing that this heterogeneity provides a unique opportunity for gaining deeper understanding into social action at the intersection of different material and cultural structures. Importantly, both parts of this section are inter-related; Uber's organizational practices (partly shaped by its strategic orientation) and workers' social experiences mutually construct each other. The pragmatist action framework outlined in chapter two is built around capturing these *continuous, mutually reconstructive interactions* (e.g. Dewey 1910a; Whitford 2002). This section, however, focuses on higher-level social-relational dynamics.

### **On-Demand Platform-Marketplaces and Supply-Side Worker-Networks: Strategic Orientation and Organizational Practices**

Supply-chain<sup>59</sup> worker-networks orient the organizational practices of on-demand platform-marketplaces to two main strategies: (1) ensuring a particular *kind* (or "quality") of worker-network—that is, mainly<sup>60</sup> that workers are legally-classified as "independent contractors"—in order to minimize operational costs, and (2) expanding the *size* (or "quantity") of supply-side worker-networks—that is,

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<sup>59</sup> The term "supply-chain network" may be more fitting. Also, while the term "provider network" is technically more descriptive, given that platforms like Airbnb—which provides temporary residential accommodation—depends on "providers" more so than "workers," I use the term "worker-network" because it more aptly captures that most of the supply-side of the on-demand economy is made up of workers who do not own the levels of capital needed for residential ownership.

<sup>60</sup> There are, of course, other dimensions to the *kind* of worker-network, including how labor productivity which, for Uber drivers, would generally be captured by "customer-rider satisfaction." I examine some of these issues below in outlining the driver experience.

the number of workers, hours worked per worker, and transactions per hour worked—in order to improve customer experiences (e.g. faster pick-up times)<sup>61</sup>. Both strategies provide competitive, monopolistic advantages (e.g. pricing power). Organizational practices within the on-demand economy do, of course, vary according to the nature of the service, organizational culture, and other factors; my focus in this section is on the strategic dimensions of supply-chain dependence on worker-networks<sup>62</sup>, viewing them loosely as orienting principles rather than as organizational imperatives. These considerations will be critical to understanding the on-demand economy’s emergence (chapter three). I examine each in turn.

### **Ensuring Workers are Legally-Classified as Independent Contractors**

While for traditional businesses, supply-chain costs are usually reduced through various efficiency-improvements (e.g. inventory tracking, shipping management), for on-demand platform-marketplaces like Uber, the most substantial opportunity to cut supply costs hinges on workers being legally classified as “independent contractors” rather than “employees.” However, this cost-reduction strategy is fraught with uncertainty given the legal complexity and political contentiousness it entails. The National League of Cities (2015: 6) noted: “due to rapidly evolving business models, intense media campaigns, and vocal constituents, the process of regulating sharing economy<sup>63</sup> businesses can be complex and contentious...with no clear precedent for the regulatory process, each city must determine which agency or agencies, committees and staff members will take the lead on meeting with stakeholders, drafting ordinances and implementing new policies.” Chapter three demonstrates how critical this political-legal

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<sup>61</sup> Of course, platform-marketplaces must correspondingly grow their “rider-network,” but gaining more buyers at the end of the value-chain is common to all traditional organizations selling a product (i.e. good or service).

<sup>62</sup> As will become evident below, this dependency on supply-side worker-networks fundamentally distinguishes the on-demand economy (e.g. Uber, Taskrabbit, Handy) from other exchange structures, including traditional businesses and the “sharing economy” (e.g. car-sharing).

<sup>63</sup> As will be clarified in a later section, “sharing economy” is not the most useful descriptor of Uber and other on-demand platform-marketplaces.



contingency has been to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model and Uber's practices (e.g. rhetoric, undermining of opponents, mobilizing consumer support). In this section, rather, my aim is to substantiate how crucial the stakes of these political-legal disputes are for Uber's organizational model, in the way of providing an initial impression as to why Uber's practices are oriented to resolving this contingency. In what follows, I identify the legal-classificatory dimensions most germane to worker-classification, establish the dispute's key financial implications for Uber, and identify two other closely related issues tied to worker-unionization and Uber's classification as a corporation.

The criteria<sup>64</sup> used to determine whether Uber drivers are "contractors" or "employees" (or other legal categories such as "workers" in the United Kingdom) vary considerably across states (and industries), but generally hinge on two criteria: (1) the *degree of control* the organization has over the worker and (2) how integral the worker is to the business' core operations. Arguments against classifying Uber drivers (and other on-demand workers) as independent contractors often apply the "economic realities test" (Weil 2015) to the working relationship between Uber and its drivers, claiming that Uber's various practices with respect to drivers *effectively* resemble a traditional employer-employee relationship, including that it: disciplines its drivers for inadequate performance (e.g. rejecting rides) and rewards them with bonuses for better performance (e.g. taking a certain number of rides in a day); "deactivates" (effectively fires, as is argued) drivers when their average ratings (given by riders) fall

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<sup>64</sup> Different bodies (e.g. Internal Revenue Service, state tax departments, U.S. Department of Labor, state departments of labor, workers compensation insurance agencies, etc.) use different criteria. A commonly applied set of criteria is based on the California Supreme Court's "economic realities" test which was used in *S.G. Borello & Sons, Inc. v. Department of Industrial Relations* is often used by government agencies (e.g. labor commissions); it put forth eleven criteria regarding whether the worker is an independent contractor or employee: (1) whether the worker is engaged in an occupation separate and distinct from that of the principal; (2) whether the work is part of the regular business operations of the principal; (3) who provides the tools, materials, and equipment for performing the work; (4) whether the worker has invested in any equipment or materials to perform the work; (5) whether the work requires a special skill; (6) whether the work being done is of the kind that doesn't require direction or supervision by the principal; (7) whether the worker has an opportunity for profit or loss in the business; (8) how long the services are to be performed; (9) how permanent the relationship is; (10) how the worker is paid, whether by the hour or by job; and (11) whether the parties believe that they have created an employment relationship (although this factor is not determinative).

below particular thresholds or when drivers are inactive for particular durations; controls the fares they are paid; does not bill drivers for their services; trains drivers; determines important sequences of the job (e.g. it does not inform drivers of customers' destinations until after pick-up); specifies requirements for the cars its drivers can use; provides equipment to drivers (e.g. iPhones); deliberately makes it difficult for drivers to collect tips; conducts background checks on drivers; depends on drivers for their core business, etc. On the other hand, Uber and its legal advocates emphasize other "realities," including that: its "driver-partners" highly value the autonomy associated with being independent contractors, such as not having fixed employee work-hours and being able to work with other companies at will; the freedom Uber affords its drivers makes partnering with it effectively similar to running one's own business; all drivers sign a contract clearly stipulating that they are not "employees," but rather, are independently contracting with Uber; and Uber does not own any of the cars and simply serves as a technology platform that matches riders with drivers.

The *independent contractor* classification is so critical because it allows Uber to avoid the substantial financial costs and legal risks associated with regular employment; this is fundamental to its organizational model. Having Uber's "driver-partners" classified as independent contractors allows Uber to avoid having to pay workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, and payroll taxes (e.g. Social Security and Medicare<sup>65</sup>). Moreover, under this classification, Uber is not required to comply with various federal laws, including the benefits and protections covered under the Fair Labor Standards Act (e.g. federal minimum wage, overtime pay standards, work-hour limitations, etc.) and Family Medical Leave Act (e.g. job-protected leave for family or medical reasons), as well as various public health and safety regulations (e.g. American Disabilities Act). More broadly, by contracting out driving to workers, Uber effectively absolves itself of various legal risks associated with its drivers' behaviors (e.g. car

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<sup>65</sup> Hall and Krueger (2015) report that 49 percent of Uber drivers receive employer-provided health insurance from their employer in a different job or through their spouse or a family member. Uber helps its drivers find their own health insurance through a partnership with Stride Health.

maintenance and vehicle tests). It also saves on various operating expenses (e.g. gas) and the financing of the cars themselves, since drivers must use their own cars (often leased from Uber).

The status of Uber's drivers also have bearing on two other issues with substantial financial implications: (1) worker-unionization and (2) whether Uber should be classified as a taxi company. First, various federal labor and privacy laws make it difficult for cities to permit independent contractors to unionize, which would allow drivers to bargain over their net wages (i.e. gross fares, surge fares, Uber's "transaction cut") as well as other contractual matters (e.g. paid sick days, deactivation policy). As of now, Uber unilaterally determines these matters in almost all markets, generally having succeeded in opposing worker efforts to unionize (Seattle<sup>66</sup> is a possible exception). Recently, however, it has agreed to what it views as a middle-ground solution in one particular market: it has recognized a "guild"<sup>67</sup> of NYC drivers representing 35,000 drivers, on the basis that a substantial majority of NYC drivers partner full-time with Uber (Scheiber and Isaac 2016). Second, Uber has been viewed (by its critics) as a de facto taxi company that, by dint of its legal classification ("transportation network company"), has effectively been able to avoid the heavy regulatory burdens of its competitors (e.g. taxicabs, limousine), including

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<sup>66</sup> Although in December 2015, the Seattle City Council voted 9-0 in favor of an ordinance that would allow Uber drivers (among other independent contractors, e.g. taxicab drivers, for-hire drivers, etc.) to unionize, although this has been vigorously challenged since.

<sup>67</sup> Several such organizations have been formed by drivers in different cities, but none has been recognized by Uber. This NYC guild (i.e. Independent Drivers Guild) will be affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Union; yet the guild itself does not have the ordinary powers associated with unionization (e.g. wage bargaining). It will meet monthly with Uber management to discuss drivers' concerns, and will be able to appeal decisions by Uber to deactivate them from the platform; officials from the guild will be able to represent drivers in such appeals. Drivers will also be able to buy various discounted services (e.g. legal services, life and disability insurance, roadside assistance, etc.). It also agreed to pilot a program that would charge riders a fee if drivers wait for more than two minutes for the pick-up. In exchange, the guild will refrain from trying to unionize for at least five years, nor will it encourage its drivers to strike or launch campaigns aimed at becoming recognized as "employees." The guild also agreed to support Uber in lobbying the NY state legislature to drop a 9% tax on black-car services; Uber suggested that the surplus that would come from this change would possibly be put toward a fund, managed by the guild, that would benefit drivers (e.g. offer paid-time off). See Scheiber and Isaac (2016).

expensive operating licenses (e.g. “medallions”), restrictive fare structures<sup>68</sup> (e.g. price ceilings or floors), background checks, street pick-ups, vehicle standards (e.g. insurance, maintenance, wheelchair-friendly), language-tests for drivers, and various others (e.g. picking up handicapped individuals, prohibitions against cancelling a ride after being hired, providing city-wide service). Yet, as a “platform-marketplace,” Uber does not pay hefty tax expenses often incurred by taxicab drivers, particularly consumption taxes. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Value-added Tax (VAT) is approximately 20%; if, based on a current lawsuit (as of March 2017), Uber is judged to be selling a service (as the taxi industry sells a service), it will owe roughly one-fifth of its revenue from fares to the British government. Similar legal disputes are currently unfolding in Canada<sup>69</sup> (Burns and Somerville 2017). Both these issues (i.e. unionization and whether Uber is effectively a “taxi company”) depend on Uber’s relationship with drivers, and could arguably nullify much of Uber’s competitive advantages in this market.

Thus, disputes regarding the legal status of Uber’s workers, as well as around the related issues of unionization and whether Uber is a “taxi company,” cut to the core of Uber’s organizational model and the cost advantages it affords; for these reasons, in the various compromises Uber has made with government agencies, Uber has always been unwavering on the drivers-as-independent-contractors proviso and has been generally successful, as chapter three illustrates.

### **Attaining Platform-Marketplace Liquidity**

The “product” of a platform-marketplace—which is the *intermediation of transactions* that meet the preferences of two sets of interacting customers (e.g. drivers and riders)—is improved as a function<sup>70</sup> of

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<sup>68</sup> Trade groups such as the Taxicab, Limousine, and Paratransit Association and taxi firms particularly contest Uber’s dynamic pricing model which they argue transgresses relevant regulations, also pointing to their willingness to adopt mobile-based technologies to enhance the taxi industry (e.g. see Curb) to facilitate driver-rider transactions does (Hawkins 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Canada is currently (as of March 22, 2017) exploring classifying Uber (and other ride-sourcing firms) as taxi companies, which would render them liable to a sales tax (i.e. Goods and Services Tax) that taxicab companies already pay (Burns and Somerville 2017).

<sup>70</sup> This function is roughly logarithmic.

the number of buyers and sellers in the marketplace, i.e. as marketplace “liquidity” rises (cf. O’Hara 1998 on liquid markets; also Hagiu and Rothman 2016). I proceed in two steps: (1) describing the ways in which Uber’s strategic orientation to marketplace liquidity is critical, and (2) identifying three general “ecological<sup>71</sup>” dependencies created by this orientation, tied to rapidly financing liquidity, worker-availability, and politics.

Marketplace liquidity is central to Uber’s on-demand organizational model. With respect to the two sides of its marketplace, the most important consumer preferences to satisfy are (1) fast pick-up times (for riders), (2) plenty of work, available flexibly (for drivers), and (3) prices high enough for drivers and low enough for riders. Uber has generally<sup>72</sup> succeeded at providing all three by growing both worker- and rider-networks to the point at which for any given ride-request at a price that is acceptable to the rider, there have been enough drivers such that at least one of them could provide that ride *within minutes of the request*, and for any given driver, the wait-time between requests has been small enough at most times during a day that there were enough available ride-requests such that they could expect to earn a satisfactory hourly wage when they drove. In order to attain platform-marketplace liquidity, Uber has aimed to expand both the *number* of participants in the market—by attracting new drivers who prefer Uber over alternative jobs, as well as new riders who prefer to use Uber over alternative ride-sourcing (e.g. Lyft, Gett, taxis)—and the average *engagement* of riders (i.e. frequency of

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<sup>71</sup> I prefer the term “ecological” to “structural” for a number of reasons that will become evident in the description of my theoretical framework.

<sup>72</sup> Regarding these three market preferences, Uber has typically been successful at ensuring that riders are picked up within five minutes of their request in major cities, that drivers have little wait-time between rides, and that prices are below that of taxicabs. For drivers, according to a 2015 estimate from Hall and Krueger (2015) based on administrative data provided by Uber, drivers across Uber’s twenty largest city-markets earn an average \$19.15/hour, a wage that excludes drivers’ expenses. For riders, pick-up times tend to be under five minutes and prices are on average lower than taxicab fares (especially so for pooled-rides via UberPool), with incidental exceptions involving “surge pricing,” a mechanism that increases prices when demand substantially exceeds supply.

ride-requests per unit time) and drivers (i.e. hours worked per driver<sup>73</sup>)—by allowing workers to earn more income per hour and riders to benefit more from Uber (given short wait-times<sup>74</sup>). This marketplace-liquidity tends to reinforce itself because rises in participants and participation tends to improve wait-times and stabilizes prices (i.e. wages, fees), which subsequently attracts greater participation, increasing liquidity further<sup>75</sup>. The upshot is not only greater revenue from transactions but competitive, monopolistic dominance in the form of pricing power (e.g. larger worker-networks provide room for price drops), more data points on user-behavior that can be used to improve driver-quality and build customer loyalty (e.g. ensure that drivers are close by to riders mostly to request a ride in particular conditions), more ability to attract financing given market gains (put toward further improving the product; see below), etc. These competitive advantages generate customer loyalty, which is *especially* important on the rider-side of the market, because while drivers often use multiple applications (e.g. Uber, Lyft, Gett), riders tend to mainly use a single platform. In this sense, monopolistic power is more likely to be derived from capturing rider loyalty, compared to driver loyalty, and thus Uber is especially intent on ensuring its driver-networks are large enough to build that rider-side loyalty<sup>76</sup>. This rider-side loyalty creates a winner-takes-all dynamic; the race is to liquidity. Indeed, it

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<sup>73</sup> One might also argue that it increases the number of transactions completed per worker per hour, but this is likely negligible.

<sup>74</sup> As early as late 2012, a few months after UberX was launched, Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick was explicit about this logic: "As liquidity goes up...people in the marketplace... who are building a marketplace, know what liquidity means... it means demand and supply go up together. In our world, as liquidity goes up, the quality of the experience goes up, and dramatically...right, so our average pick-up times in San Francisco are two minutes and forty-five seconds; when we first started in New York we were like 12 minute average pick-up times. And let me tell you, you don't want to be delivering 12-minute pick-up times to New Yorkers... as more people use it, you go from the core user base to bigger, the engagement actually gets deeper, the number of rides per rider per month actually goes up as we expand."

<sup>75</sup> Of course, various qualifications are needed, including, that at some point more drivers will *\*not\** substantially result in more riders and will marginally harm drivers, because as Uber will increasingly be able to reduce prices or increase its transaction cut, causing downward pressure on driver pay. Of course, in more competitive cities it will be more likely to reduce prices than increase its transaction cut.

<sup>76</sup> For example, when there are zero-sum trade-offs between drivers and riders (e.g. pricing, rider-driver disputes), Uber (quite generally) tends to favor riders.

was only after Uber was able to attain this liquidity<sup>77</sup> (late 2012 onward)—particularly after it launched UberX in July 2012 (see chapter three)—that it began to successfully undercut taxi services in terms of fares and wait times<sup>78</sup>. Chapter three describes the various financial programs (e.g. car-leasing programs), operations to entice Lyft drivers to Uber (see Efrati 2017 report on its “Hell” program), advertising schemes (i.e. “middle income work” for drivers, “five-minute pick-up” for riders), and promotional programs (e.g. referral bonuses, temporary guaranteed wages for drivers), all oriented toward achieving this marketplace liquidity.

This strategic orientation creates three ecological dependencies tied to (1) financing rapidly-gained liquidity, (2) worker availability, and (3) political support; all three of these points (and others) are developed in detail in chapter three. First, given the winner-take-all dynamic, it has been critical for Uber to gain marketplace liquidity as rapidly as possible; to this end, it has depended on private financing. Partly due to federal policy<sup>79</sup> (Erdogan et al. 2016) and Uber’s management’s aggressive fundraising, Uber has raised an estimated \$15 billion since its founding in 2009 (Sorkin 2016); this allowed it to dramatically out-spend its relatively under-financed ride-sourcing (e.g. Lyft, Gett) and taxicab competitors in the race toward marketplace liquidity, rapidly boosting both sides of the market through various promotions and price-subsidies with which its competitors have difficulty matching. Second, while financing helps “pull” workers into Uber’s driver-network, Uber also partly depends on ecological conditions that “push” workers in its direction. That is, Uber’s ability to generate marketplace

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<sup>77</sup> Of course, Uber had other advantages as well, but these are best-conceived as resultant from Uber’s “virtuously cyclical” financing-market gains dynamic. These other advantages include its digital technology and logistic intelligence (e.g. Uber’s efficient pricing mechanism and its trust-building rating system).

<sup>78</sup> It had liquidity advantages over Lyft and other ride-sourcing companies in the US in most markets since its beginnings.

<sup>79</sup> At least two federal policies were contributed to the growth in private investment into technology: (1) post-recessionary near-zero federal funds rates intended to stimulate spending and investment and (2) the US Jumpstart our Business Startups (JOBS) Act of 2012, which increased the limit on the number of shareholders a company needed to have before it was required to disclose financial statement. See Erdogan et al. 2016.

liquidity depends partly on alternative work conditions for its drivers being *less* attractive than driving for Uber. Third, given the importance of Uber's drivers being legally-classified as independent contractors (see above), Uber depends on states (e.g. city officials) being willing to accommodate its claims regarding the worker status of Uber drivers.

Thus, quite generally, Uber's strategic considerations (i.e. greater revenue, monopolistic power) oriented<sup>80</sup> toward attaining platform-marketplace liquidity (i.e. customer loyalty), an orientation that creates at least three ecological dependencies rooted in Uber's ability to rapidly acquire marketplace participants, particularly workers. While both sides of the marketplace must grow in tandem to achieve liquidity, I have especially emphasized worker-networks because they are distinct to platform-marketplaces. This is because while all businesses aim to expand their base of *paying* customers, platform-marketplaces are distinctly<sup>81</sup> encumbered with the challenge of expanding an additional base of customers (i.e. worker-networks).

Overall, this section has provided a general overview of the strategic dimensions of expanding networks of "independent contractors," issues that will resurface and be fleshed out in detail in chapter three. This leads to the following question: if worker-networks are so critical to Uber's operations, what high-level social-relational processes characterizes the experiences of the workers who make up those

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<sup>80</sup> Large supply-side worker-networks also provide platform-marketplaces with what could be called *extensibility*. Platform-marketplaces have access to a collective skill-pool that can be extended into adjacent markets, endowing them with a radial influence that traditional businesses lack. This is because any given worker in a worker-network brings a whole range of skills that could potentially be used for labor in various other service areas. For example, while TaskRabbit was originally focused on connecting workers with consumers for the fulfillment of home tasks like cleaning and handiwork, it rapidly spread to other service areas including waiting in lines, shopping drop-offs, etc. In the case of Uber, it has leveraged its infrastructure to experiment with motorbike services, on-demand ice cream trucks, food delivery (i.e. UberEATS), a service that allows businesses to pay for rides for customers (i.e. UberCENTRAL), etc. However, it is important to note that *extensibility* within the platform-marketplace economy varies substantially, largely as a function of the service provided. For example, a platform like Airbnb, which depends on a network of residential property owners who temporarily rent out their residences, is minimally extensible. Thus, extensibility tends to feature more prominently when providers are directly selling a service rather than renting capital.

<sup>81</sup> This process is fundamentally different from the ways in which more standard businesses generate cost-advantages, e.g. from optimizing various supply-chain segments.



networks? I provide a general perspective on this question next, which is fleshed out in different ways in chapters four and five.

### **Uber Drivers: Intra-Organizational Position and Social Characteristics**

In light of the strategic significance of supply-side worker-networks and how they shape organizational practices, it is important to develop a general understanding of the key processes underlying the social experiences of the workers who make up these networks; I do so in this section, focusing on Uber drivers. The organizational practices just described bear directly on Uber drivers' experiences, particularly by defining their intra-organizational relational-position. Yet, Uber drivers' experiences are also shaped by broader social processes, including the "functional" characteristics of driving with Uber (e.g. wage-stability, autonomy, etc.), which "pulls" workers with particular social characteristics into working with Uber (i.e. a social-selection process), as well as labor market and work-organizational developments that define Uber drivers' work-alternatives, which "pushes" workers into working with Uber (i.e. ecological-causal processes); these set of processes generate an Uber driver-workforce that is remarkably heterogeneous in terms of social characteristics (e.g. education, age-cohort, racial-ethnic backgrounds), which I argue creates a considerable degree of "cultural heterogeneity." Thus, on the one hand, Uber's drivers are in similar intra-organizational positions, yet on the other, they vary substantially in their beliefs, skills, and values (i.e. their "cultural knowledge" (Patterson 2014); see chapter two); this creates an interesting empirical opportunity to examine how "material-cultural interactions" shape social action, an opportunity that chapters four and five leverage in examining workers' coping with social-situational displacement into on-demand work and their creative practices. Thus, this section provides a general empirical backdrop to key issues that will be examined in my latter two empirical chapters (four and five).

I proceed in two parts, overviewing the ways in which Uber drivers' social experiences are underpinned by their (1) intra-organizational position—partly determined by Uber's above-described

strategic orientation and organizational practices—and (2) social characteristics, partly determined by social-selection and ecological-causal processes (pull and push factors). The first part describes rider-driver and management-driver relations, focusing on the latter. A key paradox that defines management-driver relations is born of Uber’s dependence on the political-legal classification of its workers as independent contractors: Uber seeks to *formally minimize* the degree of social-control it exercises over its workers, i.e. to avoid the semblance of an employer-employee relationship, while needing to *informally maximize* its control over its workers, i.e. to ensure workers are productive (e.g. engage positively with riders). The second part overviews Uber drivers’ heterogeneous social characteristics, accounts for them, and highlights the empirical opportunity to gain insights into how material-cultural interactions shape social action.

### **Relational Dynamics: Uber Drivers’ Position with Respect to Management and Riders**

While Uber drivers exhibit substantial heterogeneity in social backgrounds, they share a similar structural position in relation to Uber’s management and its riders; this section provides a general description of the relational dynamics that inhere to that structural position. In line with the above section, in characterizing the social position of Uber drivers from a relational perspective, I reveal some of the most salient ways in which Uber drivers’ experiences are distinct from those of workers participating in other platform-marketplaces. While this is a secondary purpose, it is important given the oft-mischaracterization of Uber drivers as part of the “sharing economy” and other misnomers. I proceed in three steps. First, I highlight that the absence of “role-mutualization” and “unique recurrent transactions” between Uber drivers and riders. Second, I focus on the power relation between Uber’s management and its drivers, which can *generally* be characterized as hierarchically structured, though drivers also possess important sources of power. This is the most critical relationship to elucidate.

### ***Rider-Driver Relations***

Briefly, it is important to define drivers' relationship with riders, given that it not only shapes driver-management relations but it also helps highlight how Uber is distinct from some other types of platform-marketplaces. Two aspects of this relationship are particularly distinct to Uber: the absence of both (1) role-mutualization and (2) recurrent transactions between unique sets of drivers-riders. First, role-mutualization refers to the degree to which the different participants of a platform-marketplace act as both buyers and sellers (e.g. Craigslist, Ebay). In the case of Uber, the sharp role-boundary between drivers<sup>82</sup> and riders is established *by design*—for example, there are two separate smartphone applications, “Uber Partners” and “Uber,” for drivers and riders respectively—and this boundary is reinforced by the practicality that having a car to use as an Uber driver generally obviates the need to pay others for transportation services. Second, Uber drivers and riders rarely transact multiple times, primarily due to the particular nature of the on-demand service, i.e. riders prefer *immediacy* which can be serviced only through (impersonal) crowd-sourcing mechanisms. This contrasts with platform-marketplaces for which a premium is placed on quality assurance. For example, Wyzant.com, a marketplace for tutoring, commonly sparks long-term relationships between high school students and tutors given the importance of “personalization” in the high-school tutoring industry<sup>83</sup>.

The non-mutuality and non-recurrent transactions that characterize Uber are important because they establish role-differentiation between workers and consumers that descriptors such as the “peer” or “trust” economy belie. “Peer economy” poorly describes Uber’s non-mutuality structure. “Trust economy” can be understood in many ways, yet each of these understandings presents as a poor descriptor of Uber. If “trust economy” suggests an exchange structure premised on rising generalized

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<sup>82</sup> It is also mostly absent in other digital marketplace platforms such as Taskrabbit and Instacart.

<sup>83</sup> This is not the case across all consumer segments in the tutoring industry. Quickhelp, which services college students that value a speedy service over personalized tutoring, exhibits a low level of recurrent transactions between tutors and students.

trust levels, then this is clearly a misguided explanation for Uber's emergence, as there is little evidence of rising generalized trust levels. If "trust economy" refers to the importance of reputation systems implemented by Uber that facilitate trust between workers (e.g. background checks) and consumers (e.g. average ratings), then this is a relevant but relatively trivial attribution because reputation systems have been in use since at least the early 1990s. If "trust economy" refers to the cultivation of strong ties between drivers and workers, then it is a misnomer given Uber's non-recurrent transactions.

### ***Management-Driver Relations***

The relationship between Uber's management and its workers is defined by the following paradox: Uber seeks to *formally minimize* the degree of social-control it exercises over drivers while *informally maximizing* control over drivers' productivity (e.g. riders' satisfaction with interaction). As in most organizations, Uber's management seeks to influence the behaviors of its workers in various ways, generally in the direction of increasing their productivity (e.g. directing them to work in areas where there is a shortage of drivers). Yet, given that Uber drivers are legally-classified as independent contractors rather than employees, Uber is unable to make use of the ordinary channels of control and work-standardization available to most employers (e.g. direct requests, training programs, employee evaluations). While Uber is able to entice workers to behave in particular ways (e.g. to drive at particular hours) by raising their pay upward (i.e. increasing gross fares or reducing Uber's fee or transaction cut), it is likely reluctant to do so given its already negative profit margin. Further, while "surge pricing" (i.e. price increases on consumers) effectively attracts drivers to work longer hours and in areas with driver shortages, it is generally disfavored by riders, whose loyalty is critical in this market, as described above. Nonetheless, Uber has a combination of direct and indirect tools to exact influence over its drivers. In this section I briefly overview four of these tools, which elucidate the hierarchical power dynamic<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> In a recently circulated paper-draft, Calo and Rosenblat (2017) have argued the regulatory response to the asymmetries of information and power between Uber and its drivers has been inadequate.

between Uber and its drivers. I conclude by qualifying the nature of this relationship by pointing to the bi-directionality of power and elements of interest-alignment.

Among the various ways in which Uber informally influences its drivers' behaviors, I will describe four: (1) reputation system; (2) norm construction; (3) behavioral nudges; and (4) financing program. First, among Uber's most direct forms of influence over its drivers is its reputation system (i.e. driver ratings), which it uses to ensure that its drivers are creating positive experiences for riders on their trips, which generates rider loyalty and hence revenue. Below certain threshold ratings, Uber drivers are often "deactivated" from the service. These thresholds vary across markets (e.g. 3.5-4.5 stars out of 5), largely dependent on the particular needs of different markets (e.g. balance of drivers versus workers). In different markets, Uber has also provided drivers with weekly performance evaluations and has publicly displayed the ratings of top-rated drivers (see UberNewsroom 2015), likely to incentivize drivers to earn higher ratings (more on this below). Second, Uber communicates content to its drivers—via in-application pop-up messages, phone push-notifications, and emails<sup>85</sup> (drivers are inundated with these)—that effectively construct norms about what they "ought or ought not do" (i.e. injunctive norms) and "what is normal" behavior (observational norms) (see Patterson 2014: 13). An example of the former is various *suggestions*<sup>86</sup> about what they could do if they desire to improve their customer rating; an example of the latter is *informational* pop-ups describing various problems that are being reported in the city (e.g. untidy cars). Third, Uber uses its massive data on users, affective messaging<sup>87</sup>, and various

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<sup>85</sup> Drivers often feel inundated with such communications.

<sup>86</sup> These are suggestions because Uber cannot explicitly direct drivers' behaviors in specific ways given that their drivers are contractors rather than employees.

<sup>87</sup> Affecting messaging is widely used among on-demand platform marketplaces. For example, Lyft describes its drivers as embodying the "entrepreneurial spirit"; Fiverr describes its workers as beating "the trust-fund kids" (Tolentino 2017).

psychological tools (e.g. visual stimuli) to nudge its drivers in order to reduce churn rates<sup>88</sup>, get drivers to work more, rather than fewer, hours, and direct drivers to areas where there are shortages (i.e. ride-requests exceed driver capacity). Scheiber (2017) describes the application of these tools as based on social-behavioral behavioral principles involving loss-aversion, income targeting, dynamics of self-control, etc. Many of these communications are variably used (e.g. experiment-and-disband); they are often deployed in the first weeks of a driver's work with Uber, likely because their effect on channeling behavior is greatest then. Scheiber (2017) also reports these tools are likely to become increasingly personalized<sup>89</sup> (e.g. see Uber Newsroom 2016). The simplest examples are pop-up visuals indicating to drivers where demand is highest (i.e. where there are shortages), including a button that drivers can tap to indicate that they would like to be navigated to such areas<sup>90</sup>. More directly controlling is an algorithm called "forward dispatch" which dispatches a ride to drivers before their current trip ends; yet, while this feature is active by default, it can be switched off by drivers<sup>91</sup>. Uber also uses "progress messages" and visuals (e.g. progress gauge-needles) to encourage drivers to work longer hours by indicating to them that that they are close to meeting certain "targets" (e.g. often arbitrary income targets), and rewards

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<sup>88</sup> Isaac (2017b) reports that Uber's "driver satisfaction rating" has decreased since February 2016. He adds that about a quarter of Uber's drivers churn every three months. Isaac also reports that the New York Times received an "internal slide deck on driver income levels" and that "Uber considered Lyft and McDonald's its main competition for attracting new drivers."

<sup>89</sup> For example, he notes that Uber has experimented with a feature that shows drivers how safely they are driving (e.g. smooth brakes, smooth accelerations; see Uber Newsroom 2016). These data can be used to encourage workers who are driving less safely to take breaks.

<sup>90</sup> Scheiber (2017) notes this graphic-button is the same one used to indicate that prices are "surging," even though in this cases the button merely directs drivers to areas of higher *quantity* of demand, not price.

<sup>91</sup> Yet, even when Uber allows drivers an option to switch, it tends to visually highlight in some way buttons that it encourages its users to select (e.g. "keep driving" versus "go offline"; see Scheiber 2017). Scheiber also reports that Uber may be working on a feature which allows drivers to indicate that they need to be in particular locations at certain times, subsequently directing drivers to rides in that area around that designated time.

drivers with “achievement badges” for meeting these goals (e.g. customer service)<sup>92</sup>. Given that 86 percent of Uber’s drivers are male (Hall and Krueger 2015), and supposedly under the assumption that male drivers’ attentions are more likely to be captured by females than males, Uber’s management typically signs messages with female names. (See Scheiber 2017 for details on these behavioral methods). Fourth, as part of an intense (and well-financed) effort to expand its driver-network starting around late 2013, particularly directed at drivers who could not join Uber because they lacked a vehicle or the ability to finance one, Uber developed financing programs (called “Vehicle Solutions”) to attract potential drivers mainly through leasing programs, but also by offering options to rent (by hour, week, or weekend) and buy discounted cars. These programs are built on partnerships with auto-manufacturers (e.g. Toyota, GM, Ford; see Buhr 2016), auto-lenders (e.g. Exeter Finance, owned by private equity group Blackstone; see Lashinsky 2014), and dealerships (Lawler 2013).<sup>93</sup> Payments for these various financial services are typically made through deductions from drivers’ weekly earnings. According to Stone (2017: 250), these and other programs were designed to “not only by [put] more cars on the road but [ensure] that drivers devoted their energies to Uber rather than to rival sharing or delivery services.” That is, once workers signed up for such programs, they became incentivized to drive exclusively for Uber *and* to put in the greater hours that Uber desires to meet its growing demand.

In these ways, Uber is socially organized to *hierarchically intermediate* between drivers and riders with general implications for management-worker relations. Unlike more horizontally<sup>94</sup> structured

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<sup>92</sup> Lyft has experimented with messages that show drivers how much money they are losing by working on certain lower-demand days compared to working on higher-demand days like weekend nights (Scheiber 2017).

<sup>93</sup> They also implemented insurance plans for drivers to extend their coverage. Chapter three describes other programs that Uber developed in this direction in subsequent years, including “Xchange Leasing” (July 2015), which established a \$1bn credit facility organized by Goldman Sachs (Newcomer and Zaleski 2016), Advance Pay (April 2016), which offered \$1,000 interest-free loans to new drivers (Dellinger 2016), etc.

<sup>94</sup> These platform-marketplaces impose only minimal controls and monitoring mechanisms on users. Norms are designed and enforced directly by users within a communal structure that is relatively unconstrained by active management.

platform-marketplaces like Craigslist or Kijiji, Uber not only facilitates transactions but actively defines their protocols through price setting, a fee structure for drivers, reputation systems, rule enforcement, and myriad other control mechanisms created and adjusted at Uber's discretion.<sup>95</sup> These dynamics are incongruent with the connotations of descriptors like the "sharing" or "collaborative"<sup>96</sup> economy, which suggest a social-organization that is fundamentally cooperative. Alternative descriptors are better but also inadequate. The innocuous "access"<sup>97</sup> economy omits fallacious references to "sharing"; however, it implies that once the platform-marketplace facilitates buyer-seller access to the service, that drivers and riders are then "free" define the relationship, missing the ways in which this "post-access" dynamic is actively managed and controlled by Uber (e.g. ratings, fees, cancellations). Finally, the "gig economy" descriptor is too restrictive; while many drivers use Uber for brief stints or for part-time work, 38 percent of them depend on Uber as their primary source of work.

Yet, this hierarchical dynamic between Uber's management and drivers should be qualified with respect to the (1) bi-directionality of power and (2) elements of interest-alignment. First, drivers—who are collectively interested in improved wage structures, protections against arbitrary "deactivation," among other interests—derive power from multiple sources, including their direct physical access to riders generally outside the purview of management, the ability to work for competitors (e.g. Lyft, Gett, Sidecar, Fasten) mostly<sup>98</sup> without Uber's knowledge (but see Efrati 2017), public sympathy, and threat of

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<sup>95</sup> Critically, this distinction between horizontal versus hierarchical intermediaries is not about whether the intermediary captures value or makes a profit. For example, Craigslist generates revenue within a passive, horizontal digital marketplace.

<sup>96</sup> While "crowdsourced" models (e.g. Kickstarter, Indiegogo) also often take transaction cuts, they have a more salient democratic or moralistic connotation than does Uber's form of "crowdsourcing."

<sup>97</sup> This highlights the expanded access buyers and sellers have to one another, made possible by technology-driven reduced transaction costs.

<sup>98</sup> Yet, as Efrati (2017) has recently reported, Uber has a program called "Hell" which has build ways to recognize drivers who are using both Lyft and Uber.



collectively organizing<sup>99</sup> (e.g. see chapter three on the NYC Independent Drivers Guild, unionization efforts in Seattle, etc.). Nonetheless, the power Uber’s management wields is exercised with both greater coordination and resources. By generally succeeding in having drivers classified as “independent contractors,” Uber has generally precluded drivers from unionization and its privileges (e.g. collective bargaining over wages). Second, while Uber’s management and drivers are fundamentally in conflict over particular interests (e.g. Uber’s fee, typically 20-30% of fares), it is also important to not over-impose a conflict dynamic on the relation, as they are aligned on many interests as well. For example, management and drivers mutually benefit from greater demand from riders—which Uber has, of course, successfully furnished, with roughly 38 percent of Uber drivers solely deriving labor income from driving for Uber (Hall and Krueger 2015)—as well as from the “flexible” work arrangement (i.e. drivers control their hours, management attracts more drivers). Further, while Uber’s management generally encourages drivers to work for longer durations through various means described below, there is little evidence that drivers are particularly aggrieved by this.

### **The Social Characteristics of Uber Drivers: Work-Situation Homogeneity and Cultural Heterogeneity**

While Uber drivers occupy similar intra-organizational positions in relation to Uber’s management and riders, as a group they exhibit a remarkable degree of heterogeneity, in terms of their backgrounds (e.g. education, labor market histories) and current engagement with Uber (e.g. number of hours worked). Understanding this heterogeneity in terms of its key dimensions (e.g. education) and its causes (i.e. social-selection and ecological-causal processes) is critical to addressing various empirical questions tied to why workers in similar intra-organizational positions behave differently. Chapter four is particularly concerned with how drivers with *different* social characteristics (e.g. education, labor market histories)

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<sup>99</sup> As noted above, Seattle has been an exception, with the Seattle City Council having voted in favor of an ordinance that would allow Uber drivers (among other independent contractors, e.g. taxicab drivers, for-hire drivers, etc.) to unionize (December 2015), although this has been vigorously challenged since. Further, in New York City, Uber agreed to drivers forming the Independent Drivers Guild; but the rights it affords fall far below of those that a union would afford (see above; Scheiber and Isaac 2016).

cope differently with on-demand work. Chapter five is also, but to a lesser extent, concerned with this heterogeneity; it focuses more on identifying different *kinds* of creative action, but notes how different kinds of creative practices are oriented to different purposes, largely defined by drivers' particular social characteristics.

I proceed in three steps. First, I provide a brief overview of the social characteristics of Uber drivers, primarily on the basis of Hall's and Krueger's (2015) descriptive study of Uber drivers, which was based on privileged survey and administrative data, in partnership with Uber. Second, I account for this heterogeneity by describing four "functional" characteristics of driving with Uber (i.e. stable/predictable work-income, autonomy, low procedural skills required, low switching and setup costs) which selects for workers with varied characteristics (e.g. formal-educational skill levels). More briefly, I describe how broader trends in work-degradation, particularly in related industries (e.g. rentier practices of taxicab medallion-owners), also helps explain the characteristics of Uber's workforce. Third, I conclude the section by arguing that focusing on variation in cultural knowledge is particularly theoretically promising, as is shown in chapters four (especially) and five. Chapter two's pragmatist action framework delves deeper into how to leverage this *work-situation homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity*.

### ***Social Heterogeneity among On-Demand Workers***

The most representative data on the characteristics of Uber drivers is based on a survey conducted by the Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) (2015) in December 2014, as well as administrative records provided by Uber to Hall and Krueger (2015); to allow for cross-group comparisons, Hall and Krueger (2015) supplement the BSG survey and Uber's administrative data with American Community Survey (2012-2013) data on taxi and chauffeur drivers and the US working-age population, focusing on Uber's

20<sup>100</sup> largest city-markets which 85 percent of all Uber drivers at the time. It is important to emphasize that both studies were commissioned by Uber. I will summarize these data briefly in this section.

Table 1 is adapted from Hall's and Krueger's (2015) report; it summarizes key social-demographic differences between Uber drivers, taxi drivers and chauffeurs, and all workers, and also includes Uber-specific data on weekly hours worked and earnings. Relative to taxi drivers and chauffeurs, the three most distinctive characteristics of Uber drivers center on them being (1) more highly formally-educated, (2) younger, and (3) driving on a more part-time or flexible basis. Regarding education, 76.9 percent of Uber drivers have at least some college experience, compared to 43.7 percent of taxi drivers and chauffeurs, and 53.5 percent of all workers. Regarding age, 49.2 percent of Uber drivers are under age 39, compared to 28.4 percent of taxi drivers and chauffeurs, and 44.3 percent of all workers. Regarding weekly hours worked, 81 percent of Uber drivers work on the Uber platform for 34 or fewer hours per week, compared to 19 percent for taxi drivers and chauffeurs. Two other findings relating to the flexible use of Uber (but are not included in Table 1) are: (1) 65 percent of drivers, in a given week, drive more or less than 25 percent of the hours they drove in the prior week; and (2) 38 percent of drivers work exclusively with Uber, whereas 61 percent work for Uber while also having a different job, either full-time (31 percent) or part-time (30 percent). Finally, Uber drivers in Uber's 20 largest markets earn an average of \$19.19 per hour<sup>101</sup> (\$20.29 per hour in Boston); this excludes gasoline, maintenance, car insurance, depreciation, and other expenses. Relative to taxi drivers and chauffeurs, Uber drivers are also more likely to be female (13.8 versus 8 percent) and white (40.3 versus 26.2 percent). Chapters four

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<sup>100</sup> The Benenson Strategy Group (2015) based its study on an online survey conducted in December 2014 among drivers or hourly earnings." in Uber's 20 largest markets: Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, New Jersey, New York City, Orange County, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. They applied weights to make their sample representative of drivers across different products (i.e. UberX, UberBlack). 601 Uber drivers completed the survey. The response rate was 11 percent, yet Hall and Krueger (2015: 7) argue that "based on a comparison of aggregated administrative data [provided by Uber], the (weighted) respondents do not appear to be very different from the full set of driver-partners in terms of their average work hours

<sup>101</sup> Hall and Krueger (2015) report that the median trips completed per hour in Uber's 20 largest cities was 1.26; in Boston, it was 1.67.

and five, among other findings, reveal considerable variation in planning among drivers (e.g. how low they plan to work with Uber).

The most striking takeaway from these data (for my purposes) is that Uber attracts a workforce that is highly diverse in formal-educational attainment; it has a greater proportion of workers at both the low and high ends of the education distribution than taxicab and limousine drivers, and a comparable education distribution to that of all workers (proportionately greater number of only-college graduates, disproportionately fewer post-graduates). What social processes underlie this education distribution? I turn to this question next, followed by drawing out the theoretical significance that such a diverse population is embedded in such a similar work-situation.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Uber's Drivers, Taxi Drivers & Chauffeurs, and All Workers (Adapted from Hall and Krueger 2015)**

Age	Uber Drivers (BSG Survey)	Taxi Drivers and Chauffeurs (ACS)	All Workers (ACS)
18-29	19.1%	8.5%	21.8%
30-39	30.1%	19.9%	22.5%
40-49	26.3%	27.2%	23.4%
50-64	21.8%	36.6%	26.9%
65+	2.7%	7.7%	4.6%
<b>Education</b>			
Less than HS	3.0%	16.3%	9.3%
High School	9.2%	36.2%	21.3%
Some College / Associate's	40.0%	28.8%	28.4%
College Degree	36.9%	14.9%	25.1%
Postgraduate Degree	10.8%	3.9%	16.0%
<b>Race</b>			
White (Non-Hispanic)	40.3%	26.2%	55.8%
Black (Non-Hispanic)	19.5%	31.6%	15.2%
Asian (Non-Hispanic)	16.5%	18.0%	7.6%
Other (Non-Hispanic)	5.9%	2.0%	1.9%
Hispanic	17.7%	22.2%	19.5%
<b>Female</b>	13.8%	8.0%	47.4%
<b>Hours Worked per Week (UberX)</b>			
1-15	51%	4%	
16-34	30%	15%	
35-49	12%	46%	
50+	7%	35%	
<b>Earnings per Hour (excludes expenses)</b>			
Boston	\$20.29		
Uber's 20 largest US city-markets	\$19.19		
<b>Number of Observations</b>	601	2080	648494

American Community Survey data (2012, 2013) are for the same 20 Uber markets covered in the BSG Survey

### **Why Uber Attracts both Low and High Skilled Workers**

In this section, I use a general analytic framework—organized around “pull” and “push” factors—to describe the social processes that underlie the heterogeneity of Uber drivers, particularly skill

heterogeneity, measured by formal-educational attainment. The pull factors are tied to the “functional” characteristics of driving for Uber—that is, aspects of the work that meet workers’ socially-constructed preferences (e.g. wage-predictability, autonomy). The push factors are tied to the functional characteristics of available *alternatives* (e.g. “mainstream” jobs) to driving for Uber (e.g. work-conditions in taxicab industry). I examine “push” factors in detail in chapter three in which I argue that Uber’s “ecology” was “poised” (Padgett and Powell 2012) to its emergence *partly* because of long-term degradation of various types of work (e.g. rentier practices in the taxicab industry, employment instability; Kalleberg 2011; Farber 2008). For this reason, my focus in this section is on the pull factors, providing only brief remarks on push factors.

#### **Social-Selection Processes (Pull Factors):**

I focus on four functional characteristics of on-demand work that could potentially attract (pull) workers of varied educational levels into driving for Uber: (1) stability of full-time work-income (i.e. non-erratic availability of work hours), (2) autonomy (i.e. considerable control over hours worked, feeling that one has no employer, supervisor, or “boss”), (3) low level of required procedural skills, and (4) low “switching and setup” costs (i.e. how timely or financially expensive it is to start doing the work).

First, driving with Uber provides stable (predictable) work-income in two ways: (1) full-time work (>40 hours/week) is available to drivers, commonly at rates at least as good as rates in the taxicab industry; and (2) supplemental income, through driving additional hours, is also generally available and stable, i.e. non-diminishing income-returns to additional labor, or wage-“guarantee-ability” (I capture both aspects with the term “wage-predictability”). With respect to the first point (full-time hourly wage rates), while Uber’s fees (i.e. how much it charges drivers) and prices (i.e. how much riders pay) fluctuate considerably, in major cities (e.g. Boston) the availability of work is quite stable. In this sense,

Uber differs from “precarious” or “contingent<sup>102</sup>” forms of nonstandard work—most typically temporary work (i.e. agencies, direct-hire), contract company work, on-call work, and day labor—for which the availability of work-hours tends to be erratic. Moreover, based on Hall’s and Krueger’s Uber-provided administrative data on gross earnings, \$20.29 per hour (Boston) seems at least as high as earnings from taxicab and limousine driving. The Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Employment Statistics, which tracks wages of taxicab and limousine drivers who are *employees* (rather than independent contractors), estimates mean wages of employee-drivers in Boston at \$13.67 per hour as of May 2016 (BLS 2016); this wage-rate is likely net of drivers’ gasoline, insurance, and other expenses. This comparison is examined in more detail chapter three. With respect to the second point on the predictability/”guarantee-ability” of additional income, marginal wages from an additional hour of work are quite similar irrespective of how many hours a driver has worked; that is, the difference-in-income between driving 10 or 11 hours in a week versus 40 or 41 hours is roughly similar (Hall and Krueger 2015). The key overall point is that relative to other forms of nonstandard work, wages derived from driving with Uber are relatively predictable/”guarantee-able”; further, wage-rates are not substantially below (if at all) those of taxicab drivers *and* wage-rate returns do not diminish across additional hours worked. As described below, these wage dynamics are critical to why Uber attracts drivers with varied social backgrounds, which as chapter four shows, is critical to why Uber drivers’ “habits” vary substantially and predispose them to evaluating their experience in the on-demand economy so differently. Chapter five shows how this wage-dynamic enables Uber drivers to creatively reorganize their lives around Uber (e.g. entrepreneurship, strengthening relationships with children with targeted gift-giving, starting a family).

Second, on-demand work provides workers with a considerable degree of *autonomy*, which for Uber drivers, essentially has two implications: (1) control over work-hours and (2) the feeling of “being

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<sup>102</sup> This group represents 7.9% of employed workers, up from 7.1% in 2006 (US General Accounting Office 2015). The growth has been mainly in on-call workers, as well as temporary agency workers (US General Accounting Office 2015).

one's own boss" or subject to only indirect supervision (e.g. through ratings). Of course, Uber has direct influence over its drivers and many of the "suggestions" it gives its driver-contractors are subtly coercive; nonetheless Uber drivers are not constrained in many of the ways workers in traditional jobs are (e.g. controlled hours). Indeed, in the BSG (2015), 87 percent of drivers cited "being [their] own boss" as a major reason for working with Uber. Importantly, Uber's hourly earning structure is what makes this autonomy *flexible*<sup>103</sup>. Hall and Krueger (2015) find that earnings per hour do not increase considerably as a function of number of hours worked in a given week; that is, across Uber's twenty largest city-markets, drivers who worked 1-15 hours per week earned \$16.89 per hour whereas drivers who worked 50 or more hours per week earned only \$0.24 more per hour (\$17.13 per hour). This reduces the disincentive (1) to work fewer, rather than more, hours, and (2) to fluctuate one's work-hours week-to-week, *if the need (or preference) arises*. Indeed, as noted above, a substantial portion of drivers fluctuate hours across weeks, and 62 per cent of Uber drivers have a second job (BSG 2015); this suggests that drivers do often use Uber to pursue other activities, including working other jobs simultaneously, exploring other opportunities<sup>104</sup>, recreation, etc. A substantial segment of drivers also use other on-demand platforms like Lyft, Fodler, Doordash, Postmates, and others. Chapters four and five show that this sense of autonomy is highly valued by most drivers and is integral to their experiences and how they organize their lives. For example, chapter four shows how it can contribute to "hysteresis" (Bourdieu 2000) and "unspecified attainability" (Winship 2015); chapter five shows how autonomy is central to how more committed Uber drivers strive to realize personal projects (e.g.

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<sup>103</sup> That is, I am defining "autonomy" and "flexibility" differently here. Flexibility is manifestation of autonomy that emerges under particular circumstances. For example, if Uber drivers earned \$10 per hour for each of their first ten hours of driving in a week, but \$20 per hour for the next ten hours, and \$30 per hour for any hour beyond the first twenty hours, then in a particular sense, the work is highly autonomous but *in effect* it will not be used very flexibly. That is, the distribution of work hours per worker per week will be concentrated above twenty hours.

<sup>104</sup> This flexibility is likely especially attractive to those at opposite ends of the age distribution; that is, young use Uber as a bridge for other opportunities, older drivers use it to supplement income or for recreation. As for longevity with Uber, Hall and Krueger (2015) report that after 6 months into driving, there is a 30 percent drop-off rate; and after 12 months of driving, there is a 50 percent drop-off.

reducing negative behaviors like cigarette-smoking, entrepreneurship, parental plan coordination) through Uber, or what I describe as “projective creativity” (see chapter two and five).

Third, the procedural skill requirements for driving for Uber are relatively low, partly due to the availability of Global Position System (GPS) software (e.g. Waze, Google Maps), which obviates the need to have local knowledge of how to navigate city-roads, effectively breaking down an once-important barrier to providing service in the transportation-service market. Fourth, starting off as an Uber driver is relatively easy as Uber’s growth model is centered on streamlining the worker recruitment process; each step of the application can be completed in the span of a few days, i.e. background screens, review of driving documentation (i.e. U.S. driver’s license, vehicle registration and insurance), various financing programs for vehicles (e.g. leasing, renting, buying), etc.<sup>105</sup> Both these factors are critical to why Uber attracts a diverse workforce with varied habits (see below and chapter four).

These considerations suggest that relative to other forms of nonstandard work, on-demand work with Uber (1) *minimally constrains* and (2) *maximally enables* the process of joining Uber, with the implication that Uber *distinctly attracts workers who have had diverse social experiences* (a point that is critical to my theoretical framing). Regarding the *minimal constraints*, the low procedural skills needed for Uber-driving does not preclude workers at the lower end of the skill distribution from joining Uber. This contrasts driving with Uber from other nonstandard work, particularly certain forms of independent contracting, which often require specialized skill-sets (e.g. tutoring with Wyzant or Quickhelp, graphic design with Upwork). An Uber driver with less than a high school degree can perform the job roughly as competently as a college-graduate Uber driver<sup>106</sup>. Relatedly, the low switching/setup costs to joining

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<sup>105</sup> It is also worth noting that on-demand work may have become more attractive because of the Affordable Care Act, as workers have become less dependent on traditional employment for health insurance.

<sup>106</sup> At the very least, the performance gap is relatively smaller for driving than it would be for a high-skilled service area like tutoring.



Uber does not preclude workers who are not positioned to premeditate a switch to Uber, whether due to substantial financial- or time-constraints or psychological aversion to non-traditional work. Thus, these *minimal constraints* make Uber accessible to both workers with low skills and workers who did not anticipate working for Uber<sup>107</sup> (as well as, of course, workers with higher skills and those who consider working for Uber as naturally befitting their labor market histories). Regarding the *enabling conditions* for joining Uber, the relative wage-predictability and autonomy that Uber affords drivers appeals to both low- and higher-skilled workers. This is (often) despite an arguably routinized aspect to on-demand work. Thus, Uber has attracted a heterogeneous workforce, most strikingly in terms of formal-educational background.

#### **Ecological-Causal Processes (Push Factors):**

Regarding “push” factors (examined in more detail in chapter three), it is important to distinguish between job-quality degradation (Kalleberg 2011; Stone and Arthurs 2013) and the lack of available jobs (i.e. unemployment); the BSG data help elucidate how each these may have contributed to pushing workers into the on-demand economy. Roughly two-thirds of Uber drivers report having had full-time jobs prior to joining Uber; only 8 percent were unemployed prior to joining Uber. For drivers with at least college degrees (47.7%), it is likely that alternative work conditions have simply become relatively less attractive to them compared to driving for Uber (see Kalleberg 2011). This is generally consistent with my interview-based findings described in chapters four and five. As for less formally-educated workers, it is likely that unemployment, particularly post-Great Recession, effectively pushed them into the rapidly growing on-demand economy. For these workers, job quality deterioration in adjacent service areas like the taxicab industry is especially pertinent, given that 49 percent of Uber drivers had worked in transportation services at some point in their lives prior to joining Uber (BSG 2015). As

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<sup>107</sup> For example, a substantial portion of older Americans are driving for Uber to supplement their retirement income (see Olson 2016).

discussed in chapter three, there has been a degradation of work conditions for drivers in the taxicab industry for the past few decades partly due to regulatory structures and the rentier practices of medallion-owners. Thus, ecological-causal processes likely attracted lower-skilled workers more than higher-skilled workers, but this is not clear and adjudicating this question is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

### ***Material-Cultural Interactions and Social Action***

The heterogeneity of Uber's drivers provides a unique opportunity—not yet seized in the literature<sup>108</sup> on nonstandard work—to understand social action at the intersection of material and cultural structures. Typically, work-structures in both formal and informal labor markets tend to attract workers with relatively similar formal-educational backgrounds (Hout 2012). For example, white-collar, blue-collar, and temporary workers typically select for high-skilled, low-skilled and marginalized work, respectively. This social-selection process substantially reduces within-group variation among workers in similar occupations, including variation in those workers' beliefs, procedural skills, values, personal norms, and other forms of cultural knowledge; chapter two defines this cultural knowledge more precisely based on Patterson's (2014) concept of "cultural configurations." Yet, Uber drivers are diverse not only in education but in age, race and ethnicity, work histories, and other characteristics. Insofar as cultural knowledge is acquired through social interactions across a variety of social structures (or ecologies; e.g. educational systems, formal and informal jobs, families), then it follows that Uber drivers exhibit a

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<sup>108</sup> As has been discussed, much of the literature to date focuses on estimating the size and compositional characteristics of the on-demand worker population (Hall and Krueger 2015; Katz and Krueger 2016; Intuit 2016) and projecting its growth trajectory (Farrell and Greig 2016b; Hathaway and Muro 2016). There is also more tangential work that identifies micro-situational impediments to "sharing" goods and services (Schor et al. 2016) and developing typologies of "mobile work" (Cohen 2010; Aguilera 2008; Brodt and Verburg 2007). Schor's "Connected Consumption and Connected Economy" project has engaged some interesting debates about the sharing economy, but much of it fails to rigorously distinguish between the different strata of phenomena associated with digital platforms. For example, work on the relationship between capitalist instability and ideological shifts in consumption, and their relation to new modes of service delivery (Dubois et al. 2014) are somewhat overstated given the evidence. Nonetheless, these projects are heightening attention around new forms of consumption and raising critical normative questions about digital platforms, and that is indeed quite useful.

considerable degree of cultural heterogeneity. I expect that this cultural heterogeneity would generate differences in social action, including how workers cope with social-situational displacement into on-demand work (chapter four) and their creative practices (chapter five). Thus, Uber drivers' cultural heterogeneity and work-structure "homogeneity"—that is, in terms of performing similar work and in similar relational positions with respect to Uber's management and riders—can be leveraged with the proper theoretical tools to gain insights into the matrix of material and cultural interactions that overlay workers' social positions within the on-demand economy. These tools will be developed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Two – A Pragmatist Framework for Understanding Nonstandard Work Relations**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework—based largely on sociological pragmatism—that I will use throughout this dissertation. However, there is little benefit to engaging with pragmatism unless doing so provides more useful insights about the social phenomena being studied than alternative theoretical perspectives; similarly, aiming to refine contemporary pragmatist frameworks, as I do in this chapter, is only worthwhile if doing so strengthens their purchase over my given empirical problems.<sup>109</sup> As such, it is important to keep my particular empirical questions in close backdrop: chapter three makes inferences about the processes underlying social-emergence, particularly the emergence of Uber in the U.S.; and chapters four and five make inferences about the processes underlying social action, particularly the causal relationship between Uber drivers' habits and how they cope with on-demand work (chapter four) and descriptions of the different kinds of creative actions Uber drivers exhibit (chapter five).

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<sup>109</sup> This orienting principle can be tied to pragmatism's epistemological instrumentalism, which views theories as tools (instruments) constructed for problem-solving rather than to strictly "correspond" some underlying quality of reality.

That established, I present this chapter's theoretical argument at a considerable degree of abstraction, largely because (1) the relevant theoretical perspectives have been oriented quite generally to nonstandard work rather than with respect to the particular social-organization of on-demand work (see chapter one), and thus some level of analytic generality is necessary; and (2) the social processes I make inferences about (i.e. social-emergence, social action) are disparate enough that they merit more focused theoretical attention than can be provided in a single chapter. Thus, with respect to this second point, it is in the empirical chapters that the proposed pragmatist framework is developed more concretely; indeed, this practice of theory-developed-through-application is itself a classic-pragmatist injunction (Peirce 1878). In chapter three, I develop a pragmatist synthesis—based on Padgett's and Powell's (2014) concept of poisedness and various concepts taken from the social movement literature, particularly the political process model (McAdam 1981; McAdam et al. 2001, Tilly and Tarrow 2006)—to understand the emergence of Uber, and how, just as Uber's "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 1985, 1996) had a transformative effect on its ecology, Uber's repertoire was also transformed through its social interactions. While pragmatism is often criticized by critical realists and analytical sociologists for offering little insight into social-emergence, chapter three shows that the pragmatist conception of social action as creative and in *continuous, mutually constructive social interactions* is central the emergence of the on-demand economy. Chapter four and five engage in more familiar pragmatist territory tied to individual-level social action, where I develop pragmatist conceptions of "habit" (focus of chapter four) and "creativity" (focus of chapter five), though I do so using alternative theoretical terms (e.g. cultural configurations, responsive versus projective creativity) that will be touched upon later in this chapter. Nonetheless, despite this chapter's somewhat abstract tone, in order to provide greater lucidity, I do highlight direct theoretic-empiric connections wherever appropriate.

This chapter is organized into two sections: (1) an overview of ("non-pragmatist") theoretical perspectives that have been applied to understanding nonstandard work relations, and (2) an

engagement with sociological pragmatism, which first overviews and critiques contemporary pragmatism and then proposes theoretical refinements to it. In the first section, I examine three perspectives on nonstandard work, mainly based on Marxian macro-structuralist historicism (e.g. Standing 2011), the “Cornell School” (e.g. Hyman 2016) and Beck’s (1992; 2000) “individualization” thesis. The second section is divided into three parts. In the first part, I show that while contemporary pragmatism provides useful explanatory insights into social action involving habit, creativity, and meaning-making, it has fallen short of fulfilling pragmatism’s theoretic potential in four ways involving: (1) ontological assumptions that are excessively restrictive and epistemological assumptions that are inconsistent with pragmatist instrumentalism; (2) conceptualizing “habit” and “creativity” vaguely; (3) narrowly understanding culture in exclusively semiotic terms; and (4) conflating power with domination. In the second part, I re-conceptualize and synthesize various pragmatist analytic categories (e.g. habit, creativity, “context,” problem-situations). To offer some examples, I (1) subsume the concept of “habit” within a typology of embodied cultural knowledge (Patterson 2014), (2) understand “creativity” as grounded in cultural knowledge rather than as representing an alternate end of a habit-creativity continuum (see Gross 2009, 2010), and (3) define the “context” of human problem-solving on the basis of a stylized conception of Abbott’s (2016) “ecological” understanding of social structure, highlighting four key dimensions and processes (i.e. overlapping structures, material resources, cultural processes, networks of actors). In the third part, I overview (briefly) the starkest differences between the proposed pragmatist framework and alternative theoretical perspectives, as well as the substantive theories on nonstandard work examined in the first part of this chapter.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING NONSTANDARD WORK RELATIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO PRAGMATISM**

While theorizing about on-demand work has been scant (see chapter one<sup>110</sup>), several frameworks have been applied to understanding the broader category of nonstandard work and the erosion of standard employment relations since the 1970s in the United States and other post-industrial economies. In this section, I overview and critique three of these perspectives, arguing that despite some of the useful insights they provide, they have severe shortcomings given my purposes. Importantly, while there are other theoretical perspectives that could be considered “alternatives” to the pragmatist framework with which I engage in the second part of this chapter, the three lines of theory examined in this section have explicitly been deployed to understanding nonstandard work relations. For example, I do not consider the work of post-structuralists, who have offered no significant contributions to understanding changing employment relations to my knowledge, although much of my critique of Beck’s concept of “individualization” (discussed below) equally applies to post-structuralism.

I consider the following three theoretical perspectives on nonstandard work relations: (1) Marxian macro-structural historicist perspectives which view the growth of nonstandard work as an instantiation of the unfolding of capitalist processes that extract value or surplus from labor to the benefit of upper class interests, (2) meso-level empirical analysis focused on elucidating the exploitative dimensions of labor processes associated with nonstandard work, best represented by Cornell’s

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<sup>110</sup> Much of the literature to date on on-demand focuses on estimating the size and compositional characteristics of the on-demand worker population (Hall and Krueger 2015; Katz and Krueger 2016; Intuit 2016) and projecting its growth trajectory (Farrell and Greig 2016b; Hathaway and Muro 2016). There is also more tangential work that identifies micro-situational impediments to “sharing” goods and services (Schor et al. 2016) and developing typologies of “mobile work” (Cohen 2010; Aguilera 2008; Brodt and Verburg 2007). Schor’s “Connected Consumption and Connected Economy” project has engaged some interesting debates about the sharing economy, but much of it fails to rigorously distinguish between the different strata of phenomena associated with digital platforms. For example, work on the relationship between capitalist instability and ideological shifts in consumption, and their relation to new modes of service delivery (Dubois et al. 2014) are somewhat overstated given the evidence. Nonetheless, these projects are heightening attention around new forms of consumption and raising critical normative questions about digital platforms, and that is indeed quite useful.

Precarious Workforce Initiative; and (3) Beck's (1992; 2000) "reflexive modernity" perspective that emphasizes how individualization processes are increasingly defining nonstandard work. I briefly describe and critique each in turn.

### **Macro-structural Historicist<sup>111112</sup> Perspectives on Nonstandard Work as a Mechanism of Capitalist Reproduction**

The first framework is generally guided by a meta-narrative within which changing social relations—such as the growth of nonstandard work and weakening of "traditional" employment relations—reflect historical capitalist processes that tend to reproduce class-based structural inequalities. This meta-narrative assumes a certain teleological dynamism, evocative of Marxian labor process theory's (Edwards 1979; Thompson 1989) focus on the vigorous ways through which capitalist interests obtain consent from workers in order to maximally extract value from their labor power. Much of these arguments point to evidence of the erosion of worker protections associated with the "standard employment contract" (Stone and Arthurs 2013), neoliberal ideological myths about work (Weeks 2011), the institutionalization of surplus work time (Hermann 2014), and the stifling of worker freedoms (Spencer 2008<sup>113</sup>); yet, considerable energy has been spent on more universal proclamations that changing work relations reflect new stages of capitalist development (Thompson 2013; Boutang 2012; Scholz 2012)<sup>114</sup> or the rise of a frustrated, class-in-the-making "precariat" (Standing 2011) facing multiple dimensions of labor market insecurity.

This Marxian historicist perspective may be useful in drawing broad connections between global political-economic developments (e.g. the growth of a structurally dislocated pool of marginalized labor)

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<sup>111</sup> "Historicism" is somewhat of an unfortunate term, as it carries often contradictory meanings. I am using it to describe the same tendencies that Karl Popper famously critiqued in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957).

<sup>113</sup> This work tends to be steeped in normativity, as with Spencer (2008) who writes: "It is thanks to capitalism that people have no freedom over how they work and they have freedom only in their leisure time."

<sup>114</sup> Thompson (2013) describes a "disconnected capitalism," Boutang (2012) a "cognitive capitalism," and Scholz (2012) a capitalism organized around digital exploitation.

and the emergence of an on-demand economy (examined in chapter three) that is dependent on supply-side worker-networks; but it's specific claim that class-reproductive dynamics of capital accumulation and labor exploitation fundamentally inhere to nonstandard work is potentially more distracting than useful, for three main reasons. First, as Kalleberg (2012) has argued, proclamations about a rising "precariat" are dubious given the heterogeneity among nonstandard workers (e.g. education, age) and the varieties of nonstandard work, points highlighted above. Relatedly, several studies have shown that short-term, temporary work has spread to white-collar jobs (Chan 2013) like law (Brooks 2012). The historicist perspective above is blind to these nuances<sup>115</sup>. Second, as Doogan (2009) has argued, variations in economic instability across countries are much better explained by analysis of institutional arrangements and policy regimes than narrowly conceived, impersonal, class-based dynamics. This Marxian variant of historicism tends to view state action as wholly endogenous to class dynamics, which is rather naïve given the plethora of work within the historical-institutionalist tradition (Tilly 1984; Evans et al. 1985; Skocpol 1992). Third, its obvious teleological construction creates severe empirical biases. Nonetheless, this perspective sensitizes us to macro-historical processes that may be implicated in the emergence of on-demand work, but its tautological, deterministic strands leave little to be discovered. Yet, class-based perspectives need not be as historicist nor as tautological, as the next body of work shows.

### **The Cornell Industrial Labor and Relations Program on Precarious Work**

The second strand is also centered on elucidating class-based processes but within much more circumscribed empirical arguments. It is well-represented by Cornell's Work Institute program's explicit focus on identifying the subtle practices that underlie the "precarious economy" (Hyman 2016). For

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<sup>115</sup> Further, while much of the nationalist uprisings post-Great Recession and right-wing electoral victories are tied to economic polarization, it is intellectually lazy to presume these processes are tantamount to the growth of nonstandard work.



example, using data from audits conducted in New York by the Department of Labor, Donahue et al. (2007) found that 39,587 employers (among 400,732) misclassified workers, which substantially reduces the labor expenses these businesses incur.<sup>116</sup> Other work with a similar orientation has identified negative consequences of nonstandard work including short and long-term wages (Gebel 2010), familial problems (Begaili et al. 2015; Craig and Powell 2011; Glass and Noonan 2016; Wight and Bianchi 2008; Sanderson 2015; Strazdins et al. 2006), psychological adversity (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Joshi and Bogen 2007; Han and Miller 2010) like loss of “personal control” (Glavin 2013), decreased community involvement (Cornwell and Warburton 2014), and particular harms for sub-populations like disabled workers (Shuey and Jovic 2013).<sup>117</sup>

This body of work provides three main insights for understanding nonstandard work, but is also severely limited. It usefully (1) identifies subtle exploitative labor practices that convincingly constrain nonstandard workers’ capacities for creative power, (2) locates these practices fruitfully at the social-organizational level, quite consistent with Baron and Bielby’s (1980) prolific “new structuralism” program, and (3) empirically bolsters the dual labor market framework<sup>118</sup> which usefully (within limits)

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<sup>116</sup> Other work at Cornell includes: connecting the rise of the “precarious economy” to changing labor models (e.g. “costocracy”) and corporate structures (e.g. conglomerates) (Hyman 2016); policy innovations for improving informal work conditions (Kudva and Lourdes 2005), studies of particularly vulnerable workers like undocumented immigrants (Griffith 2011; Rosemary et al. 2014), etc.

<sup>117</sup> This literature is too broad to examine extensively here, but some other elucidating work focuses on subtle forms of exploitation in nonstandard work, as with Mears (2015) work on nightclub promoters generating value from women’s “bodily capital.” Pedulla (2016) shows that “nonstandard work” effects can be conditioned by gender, finding that men are penalized for part-time work more than women. Numerous studies have also documented the degradation of jobs across industries, such as manufacturing (Chen 2015), retail and residential construction (Doussard 2013). Another interesting study of hospital outsourcing in Canada by Zuberi (2013) argues that internal pressures to outsource, rather than create stable jobs for hospital staff, has contributed to an uptick in “hospital acquired infections” (HAI).

<sup>118</sup> Granted this literature poorly specifies whether this dualization is marked by wages, level of skills or cultural capital, or well-defined labor regulations. In the “dual labor market” framework (Doeringer and Piore 1971), labor markets tend to be segmented into a high-wage core (or primary) segment and a low-wage peripheral (or secondary) segment. The labor market core is characterized by stable, secure, and long-term employment relations whereas the periphery is characterized by instability. However, Farber (2008) has found a decline in employment tenure *across education levels*, and further, the income volatility literature shows that income volatility increased among skilled workers in the 1990s (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994), which complicates the dual labor market framework.

distinguishes between worker experiences in the “core” versus “periphery”<sup>119</sup> of labor markets. These insights provide analytic leverage over questions about creativity and the different strata of on-demand workers, both of which pertain to the empirical problems addressed in chapters four and five. The central limitation of this approach for understanding on-demand work is more tendentious than necessitous. The explicit agenda to identify human-constraining, inequality-generating practices often pre-selects for exploitative processes rather than inductively discovering them. The unintended consequence is that this program can de-sensitize researchers to the processes through which nonstandard (e.g. unstable) work situations can induce creativity, as Joas (2004) noted in his essay on the “age of contingency.”

### **“Individualized” Nonstandard Work in Reflexive Modernity**

Finally, a third perspective, developed by Ulrich Beck primarily in *The Risk Society* (1992) and *The Brave New World of Work* (2000), posits that nonstandard work relations are best understood as part of a historical break from a *first phase of modernity*—whose central organizing principle was class—to a second, “reflexive modernity” whose organizing principles involve “risk” and “individualization.”<sup>120</sup> Beck argues that two intertwined<sup>121</sup> historical processes underlie this fundamental shift and are central to

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<sup>119</sup> On a global level, based on OECD data, more than half of the global workforce works in informal labor markets (Jutting and Laiglesia 2009). Holst (2014) has also provided evidence that that dualization processes are operative *within* firms as well, in particular industries. There has also been interesting work linking labor market segmentation (“dualization”) to different policy regimes (Emmenegger 2012) and to processes of political integration (Garcia 2012; Hausermann and Schwander 2012). All these studies seem to suggest that nonstandard work ought to be viewed not as merely “residue” from the dynamics that unfold in traditional work relations but that it is persistent phenomenon in its own right (Colin and Nadin 2012). However, it is important, as Hatton (2015) has warned, not to reify boundaries between informal and formal work so as not to miss homological processes.

<sup>120</sup> Of course, points of discontinuation in 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity have been articulated by others, such as in Daniel Bell’s *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) and Peter Drucker’s *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969), yet Beck’s work is distinctly more theoretically comprehensive, which may be both its source of appeal as well as its fundamental weakness. His ideas about risk and individualization have been applied mostly to the sociology of family (Jackson and Scott 1999; Smart and Shipman 2004) and work (Ekinsmyth 1999; Perrons 2000).

<sup>121</sup> The logic of risk distribution intertwines with individualization in the following way: as risk generalizes across individuals because institutions cannot effectively regulate them, individuals must depend on their own reflexive capacities to cope with the myriad options and challenges that beset them.

understanding nonstandard work relations: (1) the supplanting of a social-distributional logic based on *wealth* to one based on *risk* and (2) the process (individualization<sup>122</sup>) of individuals becoming *dis-embedded* (also see Giddens 1990: 17) from “social forms and commitments” (Beck 1992: 128) (e.g. class, family, nation-state, gender) and re-embedded<sup>123</sup> into “reflexive,” “do-it-yourself” biographical experiences (Beck 1997). On the first process, the distribution of risk generalizes across class lines because of the inability of modern institutions to manage technology- and market-created “manufactured risks<sup>124</sup>,” to the effect that risk increasingly shifts from the jurisdiction of institutions to individuals. For Beck, it follows that not only have traditional employment relations waned<sup>125</sup> but risky nonstandard work has generalized up the income distribution (Beck 2000). The second process (individualization) is driven by a multitude of factors<sup>126</sup>, foremost among them is the expansion of educational systems (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) that endow individuals with self-reflective capacities, used to reconfigure cultural schemata and mental models and individualize “life situations and life paths” (Beck 1998: 43). Importantly, while this opens new possibilities by expanding creative capacities, Beck warns that “all too swiftly the “elective,” “reflexive” or “do-it-yourself” biography can become the *breakdown* biography” (*my emphasis*; Beck 1999: 12).

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<sup>122</sup> Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) piece formulated Beck’s original thesis more centrally around the process of individualization.

<sup>123</sup> Researchers in this tradition explicitly opposed post-structuralist formulations that aimed to depart from “structural thinking” altogether. Rather, Beck aimed to supplant class-based structures with others.

<sup>124</sup> For Beck, manufactured risks (e.g. pollution, nuclear spills) with “natural hazards,” which are much more amenable to institutional regulation. Manufactured risks on the other hand are difficult to predict, discern, and manage, partly because they often transcend the boundaries of nation-states.

<sup>125</sup> Beck referred to the weakening of traditional employment relations in Western countries as “Brazilianization of the West” (Beck 2000). This entails rising unemployment, casual labor relations, more flexible work forms, etc.

<sup>126</sup> These include labor market competition and mobility, shifting cultural values (e.g. breakdown of family), mass consumption, etc.

While Beck's perspective identifies potentially useful social mechanisms that may be significant for understanding nonstandard work, overall his framework is confused and overwrought<sup>127</sup>. Beck's insight that Western education institutions have inculcated their students with habits of thought and action (e.g. "sense of possibilities") that may lead to (or enable) both creative power *and* biographical "breakdown" may be important for understanding how on-demand workers navigate their situations; indeed chapter four bears this out (though not exactly as Beck conceives) in its finding on how college-educated Uber drivers held "personal career-norms" (tied to college education) which led to what I describe as behavioral "hysteresis" (Bourdieu 2000). Yet Beck's useful insight about educational institutions is couched in empirical problems<sup>128</sup> and conceptual confusion; I will focus on two aspects of the latter: (1) "individualization" creates more conceptual problems than it solves; (2) Beck's theory is "ontologically naïve," which makes its predictions excessively universalistic. On the first, while Beck is often insists that individualization is a *structured* phenomenon, "re-embedding" does not always seem

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<sup>127</sup> To Beck's significant credit, the concept of "economic insecurity," which he articulated in nascent form in *The Risk Society*, pre-dated the substantial and useful work that has been done on economic insecurity since Hacker's (2006) *Great Risk Shift*. While Beck was not particularly attuned to substantiating his theories with empirical rigor, in this case he did anticipate an important concept well in advance of others. Relatedly, whether "risky situations" have generalized depends on how risk is conceptualized. There is, for example, a decline in "employment instability," which is often understood as a decline in long-term employment (Farber 2008). Chan (2013) finds that job insecurity is still mostly concentrated within low-skill occupations, but it is indeed moving to high-skilled occupations as well. As noted above, Brooks (2012) found similarly. As for "income volatility," (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994) it rose in the late 1970s and early 1980s seemed to be concentrated especially within the low-wage labor market. It also explained roughly half of the increase in cross-sectional income inequality during this time. The increase in the early 1990s was steadier and increasingly concentrated among higher-education groups). There was also a large increase in the early 2000s. Regarding "economic insecurity," Western et al. (2012) find that it's concentrated mostly among low-income households, but within that group, risk of economic loss has increased. Thus, there is some evidence for Beck's general observation, but it is unfortunately not a very useful observation without clearer conceptualization.

<sup>128</sup> Beck has been critiqued by many for being empirically scant (Goldthorpe 2002; Brannen and Nilsen 2005). Others have argued that Beck's claims of employment insecurity are exaggerated (Doogan 2005, 2009; Fevre 2007; Auer and Cazes 2000), that Beck's framework poorly accounts for persistent economic inequality (Mythen 2005), that his critique of class is confused (Atkinson 2010; Crompton 2010), etc. These same criticisms apply to the poststructuralist tradition. Beck's approach can be criticized as empirically imprecise and sometimes conceptually confused, yet still be useful; the same cannot be said of post-structuralist contributions to understanding work relations.

to follow “dis-embedding” in his work (cf. Atkinson 2007<sup>129</sup>). This would not necessarily be a problem if Beck specified *under what conditions* re-embedding does not occur (this would presumably be a post-structuralist, state of self-creation). Yet, he does not do this, to the effect that the concept of “individualization” has no practical benefit to advancing our understanding of nonstandard work other than to admonish against the use of excessively rigid concepts.<sup>130</sup> Second, Beck does not recognize that individualization processes must be concretely “mediated by embedded forms of stratification” (Mythen 2005: 138) and thus have different social consequences for across individuals and groups. This stems from a naiveté that fails to recognize the plurality of social ontologies (I return to this point in the section on pragmatism). The effect is that Beck leaves us assuming that different institutions and different types of nonstandard work will unleash universal reflexivity processes<sup>131</sup>. Thus, Beck’s analytic categories are too poorly conceptualized to be useful for my purposes; yet his argument that educational institutions can endow individuals with a *do-it-yourself biographical burden* may indeed be useful to understanding on-demand workers.

### **Applying these Theoretical Perspectives to the Empirical Questions**

In this section, I considered theoretical frameworks that have been used to understand nonstandard work and changing employment relations with the goal of culling theoretic tools that can potentially be usefully drawn upon in thinking about my empirical questions.

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<sup>129</sup> Atkinson (2007) also notes that Beck’s conceptualization of class is remarkably inconsistent, at different times emphasizing vastly different definitions, including Marxian notions about social position in industrial production processes, Weberian notions of “life situations” and status, notions of collective solidarity and identity, and sometimes simply income.

<sup>130</sup> I have noted elsewhere several studies that have benefited from well-defined conceptualizations of class, so Beck’s hand-waving banishment of the concept is not practically useful. For example, my reading of Silva’s (2013) *Coming Up Short* is that creating some class variation in her analysis would have been very useful. She found that working class Americans struggle with reconciling narratives of individualized self-creation—which she describes as emanating from the “mood economy”—with objectively harsh economic conditions. Examining Americans in different class positions would have made her analysis more insightful in my view.

<sup>131</sup> Savage (2000) and Skeggs (2004) offer an even more specific critique that Beck tends generalize from distinctly middle class experiences.

With respect to social-emergence which is my focus in chapter three, the macro-structural historicist perspective implies that the totalizing logic of capital accumulation may be implicated in the emergence of the on-demand economy. Specifically, it could be argued that capitalist progression has resulted in the growth of a structurally dislocated pool of labor which has become subject to a new form of exploitation by capitalist entrepreneurs. Indeed, chapter three does highlight the importance of the alienation of labor in “poising” (Padgett and Powell 2012) the United States to Uber’s emergence, but there are several problems with this line of theorizing. First, as noted in chapter one, Uber *disrupted* established capitalist interests tied mainly to the taxicab industry. Marxian historicist perspectives offer little insight to within-group conflict among the capitalist class. Second, alienated labor is not specific to the United States, nor is it specific to the period during which Uber emerged (2009 onward); so it is unclear how this approach would explain Uber’s emergence in the United States in particular (of course it spread elsewhere later). Relatedly, highlighting general malaise among labor is not particularly useful; here, the Cornell School’s meso-level focus on particular work-organizational practices that exploit labor offers a useful corrective. Rather than look to overall deterioration in labor markets, it is more useful to look at practices in organizations most adjacent to Uber’s service area, namely, the taxicab industry). Third, Uber’s relationship with drivers was not only based on the availability of labor but the legal-classification of drivers as independent contractors. Historicist perspectives offer little insight into such political processes that underlie that contingency. It could be argued that political processes are entirely determined by the logic of capital accumulation and thus Uber would inevitably win such political battles; but, again, it waged those battles against other capitalist interests and more importantly, it has lost many of them, as chapter three describes.

Beck’s “reflexive modernity” perspective could potentially enrich chapter four’s analysis of the social processes underlying how different workers cope with social-situational displacement into on-demand work. One of its lines of inquiry examines how particular habits among some college-educated

workers—habits involving what I later describe as “personal career-norms”—can result in a kind of “biographical breakdown” (Beck 1999) or what I describe as “hysteresis” (Bourdieu 2000). Yet, Beck offers little insight into behavioral-coping *differences* across on-demand workers; chapter four finds such differences are generated by knowledge-activation mechanisms (Andersen 2007 et al. in Patterson 2014). Further, given his critique of class-based perspectives, his concept of “individualization” is ironically totalizing. It takes the empirically supported assertion that class structures are changing and extends it to the conclusion that class is a “zombie category” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Chapter five’s focus on the social processes that underlie the different kinds of creative action exhibited by Uber drivers is enriched by the Cornell School’s emphasis on work-organizational practices that constrain human creativity. Yet, it is unclear how this approach would explain the experiences of Uber drivers who may feel that Uber’s work-structure (e.g. relative wage-predictability/“guarantee-ability” and autonomy; see chapter one) provides them with opportunities realize some of their core personal aspirations. Chapter five identifies many such drivers. Further, even if the Cornell School’s approach admitted to that possibility, it offers little insight into which group-level processes account for variations among drivers’ creative pursuits.

Overall, each of these perspectives offers useful tidbits, but on the whole, they tend to be mired in conceptual noise and self-contradiction. They are either tautological and hence leave little to be discovered (e.g. historicists), riddled with conceptual inconsistencies (e.g. Beck), or biased toward cases and processes particularly likely to bear out their conclusions and hence only social “harms” are identified as being associated with nonstandard work (e.g. Cornell school). Much of these problems stem from naive, *overly-restrictive philosophical assumptions*, as with the Marxian-historicist designation of materialist, class-based phenomena as exclusively “real,” which prevents these researchers from detecting creative action and other fundamental social processes; or with Beck’s supplanting of “class position” with “risk position,” which he does partly on the basis that class analysis depends on the false

“ontology of the nation-state” (Beck and Willms 2004: 104), not recognizing that his own work is fraught with even more tenuous ontological assumptions.

I argue that a theoretical framework based on the pragmatist tradition offers the best corrective to the above approaches’ shortcomings; it captures the processes they forefront and avoids their noise. This pragmatist framework’s advantages derive from precisely what the above perspectives lack: internally consistent and explicable ontological and epistemological foundations. While these philosophical assumptions are sometimes neglected even within the pragmatist tradition, they create promising possibilities for minimizing empirical biases on the basis of a pluralistic view of social ontology, applying analytic categories (often interdisciplinary) for their practical benefit on the basis of epistemological instrumentalism, and avoiding conceptual confusion by drawing distinctions between ideas on the foundation that knowledge is produced via clear communication in a “community of inquiry.” I develop these points and formulate a pragmatist action theory in the next section.

### **PRAGMATIST ACTION FRAMEWORKS: CURRENT AND PROPOSED FORMULATIONS**

In this section, I engage with contemporary sociological pragmatism and develop a pragmatist action framework aimed at opening new possibilities for understanding social-emergence (chapter three) and social action (chapters four and five).

Broadly, I have two goals. First and most importantly, I aim to develop theoretical tools that will be useful given my empirical problems involving Uber and on-demand work (e.g. emergence, coping with displacement into on-demand work, human creativity). Since my empirical chapters engage in disparate social processes (i.e. social-organizational emergence, human action), these theoretical tools are described at a general level in this chapter and fleshed out in more detail in the empirical chapters. That noted, I make empirical references where necessary for greater lucidity. Second, I aim to contribute to the development of a pragmatist sociological “program”<sup>132</sup>. While contemporary perspectives on

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<sup>132</sup> One could argue that a pragmatist “program” is antithetical to pragmatism itself, but this is only so in a very narrow sense.



pragmatism tend to be somewhat scattered in emphasis and orientation, there are core pragmatist philosophical principles (e.g. fallibilist, instrumentalist<sup>133</sup> inferences about process communicated in “community of inquirers”) and substantive insights (e.g. creative life-ordering). Contemporary pragmatists have done much in the way of advancing this tradition and applying it usefully to a broader range of empirical problems. For example, Neil Gross, in an unpublished paper, has recently highlighted how pragmatism bears on questions of social-emergence; this partly builds on Gross’ prior work (2010) which pointed to the implicit pragmatism in Charles Tilly’s work on political processes (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006) and repertoires of action (Tilly 1985, 1996; also see Collins 2010 on Tilly’s pragmatism<sup>134</sup>). Yet, as I argue below, the pragmatist program is still in its nascence and can be more fruitfully developed through some theoretical refinements to which I hope to contribute. On the whole, I view this section as building off of prior pragmatist work and as constituting an improvement over the non-pragmatist theoretical perspectives that have been applied to nonstandard work relations, discussed above.

I proceed in two sections. In the first section, I show that while contemporary pragmatism provides useful substantive insights into different kinds of social processes, this work too often falls short of fulfilling pragmatism’s potential in four ways involving: (1) ontological assumptions that are excessively restrictive and epistemological assumptions that are inconsistent with pragmatist instrumentalism; (2) vague conceptualizations of “habit” and “creativity”; (3) narrow understandings of culture in exclusively semiotic terms; and (4) conflation of power with domination.

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<sup>133</sup> Pragmatist instrumentalism was most clearly articulated by John Dewey and William James. Instrumentalism’s perspective is that given that theories are tools for problem-solving, they are “wrong” only inasmuch as they fail to help detect social processes that are deemed important given the object of study. That is, the standard for evaluating a theory should primarily be based on the extent to which it solves the empirical problem being considered. It should be noted that Karl Popper also endorsed a variant of instrumentalism in *Conjectures and Refutations*, albeit different from Dewey’s perspective in certain ways not relevant to our purposes.

<sup>134</sup> Charles Tilly did not explicitly associate with work with pragmatism. Instead, he was emphatic about what he called a “relational realism.” See Gross (2010) for a useful review.

In the second section, I *re-conceptualize* and *synthesize* various pragmatist analytic categories (e.g. habit, creativity, problem-situations) in order to gain greater theoretical leverage over empirical problems involving social-emergence and social action, doing so in three sections that (1) put forth an ecological conception of social structure, based on a stylization of Abbott's (2016) concept of linked ecologies; (2) develop a richer conceptualization of actors and social action than is provided by Abbott (2016), largely on the basis of Patterson's (2014) framework for understanding cultural knowledge, rules of practice, and view of the processes underlying cultural stability and change; and (3) overview (briefly) the starkest differences between the proposed pragmatist framework and alternative theoretical paradigms, as well as the substantive theories on nonstandard work examined in the first part of this chapter. Among this pragmatist variant's key features are the subsuming of the concept of "habit" within a typology of embodied cultural knowledge (Patterson 2014), understanding "creativity" as grounded in cultural knowledge rather than as representing an alternate end of a habit-creativity continuum, and defining the "context" of human problem-solving on the basis of a stylized conception of Abbott's (2016) "ecological" understanding of social structure. One example of a benefit of synthesizing these concepts is that it creates new empirical applications for pragmatism, such as theorizing how ecologies can be *poised* (Padgett and Powell 2012) to social-emergence (relevant to chapter three).

### **A Critique of Contemporary Pragmatism**

While much of recent interest in the pragmatist tradition has centered on its substantive insights into social action (Joas 1993; Joas 1996; Whitford 2002; Gross 2009; Emirbayer and Maynard 2011; Muller and Winship 2011; Tavory and Timmermans 2013; Abbott 2016), efforts to synthesize these insights into a theory of action have fallen short of their explanatory potential. I make this claim assuming that a pragmatist action theory is most likely to be useful if it meets at least two substantive criteria: (1) offers some explanatory insights into *why* actors behave the way they do in particular conditions, insights that

are substantive enough to derive some general empirical hypotheses (henceforth Action Theory Criterion 1; e.g. when habits fail, actors act creatively), and (2) provides a set of clearly-defined concepts that explain *how* actors transact in particular social interactions (Action Theory Criterion 2; e.g. particular types of actors with particular habits will act creatively in particular problem-situations). I contend that current frameworks tend to meet the first criterion, but not the second. For my purposes, “how actors transact in social relations” involves how the (transactional<sup>135</sup>) experience of on-demand work constrains or enables different types of social action and experiences among Uber drivers with varied social-biographical histories.

I argue that there are four sets of reasons that current variants of pragmatist action frameworks fall short of providing an adequate action theory to capture these empirical processes. First, they have been somewhat ontologically restrictive and epistemologically neglectful (e.g. Whitford 2002). Second, they have often conceptualized “habit” and “creativity” vaguely (e.g. Gross 2009; 2010). Third, they have tended to conceive of culture narrowly (e.g. Tavory and Timmermans 2013). Fourth, particular variants have conflated power and domination in problematic ways. I demonstrate each point below. While contemporary work has undoubtedly made immensely important advances toward developing the pragmatist program, I argue that the problems identified below have slowed progress and limited possibilities.

### **Philosophical Inconsistency in Contemporary Pragmatist Critiques of Actor-Based Assumptions**

Contemporary pragmatists have positioned themselves primarily against both positivists (Abbott 1990) and “a priori” actor theorists (Whitford 2002); I argue that while pragmatism’s anti-positivism has arguably been necessary to defining a pragmatist research program, much of the latter critique belies

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<sup>135</sup> It is important to remember that for classical pragmatists, “experience” was fundamentally *transactional* rather than a purely subjective state.

pragmatism's ontological (i.e. basic categories of social life (e.g. processes, entities) count<sup>136</sup>) and epistemological foundations (i.e. nature and fallibility of knowledge, how to think of theories and inference, etc.). I will very briefly outline how contemporary pragmatists have positioned themselves with respect to alternative philosophical traditions, and then elaborate on the inconsistencies within its critique of "a priori actor theory."

First, pragmatists (e.g. Abbott 1988, 1990) have—along with critical realists, interpretivists, and constructivists (see Gorski 2013)—spent considerable effort demonstrating the severe empirical problems that follow from positivist (e.g. Hempel 1965) ontological and epistemological assumptions (e.g. existence of universal covering laws, causality as "constant conjunctions," narrow physics-based conceptions of scientific inquiry). Second, contemporary pragmatism gained momentum partly because it depicted itself as a viable alternative to rational choice frameworks (Joas 1996; Whitford 2002). Pragmatists have asserted—along with "relational or transactional" sociologists (Emirbayer 1997; Tilly 2002; Emirbayer and Desmond 2015)—that contrary to "a priori actor theorists'" ontological presupposition that actors (rational) *precede or make up* social interactions, it is rather the *interaction that makes up the actor*, and thus, research programs should be oriented toward making inferences about processes (Abbott 2016) and mechanisms (Gross 2009). This emphasis on process and holism stems from the pragmatism's rejection of the Cartesian thought-action and mind-body ontological dualisms<sup>137</sup> (Peirce 1877; 1878; Dewey 1922a), i.e. thought and action are best conceived as enmeshed in human *practice*.

While this de-constructive work has been useful, particularly as directed toward positivists, I would argue that its position is far more ontologically restrictive and epistemologically narrow than that

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<sup>136</sup> The terms "matter" or "exist" convey the same meaning. I do not think "real" does. It is used so inconsistently in the philosophy of social science that it is practically an honorific term, but since it can easily be interpreted as related to "scientific realism" and other forms of realism, I prefer the more non-committal term "count" here.

<sup>137</sup> This pragmatist precept that thought and action cannot be viewed separately is most evident in James' and Dewey's thinking.

of the classical pragmatists. For example, in critiquing rational choice frameworks for assuming that actors have a priori beliefs and desires (i.e. that precede problem-situation interactions), Whitford (2002: 340) argues that “*only* in ‘problem situations’ are valuations [beliefs and desires] created” (my emphasis) and that “actors live their lives ‘muddling along,’ following a series of ‘habits and vital impulses’ until a ‘problem situation’ arises, causing a desire to be formed” (344). However, for this argument to be substantively meaningful, it must also make actor-based assumptions, as I will explain. Given that Whitford (2002) does not define what problem-situations are and how valuations are formed within them, we must consider different interpretations. First, if Whitford views problem-situations in the circumscribed sense of them *not* being ubiquitous to social action, then does this imply that valuations (beliefs and preferences) do not change “outside” of problem-situations? Viewing problem-situations under this narrow definition may be useful, but not without identifying what does and does not constitute a problem-situation (e.g. does an actor have to be cognizant of a problem-situation for it to be such?). Given that *social, contextualized* action is central to classical pragmatism (particularly Dewey and Mead), it is much more likely that Whitford is taking an expansive, social-embeddedness view common in, for example, the economic sociology literature (e.g. Granovetter 1985). This leads us to the second possible interpretation of his argument, that it is actually a tautology, i.e. if problem-situations are ubiquitous and if human beliefs and desires continuously form, then it is impossible for them to *not* form in problem-situations. This could be stated as a useful assumption that sensitizes us to the social-construction of beliefs and desires, but it is nothing more than that. Finally, the only other way in which to interpret Whitford’s argument—granting that it is (1) not assuming that *social* action is *asocial* (the first interpretation above) and (2) not circular (the second interpretation)—is to presuppose that he is making at least two actor-based assumptions. The first assumption is that *actors have the cognitive capacity to acquire beliefs and preferences*. Yet, one could argue that while this *does* assume that actors *make up* social interactions in some sense, that this is an innocuous assumption. Further, it

may be that Whitford (2002) does not subscribe to the view that *all* actor-based assumptions are antithetical to pragmatism's emphasis on *process* and *interaction*, but simply that assuming actors have valuations that precede problem-situations is crossing an ontological line. Yet he crosses this line with his second implicit actor-based assumption, which directly contravenes his critique of "actor portfolios." Recognizing that there is often behavioral or attitudinal heterogeneity among actors in similar problem-situations, it plausibly follows from Whitford's view<sup>138</sup> that beliefs and preferences are causally formed as part of an *interaction* between individuals *and* problem-situations. On this interpretation, Whitford is implicitly assuming that actors *carry* "portfolios" of *something* in their interactions with problem-situations (I later argue that this "something" is "cultural knowledge" (Patterson 2014)), and that variations in portfolios across individuals contribute to generating the observed heterogeneity. This non-trivial<sup>139</sup> actor-based assumption is precisely the kind that "a priori actor theorists" (e.g. rational choice theorists, analytical sociologists) have often been criticized for making.

This line of critique is unfitting given that *all* the classical pragmatists made actor-based assumptions. Dewey, Peirce, James, and Wendell (Menard 1997) were deeply influenced by evolutionary biology (e.g. Dewey 1910a) and, along with most contemporary sociologists in the pragmatist or relational sociology tradition, they readily assumed (though implicitly) that humans have an *adaptive capacity*, as with Peirce's (1878) references to the human tendency to settle "irritations of doubt," Gross' (2009) suggestion of "creative responses" to new problem-situations, or Bourdieu's

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<sup>138</sup> The only other interpretation is that the acquisition of beliefs and desires depends *entirely* on the particular type of problem-situation (or sets of them) within which an actor is embedded. That would imply that actors in similar problem-situations have similar beliefs and desires, which clearly contradicts evidence of observed behavioral or attitudinal heterogeneity among actors in similar problem-situations.

<sup>139</sup> It might imply that actors may have characteristics that pre-determine the range of beliefs and desires that problem-situations can contribute to generating and/or that actors may *select into and out of* problem-situations based partly on these actor-based characteristics.

(1984) work on the formation<sup>140</sup> of subjective dispositions (i.e. habitus) in social spaces (i.e. fields). Further, Dewey (1910) was quite explicit about the “human factor” in *A Short Catechism Concerning Truth* (see “objection nine”) in his emphasis on the “factor of human want, purpose, and realization...[that it] must work itself out in co-operation with the environmental factor” in “co-adaptation,” stressing that “[a]s long as the human factor is ignored and denied...this human factor will assert itself in irresponsible ways.” Contemporary pragmatists also make actor-based assumptions when they reference the human capacity to imagine futures, which Abbott (2016) calls “optativity” and Emirbayer and Desmond (2011) call “projectivity,” all of which is supported by cognitive science research (Pinker 2002). Why not acknowledge these assumptions explicitly for more constructive communication in a pragmatist community of inquiry? As Rodrik (2015) has argued, explicitly stating assumptions is useful precisely because it makes it easier for a community of scholars to pinpoint errors in each other’s thinking.

The pragmatist proclivity toward making descriptive and causal inferences about the *processes of continuous transaction between mind and world and between beliefs and facts* is not diminished one iota by minimal assumptions about *actors in action*, whether they are based on evolutionary (Dewey 1910a) or social-constructionist (Whitford 2002) principles<sup>141</sup>. Indeed, pragmatist instrumentalism<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Even though Bourdieu was adamantly opposed to rational choice frameworks, it is quite evident that Bourdieu adopts certain “weak” assumptions about rationality and cognition, particularly that individuals are purposely oriented toward improving their social position, that they tend toward conformity to avoid cognitive dissonance, that they intelligently detect signals from others’ outwardly dispositions, that habitus formation is based, at least partly, on behavioral reinforcement mechanisms and cognitive efficiency criteria, and that habitus functions to reproduce inequalities partly through a social-selection mechanism.

<sup>141</sup> Even Louis Menard, who has written extensively about pragmatism, argued in *Pragmatism: A Reader* that pragmatism is fundamentally opposed to formalism. I view this as an ahistorical assessment. The rationalism of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was excessively formalistic, and so classical pragmatists lambasted formalism as a form of “intellectualist” self-indulgence. But this should not be interpreted as an absolute rejection of all formalist approaches to scientific inquiry.

<sup>142</sup> Pragmatist instrumentalism was most clearly articulated by John Dewey and William James. Instrumentalism’s perspective is that given that theories are tools for problem-solving, they are “wrong” only inasmuch as they fail to help detect social processes that are deemed important given the object of study. That is, the standard for evaluating a theory should primarily be based on the extent to which it solves the empirical problem being

views theories as *tools* (or instruments) rather than as *correspondent-representations* of knowledge or *mirrors* of reality, and as such, it evaluates theories and assumptions<sup>143</sup> strictly by their “success” (not “rightness”) in solving problems as part of broadly<sup>144</sup> conceived scientific inquiry. Indeed, while instrumentalism liberally suggests theoretical and methodological pluralism, Pragmatism’s anti-Cartesianism reminds us that the construction of theoretic tools themselves is a form of *social practice* which can variably create helpful or destructive tendencies in our sociological thinking. Thus, a dogmatism against actor-based assumptions of any kind is misplaced. The requisite balance between relational and actor-based assumptions needed is well exemplified by Tilly (2002) who famously emphasized the importance of beginning an analysis by theorizing the interaction, but recognized that actor-based assumptions can be a useful part of the process. It is also consistent with Dewey’s explicit “pluralist realism”<sup>145</sup> (1922a: 356). Granted that moving beyond minimalist actor-based assumptions can often devolve into a reification of “asocial actors” that indeed detracts from the pragmatist processualist project, as analytical sociologists and rational choice theorists are often prone to do; but this concern is mitigated by pragmatism’s explicit instrumentalism and fallibilism regarding theories. Thus, while critiques of positivist ontology have been necessary, critiques of perspectives that have made *any*

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considered. It entails that “theoretical work” of any kind is only useful insofar as it better sensitizes us to the social processes that inhere to our empirical question. The instrumentalist principle is useful because it deliberately steers researchers from the pitfall of intellectually “straw-manning” rival theories, just as it avails us to a positive, practical standard for evaluating theories based on the commonsense utility they provide given the problem at hand. It should be noted that Karl Popper also endorsed a variant of instrumentalism in *Conjectures and Refutations*, albeit different from Dewey’s perspective in certain ways not relevant to our purposes.

<sup>143</sup> As Rodrik (2015) has argued vis-à-vis economics, theories are useful *because* they use a variety of assumptions to simplify what they explain.

<sup>144</sup> Dewey conceived of scientific inquiry in much broader terms than Charles Peirce, as is evident from *Art as Experience* (1934) and *Experience and Nature* (1925); though arguably less broadly than did William James.

<sup>145</sup> Dewey’s pluralist realism was constructed in opposition to a “monist realism” that viewed *all* reality as composed of a single, reducible matter. He rejected the “disjunction between monistic and dualistic realism [is] exhaustive” and argued instead that “[t]hings are things, not mental states. Hence the realism. But the things are indefinitely many. Hence the pluralism” (1922a: 356).



assumptions about actors are misguided. Either way, they have clearly not contributed to the stitching together of a pragmatist action theory.

However, contemporary pragmatism has belied its philosophical foundations to greater consequence through (1) vague conceptualizations of “habit” and “creativity,” as is particularly evident in Gross (2009; 2010), (2) by adopting a narrow, semiotic view of cultural processes (Tavory and Timmermans 2013), and (3) conflation of power with domination. I will address each of these in turn.

### **Vague Conceptualizations of Habit and Creativity**

Arguably, Gross (2009) has provided among the most important pragmatist contributions to a mechanisms-based<sup>146</sup> theory of action, yet his conceptualizations of the concepts of “habit” and “creativity” have been somewhat vague<sup>147</sup>. Based on one reading, he seems to suggest that habit and creativity are mutually exclusive—opposites on a two-sided continuum—rather than as processually co-involved, suggesting this dualist continuum in different papers: [the] “habituality-creativity continuum, for pragmatists, is meant to encompass rather than substitute for other forms of action” (2009: 368); “to view pragmatism, as a theory of action, solely in terms of creativity is to ignore the other end of the habituality-creativity continuum” (2010: 338); and “[there is an] alteration between more or less habituated patterns of response and creative improvisation and experimentation when habit proves inadequate” (2010: 338). If he is conceptualizing habit in a narrow, procedural sense (i.e. facilitating knowledge), as the “habituality-creativity continuum” reference suggests and which, according to Abbott (2016:30), is Dewey’s conceptualization of habit, then there are two problems: (1) clearly habit

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<sup>146</sup> Gross (2009: 364) defines a social mechanism as: “a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which—in certain circumstances—some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations. This sequence or set may or may not be analytically reducible to the actions of individuals who enact it, may underwrite formal or substantive causal processes, and may be observed, unobserved, or in principle unobservable.”

<sup>147</sup> Pragmatism emerged partly in opposition to the conceptual obfuscations of rationalist philosophy. Both Peirce (1878) and Dewey (1938) emphasized the importance of conveying ideas clearly particularly because communicative vagueness within a community of inquirers can devolve into useless intellectual debates and proverbial talking-past-one-another.

(as opposed to creativity) is not nearly as central to social action as Gross (2010) explicitly argues; and (2) it obfuscates what exactly creativity is grounded in if not habit.

Yet, based on another reading in which Gross seems to conceptualize habit broadly as capturing all forms of cultural knowledge (e.g. factual knowledge, procedural skills, evaluative understandings)—for example, by writing about the “habit of rationality” (2009: 367)—then the following question arises: if there is no continuum and habit shapes all action, then what exactly is “creativity” and what factors underlie when action becomes creative? The classical pragmatist view that actors tend to “experiment” and “act creatively” when their habits somehow fail to accommodate new “irritations” (Peirce 1878), “unexpected shocks” (Dewey 1910b), or “jolts” or “disturbances” (James 1904) is *indeed* very useful; but clearly whether creativity follows from these practical irritations—that is, whether individuals interpret situations as *problem*-situations—depends on a deeper understanding of “habit” as well as other factors (e.g. access to material resources, the problem-situation itself). Without this deeper understanding, we can only advance behavioral propositions like *actors tend to behave creatively when their habits fail* (i.e. meets the above-described “action theory criterion 1”) but not the more useful kind of proposition like *particular actors with particular habits tend to behave creatively when faced with particular problem-situations* (i.e. meets action theory criterion 2).

Thus, if we assume this “non-continuum” interpretation of habit—which is more plausible and is likely Gross’ actual position—then the key first step to enriching our pragmatist conception of action (e.g. creative action) is to clearly define habit and its internal distinctions, i.e. to define different *types of habit*. With such a conceptual foundation, we would be able to develop our understanding of processes that result in “habits of creativity.” To my knowledge, contemporary pragmatism has made little progress in this vein, in large part due to its vague conceptualizations. Indeed, Ulrich Beck’s view of

“new” modernity institutions creating habits of reflexivity is more developed on this question<sup>148</sup>, and it is itself fraught with conceptual contradictions, as has already been discussed. The proposed pragmatist action framework described in a subsequent section offers a clearer conceptualization of habits based on Patterson’s (2014) typology of (embodied) cultural knowledge.

### **Narrow Depictions of Culture as Social Semiotics**

Third, the scholastic eclecticism that ought to follow from pragmatism’s ontological pluralism and epistemological instrumentalism is strikingly absent in contemporary pragmatist depictions of culture. Moving beyond Gross’ (2009: 369) assertion that his mechanism-based pragmatism “is interpretive all the way down,” Tavory and Timmerman (2013) argue that a Peirce-inspired semiotic theory of meaning-making ought to be the building-block for a processualist pragmatist account. For Peirce, meaning-making has three parts: (1) a *sign* (e.g. a word) which signifies an (2) *object* (e.g. idea, material artifact, etc.), and an (3) *interpretant* which is the *effect* produced by the interpreter’s interpretation of the sign-object (the sign-object also constrains the range of interpretants) and which is itself a sign in a potentially extended chain of meaning-making. While interpreting processes of problem-solving as causally sequenced meaning-making structures contributes to Action Theory Criterion 1, it does not tell us what happens when meaning-making occurs or *how* actors interpret sign-objects, i.e. it falls short of Action Theory Criterion 2. If it did, it would be extremely useful for my empirical purposes, as the extent to which an interpreter *imposes* an interpretation on the sign-object versus the extent of the sign-object’s *constrains* the interpretation is one way of understanding whether on-demand workers’ creativity is constrained or enabled by the nature of on-demand work.

Yet, as Patterson (2014) has argued, Peirce’s symbolic interactionism is but one wing of semiotic processes—along with post-structuralist textual interpretations of semiotic structures and the British

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<sup>148</sup> This sort of conceptual vagueness is antithetical to the classical pragmatist injunction to convey ideas clearly particularly because knowledge is advanced within a community of inquirers (Peirce 1878; Dewey 1938) where communicative vagueness can spiral into unnecessary intellectual disputes.

school of symbolic studies—and further, semiotic theory is itself just one perspective among others (e.g. Verstehen interpretivists, “sociocultural” approaches, etc.). It is unclear how Peirce’s semiotics can be integrated with the broader cultural processes (e.g. norms, values, scripts) which are likely to be relevant for understanding how on-demand workers experience the on-demand economy. For example, it offers no clear approach to conceptualizing how on-demand workers with different social backgrounds (e.g. education, labor market histories) might interpret sign-objects differently; yet as I argue below (and illustrate in chapter four particularly), other perspectives can provide powerful (and causal) explanatory insights into such differences. So why limit “cultural pragmatism” to a particular variant of social semiotics and neglect all else, particularly in light of the theoretical and methodological inclusiveness of pragmatism’s philosophical foundations?

### **How Conflating Power with Domination Obscures the Advantages of Doxa**

In this final critique of contemporary pragmatism, I examine Bourdieu’s theory of practice which, like Tavory & Timmerman’s (2013) framework, draws on social semiotics but has a much stronger structuralist bent. Bourdieu’s eclectic intellectual pedigree included some inspiration from pragmatism<sup>149</sup> (particularly Dewey; see *Pascalian Meditations*); indeed, he stated explicitly in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* that “the affinities and convergences [of his work with pragmatism] are quite striking” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:122, in Emirbayer 2010). On this supposition, Bourdieu advanced arguably the most comprehensive theory of action (or practice) in contemporary sociological pragmatism, which he integrated with a stratification framework aimed at understanding social reproduction, order, and change. Given that the on-demand economy is an emergent mode of production with distinct social-relational properties, considering Bourdieu’s conceptual integration of structural and phenomenological processes—which I term “semiotic structuralism”—may be useful for

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<sup>149</sup> William James was particularly emphatic about the presence of pragmatist strands in writings throughout history, e.g. Socrates, Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, etc. (James 1904). Granted, he was referring specifically to orientations within pragmatism that combat absolutist forms of rationalism and empiricism.

understanding how the social relations that inhere to the on-demand economy change and reconstitute themselves in systems of inequality and order. Bourdieu's semiotic structuralism explicitly (see Bourdieu 1990: 55) aims to render irrelevant various conventional social-scientific antinomies (e.g. subjective-objective realities, structural-cultural processes, mental-spatial properties, determinism-freedom and conditioning-creativity dichotomies, etc.) which Bourdieu views as detracting from a truly *relational sociology* that would reveal how everyday practices not only embody social relations and their hierarchical dynamics, but are fundamental to their reproduction. This structural-relational, "realist" program (see Vandenberghe 1999: 62) is in stark contrast with culturalist theories that emphasize autonomies between "culture" and "structure," such as Alexander's (2003) "strong (cultural) program." While Bourdieu's practice theory is useful in certain ways<sup>150</sup>, it imposes a synthetic, ontological unity among structural and semiotic phenomena that is at odds with pragmatism's ontological pluralism and that overloads its conceptual tools. Below I will (1) describe this synthetic ontological unity by connecting Bourdieu's concepts of "field" and "habitus," (2) highlight the fruitful tension between two variants of relational sociology, identifying the merits of each (i.e. Bourdieu's structuralist sensitivity to group-level processes and Collins' interactionist sensitivity to creativity), and (3) argue that Bourdieu's *conflation of power with domination* creates various difficulties, also noting that this conflation is rooted in problematic ontological assumptions and substantive understanding of culture.

For Bourdieu, all social practiced occurs in "fields" (e.g. fields of art, finance, sports, etc.) which are characterized by (1) hierarchies of social positions which actors occupy, (2) a set of symbolic rules that determine which observable dispositions of actors (e.g. signs) are ascribed what amount of

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<sup>150</sup> From a pragmatist perspective, many critiques of Bourdieu have been misguided. A common example is the critique that habitus fails to capture conscious status-signaling. Pragmatism's instrumentalist principle would emphasize that a theory "failing to capture" a phenomenon is only problematic if that phenomenon is worth capturing and that theory is being used to capture it. If *conscious* status-signaling is implicated in a social process, then habitus is clearly an inappropriate concept to use. It is very common for Bourdieu to be critiqued in this sense and it is a form of straw-manning and "false framing" pragmatism reminds us to deliberately avoid.

“symbolic capital” (i.e. status, prestige, honor), thereby functioning to classify actors into different status positions within the hierarchy’s social order and establishing “collective expectations’ which are constitutive of [the field’s] normality” (Bourdieu 2000: 160), and (3) a dynamic of struggle among actors to occupy more dominant social positions, and as importantly, for dominant actors to maintain the legitimacy of the social order and their position within it by using their higher levels of symbolic capital to distinguish between higher and lower forms of “cultural capital” (e.g. language competencies, skills, etc.). Dominant groups (i.e. those with greater symbolic capital) establish as superior (i.e. via symbolic, classificatory rules) their distinctive resources (e.g. cultural capital) and impose that cultural understanding upon subordinated groups to the effect that an arbitrary symbolic order is legitimized and therefore unquestioned; Bourdieu refers to this coercive mechanism as “symbolic violence.” These hierarchical structures (i.e. fields) and their symbolic rules come to manifest themselves in everyday practices by disciplining individuals into developing certain mental and bodily dispositions (which Bourdieu termed “habitus”) needed to reconcile subjective interests (e.g. improving their social position within hierarchies, not being judged negatively, etc.) with the objective, practical dictates of the field-situations they encounter. Bourdieu argued that habitus is formed substantially within the earlier years of life (e.g. within family structures; Bourdieu refers to this as “original” habitus (see *Pascalian Meditations* (2000)) when dispositions are ripe for formation, particularly highlighting the dispositions that develop from “material conditions of existence defined by distance from necessity” (e.g. cultural capital; Bourdieu 1984: 177). Yet, habitus is “layered” by temporality and so changes over time, contrary to a common misreading of the concept (see *Pascalian Meditations* (2000) on secondary or “specific” habituses). Habitus functions to not only guide one’s practices<sup>151</sup> (e.g. tastes, lifestyle) within fields but

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<sup>151</sup> Tastes are about drawing *distinctions* in value among the range of possible consumable goods and services. By acting on tastes to consume goods and services, individuals are transmuting signs that are interpreted by others. Specifically, individuals use their economic capital and cultural capital to consume in ways that generates symbolic capital, which affords an individual the status to appropriate other forms of capital (e.g. economic) in a field of competition. In other words, in this framework, symbolic capital is the operator that converts “status” into “class,”

also to orient the individual to field-situations befitting of their habitus. That is, given that field rules assign different levels of symbolic capital to different discernible dispositions, individuals will tend to avoid situations within which they will be negatively judged and will select into situations within which they will be positively judged (given their habitus). In this sense, habitus gives actors an intuitive and embodied sense of the natural-ness of fields and their social positions within them, a taken-for-grantedness, which Bourdieu termed *doxa* (1977; 1998), that circumscribes “the universe of possible discourse,” (1977: 167) including reflexive discourses about an individual’s prospects for upward social mobility. Thus, as an embodiment of objective social structures and thus congruent with their symbolic rules, habitus functions to reproduce the objective boundaries of social orders, constituting a fundamental, yet subtle, mechanism for perpetuating inequalities across generations.

While Bourdieu’s action theory is fundamentally relational<sup>152</sup> (Emirbayer 2010), it is important to highlight its structural bent relative to other relational perspectives (e.g. Zelizer 2005; Collins 2005). Bourdieu’s insistence on how class and status structures inhere to all social relations led him to emphasize that social action should be understood in terms of the “constraints inherent in [social actors’] structural position” (2005: 208). A consequence is that Bourdieu often missed the ways in which even “constrained” action can be creative. This can be contrasted with Collins’ (2004) more micro-situational, interactionist variant of relational sociology, a perspective that reveals how everyday social practices can generate emotional energy and build social solidarity in “interaction ritual chains,” ultimately shaping stratification outcomes<sup>153</sup>. However, it turns out that the limitation to Collins’ (2005)

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just as class converts into habitus. Thus, by studying an individual’s consumption practices, we are directly gaining insights into not only that individual’s particular tastes, but their objective material conditions (embodied in their habitus). By studying a *group’s* consumption patterns, we can understand its class relations and reproduction.

<sup>152</sup> Bourdieu (1989) explicitly called for a relational sociology, and as Emirbayer (2010: 409) argues, Bourdieu “never tired of stressing the priority of structure over interaction, declaring repeatedly that ‘the truth of the interaction is not to be found in the interaction itself.’” (Bourdieu 2005: 148, in Emirbayer (2010: 409).

<sup>153</sup> Collins (2004) argued that status hierarchies and categories identities are weakening in contemporary modernity, which suggests that paying attention to these micro-interactional dynamics is becoming increasingly important.

perspective is precisely the strength of Bourdieu's: an overly-interactionist relationism weakly theorizes group-level processes (e.g. class, status). As Fine (2005: 1288) aptly argues regarding Collins' *Ritual Interaction Chains*: "if ritual depends upon group symbols, [then] the group as a unit, not just as a human manifestation of the situation, must be accounted for...the meso-level concept of the group is the glue that connects action and organization."<sup>154</sup> There is a fruitful tension here between Collins' dynamism and Bourdieu's sensitivity to meso- and macro-level processes (e.g. where do group symbols come from, exploitation, status closure, external categorization).<sup>155</sup>

Yet, given my purposes, Bourdieu's theory of practice is problematic in a more fundamental, ontological sense: it over-enmeshes symbolic (semiotic) and structural phenomena to the effect that Bourdieu *conflates power with domination*, rather than properly conceiving of domination as a socially conditioned *instance*<sup>156</sup> of power. While the social relations constituting the on-demand economy are certainly fraught with power dynamics, assuming a priori that symbolic field-rules and dispositions (e.g.

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<sup>154</sup> Fine (2005) also notes that Collins' "interaction ritual chains" is defined far too loosely, to the extent that it is difficult to think of interactions that are not "interaction ritual chains." Kaufman and Patterson (2005) make a similar argument, stating that the relational approach "tends to underspecify the role of social structural factors such as class, status, and power in the adoption or rejection of innovations" (2005: 84).

<sup>155</sup> Lizardo (2008) highlights another important distinction between how Bourdieu and the micro-interaction relationists think of culture's scope: micro-interaction relationists view "cultural resources" (Collins 1975) as valued only within circuits of meaning in "socially delimited settings", whereas Bourdieu's "cultural capital" is constructed relationally across class, and by Mohr's and DiMaggio's (1995: 168) definition, is "validated by centers of cultural authority." Lizardo (2006) argues that highbrow culture is less likely to be converted into social capital in circuits of exchange and meaning (Zelizer 2005b) beyond one's strong-tie circles because of its restricted, "asset-specific" nature.

<sup>156</sup> In other words, he fails to define any scope conditions for his theory. What does a failure to define scope conditions have to do with enmeshed ontologies? Within pragmatist epistemology, social relations are constituted by many (practically infinite) qualitatively distinct phenomena, a view Dewey describe as "pluralistic realism" (1922). I argue that the implication of this is that unifying any number of these ontologies within a theory necessarily involves a distortive representation of reality which makes it imperative to organize the *crux of a theory* around a statement of scope conditions, rather than stating those scope conditions peripherally or ignoring them altogether. Given that Bourdieu is imposing ontological unity between structuralist-semiotic realities, the most important work that needs to be done is specifying the conditions under which that ontological enmeshment is valid, i.e. under what conditions does practice embody relations of domination versus the conditions that it simply reflects years of situational behavioral reinforcement? In that vein, formulating a definition of *symbolic violence*, for example, as particularly operative in liberal democracies where violent subordination is normatively unviable would be much more useful than simply assuming its mechanics are universally operative.



habitus) always function to subordinate is an unwarranted theoretical leap creates various difficulties. For example, it obscures the processes through which “objects of power” can “coerce” interpreters (i.e. subjects or actors) into adopting *favorable* dispositions (i.e. useful rather than subordinating), processes which cannot plausibly be construed as instances of social domination, despite their coercive character. That is, “surrendering” to field *doxa* can be advantageous. The problem is further compounded by imprecise specification of how to identify the *social position* of field actors, i.e. whether they are in subordinate or dominant positions. In this regard, Bourdieu’s perspective creates biases against empirically detecting processes of social emergence that emanate from outside of mainstream concentrations of power. While this point has some parallels with Archer’s (2007; 2010) critical realist critique of the limitations of Bourdieu’s theory for understanding reflexivity, change, and emergence, my concern is less with reflexivity per se and more about the *consequences* of reflexivity for personal order and well-being. Further, if whether or not actors within a field are subordinates *depends* on the extent to which they have power to disrupt the field-rules, then the concept of “dominants” and “subordinates” carries no explanatory power whatsoever. Thus, beyond standard critiques that Bourdieu’s action theory obscures creative processes, it more fundamentally obscures how embodied social practices (i.e. practices that manifest structural relations) can constitute processes that disrupt structural hierarchies and impel social change.

My view is that these limitations stem from two problems in Bourdieu’s thinking, one philosophical and one substantive. The philosophical limitation is a failure to recognize the ontological pluralism (Dewey 1922; Gorski 2013) of social phenomena, which led to conceptions of social reality as overly static (see class-status homology literature<sup>157</sup>). Social science simply does not have adequate

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<sup>157</sup> Bourdieu’s work has been most influential in sociological work on consumption. Indeed, Campbell (1995: 103) writes that Bourdieu is “the most important contemporary theorist of consumption proper.” Like Veblen’s status signaling theory regarding “conspicuous consumption,” Bourdieu’s understanding of status hierarchies has been viewed as unidimensional (Lizardo 2008) and lacking in empirical support. Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) found that elites do not reject popular musical forms, and many other studies have shown elites’ cultural omnivorism in

conceptual and methodological tools to discern some kind of general ontological unity between phenomenological and structural experiences. Bourdieu's substantive limitation is somewhat ironic: while cultural processes are pre-eminently featured in Bourdieu's theorizing, he fails to differentiate cultural phenomena precisely. It is unclear if habitus subsumes *all* cultural orientations, or if it only captures procedural or functional dispositions. If it is the latter (the more plausible interpretation), then his view of culture is narrow; if it is the former, then his view of culture could benefit from more rigorous analytic distinctions. Among other benefits, the pragmatist action theory I advance next provides those distinctions.

### **The Proposed Pragmatist Action Framework: Components, Distinctiveness, Implications**

These polemical points regarding contemporary pragmatism just considered—that is, avoiding a dogmatism against actor-based assumptions, clearly conceptualization creativity and habit in social action, viewing cultural processes more broadly, and avoiding ontological conflationism—I now turn to contributing more positively to the development of a pragmatist action framework<sup>158</sup>.

My goal is to *re-conceptualize* and *synthesize* various pragmatist analytic categories (e.g. habit, creativity, “context,” problem-situations) in order to gain greater theoretical leverage over empirical problems involving social-emergence and social action. With respect to *re-conceptualizing* some common pragmatist analytic categories, this framework subsumes the concept of “habit” within a typology of embodied cultural knowledge (Patterson 2014); it understands “creativity” as grounded in cultural knowledge, rather than as representing the alternate end of a habit-creativity continuum; and it

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different national contexts (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson 1997; Zavisca 2005). Further, Lamont (1992) has argued that Bourdieu did not sufficiently specify the conditions under which symbolic boundaries reproduce class divisions. Specifically, they do so only when there is widespread agreement on signs and when they are reinforced by national repertoires.

<sup>158</sup> In general, this section aims to be consistent with the pragmatist ontological and epistemological principles described, including being expansive (e.g. interdisciplinary) in the search for analytic categories that are useful given my empirical goals (e.g. explaining emergence and social action) and stating conceptual definitions explicitly so that their limitations are readily pinpointed.

defines the “context” of human problem-solving on the basis of a stylized conception of Abbott’s (2016) “ecological” understanding of social structure, highlighting four key dimensions and processes (i.e. overlapping structures, material resources, cultural processes, networks of actors). Beyond these conceptual clarifications, I *synthesize* these concepts to the effect of providing an explanatory framework for understanding several social processes with which pragmatists are (or ought to be) concerned; these social processes pertain to my empirical chapters. For example, I describe how social-ecologies (Abbott 2016) can be *poised* (Padgett and Powell 2012) to particular kinds of social-emergence; this is important to chapter three which explains Uber’s emergence. On the basis of “cultural configurations” and “knowledge-activation” processes (Patterson 2014), I outline how we can construct arguments about the causal effects of culture on social action; these ideas are important to chapters four and five where I examine behavioral differences in coping with on-demand work (chapter four) and creative practices (chapter five). I also overview how cultural change occurs in this framework and how inferences can be made about such changes, and briefly describe how re-conceptualizing creativity as grounded in cultural knowledge has various theoretical benefits (e.g. adds causal structure to Peirce’s semiotic framework, helps us avoid ontological confluences common to Bourdieusian theorizing and behavioral economics).

I proceed in three sections. First, I put forth an ecological conception of social structure, based on a stylization of Abbott’s concept of linked ecologies. This section defines four key ecological dimensions and processes (e.g. cross-ecology linkages, material resources, cultural structures, networks of actors) and how they can be used to understand an ecology’s poisedness to social-emergence (central to chapter three). I also briefly outline Abbott’s conception of ecological actors (i.e. “human nature,” in his words), noting that while it usefully orients us toward thinking about human “change and stability,” its substantive conception of actors is somewhat confused. Second, I develop a richer understanding of actors and social action, largely on the basis of Patterson’s (2014) framework for understanding cultural

knowledge, rules of practice, and processes underlying cultural stability and change. This section describes how different types of cultural knowledge are acquired, how cultural knowledge can cause social action, how cultural knowledge changes, and how creativity is grounded in cultural knowledge. Third, I briefly overview the starkest differences between the proposed pragmatist framework and alternative theoretical paradigms as well as the substantive theories on nonstandard work examined in the first part of this chapter.

### **The Ecological Conception of Social Structure**

To capture the structural-dimension of social relations and experiences (i.e. “context”), I draw on Abbott’s (2016) concept of “linked ecologies.” As described above, pragmatists understand social action as oriented toward problem-solving; with respect to individuals, it is through the practice of making one’s life work that beliefs, desires, and other forms of knowledge are formed. As Whitford (2002: 344) states: “actors live their lives ‘muddling along,’ following a series of ‘habits and vital impulses’ until a ‘problem-situation’ arises, causing a desire to be formed.” Yet, there has been very little theorizing about *how problem-situations arise* and *what problem-situations entail*, particularly with respect to actors; the first is a question of social-emergence (chapter three) and the second is a question of social-ontology (chapters four and five). Problem-situations can be usefully understood as involving “social-structural dimensions” and “actor cognitions” (e.g. interpretations of problem-situational dictates); in this section I focus on clarifying my working model of the former, that is, the social-structural dimensions of problem-situations. Rather than rely on generic references to “social structures,” I develop a stylized interpretation of Abbott’s concept of “linked ecologies.”

Before developing this understanding of social structure, it is worth briefly noting why I do not draw on alternative conceptions of social structure (e.g. critical realists<sup>159</sup>, Elias' (2002) figurations<sup>160</sup>), namely Bourdieu's field<sup>161</sup>. There are several reasons to opt against using Bourdieu's field, including that it is difficult to theorize social-emergence within fields and that Bourdieu tends to presuppose a static-ness in the dispositions of actors (i.e. habitus) that is at odds with the pragmatist view that "beliefs and desires" are fluidly formed in problem-situations; the more fundamental reason, given my purposes, involves his view of relations among field actors. In the ecological view, social relations (e.g. hierarchical, horizontal) among "ecological actors" (e.g. Ubers' driver-management relations) are structured differently across ecologies; as such, relational dynamics are inductively investigated as empirical matters. In contrast, Bourdieu tends to assume that relations between field actors are fundamentally characterized by a *hierarchical structure* constituted by the actions of dominants and subordinates. Insofar as we liken the on-demand economy to a "field," it would be too restrictive to assume the nature of relationality before examining it (see chapter one's overview). For example, worker-management relations vary widely among different types of nonstandard work. As chapters four and five show, describing drivers' relations with management as defined wholly by processes of domination

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<sup>159</sup> Critical realists offer a minimal definition of emergent social structures as comprised of (1) persons, (2) cultural symbols, and (3) material artifacts (Gorski 2013). Yet, this bare definition provides no insights into the relations between the three components of "structures."

<sup>160</sup> Norbert Elias' concept of "figurations" denotes a "web of interdependences formed among human beings and which connects them: that is to say, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent persons" (Elias 1990:249). Elias' figurations offers a useful processual understanding of human interdependencies and their power dynamics, but these processes are much more well-defined in the concept of "field," which differentiates between different types of resources ("capital") and links them to broader macro-structural, class-based processes.

<sup>161</sup> Fligstein and McAdam (2012) also use the term "fields," though they modify it as *strategic action fields*, which they define as: "mesolevel social order[s] in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field" (9). There are many commonalities between their theory and Bourdieu, but they ground their perspective more in the symbolic interactionist tradition and essentially supplant the concept of "habitus" with "social skill." Yet, like Bourdieu's fields, I view it as too particularist to capture the full range of empirical patterns ecologies envision.

misses critical dimensions of workers' social experiences (e.g. various creative practices, bi-directionality of power). Hierarchical relations marked by domination are but one of many instances of social relations in the ecological view. This is more consonant with the breadth of problem-situations (e.g. economic struggles, familial conflict, romantic troubles, etc.) *and* social positions (e.g. in-group/out-group, subordinates, dominants) that humans experience<sup>162</sup>. In contrast, the concept of "ecologies" encapsulates the broad range of relational dynamics and empirical patterns that prevail in social life.<sup>163</sup>

I proceed in three steps. First, I provide Abbott's definition of "ecology" and stylize it by identifying four key dimensions most relevant to my pragmatist framework (e.g. cross-ecology linkages, material resources, cultural structures, networks of actors). Second, I highlight how this ecological conception of social structure provides a basis for theorizing how ecologies can be *poised* (Padgett and Powell 2012) to social-emergence, which is critical to chapter three's explanation of the emergence of Uber. Third, I briefly outline Abbott's conception of ecological actors (i.e. "human nature," in his words), noting that while it usefully orients us toward thinking about human "change and stability," its substantive conception of actors is somewhat confused; on this basis, the *next* section proceeds to establish a richer understanding of actor-ecological interactions and framework for explaining behavioral stability and change.

#### ***Four Key Social-Ecological Dimensions and Processes***

Abbott (2016: 34) describes an ecology as a "complex social-structure-in-the-moment [that] contains all the information of the deep past that can influence the present, either as records or some other form of

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<sup>162</sup> Relatedly, I explicitly assume that problem-situations and the social ecologies that encapsulate them *are* ubiquitous; that is, human action is *always* social action, but takes pluralist forms, as Dewey argued (1922). Thus ecologies are much more amenable to capturing this substantial social variability than fields, which has the benefit of allowing us to conceptualize actors' *social positions* in a way that helps us discern which actors are in which social positions, and how social positions shape social action.

<sup>163</sup> Bourdieu did not explicitly espouse pragmatism, yet his empirical work has a strong affinity with it, insofar as it stressed social practice, relationality, embeddedness, etc. (Emirbayer 2010). As for Abbott, he describes his work as pragmatist. Some of his positions do not strike me as pragmatist, but that is not especially relevant.

encoded historicity or—more importantly—as the present system of adjacencies and relationships that is the momentary social structure, providing the locales, facilities, and constraints that shape the possible actions of the moment.” In my stylized formulation, I highlight four key ecological dimensions and processes involving (1) linked ecologies (e.g. actor transpositions), (2) material resources, (3) cultural structures, and (4) networks of actors in sets of social positions. Importantly, these dimensions are inextricable from one another. For example, I interpret labor power as a material resource, but the extent to which it is a productive resource depends on cultural structures (e.g. skilling institutions); similarly, available material resources shape cultural structures (e.g. through job creation).

First, ecologies interact (i.e. they are linked) through a variety of mechanisms, one of which involves the transposition of actors across ecologies. As discussed below and in much more detail in chapter three, such linkages are central to Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) theory of emergence. Indeed, at the highest level of abstraction regarding social structures, there is a strong affinity between Abbott’s concept of linked ecologies and Padgett’s and Powell’s concept of multiple-networks; whereas Abbott (2016: 35-36) describes any given ecology as acting “as a flexible surround for others,” in Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012: 11) formulation, “networks are the contexts of each other.” Second, ecologies are characterized by the levels, distributions, and costs/prices of different types of material resources (e.g. capital, labor, land, materials), including technological resources (e.g. smartphones), financing (e.g. venture capital), and labor power (e.g. available workers). This includes not only the *availability* of resources, but *access* to them, which captures resource costs including asset prices (e.g. smartphone prices, auto-insurance fees, interest rates) and more subtle costs (e.g. travel costs). These considerations factored into the emergence of the on-demand economy. Fluctuations in material resources also figure into the frequency and kinds of problem-situations (e.g. anticipated versus unanticipated) that tend to beset ecological actors (see below), as chapter four shows by describing how workers often join the Uber platform due to experiencing negative shocks to their livelihood. Third, ecologies are constituted

by cultural structures that define beliefs, artifacts (e.g. status symbols), rituals, routines, norms (e.g. simple expectations, rules of practice, complex legal institutions), values, etc. (see Patterson (2014), discussed below). That is, culture is partly encoded (represented) in an ecology's artifacts (e.g. symbols, practices); it is also embodied in actors (i.e. cognitively, corporeally). Importantly, this dimension captures complex institutions (e.g. legal) that define the formal (e.g. laws, rules) and informal norms underlying market structures (e.g. extent of competition or concentration) and organizational models (e.g. worker-classification, as independent contractors, employees, etc.). These institutions also affect the problem-situations that beset actors; the weakening of social safety-net institutions heightens the severity of problem-situations for individuals (see chapter four). Of course, de facto market and organizational practices can depart from institutional prescriptions and proscriptions (i.e. decoupling; Meyer and Rowan 1977), but they are still defined by norms, albeit less formal ones. Cultural processes are also central to power dynamics (e.g. symbolic capital, status hierarchies). Fourth, ecologies are composed of networks of social actors—which includes individuals and organized collectivities (e.g. corporations, social-movements)—occupying sets of social positions. Social positions can be conceptualized differently depending on the explanandum and its empirical scope, but very broadly, they often denote access to particular levels and types of material resources (e.g. class position) and cultural knowledge (e.g. cultural position). Of course, class and cultural position are often homologous (Bourdieu 1979; 1984) but not always (e.g. high-class cultural omnivorism; Peterson and Kern 1996; Zavisca 2005). Actors are viewed as usually embedded (though to varying degrees) in multiple ecologies and engaged in continuous transactions across those ecologies each of which involves unique situational dictates (e.g. required conversational scripts), transactions that alter the actors and their ecologies. Importantly, actors can be displaced across different kinds of ecologies to different degrees of successful adaption (or failure); for example, among its other findings, chapter four shows how Uber drivers with formal-educational experiences (e.g. undergraduate and post-graduate education) tend to experience



“personal disorder” (or “hysteresis”; Bourdieu 2000) as a result of mismatches between their “career values” (see below) and the situational dictates of on-demand work. Finally, I sometimes use the term “resource landscape” to refer to the range of ecological “inputs” (e.g. material or cultural) that actors can mobilize; it depends mainly “material resources” and “cultural structures.”

### ***Detecting the Poisedness of Ecologies to the Emergence of Particular Novelties***

Defining social structures as ecologies characterized by linkages, material resources, cultural processes, and actors provides a basis for understanding the *poisedness* (Padgett and Powell 2012) of ecologies to the social-emergence; chapter three fleshes out this line of theorizing in explaining the emergence of Uber. By understanding the available material resources (e.g. technologies, financing, labor power) and cultural structures (e.g. democratic-institutional channels for consumer activists, beliefs about government and technology), we can understand both the *types* of novelty that are likely to emerge and how likely it is that any given kind of social-emergence will occur. Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) “multiple-networks” framework gives a concrete dynamism to Abbott’s (2016) concept of linked ecologies by specifying how interactions between cross-network (i.e. cross-ecology) actors with varied characteristics (what they call “skills and relational protocols”) can result in innovations; this idea is applied to the Silicon Valley entrepreneurial cluster where concentrations of technology, venture capital, and technical skill were easily accessed by Uber. Moreover, chapter three shows how alienated labor (e.g. partly due to rentier practices of taxicab medallion owners) and political-institutional vulnerability (e.g. heightened post-recession political need for job creation, concerns that opposing Uber would be publicly perceived as tantamount to opposing innovation, knotty legal-technical challenges, etc.) also poised the U.S. to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model. Based on a pragmatist synthesis of Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) theory of emergence and social-movement theories (e.g. political process model; McAdam et al. 2001), chapter three develops an account of emergence which counters the misimpression, especially among critical realists and analytical

sociologists, that pragmatist insights are limited to questions of individual-level social action. It would be difficult to capture this *poisedness to emergence* using Bourdieu's conception of social structures as fields largely because of Bourdieu's emphasis on social-reproductive dynamics. While Bourdieu did note that overlapping fields can constitute a source of social change, to my knowledge did little sustained theorizing about how fields change or emerge.

### ***A Note on "Ecological Actors"***

Finally, it is important to make a note about Abbott's (2016) conception of human actors, which I argue is limited in its explanatory power and requires development (see next section). As part of Abbot's processualist program he offers a conception of "human nature" (i.e. "the 'thingness' of humans,' as he describes it) that centers on the question of whether humans "admit change or insist on constancy," which he argues is the only dimension of human nature that is "compatible with a social ontology that is based completely on processual principles" (23)<sup>164</sup>. He defines four aspects of human nature: (1) historicity (i.e. "sheer mass of experience that individuals carry forward in time" (5); that has three "modes": corporeal, memorial, recorded (31)); (2) "organized around ideals that guides us as we live from day to day" (32); (3) optativity ("capacity to envision alternative futures" (31)); and (4) "perpetual dialogue of habituation and novelty." While conceptualizing actors around questions of "change and constancy" is useful in my view, it is less clear how useful these particular "aspects" are. The fourth dimension ("perpetual dialogue of habituality and novelty") is fraught with the same conceptual confusions regarding the alteration of habit and creativity discussed above. More importantly, the significance of first three points seems fundamentally intertwined with *cultural processes* about which Abbott says little. For example, his notion of "optativity" is a biological assertion about our cognitive capacities, which is certainly useful, but the *form* that it takes is what is

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<sup>164</sup> He notes that this conception of human nature is pragmatist in the sense that it aims to capture how "assumptions about humanity [are used] in practice to found our various inquiries into the human condition," (19)

sociologically important and on that, Abbott provides no insight. Regarding the memorial component of historicity, several questions are unanswered: what types of cultural knowledge fill “memory slots,” whose memory slots do they fill, and how are they implicated (e.g. activated) in social action?

Thus, while an understanding of social structures as *ecologies* having particular properties usefully provides ways of understanding structural poisedness to social-emergence and a range of relations between actors (e.g. domination, cooperative), its conception social action is substantively thin, even as it properly orients us toward constancy and change” (unlike Bourdieu’s static field actors). As noted above in our discussion of contemporary pragmatist insights on social action, I assume that a pragmatist action theory is most useful when it meets at least two criteria: (1) offers some general explanatory insights into *why* actors behave the way they do in particular conditions, insights that are substantive enough to derive some general empirical hypotheses (henceforth Action Theory Criterion 1; e.g. when habits fail, actors act creatively), and (2) provides a set of clearly-defined concepts that explain *how* actors transact in particular social interactions (Action Theory Criterion 2; e.g. particular types of actors with particular habits will act creatively in particular problem-situations). Importantly, absent these criteria, even a well-defined ecological conception of social structure does not enrich the pragmatist understanding of “problem-situations” because problem-situations do not simply *beset* actors (with some exceptions), but they *command actors’ attentions* in ways that necessarily involve *human-interpretive processes*. Thus, similar ecologies will generate different problem-situations for different actors, partly on the basis that material resources and cultural knowledge is unevenly shared across individuals. It is this unevenness in *cultural knowledge* that is particularly important to theorize given my purposes; chapters four and five both argue that Uber drivers’ varied social backgrounds produce cultural heterogeneity that shapes their social action. To develop a richer understanding of social action at the level of cultural pragmatics, I turn to Patterson’s (2014) framework of culture.

## Actor-Ecological Interactions: Explaining Behavioral Stability and Change

Abbott's (2016) processualism usefully orients us to thinking about human action in terms of change and stability in streams of action, but it offers little in the way of providing a causal-explanatory framework for understanding *how* different groups act in different circumstances; as a corrective to this, this section draws on Patterson's (2014) mapping of the different types of unevenly shared cultural knowledge and the social-psychological mechanisms through which actors draw on that knowledge to solve everyday problems. Developing such explanatory tools will be critical to understanding how Uber drivers cope with the situational dictates of the on-demand economy (chapter four) and engage in different kinds of creative action (chapter five).

With the goal of synthesizing Patterson's conception of culture and social action with ecological theorizing, I conceive of cultural knowledge as encoded in an ecology's cultural artifacts (e.g. symbols, practices) and embodied in an ecology's actors (e.g. cognitive processes such as memory), i.e. the third and fourth ecological dimensions identified above. Importantly, Patterson emphasizes that knowledge is "cultural" only when it is *shared* among a group of people, and this shared-ness<sup>165</sup> of cultural knowledge is what provides the basis for people to meaningfully interact with one another via "rules of practice." These rules of practice not only represent particular forms of cultural knowledge but they also underlie how individuals "choose the cultural knowledge they need, and what they do with it" (2014: 16). The aspects of his framework I utilize most involve: (1) a typology of cultural knowledge, including some remarks about how such knowledge is acquired; (2) knowledge-activation mechanisms culled from the social psychology literature; and (3) his concept of cultural configurations.

In order to develop an explanatory framework for social action from which some causal propositions about behavior can be derived (particularly useful to chapters four and five), I examine four

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<sup>165</sup> In my reading, this suggests that human preferences and beliefs have a *shared* (cultural) component, but they also have a non-shared (idiosyncratic) component, which in my framework results in non-systematic differences.

dimensions of social action: (1) how different types of cultural knowledge are acquired; (2) how cultural knowledge can cause social action; (3) how cultural knowledge changes; and (4) how creativity is grounded in culture. As a brief roadmap, in the first section, I first argue for replacing vague conceptualizations of “habit” with a more well-defined and differentiated conceptualization of (embodied) cultural knowledge; such distinctions are particularly useful because they map to identifiable channels of knowledge-acquisition. In the second section, the key point is that knowledge-activation mechanisms can be analytically linked to group-level social-interactive patterns to derive useful behavioral propositions that are generalizable (middle-range) and concrete. In the third section, I briefly describe how actor-ecological interactions result in mutual transformations over time, and how we can make inferences about those transformations. In the fourth and final section, I re-conceptualize creativity by grounding it in cultural knowledge; I also identify three kinds of creativity (elaborated on in chapter five), describe how this conception of creativity can give causal structure to Peirce’s semiotic framework, and note that it also helps us avoid excessive ontological conflation as often occurs in Bourdieusian theorizing and in behavioral economics.

### **How Are Different Types of Cultural Knowledge Acquired (Embodied)?**

A critical step to drawing causal connections between culture and social action is recognizing that different kinds of information are cognitively acquired by humans through different social processes; Patterson (2014) provides this typological foundation by specifying three domains of cultural knowledge provides: (1) *declarative* (knowledge of facts and events; e.g. language, beliefs, conventions), (2) *procedural* (know-how or skills learned through practice, and that make inferences using declarative knowledge), and (3) *evaluative* (values and norms). Patterson notes that this is but one typology of cultural knowledge that could be constructed. While he is more concerned with elucidating a fairly thorough conception of the range of cultural processes implicated in social action than he is with explicating the inter-relationships between these domains of knowledge, he sketches some of these

inter-relationships, noting for example how informal norms and values are related (they can reinforce each other; see below on personal norms) and how procedural knowledge is constructed partly based on inferences about declarative knowledge. Chapter four further develops these relationships by showing how (declarative) beliefs about the labor market and (procedural) conversational scripts can shape how Uber drivers evaluate their experiences in the on-demand economy. In this section, my goal is to (1) summarize Patterson's description of the primary domains of cultural knowledge, (2) show how it provides conceptual clarity which is lacking in the use of the term "habit," and (3) to point out how different kinds of knowledge have distinct cognitive acquisition channels. The next section builds on these ideas to outline a framework for explaining social action.

Patterson's describes (1) declarative, (2) procedural, and (3) evaluative kinds of cultural knowledge. He describes declarative knowledge as centered on "facts and events" (e.g. beliefs about what is happening in the world, ideologies about key drivers in social events, rituals such as religious practices). Consistent with my formulation above, Patterson notes that declarative knowledge can be internally embodied (e.g. cognitively held beliefs) or externally represented (e.g. artifacts). Procedural knowledge is facilitative, that is, it involves know-how and skills, often applied routinely and unconsciously (e.g. by rote memory). Importantly (see below), Patterson notes that "unlike declarative knowledge, [procedural knowledge] can rarely be explained but has to be learned through practice." For my purpose, evaluative cultural knowledge is particularly important; it entails values and norms. Patterson describes two ways in which values function: in (1) particularized domains (i.e. particularized values) and in (2) more deeply internalized, existential ways (i.e. ultimate values). The former orients behavior instrumentally with respect to more concrete, specific orientations, such as viewing bigger homes as more favorable to smaller homes, and hence bidding more money toward bigger homes. The latter (i.e. ultimate values) "define the ideal, most abstract conception of the desirable and even what makes life worth living" (Patterson 2014: 13). Both values orient behavior based on how they evaluate

objects of experience, both in terms of the *favor/disfavor* they associate with objects and the *salience* of those associations. Norms are of three types: (1) injunctive, (2) observational, (3) personal. The former two are more widely used in the social sciences; they entail situational-behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions regarding how we ought to act (i.e. injunctive) and how it is “normal” to act (i.e. based on observations of others’ behaviors in particular situations). Yet, it is the third type of norm that is particularly useful for my purposes, particularly to chapter four (on behavioral coping). Personal norms involve internalized “feelings of moral obligation” (Schwartz 1977: 221) most directly tied to the need to act in accordance with one’s values (see Rouben and Larsen 2015; Stern et al. 1999; Kallgren et al. 2000). Insofar as injunctive and observational norms shape individual practices (which in turn shape values), then personal norms are related to these other evaluative-cultural components, but indirectly. Personal norms are generally understood as situationally-activated (see Schwartz 1977), but the extent to which this is so is best understood as an empirical question. I draw on this idea, for example, in chapter four, which finds that college-educated drivers’ personal career-norms can, under some conditions tied to knowledge-activation processes (see below), impel them to what to leave the on-demand economy as quickly as possible and to instead find more “mainstream” work that will allow them to apply their formal-educational training.

From a pragmatist perspective, this is most useful because allows us to replace poorly defined concepts like “habit” and “ideals” (Abbott 2016) with more analytically well-defined conception of knowledge. Indeed, any of “habits” conceptualizations can be subsumed within this cultural-knowledge typology. For example, Dewey’s (1922b) understanding of habit (i.e. practical expertise) is best conceived of as *procedural* cultural knowledge; James’ (1904) understanding of it as a “stock of old opinions” can be conceived of as *declarative* cultural knowledge; and Peirce writes about “habits of the mind” (Peirce 1878), suggesting a much broader conception, quite similar to Gross’ (2009, 2010) in my reading (see above). Further, typologizing cultural knowledge in this way adds clarity to Abbott’s

discussion of the “mass of experience” that makes up “historicality” (see above), as well as the second (“ideals”) and third (“optativity”) aspects of “human nature” that Abbott identifies. Further, cultural knowledge captures the human capacity for “reflexivity” (Beck 1992) and “creativity” (Joas 1996) (see below on creativity). Rather than presupposing that all types of habit function in the same way, we can recognize important distinctions, such as procedural types of “habit” entailing what Bourdieu considered a “feel for the game” whereas evaluative types of “habit” entailing a “feel for what’s right and wrong.”

Beyond conceptual clarity regarding habit, these analytic distinctions are useful because they correspond to distinct channels of knowledge acquisition. For example, procedural know-how is much more likely to be acquired “at home, in one’s community and personal network, and on the job” (Patterson 2014: 11), and more generally through repetition via behavioral reinforcements, particularly during formative years of development; whereas personal norms about careers are likely substantially shaped by one’s formal-educational interactions, such as whether or not they attended college. Relatedly, much has been written about *endogenizing* habits, beliefs, desires, etc. (e.g. to “fields”), but establishing *what* is being endogenized is the often-skipped first step. Such an orientation provides a basis for understanding the “habits” that prevail in different work-organizations, which will be critical to understanding how on-demand workers respond to the problem-situations that inhere to on-demand work.

### ***How Can Cultural Knowledge Cause Social Action?***

Understanding how different kinds of cultural knowledge is acquired (as we did above) is the critical step to tracing behavioral differences across individuals to group-level processes involving class, gender, race, and other analytic categories. That is, if we (1) understand *how* different types of “habits” are formed along the temporal, normative, and emotional dimensions of biographical experiences, and if we (2) trace cultural knowledge to group-level processes (e.g. class, gender) which organize social experiences



and hence knowledge acquisition patterns, then it follows that we will be able to move beyond lower-order micro-interactional behavioral propositions characteristic of some relational sociology (e.g. Collins 2005; Zelizer 2005) and toward higher-level (i.e. middle-range) generalizations about social behavior (see Fine's (2005) comment on Collins (2005)). It is important, however, to maintain explanatory concreteness, and to that end, a useful action theory would specify social mechanisms through which cultural knowledge can shape social action. In this section, I first briefly outline those (knowledge-activation) mechanisms based on Patterson (2014); second, I identify how these knowledge-activation mechanisms can be analytically linked to group-level cultural formation processes, captured by the concept of "cultural configurations"; third, I describe how knowledge-activation mechanisms and cultural configurations can be used to derive behavioral propositions; and fourth, I illustrate the model by briefly referencing empirical findings from chapter four.

Patterson (2014) culls such mechanisms from the social-psychological literature (see Andersen et al. 2007), identifying four knowledge-activation processes through which cultural knowledge is retrieved and regulated: (1) *availability* of cultural knowledge in memory; (2) its *accessibility* or the degree to which it can be automatically activated; (3) its *application* (or applicability) to particular situations; and (4) *self-regulation* of the prior three processes (e.g. inhibition, adjustment) (see Andersen et al. 2007; cited in Patterson 2014).

On the basis of these mechanisms and empirical observations of social-interactional patterns, we can infer *relatively* stable cultural formations to sets of individuals, or what Patterson refers to as "cultural configurations," defined as: "the availability and activation by networks of persons of any ensemble of cultural knowledge and practices structured around a core set of values and norms motivated by a common set of interests, goals, or needs" (20)<sup>166</sup>. Patterson notes that individuals have

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<sup>166</sup> Patterson adds that even though individuals tend to have primary cultural configurations, they have access to multiple configurations and are often able to switch between them.

*multiple* cultural configurations and are usually able to shift between them, and in this way, the concept has affinity with work on role-sets (Merton 1957), multiple selves (Goffman 1959), multiple subjectivities (McNay 1999), and hybrid habituses (Decoteau 2013). The number of configurations available to an actor (i.e. “configural availability”) and the cultural configuration “most crucial to [the actor’s] identity, emotional security, normal functioning...” (Patterson 2014: 21) (i.e. “cultural focus”) give the concept more specific causal power. I interpret this latter concept of “cultural focus” as comparable to Bourdieu’s “layering” of habitus into secondary and “specific” (primary) habituses (Bourdieu 2000; Wacquant 2013; Decoteau 2013).

Together, cultural configurations concept and knowledge-activation mechanisms provide a basis for constructing causal arguments about culture’s effects on social action, precisely because we can observe that cultural knowledge is unevenly shared, relatively stable (e.g. often generationally transmitted), and often clustered around sub-groups (despite the complexity and dynamism of these processes). This way we can trace group-level behavioral differences to relatively stable patterns of interaction rather than totalizing analytic categories like class, race, and gender. By recognizing that sets of multiple cultural configurations vary across individuals, we can derive and test a range of interesting behavioral propositions about whether actors in a given problem-situation will act in any number of ways, including (a) shifting between cultural configurations, (b) projecting their cultural knowledge (e.g. values) to alter their problem-situations, (c) engaging more intensely in a situation, (d) changing one’s course of action in some discrete way (e.g. selecting<sup>167</sup> out of the situation, re-structuring one’s ties), etc.

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<sup>167</sup> Participants at the University of Chicago’s summer 2015 conference on pragmatism explicitly lamented the fact that contemporary pragmatists have spent nearly no time developing an understanding of how actors *select* into problem-situations. That is, while pragmatists and those working in economic and cultural sociology often critique alternative paradigms for exogenizing beliefs and preferences (often valid critiques), pragmatists have themselves tended to exogenize problem-situations.

How might these ideas apply to making sense of Uber drivers' social experiences in the on-demand economy (chapters four and five)? Given their social heterogeneity (see chapter one), we can make analytical distinctions between different drivers on several characteristics, positing that particular clusters of workers are more likely to share particular sets of cultural configurations than others given similar biographical experiences (e.g. educational attainment). For example, chapter four finds that while most college-educated Uber drivers held strong personal career-norms that tended to impel them to prefer jobs through which they could apply their educational skills over jobs through which they could not do so, these drivers varied substantially in the extent to which these personal norms were activated; these knowledge-activation differences were tied to differences in knowledge-applicability (e.g. whether degrees were applicable due to credentialing standards) and knowledge-activation (e.g. tied to family structures and friendship networks) mechanisms. In this way, the approach provides specific explanatory insight into when role-conflict (Merton 1957) does and does not occur and when individuals manage to seamlessly switch between their cultural configurations. It also leaves open interesting theoretical questions like: does greater configural availability serve as an advantage in when coping with on-demand work or can it contribute to "hysteresis" (Bourdieu 2000) or "biographical breakdown" (Beck 1999)?

### ***Cultural Change and Inference-Making***

Above, we have assumed that cultural knowledge—whether it is encoded in ecological artifacts or embodied in actors—is characterized by a degree of relative stability. Yet, central to the pragmatist understanding of action is that actor-ecological interactions, over time, result in mutual transformation. In this section I first briefly how the proposed pragmatist framework conceives of change and next I (also briefly) describe how we can make inferences about such change.

It is the pragmatic usage of cultural knowledge in everyday ecological interactions that Patterson argues is the "arena of short-run use, reproduction, and change, in which actors create

situational relations and cultural processes...” (22). This is congruent with the pragmatist view that new problem-situations that are experienced as “indeterminate” (Whitford 2002), “inchoate” (Winship 2015b), “reflective” (Dewey 1907) or “extra-mental” (Dewey 1909) induce actors to alter their behavior, thereby reconstituting their cultural configurations (e.g. configuration shifts, selecting out of situation, etc.) *through their practices*. It is also congruent with Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012: 3) biochemical metaphor of actors: “we are just a complex set of chemical reactions. Chemicals come into us; chemicals go out of us; chemicals move around and are transformed within us.” Similarly, ecologies are *altered* through actors’ transactions with them in ways that sometimes result in the emergence of new ecological problem-situations, within which new “irritations,” (Peirce 1878), “unexpected shocks” (Dewey 1910b), or “jolts” or “disturbances” (James 1904) surface to subsequently induce alterations in cultural configurations.

Thus, social change occurs through reciprocal actor-ecological interactions and the mutual construction (transformations) that they entail; yet, how can we make useful inferences about ongoing mutually-constructive processes? In accordance with pragmatist instrumentalism, depending on the empirical problem and the social processes being examined, we can make assumptions of varying degrees of restrictiveness about the social characteristics of actors and ecologies, particularly their fixity over time; these assumptions are needed to construct useful theories and empirical strategies. For example, in chapter three, I am primarily concerned with social-emergence processes, and thus I mostly assume organizational entrepreneurs have a fixed “repertoire of action” and focus on how that repertoire interacted with ecological conditions to result in the emergence of the on-demand economy. Toward the end of that chapter, I shift focus and attend to the ways in which Uber’s ecological-interactions also alter its repertoire, thereby viewing Uber’s repertoire as malleable. In chapters four and five, I assume fixity in the ecology (i.e. on-demand economy) and attend to alterations at the individual actor-level. In chapter four, my goal is to understand how actor’s cope (functionally or not)

with social-situational displacement into the on-demand economy, and thus it is important to view actors as *loosely* constituted to understand alterations in their cultural configurations. In chapter five, my goal is to understand actors' *creative actions*, and thus it is important to view *some aspects* of actors' cultural configurations as fixed in order to understand how they impel creativity in ways that might alter other aspects of their cultural configurations.

### ***Grounding Creativity in Culture***

In this final section, I offer a re-conceptualization of creativity on the basis that it is grounded in cultural knowledge. As alluded to above in my overview of contemporary pragmatist action theories, viewing actors as alternating between habit and creativity is problematic because it presupposes that creativity is orthogonal to the cognitive-cultural residues of an actor's biographical experiences; the more useful conceptualization of creative thought and action is that it is itself a kind of cultural knowledge. This conceptualization is intuitive; we can easily invoke examples of how creativity is grounded in culture, as in how different educational programs inculcate in students different degrees of creativity, or how acquiring knowledge from disparate domains often induces creative insights (a staple mechanism in the innovation and diffusion literature). Given that pragmatists often implicitly define creativity as "not habit," vague conceptualizations of habit have in turn contributed to vague conceptualizations of creativity; as such, by subsuming habit within a more well-defined conceptualization of cultural knowledge (as we did above), we can pave the way for more clearly understanding how creativity functions in social interactions. Importantly, this is not to say that actors are not often beset by new problem-situations that impel them to "experiment" toward a solution<sup>168</sup>; that is, *extreme* ecological events (e.g. starvation) can, in a sense, level out the effects of cultural differences among actors, in

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<sup>168</sup> As Muller et al. (2015) have argued by using a *map* metaphor, actors test their *incomplete* (cultural) knowledge in problem-situations by acting on it, and in circumstances in which this *enacted* knowledge results in dissatisfaction (itself determined on the basis of cultural knowledge), they will revise their strategies in ways dependent on present stocks of cultural knowledge.

which case more *psychological or biological* conceptions of behavior may be most useful. Yet, with most social vicissitudes (e.g. unanticipated job loss, adverse health event, etc.), actors' experimentation *is* grounded in "habits" of thought and action, or more precisely, cultural configurations.

In this section, I first briefly overview three kinds of creativity, discussed in detail in chapter five; second, I describe how grounding creativity in cultural knowledge can give causal structure to semiotic frameworks; three, on a more theoretical level, I briefly note that this understanding of creativity helps us avoid the excessive ontological conflation that is generally found in Bourdieu and strands of behavioral economics.

### **Kinds of Creativity:**

Thus, in this conceptualization, the question becomes *not* have actors crossed *thresholds of creativity*, but rather, *how* actors are re-organizing their lives through their continuous transactions. Yet, if actors are always being creative, then how is creativity a useful concept? The key here is to focus on different *kinds of creativity* as emanating from different cultural configurations, material resources, and problem-situations. Chapter five distinguishes between three kinds of human creativity: (1) slack creativity, (2) responsive creativity, and (3) projective creativity. Slack creativity is an analytic category derived from the behavioral economics literature (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013); it refers to actors who are unconstrained by feeling they have too little, such that they are able to think abstractly and utilize their logical processing and fluid intelligence. Chapter five critiques the use of this category as only useful for in situations of extreme deprivation. Responsive creativity is the most commonly used conception of creativity in the sociological-literature (Tuan 1999; Mullins 1999; Weems 2000; Chambers 2006; Smith 2007; Chang 2010; Brown-Gaulde 2011; Han 2012; Lamont and Hall 2012; Lamont and Mizrachi 2012; Edin and Shaefer 2016); it captures how creativity can be *triggered* by new or enduring situational *constraints* and how actors *maintain* their interests or goals in the face of those constraints. Much of creative action follows this processual, adaptive, evolutionary logic; indeed, classical pragmatists like

Dewey attended to this oft-observed pattern of action. Projective creativity is among the least examined (see Dominguez 2011; Fosse 2015; Marshall 2015; Patterson 2015) modes of action. As I argue in chapter five, it helps us understand how creative action can result in flows of action that alter the kinds of problem-situations into which actors will tend to select. Rather than being (somewhat mechanically) triggered by situational constraints, projective creativity tends to be observed when the problem-situation is harmonious with the actors' sense of normality *and* avails the actor to opportunities to *actualize* (Goldstein 1934) personal projects or capacities. While responsive creativity tends to *reinforce* (or maintain) social relations and experiences—although it can sometimes lead to transformative experiences vis-à-vis mechanisms involving emotional achievement (Yang 2000)—projective creativity tends to *transform* (or alter) the status quo. Chapter five develops these and other ideas.

#### **Adding Causal Structure to Semiotic Frameworks:**

Grounding creativity in cultural configuration has broader theoretical benefits; it sharpens the explanatory power of semiotic frameworks. In the case of Charles Peirce's semiotics framework, as Tavory and Timmerman have noted (2013: 689), "Peirce's semiotics does not tell us why, in a specific case, meaning making operates as it does, only to think of meaning making's constituent parts." As described above, for Peirce, meaning-making has three parts: (1) a *sign* (e.g. a word) which signifies an (2) *object* (e.g. idea, material artifact, etc.), and an (3) *interpretant* which is the *effect* produced by the interpreter's interpretation of the sign-object (the sign-object also constrains the range of interpretants) and which is itself a sign in a potentially extended chain of meaning-making. By viewing actors as having different sets of cultural configurations, we can ask: how does the *interpretant* vary in situations where the *sign-object* is the same but the actor's circumstance is different (i.e. different cultural configurations and problem-situations)? In certain cases, the sign-object can have a commanding "power" over the interpretant. In such situations, actors' behaviors are best viewed as malleable to the power of the objects with which they are interacting; creativity in these situations is best understood as *responsive*.

Yet, in other cases, the actor (interpreter) possesses a commanding power over the interpretant. In such situations, actors' behaviors are best viewed as projective of the actors' *relatively fixed* cultural configurations; creativity in these situations is best understood as projective. The key difference is the extent to which an actor is oriented to *changing their circumstance* (projective creativity) versus being *changed to their circumstance* (responsive creativity); both are culturally grounded. For example, variation in religious belief can substantially shape the extent to which ones' cultural configurations remain relatively fixed against changing circumstance versus changing with respect to changing circumstances. If we conceive of the on-demand economy as a complex system of sign-objects, then we can examine how Uber drivers with different cultural configurations interpret the sign-objects that they experience with different degrees of projective versus responsive creativity. Broadly, such theorizing contribute to developing causal<sup>169</sup> arguments about the interpretants that result from subject-object interactions. Chapter five develops these ideas, particularly in its conclusion.

**Avoiding Excessive Ontological Conflation:**

Finally, an additional benefit of this pragmatist conception of creativity is that it helps us avoid the excessive ontological conflation in which Bourdieu and behavioral economists indulge. Bourdieu's (1984) attempt to reconcile the subjectivity-objectivity antinomy overworks its conceptual tools by failing to recognize how cultural configurations—within which mental and bodily dispositions denoted by “habitus” are but one part—create scope for creativity even among workers who are presumably “subordinates” in “fields.” Further, Bourdieu obscures the processes through which hierarchical systems of sign-objects can “coerce” “subordinate” actors into adopting *favorable* dispositions (i.e. ones better construed as useful rather than inequality-generating), processes which cannot plausibly be interpreted as instances of social domination, despite their coercive character. This stems from forcing ontological

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<sup>169</sup> Weberian interpretivism has often strayed from its original tradition of endowing the *verstehen* of actors with causal force.



correspondences onto qualitatively distinct phenomena (Dewey 1922). Behavioral economists are liable to the same unwarranted ontological conflation, but in the form of excessive psychological reductionism, which obscures the ways in which particular forms of creative action can operate in conditions of marginalization, stigma, and scarcity. Mullainathan & Shafir (2013) present the most convincing case for some of the benefits of this reductionist approach; while it is useful in explaining a range of behaviors observed particularly in experimental settings, it misses how culture implicates itself even in conditions of scarcity. To be clear, this reductionism is problematic *not because* it is such, but because it obscures cultural processes that help explain *robustness* of human creativity and how it is oriented.

### **Clarifying How this Pragmatist Synthesis Differs from Theoretical Alternatives**

Finally, having proposed this synthesized pragmatist framework's main components, general theoretical benefits, and pointed to their specific application to my empirical chapters (i.e. emergence, coping, creativity), it is useful to ask: what are the starkest differences between this pragmatist framework and (1) higher-level" theoretical paradigms and the (2) substantive theories on nonstandard work (i.e. macro-structural historicist, Cornell School, Beck's "individualization" thesis) examined in the first part of this chapter? I provide a very brief statement to both aspects of this question.

Consistent with all strains of pragmatism, this pragmatist framework's epistemological (e.g. fallibilism) and ontological (e.g. skepticism toward general social laws) foundations distinguish it from absolutist forms of empiricism and rationalism (see James<sup>170</sup> (1904)), as well as positivism and analytical sociology (Dewey 1922a<sup>171</sup>); in these ways, the framework is similar to various forms of realism (e.g. Popper's critical rationalism, entity realists, scientific realism, critical realism, etc.). Usefully

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<sup>170</sup> He criticized empiricism's excessive materialism and rationalism's indulgent use of abstractions and formalisms.

<sup>171</sup> See above on Dewey's "pluralism realism."

distinguishing between pragmatism and differences strands of realism is knotty because the latter are so varied; further, my view is that the terms “realism<sup>172</sup>” and “scientific” is so inconsistently defined in the literature that, unless clear philosophical definitions are established (which is of course not my interest), these terms are usually best understood as honorific. Yet, my framework is much more consistent with Dewey’s “pluralist realism” than Peirce’s variant (although both reject a correspondence theory of truth common to most realisms), mainly in Dewey’s (and James’) broad view of scientific inquiry and the greater contingency he accords to the products of actor-ecological interactions (e.g. Peirce saw more historical convergence in knowledge). In this latter sense, like critical realism, this pragmatist framework differs from Bourdieu’s ontological conflation (described above); yet unlike critical realism, it places greater substantive emphasis on how social interactions are constituted by relatively *stable* cultural processes involving habit (i.e. cultural configurations) and its ontological foundation is more minimalist<sup>173</sup>. It also has strong similarities with Charles Tilly’s relational realism, as well as social-movement theorists who draw on the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006; see chapter three). Neil Gross (2010: 345) has argued similarly about Tilly, writing: “[for Tilly] there are no macro-level functional imperatives that completely predetermine outcomes, no tight rigging of every feature or even most features of society to a singular systemic logic, and hence no historical teleologies...this metatheoretical position—this commitment to recognizing the plurality of social dynamics and the in-principle openness of history—derived...from an opposition to reductionism.”

This “plurality of dynamics” and rejection of “macro-level functional imperatives” is partly what distinguishes this pragmatist framework from the above-discussed “theoretical alternatives” to

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<sup>172</sup> For example, it is often said the assumption of a “mind-independent reality” is common to all realisms, but to my understanding it is not quite clear what this refers. While Hacking (1983) views pragmatism as anti-realist (e.g. pragmatist-instrumentalist anti-realism toward theories), it is not clear to me that the same pragmatism is anti-realist with respect to objects. Dewey (1922a: 356) described his position as “pluralist realist” by stating: “[t]hings are things, not mental states. Hence the realism. But the things are indefinitely many. Hence the pluralism.”

<sup>173</sup> One might view pragmatism as bridging lines of theory between critical realism and Bourdieu.

understanding nonstandard work. With respect to the Marxian historicist perspective, while the logic of capital accumulation can certainly fit into a pragmatist theory of emergence, it is in no sense viewed as singularly determinative of social-emergence. Similarly, pragmatism in no way obfuscates processes of within-class conflict (e.g. bourgeois entrepreneurs and incumbent interests; e.g. Uber versus Taxicab industry). It also views the growth of alienated labor as rooted in reversible, organizational-level processes (e.g. taxicab medallion-owner's rentier practices in relation to drivers can be altered through regulation). As chapter three demonstrates, pragmatism opens possibilities for capturing processes (e.g. political-legal battles over worker-classification) implicated in the on-demand economy's emergence that are not within the theoretical purview of Marxian-historicist alternatives. With respect to Beck's "reflexive modernity," the extent to which culture is organized around class, race, gender, and other social categories is essentially an empirical matter. As chapter four demonstrates, this allows pragmatism to account for differences between Uber drivers—largely based on cultural configurations organized around social categories—in how they cope with on-demand work. Such within-group differences are poorly captured by Beck's individualization theory. With respect to the Cornell School's meso-level, class-based perspective, pragmatism also makes less restrictive assumptions about labor-capital relations and tends to view actors' creative capacities as more resilient to ecological-situational dictates than Marxian theories. Essentially, the extent to which workers' creative capacities are constrained by work-organizations is purely an empirical matter for pragmatists. Chapter five bears out the benefits of approaching questions of worker-creativity inductively.

## **Chapter Three – Taking the State for a Ride: The Emergence of the On-Demand Economy**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, I examine the social-emergence of the on-demand organizational model by focusing on the case of Uber, founded in the United States in March 2009. Uber's emergence unfolded over a

process of mutual social-construction between organizational entrepreneurs and their social ecology. In order to understand these entrepreneurial-ecological interactions, I focus on two transactional (reciprocal) processes: (1) how particular sets of ecological properties *poised* the United States to the emergence of Uber's on-demand organizational model, and (2) how Uber's particular social actions—what I call its “mode of claim-making” or its “repertoire of contention” (Tilly 1985, 1996)—successfully resulted in the genesis and reproduction of its organizational model. I synthesize Padgett's and Powell's (2012) concept of poisedness with insights about dynamics of contention (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tarrow and Tilly 2006) and resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977) from the literature on the emergence of social movements, all within a pragmatist framework that highlights the *continuous transactions* between actors—understood through their “collective habits” and creative experimentation (Gross 2010)—and their social-ecologies.

Related research has focused on the on-demand economy's general characteristics (Hall and Krueger 2015; Schor et al. 2016), its size (Farrell and Greig 2016; Katz and Krueger 2016; Hathaway and Muro 2016), and its effects (e.g. Cohen et al. 2016); yet, that there has been no account of its emergence is a missed opportunity to gather useful empirical and theoretical insights. On the empirical level, understanding the processes through which the on-demand economy emerged advances our understanding of both its social consequences and its historical significance. As Stinchcombe (1965) argued decades ago, there is always some degree of path-dependence between the genesis of an organizational form and its subsequent practices. To the extent that this path-dependence is strong in a particular empirical phenomenon, then investigating the emergence of that phenomenon is critical to understand how it affects human well-being. Thus, if the on-demand economy's effects are important (as chapter one substantiated), then so are its causes. Yet, even if in a particular empirical instance path-dependence is weak, then grounding the on-demand economy's social-emergence “within [its] time-place limits” (Tilly 1984: 60) sheds light on its historical significance, particularly whether it should be

understood as, on the one hand, constituting a force of discontinuous social change within the analytically-specified timeframe that bounds the incidence of its emergence, or if, on the other hand, it should be understood as part of more incremental historical processes (see Kuhn (1962) for relevant distinctions). Based on Padgett's and Powell's (2012: 5) framework for understanding emergence, the on-demand economy's social reverberations and its historical significance bear directly on whether it changed "the ways things are done" (what they call "invention") or merely "improve[d] on existing things" (i.e. "innovation").

On a theoretical level, investigating the on-demand economy offers a rich opportunity to develop a pragmatist framework for understanding social-emergence in at least two ways. First, inasmuch as pragmatists are interested in understanding how cultural configurations (e.g. habits) change over the course of actor-ecological interactions, then pragmatists' (rightful) insistence on the oft-usefulness of viewing human preferences and beliefs as endogenous to problem-situations (e.g. Whitford 2002) is incomplete without also sometimes attending to how and why problem-situations emerge.<sup>174</sup> That is, not theorizing how ecologies emerge is tantamount to not theorizing the social-construction of human preferences, beliefs, and psychological constraints. To this end, pragmatism could benefit from Padgett's and Powell's (2012) theorizing about these issues. Their concept of interacting multiple-domains strongly evokes Abbott's (2016) view of "linked ecologies" (as well as Bourdieu's work on overlapping fields), but they augment "linked ecologies" by specifying mechanisms for understanding how ecologies change via actor-transpositions and constructive feedback processes and specifying which actors are most likely to trigger social changes (i.e. multifunctional, cross-domain actors). As argued below, Padgett's and Powell's (2012) is limited in important ways (e.g. lack of

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<sup>174</sup> Participants at the University of Chicago's summer 2015 conference on pragmatism explicitly lamented the fact that contemporary pragmatists have spent little effort theorizing both the emergence of ecological problem-situations and the social processes that underlie how and which problem-situations actors select into.

sensitivity to power relations and cultural processes), but it does provide an example of the type of theorizing pragmatists need to do to understand where problem-situations come from and how they beset actors. Second, contrary to the misimpression that pragmatism offers little theoretical benefit in the way of understanding social-emergence (especially among “critical realists” and “analytical sociologists”), pragmatism’s emphasis on *creative processes*<sup>175</sup> lends itself naturally to questions of emergence. Indeed, as is described below, pragmatism effectively subsumes the most useful insights of a variety of theoretical strands, including Padgett’s and Powell’s view of actors and their relations as fundamentally transformable, the political process model’s view of power and opportunity (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006; see Gross<sup>176</sup> (2010) for an argument about Charles Tilly’s implicit pragmatism), and resource mobilization theory’s broad conception of “resources” and how they can be creatively used. It enriches these arguments as well. For example, it allows us to see how an ecology’s “poisedness” (Padgett and Powell 2012) to innovation is fundamentally *relational*; that is, ecologies are poised to *particular* types of innovations (cf. Wejnert 2002). Further, it allows us to see how actor’s “repertoires of contention” (Tilly 1985, 1996) are constructed through creative experimentation (Dewey 1910). Capturing such processes of actor-relation mutual transformation is critical for our purposes, given that since Uber’s founding it has been roiled in “contentious politics<sup>177</sup>” (Tilly and Tarrow 2006) which, as I argue, have altered its trajectory.

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<sup>175</sup> Implicit in Dewey’s (1922) conception of actors in continuous transaction with problem-situations (i.e. ecologies) is a notion of emergentism, although understood in strictly relational terms. That is, the causal powers of emergent entities are not *uncovered*, but rather, they are *discovered* dynamically (in motion) through actors’ transactions. This insistence on actor-ecology *relationism* was central to Charles Tilly’s (1984) lambasting of the concept of “society” on the basis that it viewed structures as extricated from relations to actors. With respect to the on-demand economy, from a pragmatist perspective the conception of it having “causal powers” independent of its worker network is meaningless.

<sup>176</sup> Neil Gross has written a yet-unpublished paper on pragmatist explanations of emergence, circulated and presented to a Harvard “pragmatism reading group” in summer 2017.

<sup>177</sup> Indeed, Uber received its first Cease and Desist order as early as October 2010 in San Francisco just three months after its launch. After effectively ignoring the order, they issued a response which foreshadowed one aspect of their future strategy, i.e. publicly caricaturing regulatory bodies as out of touch with technology and its

Before providing a roadmap for this chapter, it is important to define my scope and focus. At one level, Uber's emergence is about unprecedented private-capital investment in technology and a strategy (arguably) oriented toward securing a combination of scale-efficiency advantages and monopolistic market power; yet this business strategy itself and the financing that made it possible are not my focus. Indeed, Uber has attracted around \$15 billion<sup>178</sup> in private-capital to fund its global operations; undoubtedly, its trajectory would have been very different absent particular developments in venture capital and private equity, which have resulted in a tripling in private-capital technology investments between 2012 and 2015 (Erdogan et al. 2016). Financing (and technology) were crucial to Uber's emergence, as was Uber's set of ideas (or strategy) about its end goals (i.e. monopoly, scale-efficiency). Rather, my focus is very much pragmatist-inspired; it is to understand these resources and ideas *in motion*, i.e. through the lens of historically contingent *continuous transactions* constituted by both Uber's actions and ecological properties (e.g. political processes). The explanandum merits this approach (as will be shown), given the mutual construction of Uber and its ecology since its emergence. I will often describe Uber's actions as its *repertoire* or *repertoire of contention* (Tilly 1985, 1996); by that, I am referring to the *mode* in which Uber transacts (or makes claims) in its ecological interactions, rather than its end-goal strategy (e.g. monopoly power).

The chapter is divided into three parts: (1) theoretical framework, (2) empirical analysis, (3) discussion. First, the theoretical framework is organized around a pragmatist synthesis of Padgett's and Powell's (2012) theory of emergence, the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001;

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possibilities: "UberCab [Uber's name at the time] is a first to market, cutting edge transportation technology and it must be recognized that the regulations from both city and state regulatory bodies have not been written with these innovations in mind. As such, we are happy to help educate the regulatory bodies on this new generation of technology and work closely with both agencies to ensure compliance and keep our service available for our truly Uber users and their drivers." In the following years, Uber was routinely issued court injunctions (Howell 2015), ordinances advocated for by taxicab lobbyists (Wisniewski and Byrne 2016), car-impounds (Sadowski 2015), and faced other regulatory setbacks.

<sup>178</sup> Roughly \$13 billion of this is equity-financing and \$2 billion is credit-financing.

Tilly and Tarrow 2006), and resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977). On the basis of Padgett's and Powell's work, I develop the concept of "poisedness," which they view as "the next research frontier" (2012: 26). After overviewing their framework, I argue that, among other limitations, it under-theorizes the ways in which power relations and cultural processes are implicated in an ecology's poisedness to innovation. Partly to rectify this, I establish a pragmatist marriage between their framework and the social-movement literature based on the ontological primacy that both approaches give to continuous, mutually-constructive transactions between actors and ecologies. This theoretical synthesis captures the ways in which a broad range of "resources" (e.g. "alienated workers," technology), power relations (e.g. political vulnerabilities, claim-making) and cultural processes (e.g. valorized popular support) inhere to the poisedness of an ecology to innovation.

In the second part, I apply this theoretical framework to empirically investigate the emergence of Uber. I proceed in two parts, examining: (1) the poisedness of Uber's ecology to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model, and (2) the strategic and transactional deployment of Uber's repertoire (i.e. mode of claim-making) in its ecological interactions. In the first part of this empirical section, I examine three dimensions of poisedness that bring to focus the relevant ecological resources and political-economic structures implicated in Uber's emergence, these being: (1) the technological preconditions (i.e. reduced transaction costs for coordinating driver-rider transactions) and entrepreneurial clusters (i.e. provided arms-length access to key resources); (2) work conditions in the adjacent transportation industry and job quality trends (i.e. created a pool of workers for whom flexible, on-demand work was perceived to be attractive); and (3) political vulnerability (i.e. government actors' capacity to contend with Uber's "claim-making" was undermined by various political vulnerabilities). In the second part of the empirical analysis, I demonstrate that the most critical dimension to Uber's survival and growth has centered on it having been successful in making various political-legal claims, particularly regarding the legal-classification of its "driver-partners" as "independent contractors." I



describe this success as a function of the *contentious interactions* between Uber and its opponents (e.g. taxicab lobbyists, city-officials). These interactions were structured by both Uber's repertoire (i.e. its mode of claim-making)—described as involving blitzkrieg, prophylactic, and Janus-like tactics (i.e. two-faced pugnacity and ingratiating)—and the social-ecology within which it was embedded. I offer several case-illustrations of the deployment of this repertoire. This second part of the empirical analysis gives "poisedness" richer meaning by describing it as *poisedness to Uber's successful claim-making*. Just as poisedness is understood in this relational sense, so too is Uber's repertoire, which is described as having been altered processually through Uber's ecological interactions, particularly since early 2015.

Finally, in the discussion, I pursue three lines of analysis: I (1) highlight the link between poisedness and ecologies' social-organization of work and consumer politics, (2) emphasize the mutual-construction of Uber and its ecology by making two inferences about the social mechanisms (Gross 2009) through which Uber transformed its ecology and through which Uber was transformed by its ecology, and (3) specify some directions for future research about ecological poisedness, emphasizing that "poisedness" is a *relational* concept, arguing that research on poisedness and innovations should be guided by historically-concrete, middle-range propositions, and suggesting cross-national research that deepens our understanding of the relationship between an ecology's consumer politics and its poisedness to particular types of innovation.

## **THE GENESIS AND REPRODUCTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL NOVELTY**

In this section, I extend Padgett's and Powell's (2012) theory of emergence by developing their concept of the "poisedness" (or "vulnerability") of an ecology (or "social structure") to organizational novelty.

While Padgett and Powell frame their approach to capture a rich set of relational processes and mechanisms, they are explicit about their empirical priorities: "In this volume we usually do not examine

prior structural vulnerability<sup>179</sup> to innovation and invention, although this is a crucial part of our theoretical framework. This is the next research frontier” (2012: 26).

In the way of taking up where they have left off and establishing a pragmatist framework for understanding the emergence of the on-demand economy, I proceed in two sections. First, I overview Padgett’s and Powell’s framework, identifying its main components (e.g. network folding, autocatalysis, poisedness). I conclude this section noting three reasons it is important to cull theoretical ideas from outside Padgett’s and Powell’s framework in order to enrich our understanding of poisedness: their undertheorizing of (1) power and (2) culture, and the (3) strong distinction they make between the genesis of a novelty and its catalysis (or reproduction). Second, I develop a pragmatist framework for understanding poisedness, based partly on theories about the emergence of social-movement organizations, namely resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977) and the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006). In doing so, I establish a pragmatist marriage between Padgett’s and Powell’s framework and a particular strain within the social-movement literature (i.e. political process model) based on the ontological primacy they give to *continuous, mutually-constructive transaction* between actors and ecologies. Overall, the theoretical synthesis captures the ways in which a broad range of “resources” (e.g. “alienated workers,” technology), power relations (e.g. political vulnerabilities, claim-making) and cultural processes (e.g. valorized popular support) inhere to the poisedness of an ecology to innovation; on this basis, I conclude this section by briefly describing how my theoretical framework will inform my empirical investigation into the on-demand economy’s emergence by highlighting relevant factors (e.g. resource landscape, political processes, strategic repertoires).

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<sup>179</sup> Generally, they seem to prefer the term “structural vulnerability.” I prefer the term ecological poisedness, partly because I think the term “structure” is less precise. For example, structure is commonly constructed as distinct from “culture,” but many sociologists think of structure in cultural terms (e.g. “cultural structures”; Alexander 2003). The term “ecological poisedness” is far clearer, as ecologies clearly have both material and symbolic dimensions.

## Organizational Novelty: Network Folding and Autocatalysis

This section overviews Padgett's and Powell's (2012) theory of emergence by providing a basic description of how novelty is generated (i.e. "network-folding), its key mechanisms (e.g. "anchoring diversity"), its view of actors and relations as mutually constitutive in ongoing streams of action, its distinction between "innovation" and "invention," and what "poisedness" entails. I conclude by arguing that insofar as we are interested in developing the concept of poisedness, there are three reasons to draw on theoretical ideas outside of Padgett's and Powell's framework relating to their undertheorizing of power and culture, as well as the strong analytic distinction they make between the genesis of a novelty and its catalysis (or reproduction).

Padgett and Powell (2012) offer a network-based account of the processes that underlie the social-emergence of novelty (e.g. innovations, inventions), based substantially on concepts and metaphors from the biological and chemical sciences (e.g. novelty can be likened to speciation). Their theory can be understood in terms of (1) interacting multiple-network domains (i.e. relational structures; e.g. kinship domains) and (2) actors (e.g. individuals, organizations) who flow between those networks. Actors are viewed as *constituted* by skills (e.g. skills for generating products<sup>180</sup>) and "communication protocols<sup>181</sup>" (i.e. rules regarding with whom to interact for learning, teaching, and other resource exchanges<sup>182</sup>) which are acquired or learned through past (and present) network-interactive experiences. Actors carry these skills and protocols with them as they flow across network domains, subsequently interacting with others with different sets of skills and protocols; it is this

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<sup>180</sup> Padgett and Powell (2012) describe these skills as "production skills," which are "rules or technologies that transform products into each other."

<sup>181</sup> They are also sometimes called "relational protocols."

<sup>182</sup> Padgett and Powell (2012) refer to "recurrent and focused resource flows" as "relational ties" (5); whereas "constitutive ties" refer to the teaching and learning of production skills (i.e. for new products) and communication protocols (defined in-text).

interaction of *multiple networks* through actor-transpositions—referred to as “network-folding”—that generates novelty, and the particular set of overlapping networks (e.g. kinship, economic, religious) determines what range<sup>183</sup> of novelty can possibly emerge.

They identify several network-folding mechanisms that have been observed to generate novelty, including regions that agglomerate actors with diverse sets (what they refer to as “anchoring diversity”) and actions that “keep future lines of action open in strategic contexts where opponents are trying to narrow them...by [sustaining] multiple attributions of identity through uttering sphinx-like statements that plausibly can be interpreted in multiple ways” (24-25) (i.e. “robust action and multivocality”). In relation to the on-demand economy, “anchoring diversity” suggests that “entrepreneurial clusters” (Chatterji et al. 2013), where a broad range of productive resources (e.g. technology, finance, human capital) can be readily accessed, are particularly conducive to innovation, and the concept of “multivocality” may be implicated in Uber’s rhetorical strategy vis-à-vis its different constituents and stakeholders. It is through these mechanisms (and others) that network folding triggers innovation; that is, as actors—attached to multiple networks and carrying particular skills and “protocols”—are transposed into new domains, new combinations of skills and protocols generate novelties, such as new products, practices, and under certain conditions new biographies that spillover to new network domains.

Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) theory views actors and relations (e.g. network/organizational structures) as mutually constructing each other,<sup>184</sup> in a dynamic that closely resembles the pragmatist notion of actors engaged in continuous transaction with ecological problem-situations; thus, they are deeply concerned with the pragmatics of social change and reproduction. They argue that in the face of

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<sup>183</sup> Padgett and Powell (2012) refer to this as the “topology of the possible,” a phrase they borrow from Stadler et al. (2001).

<sup>184</sup> They write that their mantra is: “In the short run, actors create relations; in the long run, relations create actors. The difference between methodological individualism and social constructivism is not for us a matter of religion; it is a matter of time scale” (Padgett and Powell 2012: 2-3).

“continual turnover,” skills (of individuals), products (of firms), and other entities are “transformed and molded into *ongoing streams of action*” (8; my emphasis) in a dynamic process of self-reproduction involving constructive feedback (e.g. learning) and renewal mechanisms (they liken this to the Darwinian concept of “autocatalysis”). In this sense, relational structures (e.g. networks) are not merely conduits<sup>185</sup> for “information” (e.g. skills, protocols) to pass through; they are *transformative*, shaping the biographies of persons and organizations. These transformational processes are *reinforced* by self-reproductive and constructive feedback mechanisms, including, in the case of novel products, “recurrent and focused resource flows” (i.e. relational ties) and, in the case of skills and protocols, “learning and teaching” processes (e.g. across generations<sup>186</sup>) that are “induced in linked chains” (9) of actors. That is, in general, the reproduction or survival of innovations depends partly on their capacity to attract “resource flows” and “people flows,” and their ability to survive in multiple environments.

Padgett and Powell (2012) view most novelties as “innovations;” whether they *become* “inventions” depends on the extent to which the “innovative recombination cascades out to reconfigure entire interlinked ecologies of ‘ways of doing things’” (5). These potential outward reverberations themselves depend on, among other factors, the degree to which the implicated actors, skills, and protocols are rooted in a multitude of networks (i.e. their “multifunctionality” (11)), and what Padgett and Powell describe as the “structural vulnerability” (5) of the array of multiple-networks, or its “poisedness” for “system tipping” (6).<sup>187</sup> The multifunctionality dimension is fairly intuitive and familiar, as it strongly resembles the familiar concepts of structural holes (Burt 1995) and weak ties (Granovetter

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<sup>185</sup> This view departs from the common conceptualization of diffusion processes as driven by imitation processes (e.g. mimicry); rather, diffusion is much more like “chain reactions” (Padgett and Powell (2012: 9)).

<sup>186</sup> That is, from more experienced to less experienced actors.

<sup>187</sup> Padgett and Powell (2012) note that innovations are far more common than inventions. This is largely because inventions typically involve transpositions between actors into networks that are often quite alien, and thus the opposition between the skills and protocols that interact tends to be more volatile, and thus even when combinations occur, they are not likely to be supported by constructive feedback mechanisms.

1973), and their positional consequences (e.g. entrepreneurship); yet, as Padgett and Powell (2012) note, ecological poisedness is poorly understood. They do note that the *thinner* the “redundancy” of a multiple-network system—that is, the less it is characterized by a “dense spaghetti of overlaid and intertwined production networks with feedback cycles at their cores” (2012: 26)—the more poised that multiple-network becomes to instability and reverberation. Among the several redundancy-thinning processes they identify (e.g. personnel turnover, parasites, neutral drift; see 26-28), political crisis is the most significant for my purposes. Yet, beyond stating that the effect of a crisis depends largely on the “structure of [the] ecology,” they offer little in the way of developing this process, admittedly leaving it to future researchers.

In picking up where Padgett and Powell have left off in their conceptualization of ecological poisedness, argue that it is useful to cull concepts from beyond their theoretical framework for three main reasons. First, strikingly absent from their remarks about poisedness is any sustained attention to the importance of power relations. This may simply be a matter of emphasis, but it also may be an omission born of their heavy use of biochemistry models<sup>188</sup> to understand social interaction. Nevertheless, the key point for my purposes is that it is important to theorize the ways in which state-capitalist relations—and the resource landscapes (McCarthy and Zald 1973) and political processes (McAdam et al. 2001) that inhere to those relations—affect the poisedness of a social ecology given the substantial degree of state intervention in American business (Prasad 2012) and, more specifically, given the on-demand economy’s salient legal-regulatory and labor market dimensions (examined later). In this

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<sup>188</sup> The very strength of Padgett’s and Powell’s (2012) theory—its sensitivity to network-based structural dynamics, particularly those of formal-organizations, and the hypotheses these sensitivities yield—may bias it toward novelty-generating processes that involve recombinations (e.g. chemical-reactions) rooted in *social contact*, against novelty-generating processes rooted in more *projective* (rather than *responsive*) forms of action (see chapter five). This is not an argument I will develop here, beyond noting that pragmatist conceptions of action partly (and fruitfully) dampen the heavy “structuralism” of Padgett’s and Powell’s approach, rather than merely augment it by identifying intervening mechanisms.

light, it is important to follow Tilly's (1984: 15) injunction to be sensitive to the often-subtle (and obvious) ways in which state-capitalist processes are implicated in the "creation and destruction of different sorts of social structures."<sup>189</sup> As discussed in the next section, the social-movement literature (e.g. resource mobilization theory, political process model) captures such dynamics and can be drawn upon to complement Padgett's and Powell's nascent exploration of poisedness. Second, Padgett's and Powell's theory could benefit from a more sophisticated conceptualization of culture. For example, their concepts of "production skills" and "relational protocols" are much better captured by Patterson's concept of "cultural configurations," as the latter is differentiated into different types of knowledge with different social-interactive sources (see chapter two) and it helps us avoid taking the biochemistry analogy too far by viewing actors as constantly *reacting* to their interactions, rather than, as described in prior chapters, as having the capacity to project their values, goals, and interests onto their ecologies<sup>190</sup>. Third, Padgett and Powell (2012; see pp. 11) tend to draw distinctions between the processes that *spawn* emergence and the slower processes those that *reproduce* it; while this distinction can be useful, for my purposes it is not, as the genesis of organizational novelty is not practically meaningful unless it is to some degree reproducible. Understanding social-emergence necessarily entails investigating the processes that sustain it. On the basis of these three points, the next section develops the concept of ecological poisedness within a pragmatist framework.

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<sup>189</sup> The more complete reminder is (Tilly 1984: 14-15): "In the case of Western countries over the last few hundred years, the program begins by recognizing that the development of capitalism and the formation of powerful, connected national states dominated all other social processes and shaped all social structures. The program continues by locating times, places, and people within those two master processes and working out the logics of the processes. It goes on by following the creation and destruction of different sorts of structures by capitalism and statemaking, then tracing the relationship of other processes...to capitalism and statemaking."

<sup>190</sup> Padgett's and Powell's (2012) view of adaptive, Darwinian actors transposing between network-domains, is at best undeveloped or inexplicit, and at worst at odds with the observed capacity of actors, under certain conditions (e.g. well-defined preferences, beliefs, and resources), to engage in sophisticated strategic action on the basis of their interests, goals, or values, including resource exploitation and opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998).

## **A Pragmatist Extension of the Concept of Ecological Poisedness**

In this section, I extend Padgett's and Powell's theory of emergence by developing their concept of ecological poisedness. I draw mainly on the social-movement literature—specifically resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977) and the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006)—as well as cultural concepts described in chapter two. The processes underlying the emergence of social-movement organizations have been usefully applied to other organizational contexts (see Davis and Thompson 1994; Havagreeva 1994; Weber et al. 2009); it is in this vein that I examine these theories. Among other goals, I seek to redress Padgett's and Powell's under-theorizing of power and culture and to effectively dispense with their genesis-catalysis distinction. I also aim provide a broader understanding of “resources,” one that captures, for example, how the social-organization of work can indirectly create potential resources (e.g. alienated labor).

There is a convenient pragmatist marriage between Padgett's and Powell's framework and a particular strain within the social-movement literature (i.e. political process model), which makes synthesizing some of their respective ideas within a pragmatist framework quite fitting. Central to both perspectives are the *continuous transactions* between moving actors and their social-ecologies, which is critical to the pragmatist framework described in chapter two. For Padgett and Powell, this transactional view is reflected in (1) the reciprocity of actor-ecology interactions, (2) the learning processes that underlie changing cultural configurations, (3) the transformational, rather than transmissional, view of networks and other relational structures, and (4) the social-organizational change that occurs through the pragmatics of ecological adaption. As described below, the political process model emphasizes the transactional “claim-making” between emergent-organizations and states. Further, Gross (2010: 345) has emphasized that Charles Tilly—an early proponent of the focusing on political process and mechanisms (see Tilly 1973; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006)—was committed to



“recognizing the plurality of social dynamics and the in-principle openness of history.”<sup>191</sup> While notions of systemic “network feedbacks” and path dependency feature heavily in Padgett’s and Powell’s work, they explicitly avoid deterministic thinking, writing: “[Scientific prediction]... is not the specification of a fixed-point equilibrium. It is the description of processual mechanisms of genesis and selection in sufficient detail to be capable, in the rich interactive context of the study system, of specifying a limited number of possible histories” (2012: 2). Thus, beyond merely amalgamating these theories under the rubric of theoretical pluralism, there is a strong meta-theoretical affinity between the two when examined within a pragmatist framework.

I proceed in two sections. In the first, I advance a simple proposition that the types and levels of resources (i.e. “resource landscape”) of an ecology bear on its poisedness to innovation. Drawing on resource mobilization theory, I emphasize the varied resources that can be mobilized by “organizational entrepreneurs” (McCarthy and Zald 1977), and specifically highlight a few types of resources likely to be relevant to the on-demand economy’s emergence (e.g. popular support). I extend this line of reasoning by arguing that the degree of resource inequality in an ecology indirectly influences its poisedness to emergence. In the second, after noting that resource mobilization theory risks overlooking the ways in which social-emergence can be enabled or constrained depending on shifts in political opportunity structures, I draw on the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006) to highlight the importance of being sensitive to how changes in the political process (e.g. rising political vulnerability) and particular entrepreneurial strategies (e.g. mobilizing popular support) shape an ecologies’ poisedness to novelty. I enrich the political process model by describing cultural factors that it neglects, namely the ways in which both an entrepreneur’s ability to mobilize popular support

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<sup>191</sup> Gross (2010) goes on to argue that Tilly’s conception of mechanisms dramatically differs from that of analytical sociologists and closely resembles the pragmatist conception of mechanisms organized around “practices.”

and an entrepreneur's strategic repertoires are culturally determined. I conclude with summary remarks about how this framework informs my empirical investigation.

### **Resource Landscapes**

An ecology's "resource landscape"—that is, the *levels* and *kinds* of resources accessible for use—can shape the degree to which it is poised to organizational novelty. At the most basic level, this simple proposition entails that two ecologies with similar network-redundancy—that is, "density of overlaid and intertwined production networks" (Padgett and Powell 2012: 26)—but dramatically different levels of (for example) technological resources and human capital, are likely to be poised to different degrees with respect to the emergence of high-tech organizations. Yet Padgett and Powell offer no articulation of how resource landscapes fit into the poisedness of an ecology.

Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977) enriches this proposition through its broad conceptualization of the types of resources that can be implicated in social-emergence, which include material (e.g. technological, physical and financial assets), cultural (e.g. moral support, ideological legitimacy, sympathy, procedural skills), logistical (e.g. communication networks), and other types of resources (see Edwards and McCarthy 2004). In contrast to collective behavior models (Smelser 1963; Turner and Killian 1972) that highlighted the importance of shared subjectivities (e.g. grievances, beliefs about efficacious strategy), resource mobilization theorists placed emphasis on structural concentrations of power (e.g. elite resource control<sup>192</sup>, exclusionary systems), noting that what is most critical to social-emergence is the "organizational entrepreneur's" (McCarthy and Zald 1977; also see Stinchcombe 1965) ability to attract sponsorship and sympathy from "mass and elite publics" (McCarthy and Zald 1977), particularly the latter given their disproportionate control over resource pools.

Combining these ideas with Padgett's and Powell's network-folding mechanism of "anchoring diversity,"

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<sup>192</sup> In this sense, resource mobilization theory connects with theories of elite power that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967).

it follows that innovation is more likely to occur in ecologies that agglomerate a range of resources, or as Chatterji et al. (2013) have called them, “entrepreneurial clusters.”

Despite some of its limitations (e.g. neglect of internal-organizational dynamics; Morris 1981; see McAdam 1982 for other criticisms<sup>193</sup>), for my purpose—that is, understanding the emergence of the on-demand economy—resource mobilization theory usefully points to not only the “harder” types of resources (e.g. technological, finance, human capital) likely implicated in Uber’s emergence, but the “softer” ones as well (e.g. digital media, referral programs, network ties). Given various characteristics of the on-demand economy (e.g. dependence on supply-side worker-networks, public salience; see chapter one), it is especially likely that its emergence hinged at least partly on “mobilizing supporters, neutralizing and/or transforming mass and elite publics in sympathizers” (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1217). For example, with respect to the emergence of Uber, viewing “popular support” as a resource to be utilized in legislative battles is likely to be important.

Yet, there is a much more subtle, yet vitally important, way in which thinking broadly about resources can sharpen our theoretical sensibilities: the degree of *resource inequality* in an ecology bears directly on the resource landscape. To clarify this, at the most general level we can ask: is there theoretical reason to posit that two distinct ecologies, similar along every dimension (e.g. same technologies, natural resources, population count) *except* that one has dramatically higher levels of wage inequality than the other, would have similar resource landscapes? I contend that their resource landscapes would be quite different on the basis of two assumptions: (1) wage inequality generates heterogeneity in “economic insecurity” (see Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012); and (2) concentrations of economic insecurity (e.g. among low-income workers) can be construed as a potential “resource” by capitalist interests who can sometimes profit from “mobilizing that insecurity.” On a more concrete

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<sup>193</sup> McAdam (1982) argues that resource mobilization theory is applicable to only a limited range of social movements, misses the power of disruptive tactics, neglects internal organization (as noted above), etc.

level, with respect to organizational models that depend on supply-side worker-networks—as does the on-demand economy—the availability of a substantial pool of workers alienated from their low-wage employment relations may constitute a resource that can be mobilized to generate organizational novelty. Thus, while resource mobilization theory does not, to my knowledge, entail that particular modes of work-organization can function as *indirect* resources, its broad view of resources is consistent with such theorizing. Overall, this discussion suggests that an ecology's resource landscape is critical to its poisedness to novelty, sensitizing us to a broad range of resources (e.g. technology, popular support, alienated labor) that can potentially be mobilized by organizational entrepreneurs.

### **Political Opportunity**

Inasmuch as resource mobilization theory views emergence as mainly a function of resource flows (e.g. elite sponsorship), it risks overlooking the ways in which social-emergence can be enabled or constrained depending on shifts in political opportunity structures; the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006) offers precisely this corrective, among insights<sup>194</sup>. At the same time, this model, in its most common formulation, is itself limited by an arguably naïve view of the cultural underpinnings of political processes. In what follows, I first briefly describe the political process model, highlighting two key takeaways; then, I proceed to identify two ways in which political processes are themselves dependent on cultural knowledge (i.e. valorizing popular support) and cultural pragmatics (e.g. entrepreneurial experimentation).

### ***Key Ideas in the Political Process Model***

The crux of the political process model holds that (1) the strategic opportunities of actors (e.g. competitive bargaining power) outside the bounds of mainstream concentrations of power (i.e. non-

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<sup>194</sup> For example, compared to resource mobilization theory, political process models pay more attention to factors including internal-organizational readiness (e.g. mobilizing structures, communication networks, leadership, popular base), shared cognitions (e.g. goals, beliefs), cultural frames, etc. They also tend to view political systems as less exclusionary than do resource mobilization theorists.

elites) can be strengthened as a function of changes in political structures (e.g. shifts in state interests), and (2) these opportunities are realized through “interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors’ interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs” (Tilly and Tarrow 2006: 7). While there are various other important components to the model—such as collective realizations of organizational strength or what McAdam (1982) calls “cognitive liberation”—my primary interest is the theoretical direction it provides to the ways in which entrepreneurial opportunities are structured by (1) alterations in the political process and (2) modes of entrepreneurial claim-making, which Tilly (1985, 1996) termed “repertoires of contention.” Rajan (2010)’s explanation of the Great Recession, although not explicitly based on the political process model, offers a compelling illustration of how political vulnerabilities can be created by stratification processes and manipulated by corporate actors. Among the various structural factors he considers (e.g. trade imbalances that fueled US consumption, poorly integrated global financial system), particularly interesting is the effect of skewed political incentive structures. Specifically, he argues that in the years preceding the Great Recession, governments faced immense political pressure to combat secular wage stagnation, rising income and wealth inequality, and employment insecurity, all of which were exacerbated by the US’s weak social safety net (e.g. relatively short-termed unemployment benefits). Yet, given (1) the global supply glut that structurally predisposed the United States to high levels of consumption, and (2) political incentives to focus on short-term economic gains (e.g. keeping unemployment rates low) rather than strengthening economic fundamentals (e.g. long-term output), policy makers chose low-hanging solutions like easing interest rates and loosening lending standards to boost consumption, at the expense of attending to the more intractable challenges of structural inequalities in labor markets, education, housing, and other sectors. Simultaneously, the political vulnerability of the state created an opportunity for financial corporations to push for deregulatory policies that allowed them to engage in

riskier practices (e.g. increasing their position in risky securities issued to finance the subprime mortgage crisis), which ultimately triggered the crisis.

Thus, social inequalities, democratic imperatives, and organizational (e.g. corporate) strategies can all converge in the political process; with respect to my investigation of the on-demand economy's emergence, there are at least two takeaways from this model. First, inasmuch as the emergence of the on-demand economy is dependent on political claim-making (e.g. pressuring regulators to classify Uber drivers as independent contractors rather than employees), then it is important to attend to the social processes (e.g. economic downturns, legal processes, mobilization of consumer activists) that might expand or contract the opportunities for companies like Uber to make successful claims on the government. Second, to the extent that modes of claim-making (e.g. disruptive strategies, tactical experimentation<sup>195</sup>)—or what Tilly (1986, 1995) referred to as “repertoires of contention”—alter the political process, i.e. its relative power over government actors, then it is important to understand these repertoires. Uber's growth despite heavy legislative challenges may have partly had to do with the fact that “multiple audiences attribute[d] different interests to [it]” (i.e. multivocality; Padgett and Powell: 24-25); the extent to which this was due to its multiple constituents or a rhetorical strategy must be determined.

### ***How Culture Mediates Political Process***

These political processes and the opportunities they create for entrepreneurs are mediated by culture in at least two ways; first, organizational entrepreneurs' ability to mobilize popular support to stir consumer activism depends on prevalent cultural knowledge structures, and second, entrepreneurial repertoires of action (i.e. strategies) and their pragmatic deployment are culturally determined. At the

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<sup>195</sup> McAdam (1982) explicitly notes that resource mobilization theories tend to ignore the efficacy of disruptive tactics. Gross (2010) highlights substantial similarities between Tilly's concept of repertoires of contention (in *Popular Contention in Great Britain* and *The Contentious French*) and pragmatist conceptions of “collective habits” and experimentation.

most basic level, to the extent that shared meanings—for example, about what is true (e.g. advertisement claims), what things are valued (e.g. fairness of prices), whether particular tactics are morally right (e.g. rationales for breaking the law to promote freedom and other public goods)—affect political processes and the types of political opportunities available to entrepreneurs, then an ecology’s cultural dimensions are critical to its poisedness to novelty. This insight is quite basic to work on social diffusion which has for decades pointed to the various ways in which culture is implicated in innovation through, for example, shaping perceptions toward innovators (e.g. “activists”; see McAdam and Rucht (1993)), status hierarchies and cultural entrepreneurs (Menzel 1960; Kaufman and Patterson 2005), cultural interpretation<sup>196</sup> (see review in Strang and Soule 1998; e.g. Snow and Benford (1999) on cultural frames), legitimation processes (Hirsch 1986; related is DiMaggio and Powell (1983) on cultural expectations and coercive isomorphism), etc. Thus, an ecology’s “cultural poisedness” to emergence is an extremely important area of theorizing; yet given my goal of understanding the emergence of a phenomenon very much contingent on political processes (as is illustrated in later sections), I view culture as consequential primarily through its mediating effects on political processes.

First, whether an entrepreneur can mobilize popular support (i.e. a “resource”) to bolster a novelty depends partly on cultural configurations (e.g. beliefs, values, advocacy know-how) among the populace, with two factors being particularly important: (1) to what degree does the novelty meets the interests, goals, and values of its constituents, and (2) moral understandings of the novelty (e.g. beliefs, narratives, norms). Resource mobilization theory offers little insight into these or other cultural dimensions, aside from pointing out the importance of networks and social contact; yet both these factors are themselves at least partly endogenous to culture (e.g. homophily). On the first point, at the most intuitive level, organizational emergence must create sustained “value” for constituents (e.g.

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<sup>196</sup> Also see Fine (1977) and Gottdeiner (1985) for the ways in which group-level cultural processes mediate the interpretation of cultural goods.

drivers, riders, at-large public), and what is interpreted as “value” is substantially culturally determined<sup>197</sup>. With respect to the on-demand economy, the extent to which workers driving on the Uber platform—rather than participating in more mainstream employment—experience this work as a means to realizing their values, goals, and interests (e.g. flexibility, “freedom”) is strongly dependent on their cultural configurations, as demonstrated in chapters four and five. These experiences, in turn, affect their support for, or antagonism toward, Uber. Regarding the second point (i.e. normative understandings of the novelty), as the “politics of consumption” and “consumer citizenship” literature shows (Cohen 2004; Connolly & Prothero 2008; Barnett et al. 2011; Trentmann 2012), consumers’ beliefs, narratives, and normative understandings are central to whether they express support for various innovations (e.g. new products; see Warde 2015 for a review). With respect to the on-demand economy, the extent to which Uber’s practices (e.g. repertoires of action with respect to government, internal policies affecting workers) are culturally congruent with consumers’ understandings of the “rightness/wrongness” of these acts is likely critical to whether they will offer support to the model (e.g. calls to legislators) thereby affecting the political process and, subsequently, Uber’s persistence.

Second, the strategies and tactics deployed by resource-mobilizing entrepreneurs amidst contentious politics are themselves partly culturally determined; it follows that, to the extent that these deployments affect organizational emergence, then their cultural underpinnings must be understood. While Tilly (1986, 1995) described how repertoires of contention change over time (i.e. due to capitalist development and statemaking processes), explaining *shifts* in repertoires is not quite the same as explaining the *content* of repertoires, which are themselves types of procedural cultural knowledge (Patterson 2014). With respect to the on-demand economy, it is quite likely that the degree of cultural

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<sup>197</sup> When Padgett and Powell (2012) describe “exchange ties” (i.e. “recurrent and focused resource flows” (5)) as emerging to “reinforce the flow of transformed products” to the effect of sustaining or reproducing innovations, they are presupposing that the given participants in these exchange ties value such participation. Yet, this ought to be explained, not assume.



congruence between Uber's strategic repertoire and the broad institutional arrangements within which they are deployed is determinative of the persistence of the on-demand organizational model. Further, it follows that the successful diffusion of this model in different ecologies (assuming cross-ecology institutional variation) will necessarily entail adaptations in repertoires. While I do not examine Uber's relative success in different countries or cities as a function of these locales' ecological attributes, it is worth attending to the ways in which Uber's strategic repertoire in the United States has changed over time, quite possibly as a function of experimentation at the level of cultural pragmatics.

Concluding this section, I have aimed to extend Padgett's and Powell's (2012) concept of the "poisedness" of an ecology to novelty. In their brief foray into the matter, Padgett and Powell pointed out that the "redundancy" within a multiple-network system underlies its poisedness; yet, this is but one dimension. By theorizing about social processes associated with power, culture, and state-capitalist relations we were able to reveal a richer set of processual determinants of ecological poisedness. If these processes indeed constitute important dimensions of poisedness, then we would expect to empirically observe their causal significance in the social-emergence of the on-demand economy. Particularly, I hypothesize that the combination of (1) Uber's resource landscape (e.g. alienated labor, arms-length access to technology) and political opportunities (e.g. vulnerabilities of government actors' to Uber's claims), as well as (2) its mode of claim-making (i.e. repertoire) and its variations over time, will be observed to have been critical to Uber's emergence.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF THE ON-DEMAND ECONOMY: ECOLOGICAL POISEDNESS AND CONTENTIOUS REPERTOIRES**

In this section, I apply the above framework to empirically investigate the emergence of the on-demand economy, focusing on the case of Uber. Uber's social impact, broadly conceived, has exceeded that of any other US corporation that has emerged in the past decade: it facilitated 169 million transactions in March 2016 (around 50 million of which were in the US; see Newcomber 2016b), currently operates in

around 573 cities worldwide, and commands the majority<sup>198</sup> market share within the on-demand ride-sourcing market in the US; it has grown to an estimated valuation of \$68 billion dollars and created work for hundreds of thousands of Uber-driving workers in the US; it has become the touchstone for normative debates about the nonstandard forms of work and the role of law and public policy in regulating this work; and its organizational model has been imitated in a wide-range of industries (see chapter one for further details).

Uber's impact has occurred in a relatively short time-frame, the key events of which I will summarize. In March 2009, "UberCab" was founded, changing its name to "Uber" in October 2010. In 2010, it debuted in San Francisco (July), raised a "seed round" of financing (\$1.25 million in October), and Travis Kalanick (original cofounder and present-CEO) stepped in as CEO (December). In 2011, it launched in New York City (followed by Seattle, Boston, Chicago, and DC) and raised a Series B round (\$32 million). In 2012, a crucial year, it launched "UberX"—its low-price, mass product (in July; prior to UberX, Uber was exclusively a luxury "black car"<sup>199</sup> service)—and spread to various US cities and internationally (e.g. Paris, London, Toronto). Its main US competitor<sup>200</sup> Lyft launched in San Francisco in August 2012. In 2013, California became the first state to regulate the ride-sourcing market, a critical victory which resulted in the legal-categorization of UberX drivers as "non-commercial"<sup>201</sup>. Uber also raised Series C funding (\$258 million at \$3.76 billion valuation from Google Ventures), expanded to Asia (e.g. India, Taiwan) and Africa (e.g. South Africa), and reached about 40,000 active US drivers by the end

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<sup>198</sup> Estimates vary widely, but hover around 85 percent of the US on-demand ride-sourcing market.

<sup>199</sup> That is, it used luxury cars including Mercedes S-class, BMW 7 Series, Lincoln Town Cars, Cadillac Escalades, etc.

<sup>200</sup> Uber's second biggest competitor in the U.S. is Gett, which recently acquired Juno (Lunden 2017).

<sup>201</sup> The Public Utilities Commission of the State of California' rules and regulations stated effectively categorized Uber as a "Transportation Network Company" (i.e. TNC), defined as: "an organization whether a corporation, partnership, sole proprietor, or other form, operating in California that provides prearranged transportation services for compensation using an online-enabled application (app) or platform to connect these passengers with drivers using their personal vehicles" (Public Utilities Commission of the State of California 2013).

of the year. 2014 was another particularly critical year (like 2012). Uber grew its active US driver-network to about 160,000, launched new car-leasing financing programs to attract drivers given rising demand, raised massive funding (e.g. \$1.8 billion in Series E funding at a \$40 billion valuation), continued its international expansion (e.g. China, Nigeria), launched major new products (e.g. UberPool<sup>202</sup>, which allows for sharing rides with others), faced heightened public backlash after leaks about its aggressiveness toward journalists and after alleged passenger rape incidents (e.g. in India), and changed its slogan from “everyone’s private driver” to “where lifestyle meets logistics” (signifying its plans for providing a broader range of services). By the end of the year, it was operating in about 50 countries and 250 cities. It was valued at roughly \$40 billion by the end of the year. In 2015, Uber had roughly \$8.5 billion in gross bookings. In that year, it continued to experiment with new products (e.g. Uber Cargo) and grew globally. It also acquired its first company (i.e. deCarta, a map software startup). It raised financing through multiple rounds at different valuations (\$51 billion in August 2015 and \$62.5 billion in December 2015); it also raised \$1.6 billion in debt-financing from Goldman Sachs in early 2015. It incurred severe financial losses in China, estimated at \$2.8 billion. While it experienced some regulatory setbacks, on the whole, it was successful in the numerous legislative battles it waged, particularly in the United States. For the first three-quarters of 2015, Uber lost \$1.7bn in net profit (\$1.2bn in revenue; Newcomer and Huet 2016); it is still unprofitable globally. By the end of the year, estimates are that it had around 1.1 million monthly active drivers *globally* and around 400,000 in the US. In 2016, Uber had a total of \$20 billion in gross bookings (\$6.5 billion in revenue; Newcomer 2017b). It also reported that it had become operationally profitable in the United States for the first time

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<sup>202</sup> There are some reports that Uber expedited the release of UberPool partly after learning about Lyft’s plan to launch Lyft Line, also a ride-pooling service (Isaac 2017b).

(Newcomer 2016b);<sup>203</sup> globally, however, it lost roughly \$2.8 billion<sup>204</sup>. It raised \$2 billion in private equity funding and \$3.5 billion from the Saudi Arabia Public Investment fund; it also received a \$1.15 billion loan. This funding was partly to offset losses in China, where it effectively lost in competition to Didi Chuxing<sup>205</sup> (currently estimated at \$50 billion; Lunden and Russell 2017b). Uber's main U.S. rival, Lyft, raised \$1bn in 2016 (it was valued at \$7.5 billion in April 2017)<sup>206</sup>. Uber also settled in a landmark class action lawsuit, paying roughly \$100 million to drivers represented in the case (April). Uber recognized the first "guild" of driver-partners in New York City. By July 2016, it announced it had completed its 2 billionth trip. It also launched more products (e.g. Uber RUSH, which lets businesses integrate Uber into their delivery systems) and substantially revamped the rider-side application's interface design (e.g. making pricing more transparent). 2017 thus far has been characterized by the most dramatic public controversies to date (e.g. sexual harassment allegations within Uber, various high level resignations; see Dickey 2017). Yet Uber has also taken various measures to demonstrate to the public a salubrious shift in its practices. Today it is operating in 573 cities in 75 countries.

I proceed in two parts, examining: (1) the poisedness of Uber's ecology to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model, and (2) the strategic and transactional deployment of Uber's repertoire (i.e. mode of claim-making) in its ecological interactions. In the first part, I describe three

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<sup>203</sup> Uber reported in previously undisclosed financial documents to Bloomberg that they were then making 19 cents on average per ride in the US. This does not take into account interest, tax, and equity-based compensation for employees. See Newcomer 2016b.

<sup>204</sup> This excludes financials tied to Uber's china operation, which Uber sold in July 2016 to its Chinese rival Didi Chuxing in exchange for an 18 percent stake in Didi Chuxing.

<sup>205</sup> Didi Chuxing was massively funded, from within China and outside. For example, Apple invested \$1bn in Didi in May 2016 (Isaac and Goel 2016). Uber secured 18% of Didi as part of the deal. To date, Didi Chuxing has raised \$13 billion (\$5.5 billion of which was announced in April 2017), and its valuation is estimated to be at \$50 billion (Lunden and Russell 2017b).

<sup>206</sup> \$500 million of this \$1bn came from General Motors. This was Lyft's largest financing round to date. See Newcomer 2016a. Yet, on April 11, 2017, Uber announced another round of \$600mn in funding, at a \$7.5 billion valuation, which brings it to \$2.61bn in total capital raised to date (Etherington 2017b).

dimensions of poisedness that bring to focus the relevant ecological resources and political-economic structures implicated in Uber's emergence, these being: (1) the technological preconditions and entrepreneurial clusters; (2) work conditions in the adjacent transportation industry and job quality trends; and (3) political vulnerability. In the second part, I demonstrate that the most critical dimension to Uber's survival and growth centers on it having been successful in making various political-legal claims, particularly regarding the legal-classification of its "driver-partners" as "independent contractors." This success is understood as a function of *contentious interactions* between Uber and its opponents (e.g. some city officials, taxicab lobbyists, segments of the public) which are structured by both Uber's strategic repertoire—described as involving blitzkrieg, prophylactic, and Janus-like tactics (i.e. two-faced pugnacity and ingratiating)—and the social-ecology within which it is embedded. This second part gives the ecological poisedness described in the first part richer meaning by viewing it as *poisedness to Uber's successful claim-making*. Just as part two understands poisedness in a relational sense, it also views Uber's repertoire as having been altered processually through Uber's ecological interactions, particularly since early 2015.

### **Ecological Poisedness to the On-Demand Economy**

In this section, I describe several ways in which Uber's ecology was poised to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model. Drawing on the above-described framework, I cast a broad light on Uber's resource landscape and describe core aspects of the political process within which Uber has engaged in claim-making in relation to the government. I proceed in three sections. First, I describe several key technological advancements (e.g. GPS, cloud computing, reputational systems) that dramatically reduced Uber's transaction costs for coordinating driver-rider transactions; it was able to efficiently access these technological resources and others (e.g. financing, high-skilled labor) by dint of being anchored in an entrepreneurial cluster (i.e. Silicon Valley) in which various complementary resources were readily accessible. Among other theoretical underpinnings, this section connects to

Padgett's and Powell's concept of "anchored diversity." Second, I take a broader view of the resource landscape by describing the economic-structural developments (e.g. in the taxi industry, long-term rises in economic insecurity) that have created a pool of workers for whom flexible, on-demand work was perceived to be relatively attractive. This section reveals how Uber's emergence was inextricable from historical state-capitalist interactions and work-organization processes. Third, I describe how government actors' capacity to contend with Uber's "claim-making" was undermined by political costs and vulnerabilities partly attributable to pressures to create jobs, signal the government's embrace of innovation, and complex legal-technical challenges and knotty political conflict. I note the strong cultural dimensions of these contentious interactions and the importance of capturing these claim-making dynamics by observing the deployment of Uber's strategic repertoire in relation to government actions and broader ecological dynamics.

### **Technological Resources and Entrepreneurial Clusters**

Two critical aspects of an ecology's resource landscape involve the (1) available technological resources and (2) the "entrepreneurial clusters" that make those technological resources readily accessible (via financing, high-skilled workers, etc.). This section highlights how these factors were implicated in Uber's emergence.

As a digital platform accessed mainly on smartphones, Uber could not have emerged absent the critical technological developments that dramatically reduced the transaction costs associated with coordinating buyer-seller marketplaces. Beyond earlier watersheds in computer technology (e.g. creation of integrated circuits 1958, CMOS technologies in 1963, lithium ion batteries in 1985, Wi-Fi in 1996, etc.), some<sup>207</sup> of the key most critical recent advancements have included: (1) improvements in global positioning systems (i.e. GPS) and sensors, which enabled locational tracking on mobile devices,

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<sup>207</sup> Social-networking platforms (e.g. Facebook) and digital advertising technologies have also been critical for rapid expansion into new markets, which is essential for on-demand platforms that need to cross critical thresholds in numbers of sellers (e.g. drivers) before gaining market viability.

critical to all on-demand services; (2) cloud computing developments, which have been integral to effectively managing back-end “big data” processes and systems, including the integration of digital payment technologies that facilitate the millions of financial transactions that occur daily in the on-demand economy (cloud-based services have also substantially reduced setup costs for startups imitating Uber’s model); and (3) digital “reputation” systems, which have been arguably essential to providing a base level of “quality assurance” for both workers and consumers on on-demand platforms. The development of these technologies was rapidly accelerated by the tremendous spread of smartphone ownership down the income distribution, having increased from 35 to 77 percent between 2011 and 2016 in the United States (Smith 2017). The iPhone’s release in 2007 was particularly momentous as it ushered in an era where digital technology is now readily accessible to consumers at nearly all times. This created substantial economic synergies<sup>208</sup> at the juncture of consumer preferences for on-the-go services and the decreased supplier-costs for providing those services. The relevant upshot is that, effectively harnessed, these technologies bring consumers and suppliers who are at opposite ends of the value chain increasingly to short, arms-length distances at reduced transaction-costs, i.e. costs associated with coordinating services, contracting personnel, etc. Thus, from one perspective, Uber’s core value-add essentially lies in effectively availing itself of this technological opportunity to carry out this new form of consumer-supplier intermediation<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>208</sup> The tremendous opportunities for capturing this value is partly reflected in tripling of capital invested in technology companies in the past three years (Erdogan et al. 2016).

<sup>209</sup> Interestingly, in 1987, Malone et al. published an article titled “Electronic Markets and Electronic Hierarchies” in which they wrote: “By reducing the costs of coordination, information technology will lead to an overall shift toward proportionately more use of markets—rather than hierarchies—to coordinate economic activity.” This is remarkably prescient, yet arguably viewed markets and hierarchies too dichotomously.

Yet, these technological advancements are unevenly accessed; particularly, the productive resources that underlie them are concentrated in “entrepreneurial clusters”<sup>210</sup> (Chatterji et al. 2013) where “entrepreneurial people” (Glaeser et al. 2010) disproportionately live and work<sup>211</sup>. For Padgett and Powell (2012: 15-16), these “industrial districts” anchor collaborative activities between diverse, complementary entities (e.g. venture capital, research facilities, “labor mobility”) heighten the likelihood of novelty. Uber used its hometown of southern San Francisco (“Silicon Valley”)—which epitomizes this resource complementarity and entrepreneurial culture (Saxenian 1994)—as its launching ground, partly given that its residents tend to be early-adopters of new technologies. To create a clearer picture of precisely why being located in an entrepreneurial cluster like Silicon Valley contributed to Uber’s emergence, it is important to recognize that early-stage startups generally try to split their time optimally between three mutually reinforcing goals: (1) testing and demonstrating their product is in demand (i.e. “product-market fit”), (2) securing enough financing to sustain operations or grow, and (3) hiring highly productive employees. A substantial advantage of operating in entrepreneurial ecologies like Silicon Valley is that the search costs for financing (e.g. “angel investors” and venture capital firms) and human capital (e.g. engineers, operations and marketing experts, product managers) are reduced by the dense concentration of these assets. In general, the relevant implication for Silicon Valley founders like Uber’s is that they can devote more resources to proving and tightening product-market fit (e.g. customer-testing, marketing) because they can save much of the time and money needed to access financing, human capital, and media attention (i.e. for customer acquisition); indeed, they are often able to raise money with only a prototype product or little to no sales, particularly when founders have prior

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<sup>210</sup> Josh Lerner’s (2009) *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* offers an interesting analysis of how governments are often over-enticed by the prospect of replicating Silicon Valley-like success in their own cities and countries, but fail due to a variety of implementation, design, and other problems.

<sup>211</sup> Of course, technological innovations tend to diffuse over time across countries through various mechanisms (e.g. learning, imitation, competition, coercion; see Simmons et al. 2007). Yet, these diffusion processes are separate from *entrepreneurial*, founding processes.



histories of success.<sup>212</sup> Further, the “quality” of venture capital firms is also unevenly distributed, highly concentrated in entrepreneurial clusters. Thus, financing from high-status investors can have strong status-signaling effects, resulting in greater legitimacy from prospective investors, media outlets, and even politicians. For an on-demand organizational model like Uber’s, comparative advantages are derived largely from the scale-benefits of supply-side worker-networks, and thus raising funds, hiring talent, and gaining legitimacy quickly was central to capturing market share and establishing market dominance. Uber’s founders were able to raise seed-funding of \$1.25 million only four months after their launch in San Francisco on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, from investors<sup>213</sup> co-located and eager to fund the next Silicon Valley tech “unicorn” (i.e. billion-dollar-plus company). Series A<sup>214</sup> funding came two months later (\$11 million at \$60 million valuation) and was used to launch in New York City in May 2011 and other US cities, namely Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and Washington DC. Series B funding in December 2011 (\$32 million) was critical to rolling out “UberX” (July 2012), the low-price product that marked Uber’s entry to mass markets, and gaining market share quickly to keep competitors like Lyft (launched in San Francisco in August 2012) at bay. In subsequent years, financing kept pouring in—roughly \$15 billion to date (Sorkin 2016)—largely on the basis of Uber’s strategy of growing both sides of its marketplace (i.e. drivers and riders) securing monopolistic advantages in the market and creating a “liquid market” (see Rothman 2016), i.e. a marketplace in which transactions are mutually beneficial to the extent that neither party is incentivized to withdraw. Further, as a booming “silicon valley” startup, when California became the first state in September 2013 to regulate the emergent ride-sourcing industry (based on the California Public Utilities Commission’s unanimous vote; Yeung 2013), Uber gained substantial

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<sup>212</sup> Founders Garrett Camp and Travis Kalanick had each just sold their respective startups, Stumble Upon to Ebay and Red Swoosh to Akamai. Thus, their reputations and social ties also made it easier for them to access finance.

<sup>213</sup> These included First Round Capital (worked with Robert Hayes), LowerCase Capital (Chris Sacca), Napster’s founder Shawn Fanning, Zappos’ Alfred Lin, VisiCalc’s Mitch Kapor, etc.

<sup>214</sup> This round was led by Benchmark.

legitimacy nationwide, particularly because California is publicly perceived as a trailblazer in innovation. As for talent, since its early years Uber has needed engineers who could optimize models for demand estimation, dynamic pricing, congestion predictions, supply matching and positioning, whom they were readily able to find in Silicon Valley's talent pool; indeed, they established a "math department" early on with nuclear physicists, machine learning experts, computational neuroscientists, etc.

Thus, Uber's founding amidst a resource landscape with the types of complementary resources (e.g. technological, high-status angel investors and venture capitalists, high-skill labor) it needed to build its infrastructure and gain an initial market foothold is an important part of the on-demand economy emergence. This aspect of the story is consistent with transaction cost theory's proposition that firms tend to emerge when the costs of coordinating transactions within a firm fall below those of doing so in the market (Coase 1937; Williamson 1981). Technological advancements have certainly functioned as necessary conditions for dramatically reducing the costs of intermediating buyers and sellers in traditional markets (e.g. Craigslist). Yet, the on-demand economy depends on much more than accessible and requisite technology and finance; it has depended critically on a pool of available workers, whose availability is at least *partly* a function of broader work-organization and labor-stratification processes.

### **Alienated Labor: Work Conditions in the Transportation Industry and Job Quality Trends**

Given that growing supply-side worker-networks are fundamental to Uber's organizational model and its scale and competitive advantages (see chapter one on liquid marketplaces)—that is, as worker-networks grow, Uber is able to improve rider engagement and loyalty due to faster pick-up times, among other related benefits<sup>215</sup>—the ecological availability of a pool of workers willing to join these networks en masse has been a critical factor in Uber's emergence. As noted in the above-described theoretical

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<sup>215</sup> For example, as worker-networks grow, Uber is able to raise the minimum driver rating required for drivers to operate in a market, thereby improving driver quality, which in turn generates greater buy-side demand.

framework, work-organization and labor-stratification processes can indirectly generate resources to be mobilized by entrepreneurs. In this sense, Uber's emergence is directly related to employment conditions of the past decade and the political-economic developments that underlie them<sup>216</sup>. Two developments are particularly relevant: (1) work conditions in the transportation industry (e.g. taxicab, limousine drivers) and (2) broader employment trends in "job quality."

First, given that an estimated 49 percent of Uber drivers (Benenson Strategy Group 2015) worked in transportation services at some point prior to joining Uber (e.g. taxicabs<sup>217</sup>, livery cabs, for-hire services such as "black cars"), it is important to understand work-conditions in those industries, as they bear directly on Uber's ability to attract workers from adjacent labor markets; on the whole, in most major US cities (e.g. New York City, Chicago), work conditions for taxicab drivers have degraded, and this is tied to (1) a poorly adapted regulatory structure and (2) the rentier practices it creates. With respect to the first factor, taxicab regulations have been largely un-adaptive to social changes in transportation. In nearly all cities, in order to control the supply of taxicabs, quotas were established regarding the number of available taxicab operator licenses (i.e. "medallions," vehicle-affixed metal plaques). In Boston, for example, the quota (managed by the Hackney Carriage Unit<sup>218</sup>) was set at 1525 in the 1930s, increasing to 1825 in the late 1990s (Berdik 2004) and unchanged since. Medallion-owners typically own multiple medallions and lease them out to drivers, typically for around \$70-\$100 per day in

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<sup>216</sup> Demographic factors (e.g. aging population) and the rise of dual-income households also likely contribute to the availability of workers interested in flexible, on-demand work; however, my main focus is on political-economic developments tied to work.

<sup>217</sup> Among the variety of services, there are taxicabs (in NYC, these are the "yellow cabs"), livery cabs, "black cars," "dollar vans," etc. Generally, these are governed by different rules. For example, in NYC livery cabs have designated areas; they tend to dominate the outer boroughs and uptown Manhattan, and they are restricted from picking up passengers directly on the street, though this rule has been relaxed recently. "Black cars" are luxury cars that mostly, in New York City, serve corporations and high-earners. Dollar vans mostly serve those on the outer boroughs.

<sup>218</sup> The Hackney Carriage Unit is part of the Boston Police Department.

major cities like Boston and New York City and Boston. Yet, while the taxicab industries<sup>219</sup> are highly regulated via fare controls, medallion quotas, and other requirements (e.g. driver qualification, vehicle safety, insurance requirements, colors of cabs, etc.), in the 1970s and early 1980s, deregulatory<sup>220</sup> measures were taken that effectively categorized the majority of taxicab and limousine drivers in the industry as “independent contractors,” on the legal judgment that they were not under the “direction and control” (Kluger 2008) of taxi firms (i.e. medallion-owning firms). This independent-contracting model, rather than the commission-based model that generally prevailed prior to the early 1980s, is now dominant (Schwarz-Miller and Talley 2003). In Boston, 48 percent of the owners of taxi-medallions buy or lease vehicles, affix medallions to them, and rent them out typically over two 12-hour shifts to different taxicab drivers (“shift drivers”); 25 percent operate the vehicle themselves as owner-operators; and 20 percent lease the medallion to a driver who owns their vehicle<sup>221</sup> (Nelsen 2013)<sup>222</sup>.

This combination of medallion quotas and the independent contractor model effectively allowed medallion-tycoons<sup>223</sup> (e.g. taxi garages, brokers) to construct rentier relations with taxicab drivers, in which drivers experience a double-disadvantage: they are typically not protected by labor laws applicable to “employees” *and* they face the brunt of rent-seeking taxi-companies who disproportionately control the limited supply of taxi licenses. Like Uber drivers, taxicab drivers with leases lack various employee-based benefits (e.g. health coverage, overtime pay, sick days, paid

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<sup>219</sup> There is, of course, substantial variation across cities.

<sup>220</sup> For example, ever since the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission (NYC is the largest taxicab market) legalized leasing of vehicles to taxi drivers in 1979, effectively rendering these drivers “independent contractors” with respect to taxi firms; prior to 1979, *employed* taxi drivers on a commission-based or hourly model, i.e. taking a fare “cut” for each ride. The result was drivers lost various fringe benefits entitled to employees and were also incentivized to work extreme hours to generate as much returns as possible given the leasing costs.

<sup>221</sup> The remaining medallion-owners typically hire managers to manage the investment.

<sup>222</sup> For example, in San Diego, 69 percent of registered taxis are owned by firms who leased out multiple cars to independent contractors and 25 percent are owned by single-license holders who also lease out their vehicles; only six percent are owner-driven, i.e. driven exclusively by the license-holder (Esbenshade 2013).

<sup>223</sup> For example, in Boston, a single person, Eddie Tutunjian, owned 362 medallions, which is roughly 20 percent of supply as of early 2017. He has recently sold these medallions to developer Jay Doherty for \$145 million. See Adams (2017).

vacation), but they face various taxi-specific expenses and problems, including: leasing fees<sup>224</sup> (usually daily or weekly); gas expenses (roughly \$25/day); vehicle repair costs, which car-owners often refuse to cover, effectively coercing drivers to incur these expenses out-of-pocket or otherwise lose riders for a vehicle they have already leased; fees to taxi dispatchers<sup>225</sup> (i.e. or “radio associations”), who require payments in cash and refuse to provide receipts (dispatchers have control over ride-assignments and so drivers avoid risking upsetting them); problems with drivers who “long-hood” (i.e. lie about their locations to dispatchers in order to “steal” rides from other drivers); greater initial “fixed costs” (e.g. often must pass a city-geography exam and take classes, mandatory car replacements every few years); fare-jumpers (i.e. riders who do not pay); disrespectful, abusive, or criminal riders (e.g. robberies, verbal or physical harassment, inebriation, slamming doors) who are not “rider-rated” as they are on Uber, etc. (Hoffman 2006; Hoffman 2008; Brennan Center for Justice 2007; Davis 1959; Schaller and Gilbert 1995). The medallion-owning taxicab firms have had little material incentive to alter these arrangements.

Thus, even as independent contractors, taxi drivers’ work conditions are deeply affected by regulations governing the taxi-industry as well as rentier practices. With respect to wages, there is substantial variation depending on market conditions (e.g. some show cab drivers earn below minimum wage in various cities; see Brennan Center for Justice 2007; Bruno 2009; Esbenshade et al. 2013). The most representative data come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Employment Statistics, which tracks wages of taxicab and limousine drivers who are *employees* (rather than independent-contractors); it estimates mean wages of employee-drivers at \$13.00 per hour as of May 2015. Given that these employees, this wage-rate is likely net of drivers’ gasoline, insurance, and other expenses. According to a 2015 estimate from Hall and Krueger based on administrative data provided by Uber, drivers across Uber’s twenty largest city-markets earn an average \$19.15 per hour. This, of course, is *not*

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<sup>224</sup> The daily rates can be around \$70 for 12-hour shifts (Berdik 2004).

<sup>225</sup> In Boston, taxicab medallion owners must be affiliated with dispatchers or “radio associations,” of which seven are authorized by city and dispatch the trips to medallion-affixed taxicabs (see Nelson 2013).

net of Uber drivers' expenses, so the comparison of wages must be strongly qualified; yet at a minimum, net wages for Uber drivers do not appear to be much (if at all) lower than they are for taxicab drivers.<sup>226</sup> Putting taxicab-Uber net-income differences comparisons aside (as that would require further analysis and is not my focus) and bearing in mind that half of Uber drivers worked in transportation at some point prior to joining Uber, there does seem to be strong evidence that the most relevant alternative to Uber has become (at least perceptively) unattractive, partly due to the regulatory and (arguably) rentier structure of the industry.

Second, beyond adjacent industry-specific dynamics (e.g. taxicab industry), macro-structural developments since the 1970s—particularly long-term rises in economic insecurity<sup>227</sup> (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012), employment instability (Farber 2008; Hollister 2011), and polarization in *job quality* since the 1970s (e.g. job security, employment tenure, longer unemployment spells, declines in workplace benefits like defined-benefit pension, access to internal labor markets (see Kalleberg 2011)) have attenuated workers' attachment to traditional employment relations and thus reduced the relative costs of switching to Uber. Yet, it would be imprecise to interpret, in general terms, these developments as having pushed workers *involuntarily* toward on-demand work; rather, these trends suggest that *available* alternative work conditions have deteriorated, rendering Uber a more *relatively* attractive

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<sup>226</sup> Taxicab drivers have, in certain cases, leveraged the threat of switching to Uber as bargaining power against taxi firms (see Ashe 2015).

<sup>227</sup> "Economic insecurity" (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012) captures the degree to which individuals and groups are protected against—through their wealth, support networks, public insurance—adverse economic events (e.g. job loss, health costs, family dissolution). As Hacker (2006) argued in *The Great Risk Shift*, since the 1970s broad structural and institutional developments have resulted in the eroding of public and private support systems and the shifting of a variety of economic risks (e.g. costs associated with job loss and adverse health events) onto private workers and families. The concept of "economic insecurity" provides a helpful way of understanding the moving parts of a stratification system, and researchers (Hacker et al. 2011; Western et al. 2012) have argued that focusing on the dynamics surrounding *economic losses and buffers*— as opposed to static *levels of resources* as in the income inequality literature—has the advantage of providing a window into how inequality is *experienced*. However, it should be noted, that many have argued that studies revealing rising economic insecurity are fraught with measurement problems (Winship 2009). However, the rise of income volatility (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994; 2009) is less controversial.

option for job-searchers. Indeed, as of December 2014, 59 percent of Uber drivers were estimated to have had full-time employment prior to joining Uber while only 8 percent were unemployed; 47.7 percent had graduated a four-year college compared to the 41.1 percent national average (Benenson Strategy Group 2015<sup>228</sup>; Hall and Krueger 2015). Thus, while less formally-educated and more economically vulnerable workers likely joined Uber at least partly due to lack of work options, for a substantial segment of workers, the above-described economic-structural trends should be understood as having made working for Uber more attractive *relative to comparable work conditions*, which have deteriorated for various reasons<sup>229</sup> (see Kalleberg 2011 and chapter one; also Stone and Arthurs 2013). Of course, these conditions do not imply that working for Uber *indeed* offered better work conditions, which is a separate empirical question; they simply predisposed workers to explore Uber and other on-demand work.

Uber effectively capitalized on these labor market developments by highlighting the relative advantages of being an Uber “driver-partner” especially at the end of 2013, after three key developments: (1) it raised \$258 million from Google Ventures and others in a Series C round in which numerous investors were vying to buy-in and thus Uber (particularly Travis Kalanick) was able to confidently control the deal’s terms, (2) California became the first state to legally recognize the ride-sourcing industry through direct regulation (September 2013), and (3) rider-demand was rapidly rising. Subsequently in 2014, Uber increased their active US drivers from around 40,000 to 160,000 (Hall and Krueger 2015) through aggressive marketing, insurance plans for drivers to extend coverage, and various

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<sup>228</sup> The Benenson Strategy Group sampled 601 Uber drivers in December 2014. It was an anonymized, online survey with a very low response rate of 11%; yet, as Hall and Krueger (2015) have argued, compared to aggregated administrative data from Uber, the sample is highly similar to other Uber drivers in terms of average work hours and weekly earnings. This does not, of course, indicate that the sample is not different in other significant ways. This is the only survey data available on Uber drivers as of now.

<sup>229</sup> These include growth of skill-bias technologies, improved automation technologies, global-competitive pressures to cut costs by offshoring and outsourcing to contractors, weakening of unions and other labor market deregulations, rising pressures for corporations to realize short-term profits for investors, etc.

financing programs (called “Vehicle Solutions”) aimed at attracting potential drivers mainly through leasing programs, but also offering options to rent (by hour, week, or weekend) and buy discounted cars. These financial services began as partnerships with auto-manufacturers (e.g. Toyota, GM, Ford; see Buhr 2016), auto-lenders (e.g. Exeter Finance, owned by private equity group Blackstone; see Lashinsky 2014), and dealerships to provide financing to drivers who typically could not get loans on their own (Lawler 2013). Overtime, it has increasingly expanded such programs in their quest for expanding their worker-networks (see chapter one on marketplace liquidity), programs that often ignored<sup>230</sup> formal measures of creditworthiness in favor of background checks. In July 2015 developed expanded these efforts further by setting up an in-house service; they established a program operated by an Uber subsidiary called “Xchange Leasing,” based on a \$1bn credit facility organized by Goldman Sachs, which provides and manages vehicle leases to drivers (Newcomer and Zaleski 2016). In April 2016, they experimented with \$1,000 interest-free loans to new drivers (Dellinger 2016) through a program called Advance Pay. In 2015 and 2016, roughly 50,000 and 100,000 drivers respectively used such programs to access vehicles (Hook 2016b). Payments for these various financial services are typically made through deductions from drivers’ weekly earnings. These initiatives particularly attract immigrants who are unable to join Uber’s platform due to financing constraints (e.g. poor or no credit histories); they also spiked driver engagement by effectively incentivizing workers to drive longer hours<sup>231</sup>.

Thus, declines in job-quality (e.g. in transportation services) and rises in economic insecurity contributed to making working for Uber a more *relatively* attractive option for workers. Aided by venture capital, increased legitimacy, and growing demand, as well as the car-financing and insurance

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<sup>230</sup> For example, Hook (2016b) reported that Amit Jain, president of Uber India, said: “To us, creditworthiness is not a criteria, our goal is to give out leases and give out cars to as many people as possible...if somebody cannot pay the monthly amount, they can simply return the car.” He noted that they typically use background checks rather than traditional credit checks.

<sup>231</sup> It should be noted in the same year, Uber cut prices in several US cities, largely in an effort to expand consumer demand just as it was expanding supply. This resulted in backlash by drivers and so the price hike was reversed in some of those cities.



programs it made available to new drivers, Uber was able to attract hundreds of thousands of US driver-partners in a relatively short time frame. These developments also illustrate the inextricable link between social-stratification and the resource landscape. Yet, these economic-structural developments have been critical to Uber's emergence through a different mechanism: shaping the political-legal context within which Uber operates. I turn to this consideration next.

### **Political Vulnerability**

Finally, various economic, democratic, and legal-regulatory dynamics in the United States rendered government actors politically vulnerable to Uber's mode of political-legal claim-making in three ways: (1) the Great Recession heightened the political need to support job-creating efforts, strengthening Uber's claims for creating fundamental economic value; (2) given that for substantial segments of the population Uber symbolized technological innovation, government actors were concerned that opposing Uber would be perceived as tantamount to opposing forward-thinking and positive change; and (3) the complex legal-technical challenges and knotty political conflict led to a considerable degree of political paralysis. The confluence of these factors incentivized government actors to be more accommodating to Uber's claims.

First, the enormous social problems created by the Great Recession—as measured by, for example, the unemployment rate peaking at 10.1% (October 2009), remaining above 7.8% until late 2012, and long-term unemployment having reached a historical peak of 45.1%<sup>232</sup> (Kosanovich and Sherman 2015)—created political pressure at various levels of government to mitigate and reverse the devastating effects that ensued (Grusky et al. 2011; Bartels 2013; also Rajan 2010). Uber was founded before the recession's peak and amidst its slow recovery, and its legal-regulatory battles (as examined in the following section) were waged mainly at the municipal level. Beyond issues of public safety (e.g. driver background checks, vehicle safety), transportation logistics (e.g. Uber's effect on traffic and

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<sup>232</sup> That is, among unemployed persons, 45.1% were unemployed for 27 weeks or longer.

parking), potential tax revenue that could be collected from the on-demand economy (e.g. workers' compensation and unemployment insurance funds), worker complaints (e.g. drivers being "deactivated" without clear cause), the Great Recession particularly amplified concerns about labor-market dislocations and weak economic growth, sensitizing city officials to the importance of signaling vigorous job-creation efforts and innovative thinking to constituents. Given that Uber (and other on-demand firms) could purportedly absorb some post-recession labor slack—as well as function as a purportedly absorb some post-recession labor slack and also create value in the form of a consumer surplus (Cohen et al. 2016)—city-officials were incentivized to be accommodative partly on the basis of the long-term social value Uber could create.

Second, beyond economic fundamentals, government actors were also concerned with short-term public perceptions regarding how adaptive they were being to technological change. A report by the National League of Cities interviewed city-officials about their experiences with technology platforms (e.g. Uber), finding: "an emergent theme across interviews [was officials desiring] for their cities to be seen as innovative and adaptive" (2015: 6). One official stated: "If you go at it with the approach that [these companies] are invading, you'll have a lot more trouble coming up with a good transportation-for-hire ordinance" (National League of Cities 2015: 7). These concerns were amplified in two ways: (1) for the past several years Uber has been seen as the quintessential Silicon-Valley innovator, and thus opposing it could readily be mistaken for opposing "positive progress," and (2) as is described later in the chapter, Uber has deliberately sought to afflict "status damage" on its opponents, likely in part to signal to others the costs of opposing it. For example, in the same report by the National League of Cities (2015: 7), it was noted that at least one official who was vocally opposed to Uber's practices was "vilified in the media and accused of being 'anti-innovation.'"

Third, government responses to Uber's thorny de facto growth were characterized by a degree of *political paralysis* that contributed to Uber making rapid market gains while its opponents fretted

over government inaction. This paralysis had two dimensions: (1) the relevant legal frameworks for regulating transportation companies were not constructed with Uber's organizational model in mind, and (2) governments were facing pressure not only from Uber and its sympathizers, but from taxicab lobbyists and their supporters, which hindered decisive action. The National League of Cities (2015: 6) noted in its report that "due to rapidly evolving business models, intense media campaigns, and vocal constituents, the process of regulating sharing economy<sup>233</sup> businesses can be complex and contentious," and that "with no clear precedent for the regulatory process, each city must determine which agency or agencies, committees and staff members will take the lead on meeting with stakeholders, drafting ordinances and implementing new policies." The upshot of the complex legal-technical challenges and knotty political conflict was weariness and irresolution, from which Uber benefited through its "blitzkrieg" tactics, examined in the next part of this chapter. These challenges faced by regulators (i.e. job-creating goals, pressures to signal innovativeness, political paralysis) are best fleshed out empirically at the level of *interaction* between Uber's claim-making with respect to governments, and so I develop this processual "dynamic of contention" (McAdam et al. 2001) in the second part of my empirical findings next.

Concluding this first set of findings, I have pointed to several ways in which Uber's ecology was poised to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model. Specifically, technological developments (e.g. GPS, cloud computing, reputational systems) have dramatically reduced Uber's transaction costs for coordinating driver-rider transactions while its founding in Silicon Valley anchored it in an entrepreneurial cluster in which the requisite, complementary resources were readily accessible. Yet, its resource landscape was broader than these technological and geographic factors suggest; labor market developments within the taxi industry and more broadly have created a pool of (arguably

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<sup>233</sup> As pointed out in chapter one, "sharing economy" is not the most useful descriptor of Uber and other on-demand platform-marketplaces.

alienated) workers for whom on-demand work is perceived to be relatively attractive. Uber's emergence is inextricable from this ecological fact, rooted in historical state-capitalist interactions and the work-organization and labor-stratification processes they entailed. Finally, government actors capacity to contend with Uber's "claim-making" was undermined by political costs and vulnerabilities partly attributable to the need to create jobs, to signal the government's embrace of innovation, as well as complex legal-technical challenges and knotty political conflict. To effectively capture these claim-making dynamics, it is essential to empirically investigate the deployment of Uber's strategic repertoires in relation to government actions and broader ecological dynamics. This *transactional or interactional* level of analysis is precisely where pragmatists, Padgett and Powell, and political process theorists like Tilly fruitfully converge. The second part of my empirical investigation is guided by this ontological orientation.

### **Uber's Repertoire-in-Action: Blitzkrieg, Prophylaxis, and Janus-like Tactics**

In this section, I aim to demonstrate that the most critical dimension to Uber's survival and growth involves it having been successful in making various political-legal claims, particularly regarding the legal-classification of its "driver-partners" as "independent contractors." I frame this success as a product of *contentious interactions* between Uber and its opponents (e.g. some city officials, taxicab lobbyists, segments of the public). These interactions were structured by both Uber's repertoire (i.e. its mode of claim-making)—described below as involving blitzkrieg, prophylactic, and Janus-like tactics (i.e. two-faced pugnacity and ingratiating)—and the social-ecology within which it was embedded. As described above, this ecology was *poised* for Uber's emergence in various ways (e.g. post-recession political vulnerabilities); this section gives that poisedness richer meaning by viewing it as *poisedness to Uber's successful claim-making*. Just as poisedness is understood in this relational sense, so too is Uber's repertoire, which is viewed as having been altered processually through Uber's ecological interactions, particularly since early 2015.

In interpreting the evidence on Uber’s repertoire-in-action, it is important to recall chapter one’s overview of how critical supply-side worker-networks are to Uber’s organizational model, particularly the degree to which Uber depends on its workers being legally-classified as independent contractors<sup>234</sup> for cost advantages (e.g. workers’ compensation, unemployment insurance, payroll taxes, consumption taxes) and other benefits (e.g. stave off worker-unionization, greater discretion over “firing” or “deactivating” drivers). In the various compromises Uber has made with government agencies, Uber has always been unwavering on the drivers-as-independent-contractors proviso and has been generally successful. This strategic orientation has been the basis of Uber’s growth strategy which centers on attracting large numbers of workers in order to attain platform-marketplace liquidity (see chapter one for details). One benefit of marketplace liquidity has a *political* component: as Uber’s worker-network grows, it can improve the rider experience (e.g. faster pick-up times, lower prices); as the rider experiences improves, Uber generates greater public support; as public support rises, state actors become more incentivized to accommodate the claims Uber makes. Thus, Uber’s growth strategy hinges on markets as much as it does political contention.

I proceed in three steps. First, I describe Uber’s three-pronged strategic repertoire—(1) rhetoric aimed at promulgating the public benefit Uber creates, (2) undermining its opponents, and (3) mobilizing consumer support into political action—and provide some narrative context regarding this repertoire’s formation and furnishing which involves competition, political vulnerability, and financing, tracing these processes to Uber’s entry into mass markets in July 2012 with the launch of UberX. The second and third sections provide case-illustrations of the transactional deployment of Uber’s repertoire over time; these sections are organized *partly* temporally. The second section focuses on Uber’s early

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<sup>234</sup> The criteria used to determine whether Uber drivers are “contractors” or “employees” (or other legal categories such as “workers” in the United Kingdom) vary considerably across states (and industries), but generally hinges on two criteria: (1) the degree of control the organization has over the worker and (2) how integral the worker is to the business’ core operations. See chapter two for details.

years (2009-2014) throughout which it repeatedly deployed its three-pronged repertoire through what I describe as blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics. That is Uber would seek to gain a strong foothold in the market as rapidly as possible (blitzkrieg) while simultaneously securing its market gains by both politically mobilizing its newly found consumer support and publicly afflicting “status damage” on its opponents *before* they can muster enough political-organizational strength to undermine Uber’s claims (prophylaxis). I argue in the third section that Uber’s repertoire has become increasingly Janus-like; on one hand its interactions have been as pugnacious as ever, yet on the other, it has increasingly been proactive in demonstrating goodwill to governments and its constituents. In the discussion section I offer some explanatory remarks regarding this phenomenon.

### **Uber’s Repertoire of Contention: (1) Rhetoric, (2) Undermining Opponents, (3) Mobilizing Consumer Support**

This section describes Uber’s strategic repertoire (i.e. mode of claim-making) and provides some narrative context regarding its formation and furnishing. In two parts, I first describe a sequence of events—involving (1) competition, (2) political vulnerability, and (3) financing—that followed the launch of UberX in July 2012 and altered the dynamics of contention between Uber, its opponents, and its stakeholders in ways that defined Uber’s strategic repertoire; second, I describe three components of that repertoire, which involve: (1) rhetoric aimed at promulgating the public benefit Uber creates, (2) undermining its opponents, and (3) mobilizing consumer support into political action.

### ***The Social Formation and Backdrop of Its Uber’s Repertoire***

From mid-2012 to the end of 2013, Uber’s internal organization increasingly reflected a simultaneous (1) strategic cognizance that political-legal contention would be among its most substantial challenges and (2) accumulation of resources (i.e. financing and political capital) necessary to put toward these contentions. These developments stemmed largely from the launch of UberX in July 2012, which effectively shifted Uber’s orientation from the high-income, luxury transportation market to the “mass” market. Prior to UberX, Uber’s main product was UberBlack, which offered services in luxury vehicles

(e.g. Cadillac Escalade ESV, Mercedes-Bens GL-Class) which were roughly twice as expensive as a typical taxicab ride. Critically the barriers to becoming an UberX driver were (are) far lower than those of becoming an UberBlack driver; in addition to having to own luxury vehicles, UberBlack drivers needed to meet a range of other requirements, including having commercial registration and insurance, undergoing a vehicle inspection, being subjected to stricter background checks, providing photos of their vehicle, and having special permits to pick-up riders from airports. Given that UberX drivers are categorized as “non-commercial” drivers, their recruitment process was faster than that of UberBlack drivers. The upshot was that UberX drivers flooded the market en masse (especially by late 2013), and at fares roughly three-fourth those of taxicab drivers, substantially growing both sides of the market. By late 2013, there were more active UberX drivers than UberBlack drivers (Hall and Krueger 2015).

Critically, the influx of drivers (and riders) was enabled largely by Uber’s substantial financing<sup>235</sup>—which it had attracted partly due to its rapid growth and public visibility—allowing Uber to out-spend its competitors (e.g. Lyft, Gett, Sidecar) to effectively capture winner-take-all<sup>236</sup> markets (see Rothman 2016<sup>237</sup>). Lyft and Sidecar both had head-starts over Uber in the low-price, mass transportation market, having launched “beta” versions in San Francisco by June 2012 (Cutler 2012). Yet Uber was substantially better funded. While Lyft had raised around \$7 million by mid-2012, Uber had raised \$32 in its Series B round by December 2011. The financing gap would continue to widen<sup>238</sup>; to date, Lyft has

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<sup>235</sup> It should be noted that the supply of venture capital was unusually high between 2010 and 2015, partly due to near-zero Federal Funds Rates.

<sup>236</sup> Even though drivers often use multiple on-demand applications (e.g. Uber and Lyft), riders typically use only one of the platforms. Nonetheless, it is a winner-takes-all market on both sides (riders and drivers), and thus generating strong network effects to achieve liquid markets has always been critical (see chapter one).

<sup>237</sup> Venture capitalist Simon Rothman (2016) makes a similar argument emphasizing that Uber’s tremendous private-financing allowed it to buy its way to marketplace liquidity.

<sup>238</sup> Today, Lyft has raised an estimated \$2.65 billion to date, most recently (April 11, 2017) having raised \$600 million (Etherington 2017b). \$1 billion of the total was raised in January 2016, \$500 million of which came from General Motors (see Newcomer (2016a)). Uber has raised roughly six times more private capital.

raised roughly \$2.61 billion (Etherington 2017b) and Uber has raised roughly \$15 billion. By 2013, Uber was by far the most sought after<sup>239</sup> investment in Silicon Valley, leading it to organize its Series C round (August 2013) as an auction that ultimately valued it at \$3.76 billion. Uber put this financial edge toward expanding its driver-network and rider-network through financial-service programs (see above on loan programs), advertising (i.e. “middle income work” for drivers, “five-minute pick-up” for riders), various promotional programs (e.g. referral bonuses, temporary hourly wage-guarantees<sup>240</sup> for drivers), all oriented toward the marketplace liquidity described in chapter one (see O’Hara 1998; Hagiu and Rothman 2016). It also leveraged its finances to execute several, more subtle, competitive tactics, including: developing a program called “Hell” that would allow it to collect data on Lyft drivers, such as their prices and which ones were also driving for Uber, which allowed Uber to develop targeted incentives (e.g. bonuses) for these drivers to switch exclusively to Uber (Efrati 2017); buying anonymized data about Lyft customers from Slice Intelligence, which used an email-digest service (i.e. “Unroll.me”) that stored Lyft receipts sent to Lyft customers’ emails (Isaac 2017b<sup>241</sup>); having Uber employees send ride-requests to Lyft and then to immediately cancel in order to frustrate Lyft drivers or take the ride and try to persuade the drivers to switch to Uber, (Fink 2014), etc.

This market expansion transformed relations between Uber and its stakeholders in two particularly significant ways: (1) given the dramatically increased competitive pressures Uber had placed on traditional transportation-providers, opposition within the taxicab industry and among its advisors became increasingly staunch, and (2) given that the cities within which Uber was operating lacked a

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<sup>239</sup> Uber attracted investment from various celebrities, including Edward Norton, Olivia Munn, Sophia Bush, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jay Z, etc (Isaac 2017b). Stone (2017) reports that Jay Z tried to invest a second time, wiring funds directly but CEO Travis Kalanick had the money returned, stating there was already too much interest from investors.

<sup>240</sup> Uber generally uses wage-guarantees when demand exceeds supply, including when it launches new products. For example, it did so in Sweden when UberEats was launched (Wisterberg 2017).

<sup>241</sup> Isaac (2017b) also reports that in 2016, Uber provided some of its top managers with a playbook for competing against Lyft and damaging it. He also reports that in 2014, Uber’s CEO met with Lyft’s CEO to discuss a possible acquisition but the deal fell through.



legal-policy framework for regulating Uber’s newest product (i.e. UberX), the dynamics between Uber and regulators were fraught with uncertainty and potentialities. With respect to the first point, Uber increasingly found itself immersed in mostly zero-sum political battles against taxi lobbyists and sympathizers. With respect to the latter, the political vulnerabilities experienced by government actors, due to their unpreparedness as well as other factors—pressures to create jobs and to signal innovativeness (described above)—constituted a political opportunity for Uber to push for its legislative and regulatory interests. The result was a contentious dynamic fraught with possibilities for social-relational change.

Recognizing this, by 2013, Uber’s management had become keen on using investor relations to build a network of supporters that wielded tremendous political influence, domestically and globally<sup>242</sup>. In analyzing this period, Stone (2017) describes<sup>243</sup> Uber’s CEO Travis Kalanick as being particularly enticed by the possibilities of investment partnerships with Google Ventures and TPG Capital,<sup>244</sup> seeking the former for its technological power and the latter for its founding partner David Bonderman whom Kalanick thought “could help Uber with its regulatory problems around the world” (Stone 2017: 245). In addition to attracting such investors and expanding its global network of lobbyists, Uber began hiring a cadre of former political operatives with varied networks (e.g. Democrat, Republican) and areas of knowledge (e.g. regional regulations) into senior management roles, including, among several others<sup>245</sup>:

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<sup>242</sup> Uber’s technological infrastructure was also become increasingly sophisticated and robust at this time, partly a result of Travis Kalanick hiring Thuan Pham to become Chief Technology Officer of the firm as of April 2013. While Uber’s software crashed for three years in a row on New Year’s Eve (given the peak demand), Pham’s team succeeded at ensuring that the system remained stable for the first during New Year’s 2014. See Stone (2017: 249).

<sup>243</sup> Brad Stone’s *The Upstarts* offers a detailed account of this Series C funding round.

<sup>244</sup> Google invested \$258 million and TPG Capital \$88 million.

<sup>245</sup> Uber’s Public Policy Advisory Board includes: former US Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, former Prime Minister of Peru Roberto Danino, former head of the White House’s Domestic Policy Council Melody Barnes, former head of the Australian competition authority, Saudi Arabia’s Princess Reema Bandar al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, among others. Other senior Uber managers who formerly occupied public roles include Emil Michael, a lawyer and former special assistant to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, serving as Uber’s Senior Vice President

David Plouffe, political strategist and former campaign manager to President Barack Obama, serving as Uber's Senior Vice President of Policy and Strategy; Rachel Whetstone, formerly Political Secretary to the UK's Home Secretary Michael Howard, serving as Uber's Senior Vice President of Policy and Communications; Jill Hazelbaker, former national communications director for John McCain's presidential campaign, serving as Uber's Vice President for Communications and Public Policy; Neelie Kroes, former European Commissioner, serving on Uber's Public Policy Advisory Board, etc. (Hook and Waters 2016; Hook 2006). Uber also hired engineers like Ben Metcalfe who described himself as specialized in building "custom tools to support citizen engagement across legislative matters [for] social good and social change" (Isaac 2017b<sup>246</sup>).

### ***Rhetoric, Mobilizing Support, Undermining Opponents***

In the context of government officials being under pressure from various sides (e.g. taxi lobby, consumer-citizens, Uber and Lyft) and in a political wallow defined by uncertainty regarding how to craft laws and policies around a phenomenon that was novel and growing, Uber was accumulating financing, political capital, and market share, and harnessing these resources as part of an increasingly practiced three-pronged repertoire of contention involving: (1) rhetoric aimed at, among other things, promulgating the public benefit Uber creates, (2) mobilizing consumer support into political action, and (3) undermining and foiling its opponents (e.g. code and law enforcement officials, politicians, journalists). This repertoire was essentially deployed to pressure governments into passing Uber-friendly regulations.

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of Business, and Matt McKenna, formerly spokesman for the Office of President William J. Clinton, served as Uber's Head of Communications (though no longer). Uber also has several consultants with deep political ties, including Ian Osborne, former adviser to British Prime Minister David Cameron. Others include Michael Wolff, who has advised on the US Department of Defense.

<sup>246</sup> Isaac (2017b) notes that CEO Travis Kalanick also tried (unsuccessfully) to attract Oprah Winfrey to Uber's board. This may have largely been a public relations move.

First, regarding its rhetorical strategy, Uber publicly espouses values that denote both an affective vision of what Uber defines as positively important and what it deliberately opposes or disfavors. The values it positively espouses have a strong libertarian streak and are expressed through various claims asserting that: drivers and riders should be able to engage freely in any way that they want, without government constraining this freedom at the behest of “taxi special interests working to stifle competition and protect their monopoly<sup>247</sup>”; drivers *prefer* to work as independent contractors, to pursue their economic opportunities flexibly (e.g. setting their own hours), with their free consent to working as independent contractors as ultimately what matters; riders should be able to get where they want to go as cheaply, quickly, and easily as possible, without governments creating artificial inefficiencies. Variants of this rhetoric have been deployed repeatedly. Regarding Uber’s claims for what it stands against, Uber presents itself as an “underdog” innovator opposing an alternative set of values it associates with corrupt, established political-corporate interests who engage in monopolistic “regulatory capture” (e.g. Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit Association; see O’Donnell 2016<sup>248</sup>), as well as backward bureaucrats who are afraid of technological progress, and journalists who generate sensationalist misimpressions about Uber. It bolsters these claims by furnishing evidence that Uber creates jobs for workers, expands resource utilization (e.g. unused cars), lessens the carbon footprint, reduces accidents caused by drunken driving<sup>249</sup>, improving safety through route-monitoring, reducing traffic congestion, complementing existing infrastructure by offering their products to underserved

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<sup>247</sup> This 2014 Uber statement is from [action.uber.org/Illinois](http://action.uber.org/Illinois). In it Uber urged Chicago residents to veto Illinois State Senate HB 4075 would severely restrict Uber’s operations in Chicago.

<sup>248</sup> O’Donnell (2016) reports that internal emails from the Hillsborough (in Florida) Public Transportation Commission (PTC) shows that the PTC worked with the taxi limousine industry on stings against Uber. This and other incidents partly validates Uber’s claim of political-industrial collusion.

<sup>249</sup> Among the research on Uber’s possible effect on drunk-driving, a recent working paper by Jessica Peck (2017) estimates a 20-30% reduction in alcohol-related collision rates in New York City since Uber’s launch there in May 2011.

populations (e.g. areas beyond the bounds of metro systems), generates consumer surplus<sup>250</sup> (e.g. faster pick-ups, route-optimizing), etc.

Second, regarding mobilizing consumer support into political action, this tactic has been deployed in tandem with Uber's rhetorical tactics and targeted attacks on opponents. Typically it involves rapidly generating "effervescence" among its supporters through parties, Twitter "hashtag" campaigns, pop-up messages through the Uber application, emails, blog posts, among other tactics<sup>251</sup>. In these ways, Uber channels public sympathy into timely political action (e.g. the days leading up to a city council vote) that has generally succeeded at pressuring government actors into making decisions favorable to its interests. Uber supported these tactics with an email-based system that allowed Uber's users to easily contact their legislators to support Uber's political initiatives (Isaac 2017b<sup>252</sup>).

Third, regarding targeting its opponents, Uber has mostly focused on undermining municipal or state officials who have advocated specific regulation that restricts Uber's operations in some way, but it has also targeted enforcement officials (e.g. law, city codes), lawyers, journalists, and others. It has curried favor with "friendly" actors, particularly at the direction of its political advisors (e.g. David Plouffe).

Elements of each of these strategies is well-captured in an excerpt from a speech by Uber CEO Travis Kalanick to his employees, given on Uber's fifth anniversary: "Nearly every time we try to set up shop in a new city, there's a powerful industry with powerful allies who try to stop progress...The only reason they haven't succeeded is because of you. It's because there's always a handful of Uber riders

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<sup>250</sup> Cohen et al. (2016) estimate the overall consumer surplus generated by UberX in 2015 in the United States at \$6.8 billion.

<sup>251</sup> For example, in an interview with *Inc. Magazine*, Uber's CEO emphasized how they build an emotional attachment with their users: "On Valentine's Day in Chicago, we had every driver give every woman who got in the car a rose. That is scaling romance" (Lagorio-Chafkin 2013).

<sup>252</sup> Isaac 2017b also reports that "In some places, uber employees were also told to create computer programs known as scripts that would automatically vote for the ride-hailing service in city-administered surveys."

and drivers who decide to stand up and speak out and petition City Hall. And then they're joined by a few more. And then a few more. And pretty soon, an entire community of people is fighting for a new way of doing things that makes their lives a little easier" (Uber Newsroom 2015a). At a technology conference, Kalanick said: "We're in a political campaign," adding that the candidate is Uber and the opponent is Taxi. "Nobody likes him, he's not a nice character, but he's so woven into the political machinery and fabric that a lot of people owe him favors" (Isaac 2017b). Such battles have been based on the logic that paying various fines and settlements is well worth the eventual benefit of the law finally "catching up" with Uber's vision. The following two final sections provide case illustrations of this repertoire-in-action, including evidence of its alteration over the course of its deployment, particularly after 2014.

### **Blitzkrieg and Prophylaxis**

Especially in its early years (roughly from 2009 through 2014), the repeated deployment of Uber's three-pronged repertoire (i.e. values-based rhetoric, mobilizing consumers, undermining opponents) across different city-markets could aptly be characterized as combining blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics; that is, Uber would seek to gain a strong foothold in the market as rapidly as possible (blitzkrieg) while simultaneously securing its market gains by both politically mobilizing its newly found consumer support and publicly afflicting "status damage" on its opponents *before* they can muster enough political-organizational strength to undermine Uber's claims (prophylaxis). This repertoire is routinely bolstered through various groundwork measures involving (1) ascertaining that a city-market constitutes a desired opportunity—by investigating regulatory structures, routes, population size and concentration, income distribution (UberBlack targets high-earners), car ownership, tech-adoption rates, consumer sentiment, competition and substitutes, 2) designating a general manager charged with promoting Uber to both sides of the market (i.e. to drivers and riders), broad community outreach (e.g. local businesses, social-media messaging), and identifying local obstacles (e.g. regulatory impediments, political opponents),

and (3) Uber's software which collects, on an ongoing basis, massive amounts of data on application usage (e.g. who uses it, where, when, etc.) and other variables (e.g. wait times), all of which is used to generate management tools (e.g. heat map visualizations) and optimize the platform (e.g. driving routes). In this section I provide some case-examples; first, I illustrate the blitzkrieg deployment of Uber's three-pronged repertoire (i.e. values-based rhetoric, mobilizing consumers, undermining opponents) by briefly overviewing Uber's launches in various cities (e.g. Washington D.C., Chicago) and second, I describe three prophylactic tactics used by Uber to protect its political and market gains, involving manipulating drivers' emotions about unions to prevent a build-up of support, investigating lawyers opposing Uber to enervate their efforts, and developing technological tools to disrupt law and code enforcement stings.

One of Uber's earliest and most symbolic victories was in the U.S. capital Washington D.C. After months of reconnaissance and identifying a market fit between Uber's luxury product (i.e. UberBlack; this was prior to UberX's launch) and D.C.'s particularities (e.g. high-earners, formal dressers, does not cap cab supply, cabs charge a fee for extra stops, federal employees often have transport costs covered by the General Services Administration), Uber launched in DC in mid-December 2011 (Eldon 2011). One month later, the D.C. Taxicab Commission executed a sting operation in which its chairman (Ron Linton) personally took an UberBlack to a destination where City Hack Inspectors awaited; subsequently, the driver was ticketed (\$1,650 in fines) and his car was impounded (DeBonis 2012). Uber proceeded by covering the driver's fine, claiming the Taxicab Commission could not point to specific regulations that Uber or the driver had violated, and continuing its operations full-fledged. Pressure continued to mount against Uber, to the point that in summer 2012, just a few days before Uber was planning on launching UberX, D.C. Councilmember Mary Cheh<sup>253</sup> declared her intention to propose an amendment (referred to

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<sup>253</sup> Mary Cheh was Chair of the Council's Environment, Public Works and Transportation Committee.

as the “Uber amendment”) to a taxicab modernization bill that would regulate “sedan-class” vehicles (e.g. UberBlack and UberX) and effectively require Uber to charge a minimum of \$15/fare, which would radically alter Uber’s fee-structure<sup>254</sup>. Uber responded via emails and a blog-post titled “Un-Independence” (UberX was announced on American Independence Day), urging DC residents to write and call the City Council members who were voting on the amendment, listing each of their names, phone numbers, emails, and Twitter accounts on its website. Uber’s CEO Travis Kalanick publically lambasted the price floor, stating: “It was hard for us to believe that an elected body would choose to keep prices of a transportation service artificially high—but the goal is essentially to protect a taxi industry that has significant experience in influencing local politicians” (Uber Newsroom 2012a). He also submitted a public letter, addressed to the council, describing how Uber was creating jobs in DC, advancing its technological infrastructure, improving quality of life, and noting that Uber is “a technology community armed with 100’s of millions of twitter and Facebook followers who passionately believe in consumer choice and are willing to wage a digital battle to be heard.” Perhaps most importantly, D.C.’s City Council members were inundated with thousands of emails, calls, and tweets; Councilmember Jack Evans stated he received over 5,000 emails (Freed 2012). Within days, Mary Cheh pulled her amendment (Eldon 2012)<sup>255</sup>.

Similar sequences of events occurred in other major cities in the following months, including Denver<sup>256</sup>, Chicago, and Miami. In Chicago, after oppositional legislation by the Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection in October 2012, Kalanick described Uber’s response: “What we did in

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<sup>254</sup> In D.C. at the time, its fee structure was a \$7 base fee, in addition to \$3.25/mile and \$0.75/minute (Freed 2012).

<sup>255</sup> More recently, Uber has been trying to tap into the 2.7 million federal employees in D.C. whose city-transportation is generally covered by the General Services Administration. Yet, as of now the rules are unclear as to whether these employees can get reimbursed for using an Uber service; Uber is currently trying to redress these rules in its favor. See Jopson 2016.

<sup>256</sup> Uber launched in Denver in September 7, 2012 (Uber Newsroom 2012b), but four months later the Colorado Public Utilities Commission proposed regulations that would make Uber’s pricing model illegal, ban drivers from the downtown area, etc. Uber launched its #UberDENVERLove Twitter campaign and urged its supporters to contact their local officials, which they noted taxi firms have been doing for decades (Uber Newsroom 2013).

Chicago, what we do in all these cities, is reach out to all of our users and say, take action—email your councilperson; email the mayor...Uber riders are the most affluent, influential people in their cities. When we get to a critical mass, it becomes impossible to shut us down” (Lagorio-Chafkin 2013). A political struggle ensued for two years until Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, on his last day in office, enacted a law that would effectively legitimize Uber (Uber Newsroom 2015b; Griswold 2016). In Miami-Dade County, opposition from the taxi industry and county commissioners was particularly vehement, successfully having pushed for classifying Uber as a “for-hire transportation” company (Mazzei 2014). The Miami’s large market was critical for Uber, and so it flew most of its 400 employees there in October 2013 (2017) to round up support in the city. After a stalemate for several months, Uber’s competitor Lyft decided to launch despite the illegality of doing so (May 2014), and Uber simply followed suit a month later (Elfrink 2014), both operating in clear defiance of the law. Roughly one year later, after much of the same political mobilization described above, Miami Mayor Carlos Gimenez essentially caved to a social dynamic that was transformed culturally (i.e. use of Uber was normalized in everyday practice), economically (i.e. prices had shifted and the market had expanded), and politically (i.e. city officials were enervated and symbolically inefficacious), announcing: “Demand is too great...You’re not going to put that genie back in the bottle...I’m not going to drag Uber and Lyft back into the 20th century...I think the taxi industry has to move into the 21<sup>st</sup>” (Garvin and Hanks 2015).

The market and political-legal gains Uber achieved through blitzkrieg tactics—which allowed it to quickly reach the point of “demand being too great” for government officials to effectively restrict it—was augmented by various prophylactic measures that prevented future losses to those gains. Specifically, Uber was usually been successful at undermining its opponents (e.g. lawyers and their plaintiffs) and foiling their oppositional tactics (e.g. unionizing, code-enforcement stings). I provide three illustrations: (1) manipulating drivers’ emotions about unions to prevent a build-up of support, (2) investigating



lawyers opposing it to enervate their efforts, and (3) developing technological tools to disrupt law and code enforcement stings.

First, Uber has been successful at undermining the attempts by some of its drivers to unionize (see chapter one for reasons), as is best illustrated by the case of Seattle, where its “Uber Seattle Partner Podcast” has been used regularly to shape Uber drivers’ beliefs and emotions about unionization. Seattle is the only city in which unionizing efforts<sup>257</sup> have come close to fruition. In December 2015, the Seattle City Council voted unanimously in favor of a landmark ordinance that would allow Uber drivers to unionize (Wingfield and Isaac 2015), a major victory for Teamsters Local 177 and the App-Based Drivers Association (a group of Uber drivers); although after over a year of legal challenges, a district judge temporarily halted the ordinance (April 2017; Gutman 2017). Given that drivers’ beliefs and emotions about the ordinance were critical to how City Council member would vote on the ordinance, as well as how, in the event that the ordinance did pass, drivers would vote regarding various collective bargaining measures (e.g. negotiating for fixed hours), Uber actively tried to sway its drivers to oppose the ordinance. One of the ways it did so was through a podcast to which drivers can listen through the Uber Partner application (Golson 2017); indeed, they are urged to listen through a saliently displayed “listen now” button (Heller 2017). In the podcast, drivers call in to give their thoughts about the Seattle ordinance in conversation with the podcast host (general manager of Uber in the Pacific Northwest). The podcast episodes focuses on themes exemplified through these quotes: “the Teamsters being behind this” and they are “trying to find a new source of revenue”; “it’s hard to understand how they can be trusted”; “what can I do today to take action? Because I need to do something to stop this, and other drivers when they hear this they’re gonna want to do something

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<sup>257</sup> Given that independent contractors are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act and other federal laws, their opportunities for collective bargaining are quite limited; for this reason, Uber’s opponents have typically focused efforts on worker-classification. Yet, in Seattle, the ordinance that was approved circumvented these issues and simply grants drivers collective bargaining rights even as independent contractors.

immediately to stop it as well”; “Okay well, I have another question. Why do the Teamsters want to represent Uber drivers, who are entrepreneurs? I mean we own our own businesses, we’re not employees, why would they want to represent us?” (see Heller 2017 for details). This sort of programming can be viewed as largely intended to manage drivers’ emotions to prevent them from supporting the union movement.

Second, Uber has also sought to undermine specific individuals whom it views as acting against its interests. After labor lawyer Andrew Schmidt filed a complaint against Uber’s CEO Travis Kalanick in December 2015 alleging that Uber’s surge pricing violated anti-trust laws, Uber hired a research firm to investigate Schmidt and his client (see Brandom and Hawkins (2016) for details). On the basis of a court-mandated discovery order, internal documents revealed that Uber’s General Counsel (Sallie Yoo) asked Uber’s Chief Security Officer if Uber could learn more about the plaintiff. The inquiry reached the head of Uber’s Global Threat Intelligence (Matthew Henley) who commissioned Global Precision Research to conduct “a sensitive, very under-the-radar investigation.” This investigation entailed seven interviews conducted over ten days to glean information about Schmidt and his plaintiff. In a sworn deposition it was revealed that Uber had hired the company three times prior. Uber defended itself by stating that they were concerned for the physical safety of Travis Kalanick since the lawsuit was particularly filed against him rather than the corporation. There is also some evidence, albeit weaker, that Uber has also sought to undermine the credibility of particular journalists<sup>258</sup>.

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<sup>258</sup> In October 2014, after a journalist named Sarah Lacy posted an article (2014) that lambasted an Uber blog-post that posted photos of scantily-clad women and inappropriate text (“Who said women don’t know how to drive?”), a leaked speech from a private company dinner at Uber by an Uber executive (Emil Michael) suggested that the company should consider hiring opposition researchers and journalists to investigate opponents (e.g. journalists like Sarah Lacy; see Smith 2014). Uber publically apologized for this incident and clarified that there has been no actual investigation into journalists, although it had been leaked that Uber has used an internal tool called “God View”—which makes easily viewable the trips of individual Uber users—has been “showed off” at Uber launch parties (Hill 2014) and to journalists (Bhuiyan and Warzel 2014).

Third, Uber has made heavy use of its data on users (e.g. movements, activities) and cities to protect its interests. Since at least 2014 (possibly earlier), Uber has equipped its city managers with various tools for identifying individuals—typically law and code enforcement agents, other city officials, and taxicab industry operatives— suspected of participating in sting operations or other activities (e.g. physically harming drivers) detrimental to Uber in some way (Isaac 2017a). These tools “geofence” areas (on digital maps) around government offices for easy monitoring of activity, detect user credit card information that suspected to be linked to police credit unions, monitor accounts with cheap mobile phones that officers might purchase to avoid being tracked, collect social media data linked to law enforcement, among others. They are all part of Uber’s global Violation of Terms of Service (VTOS) program, within which managers can “greyball<sup>259</sup>” or tag suspected individuals<sup>260</sup> to the effect that the versions of the Uber application that these greyballed individuals would only populate “ghost” (fake) vehicles. This made it difficult for officials to collect evidence about Uber’s operations and they have been at least partly effective. For example, in December 2014, when city officials in Portland were running sting operations on Uber—which had announced operations despite the city’s mayor and transportation bureau commissioner’s vocal opposition (Dougherty 2014)—Uber’s tactics effectively precluded code inspectors from hailing Uber cars (Isaac 2017a).<sup>261</sup> Shortly after these foiled stings, Uber

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<sup>259</sup> Information about the Greyball tool was linked to the New York Times in March 2017 by four former or current Uber employees (Isaac 2017). The tool was used in cities like Portland, Tampa, Boston, Paris, Las Vegas, Australia, China, South Korea, etc.

<sup>260</sup> Uber cites the various harms that its drivers have faced globally from opponents (e.g. physical attacks from taxi drivers, entrapment by officials; e.g. see Hamilton-Smith 2015; Rubin and Scott 2015) as the purpose for such protective tools as Greyball. Isaac (2017b) reports that Greyball was also applied to geofence Apple’s headquarters in Cupertino, California, because Uber had engaged in a practice called “fingerprinting” which violated Apple’s privacy rules. Fingerprinting involved a piece of code that allowed Uber to identify an iPhone even after Uber and other content was deleted from the iPhone. This was used by combat drivers who were purchasing multiple iPhones with purpose of taking advantage of Uber’s various promotions to entice drivers into taking more rides. When discovered the practice, Apple’s CEO Tim Cook met with Uber’s CEO Travis Kalanick and threatened to remove Uber from Apple’s App Store unless Uber ceased this practice, which they did.

<sup>261</sup> It even instructed Uber drivers who were hailed by “greyballed customers” to cancel the rides.

was able to reach an agreement with Portland officials on a brief suspension<sup>262</sup> followed by being able to operate legally within the city (Rose 2014)<sup>263</sup>.

Thus, in Washington D.C., Chicago, Denver, Miami, Portland, and other cities, Uber has repeatedly practiced its three-pronged repertoire (i.e. values-based rhetoric, mobilizing consumers, undermining opponents). It has also refined this repertoire through its deployment in different ecologies. In Uber's earlier years in the United States, blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics were effectively particularly because Uber's opponents were ill-prepared to handle its disruptiveness. These tactics continue to be used as the next section shows, but Uber's rapid growth throughout 2014 and its continued legislative victories in the US throughout 2015 arguably marked a new developmental stage in Uber's contentious repertoire. I explore this subtle shift in the next and final section.

### **Janus-Like Tactics**

Since Uber's substantial growth in 2014—moving from roughly 40,000 to 160,000 US drivers and operating in over 50 countries and 250 cities by the end of that year—it has increasingly become Janus-faced in its tactics: on one hand, its pugnacious interactions with political opponents has continued; yet on the other, it has launched a “charm offensive” aimed at proactively demonstrating to governments and its constituents that Uber is interested in partnership and cooperation over the long-run with cities, countries, and regions. I describe some of the likely reasons for these Janus-like tactics in the conclusion of this chapter; yet in this sub-section, I focus on providing the evidence.

Uber's recent aggressiveness is best-illustrated by its deliberate public ridiculing of oppositional city officials in New York City and Austin in mid-to-late 2015. In mid-June of that year, members of the New York City Council proposed a bill that would place a moratorium on new Uber drivers for a twelve-

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<sup>262</sup> As usual, Uber had referred to Portland's laws as “antiquated regulations” (Rose 2014).

<sup>263</sup> As of May 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice launched a criminal investigation into Uber's use of Greyball; Uber had seized using the program ever since the public learned of the program in March 2017 via the *New York Times* (Levine and Menn 2017).

month period for the purpose of controlling traffic congestion and pollution (Uber was adding roughly 2000 drivers / month at the time in NYC; Eldredge 2015). Uber claimed that this proposal was effectively a replica of a measure proposed by the taxi-lobby months earlier. Given Mayor de Blasio support of the bill, Uber implemented a feature in Uber they called *de Blasio Mode*. When users would click the “de Blasio tab” they would see pop-up message stating that it would take 25 minutes for a car to arrive in midtown Manhattan under de Blasio Mode, but only two minutes otherwise; en routine, it also encouraged them to contact the mayor and city council members to express their outrage. David Plouffe,<sup>264</sup> former Campaign Manager to President Obama and Uber Executive, added: “With this view, New York City riders can see for themselves how much time [Mayor de Blasio’s] political payback to big taxi owners will cost them” (Campanile et al. 2015). While Uber is still operating in New York City, with greater legitimacy since the formation of New York’s Independent Driver’s Guild (see above), its strategy ultimately failed in Austin, Texas. Despite the rapid growth it had achieved there, Austin City Council Member Ann Kitchen (Chair of the Mobility Committee) proposed a bill, to be voted on in November 2015, that would require Uber (and Lyft) drivers to conduct fingerprint-based criminal background checks. In response, Uber launched a temporary “horse and buggy” version of its application called “Kitchen’s Uber,” intimating (non-subtly) that Kitchen and Uber’s opponents are backward and out-of-touch with technology (Thornby 2015). Nonetheless, Kitchen’s proposal passed and operating in Austin became too costly for both Uber and Lyft, leading them both to end operations there in May 2016.

On the other hand, roughly since early 2015 till the present, Uber has become much more proactive in demonstrating its desire for long-term partnerships with governments around the world and the public at-large by (1) highlighting the scope of public benefits it creates, (2) attempting to substantiate those claims by disseminated various research studies, and (3) initiating new policies and internal-organizational changes in ways that better comport with its espoused values. First, with respect

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<sup>264</sup> Plouffe also later met with Andrew Cuomo, a rival of de Blasio, to garner support.

to depicting Uber's broadly-conceived public benefits, in January 2015 Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick gave a speech in Munich, Germany titled "Uber and Europe: Partnering to Enable City Transformation" in which he stated: "we're starting to reach that inflection point at a certain size where the impact that we can bring to cities is huge and we have proof points that we can talk to these mayors about" (see DLD 2015). He emphasized how Uber could create 50,000 jobs in Europe in just one year, citing a range of other benefits that could be achieved with long-term partnership (e.g. reducing carbon footprints, complementing existing infrastructure, improving traffic and parking efficiency, creating economic value by reducing resource underutilization, etc.)<sup>265</sup>. A few months later in the US, Uber touted a partnership with Life Reimagined (a subsidiary of the American Association of Retired Persons), promoting it as a "natural fit" given that Uber is "highly adaptable to [the elderly's] lifestyle" and is a "great way to make money [and] meet people and serve the community" (Uber Newsroom 2015c). Second, in an effort to substantiate these and other claims about Uber's public benefit, Uber commissioned (or informally encouraged) a number of research studies. For example, it provided internal administrative data to various economists (e.g. Hall and Kreuger 2015; Cohen et al. 2016) to estimate Uber's effects on various outcomes (e.g. driver wages, consumer surplus, etc.) and partnered with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to publish evidence supporting its claim that Uber reduces drunk-driving incidents<sup>266</sup> (MADD 2016). Third, it has taken several actions that arguably strengthen the legitimacy of some of the above claims. Recently, it announced "Movement," an effort devoted to sharing with city planners and researchers anonymized traffic data that it has collected (see Etherington 2017a for details). These data

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<sup>265</sup> After a year of strong resistance to Uber in Europe (e.g. France in January 2015, Central London protest in February 2016), Uber, along with 46 other companies, submitted a letter to the European Union, addressed to EU President and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, declaring their support for the European Union's "efforts to seek and remove obstacles in the broader European internal market for goods and services." Cf. Hern (2016).

<sup>266</sup> Uber has claimed that its platform has reduced drunk-driving incidents; but other studies have questioned this result. Yet, a recent working paper by Jessica Peck (2017) estimates a 20-30% reduction in alcohol-related collision rates in New York City since Uber's launch there in May 2011.

were cleaned and organized around commonly used traffic analysis zones so that they could be readily analyzed and used. In its public communication about the program, Uber has highlighted that its interests are strongly aligned with those cities, as the data can be used to improve urban infrastructure and mobility in ways that are mutually beneficial. It has taken other actions as well. It created a feature that would allow users to permanently delete their accounts and data with ease; this was not possible prior to April 2017 (Conger 2017). In the UK it has begun offering drivers free English classes (Smith 2017). On March 21, 2017, after a series of controversies in the prior two months (e.g. charges of sexual harassment within Uber), Uber released to the public<sup>267</sup> some details about its plans to improve “leadership and accountability” and its intentions to dissolve an internal “cult of the individual”; further, it admitted that it has “underinvested in the driver experience and relationships with many drivers” and needs more “humanity in the way we interact with drivers” (Uber Newsroom 2017).

Thus, since early 2015—after a year of four-fold growth in US markets and continued legislative victories, carried out through blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics—there is evidence that Uber’s repertoire is being altered through its political transactions, a develop I offer preliminary explanatory remarks on in the discussion to follow next.

Overall, building on top of the prior section’s findings regarding the several ways in which Uber’s ecology was poised to the emergence of the on-demand organizational model (e.g. political vulnerability, alienating work conditions), this section illustrated how that emergence was realized through the transactional deployment of Uber’s repertoire of contention. Specifically, after establishing the strategic basis of Uber’s repertoire and its main components (i.e. rhetoric about values, undermining

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<sup>267</sup> Uber regularly releases to the public, via the *Uber Newsroom*, varied updates regarding Uber-related happenings. These releases can plausibly be construed as a means of relaying particular information to journalists, though this is often denied, as when Arianna Huffington (an Uber Board Member), noted in one of these reports (March 21, 2017): “There’s been no shortage of news about Uber lately, so before we start I wanted to make clear again that the purpose of this call is not to create yet more headlines.”

of opponents, mobilizing supporters), I examined the repertoire in action and provided evidence of its temporal alteration over the course of Uber's ecological interactions.

## DISCUSSION

As described in chapter one, few organizations have figured as saliently into contemporary social life—for individuals (e.g. workers, consumers), institutions (e.g. legal, industrial), and public discourse—in so few years as has Uber, a ride-sourcing platform in the on-demand economy. In the introduction to this chapter, I made two points about the empirical significance of understanding Uber's emergence: (1) assuming some degree of path-dependence rooted in Uber's genesis, then if Uber's social effects are important, it follows that so are its (analytical) causes; and (2) if no path-dependence can be assumed, then understanding Uber's emergence (e.g. genesis, reproduction) is (at a minimum) necessary to grasping its historical significance, and whether it should be characterized, according to Padgett's and Powell's (2012) framework, as an "invention" or merely an "innovation." I return to this latter question in the concluding chapter of this dissertation, as it requires a broader analysis beyond this chapter's purview. I applied a pragmatist theoretical framework to my empirical question also for two partly-polemical reasons: (1) I argued (to fellow pragmatists) that endogenizing human preferences and beliefs to "problem-situations" without attending to how and why problem-situations emerge is often insufficient; and (2) I argued (to non-pragmatists, e.g. analytical sociologists, critical realists) that pragmatism's emphasis on *process* and *creativity* render it particularly apt to addressing questions of emergence, sensitizing it to actor-relation mutual social-construction that can account for the ways in which Uber's been transformed over time through its contentious interactions; further, given its ontological and epistemological foundation, pragmatism can subsume useful insights from a variety of theoretical strands, such as Padgett's and Powell's concept of poisedness and actor-relation transformations, political process theorists' concepts of political opportunity and repertoires of contention, and resource mobilization theorists' broad conception of "resources" (e.g. alienated labor).



It is my goal that applying this pragmatist framework contributed to meeting at least the second goal of demonstrating pragmatism's usefulness to questions of emergence.

In this final section, I pursue three lines of discussion. First, I highlight the link between an ecology's poisedness to novelty and its (1) social-organization of work and (2) consumer politics. Second, I discuss the mutual social-construction of Uber and its ecology, describing bi-directional social mechanisms in turn, in accordance with Neil Gross' (2009) pragmatist definition of social mechanisms. Specifically, I describe the sequence of events and processes that linked Uber's initial harnessing and mobilization of resources to governments' sanctioning of Uber, i.e. Uber's transformation of its ecology. With respect to how Uber's ecology transformed Uber, I first describe Uber's repertoire shift and then posit three hypotheses for explaining it, proceeding to argue which of these hypotheses is most plausible and describing its operative mechanism. Third, I specify some directions for future research about ecological poisedness, emphasizing that "poisedness" is a *relational* concept, arguing that research on poisedness and innovations should be guided by historically-concrete, middle-range propositions, and suggesting cross-national research that deepens our understanding of the relationship between an ecology's consumer politics and its poisedness to particular types of innovation.

### **Work-Organization and Consumer Politics as Dimensions of Poisedness**

By taking a broad view of the "resource landscape," as prescribed by resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977)—that is, moving beyond importance of technological resources, venture capital, human capital, and the entrepreneurial clusters that make those "harder" resources more accessible—this chapter reveals two critical, yet under-theorized, dimensions of ecological poisedness tied to (1) work-organization and (2) consumer politics.

Regarding work-organization, given that economies of scale in the on-demand organizational model are derived from massive supply-side worker-networks, it follows that social processes that "push" workers away from mainstream labor markets *indirectly* create a "resource" that can be

harnessed by organizational entrepreneurs. In the empirical section on ecological poisedness, I argued that declines in job quality (e.g. in transportation services), among other factors (e.g. rising employment instability and economic insecurity), heightened the attractiveness of working with Uber *relative* to more traditional employment arrangements. I also noted that it would be a mistake to interpret the operative mechanisms in these developments as involving a *lack* of employment or other narrow conceptualizations of weak labor market “fundamentals”; indeed, Hall and Krueger (2015) have found that only 8 percent of Uber drivers were unemployed prior to joining Uber, and as a whole, the Uber workforce is formally educated at higher rates than the average population. Rather, these work-labor market processes are best conceptualized as tied to *practice*-based mechanisms (Gross 2009, 2010) at the level of organizations (Baron and Bielby 1980)—such as the rentier practices that prevail in the taxicab industry and the restructuring of workplace benefit programs (e.g. replacement of pensions with defined contribution plans); these changes have, as I have argued, attenuated workers’ emotional connections to mainstream employment. This *alienation from mainstream labor* is the key process that underpins the relationship between work-organization and poisedness.

Regarding the relationship between consumer politics and poisedness, while the “politics of consumption” has viewed consumption as a means for consumers to exercise<sup>268</sup> social power—including being used to combat social exclusion (Chambers 2006; Lamont and Molnar 2001; Mullins 1999; Lee 2002; Chin 2001) and aesthetic degradation (Weems 2000), to organize labor (Rosenzweig 1983; Cohen 2003) and empower women (Ownby 1999; Peiss 1986; Frank 1994; Orleck 1995; Enstad 1999), and for self-realization and identity-affirmation (Featherstone 2007; Leigh et al. 2006; Schouten and

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<sup>268</sup> Much of this literature is a reaction to the dominant research strand on consumption from roughly the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1970s, which took a “critical” stance on consumption. This included work from the Frankfurt School on how the “culture industry” that disseminates standardized cultural goods and content that effectively tranquilizes the masses into conformity (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2000; also see Friedan 1963 and Ewens 1976); it also included institutionalist research on the ways in which producers manipulate consumer desires, how these processes crowd out public goods, etc. (Galbraith 1958).

McAlexander 1995; Lears 1983)—to my knowledge there is no empirical work on its relation to innovation. Reflecting on this literature, Jacobs (2011: 567) emphasized the “need to move beyond thinking of the politics of consumption as just another arena in which social actors struggled for power” and to instead ask (among other questions) how consumer politics shapes state policy. This chapter advances this agenda, showing that consumer activism was central to Uber’s strategy and its successful claim-making, as Uber’s CEO described: “What we did in Chicago, what we do in all these cities, is reach out to all of our users and say, take action—email your councilperson; email the mayor...Uber riders are the most affluent, influential people in their cities. When we get to a critical mass, it becomes impossible to shut us down” (Lagorio-Chafkin 2013). Growing rapidly in cities through blitzkrieg (and prophylactic) tactics was integral to Uber’s repertoire precisely because once Uber crossed a threshold of consumer support, the political action of those consumers became too overwhelming for Uber’s opponents to contest. Jacobs (2011: 571) has also recommended that “to the extent citizens have taken political action as consumers, [we must ask] how did these practices change over time?” I found that as Uber’s contentious repertoire increasingly became publicly known (i.e. common cultural knowledge; see Patterson 2014: 6), consumer activism *against* Uber has mounted. This opposition particularly accelerated in early 2017 after several events<sup>269</sup>, including growing perceptions that Uber’s CEO Travis Kalanick was morally unconcerned with actions taken by the Trump Administration that segments of the public perceived with disfavor (e.g. Kalanick was on Trump’s economic advisory council) and a Twitter-based “#DeleteUber” campaign that was estimated to have resulted in 200,000 deletions (Statt 2017; also see German 2017). Thus, as McAdam (1982) noted in his original formulation of the political process model, “resources” can sometimes have negative effects on emergence.

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<sup>269</sup> Other backlash-triggering events included a public allegation made by Uber engineer Susan Fowler (2017) about rampant sexual harassment at Uber (Bhuiyan 2017), a video leaked of Uber CEO Travis Kalanick in a verbal dispute with a driver (Newcomer 2017), etc.

## **The Mutual Social-Construction of Uber and its Ecology: Actor-Relation Transformations and their Social Mechanisms**

By attending to both the political opportunity structure (as prescribed by the political process model; McAdam et al. 2001) and how Uber transacted with it through its three-pronged repertoire of contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2006; i.e. values-based rhetoric, mobilizing consumers, undermining opponents), this chapter revealed the mutual social-construction of Uber and its ecology; that is, just as entrepreneurial action transformed Uber's ecology (e.g. legal sanctioning of Uber's operations), that changed-ecology reciprocally transformed Uber (i.e. its mode of claim-making). I will discuss these bi-directional processes in turn and in accordance with Neil Gross' (2009) pragmatist definition<sup>270</sup> of social mechanisms which is organized around social practices, temporality, causal mediation, having some degree of generality, as well as being analytically reducible to lower levels of complexity.

### **The Social Mechanism through which Uber Transformed its Ecology**

First, this chapter provided insight into why Uber's claim against government was successful, and more broadly, how Uber's repertoire-in-action altered its social relations. In line with this formulation, I identified how, at the ecological level, (1) the pressing need for job-creation in the Great Recession's aftermath, (2) public officials' concerns that opposing Uber would be perceived as tantamount to opposing forward-thinking, and (3) a degree of political paralysis triggered by complex legal-technical challenges and knotty political conflict, created political vulnerabilities of which Uber took advantage through its blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics, which involved (1) values-based rhetoric, (2) mobilizing consumers, and (3) undermining its opponents. The key sequence of events (i.e. social mechanisms; Gross 2009) that defined this social-interactional process were as follows:

Relevant resources (e.g. worker-networks, consumer activism, technology, financing) are effectively harnessed (e.g. entrepreneurial clusters with concentrated resources) and mobilized by organizational

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<sup>270</sup> Gross (2009: 364) defines a social mechanism as: "a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which –in certain circumstances—some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations. This sequence or set may or may not be analytically reducible to the actions of individuals who enact it, may underwrite formal or substantive causal processes, and may be observed, unobserved, or in principle unobservable."

entrepreneurs while a political opportunity expands (i.e. labor market slack, democratic imperative to signal innovation, political paralysis) → (causing) Uber to rapidly achieve market gains (blitzkrieg) and protect those gains (prophylaxis) → (causing) growth in a supportive base of influential consumers (e.g. high-income, journalists, politicians) → (causing) reproductive stability and feedback cycles (i.e. network redundancy; Padgett and Powell (2012: 24)) → (causing) Uber's opponents to incur greater costs and risks when attempting to contend with Uber's de facto growth and its political support from consumers → (causing) political paralysis (also caused by lack of institutional preparedness for accommodating the novel organizational model) and symbolic inefficacy → (causing) prolonged periods in which legal structures (prohibiting Uber) and social-practices (Uber's operations) are increasingly unaligned → (causing) government actors to be increasingly concerned with a loss of legitimacy given this lack of alignment, yet given (1) that they are unable to decouple regulatory policies from on-the-ground activities given public scrutiny, (2) the discretionary judgment that Uber creates some economic value, and (3) Uber's accelerating growth, governments re-align legal-structures with social practices by sanctioning Uber.

Yet, while this social mechanism exhibited a high degree of *spatial* generality—that is, it was operative in most US city-markets within which Uber launched—its *temporal* generality was fundamentally limited by the mutual social-construction of actors and relations; that is, just as entrepreneurial actors mobilize resources within a political opportunity structure in a creative process that alters social relations (i.e. social-emergence), the emergent sets of relations reciprocally alter the entrepreneurial actor (and other actors). To the extent that this reciprocal process is transformative of actors, then the above-described social mechanism's generality is limited. If we conceptualize an actor's properties in terms of their modes of social action, or in the case of Uber, its strategic repertoire, then we arrive at the following question: to what extent was Uber's repertoire altered over time as a result of its ecological interactions, and how can we best understand that alteration?

### **The Social Mechanism through which Uber was Transformed by its Ecology**

I observed a shift in Uber's repertoire from being almost-uniformly pugnacious in its orientation toward governments (e.g. undermining opponents through rhetorical attacks) to continuing its pugnacity but increasingly pairing it with a charm offensive aimed at proactively demonstrating to governments and its constituents that Uber is interested in partnership and cooperating over the long-run with cities, countries, and regions. While repertoire shifts are difficult to discern over short time-periods—for example, Tilly's (1986, 1995) examination of shifts in repertoires of contention were typically observed

over decades and centuries—there does seem to have been a marked change in Uber’s rhetoric and actions, for example: making its data-privacy policy more transparent, publically announcing its plans to dissolve its internal “cult of the individual” and emphasizing its commitment toward greater “humanity in the way [it interacts] with drivers.” While Uber has always presented itself as a force of public benefit, in recent years it increasingly presented a much broader vision of this benefit, as including reducing carbon footprint, complementing existing infrastructure (e.g. public transportation), etc. Particularly significant is the launch of “Movement” (as of January 2017) to provide city planners and researchers with highly detailed traffic data to improve urban infrastructure and mobility particularly reflects Uber’s about-face. Unlike many of Uber’s other recent actions (e.g. combatting sexual harassment), Movement cannot be viewed as simply paying “lip service” to curry public favor in the aftermath of embarrassing scandals. It was not launched at the behest of the government or triggered in response to any direct chain of events; further, the data that are being released could arguably be used by Uber’s competitors. This is a dramatic shift from the days when Uber would flaunt its Cease and Desist Orders on its website (e.g. Uber Newsroom 2010).

This raises the question: what accounts for this shift in practices, albeit observed over only a short period? There are three possible answers, among which I argue that the third is most plausible: (1) given Uber’s growth into global markets, Uber has calculated that the blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics that worked in the United States are less likely to work in those different ecologies; (2) given that Uber has over time attracted more and more private investment, Uber’s management has become increasingly beholden to investors who want to reduce the risk of their investment and increase the likelihood that Uber will exit into the public markets; and (3) Uber’s emergence altered the political process, which in turn altered Uber’s repertoire. While these hypotheses can partly overlap, the first is tied to Uber’s global forays, the second focuses on internal power dynamics, and the third is tied to the political process itself. Regarding the first hypothesis, if Uber’s entry into global markets accounted for

Uber's shifting repertoire—that is, assuming that there is more ecological variation across countries than across U.S. states and Uber needed to adjust its repertoire for that heterogeneity—then it would be expected that Uber's strategy would have shifted much earlier than 2015. Yet, Uber began entering foreign markets as early as 2011 (e.g. Paris, France). By 2013 it was operating in multiple European cities, Australia, and had forayed into India and Africa, and by the end of 2014, it was operating in 251 cities in 51 countries. Thus, it was not Uber's decision to *enter* global growth markets that accounted for its repertoire shift; but, as I argue below, its repertoire-experimentation in these varied markets was likely an important factor. Regarding the second hypothesis, if this principal-agent power-dynamic accounted for the repertoire shift, it would be expected that Uber would be struggling to raise financing and that Uber's current investors would have become increasingly restless with Uber's estimated negative profits and would have wielded their power to shift Uber's management practices earlier. Yet, there is little evidence of this. It is true that the supply of venture capital contracted in 2016<sup>271</sup>, but not for Uber; in that year, Uber raised \$3.5 billion from the Saudi Public Investment Fund, \$2bn in private equity funding, \$200 million from Russian billionaire Mikhail Fridman, and a \$1.15 billion leveraged loan. Also in 2016, when asked about the possibility of a near-future IPO, Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick stated: "I'm going to make sure it happens as late as possible" (Oreskovic 2016). Further, Uber has been valued as a multi-billion dollar company since 2013, *prior* to Uber's greatest growth period from 2014 onward, and thus, this would suggest its investors are not particularly risk-averse. Further, Isaac (2017b) reports that Travis Kalanick and his close friends control the majority of voting shares and that they have stacked most of Uber's board of directors with allies. Nonetheless, the goal of mitigating risk as Uber's valuation rises is likely important, but I argue it is less determined by Uber's investors and more by Uber's management.

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<sup>271</sup> This was partly due to rises in the Federal Funds Rate.

Rather, the third hypothesis highlights the key social mechanism in my explanation: Uber's emergence *altered the political process* in ways that in turn shaped Uber's repertoire. It was not Uber's foray into global markets or Uber's management succumbing to growing pressures from investors, but rather, a political process that has *matured* through government actors becoming increasingly familiar with Uber's three-pronged repertoire (values-based rhetoric, mobilizing consumers, undermining opponents) and its execution (i.e. blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics), and most importantly, *learning* how to respond to it. There have been increasing incidents of public officials (e.g. regulators, courts) taking tougher lines with Uber as Anchorage, Alaska in 2015 (Doogan 2015), Austin, Texas and Hungary in 2016 (MacMillan and Silverman 2016; Than and Fenyo 2016), and as of April 2017, Uber was banned completely from operating and advertising in Italy (Dillet 2017) and effectively seized operations in Denmark given new restrictive laws (Petroff 2017). Governments have learned that when they enforce relevant laws and regulations against Uber, partly on the basis of public safety (e.g. Austin) and fair competition (e.g. Italy), there are many new players in this place eager to replace Uber's and Lyft's collective monopoly *and* operate according to the rules. For example, after Uber and Lyft left Austin on May 9, 2015, they created a void that was quickly filled by comparable services (e.g. Salesforce-backed Wingz, Boston-based Fasten, a nonprofit called RideAustin; see Taylor 2016). Thus, by early 2015, after a year of rapid growth in 2014 (e.g. Uber's US drivers increasing from 40,000 to 160,000 (Hall and Kruegar 2015)), the game Uber had played in its first several years had markedly changed, requiring Uber to adapt its "collective habit" (Gross 2010), i.e. to shift its repertoire. The sequence of processes through Uber's repertoire was altered as a result of altered social relations could be described as follows:

Uber's expands rapidly in the US and globally in 2014 → (causing) government-institutional actors to increasingly pay attention to other governments' interactions with Uber → (causing) governments to become increasingly familiar with Uber's repertoire → (causing) governments to expand their own repertoires for interacting with Uber → (causing) governments to take a more severe line with Uber in their cities → (causing) Uber to learn, based on its changing interactions with city-markets, new modes of claim-making (i.e. a process of creative experimentation) → (causing) Uber's repertoire to become characterized less by pugnacity and more by practices designed to benefit the public and signal a conciliatory and stable posture.



Critically, there is strong evidence to suggest that not only are Uber's blitzkrieg and prophylactic tactics becoming less effective in these contemporary, transformed ecologies, but that the more conciliatory practices it as adopted today would have been less effective in Uber's earlier years. Had Uber first attempted to ingratiate itself with public authorities and demonstrate its commitment to abiding by the law, its opponents would likely have been able to wage their battle with far fewer costs, particularly the cost of offsetting the effect that consumers who wanted Uber to operate in their city were having on public officials; this would have strengthened Uber's opposition. By flouting the laws and touting itself as democratizing technology, it bought itself the time to grow immediately and confound its opponents, through mechanisms already described. Yet as Uber increasingly became pervasive, city-ecologies have increasingly absorbed its repertoire of practices, creating new ecological rules to which Uber is adjusting.

### **Future Directions on Ecological Poisedness**

In this final section, I specify some directions for future research about ecological poisedness. First, I emphasize that "poisedness" is a fundamentally *relational* concept. Second, I argue that research on poisedness and innovations should be guided by historically-concrete, middle-range propositions. Third, I highlight two historically-contingent factors that underlie the relationship between an ecology's consumer politics and its poisedness to particular types of innovation: (1) political systems and their processes, and (2) cultural knowledge structures. Fourth, I note some other research directions (e.g. continued observation of shifts in Uber's repertoire, determining whether the on-demand organizational model is an innovation or invention).

Ecologies should not be understood as being *poised for innovation*; rather, *ecologies characterized by particular processes*—for example, an ecology's consumer politics and its underlying cultural and political processes—are poised for innovations *characterized by particular processes*—for

example, organizational dependency on worker-networks. That is, ecological poisedness is fundamentally a relational concept. This means that the validity of the proposition that an ecology's social-stratification dynamics (e.g. work-organization) partly determines the ecology's poisedness to the on-demand organizational model is *contingent* on the on-demand organizational model's dependence on supply-side worker-networks. Thus, it is meaningless to theorize an ecology's poisedness to innovation without specifying the characteristics of that innovation. Wejnert (2002) argues along similar lines in her conceptual framework for understanding social diffusion and the adoption of innovations. It has important implications for research on the relationship between income-inequality and innovation (Acemoglu et al. 2012; Frank 2009; Aghion et al. 2015).

Yet, while a logic of contingent relationships defines ecological poisedness and the emergence of innovations, this should not detract us from formulating historically-concrete middle-range propositions about the relationship<sup>272</sup>. Multiple social-selection logics exist. Some of them are based on an economic equilibrium-based logic; for example, the work-organization processes that have contributed to the degradation of work for segments of the population (e.g. taxi drivers) had the effect of expanding demand for jobs that are perceived to be relatively more favorable, such as (arguably) driving for Uber. Other logics may be based on exploitation or opportunity-hoarding processes. This chapter only scratched the surface of such relationships; yet it did highlight some interesting relationships that, with deeper examination, could be fruitful, particularly regarding *consumer politics*. While Uber's political-mobilization of consumers to pressure governments into meeting its claims figured prominently in my analysis of the on-demand organizational model's emergence, my insights into *why* consumer politics (i.e. as an ecological property) mattered lacked historical grounding. To develop a more concrete understanding of the social mechanisms through which an ecology's consumer politics poise it to particular types of emergence, those social mechanisms must be situated, as Charles

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<sup>272</sup> This line of inquiry is most consistent with Charles Tilly's and Max Weber's historical sociology.

Tilly oft-recommended, “within their time-place limits” (1984: 60). To this end, I highlight two historically-contingent factors that underlie the relationship between an ecology’s consumer politics and its poisedness to particular types of innovation: (1) political systems and their processes, and (2) cultural knowledge structures. Both these ecological dimensions vary widely over time and place and yet both are critical to how consumer politics are implicated in the emergence of innovations.

With respect to political systems, some of the key dimensions to examine include channels for democratic participation and their degree of openness, endogeneity of state policies to electoral dynamics and lobbyists, regulatory structures, bureaucratic accountability, etc. For example, with respect to the social mechanisms implicated in Uber’s emergence, I noted the difficulty of US legal-institutions decoupling regulatory policies restricting Uber’s operations from Uber’s on-the-ground activities, which led to (along with other factors) governments re-aligning their legal-structures with social practices by sanctioning Uber. Drawing on insights from new institutional theory, (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Tilcsik 2010), it would be useful to examine variations in, on the one hand, *how long* legal-institutions can manage to maintain gaps between laws that prohibit Uber’s operations and, on the other hand, Uber’s de facto operations. With respect to cultural knowledge structures, some of the key dimensions to examine include degrees of confidence in various institutions (government, courts, business), evaluative knowledge about businesses breaking the law and the importance of consumer activism, public officials’ cultural configurations (e.g. beliefs about the duties, including the importance of promoting innovation), etc. For example, Uber has, for the most part, failed in Japan; to what extent is this partly due to beliefs regarding the role of law enforcement or values about the worthiness of businesses that break the law? To what extent was consumer politics significant to Uber’s emergence in the United States because a libertarian narrative of entrepreneurs plowing forward to create economic value for its compatriots against the tyrannical constraints of “big government” resonated with the populace’s cultural beliefs and values? Of course, political and cultural phenomena overlap. For

example, variations in the incentive structures of public officials in different countries to signal to citizens their support for innovation are probably a function of electoral systems and norms of political participation. I plan to pursue this research in future work.

Finally, for future work, it is important to continue to observe how Uber's repertoire changes over time as a function of its ecological interactions. Collecting evidence on discrete changes in Uber's repertoire, if they occur, will require more years of historical observation than are covered in this chapter and is a valuable line of inquiry. Relatedly, more data is needed before we can determine whether the emergence of the on-demand organizational model ought to be viewed, in Padgett's and Powell's (2012) formulation, as an *invention* or merely an *innovation*; this is a question I flesh out directly in the conclusion of this dissertation.

## **Chapter Four – Social-situational Displacement and Personal (Dis)order among On-Demand Workers**

*While the power of thought frees us from servile subjection to instinct, appetite, and routine, it also brings with it the occasion and possibility of error and mistake...it opens to us the possibilities of failures." -- John Dewey (1910b)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter examines the causal relationship between habits and coping with on-demand work.

Specifically, I ask: how do Uber drivers' cultural configurations and problem-situations shape how they evaluate their experience working in the on-demand economy? Drivers' evaluations of their experiences bear directly on how often they work with Uber, how long they plan to continue to do so, the subtle costs and benefits they notice (and do not notice) and care about, among other outcomes. In this introductory section, I delineate the empirical importance of this question, my theoretical motivations, and provide a roadmap for the chapter.

The importance of understanding the coping experiences of Uber drivers is heightened by two recent developments: (1) the privatization of household risk—or what Hacker (2006) has termed “the

great risk shift”—has generated various kinds of “instabilities” (instantiated below) which necessitate understanding how actors are coping with shifts in personal circumstances (e.g. new problem-situations like job loss); and (2) the rising proportion of workers who have been displaced from more mainstream, traditional employment into more fringe, nonstandard work necessitates a better understanding of these workers, many of whom have college-degrees, are coping as service-providers in on-demand economy. I will briefly expand on each trend.

First, a confluence of structural developments have contributed to rises in various kinds of household instabilities. While economic insecurity<sup>273</sup>—which can be defined as the degree to which individuals and groups are protected against adverse economic events (e.g. job loss, health costs, family dissolution) through their wealth, support networks, and public insurance—is mostly concentrated among the low-end of the income distribution, several studies have shown that it has spread upward since roughly the 1970s (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012).<sup>274</sup> This trend *partly* parallels rises in income volatility<sup>275</sup> (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994; 2009) as well as the institutional weakening of social-insurance mechanisms that buffer against adverse events.<sup>276</sup> As chapter one described, there has also been a

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<sup>273</sup> The concept of “economic insecurity” provides a helpful way of understanding the moving parts of a stratification system, and researchers (Hacker et al. 2011; Western et al. 2012) have argued that focusing on the dynamics surrounding *economic losses and buffers*— as opposed to static *levels of resources* as in the income inequality literature—has the advantage of providing a window into how inequality is *experienced*.

<sup>274</sup> It should be noted that Western et al. (2012) find that among low-income households economic insecurity has especially increased. However, many have argued that studies revealing rising economic insecurity are fraught with measurement problems (Winship 2009). Yet rises in income volatility (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994; 2009) are less controversial.

<sup>275</sup> Rising income volatility, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, seems to have especially been concentrated especially within the low-wage labor market (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994). This income volatility explained roughly half of the increase in cross-sectional income inequality during this time. The increase in the early 1990s was steadier and increasingly concentrated among higher-education groups). There was also a large increase in the early 2000s.

<sup>276</sup> As Hacker (2006) argued in *The Great Risk Shift*, since the 1970s broad structural and institutional developments have resulted in the eroding of public and private support systems and the shifting of a variety of economic risks (e.g. costs associated with job loss and adverse health events) onto private workers and families.

restructuring of work-organization characterized by rises in employment instability (Farber 2008<sup>277</sup>; Hollister 2011), increased job switching<sup>278</sup> (Steward 2002), increased occupational displacement<sup>279</sup> (Kambourov and Manovskii 2008), and the generalizing of job insecurity to higher-skilled occupations<sup>280</sup> (Chan 2013; Brooks 2012). While these trends each have their particularities, collectively they suggest the growing importance of understanding how individuals cope with anticipated and unanticipated shifts to personal circumstance.

Second, there has been a dramatic growth in nonstandard work in recent years, as chapter one described. Katz and Krueger (2016) found that “all of the net employment growth in the U.S. economy from 2005 to 2015 appears to have occurred in [nonstandard work categories<sup>281</sup>],” and the US General Accounting Office (2015) documents the nonstandard workforce as having grown 5.1 percentage points between 2006 and 2010<sup>282</sup>. Further, while on-demand work represents a relatively small proportion of

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<sup>277</sup> Farber (2008) examined data on the job durations of 876,063 workers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Displaced Workers Survey and found that declines in job tenure were particularly strong among men in the private sector. Evidence of short-term churning is weaker (Farber 2009), but short-term instability rates seemed to increase specifically among low-skilled men in the early 1980s. However, Cappelli (2001) has argued that only a small percentage (~10%) of private sector firms have ever been able to provide long-term employment to their workers, and that most firms have always had unstable employment, which counters the argument that declining long-term job tenure is a significant phenomenon.

<sup>278</sup> Focusing on employment transitions, Steward (2002) found that in the 1990s job switching increased (unclear if voluntary or involuntary) and employment-to-unemployment decreased due to economic growth.

<sup>279</sup> Kambourov and Manovskii (2008) showed that occupational switches have increased especially among young and private-sector workers.

<sup>280</sup> Chan (2013) does find that job insecurity is still mostly centered in low-skilled jobs, despite the generalizing of this trend to higher-skill jobs.

<sup>281</sup> They use the term “alternative work arrangements,” but the work categories of reference are similar to the ones I am discussing. They note that Current Population Survey data shows that total employment increased by 9.1 million between 2005-2015. Based on a survey they conducted, they estimate that the number of workers employed in alternative arrangements increased by 9.4 million during this period.

<sup>282</sup> The US General Accounting Office (2015) found that nonstandard workers (based on the broadest definition) accounted for 40.4% of the labor force in 2010, having risen from 35.3% in 2006. Measuring trends in the size of the nonstandard work population over time is difficult because the first large-scale survey of nonstandard workers, conducted as part of the Census’ Current Population Survey, occurred in 1995. Most of the rise in nonstandard work between 1995 and 2010 has occurred since 2005. See Bernhardt (2014) for an excellent review of measurement and other practical impediments to studying on-demand work.

the total labor force (0.5%<sup>283</sup> of all workers (Katz and Krueger 2016), its growth rate has been dramatic (170%<sup>284</sup> year-to-year growth in September 2015 (Farrell and Greig (2016)), with much of this growth driven by ride-sourcing (e.g. Uber) and the “rooms industry” (e.g. Airbnb), particularly the former (Hathaway and Muro (2016)<sup>285</sup> due to its stability, autonomy, and low participation costs. These trends suggest that more and more workers with varied labor market histories and other social characteristics (e.g. formal-educational background) are shifting into nonstandard work relations, including on-demand work. Indeed, 47.7 percent of Uber drivers in 2014 had at least a college degree, compared to 41.1 percent of all workers (Katz and Krueger 2016). Little is known about how these differences in social background differentially affect how these workers are experiencing the on-demand economy. For instance, there is a substantial literature about how individuals and groups from the “fringe” (e.g. immigrants) cope when they are displaced into the “mainstream”—including research on immigrant incorporation (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Chang 2010) and assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Alba 2005); yet research on “mainstream-to-fringe” displacement has been relatively scant. Thus, overall, this study is empirically motivated by the importance of better understanding how individuals cope with new problem-situations, specifically within the on-demand economy.

My theoretical motivations are more singularly focused on a variant of the classic structure-agency problem that centers on how to think about “habit and creativity” in human action. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus hovers over much of this literature, having inspired, on the one hand, refinements that make allowances for human reflexivity and social change (McNay 1999; Decoteau 2013), and on the

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<sup>283</sup> This is in between Harris and Krueger’s (2015) estimate at 0.4%, which was based on counts of Google searchers involving online intermediaries, and Farrell and Greig’s (2016a) estimate at 0.6%, which was based on bank deposit data associated with online work platforms.

<sup>284</sup> Farrell and Greig (2016b) found that while monthly year-over-year growth of workers in the “online (labor) platform economy” is declining (peaked at 450% in August 2014), it is still rapidly growing (170% year-to-year growth in September 2015).

<sup>285</sup> Hathaway and Muro (2016) take advantage of a Census Bureau dataset on “nonemployer firms” that can be used to (crudely) identify workers earning income from online intermediaries like Uber.

other, forceful opposition, particularly on the basis of Margaret Archer's (2010) critical realism. I argue that much of this discourse aims to make general inferences about social processes (e.g. "habitual action") and their distinctions using analytic constructions that pay little attention to how different *types of habit* figure into everyday social action in different ways. Building on the pragmatist framework outlined in chapter two, we can develop a clearer conception of "habit" that connects group-level processes (e.g. class, immigration) and concrete micro-sociological mechanisms, on the basis of Patterson's (2014) concept of cultural configurations and Andersen et al.'s (2007) knowledge-activation mechanisms (cited in Patterson 2014). It is worth noting that this theoretical approach provides a useful intermediation between two versions of relational sociology, the first of which—arguably best represented by Bourdieu (1984; 2000)—focuses on highly structural group-level processes while obscuring within-group (e.g. within-class) behavioral differences (see chapter one), and the second of which—arguably represented by Collins (2005)—focuses on micro-interactional dynamics while obscuring the ways in which, in Fine's (2005: 1288) words, "the meso-level concept of the group is the glue that connects action and organization.

I proceed in five sections: (1) brief theoretical remarks on habit; (2) literature review and synthesis (social-situational displacement and cultural pragmatics); (3) data and methods; (4) findings; (5) discussion. First, I briefly highlight how the pragmatist principle of understanding objects in terms of their effects (Peirce 1878) helps usefully transcend the confused habit-creativity dichotomy. Second, I review the literature on how individuals cope with social-situational change, giving particular attention to the behavioral consequences of changes in employment circumstance. I organize this literature around two sets of social processes involving the effects of habit on social action and experience: habits that dispose actors to (1) functionally *adapt* to situational dictates and (2) habits that result in what I describe, following Bourdieu (2000), as experiential "*hysteresis*" (i.e. mismatch between cultural configurations and ecological-situational demands). I conclude this section by developing two sets of



points that emphasize how cultural configurations and problem-situations are inextricable from group-level processes, and how the effects of habits can be usefully understood by examining an actor's situational dictates and the content and activation of their cultural configurations. Third, I describe my data and methods. I draw on 62 semi-structured interviews with Uber drivers conducted in the Greater Boston Area in Massachusetts, between September 2015 and July 2017. I describe the interview format, content, and point out some limitations to interview-based data and how I minimize them.

Fourth, I present my findings, which are organized into three sections that elucidate some of the key social-behavioral processes relevant to understanding how different Uber drivers cope with on-demand work: (1) how personal norms affect drivers' behavior and how this effect is specified by social-structural knowledge-activation processes; (2) how acute problem-situations (e.g. unanticipated income shocks) trigger drivers to shift into *goal-focused* cultural configurations; and (3) how beliefs about the labor market and conversational scripts underlie the social-construction of drivers' career values. The first section illustrates how personal career-norms tend to impel some college-educated drivers to want to escape from on-demand work and to instead find more mainstream work which applies their formal-educational skills; yet it also shows how the effect of these personal career-norms can be attenuated by knowledge-applicability and –accessibility processes involving labor market institutions (i.e. credential-equivalency rules), familial commitments, and friendship networks. The second section describes how acute problem-situations (e.g. negative income shocks) trigger segments of drivers to shift into *goal-focused* cultural configurations which render them inattentive to the subtle costs and benefits of driving with Uber. In the third section, I illustrate how for many drivers, whether or not they find substantial value in driving for Uber depends considerably on their *beliefs* about the labor market and their *skill* at interacting with riders. With respect to beliefs about the labor market, while overall nearly all drivers valued Uber's pecuniary benefits (e.g. wages), a particular subset of drivers *especially* valued Uber's non-pecuniary benefits, specifically the relative autonomy it provides (e.g. control over work hours, no

direct boss). These drivers typically had strenuous labor market histories, often having experienced rentier practices (see chapter one) within the taxicab and limousine industry. This was especially the case with immigrants who typically had extensive exposure to exploitative and/or severe labor market conditions in their countries-of-origin as well as often in the U.S. With respect to conversational scripts, I offer very preliminary evidence that drivers who lack the conversational scripts necessary for enjoyable conversations with riders tend to increasingly disfavor driving for Uber.

In the fifth and final section, I discuss my findings in two parts, making (1) inferences about key social mechanisms; and (2) suggestions for future research. In the first section, I describing three social mechanisms, identifying their internal sequential logics and specifying empirical and theoretical implications and qualifications. In the second section, I identify five limitations to this research and remark on how future research can enrich these findings.

## **A “DIFFERENCE OF PRACTICE”: UNDERSTANDING HABIT THROUGH ITS EFFECTS**

In this section, I briefly argue that to improve our understanding of “structure-agency” dynamics, it is most useful to focus on the practical consequences of different kinds of habit, rather than to the resort to a habit-creativity dichotomy that prevails in various strands of contemporary social theory (e.g. critical realism<sup>286</sup>). My position is borne quite directly from Peirce’s (1878) injunction in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear* regarding how to most usefully make inferences about social ontology: “consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” James<sup>287</sup> (1905) made a similar injunction a few decades later regarding *conceptual distinctions*: “there is no one

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<sup>286</sup> Critical realism has become particularly influential in British sociology and is ascending in the U.S. (e.g. Critical Realism Network).

<sup>287</sup> More broadly, James was critiquing radical forms of materialism and idealism given that they had driven intellectual debates onto tangents utterly divorced from practical value. It is important to note that “practical value” is defined very broadly by pragmatists, i.e. “pure” sciences and mathematics can certainly be viewed as contributing practical value even if not in the immediate short-term.

of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.” In a similar vein, I take it that habit is best understood by observing its effects on various behavioral outcomes. Specifically, this chapter examines how habit affects how individuals cope with social-situational changes.

Much of contemporary sociological theorizing takes different inspiration; it is oriented less toward understanding *the unfolding effects* of structure-agency dynamics and more toward determining whether action is “more habitual or creative.” Critical realist Margaret Archer presupposes this habit-creativity dichotomy in her critique of Bourdieu, writing: “the relevance of habitus began to decrease toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century given major changes in the structures of advanced capitalist democracies...in these circumstances, habitual forms prove incapable of providing guidelines for people’s lives and, thus, make reflexivity imperative” (Archer 2010: 272), a reflexivity that is exercised through a deliberative, “internal conversation.” Broken down into a logical structure, Archer’s argument can be expressed as follows: *actors increasingly have the need to be less habitual, therefore habits have become less relevant*. Yet, there is a deep problem<sup>288</sup> with this line of reasoning, albeit somewhat subtle. By assuming that habits have no bearing on reflexivity—as a habit-reflexivity/creativity dichotomy implies—the only way one can reconcile the twin empirical facts that (1) social-situational changes can create personal discordance between one’s habits and one’s social-situation (i.e. situational dictates) and that (2) actors often successfully cope with this discordance is to *assume that habits have no “staying power” or persistence*. This leads to the view that actors can somehow become *asocial*, that is, able to extricate themselves from cultural structures (among other influences). In the pragmatist formulation proposed in chapter two, the extent to which cultural configurations persist or actors’ ability to shift between them depends substantially on cultural processes, i.e. the persistence of particular habits depends partly on those habits (among other factors). Of course, pragmatism

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<sup>288</sup> Also, it should be noted Bourdieu did recognize the importance of “reflexivity” (e.g. in *Homo Academicus* (1988)) and he did not view it as contradicting “habitus,” to my knowledge.

recognizes ontological differences between social and natural phenomena (like critical realists<sup>289</sup>, unlike positivists), yet its ontological position is far more minimalist, capturing interpenetrations between actors and ecological structures.

With respect to understanding how Uber drivers cope with on-demand work, how would the pragmatist maxim of grasping concepts (e.g. habit) through their effects be useful? At the most elementary level, doing so fits with my goal of contributing to the normative discourse around on-demand work (e.g. see chapter one). Yet, to understand the theoretical benefits of focusing on the effects of habit on personal order, three assumptions must be added to the pragmatist maxim that the *nature* of “habit” lies wholly in its practical consequences. First, habits are largely<sup>290</sup> rooted in cultural knowledge represented in ecologies (e.g. artifacts) and actors’ minds (e.g. beliefs), as described in chapter two. Second, habits underlie all forms of action, including action that is more deliberative, novel, or disruptive; that is, it underlies *both* unconscious, routine action and conscious, rational-deliberative action. Third, actors’ *success* at settling “discordance” (see Peirce 1877) between habits and situational dictates depends at least partly on the *content* of habit, i.e. the particular ensembles of cultural knowledge that make up cultural configurations. Thus, it follows that if the “object” we are trying to make inferences about is *how “habit” affects action*, then in Peirce’s words, “our conception of [habit’s] effects is the whole of our conception of [it].” It is on this basis that my focus is on understanding how different types of habits generate different behavioral outcomes, or more specifically, how Uber drivers with different cultural configurations (e.g. different beliefs, values, norms) cope differently in the on-demand economy.

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<sup>289</sup> Beyond their strong opposition to the positivist quest for “general social laws,” contemporary Pragmatists and Critical Realists *do* share a more humble ambition of identifying causal mechanisms (Gross 2009; Gorski 2013).

<sup>290</sup> Cultural knowledge is by definition *shared*. It is unreasonable to assume that habits are *entirely* rooted in shared culture; they undoubtedly have an idiosyncratic component tied not only to unique combinations of cultural knowledge embodied by any individual but also to genetic and other biological structures.

## **SOCIAL-SITUATIONAL DISPLACEMENT AND CULTURAL PRAGMATICS: ADAPATION VERSUS HYSTERESIS**

In this section, I synthesize some of the research on how individuals cope with social-situational changes (e.g. new problem-situations), for the purpose of identifying empirical and conceptual references that will orient our investigation into how workers cope in the on-demand economy. This literature is quite broad, with a substantial portion of it focused on observing behavioral changes resulting from dramatic shocks to individual circumstances, such as how lottery winners behave post-winnings<sup>291</sup> (Kuhn et al. 2011; Agarwel et al. 2007)). The subset of this literature that I examine focuses mainly on social-situational change with respect to employment circumstances, as this is most pertinent to this chapter's empirical interests; yet I also touch upon coping with more chronic problem-situations (e.g. economic insecurity). For analytical convenience, I organize this literature around two sets of social processes involving the effects of habit on social action and experience in problem-situations: habits that dispose actors to (1) functionally *adapt* to situational dictates and (2) habits that result in what I describe, following Bourdieu (2000), as experiential "*hysteresis*."

I proceed in three sections. First, I provide empirical illustrations of how the *adaptive* effects of habit. Second, I illustrate how habits can result in behavioral hysteresis, which I define in terms of a mismatch between cultural configurations and ecological-situational demands. Third, given this chapter's research question—that is, how do variations in cultural configurations and problem-situations shape how Uber drivers evaluate their experience working in the on-demand economy—I elaborate on the most useful findings of this literature review through two sets of points that emphasize (1) how cultural configurations and problem-situations are inextricable from group-level processes, and (2) how

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<sup>291</sup> Income shocks can often have broader social effects, often called Veblen effects within the economic literature. Kuhn et al. (2011) find that not only do lottery winnings affect the winners themselves (e.g. some effects on durable expenditures but not on most components of household expenditure), but also their neighbors (e.g. more likely to buy a new car).

the effects of habits are best understood by examining an actor's situational dictates and the content and activation of their cultural configurations.

### **Cultural Versatility Vis-a-Vis Ecological Demands**

There is a substantial body of work that supports the view that actors' habits can dispose them to functionally adapting to changes in social circumstance. Much of the literature illustrates actors' capacity for what chapter five describes as "responsive creativity," which shows how actors adapt (reconciling/maintaining interests) in the face of a range of problems, including financial distress, labor market navigation, negative external categorizations, consumption, extreme poverty, etc. Among the many examples that illustrate this adaptive capacity—such as the reshuffling of core networks<sup>292</sup> (Small et al. 2015) and surfacing of particular forms of cultural declarative knowledge<sup>293</sup> (Dominguez 2011)—I focus here on two particularly important examples involving job displacement.

First, in a study of how high-tech white-collar workers coped with job displacement after the dot-com bubble, Carrie Lane's (2011) *A Company of One* found that these workers described their predicament by drawing on "free-market" ideology. That is, rather than attribute their current employment situations to the personal actions of their employers who laid them off, they tended to characterize their job loss as necessary and as "natural" to how the "free market" works. They deliberately espoused values of individualism, describing themselves as "career managers," "bundles of skills," and "self-marketing departments"; further, they were keen on distinguishing themselves from workers who they viewed as seeing themselves as victims. These workers also noted that, in many ways,

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<sup>292</sup> Small et al. (2015) finds that as individuals become embedded in new social-ecologies, their "core discussion networks [change] remarkably quickly," i.e. largely because of changes in situational dictates (e.g. obligations, routines), etc.

<sup>293</sup> Dominguez (2011) finds that in striving for social mobility in the United States, Latin-American immigrant women are greatly inspired by memories of the migratory sacrifices their parents made as well as their knowledge of the limited opportunities for social mobility in their countries of origin. These accounts can be interpreted as actors switching to cultural configurations which bring to the forefront of consciousness certain declarative forms of cultural knowledge, i.e. one's tied to familial history.

being laid off made them “better men” by helping them become more available to their children and family.

While Lane’s (2011) study on coping with job displacement focused on technology professionals, Marianne Cooper’s (2014) *Cut Adrift* offers an account of how Americans of heterogeneous class backgrounds—crudely measured by income—cope with new forms of economic risk (e.g. increasing personal debt). She finds that while low-income families tended to turn to religion (e.g. prayer, church) for support, they—like middle-income families—ordered their lives (e.g. controlling anxiety) around strategies: (1) “holding on,” which involves the day-to-day management of financial and emotional survival (carried out mainly by women), and (2) “downscaling,” which involves adjusting internal values and personal expectations toward less lofty household ambitions. Interestingly, Cooper observed that unlike middle-income parents who tend to *downscale*, higher-income parents shift into “upscaling” strategies which involve adjusting values and personal norms upward toward higher forms of achievement.

Together, these examples illustrate two points that are relevant for my purposes regarding how habits can function in problem-situations. First, at least in some cases, as Lane (2011) shows, actors can be quite versatile in drawing on their cultural configurations (e.g. free-market ideology) to cope with their changed circumstance. Second, the process of applying one’s cultural configurations in problem-situations seems to at least partly be influenced by class, as Cooper’s (2014) work shows. Thus, while individuals have some degree of cultural versatility, that versatility is structured by group-level processes. If cultural versatility is socially structured, it follows that certain sets of cultural configurations may also be structured to be less adaptive (i.e. mal-adaptive) to particular ecological depends. In other words, habits can function less adaptively. I turn to empirical illustrations of this process next.

## Cultural-Ecological Hysteresis

Habits can also generate “dysfunctional” behavioral outcomes; this mal-adaption evokes Bourdieu’s (2000: 160) often-neglected concept of “hysteresis,” which could crudely be defined as a mismatch between ecological (or field) demands and cultural configurations (e.g. habitus). In Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, hysteresis occurs when “dispositions are out of line with the field and with the ‘collective expectations<sup>294</sup>’ which are constitutive of its normality” (2000: 160)<sup>295</sup>. Hysteresis, then, represents a discordance between *habits* and *ecological-situational dictates*; given that I conceptualize habits as cultural configurations, hysteresis can be described as discordance between cultural configurations and ecological-situational demands. Below I provide some empirical examples that approximate this cultural mal-adaption or hysteresis.

Arlie Hochschild’s (1979; 1983) pioneering research on “emotion work” and “emotional labor<sup>296</sup>,” particularly with respect to work-organizations, offers a useful set of mechanisms for understanding how work- and class-based interactions can result in experiencing hysteresis. Much of the sociological literature on emotion reveals how social-ecologies and their culturally constituted dimensions (e.g. status and power dynamics, interactional rules) tend to elicit different emotions in terms of content (e.g. sympathy) and form (e.g. bodily or verbal displays, degree of effusiveness). Actors are commonly viewed as managing these emotions for various purposes, including to express their values (e.g. moral expressions) and interests (e.g. status-signaling, stigma-avoidance) (cf. Fine and Fields (2008)). This emotional management results in varying degrees of “emotional achievement” (e.g. self-

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<sup>294</sup> I note below that “collective expectations” are better described as “observational norms” (see Patterson 2014).

<sup>295</sup> The broader argument Bourdieu was making here is that habitus can be transformed overtime as a result of these field-habitus mismatches. This contrasts with the common depiction of Bourdieu as being primarily a theorist of social-reproduction, rather than change.

<sup>296</sup> Emotional labor refers to managing one’s feelings through various strategies (e.g. bodily, cognitive, expressive) to meet the emotional demands of a job (Hochschild 1983).



validating experiences; see Yang 2000), which in turn shape various outcomes (e.g. see Greer on coping ability).

Processes of emotional management are culturally structured, as illustrated by Sharone's (2013) *Flawed System/Flawed Self* and Silva's (2013) *Coming Up Short*. Sharone examines the job search experiences of American and Israeli workers, tracing differences in these workers' emotional management and behaviors partly to labor-market institutions in the respective countries (e.g. presence of job search agencies). Particularly important for my purposes is his comparison of "blue- versus white-collar" workers in the US. He describes white-collar job seekers as engaged in a "chemistry game" that encourages them to take personal responsibility for their employment situation and to aspire toward jobs which evoke feelings of passion and authenticity. When these workers sometimes do not find such work, rather than attributing their failure to the "social system"<sup>297</sup>, they tend to blame themselves. (It should be noted that this seems to be somewhat inconsistent with Lane's (2010) above-described finding) Blue collar workers, on the other hand, participate in a "diligence game" which involves demonstrating a strong work ethic and personal motivation. Combining Sharone's (2013) findings with those of Jennifer Silva (2013) in *Coming Up Short* suggests that age-cohort factors constitute an important source of within-class heterogeneity in emotional management; Silva (2013) finds that young working class Americans have also internalized notions of personal responsibility—which she connects to national "neoliberal ideology"—and highly value work that provides emotional excitement and enables creative capacities. Yet, she observed that these young workers were struggling to reconcile these feelings with their bleak economic prospects (e.g. debt, limited jobs). Thus, both class- and age-related processes structure the amount of emotional labor workers must do, with higher-class and

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<sup>297</sup> Ofer (2013) argues that Israeli white-collar workers, in contrast, are playing a "specs game" in which job-seeking is heavily dependent on application screeners, employment testing agencies, and other institutions which emphasize formal qualifications and resume buzz words. The result is that job-seekers who fail to find work largely attribute blame to the system.

younger workers tending to experience greater emotional labor. This suggests not only the by-now near-truism that cultural configurations vary by class and age, but it demonstrates a particular form of emotional disadvantage (i.e. self-blame) associated with upper class positions and youth.

Several studies focused on race and immigration highlight the various ways in which “reference groups” are implicated in the formation of various kinds of habits; for example, they point to how habits are shaped by role models (Wilson 1987; 2009), comparisons to racial out-groups (Frazier’s (1957)<sup>298</sup>), and (in the case of immigrants) country-of-origin compatriots (Dominguez 2011). Waldinger’s (1996) examined which groups sort into which types of jobs in New York City, focusing on the experiences of African Americans and immigrants. While some of his conclusions are questionable, his work does highlight how “social contact” can shape evaluative cultural knowledge (e.g. values, observational norms, personal norms). He uses the concept of ethnic labor queues to argue that “white flight” out of manufacturing jobs in New York City created job vacancies which immigrants, but not African Americans, tended to fill. He argues that not only did African Americans lack the networks to access these job vacancies, but that they did not seek these low-skilled jobs because their job aspirations were constructed largely in reference to the jobs they observed white Americans occupying. They aspired toward public sector jobs that tended to require network connections that low-skilled segments of the African Americans lacked. He argues that immigrants, on the other hand, flocked to these low-skill jobs because they interpreted them as far more satisfying than the jobs available in their countries-of-origin. This line of argument parallels Dominguez’s (2011) work on Latin American immigrant women whose social mobility strategies were motivated by memories of the migratory sacrifices their parents made as well as their knowledge of the limited opportunities for social mobility in their countries-of-origin. While

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<sup>298</sup> Frazier’s classic book (1957) tried to describe and explain the cultural configurations and behaviors of a black middle class. After explaining the emergence of the US’ 1950s “black bourgeoisie” (e.g. rooted in occupational differentiation, northward migration, etc.), he argues that this group has become disconnected from the racial traditions of majority of blacks while at the same time being disavowed by white Americans. The result, as Frazier scathingly argues, is a vainglorious group whose prospects for racial progress are debilitated by their delusion.

some of Waldinger's arguments against the importance of deindustrialization and skill mismatches are arguably overstated (see Wilson's (2009) integration of these factors with cultural dimensions), and while it is unclear to what extent networks versus aspirations account for these differences, Waldinger's work does seem to suggest that it can be difficult to extricate oneself from focal cultural configurations (e.g. personal norms), which can be interpreted as a kind of behavioral hysteresis.

Ana Villalobos's (2014) *Motherhood: Making it All Better in Insecure Times* suggests how cultural *beliefs* regarding effective parenting strategies can "misfire" (Bourdieu 2000: 162). Villalobos refers to these parenting practices as "security strategies"; she traces these strategies partly to popular beliefs regarding the importance of the mother-child relationship in a child's early years. Consistent with these beliefs, Villalobos finds that many mothers adopt an "intensive mothering" strategy involving establishing a strong connection with their children. Yet this strategy often results in neglecting other priorities (e.g. employment, relationships, self-care, etc.) which creates a "motherload" that exacerbates insecurity. Somewhat paradoxically, less intense mothering strategies tend to be more functional to the situational dictates of parenting.

The key takeaway from these studies is that particular sets of habits can generate less-than-desired outcomes for actors coping with various problem-situations. Understanding habits as embodied cultural knowledge, there is substantial evidence that declarative knowledge (e.g. Silva 2013 on ideology; Villalobos 2014 on beliefs) and evaluative knowledge (e.g. Sharone 2013 on norms and values), can in widely varying cases be mismatched against situational dictates. Further, these studies further substantiate the point that cultural configurations are grounded in higher-level social processes involving class, immigration, gender, etc.

### **On-Demand Work and Personal (Dis)order**

This literature review establishes that different kinds of habits can be usefully understood as being in varying degrees of harmony or discordance with respect to the demands of different problem-

situations; these empirical illustrations of the effects of habit provide useful insights that can help direct my empirical investigation into how Uber drivers cope with on-demand work. However, it is important to note that while above I described the effects of habits dichotomously in terms of *adaption* or *hysteresis*, this was for analytical and presentational convenience; as we examine how Uber drivers concretely behave, it is more useful to understand the effects of habit on how actors *personally order*<sup>299</sup> their lives. This concept better describes the fact that habits *fit* with situational-dictates *to varying degrees* (i.e. continuously rather than discretely), and the extent of this fit does not generate either perfectly deliberative rationality or complete hysteria, but rather, its effects flow (often un-dramatically) into the continuous flux of everyday life through which actors try to make their lives work. Below I elaborate on the above review by making two points tied to the importance of: (1) recognizing that cultural configurations and problem-situations are inextricable from group-level processes, and (2) understanding the effects of habits by examining an actor's situational dictates and the content and activation of their cultural configurations.

### **Group-Level Processes and the Social Distribution of Cultural Configurations and Problem-Situations**

It is critical to recognize that *group-level processes* underlie *both* the social distribution of cultural configurations *and* problem-situations.

With respect to cultural configurations, in the most general sense, these are formed and embodied through the biographical social-interactions actors have experienced (see Abbott 2016 on historicity); but on a more analytical level, these interactions are usefully understood as clustering around certain group-level processes involving class (Cooper 2014), race and immigration (Dominguez 2011), state capitalist ideology and narratives (Lane 2011; Silva 2013), gender (Villalbos 2014), and labor market institutions (Sharone 2013). These processes structure the social-interactions through which

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<sup>299</sup> This concept of “personal order” emerged from a conversation with Christopher Winship. Yet, any shortcomings in my articulation of it are solely my doing.

actors acquire cultural knowledge. For example, governments and universities espouse the importance of a college education (i.e. a group-level process) thereby attracting sets of individuals to attend college (e.g. privileged high school graduates) and who subsequently internalize particular ensembles of cultural knowledge (e.g. skills, “career values”) through their collegiate interactions.

With respect to the kinds of problem-situations (e.g. severity, frequency) that actors face, these are also partly structured by group-level processes, including rising income volatility (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994) tied to variable earnings (e.g. erratic work schedules, unstable non-labor income transfers), weakening social-insurance mechanisms (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012), employment instability (Farber 2008), among others. As described in chapter two, two of the four ecologies dimensions stylistically identified (i.e. linkages, material resources, cultural structures, networks of actors), their *material resources* and *cultural structures*, shape the frequency and kinds (e.g. unanticipated versus anticipated) of problem-situations (e.g. income shocks) that tend to emerge, as well as actors’ resources for buffering against the severity of those problem-situations. Other group-level processes shape the *variety* of problem situations that emerge, such as social-organizational dynamics that generate repetitive, tedious work, which might in turn create problems of boredom for workers. Overall, the key point for my purposes is that in understanding how Uber drivers cope in the on-demand economy, it is critical to understand that these drivers’ cultural knowledge and the problem-situations they face cannot be extricated from higher-level social processes. For my direct purposes, we would expect college-educated Uber drivers to have different cultural configurations than non-college-educated drivers (of course with substantial within-group variation); similar differences are expected to be generated by immigration processes. As noted in chapter two and in the discussion section of this chapter, these group-level processes are often problematically neglected by particular strands of micro-interactional relational sociology (e.g. Collins 2005).

## Determinants of the Effects of Habits

In coping with anticipated and unanticipated problem-situations, actors have the cognitive capacity to *shift between cultural configurations* to adapt to situational dictates (see Patterson 2014), but they also have the capacity to *select out* of the problem-situation altogether; in order to understand the effects of habit, we must observe how actors with different habits behave in different kinds of problem-situations. Generally, how actors cope is usefully understood as depending on the (1) problem-situation and its demands, which I will often term “situational dictates,” and (2) actors’ cultural configurations.

First, as noted above, social-ecologies partly determine the frequency and kinds of problem-situations they tend to generate (e.g. severity) will shape the kinds of effects that habits are likely to have. For example, an unanticipated negative shock to one’s income or health may trigger an actor to shift into a “survival-mode” cultural configuration; I describe this below as a “goal-focused cultural configuration.” In contrast, more chronic, less severe problem-situations may result in *less* shifting between cultural configurations; this may result in actors becoming more deeply embedded in a more restricted set of problem-situations, which in turn would strengthen the actor’s cultural focus (Patterson 2014; see chapter two).

Second, the *content* and *activation* of an actor’s cultural configurations (i.e. habits) will partly determine their function; four points are important. First, actors can only shift into the cultural configurations that happen to be *cognitively available* to them; for example, goal-focused cultural configurations must be embodied to be used. In some situations, a lack of requisite cultural configurations given particular situational dictates can result in selecting out of that problem-situation (e.g. quitting a job) or extreme dissatisfaction; in my findings below I offer an illustration of the latter, where an Uber driver’s inadequate *conversational script* resulted in unpleasant driver-rider interactions. Critically, micro-situational characteristics can sometimes lead actors who lack requisite cultural

configurations to prolong their experience of the problem-situation rather than select out; for example, the autonomy that Uber provides workers leads many drivers to continue driving despite overall distaste for the experience. Second, as noted in chapter two, whether a problem-situation is anticipated or unanticipated depends on one's beliefs, ideologies, and norms; insofar as anticipated and unanticipated problem-situations will generate different behavior, the content of this cultural knowledge is critical.

Third, the capacity to shift between cultural configurations that are suitable for a given problem-situation is itself a form of cultural knowledge that is learned and practiced. For example, actors can acquire information about how useful it is to be versatile in a "digital economy" (i.e. declarative knowledge), practice such versatility within particular institutional arrangements such as high-skilled technical labor markets (i.e. procedural knowledge), and valorize their actions on the basis of values regarding freedom and observational norms regarding how other technology workers (or immigrants) behave. Lane's (2011) *A Company of One* offers a useful illustration of this. More broadly, the content of embodied habits partly determines their changeability. Bourdieu (2000: 149) made a similar argument about how the content of habitus<sup>300</sup> changes its changeability: "Habitus helps to determine what transforms it. If it is accepted that the principle of the transformation of habitus lies in the gap, experienced as a positive or negative surprise, between expectations and experience, one must suppose that the extent of this gap and the significance attributed to it depend on habitus."<sup>301</sup> Fourth, applying one's cultural knowledge requires that that knowledge be cognitively-activated (Andersen et al. 2007 in Patterson 2014; see chapter two) through various mechanisms (e.g. applicability-, accessibility-, self-regulatory mechanisms) involving the structure of an actor's social interactions, exposure to

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<sup>300</sup> Following Patterson (2014), habitus is but one form of cultural knowledge in my framework.

<sup>301</sup> Undoubtedly, Bourdieu also considered the "content" of the field (or ecology) as determinative of habitus' changeability.

environmental cues, etc. These mechanisms figure prominently into my explanation of behavioral differences among college-educated Uber drivers.

Thus, this review of the literature and the elaborative synthesis that followed should help us address the question of how Uber drivers cope with on-demand work to personally order their lives by orienting us toward: (1) group-level processes (e.g. education, immigration), particularly those that shape the distribution of cultural configurations among Uber drivers; and (2) for any given worker, understanding the problem-situations they face and the content and activation of their cultural configurations.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

I draw on 62 semi-structured interviews with Uber drivers conducted in the Greater Boston Area in Massachusetts, between September 2015 and July 2017.

Regarding format, Uber drivers were accessed by calling an “UberX,” which is the most basic private car service offered by Uber. They were then asked if I could conduct a short interview with them while they were driving me to an arbitrary destination, after which we would typically continue the conversation in the parked car, at a nearby venue, or by phone later in the day. 78 percent of drivers agreed to be interviewed, resulting in 62 interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 4 hours. I attribute the high response rate largely to having engaged Uber drivers amicably, demonstrating intimate knowledge of the various qualitative aspects of driving for Uber, and expressing genuine interest in better understanding their experiences.

Regarding content, interviews were usually divided into two parts; the first involved mostly structured, fact-finding questions, and the second involved more open-ended questions, aimed at discursively understanding their beliefs, values, norms, and other aspects of their cultural configurations, in relation to their experiences with Uber. In the first part of the interview, after gleaned basic background data (e.g. education, age, citizenship), I proceeded to ask questions that could be



grouped into six categories: (1) labor market history (including Uber; e.g. circumstances and most direct reasons of participation; hours/week with Uber; income sources (including Uber)); (2) how they evaluated their experience with Uber (e.g. pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits and costs of work, normative views of Uber and its treatment of workers); (3) knowledge of Uber's practices; (4) financial history, situation, dependents (e.g. income sources/breakdown (e.g. wife), dependents, expenses, debt, investments, savings); (5) economic security and resource buffers (e.g. healthcare insurance, preparedness for retirement, resource buffers against adverse events); and (6) how driver perceives Uber as having affected his short-term (e.g. financial, ties, behaviors, psychology, etc.) and long-term situation (e.g. financial plans). In the second portion of the interview, I probed into their cultural knowledge—including their beliefs, ideologies, subjective social status, normative concerns, particularized and ultimate values, considerations of ought-ness and conceptions of normality—typically followed by investigating the ways in which this knowledge is concretely used in their social-interactive experiences of on-demand work.

This interview-based data collection approach has limitations, but it does suit my empirical purposes quite well. An old and important literature on interview data warns of their various pitfalls, including tendencies for “errors of inference” (Becker and Geer 1957: 13; i.e. interviewer misunderstandings of interviewee's intended meanings, missing data on what interviewees avoid disclosing), “attitudinal fallacy” (i.e. conflating attitudes with behaviors; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; see Wicker 1969 for earlier descriptions of this problem), reliability problems associated with retrospective self-reports (Cook and Campbell 1979 on social desirability bias; Schwartz and Sudman 1994 on memory issues), tendencies toward methodological individualism and interviews fallaciously imposing coherence on interviewee narratives (Lamont and Swidler 2014), etc.

Mindful of these potential snares, interviews were particularly useful for my particular research question for at least three reasons, beyond being relative inexpensive and amenable to systematic

comparisons and inference-making. First, given my interest in the effects of cultural configurations, interviews allowed me to probe into the shared and idiosyncratic meanings that constituted workers' cultural knowledge. Relatedly, interviews allow me to construct a "temporal and narrative structure of events that already have occurred," as noted by Jerolmack and Khan (2014: 180) who are themselves noted for having raised flags about the common limitations of interview data. Cultural knowledge can then be traced to these temporal and narrative biographies. Second, as Pugh (2013) has argued, properly conducted interviews can capture emotional dimensions of behavior (e.g. fictional expectations (Beckherth 2016), abstract feelings of ought-ness, ideals) which are central especially to grasping evaluative knowledge such as "ultimate values" (Patterson 2014). While the norms that actors hold are often better observed via ethnographies and participant observation (particularly when combined with interviews), cultural values are often best captured through skillfully constructed in-depth interviews which push interviewees into revealing internalized (and relatively stable) motivational drivers. Third, as Lamont and Swidler (2014) argue, interviews can be used innovatively to understand how actors understand their social positions in relation to others and hence they can capture boundary-making processes. They further emphasize that whether interview data is "good and bad" depends on both the question and how interviews are conducted; for example, much of their utility is lost when interviewers do not "encourage [interviewees] to evoke a variety of interactional settings, social contexts, and institutional situations" (157-158). However, as advised by Jerolmack and Khan (2014), it is important to be explicit that my interview data derive from what interviewees say (and do *within interview settings*), not direct observations of their past, present, and future behaviors.

Finally, my methodological orientation very much iterates between deductive and inductive modes (Wilson and Chaddha 2009; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). While the semi-structured format and formulation of questions that I use avails my approach to "grounded interpretations" (Glaser and

Strauss 1967 prefer the term grounded “discovery”<sup>302</sup>), modifiability, and closeness-of-fit between data and analytic categories (Charmaz 2006), I explicitly rely on certain preconceived understandings, including that cultural knowledge is “constituted” and relatively stable (Patterson 2014) and that actors have adaptive capacities (Dewey 1910) oriented toward the resolution of everyday ecological problems (i.e. settling “irritations of doubt” (Peirce 1878)).

## FINDINGS

The findings are organized into three sections that elucidate some of the key social-behavioral processes relevant to understanding how different Uber drivers cope with on-demand work: (1) how personal norms affect drivers’ behaviors and how this effect is specified by social-structural knowledge-activation processes; (2) how acute problem-situations (e.g. unanticipated income shocks) trigger drivers to shift into *goal-focused* cultural configurations; and (3) how beliefs about the labor market and conversational scripts underlie the social-construction of drivers’ career values.

The first section broadly involves illustrating an effect and then specifying the social conditions that (*in*)*activate* that effect. In the first part, I show how a segment of college-educated drivers, especially those who are U.S.-educated (as opposed to foreign educated), have a strong urge to switch out of driving with Uber and to instead find work that applies their educational credentials. These drivers evaluate Uber as useful but “just not for them” given their educational training, and in some cases this results in drivers *spreading themselves thin* between different paths, resulting in what I interpret as sub-optimal decision-making. Yet, personal career-norms must be *activated* to affect behavior, and on this basis, the second part of this first sections shows how for foreign-educated drivers, the effect of personal career-norms on their Uber experience is attenuated because of socially-structured *inapplicability* and *inaccessibility* tied to labor market institutions, familial commitments, and

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<sup>302</sup> Charmaz (2006) differs with Glaser & Strauss (1967) on whether data is ever “discovered,” arguing that observers can never *not* partly construct the data, and hence the grounded theorist is at best “interpreting” phenomena.

friendship networks. The second section describes how acute problem-situations (e.g. negative income shocks, sudden increases in consumption needs) trigger segments of drivers to shift into *goal-focused* cultural configurations, which I define restrictively as entailing a self-regulated (e.g. suppression of particular kinds of knowledge), deliberate (conscious) cognition oriented toward attaining a well-defined outcome (e.g. a biological *need* or more socially-constructed interest like resolving boredom). Despite their heterogeneous problem-situations and social characteristics, Uber drivers who had shifted into goal-focused cultural configurations all shared an *inattention to the subtle costs and benefits* of driving with Uber. They were far less likely to evaluate their experiences with Uber in holistic terms like most of the drivers described in the first (and third) section. In the third section, I illustrate how for many drivers, whether or not they find substantial value in driving for Uber depends considerably on their *beliefs* about the labor market and their *skill* at interacting with riders. With respect to beliefs about the labor market, while overall nearly all drivers valued Uber's pecuniary benefits (e.g. wages), a particular subset of drivers *especially* valued Uber's non-pecuniary benefits (i.e. high value-salience), namely the autonomy it afforded them. These drivers typically had strenuous labor market histories, often having experienced rentier practices (see chapter one) within the taxicab and limousine industry. This was especially the case with immigrants who typically had extensive exposure to exploitative and/or severe labor market conditions in their countries-of-origin as well as often in the U.S. With respect to conversational scripts, I offer very preliminary evidence that drivers who lack the conversational scripts necessary for enjoyable conversations with riders tend to increasingly disfavor driving for Uber. This is based on the simple mechanism that humans tend to like activities at which they perform well. Yet, I offer some remarks about better understanding this relationship between conversational scripts and career values, but note that I have provided only scant pertinent evidence and that this is an area for future research.

## The (Ab)Normality of On-Demand Work: Personal Norms and Knowledge-Activation

### Processes

Among a subset of Uber drivers, I observed a strong relationship between *internalized values tied to formal-education and work* and whether drivers experienced on-demand work as *normal* to their social backgrounds; as importantly, this relationship was found to be mediated by social-structural knowledge-activation processes (Patterson 2014; see chapter two). This relationship is important for two reasons: (1) drivers' interpretation of their experiences as *normal* or *abnormal* has behavioral consequences, constituting a proximate cause (among others) for how engaged are with Uber (e.g. whether they were searching for other jobs, long-term plans); and (2) internalized values are understood in terms of group-level knowledge-acquisition processes tied to formal-educational institutions, and as such, these empirical findings draw a connection between concrete action and higher-level social processes.

Bourdieu drew similar connections when he noted that human "dispositions [can be] *out of line* with the field and with the 'collective expectations' which are constitutive of its normality" (Bourdieu 2000: 160; my emphasis); yet he was describing the behavioral dimensions of mismatches between actors' habituses and injunctive and/or observational norms (Patterson 2014). My focus is on mismatches between values and ecological-situational dictates and how this mismatch manifests itself in behavior; further, I capture this sense of (ab)normality and its activation in social action by using the concept of "personal norms" which involves internalized "feelings of moral obligation" (Schwartz 1977: 221) tied to the need to act in accordance with one's values (Stern et al. 1999; Kallgren et al. 2000; Rouben and Larsen 2015; see Patterson (2014) for norm types), i.e. how objects of experience are evaluated (e.g. favorability, salience). The concept coheres with my analytical framework because it is generally understood as situationally-activated, but the extent to which this is so is an empirical question. My focus particularly is on "career values" hence my use of the term "personal career-norms." I proceed by describing two sets of findings in this section: (1) how the U.S. higher educational experience

(undergraduate, post-graduate) can create a gap between career values and situational dictates which impels actors to harmonize their work practices with career values, and (2) how personal career-norms of foreign-educated immigrants are attenuated by the absence of knowledge-activation processes. Overall, I show how *under certain social-situational conditions*, particular cultural configurations can lead to an experiential hysteresis in decision-making among workers in the on-demand economy.

### **When Internalized Values are “Out of Line” with Situational Dictates: The Urge to Find Mainstream**

#### **Work**

The cases of Tom, Fred, and Mehmet illustrate how internalized values tied to U.S.-based formal educational experiences can result in the formation of personal career-norms which can impel drivers to try to resolve an experiential “inconsistency” between the kind of middle-to-high skill work they expected to be doing and the relatively low-skill work they were doing as Uber drivers.

#### ***Behavioral Hysteresis***

Tom is a white male, single, in his 30s, and has been driving with Uber for under a year. He had attained a doctorate degree from a for-profit college in a subject area involving organizational leadership several years prior, financing this education with nearly a hundred thousand dollars in student loans. Despite this financial burden, Tom spent nearly thirty to forty hours a week working on a startup venture, along with a friend of his, that he hoped would gain momentum so he could devote all his efforts to it. (To protect the driver’s anonymity, I will not disclose the function of the startup, but it is somewhat related to his doctorate degree). Tom did not initially mention that while he had been working on this startup for years, it was generating negligible income, but when conversationally nudged to discuss this, he said: “Yeah we’re still figuring the financial details out, but there’s such a need for this business and we know how to make it work.” He went to say: “you know, this is basically what I’ve already dreamed of doing, connecting with people, and it’s what I studied for in my PhD.” Beyond the substantive passion he felt for this startup, he interpreted it as the most fitting path for him to invest his time given that it aligned

well, in his view, with his formal-educational training. The upshot was that this preoccupation left him with only twenty working hours a week to drive with Uber, even though Uber was Tom's main source of income; this roughly twenty-hours of wage-labor amounted to around \$1500 per month, net of major expenses (before taxes). This was just enough for him to make ends meet, while his interest on debt continued to accrue.

Tom was experiencing a *mismatch* between particularized (career) values (associated with his formal-educational experiences) and his practical ecological-situational dictates; the behavioral result seemed like, from my perspective, severe financial mistakes. When pressed as to how optimal his plan was given his debt burden, he said: "well yeah I get that but it's what I'm good at and it's my passion. Anyone can be an Uber driver, but I feel [name of startup] is *my* contribution." Tom's remarks suggest that his personal norms were tied to his formal-educational experiences in at least two ways: (1) internalized "career values" involving wanting to align his labor-income with his "passions," and (2) an emotional need to "make relevant" the educational credentials he had accumulated so much debt in order to earn. With respect to his need to put his educational credentials to use in the labor market, it is unclear as to whether this was more the result of emotionally justifying either the *time* he had spent attaining this credential or the *student debt* he had accrued; it was likely a combination. More clear was that Tom's commitment to his career values were strengthened by dint of his emotional need to apply his credentials; that is, while it is possible that Tom's career values *preceded* his formal-educational experiences, his educational experiences internalized those values to the effect that they continued to find expression in his work and financial decisions.

### ***"It's Just Not For Me"***

Other drivers also held strong personal career-norms tied to their graduate or post-graduate educational experiences in the U.S., but unlike Tom, their alternative work prospects seemed more achievable; Mehmet and Fred fall into this group. Mehmet had completed his PhD in a physical science

(not specified for anonymity) from a well-known public research university. He subsequently worked as a post-doctoral fellow for several years, followed by a stint at a research institute in the Greater Boston area. Yet, due to troubles with his work visa, he had to return to his country-of-origin. After these visa issues were resolved, he returned to the U.S. and was working part-time with Uber as he searched for a job in the pharmaceutical industry. For Mehmet, working as an Uber driver for longer than a year was an impossibility: “I have a PhD. I am not a[n] Uber driver. I drive just temporarily and to look for jobs so I can use my research and lab skills... Uber’s good, it’s just not for me.” Fred graduated with an undergraduate degree also in biology<sup>303</sup> in the early 2000s and later went back to school for a masters in environmental management. He worked in various research and business positions since graduating. He had been laid off just a few months prior and had been working full-time with Uber since, but was actively looking for other work: “Uber’s alright man, it’s super flexible, money’s decent, I meet really cool people, like an actress, an author, a famous investment fund guy... I get to see a lot of the city. I’m kind of a sociologist like you. But honestly, I still prefer doing something where I can use my skills. I mean that’s why I went to school and got my masters after all, you know?”

All three drivers (Tom, Mehmet, Fred) evaluated Uber as a useful way to earn a living, *just not for them personally* given their educational backgrounds. In Tom’s case (the driver working on the startup), these personal norms created a degree of hysteresis that was particularly dysfunctional. He generally knew what he wanted, but did not have a clear conception of the constraints he faced pursuing different options. That is, Tom knew he wanted to build a business of his own, but he did not have a concrete sense of the various challenges he would face doing so; the upshot was he was

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<sup>303</sup> In some cases, I will note the area of study of the driver and in other cases I will not. This is largely based on judgments regarding how identifiable the case is. Mehmet has a PhD from a well-known university in Boston; a substantial segment of Uber drivers have post-graduate degrees (10.8%; Hall and Krueger 2015), not many have degrees from relatively high-status universities like Mehmet. Further, Mehmet’s biography was distinct in multiple ways (e.g. visa expiration). Thus, Mehmet would be more easily identified by providing his area of expertise than Fred.



“muddling through” with Uber, in substantial debt and earning income only part time. Winship (2015) terms such lack of knowledge about one’s decision constraints “unspecified attainability,” noting that it results in “extra-rational” behavior (i.e. outside the bounds of “strong” assumptions about rational decision-making) which is purposive (i.e. intentional) but not always utility-maximizing. Fred and Mehmet seemed to have a clearer grasp of the constraints they faced, and their desire to find mainstream work seemed more attainable; nonetheless, they had been searching for several months and both were increasingly experiencing angst, particularly Mehmet (the driver with the PhD in a physical science). Thus, the gulf between values and situational dictates can result in situational discomfort, and in more extreme cases, hysteresis; this mismatch is fundamentally tied to cultural processes such as personal career-norms. Yet, this raises the question; are we to expect that personal career-norms associated with formal-education will generally impel college-educated drivers away from on-demand work and toward searching for mainstream work? For instance, Tom, Mehmet, and Fred occupied a small age range; they were between their late 20s to late 30s. It is plausible that the *shorter the duration since graduation, the stronger the effect of personal career-norms are?* In this way, age can mediate (strengthen, attenuate) the effect of personal-career norms. On this logic, what other factors can potentially mediate, specifically attenuate, the effects of personal career- norms? I turn to this question next.

### **When Personal Career-Norms are Inapplicable and Inaccessible: the Normalcy of On-Demand Work**

In this section, through the cases of Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro, I illustrate how the behavioral effects of personal career-norms can become attenuated due to the *absence* of particular knowledge-activation processes, namely *knowledge applicability and accessibility* mechanisms (see chapter two). *Knowledge-applicability* involves how relevant cultural knowledge (e.g. personal norms) is given the problem-situation; *knowledge-accessibility* involves “the degree to which [cultural knowledge] can be automatically activated” (Andersen et al. 2007: 139; from Patterson 2014). Personal career-norms tied

to applying one's educational credentials are understood as have varying degrees of *applicability* depending on labor market institutions (e.g. credential equivalency), whereas the degree to which personal career-norms are *accessible* to actors over time and across problem-situations depends partly on the structure of one's social interactions (e.g. core networks such as family and close friends). Importantly, knowledge-applicability and –activation mechanisms are understood as *socially structured* by higher-level group processes including immigration, assimilation, labor market institutional structures, etc. Bearing these processes in mind, for presentational and analytic convenience, I have organized my comparison of the experiences of Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro (this section) with those of Tom, Fred, and Mehmet (prior section) on the basis of whether their formal-educational degrees were attained in the U.S. or abroad; that is, Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro were all college-educated abroad, whereas Tom, Fred, and Mehmet were college-educated in the U.S. This is a useful way to present these findings because drivers with foreign credentials are *usually* immigrants, and both foreign-credentials *and* immigration processes *broadly* contribute to the *inactivation* of personal-career norms, in ways that will be made more concrete below. To sharpen the comparison, at the end of this section I remark on hybrid cases like that of Mehmet, who is an immigrant with domestic educational-credentials. Overall, the case of Sisi illustrates how the *applicability* mechanism relates to the attenuation of personal career-norms; the case of Hadi illustrates the *accessibility* mechanism; and the case of Pedro illustrates both *applicability and accessibility*<sup>304</sup> mechanisms. I examine each case in turn.

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<sup>304</sup> In order to capture the *knowledge-applicability* mechanism, two empirical angles can be taken, namely examining: (1) differences in the *content* of cultural knowledge represented within U.S.- versus foreign-based universities (e.g. beliefs about work, the ultimate purpose of an education, etc.) and/or (2) how foreign- versus U.S.-based *credentials* are legitimated differently within institutional structure of the U.S. labor market. The first empirical angle is beyond the scope of this chapter and likely less critical for the majority of non-elite universities; indeed, based on my interviews, all college-educated drivers shared at least some *minimum* formal-educational cultural configurations involving beliefs about the social significance of education and a general desire to be learned and aware of how things in the world work. Thus, my focus is on credential applicability.

### ***Credential Equivalence and the Applicability Mechanism***

Sisi had an undergraduate degree in engineering from a university in his country-of-origin (eastern African country); he was in his early 50s and had been in the U.S. for almost two decades, having started driving with Uber just over six months ago. Sisi had taken various steps to find work as an engineer in the United States given his educational background, including having taken engineering courses through an education-extension program in the Greater Boston area. While he succeeded at securing a brief internship with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation several years ago, he was not offered a full-time position because his degree did not meet institutional standards for credential equivalency: “they told me that although I am overqualified, I do not have a certificate and so I can no longer work there.”

It became clear throughout my interview with Sisi that over time, his identity as an engineer came to increasingly carry symbolic rather than practical significance. He expressed his desire to work as an engineer in abstract, wistful terms, more like it was a deferred dream than a concrete part of his short-term plans: “When I’m 70, knowledge will not go away. Engineering is like wine, it becomes better with age. Maybe I can go into teaching.” Sisi’s likening of engineering to wine was meant to express a deep fondness for the field and for scientific knowledge in general, but it also suggested a personal resignation to the possibility of working as an engineer in the short-run (i.e. “when I’m 70”). Indeed, in the first part of our interview, he focused much more on the day-to-day, practical dimensions of his life: “I am making pretty good money now [with Uber]... I can even go on vacations with my wife more easily because we can coordinate our schedules...and I am spending more time with my kids and don’t have to pay for baby sitters... I take the kids to school so my wife can work, and I relax when I want...this car is \$22,000 and it’s paying for itself... I just have to pay oil changes and things like that... it’s a very good car... also if I want to buy something, I can do Uber boom boom boom and get enough money to get it... I can also sell the car or maybe buy another car.” It was my *suggestive* remarks regarding his engineering

background that seemed to activate personal-career norms that were indeed both latent *and* strong; he later stated in the interview that with Uber “I can even take more engineering classes if I want with my freedom driving.” In this way, Sisi used the autonomy that Uber afforded him to express an ultimate value (i.e. him being an engineer) central to his identity yet without preventing him from meeting the practical exigencies of his situation. Thus, like Tom, Mehmet, and Fred, Sisi experienced strong personal-career norms urging him to apply his educational expertise; yet unlike these U.S.-educated drivers, his credential was *inapplicable* due to institutional laws and rules regarding credentials. Importantly, Sisi’s immigrant friendship network *and* his familial commitments (he had two children) also rendered his personal career-norms relatively *inaccessible*, but these family- and network-structured mechanisms are, respectively, better elucidated through the cases of Hadi and Pedro.

#### ***Family Commitments and the Accessibility Mechanism***

Hadi’s case reveals how familial interactions and commitments can structure the chronic *accessibility* of different kinds of cultural knowledge, effectively moderating (attenuating) the behavioral effect of personal career-norms. Hadi was in his late 20s and had emigrated to the U.S. from a country in North Africa where he had attained an undergraduate degree in the food sciences. He had been driving for Uber for roughly six months, but only part-time for roughly 15 hours per week; he worked 40 hours per week in the northern part of Boston, at a job which had nothing to do with his educational training. Given that he would commute to work every day, he typically drive with Uber on his way to work to supplement his income; yet at other times, he drove more dedicatedly). Similarly to Sisi, Hadi held personal career-norms involving the types of work most normal to his educational background, but this cultural knowledge was *latent*; it was only on my suggestion that he described his long-term goal to work in food safety. Indeed, he was contemplating leaving his current job and working full-time with Uber because he did not like his current boss. Having been in the U.S. for only two years and having two children while in his late 20s, it was quite clear that Hadi’s family constituted his core (or focal) network.

Family resurfaced repeatedly throughout our conversation: “my wife and I love this country and the opportunities it creates like Uber, you know for extra money for things we need like for the kids.” Hadi’s family occupied his time leaving scope for interacting substantially with non-family members. This was partly due to his recent arrival in the U.S. which gave him little time to assimilate more fully. When asked how he spends his leisure time and with whom he predominantly interacts, Hadi responded: “I just go home after work and spend time with my family.” Thus, overall, Hadi’s interactions were mostly confined to his family, providing little scope<sup>305</sup> for activating personal career-norms tied to his educational training.

### ***Personal Career-Norm Inapplicability and Inaccessibility***

The case of Pedro illustrates more clearly how both the *inapplicability* and *inaccessibility* of cultural knowledge can mediate (attenuate) the influence of personal-career norms on action. Pedro was in his mid-30s and received a college degree from his country-of-origin (in South America) almost a decade ago and had been driving for Uber for the past three years. While Pedro was somewhat quick to emphasize that he was college-educated, suggesting he valued his educational background, compared to Sisi, he showed *far less* personal concern with applying his education credentials directly in the labor market. I attribute this mainly to the fact that over his three years with Uber, Pedro had built a friendship network around Uber drivers, partly on the basis of various bonuses that Uber provides its workers for referring their contacts to Uber. In describing his experience with Uber, the conversation quickly shifted to how many friends he has who also drive for Uber: “I’ve many friends who drive for Uber. And I bring new ones to join. This guy who just called me now [he had gotten a call during our interview which he did not pick up], he’s calling to get advice about how to manage things with Uber,

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<sup>305</sup> It should be noted that given that Hadi was from an Arab country and my name is Arab-sounding, Hadi and I soon started to converse in Arabic which helped establish some rapport. While we did not discuss religion, a religious symbol in his car suggested his Muslim faith. This may also have contributed to his focus on family (see Ellison et al. 2010 on how religious and familiar practices can reinforce each other), although I did not investigate the matter to any sufficient depth.

how to avoid traffic, when to drive...I invited my friend from Canada to join. Same with another from here in MA. I taught him how to do it.”

In somewhat of an uncomfortable conversational moment, I indirectly undermined Pedro’s emphasis on how happy he was driving for Uber by pointing out that he was not directly applying his college credentials. I first asked a very open-ended question about his undergraduate experience to see if he would relate it in any way to his current work; when he did not make that connection, instead digressing into a conversational tangent, I followed up with a much more direct question: “do you feel you are applying your undergraduate degree in business in anyway today?” Pedro had a friendly conversational style, but his facial expression and tone when responding to my question was a bit dismissive: “you know, I don’t know buddy, I like what I am doing. I did work a 9 to 5... like professional job back home. But, you know, who knows what will happen, but this is pretty good now. Uber’s good work and my friends who are trying it think that also.”

In my conversation with Pedro, it became increasingly clear that, at least in the present, his college background bore little weight in his everyday experience with Uber and in his plans. I attribute this both to *knowledge-activation* and *-applicability* mechanisms, but I will focus on the former since Sisi’s case elucidates the latter. A substantial number of Pedro’s friends were also college-educated immigrants, also working as Uber drivers *or* in comparable service-sector jobs that also did not require college degrees. The upshot was that Pedro scantily experienced the kind of procedural or conceptual priming that would activate personal career-norms tied to applying his formal-educational skills to his work. Another interpretation is that he increasingly developed a sense of the type of work that is normal to his circumstance based on his observations of the actions of others in similar social positions to him; that is, observational norms came to out-weigh personal career-norms in behavioral influence.

For Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro, the effects of personal career-norms partly rooted in higher-educational experiences were attenuated by different social processes, substantially shaped by

immigration. None of them expressed short- or medium-term plans to stop driving with Uber. For Sisi, the desire to work as an engineer was strong and even manifested itself in an internship with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation; nonetheless, despite some of his efforts to find work as an engineer, his credentials were institutionally *inapplicable* and over time, his dream of working as an engineer had come to have little practical bearing on his day-to-day life and plans. For Hadi, strong familial commitments confine the scope of his interactions, focusing his attention on providing for his family rather than ensuring consistency between his career values and work. In Pedro's case, working a traditional 9-5 job in the U.S. was not even a "dream deferred"; his social ties were comprised substantially of fellow immigrants with similar educational backgrounds who were also working service-sector jobs (e.g. driving with Uber), creating little scope for regular conceptual or procedural priming involving formal-education, i.e. his personal career-norms were largely *inaccessible*.

### **Comparing the Two Groups of College-Educated Drivers**

Drawing the larger comparison between the two sets of drivers—that is, Tom, Mehmet, and Fred on one hand, and Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro on the other—overall, I found that the degree of *applicability* and *accessibility* of the drivers' personal career-norms differed substantially between the two groups, to the effect that Tom, Mehmet, and Fred were actively seeking mainstream work (i.e. viewing Uber as useful but "not for them") whereas Sisi, Hadi and Fred showed expressed scant interest in leaving Uber at least in the short- and medium-run. Some of the key social processes that attenuated the effect of personal career-norms on action involved the institutional legitimacy ascribed to U.S.- versus foreign-based educational credentials in the U.S. labor market, familial commitments, and friendship networks. Yet, the evidence does not point to such clear-cut conclusions; three qualifications are necessary tied to (1) immigrants with U.S. credentials, (2) familial commitments, and (3) age.

First, Mehmet, who is foreign-born but U.S.-educated (PhD from well-known university in Boston), shared more in common with US-credentialed drivers (i.e. Tom and Fred) than immigrant

drivers (Sisi and Pedro), suggesting that *applicability* mechanisms can at least sometimes override *accessibility* mechanisms. It is also important to recognize that the more *applicable* cultural knowledge is, the more *accessible* it tends to become; that is, through Mehmet's PhD program he met and befriended like-minded researchers which reinforced the accessibility of his personal career-norms. It should also be noted that Mehmet's education (via his PhD program) was likely more rigorous and research-intensive than that of any other drivers, and in this way, he had far more *procedural practice* applying his knowledge than other drivers. As Patterson (2014: 20) notes: "repeated procedural priming and chronic accessibility can, over time, generate new associations in regard to given knowledge structures, leading to new meanings and changes in long-term memory of the knowledge in question...the effects of procedural priming are far more persistent than those from being primed conceptually." Thus, not only was Mehmet's degree more applicable than other drivers, it was also more cognitively accessible given years of procedural training.

Second, while drivers in the first group were mostly in serious relationships (e.g. Mehmet was married with no children, Fred had a girlfriend), only Sisi (engineer) and Hadi (food scientist) were married with children. Of course, familial commitments would be expected to attenuate personal career-norms for both immigrants and non-immigrants; this was validated more generally with respect to other Uber drivers, some of whose cases are described below. Thus, family structure influences cultural knowledge-accessibility mechanisms quite universally, despite its incidental pairing with immigrant drivers above.

Third, no strong *general* conclusions can be drawn about how age moderates the effect of personal career-norms on social action. The first group (Tom, Fred, and Mehmet) range in age from late 20s to late 30s, where as Hadi and Pedro were in their late 20s and early 30s respectively, and Sisi was in his early 50s. Further, on a more theoretical level, the effects of age are unclear. From one perspective, the more time that elapses over the period after which a college-graduate completes their formal-



education, the *cognitive availability* of personal career-norms associated with college might weaken; yet on the other hand, if one's educational credentials are drawn upon substantially over time, then personal career-norms may become even *more cognitively available and accessible* due to repeated procedural priming.

### **How Acute Problem-Situations Can Shift Drivers into Goal-focused Cultural Configurations**

The above findings were centered on *one kind of cultural configuration* that involved *personal career-norms* and demonstrated how particular social conditions (e.g. labor market institutions, network-based interactional cues) and mechanisms (e.g. knowledge-applicability and –accessibility) *specified* the behavioral effects of that cultural configuration; yet, as noted by Patterson (2014), actors often *shift between cultural configurations*, and in this section, I describe how various acute problem-situations that drivers experience trigger them to shift into *goal-focused* cultural configurations. I define *goal-focused* cultural configurations quite restrictively: they entail a deliberate (conscious) cognitive orientation which is self-regulated to attain a well-defined outcome that pertains to a relatively short-time horizon. Five clarifications are needed. First, goal-focused configurations are characterized by a high degree of *self-regulation* (Andersen et al. 2007 in Patterson 2014; see chapter two), particularly the *inhibition* of accessing and applying particular kinds of cultural knowledge which can *distract* actors from attaining their goals. Second, it is important to recognize that actors are generally always oriented to “purposes” with respect to which they are not necessarily conscious; I am defining “goals” as purposes to which actors are *consciously aware* and about which *concrete action-propositions* are made. Third, goal-focused cultural configurations are, of course, extremely varied. For instance, an “outcome” could be a *need* critical to biological survival (e.g. resolving extreme poverty) or it can be a more socially-constructed *interest* (e.g. finding a spouse); such differences have important behavioral implications. Further, they can involve different kinds of declarative and procedural knowledge and be structured around different values and norms. Their defining characteristic is they are *goal-focused* (outcome-

oriented, conscious, concrete). Fourth, *goal-focused* cultural configurations must be *activated* like all kinds of cultural knowledge, but in contemporary modernity actors often (though not always<sup>306</sup>) have experienced extensive procedural priming to that effect (e.g. “studying to the test”). Fifth, based on this conceptualization, most cultural configurations are indeed *non-goal-focused*. For example, expressing wanting to work as an Uber driver *temporarily* or *to make money* does not entail being goal-focused, as both those declarations can be quite abstract. Among the above-described drivers, only Mehmet (PhD from a Boston university) was goal-focused, as he had very concrete plan within which Uber was intended to be a brief component. How, then, do goal-focused cultural configurations figure into the lives of Uber drivers and what social processes underlie why subsets of drivers shift into them? I offer several illustrations, organized around (1) pecuniary (e.g. financial) and (2) non-pecuniary (e.g. physical, recreational) goals.

### **Pecuniary Goals**

Several drivers reported having started driving for Uber shortly after experiencing either a negative income (or wealth) loss or sudden rise in consumption needs. As described above, these pecuniary events could be usefully understood as activating self-regulatory mechanisms that suppressed certain cultural configurations (e.g. long-term career aspirations) so that these drivers could singularly focus on earning enough income through Uber to offset the financial shock.

Wang reported that he started driving with Uber shortly after he experienced an extreme negative shock to his wealth. In his 50s, Wang had run a financially successful business in the Greater Boston area for over a decade (for anonymity I will not specify the business). Yet he reported having recently lost around \$2 million through gambling, a pastime to which he described becoming addicted

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<sup>306</sup> For example, the rise of diagnoses of Attention-Deficit Disorder partly reflects how contemporary social practices (e.g. smartphones) can prime individuals into cultural configurations that are far from goal-focused.

over the years: “I would make lots of money then go play [name of game he played<sup>307</sup>]. I spent all my time on it... and I lost everything because of it...I also gave away most of my business because of it.” He went on to describe how he uses Uber: “I drive maybe 10 hours each day to pay my bills and rent.” Wang described what he experienced as severe depression and noting that now he is focused on just getting out of it: “For long time I was, you know, feeling depression... I lost everything and my family had nothing. So I’m doing this just trying to get some things back for us.”

Many other drivers experienced a rise in consumption needs. Adam was in his late 40s and had been driving for nearly a year in order to pay off recent debt (almost \$200,000) he had taken out in order to finance his children’s college education; his case particularly illustrates how the autonomy (e.g. work-hours flexibility) that Uber affords its drivers weaves into how some drivers organize their lives. Adam was married and alternated between living in Boston and Florida, spending about two weeks in Boston for every one week in Florida. He explained why he organized his life this way: “I make good money [as a sales rep] here in Boston. Like about \$125,000 doing that. But my wife lives in Florida so that’s why I go there about every two weeks.” He would “max out” the hours at the sales job and spend his evenings driving for Uber from 5 to 9pm every night while in Boston to contribute to paying off his children’s student loan debt: “It’s a good way to make extra money. Obviously my other job is good but, I treat that as my day job and Uber as my night job so I can pay off this debt.” Diego was in his mid-40s and had a full-time job as a hotel cook which paid around \$20 dollar per hour; he started driving for Uber soon after his wife had a child because he needed more income to meet their family’s rising costs.

### **Non-pecuniary Goals**

In other cases, drivers are focused on goals with strong non-pecuniary dimensions. Harold, who is in his mid to late 50s, worked two part-time jobs, roughly around 20 hours per week as a windshield repair professional and 20 hours per week as an Uber driver. He described his joining Uber six months ago as

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<sup>307</sup> Again, the game will not be specified to protect anonymity.

based on a desire to diversify his work activities: “They both pay about the same, and I could work more hours in either if I wanted. But when I learned about Uber being an option, it was a great way to just do something different. In my repair job it’s kind of repetitive, you know, and with Uber, it can be tiring sitting all day, so I like to mix it up... so I cut hours there after starting [with Uber]...I’ve been doing repairs for a long time and you get kind of tired of it over time and want to do something different.” Sophia, also drove for Uber part-time; in her other part-time job she did language translation (she spoke Russian). She was married but had no children, and her husband worked in the entertainment industry and traveled frequently. She described driving for Uber purely for recreational purposes: “I don’t really need to do this. My husband makes enough but I like driving around and meeting nice people, like you! So I just do it only for my own pleasure and to see new things and do new things.” Farid also drove for similar reasons. He had a part-time job and was in his early 50s and reported that he inherited a home worth nearly \$400,000 in the Greater Boston area and drive merely to “satisfy [his] curiosity when [he’s] bored.”

### **Tunnel-Vision and Inattention to Situational Subtleties**

Overall, these drivers differed considerably in the problem-situations they faced (e.g. severe gambling loss, rising expenditures, boredom at work), in their social backgrounds (e.g. immigrant status, educational attainment, wealth), and in their available cultural knowledge (e.g. beliefs, skills, values, norms). Yet, their goal-focused cultural configuration tended to level off the effects of their distinctive attributes, creating an important behavioral convergence: *these drivers were far less likely, relative to other drivers, to express grievances about the mundane difficulties oft-associated with Uber.* While many Uber drivers express overall satisfaction with Uber, they nonetheless typically describe (unprompted) both the common benefits (e.g. wages, autonomy) and costs (e.g. depreciation to car, difficult riders) of driving for Uber, often noting that the benefits outweighed the costs. In contrast, while these goal-focused drivers were aware of these issues, they generally paid little attention to the more subtle

aspects of driving for Uber (e.g. back pain, petulant riders) and instead focused on evaluating whether Uber was helping them attain their specific goal. Kevin, the driver who started driving for Uber after a severe gambling loss, demonstrated quite explicitly this disregard for the subtle costs of driving for Uber when asked directly about them: “all work has problems but I am trying to rebuild my family and my life so I’m just driving to make money.” Indeed, these drivers’ experiences with Uber reflected *tunnel-vision* (Mullaianthan and Shafir 2013; see chapter five) that blocked out distractions.

In this sense, these drivers differed dramatically from those of the drivers described in the first section. Many goal-focused drivers also had college degrees, like the drivers described in the first section, yet their educational backgrounds were entirely orthogonal to their Uber experience. We could frame this finding in terms of knowledge-activation theory, by highlighting how various aspects of these drivers’ cultural knowledge (e.g. personal career-norms) were simply *inactivated* by dint of their circumstances, but it is important to be more specific; unlike Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro—all three of whose personal career-norms were inactivated by dint of credentialing systems, familial commitments, and friendship networks—the just-described goal-focused drivers were beset by more *acute* problem-situations, particularly pecuniary ones. These *sudden events* (again, particularly income and consumption shocks) were mostly *unanticipated* and triggered a tunnel-vision which *regulated* (suppressed) distractions, giving these drivers a “just do it” orientation that led them to transcend mundane, detailed evaluations of the Uber experience (e.g. complaints about riders, vehicle depreciation, touting the autonomy it provides). These drivers *necessarily use incomplete cultural knowledge* to problem-solve. In contrast, Sisi, Hadi, and Pedro (described in first section) were quite happy with their Uber experience but nonetheless described its downsides in much greater detail. For these goal-focused drivers the downsides were experienced but rarely expressed because, as I argue, their goal-focused cultural configurations blocked them out. Any gaps between career values and situational dictates were entirely irrelevant.

## **Beliefs about the Labor Market and Conversational Scripts: The Social Construction of Career**

### **Values**

In the above two sections, I first described the effect of personal norms (in relation to career values and situational dictate) on Uber drivers' behaviors, including how that effect is moderated by knowledge-activation mechanisms, and then described how new problem-situations (e.g. income shocks) can trigger drivers into shifting into goal-focused cultural configurations which orient them to consciously use Uber for singular purposes out, suppressing most other considerations; in this final section, I illustrate how for many drivers, whether or not they find substantial value in driving for Uber considerably depends on their *beliefs* about the labor market and their *skill* at interacting with riders. In this way, I show how declarative (e.g. beliefs) and procedural (e.g. scripts) kinds of cultural knowledge can influence evaluative knowledge (e.g. values). This section highlights how social-biographical experiences can *alter* values about careers and work. I proceed in three sections: (1) I describe how the formation of beliefs about mainstream work (e.g. taxicab industry's rentier practices) can strengthen the weight (i.e. *salience*) that the value of autonomy carries for Uber drivers in how they evaluate their Uber experience; (2) I briefly illustrate how conversational scripts that poorly fit the situational dictates of interacting with Uber riders can make the autonomy that inheres to driver-rider interactions a *negative value* for some Uber drivers; and (3) I conclude with remarks about group-level processes underlying beliefs about the labor market and conversational scripts.

### **The Formation of Beliefs about the Mainstream Work and the Value of Autonomy**

While nearly all workers valued the "autonomy" that Uber afforded them—that is, the ability to choose one's work-hours and the sense of not having a boss—the value-*salience* (Patterson 2014) attributed to this non-pecuniary benefit was especially high among Uber drivers with extensive labor market histories either abroad or in the U.S. For my purposes, highlighting how labor market experiences *in the U.S.* shaped Uber drivers' beliefs about work is useful for the following reason: I generally observed that

immigrant Uber drivers who had recently moved to the U.S. strongly tended to focus on the *pecuniary* benefits of driving for Uber; as noted above, they could earn roughly \$20 per hour (in Boston and excluding expenses) nearly any time they would like. Similarly, non-immigrant drivers with U.S.-based college degrees also tended to emphasize this pecuniary dimension. It was immigrant drivers across all formal-educational backgrounds who had by far the strongest tendency to describe *autonomy* (a non-pecuniary benefit) as *positively critical* to their Uber experience. These workers had experienced a variety of U.S. based jobs—mostly in the low-to-middle wage service sector (e.g. taxicab drivers)—prior to joining Uber, and their *beliefs* about the work conditions “out there” were *formed* through those experiences. Importantly, those beliefs shaped, as I argue, shaped their work *values*. I provide several illustrations below.

Ronnie reported that he had been working full-time with Uber for the past year, putting in roughly 60-80 hours per week. He immigrated to the U.S. in 2002 from a country in eastern Africa. In his first few years in the U.S. he worked as a limousine driver yet quit in 2005 because he felt he was being cheated financially by the owner of the limousine: “The guy I worked for gave me little. He said it was to pay for insurance. By the end of the week I’d get different amounts different times and he always said the payments were going to insurance. I didn’t understand why this was so.” Ronnie often presented his jobs before Uber as *confusing* and *erratic*. It is likely that Ronnie was simply charged exorbitant fees by the limousine owner (see chapters one and three on rentier practices in the taxicab and limousine industry); while Ronnie seemed to recognize this, he tended to express his frustration as confusion as to why there was a lack of transparency rather than anger. He left limousine-driving for this reason and became a trucker from roughly 2005 to 2016. When I learned about Uber he decided to make the switch, largely because of the physical strains of trucking and the inconsistent wages: “I had to lift heavy things... I would lift pipes, big metals, just hauling pipes a lot. Working for Uber is way better in this way.” He went on to emphasize how inconsistent his wages were as a trucker: “you see, they pay by the

mile. But they give you different miles different weeks. So one week I get 3000 miles, other work I get 2000 miles...I don't know why it's like that, but even if you do get good miles the work is just very tough." When I pressed him on why he could not get "more miles," he said that the truck companies would say they had to be fair to other drivers; it is more likely a practice aimed at keeping wages low through a large supply of truckers. Importantly, when Ronnie described his Uber experience, he did so directly in comparison to his prior jobs: "With Uber, it's you who have the power. I want to drive at 4am no one says nothing. I made \$2000 last one and no one says nothing. With trucking they don't want to give you too many miles. I've no control, no power." He went on to say: "If I have back or shoulder pain, I can stop whenever I want. So it's much easier than trucking." When asked whether he would like to have a more traditional, 9-5pm job, Ronnie brushed the suggestion off as simply irrelevant to him.

A substantial number of Uber drivers had quite similar histories. In the five years that Pedro had been in the U.S. (described above; college-educated immigrant), he worked at a restaurant cooking barbecued food in his first year, and after that he did seasonal construction jobs (e.g. roofing) before switching to Uber full-time three years ago: "You see, its [Uber] a life-saver for me, before I'd work restaurants, at building sites. One thing about my last job...the pay was good. Like \$35 per hour sometimes...But the people you deal with. The work is tiring and they give almost no breaks. It makes you crazy." Pedro did not like his 9 to 5 job back in his country-of-origin, and described how he dreamt about driving for Uber even before immigrating to the U.S.: "you're not going to believe me, but before I came here [from his country-of-origin] I watched videos of driving for Uber on Youtube and I dreamed to do it... I love the freedom of driving ...it's nice to not have a boss... I love being outside like this, talking to people, I like to be free... and it helps me learn better English. Actually I'm taking an English class now." Amir, who had worked for Uber for around two years, immigrated to the U.S. twenty years prior in various service jobs. He was delivering pizza for six years before joining Uber but described the work conditions as distressing: "delivering pizza can be very hard. It rains on you, sometimes you work when



it's extremely cold and snowing, and people make you wait for them in the car when something heating isn't working. My boss would make me clean the shop which was just so bad sometimes...I really Uber. If I do good then they give me a five star rating. That feels good you know. The pay is regular and I work when I want." Like Amir, Jamal described 9-year work as a car mechanic as physically draining (due to the cold) and inconsiderate boss: "it's simple. I don't have to deal with shitty bosses, its better money, and I work when I want." Fabiola emigrated to the U.S. twenty years ago from a Caribbean country, and had been working with Uber for about a year and a half. For most of her life in the U.S. she worked at a hospice where the work-hours were sometimes inconsistent, so she smoothed her income by also working as a taxicab driver. Yet, hospice work was also physically draining, especially after stomach pain she was having and for which she underwent surgery: "my back had always hurt me from cleaning work and so Uber is much better now." She also described her relative preference for driving with Uber over taxi-driving: "With taxi there was so much rules. Uber is simpler for me and I work when I want." When asked about the wages, she reported that she earned roughly the same as a taxi driver versus Uber driver, but that overall she believed Uber was increasingly attracting more passengers. Most importantly, for Fabiola, Uber afforded her the opportunity to consolidate her work-income to the effect that she could concentrate on one, full-time job: "it's much simpler for me working one job than doing this and that and switching from here to there."

### **Conversational Scripts and Enjoyment**

Finally, the case of Jafar demonstrates how conversational scripts, particularly the extent to which these scripts functionally fit with the situational dictates of rider-driver interactions, can shape the extent to which a driver enjoys the Uber experience. The key behavioral mechanism here is simple: humans have a tendency to like activities with respect to which they perform well. Inasmuch as this is true, procedural and evaluative cultural knowledge are intertwined. Jafar is an immigrant to the U.S. (he would not indicate his country-of-origin) who expressed strong dissatisfaction with driving for Uber, largely on the

basis that he seemed to abhor interacting with riders, a considerable number of whom he considered obnoxious and inconsiderate: “many of these riders don’t realize this is my personal car, not Uber’s, and so they sit in the car like they own it. They complain about everything. They’re very loud, slam the doors, tell me how I should drive.” He went on to describe how he often does not want to talk to riders: “They often talk on and on you know. I’m not saying you do, this is fine, but I don’t always want to talk with them.” Jafar reported he was arranging to find other work, despite the fact that Uber paid well: “I can make very good money with Uber, but it’s just not worth it given the way riders treat you. So I’m not doing this for long.”

In understanding Jafar’s experiences, it is important to recognize that interviewee’s description of their experiences and driver-rider interactional events cannot simply be assumed to be consistent (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). For two reasons, I attribute Jafar’s disdain for rider-interactions partly to Jafar not having available to him the conversational scripts (e.g. cultural capital<sup>308</sup>) needed to engage successfully in driver-rider interactions: (1) the majority of Uber drivers I interviewed reported that overall interactions with riders were at least tolerable and that only occasionally were riders outwardly petulant, and (2) Jafar’s conversational style was aggressive and reflected an irritability likely to generate conversational tension with his interlocutors. Conversational scripts do not *only* entail having facility with “sequences of words”, but also knowing how to interpret interlocutors’ words and actions to useful ends (e.g. conversational patience).

### **Group-level Processes Underlying Beliefs about the Labor Market and the Distribution of Conversational Scripts**

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<sup>308</sup> Of course, Bourdieu’s construct of “cultural capital” presupposed a hierarchical symbolic order in which cultural capital was possessed by higher-class groups. Cultural capital can be understood in a more delimited sense, as is common among micro-interactional relational sociologists (e.g. Lizardo 2006), where it is applicable in more “socially delimited settings” (Collins 1975). In this interpretation, knowing how to communicate effectively with riders *is* a form of cultural capital specific to the interaction; that is, cultural capital need not be “validated by centers of cultural authority” (Mohr and DiMaggio 1995: 168).

Concluding this section on how labor market beliefs and conversational scripts shape drivers' career values, it is important to connect these processes to arguably derivative, higher-level social processes. I offer some brief remarks on these relationships below.

With respect to the formation of fairly negative beliefs about the labor market, this is best understood as a phenomenon specific to low-wage jobs with severe work conditions. For example, a substantial number of Uber drivers worked formerly in the taxicab or limousine industry, and these drivers' evaluations of Uber were constructed in direct comparison with their other transportation jobs. That is, all else equal, drivers who reported negative experiences in other jobs were more likely to favor their Uber experience. Thus, it is critical to interpret survey-based reports of drivers' satisfaction with Uber in *comparative* rather than absolute terms; that 78 percent of Uber drivers are "satisfied with their experience driving on the Uber platform" (Benenson Strategy Group 2015; see chapter one) reveals as much about working for Uber as it does about the alternative work arrangements available to most Uber drivers in the U.S. More broadly, to the extent that relations between Uber and its drivers—including wage adjustments aimed at balancing the supply of drivers with given demand—depend on current drivers' satisfaction, these management-driver relations are strongly dependent on the social-organization of work and its political-economic dimensions.

Immigration constitutes another important higher-level social process tied to beliefs about labor markets that is critical to understanding how workers evaluate their Uber experiences. The majority of Uber drivers I interviewed in Boston were immigrants, and while in many ways the most relevant beliefs about labor markets that they held were formed anew in the U.S. (i.e. post-immigration), many of these drivers' beliefs and ideologies about work were partly based on their country-of-origin labor market experiences, especially among recent immigrants. Hadi (described above; college-educated in the food sciences), who immigrated to the U.S. just two years ago, described that he felt grateful for being in the U.S. partly because work conditions in his country-of-origin (North African Arab country) were quite

difficult: “All work can be hard but I do much better than Uber than I would with work back in [country-of-origin]. There’s less corruption in America, people drive much better, the pay is better, just life is easier.” Thus, declarative cultural knowledge relevant to evaluations of Uber are not limited to beliefs about labor markets but also broader beliefs about political-economic ecologies and arguably ideologies about how to succeed. This finding among immigrant drivers was quite striking and consistent. It is consistent with Dominguez (2011) finding that Latin-American immigrant women in the U.S. often feel greatly inspired by memories of the migratory sacrifices their parents made as well as their knowledge of the limited opportunities for social mobility in their countries of origin.

Overall, these social experiences, both in low-wage jobs in the U.S. and in the countries-of-origin of immigrant drivers, strongly shaped the *value-direction* and *salience* that drivers associated with Uber, particularly the relatively *autonomy* that working for Uber entails. As noted above, nearly all Uber drivers remarked on the pecuniary aspects of Uber-driving; but it was mainly the drivers who had extensive (negative) labor market histories that described Uber in terms of “power,” “control,” and “freedom.” The beliefs they formed about the kinds of work opportunities available to them (e.g. rentier practices in the taxicab industry, inconsiderate bosses, contingent work-hours) in the U.S. and abroad increased how much they valued the autonomy Uber provided. When asked whether they expected to return to their prior jobs (or similar ones) at some point, these workers were most likely to dismiss the possibility as outside the scope of their considerations; in a sense, on-demand work had become their “new normal.” This was especially the case for workers who had been driving with Uber for several years. This is likely at least partly due to the tendencies of workers to increasingly become habituated in the procedural skills required by their current work-situation (i.e. procedural priming), to the “detriment” of *not* developing other skills that may be more useful in mainstream labor markets, such as willingness to work under the direct authority of a supervisor or boss. This mechanism may also partly underlie the widely-document negative effect of long unemployment spells on lifetime earnings (cf.

Brand 2015), among other factors (e.g. negative signals to employers). More generally, such procedural-priming may also make it difficult for those who have worked extensively in informal labor markets to shift into formal-sector jobs (e.g. see chapter five's brief review of the coping-strategies developed by Jamaican black street vendors regarding credit; Brown-Gaulde 2011).

With respect to conversational scripts, it would be a mistake to interpret Jafar's conversational script as rooted in narrow conceptions of class or the general experience of immigration. With respect to class, in Bourdieu's formulation, Jafar's conversational scripts are a component of a habitus formed on the basis of class-structured field interactions. While this formulation has elements of usefulness, it fails to account for the many lower-class Uber drivers whose conversational scripts *do* fit the situational dictates of driver-rider interactions. With respect to immigration, the majority of immigrant Uber drivers experienced no conversational impediment to interacting successfully with riders. Due to language barriers, they sometimes maintained a strictly transactional conversational tone, but only rarely did they disfavor these interactions as Jafar did. It is not particularly useful to make strong statements about the social underpinnings of Jafar's mal-adaptive conversational script based on the limited data I collected on this question, but it may very well have been acquired and adapted to the ecological-conversational interactions he experienced in his country-of-origin. It is likely that "kinds" of conversational scripts and their distributions vary substantially across countries, which would merit further research into within-immigrant variations in conversational scripts in relation to rider-driver conversational success.

## **DISCUSSION**

This chapter has aimed to understand the social processes that underlie how Uber drivers cope with social-situational displacement into on-demand work, particularly focusing on how "habits" shaped their social experiences and actions. I argued, from a classical pragmatist position, that habits are most clearly understood in terms of their effects, and since habits are largely culturally grounded, it is more useful to

understand habits as<sup>309</sup> cultural configurations (Patterson 2014), which not only defines different kinds of cultural knowledge with different effects but also specifies the concrete social-psychological mechanisms through which these kinds of knowledge becomes cognitively acquired and activated. I framed my research question around the empirical literature on how actors cope with social-situational change; this literature shows that different cultural configurations tend to generate different degrees of behavioral success, which I described in terms of *cultural adaption* and (in Bourdieu's terms) *cultural hysteresis*.

Overall, my findings about how different Uber drivers cope with on-demand work demonstrated empirical links between social-ecological processes (e.g. formal-education, social instabilities, labor market developments, immigration) and individual-level action; in this way, I aimed to strike a balance between *meso- and macro-level group processes* and *concrete, micro-level behavior*. Some relational sociologists like Bourdieu (1984; 2000) have tended to bias their analyses toward capturing “structural”-group dynamics (see Emirbayer 2010), whereas other relational sociologists like Collins (2005) and Zelizer (2015) bias their analysis toward concrete “micro-interactional” dynamics (see Fine 2005). As described in chapter two, I have sought a pragmatist medium between these relational-sociological approaches. I traced behavioral differences to group-level heterogeneity in cultural configurations by, for example, showing how college-educated drivers held stronger personal-career norms than non-college educated drivers; yet I grounded these differences in concrete mechanisms by showing how, for example, these personal career-norms tended to be *inactivated* for drivers in specific social-situations (e.g. lacked credential-equivalency, strong familial commitments, particular friendship networks). Inattention to group-level processes would have obscured the relationship between personal experience and social relations (Mills 1959); inattention to concrete mechanisms help avoid crude

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<sup>309</sup> Of course, as noted in chapter two, in a broader sense habits are comprised of both cultural knowledge *and* idiosyncratic knowledge, the latter being the component that captures knowledge that cannot be traced directly to shared forms of knowledge.

generalizations (see chapter two) such as Beck's (1992; 2000) individualization thesis or Marxian-historicist universalist claims about a class-in-the-making "precariat" (Standing 2011).

I discuss my findings in two sections, providing (1) inferences about key social mechanisms; (2) suggestions for future research. In the first section, I describing three social mechanisms, identifying their internal sequential logics and specifying empirical and theoretical implications and qualifications. In the second section, I identify five limitations to this research and remark on how future research can enrich these findings.

### **Inferences about How Uber Drivers Cope with On-Demand Work**

Based on my findings, three social mechanisms can be inferred. As I did in chapter three, I follow Gross' (2009) pragmatist definition<sup>310</sup> of social mechanisms which is organized around social practices, temporality, causal mediation, having some degree of generality, as well as being analytically reducible to lower levels of complexity. These three mechanisms connect (1) mainstream formal-education, personal-career norms, and behavioral hysteresis in the on-demand economy, (2) the privatization of household risk and shifts into goal-focused cultural configurations, and (3) labor market developments, worker-evaluations of Uber, and character-forming effects.

#### **Social Mechanism #1: Mainstream Formal-Education, Personal-Career Norms, and Hysteresis in the On-Demand Economy**

Drivers with U.S.-based undergraduate or post-graduate degrees tended to hold personal career-norms that impelled them toward using Uber to search for work opportunities through which they could apply their formal-educational skills, namely mainstream work and entrepreneurship. Yet, for a substantial segment of college-educated drivers, the effects of these personal career-norms on behavior was

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<sup>310</sup> Gross (2009: 364) defines a social mechanism as: "a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which –in certain circumstances—some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations. This sequence or set may or may not be analytically reducible to the actions of individuals who enact it, may underwrite formal or substantive causal processes, and may be observed, unobserved, or in principle unobservable."

*attenuated* by various social-ecological processes, which can be broadly categorized into two types involving knowledge-*applicability* and –*accessibility* mechanisms. First, drivers with education credentials from *foreign universities* also held personal career-norms about applying their educational credentials to their work *but* these personal norms were often *inapplicable* in the U.S. labor market given its institutional rules regarding credential-equivalency. Second, other drivers' personal-career norms were inactivated because they were relatively *inaccessible*; these drivers' social relationships were structured in ways (e.g. strong familial focus, immigrant friendship networks) that tended to preclude interactions with individuals whose educational credentials were directly pertinent to their work. Given that college-educated Uber drivers tend to be immigrants rather than not, these knowledge-inaccessibility mechanisms were mainly observed among college-educated immigrants, but there is no theoretical basis for these mechanisms not being relevant to non-immigrants. On the basis of this finding, we can infer the following social mechanism as critical to understanding the behavior of college-educated on-demand workers under certain conditions:

Formal-educational institutions → (causing) graduates to favor work that necessitates their educational training or credentials over work that does not → (causing) personal career-norms form to create consistency between these career values and work-situations → (causing) these personal career-norms are activated when (1) educational-credentials are generally applicable in the labor market *and/or* (2) the content of an actor's social ties is substantially comprised of persons whose educational credentials are interpreted as being necessary to their work → (causing) college-graduates—working in jobs which (1) require low-skills and (2) entail a high degree of autonomy that affords workers that opportunity to control their schedules—will use such relatively high-autonomy work to explore work opportunities that allow them to apply their credentials in some way → (causing) these workers to sometimes experience successful transitions to the jobs they desire or to experience a kind of behavioral hysteresis resulting in working fewer hours, lost income (or worker-productivity) potential, and likely other negative outcomes (e.g. negative stress), depending on (1) the workers' credentials and skills and (2) labor market demand for those credentials and skills.

Notwithstanding that not all formal-educational institutions will inculcate in their graduates a lasting desire to apply their educational credentials and skills to their work, this above-described social mechanism has important implications. On the most general level, insofar as the skills that students acquire in college are weakly demanded in the labor market, then college-educated on-demand workers



are more likely to experience behavioral hysteresis than successful outcomes by dint of their personal career-norms. This consequence will be amplified with the occurrence of any of the following trends: (1) expansion in college education (especially for-profit colleges), (2) growth in high-skill jobs outpacing growth in skill-training (i.e. skill-biased technology); (3) the on-demand economy attracts more college-educated workers (47.7 percent of Uber drivers were college-educated in 2015), and (4) the on-demand economy grows, all three trends of which are quite plausible if not likely. Yet, several social processes could disrupt this effect. First, if the on-demand economy is re-organized to provide *less autonomy* to workers that it currently provides—for example, if Uber’s drivers are scheduled into fixed driving hours with guaranteed wages, as some union-supporting drivers have demanded—then it is likely that college-educated drivers will have less scope to use Uber for work-exploration; this would reduce the successful use of Uber for workers transitioning between work opportunities *and* incidents of behavioral hysteresis. Second, various social-ecological developments could preclude the *activation* of these college-based personal career-norms, including growth in families with children which could preoccupy workers with practical familial exigencies, rises in immigration, among other possible developments. Third, growth in vocational schools may attract greater proportions of high school students, creating different kinds of personal-career norms.

On a theoretical level, it is important to recognize that the experience of holding career values that are inconsonant with one’s work-situation can be understood using different conceptual frameworks including role-sets and role-conflict (Merton 1957), multiple selves (Goffman 1959), multiple subjectivities (McNay 1999), hybrid habituses (Decoteau 2013); but none of these tools help us understand why *some* college-educated drivers experienced hysteresis while others did not. Rather, it is the theoretical pairing of cultural configurations and knowledge-activation theory that allows for explanations that specify when, to use Merton’s (1957) framework, role-conflict occurs and when it does not.

## Social Mechanism #2: The Privatization of Household Risk and Shifts into Goal-Focused Cultural

### Configurations

Uber drivers who experienced acute problem-situations—such as negative income shocks (e.g. gambling losses) or sudden increases in consumption needs (e.g. new child dependent) and non-pecuniary events such as boredom due to routinized work—shifted into what I described as *goal-focused* cultural configurations, which entail a self-regulated deliberate (conscious) cognitive orientation toward attaining a well-defined outcome that pertains to a relatively short-time horizon. It would be mistaken to understand goal-focused cultural configurations as ubiquitous; while contemporary modern institutions provide ample procedural priming for goal-focused cultural configurations (e.g. “studying to the test”), based on my restrictive definition of “goal-focused” behavior, most social action is best characterized as non-goal-focused. Indeed, goal-focused cultural configurations have specific behavioral effects; they inhibit actors from accessing and applying knowledge that would distract them from their concretely-specified goals. I observed that drivers who joined the Uber platform because of the onset of acute problem-situations (e.g. income loss)—as opposed to those who joined it for broader purposes such as highly valuing the autonomy it affords or as a way to search for mainstream work—tended to be *inattentive* to the subtle costs and benefits to driving with Uber and exhibited what could be described as tunnel-vision behavior (see Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; discussed in chapter five). These goal-focused drivers, despite their heterogeneity in terms of the problem-situations they faced and their social backgrounds (e.g. education), all tended to be less likely to *express grievances about the mundane difficulties oft-associated with Uber*. Those who were driving with Uber for strictly pecuniary goals also tended to pay little attention to the non-pecuniary benefits of driving with Uber (e.g. autonomy). Most importantly, the more the acute problem-situation was *sudden and unanticipated*, the more drivers tended to shift into goal-focused cultural configurations. Based on this finding, we can infer the

following social mechanism as critical to understanding how workers who join the on-demand economy due to being beset by sudden (arguably unanticipated) problem-situations behave:

Unanticipated problem-situations (e.g. income loss, new expenditure) → (causing) workers to join the on-demand platforms like Uber as service-providers → (causing) workers to evaluate *only* the pecuniary and/or non-pecuniary dimensions *specific to their goal* while providing scant attention to other experiential dimensions

This mechanism has several implications, two of which involve (1) procedural and conceptual priming and (2) rising “social instabilities” tied to the privatization of household risk. First, insofar as inattentiveness toward the subtle pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs of driving for Uber (e.g. vehicle depreciation, skilling opportunity costs, physical strain) results in a greater personal capacity to drive with Uber for longer, rather than shorter, periods, then it follows that drivers who perform on on-demand work as the result of an acute (usually unanticipated) problem-situation will be especially affected by the *procedural* priming entailed in driving with Uber, including improved conversational skills, improved verbal English for non-native speakers, greater physical and emotional resilience, as well as an “on-demand worker habitus” characterized by particular tastes for interpersonal interaction, travel, cleanliness, etc. It could also entail greater *conceptual* (declarative-knowledge) priming including exposure to new beliefs and ideologies through driver-rider conversations, discovery of new city areas, etc. Inasmuch as declarative and procedural cultural knowledge can shape evaluative knowledge (e.g. values), the repeated practice of goal-focused cultural-orientations over long durations may result in the formation of new cultural configurations. Second, to the extent the above mechanism is operative, then it follows that macro- and meso-level social-ecological changes that tend to generate “social instabilities” will accentuate this social mechanism’s importance. As described in the introduction to this chapter, the privatization of household risk—what Hacker (2006) describes as “the great risk shift”—has generated greater “instabilities.” Household economic insecurity has spread up the income distribution

since roughly the 1970s (Hacker 2006; Western et al. 2012<sup>311</sup>). This trend *partly* parallels rises in income volatility<sup>312</sup> (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994; 2009) as well as the institutional weakening of social-insurance mechanisms<sup>313</sup> to protect against such volatility. Further, as discussed in chapter one, the restructuring of work-organization—including rises in employment instability (Farber 2008<sup>314</sup>; Hollister 2011), increased job switching<sup>315</sup> (Steward 2002), increased occupational displacement<sup>316</sup> (Kambourov and Manovskii 2008), and the generalizing of job insecurity to higher-skilled occupations<sup>317</sup> (Chan 2013; Brooks 2012)—has further heightened social instabilities. Thus, this “risk shift” can plausibly be interpreted as heightening incidents of unanticipated social-situational change, which could suggest

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<sup>311</sup> It should be noted that Western et al. (2012) find that among low-income households economic insecurity has especially increased. However, many have argued that studies revealing rising economic insecurity are fraught with measurement problems (Winship 2009). Yet rises in income volatility (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994; 2009) are less controversial.

<sup>312</sup> Rising income volatility, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, seems to have especially been concentrated especially within the low-wage labor market (Gottschalk and Moffitt 1994). This income volatility explained roughly half of the increase in cross-sectional income inequality during this time. The increase in the early 1990s was steadier and increasingly concentrated among higher-education groups). There was also a large increase in the early 2000s.

<sup>313</sup> As Hacker (2006) argued in *The Great Risk Shift*, since the 1970s broad structural and institutional developments have resulted in the eroding of public and private support systems and the shifting of a variety of economic risks (e.g. costs associated with job loss and adverse health events) onto private workers and families.

<sup>314</sup> Farber (2008) examined data on the job durations of 876,063 workers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Displaced Workers Survey and found that declines in job tenure were particularly strong among men in the private sector. Evidence of short-term churning is weaker (Farber 2009), but short-term instability rates seemed to increase specifically among low-skilled men in the early 1980s. However, Cappelli (2001) has argued that only a small percentage (~10%) of private sector firms have ever been able to provide long-term employment to their workers, and that most firms have always had unstable employment, which counters the argument that declining long-term job tenure is a significant phenomenon.

<sup>315</sup> Focusing on employment transitions, Steward (2002) found that in the 1990s job switching increased (unclear if voluntary or involuntary) and employment-to-unemployment decreased due to economic growth.

<sup>316</sup> Kambourov and Manovskii (2008) showed that occupational switches have increased especially among young and private-sector workers.

<sup>317</sup> Chan (2013) does find that job insecurity is still mostly centered in low-skilled jobs, despite the generalizing of this trend to higher-skill jobs.

individuals shifting increasingly into goal-focused cultural configurations and their accompanying cultural and behavioral consequences.

On a theoretical level, it is important to emphasize that the most distinctive characteristic of goal-focused cultural configurations is the self-regulated suppression of non-relevant cultural knowledge; indeed, they *necessarily* entail the use of *very* limited (i.e. largely incomplete) *cultural knowledge*. It is because they are based on *specific* goals that *what is non-relevant is quite expansive*. This neatly builds on Muller et al.'s (2015) two-sided analogy of social action to mapmaking: (1) like mapmakers, actors necessarily use incomplete knowledge to problem-solve; and (2) also paralleling mapmakers, they revise cultural knowledge ("habits," in their words) when that knowledge fails to result in favorable outcomes (e.g. mapmakers will change their map depending on the purpose). The second component is a core pragmatist tenet that is central to the pragmatist action theory framed in chapter two; it strikes me as effectively universally applicable. Yet, with respect to their point about the necessary use of incomplete knowledge, it is important to build off this conceptual framing to specify *to what degree* different actors in different circumstances will use *incomplete cultural knowledge* to problem-solve. Put differently, on the basis that maps or the use of cultural knowledge is always necessarily incomplete, a useful question to ask is: *how much* (and which) *of an actor's cultural knowledge* will be put to use under specified conditions? Importantly, "put to use" entails the kind and range of social phenomena on which the actor will cognitively focus. In somewhat of a stylized argument, I propose that goal-focused cultural configurations orient actors to draw on an *extremely* limited range of cultural knowledge to the effect that they cognitively focus on effectively nothing that is not pertinent to their goal. Thus, those who experience unanticipated problem-situations are mapmakers using *simpler* maps than most.

### **Social Mechanism #3: Labor Market Developments, Worker-Evaluations of Uber, and Character-Forming Effects**

Uber drivers' beliefs about labor market conditions and their conversational scripts shape *which* aspects of driving for Uber they favor and disfavor (e.g. wages, autonomy, conversations) and *how much* they favor/disfavor those aspects; that is, more generally, declarative and procedural knowledge can shape evaluative knowledge (e.g. values). I found that while nearly all drivers valued the pecuniary benefits of being on the Uber platform, how drivers evaluated Uber's *non-pecuniary* aspects of Uber differed. Above, I highlighted how goal-focused cultural configurations can orient drivers to evaluate only particular aspects of their Uber experience (i.e. those phenomena pertaining to their goals); yet I also observed that drivers who had (1) formed negative beliefs about work-conditions in mainstream labor markets (e.g. rentier practices in taxicab industry), (2) immigrated to the U.S. and believed that opportunities in their country-of-origin were relatively bleak (e.g. low wages, corruption), and (3) possessed the conversational scripts to interact pleasurably (or not distastefully) with riders, tended to attach high value-salience to the non-pecuniary aspects of driving with Uber, particularly the autonomy it provides. While mostly immigrants, these drivers were quite socially diverse in terms of age, education, and countries-of-origin.

It is useful to contrast these drivers (i.e. bleak beliefs about labor market) to those (1) who, due to being beset by unanticipated problem-situations (e.g. income downswing), had shifted into goal-focused cultural configurations, and (2) who held strong personal career-norms about the types of work that fit their backgrounds (i.e. college-educated backgrounds) and those. With respect to the first group, they (i.e. typically-immigrant drivers with negative beliefs about labor market opportunities) realized much *broader* value through on-demand work; that is, they noticed and evaluated the *varied* dimensions of their Uber experience. With respect to the second group, these drivers realized much *deeper* value through on-demand work; that is, they were much more "cognitively present" and introspective about how Uber fits into their life.

Overall, based on these findings on the relationship between beliefs and conversational scripts and actors' particularized values, we can infer the following social mechanism as critical to understanding how workers' beliefs about their opportunities in the U.S. (and in some cases, their countries of origin) and their conversational scripts figure into their experiences with on-demand work:

Negative mainstream labor market experiences (especially low-wage jobs), negative living and work experiences in countries-of-origin (for immigrants), and/or conversational experiences conducive to acquiring conversational skills requisite for successful driver-rider interactions → (causing) formation of negative beliefs about work opportunities that are alternatives to Uber and/or functional conversational scripts → (causing) drivers to value *deeply* a *range* of pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits available through driving with Uber → (causing) these drivers to prolong the duration of their experience with Uber

This mechanism has several implications involving: (1) trends in the social-organization of work and labor markets and (2) "character-forming" effects on drivers. First, as chapter three described quite generally, the poisedness of the U.S. to the emergence of the on-demand economy was critically tied to various labor market developments in the U.S. since the 1970s—including rises in employment instability (Farber 2008; Hollister 2011), growing polarization in job quality (Kalleberg 2011), degradation of work conditions in the taxicab and limousine industry (i.e. poorly adapted regulatory structure, rentier practices, etc.)—developments which generally attenuated workers' attachment to traditional employment relations and thus reduced the relative costs of switching to Uber. The above-described social mechanism adds qualitative concreteness to this relationship. These labor market developments were directly experienced by many of the Uber drivers I interviewed, shaping their beliefs about the kinds of work that tend to be available, and these beliefs, in turn, shaped how they evaluate their Uber experience. Thus, social scientists cannot usefully evaluate the normative dimensions of the on-demand economy absent comparisons to the work-alternatives typically available to Uber drivers, particularly with respect to the kinds of workers who have experienced the brunt of the re-organization of work in the past several decades. Further, we can expect that to the extent that mainstream work conditions deteriorate, the on-demand economy will continue to attract *and retain* the kinds of workers who

typically sort into jobs with degraded work conditions (among other kinds of workers). Second, with respect to “character-forming effects” for drivers, it is important to recognize that these drivers (i.e. those with negative beliefs about the labor market) tended to express greater satisfaction with their Uber experience relative to other drivers. Indeed, the upshot of this *greater breadth and depth* (see above) of experience with Uber could be described as having both *material* and *ideational* dimensions: these drivers were much more likely to work longer hours with Uber and earn more income because of that (material upshot), just as they were more likely to organize their lives and plans for the future around their Uber experience (ideational upshot). Thus, these drivers were by far the most likely to experience on-demand work as a *new normal*, in ways that, as chapter five examines, shaped their creative planning.

## **Future Research**

These findings and inferences suggest several fruitful lines of inquiry for future research, particularly based on observations of workers over time and observations of a broader range of drivers.

First, all the above inferences are restricted to workers with *a particular set of attributes that led them to join the Uber platform*. Do these social mechanisms involving the *effects* of (1) personal-career norms, (2) acute problem-situations (e.g. income losses), and (3) beliefs about the labor market and conversational scripts hold for individuals who lack these *situation-selecting* attributes? While my Boston Uber-driver interviewees were highly socially heterogeneous, more generalized inferences would require collecting data on workers *not driving for Uber* and examining how and to what extent these mechanisms are operative in their cases.

Second, I argued that college-educated drivers who held strong, knowledge-activated personal career-norms experienced, to different degrees, behavioral “hysteresis” (Bourdieu 2000) or “unspecified attainability” (i.e. weakly known constraints to choices; Winship 2015); yet, I did not observe whether this hysteresis resulted in long-term detrimental outcomes. This would require observing drivers’ life



outcomes over *at least* several years. I interpreted Tom's (PhD from a for-profit university) decisions as sub-optimal to his earnings, and noted that Mehmet and Fred (PhD from well-known Boston university and undergraduate degree in biology) also may have been under-investing in Uber; yet I did not provide strong evidence supporting this claim. Such longitudinal data would also help mitigate against errors associated with retrospective interview-based data.

Third, studies that investigate a broader range of between-group differences could be insightful. For example, among immigrants, I did not consider differences in countries-of-origin (e.g. labor market differences, living standards, etc.); yet, it follows based on my finding regarding how beliefs shape values that these such within-immigrants differences and others (e.g. cross-national differences in ideology and work-life narratives) are important. Similarly important are differences between formal-educational institutions in the kinds of career values they inculcate in their graduates regarding the meaning of a college education.

Fourth, values and norms figured strongly in my findings, in terms of their effects (e.g. whether college-educated drivers sought mainstream work) and their causes (e.g. formal-education, labor market histories); yet, I did not examine more complex relationships. For example, I argued that familial commitments dampened the effects of personal career-norms among college-educated drivers, but insofar as familial commitments are partly the result of particularized values (e.g. favoring marriage, children, "family life"), then social processes that underlie these values are important. One such social process inheres to religious affiliation; some of my interviewees identified with religions which espouse familial values. I did not focus on this question, but it is undoubtedly important.

Fifth and finally, I provided some evidence into the relationship between conversational scripts—which I identified as a kind of procedural cultural knowledge—and values, specifically arguing that those who lacked conversational scripts conducive to pleasurable driver-rider conversations tended to favor the non-pecuniary dimensions of Uber less (or to strongly disfavor of them). While I would

argue the theoretical basis for this claim is quite strong, I provide scant evidence to substantiate this proposition. I would argue that maladaptive conversational scripts shape how drivers value their Uber experience so substantially that there are simply few such workers driving for Uber, making it harder to observe their experiences. Nonetheless, future research could usefully focus more on the social- interactional sources of conversational scripts that are poorly suited to driver-rider interactions than on establishing the relationship between conversational scripts and enjoyment, although the latter is of course important as well.

## **Chapter Five – Projective and Responsive Creativity among On-Demand Workers**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter develops an analytic structure for conceptualizing human “creativity” and applies it to understanding some of the kinds of creative actions exhibited by Uber drivers. Specifically, I ask: in what ways do more committed Uber drivers re-organize their lives (e.g. personal aspirations) around the work they perform, given the structural properties of on-demand work (e.g. wage dynamics, work-hours, rules)? In contrast with chapter four—which aimed to make *causal* inferences about the relationship between habits, problem-situations, and how drivers evaluate their experiences coping with on-demand work—this chapter makes mainly *descriptive* inferences about social processes involving human creativity. Making inferences about these processes can help us develop theoretical tools that capture the antecedents and consequences of different kinds of human creativity; further, these tools can be empirically useful for understanding the range of creative actions taken by workers in the on-demand economy. In this introduction, I briefly outline some key theoretical and empirical motivations, and provide a roadmap for the chapter.

My theoretical motivation for focusing on creativity is based partly on the assumption (defended in chapter two) that conceptualizations of creativity in contemporary social sciences are somewhat crude and poorly developed; typically, creativity is understood either in negative terms as

“not habit” (habit as viewed as “cultural residue”) or it’s understood as a generic descriptor for how actors behave when their habits fail. In contrast, this chapter takes it on assumption that creativity is guided by habit (i.e. cultural configurations; e.g. values direct creative pursuits); further, it illustrates how it can be useful to understand actions that are observed in situations of “normal functioning” (i.e. in which habits are *not failing*) as *creative*. Consistent with pragmatist instrumentalism and a strong aversion to reifying a habit-creativity continuum, the question is not about specifying *when* creativity occurs or declaring that creativity is ubiquitous—which would strip the concept of any kind of useful meaning—but rather how we can use the concept of creativity to understand micro-level *change* (or *novelty*), which is quite often an unintended consequence of everyday action, as discussed in this chapter’s concluding section. That is, the analytic *instrument* of “creative action” is most usefully invoked when our empirical interest involves understanding behavioral *change*.

This this end, this chapter attempts to make a modest contribution to our understanding of creative action by constructing analytic categories that correspond to three kinds of creative action I term (1) slack, (2) responsive, and (3) projective creativity. I derive the construct of “slack creativity” from recent work in behavioral economics that is best exemplified by Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) research program on the cognitive effects of perceptions of scarcity, centered on the observation that scarcity dampens cognitive capacities (e.g. fluid intelligence) and executive control functions (e.g. manage planning), both of which are often associated with creativity. I argue that this construct is useful but mainly for distinguishing between normal conditions and the *most extreme* kinds of deprivation; there is substantial evidence that the human capacity to generate novel (which I associate with creativity) actions or products is robust to material circumstances. The most fruitful theoretical tension is between responsive and projective creativity, which is my focus. Most contemporary sociological work conceives of creativity as *responsive*, involving the range of strategies actors use to adapt to being beset by various kinds of problem-situations (e.g. stigmatization, extreme poverty); it captures how creativity

can be *triggered* by new or enduring situational *constraints* and how actors *maintain* (or reconcile) their interests or goals in the face of those constraints. Much of creative action follows this processual, adaptive, evolutionary logic; indeed, classical pragmatists like Dewey attended to this oft-observed pattern of action. Yet, insofar as we are interested in behavioral change, responsive creativity only helps us understand how actors interact with problem-situations that *beset* them; it provides little insight into the social processes that underlie how actors *socially-select into problem-situations* (see chapter two<sup>318</sup>). Chapter three attempted to show how actor-ecological interactions result in the *emergence* of new problem-situations; the concept of *projective creativity*, developed and applied in this chapter, helps us understand how creative action can result in flows of action that alter the kinds of problem-situations into which actors will tend to select. Rather than being (somewhat mechanically) triggered by situational constraints, projective creativity tends to be observed when the problem-situation is harmonious with the actors' sense of normality *and* avails the actor to opportunities to *actualize* personal projects or capacities. While responsive creativity tends to *reinforce* (or maintain) social relations and experiences—although it can sometimes lead to transformative experiences vis-à-vis mechanisms involving emotional achievement (Yang 2000; see concluding section)—projective creativity tends to *transform* (or alter) the status quo. Based on this formulation, I argue in the concluding section of this chapter that projective creativity helps provide a clearer conception of “human agency.”

This theoretical focus on creativity dovetail with my empirical motivation to advance the contemporary normative discourse about on-demand workers. As noted in chapters one and two, I take it on assumption that work-structures which enable humans to use their creative capacities to project their values onto their experiences and practices are intrinsically more desirable, all else equal, than

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<sup>318</sup> Participants at the University of Chicago's summer 2015 conference on pragmatism explicitly lamented the fact that contemporary pragmatists have spent nearly no time developing an understanding of how actors *select* into problem-situations. That is, while pragmatists and those working in economic and cultural sociology often critique alternative paradigms for exogenizing beliefs and preferences (often valid critiques), pragmatists have themselves tended to exogenize problem-situations.

work-structures which constrain those capacities. Insofar as we view this kind of “positive freedom” as intrinsically good, then investigating some of the ways in which Uber’s work-structure enables or constrains opportunities for creative action is worthwhile. This matter is especially pressing with respect to on-demand workers, who are often publicly viewed as being “left out” of the promises of neo-liberal economic prosperity, that is, conceived of as being structurally disconnected or dis-embedded (Beck 1992; 2000; Giddens 1990) from the “mainstream” (e.g. minimal to no college experience), living life “on the fringe” where they daily experience the kinds of vicissitudes that constrain human freedoms and potential. Undoubtedly such narratives aptly describe the experiences of some workers, but as described in chapters one and two, it is important to take a more inductive approach to on-demand work, given its distinctive structure properties, described in chapter one (e.g. relative wage-predictability and autonomy). Are on-demand workers’ creative capacities constrained by a “tunnel-vision” (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013) exacted upon them by perceptions of scarcity or the practical exigencies of life on the fringe? Do these workers constantly *respond* to the new and enduring situational dictates of on-demand work (i.e. responsive creativity)? Or does Uber’s work-structure avail them to opportunities to project their values onto their experiences and take steps toward realizing their aspirations (i.e. projective creativity)? My empirical focus is to illustrate what is often obscured in the contemporary sociology of nonstandard work, that is, the ways in which on-demand workers engage in projective creativity—such as using Uber to realize entrepreneurial ambitions or familial aspirations (e.g. having a child), and taking steps toward these projects (e.g. meticulous financial tracking)—while also highlighting important observations of responsive creativity (e.g. behavioral adaptation to rules against smoking in vehicles).

I proceed in four sections: (1) synthesis of the literature on creative action; (2) data and methods; (3) findings; and (4) discussion. First, I construct three analytical categories (*slack*, *responsive*, *projective*) corresponding to different modes of creative action. I argue that while the behavioral-

economics perspective that creativity is enabled by the *absence* of scarce resources (i.e. enough slack for creativity) is useful in its generality and the hypotheses it yields, it is relevant to only the most *extreme* forms of material deprivation. The construct of responsive creativity captures how actors use various kinds of resources to maintain (or reconcile) their interests in the face of new or enduring (often extreme) problem-situations (anticipated or unanticipated) which disrupt or constrain their interests or goals in some way; yet, it does not capture the ways in which creative action can be oriented to projecting one's values onto their experiences and practices to the effect of actors selecting into particular kinds of problem-situations (e.g. generating familial commitments). The third construct of projective creativity captures these processes. Projective creative action is as heterogeneous as cultural configurations are, with different actors have different aspirations and projects (e.g. entrepreneurial, consumption, familial); further, I emphasize that different work-structures will vary in both the extent and the ways in which they elicit projective creativity, noting that Uber's work-structure (e.g. autonomy, wage-predictability) is expected to be particularly conducive to projective creativity. In the second section, I describe my data and methods. I draw on 62 semi-structured interviews with Uber drivers conducted in the Greater Boston Area in Massachusetts, between September 2015 and July 2017. I describe the interview format, content, and point out some limitations to interview-based data and how I minimize them.

Third, I present my findings, which are organized into three sections involving (1) financial projects; (2) familial aspirations and (3) behavioral regulation. In the first section, I describe a common pattern of drivers experiencing, for the first time, due to Uber's work-structure, a feeling of financial self-efficacy tied to gaining control over their finances (e.g. debt) and accumulating wealth (e.g. car-ownership). This financial self-efficacy impelled these drivers to take concrete steps (e.g. financial-tracking) toward realizing some of their personal aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurship, major consumption). In the second section, I describe how Uber drivers with families commonly used Uber to

realize familial aspirations involving strengthening relationships with children, improving spousal coordination and communication, and starting a family, in ways that were otherwise cumbersome prior to their having joined Uber. In the third and final section, I illustrate how the work-structure of driving with Uber (e.g. prohibition against smoking in vehicles, dynamic pricing system, rating systems) triggered various behavioral responses among drivers (e.g. reduced alcohol consumption, reduced weekend partying, attentiveness to customer ratings).

In the fourth and final section, I discuss the findings in three sections; the first two sections make descriptive inferences about the social processes underlying projective and responsive creativity (respectively), and the third section offers some final remarks on how the findings can improve our understanding of “human agency,” emotional achievement, and unanticipated novelty. The first discussion section (on projective creativity) is based on the first two sets of findings, and identifies a social mechanism (Gross 2009) organized around the concept of “specified attainability” (Winship 2015). The second section (on responsive creativity) is based on the third set of findings, and identifies a simpler mechanism in which work-structure constraints trigger behavioral changes. The third section discusses some “conceptual frontiers” for future research involving how (1) the construct of projective creativity adds clarity to the sometimes-muddled concept of human agency by capturing how actors select into problem-situations, (2) responsive and projective creativity can add causal-structure to Peirce’s semiotics, (3) responsive creativity can trigger emotional achievement to the effect of shaping practices and forming new values, and (4) novelty—and hence micro-level social change—is quite often generated as an unintended consequence of creative action.

### **THREE MODES OF CREATIVE ACTION: SLACK, RESPONSIVE, PROJECTIVE**

Based on an interdisciplinary synthesis of some of the literature on “creative action,” this section identifies three modes of human creativity, each of which reflects different assumptions about the key social processes implicated in creative modes of action. For the purpose of generating enough empirical

variation in creative action to inductively establish useful analytic categories with respect to human creativity, I examine a broad range of resources and problem-situations implicated in creative action. I organize this section around the following three conceptions of creativity: (1) *slack* creativity, which reflects a view most associated with behavioral economics (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013); (2) *responsive* creativity, which reflects the prevailing conceptualization of creativity within contemporary sociology; and (3) *projective* creativity, which reflects, as I argue, a particularly important yet neglected perspective. Summarily, I argue that the work on responsive and projective creativity reveals that actors engage in creativity in widely varying circumstances which, at a minimum, establishes strong scope conditions for Mullainathan's and Shafir's (2013) behavioral theory. Further, I argue that while in a particular sense all creative action can be understood as a *response* to temporally prior conditions, the "response" framework falls short of adequately explaining numerous empirical instances in which creativity involves actors projecting their values onto their experiences and practices. I conclude this section with some remarks about how this synthesized literature can sensitize our analysis to key social processes likely to be relevant to understanding the creative actions of on-demand workers.

### **Slack Creativity**

A quite general framework for understanding creativity can be derived<sup>319</sup> from Mullainathan's and Shafir's (2013) research into the cognitive effects of scarcity. They argue that when actors "feel [they] have too little" (12), their cognitive capacity (e.g. information retention, logical processing, fluid intelligence, abstract thinking) and executive control functions (e.g. manage planning, impulse control, inhibitions) become severely constrained (see 39-68); the corollary is that creativity tends to be observed when actors have sufficient "slack" or "room" for creativity. Their argument's generality stems from the fact that the automatic cognitive processes generated by perceptions of scarcity or slackness

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<sup>319</sup> Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) are not primarily focused on creative action but their work has obvious and strong implications for it.



are quite similar irrespective of the *type* of resource (e.g. money, time, food) that commands attention; that is, scarcity in *any* (needed) resource generates a similar mindset, characterized by “focus[ing] single-mindedly on managing the scarcity at hand” (29), or what they describe as “tunneling.” While tunneling provides actors with the benefit of being more cognitively disposed to the efficient management of present needs, its flip-side is a narrowing of planning, and other modes of action that involve creativity, or what they call a “bandwidth tax.” In these ways, their theory has the benefit of both being generalizable and yielding specific hypotheses about the relationship between resource levels and the human capacity for creativity. It also relaxes strong assumptions about rationality by capturing the concrete ways in which human cognition is prone to distortions and other malfunctions, and the ways in which human perceptions are limited by the problem-situations within which actors are embedded (Simon 1957).

Insofar as we are interested in using insights from this perspective to better understand creativity among on-demand workers, it is critical to delimit this perspective’s scope of relevance<sup>320</sup>. The strongest evidence in favor of the argument that actors who experience scarcity of any kind—that is, with respect to any kind of resource—will experience similar<sup>321</sup> cognitive and behavioral effects is based on experimental studies in which the “felt experience” of scarcity can be precisely induced. In such situations, scarcity is starkly experienced to the effect of (arguably) levelling off much of the effects of cultural configurations and biological makeup (e.g. genetic distinctiveness). For example, extreme

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<sup>320</sup> Behavioral economists like Mullainathan and Shafir (2014) define scarcity in terms of *perception* of having too little, which renders the claim that scarcity constrains creativity *almost* tautological, because a substantial aspect of the experience of “feeling that one has too little” is precisely the feeling that one should cognitively attend to that scarcity, which necessarily entails some degree of tunnel vision.

<sup>321</sup> The problem is that exclusively examining the consequences of “something” tends to force us to standardize the conceptualization of that “something” into just “one thing,” i.e. uniform across individuals. Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) do this quite explicitly, overlooking the extent to which an understanding of the determinants of the experience of scarcity bears *directly* on the scope of their argument regarding scarcity’s taxing effect on bandwidth for creativity: “Where does the feeling of scarcity come from? Physical limits, of course, play a role...[so do] subjective perceptions of what matters [which] are shaped by culture, upbringing, even genetics...we largely avoid that discussion [focusing] instead on the logic and consequences of scarcity” (2013: 11-12).

hunger likely induces similar effects across most individuals. However, when less extreme degrees of scarcity are experienced, which by definition corresponds to a greater range of cases, there is much more scope for cultural (and other) processes to factor into the complex of causes that shape behavior. Thus, scarcity does indeed constrain creativity, but likely only in extreme degrees. Among Mullainathan's and Shafir's most central examples is poverty. Yet, there is ample evidence that poverty generates widely divergent experiences and behaviors across groups, especially cross-nationally. Further, there is little evidence that individuals who experience scarcity in dignity, status, social inclusion, and other utility-generating "resources" all behave similarly. Indeed, the next two sections provide several examples of individuals dealing with deprivations of various kinds and yet exhibit remarkable degrees of creativity.

### **Responsive Creativity**

Creative action is most commonly understood in the sociological literature as a *response* to a new or enduring problem-situation of some kind (e.g. loss of worker protections under neoliberal policies, stigmatization, poverty, etc.). I illustrate this perspective with examples from research on neoliberal economic restructuring, negative social categorizations (e.g. stigma) in various contexts (e.g. labor markets), social mobility, and extreme poverty.

A substantial body of work has focused on how individuals cope with neo-liberal economic restructuring in developing and developed countries. In her three-year fieldwork in peripheral communities in a peripheral neighborhood in Santiago, Chile, Han (2012) described how low-income Chilean families developed coping strategies based on networks of care in response to the debt burdens they faced partly as a result of Chile's aggressive neoliberal restructuring. Brown-Gaulde (2011) describes how Jamaican *higglers* ("lower-class" black street vendors (2)) resort to various creative strategies to sell their goods and combat the cultural denigration of their blackness (e.g. utilizing the "colour and flair of black women's fashion" to attract buyers (92)). Lamont and Hall (2013) feature wide-

ranging research on both the effects of neo-liberalism (e.g. on individuals, communities, organizations, national and international policy regimes) and the “capacity of groups...to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it” (2), a capacity they refer to as “social resilience” (2013). Importantly, they highlight that not only did the expansion of market structures and accompanying policies take a constraining toll on individuals, communities, and organizations, but it “brought forth various types of creative responses” and “new visions of agency” (2013: 5) that varied depending on the cultural resources available to people to mobilize<sup>322</sup>.

In a similar vein, researchers have examined how actors respond to the external categorizations imposed on them by out-groups (see Jenkins’ (1996) social identity theory), much of which has focused on stigmatization processes encountered by racial and ethnic minorities (see Chang 2010 and Tuan 1999 on Asian Americans; Fox (2010) on Mexican Americans; Holzer (1996) on African Americans)<sup>323</sup>. Lamont and Mizrahi (2012) provide a cross-national perspective on how stigmatized groups draw on different cultural knowledge<sup>324</sup> depending on their particular national ecologies<sup>325</sup> (e.g. Brazil, Israel, US), and how these varied responses (i.e. “rhetorical and strategic tools” (2)) ultimately shape social and symbolic

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<sup>322</sup> Lamont and Hall (2013) partly link this capacity to neo-liberal ideology itself, noting that it “inspired changes in the dominant scripts of personhood toward ones more focused on a person’s individuality and productivity” (5: also see Greenhouse 2009 on this). They also argue that social resilience also involves actively mobilizing *people* into community action, not just “calling upon existing resources” (22).

<sup>323</sup> Chang (2010) argues that US-Asian foreign relations have, through American history, resulted in Asian Americans being perceived as “foreign” and inassimilable. Tuan (1999) describes how Asian Americans struggle with an “authenticity dilemma”. Fox (2010) notes that Mexican Americans were initially viewed optimistically by mainstream society, but after the 1920s they came to be viewed as thrifless and lazy. Similar negative stereotypes and social exclusionary processes beset African Americans (Holzer 1996; Lamont and Molar 2001).

<sup>324</sup> They prefer the terms “cultural repertoires” (used for “strategies of action” for managing the social world; or “toolkits”, as with Swidler 1986) and “cultural frames” (*how* phenomena are perceived and filtered), ideas which are captured well by the differentiated concept of “cultural knowledge” which I use for consistency.

<sup>325</sup> Their edited volume leverages their cross-national research design—which focuses on Brazil, Israel, and the United States (but also considers France, Canada, South Africa, and Sweden)—to understand destigmatization processes in light of (1) cultural repertoires, (2) social-identification processes (e.g. cognition, emotion, morality, identity management) and (3) national processes (e.g. state actions, ideologies, collective histories).

boundaries. For example, Fleming et al. (2012) find that African Americans combat negative stereotypes and gain dignity and social membership in various ways, including by “teaching the ignorant” (43) and behaving in ways that “conform to outgroup norms” (44). The race and consumption literature is also fraught with examples of how consumption can be used as a resource in response to various problem-situations, including status deficits<sup>326</sup> (Charles et al. 2009), political disenfranchisement<sup>327</sup> (Chambers 2006; Mullins 1999; Lee 2002; Chin 2001), social exclusion<sup>328</sup> (Lamont and Molnar 2001), and aesthetic degradation (Weems 2000).<sup>329</sup> With respect to labor markets, Smith’s (2007) *Lone Pursuit* describes how

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<sup>326</sup> Drawing on Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption, Charles et al. (2009) define status in terms of wealth to show that blacks and Hispanics engage in higher levels of conspicuous consumption because they have greater incentives to send signals that separate them from their poor-than-average racial reference groups. Their argument is three-fold: (1) individuals want to signal their income and wealth, but cannot to do so directly in everyday life, and so they do so by buying visible goods; (2) individuals compete against members of their own racial group (i.e. racial “reference group”) by buying goods that signal that they are wealthier than they are; and (3) the lower the mean income/wealth levels of members of their racial group who are in their environment, the greater proportion of visible goods individuals in that racial group will buy. Using Consumer Expenditure Survey data, they find support for the argument that the relative income levels of members of one’s racial group shape’s consumption practices. In their view there is a centralized authority on status, it tends to be the wealthy, and their consumption practices tend to trickle-down for adoption by the rest of society.

<sup>327</sup> Chambers (2006) found that blacks used consumption as a means to demonstrate their desire to participate as equal citizens in American democracy. Mullins (1999) argued that between the civil war and the 1920s a consumer culture was born that excluded blacks from consumption spaces, but which blacks contested actively. Thus, for blacks consumption was an expression of political inclusion. Lee (2002) argued that contrary to presumptions of merchant-customer tensions, businesses and their customers engage in friendly, mundane interactions that create harmony and thwart community conflicts. Chin (2001)’s study of consumption among 22 poor and working class black children reveals how black children are taught from a young age to be frugal so as to combat economic disadvantages.

<sup>328</sup> Lamont and Molnar’s (2001) find that consumption is central to group identification (and social categorization) processes. They apply a social identity perspective to show that blacks use consumption partly to assert social membership in symbolic communities, particularly the American middle class. Marketing specialists “promote normative models of collective identity that equate social membership with consumption” (32). Thus, their perspective captures different aspects of how consumption functions: (1) consumption can be alienating but also meaningful (in this case it signifies group identification); (2) groups can resist pre-defined consumption categories and meanings but they are subject to the influence of dominant commercial interests; (3) groups may face negative stereotypes regarding their consumption habits but they are not powerless in combatting them. For example, they find that blacks use consumption to offset negative external categorizations (e.g. stereotypes about wasteful spending).

<sup>329</sup> Weems (2000) argues that African Americans have historically used consumption as a way to achieve dignity and emancipating itself from historical degradation. He argues that black women’s disproportionate consumption of personal care and beauty products is a response to advertisers who denigrated black beauty.

interpersonal distrust dynamics among job-holding and job-seeking African Americans leads the job-seekers to adopt a “defensive individualism” that characterizes a hesitation or refusal to seek help from jobholders in their networks.

Recent work suggests that individuals in even the most extreme circumstances of poverty and deprivation can respond quite creatively to the problems they face. This is most evident in Edin’s<sup>330</sup> and Shaefer’s (2016) *\$2 a Day: The Art of Living on Virtually Nothing in America*, which vividly profiles the ways in which the poorest American families discover and use new sources of income (e.g. collecting aluminum cans and exchanging them at scrap yards and recycling centers for cash and donating blood plasma) and find ways to save money (e.g. using public libraries, homeless shelters, food pantries, resource-sharing with friends and kin). While these individuals certainly draw on their institutional surroundings, their financial deprivation is so extreme that they cannot afford to be organizationally<sup>331</sup> embedded to the same degree as, for example, the urban mothers in Small’s (2009) *Unanticipated Gains*, and yet they nonetheless find remarkable ways to cope.

Overall, this and other work on responsive creativity offers useful insights into human creativity, but it also has important limitations. With respect to its contributions, the construct of responsive creativity captures the myriad ways in which actors use various kinds of resources (e.g. cultural, material) to maintain (or reconcile) their interests in the face of new or enduring problem-situations (anticipated or unanticipated) which disrupt or constrain their interests or goals in some way. This

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<sup>330</sup> This work on extreme poverty is a continuation of a substantial literature on coping with financial distress, much of which can be traced to Edin’s and Lein’s (1997) *Making Ends Meet: How Single mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*.

<sup>331</sup> Recent work has aimed to reframe our understanding of social capital by emphasizing the organizational structures within which social networks operate (see Pescosolido 1992 for earlier formulation). For example, Small (2009)’s *Unanticipated Gains* argues that research on mobilizing social capital has fallen short of grasping the significance of the social-organizational structures within which networks emerge. He finds that the child care centers in which NYC urban mothers enroll their children—through various institutional practices (e.g. coordinating pick-up and drop-off times, organizing field-trips, fund-raising, spring cleaning events, etc.)—have the effect of strengthening and expanding the personal networks of mothers, improving their well-being and their ability to problem-solve in their daily lives.

captures the classical pragmatist view that actors creatively concoct new strategies when their habits fail. Viewing creativity as a *response* also opens a useful corollary research strand devoted to understanding *which* resources are mobilized in which problem-situations, such as who in one's core network is called upon for help-seeking (Dominguez and Watkins (2003), Small and Sukhu (2016)).<sup>332</sup> It also demonstrates the *robustness* of human creative problem-solving even in situations of extreme deprivation (e.g. Edin and Shaefer 2016), which somewhat undermines the generality of Mullainthan's and Shafir's (2013) perspective. However, with respect to this research strand's limitations, it is important to recognize that this dominant framing of creative action as *responsive* is quite evocative of the "behavioral stimulus" propositions (associated with George Homans), which (ironically) most creativity-as-response researchers tend to oppose for being too mechanical. Importantly, from a pragmatist-instrumentalist perspective (see chapter two), a stimulus-response model of creativity can be problematic for our purposes *not* because it is "mechanical," but because it may bias our analysis against detecting modes of creativity that shape the kinds of problem-situations that actors *select*<sup>333</sup> *into*. That is, viewing creativity as *responsive* suggests that actors are only *beset* (exogenously) by problem-situations and have no influence on the situations they flow in and out. Yet, as discussed in chapter two, social experience fundamentally entails continuous transactions between actors and problem-situations (e.g. between "mind and world" and "belief and fact"; see Peirce 1877; 1878; Dewey 1922). Next, I point to empirical evidence that validates this perspective that social action entails *both* responsive and "projective" creativity.

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<sup>332</sup> Small and Sukhu (2016) document the processes through which individuals decide on *which* individuals to turn to for help in their personal networks, processes that differ in the extent of *deliberation* on whom to contact. They argue that these processes are partly determined based on the type of help needed (e.g. skill, help) and contextual factors (e.g. accessibility). Dominguez and Watkins (2003) find that among low-income mothers, physical proximity, reciprocity, and family tensions shape whether and how they draw on social support. They also note that social support networks can create problems for individuals by enforcing time-consuming expectations on women.

<sup>333</sup> At the summer 2015 pragmatist conference at the University of Chicago, the lack of work in contemporary pragmatism on how actors *select into* problem-situations was specifically lamented.

## Projective Creativity

Finally, creative capacities are often oriented toward *actualizing*<sup>334</sup> (Goldstein 1934) or realizing one's values (e.g. desire to start a family or aversion to having a boss). Rather than being a direct response to a *constraining* or disruptive problem-situation, "projective creativity" is often observed in "normal," harmonious situations. Further, rather than involving actors being *beset* by situational dictates, projective creativity often results in actors forging new flows of action which shape the kinds of problem-situations they will subsequently encounter (e.g. entrepreneurial problems). I provide some illustrations below from the empirical literature on immigrant mobility, aesthetic production, and non-marital childbearing.

In her study of Latin American immigrant women in two Boston neighborhoods, Dominguez (2011) put forth the concept of "self-propelling agency" (i.e. "SPA"; 13) to describe her research subjects' feeling of self-efficacy and their aspiration toward upward mobility. This SPA was partly based on a deep-seeded desire to "live up to" their parents' migratory sacrifices as well as the cultural knowledge (i.e. beliefs) about the limited opportunities for upward mobility in their countries of origin.<sup>335</sup> The construct of SPA captures how these women active projected core elements of their cultural configurations in ways that generated "social flows" (2011: 13) that shaped the kinds of practices they engaged in.

Other telling illustrations of projective creativity are offered in Patterson's (2015) edited volume *The Cultural Matrix*, which highlights (among other points) the creative contributions (e.g. aesthetic) of America's black youth who "are becoming structurally disconnected from the dominant institutions of

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<sup>334</sup> Self-actualization here is viewed more in Goldstein's (1934) formulation rather than Maslow's (1954); i.e. it involves an expression of creativity that is effectively ubiquitous rather than only achieved after "lower" needs are met.

<sup>335</sup> Dominguez (2011) also advances the notion of "efficient populations" as ones in which the concentration of SPAs is high enough to establish social support systems among the population. She also highlights the importance of drawing on resources made available through social support networks (e.g. strong family ties, weak work ties).

American society” (Fosse 2015: 139) and yet have had “[paradoxically] extraordinary influence on the nation’s popular culture” (Patterson 2015: 9). For example, Marshall (2015) describes how black hip-hop artists have “refashioned” media technologies and aspects of mainstream popular culture to transform hip-hop into a global youth culture.

Edin’s and Kefala’s (2005) *Promises I Can Keep* offers an interesting example of how understanding creativity as projective—rather than as merely a triggered response to the problem-situations that beset individuals—can imbue explanations with causal power. Providing an account of the rise in non-marital childbearing among poor women in Baltimore, they find that while these poor women viewed marriage as a luxury, having children was “an absolutely essential part of a young woman’s life, the chief source of identity and meaning” (6). This quite clearly illustrates how actors’ values can be projected onto social experiences and practices in ways that shape the kinds of problem-situations that those actors will subsequently encounter.

Thus, the construct of projective creativity sensitizes us to how actors can project their cultural knowledge (e.g. values) onto their practices and experiences, in ways that shape the kinds of situations they select into. Projective creative action is as heterogeneous as cultural configurations are; different actors have different aspirations and projects (e.g. entrepreneurial, consumption, familial). It is important to recognize that the construct of projective creativity sensitizes us to how both (1) cultural configurations *and* (2) ecological structures (e.g. neighborhoods, work-structure) can orient creative action; indeed, it is the interaction of cultural configurations with ecological structures that is most critical (see chapter two). In this way, different kinds of work-structures will vary in both the extent and the ways in which they elicit projective creativity. I expect that Uber’s work-structure, as described in chapter one, particularly the relative autonomy (e.g. control over work-hours) it affords workers as well as the predictability of its wage structure, is conducive to projective creativity.



## DATA AND METHODS

I draw on 62 semi-structured interviews with Uber drivers conducted in the Greater Boston Area in Massachusetts, between September 2015 and July 2017. I use mainly the some data that was described in chapter four, but focused much more on analyzing data from drivers who demonstrated considerable commitment to driving with Uber; these drivers typically (but not always) worked full-time and had been doing so for at least six months.

Regarding format, Uber drivers were accessed by calling an “UberX,” which is the most basic private car service offered by Uber. They were then asked if I could conduct a short interview with them while they were driving me to an arbitrary destination, after which we would typically continue the conversation in the parked car, at a nearby venue, or by phone later in the day. 78 percent of drivers agreed to be interviewed, resulting in 62 interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 4 hours. I attribute the high response rate largely to having engaged Uber drivers amicably, demonstrating intimate knowledge of the various qualitative aspects of driving for Uber, and expressing genuine interest in better understanding their experiences.

Regarding content, interviews were usually divided into two parts; the first involved mostly structured, fact-finding questions, and the second involved more open-ended questions, mostly aimed at understanding drivers’ cultural configurations, specifically their personal aspirations and plans. In the first part of the interview, after gleaning basic background data (e.g. education, age, citizenship), I proceeded to ask questions that could be grouped into six categories: (1) labor market history (including Uber; e.g. circumstances and most direct reasons of participation; hours/week with Uber; income sources (including Uber)); (2) how they evaluated their experience with Uber (e.g. pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits and costs of work, normative views of Uber and its treatment of workers); (3) knowledge of Uber’s practices; (4) financial history, situation, dependents (e.g. income sources/breakdown (e.g. wife), dependents, expenses, debt, investments, savings); (5) economic

security and resource buffers (e.g. healthcare insurance, preparedness for retirement, resource buffers against adverse events); and (6) how driver perceives Uber as having affected his short-term (e.g. financial, ties, behaviors, psychology, etc.) and long-term situation (e.g. financial plans). In the second portion of the interview, I probed into their cultural knowledge—including their beliefs, ideologies, subjective social status, normative concerns, particularized and ultimate values, considerations of oughtness and conceptions of normality—typically followed by probing more deeply interviewees’ personal aspirations and plans in relation to their on-demand work. Please see chapter four for notes on methodological concerns<sup>336</sup> and strategy<sup>337</sup> (or see footnotes).

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<sup>336</sup> This interview-based data collection approach has limitations, but it does suit my empirical purposes quite well. An old and important literature on interview data warns of their various pitfalls, including tendencies for “errors of inference” (Becker and Geer 1957: 13; i.e. interviewer misunderstandings of interviewee’s intended meanings, missing data on what interviewees avoid disclosing), “attitudinal fallacy” (i.e. conflating attitudes with behaviors; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; see Wicker 1969 for earlier descriptions of this problem), reliability problems associated with retrospective self-reports (Cook and Campbell 1979 on social desirability bias; Schwartz and Sudman 1994 on memory issues), tendencies toward methodological individualism and interviews fallaciously imposing coherence on interviewee narratives (Lamont and Swidler 2014), etc. Mindful of these potential snares, interviews were particularly useful for my particular research question for at least three reasons, beyond being relative inexpensive and amenable to systematic comparisons and inference-making. First, given my interest in the effects of cultural configurations, interviews allowed me to probe into the shared and idiosyncratic meanings that constituted workers’ cultural knowledge. Relatedly, interviews allow me to construct a “temporal and narrative structure of events that already have occurred,” as noted by Jerolmack and Khan (2014: 180) who are themselves noted for having raised flags about the common limitations of interview data. Cultural knowledge can then be traced to these temporal and narrative biographies. Second, as Pugh (2013) has argued, properly conducted interviews can capture emotional dimensions of behavior (e.g. fictional expectations (Beckhert 2016), abstract feelings of oughtness, ideals) which are central especially to grasping evaluative knowledge such as “ultimate values” (Patterson 2014). While the norms that actors hold are often better observed via ethnographies and participant observation (particularly when combined with interviews), cultural values are often best captured through skillfully constructed in-depth interviews which push interviewees into revealing internalized (and relatively stable) motivational drivers. Third, as Lamont and Swidler (2014) argue, interviews can be used innovatively to understand how actors understand their social positions in relation to others and hence they can capture boundary-making processes. They further emphasize that whether interview data is “good and bad” depends on both the question and how interviews are conducted; for example, much of their utility is lost when interviewers do not “encourage [interviewees] to evoke a variety of interactional settings, social contexts, and institutional situations” (157-158). However, as advised by Jerolmack and Khan (2014), it is important to be explicit that my interview data derive from what interviewees say (and do *within interview settings*), not direct observations of their past, present, and future behaviors.

<sup>337</sup> My methodological orientation very much iterates between deductive and inductive modes (Wilson and Chaddha 2009; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). While the semi-structured format and formulation of questions that I use avails my approach to “grounded interpretations” (Glaser and Strauss 1967 prefer the term grounded “discovery”), modifiability, and closeness-of-fit between data and analytic categories (Charmaz 2006), I explicitly rely on certain preconceived understandings, including that cultural knowledge is “constituted” and relatively

## FINDINGS

Illustrations of creative action among Uber drivers can be presented *biographically*—that is, by describing the varied kinds of creativity exhibited by particular drivers over time—or *thematically*; given this chapter’s focus on making descriptive inferences about different kinds of creative action, I take the latter approach, presenting multiple *themes* involving driving using Uber for creative purposes.

Three qualifications regarding the kinds of observations I will present need to be specified. First, as noted above, I focus my observations on drivers who are quite committed to Uber; that is, I generally exclude observations of drivers with, for examples, strongly activated personal career-norms that impel them to interpret their Uber experience as transitional and short-lived (see chapter four). This means that drivers like Kevin (introduced in chapter four), who joined Uber after a severe gambling loss and who intended to driver with Uber only for the coming month before launching what he called an “internet business” would be excluded. Second, conceptualizing projective creativity as involving actualizing one’s values, I prioritize values which could be commonsensically characterized as more substantively “weighty” than less. For example, several drivers described using Uber to make more time for hobbies they enjoy (e.g. softball, pool); I generally disregard these kinds of aspirations, and instead, focus on more personally transformative activities involving the regulation of consequential behaviors (e.g. cigarette-smoking, meticulous financial tracking and entrepreneurship plans, major kinds of consumption, planning to have a child). Third, I do not focus on drivers who use Uber for personal skilling (e.g. English classes); such instances of personal-skilling do illustrate projective creativity but have already been sufficiently touched upon in chapter four.

I organize the findings into three sections: (1) financial projects; (2) familial aspirations; and (3) behavioral regulation. In the first section, I describe a common pattern of drivers experiencing, for the

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stable (Patterson 2014) and that actors have adaptive capacities (Dewey 1910) oriented toward the resolution of everyday ecological problems (i.e. settling “irritations of doubt” (Peirce 1878)).

first time, due to Uber’s work-structure, a feeling of financial self-efficacy tied to gaining control over their finances (e.g. debt) and accumulating wealth (e.g. car-ownership). This financial self-efficacy impelled these drivers to take concrete steps toward realizing some of their personal aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurship, major consumption). In the second section, I describe how Uber drivers with families commonly used Uber to realize familial aspirations involving strengthening relationships with children, improving spousal coordination and communication, and starting a family, in ways that were otherwise cumbersome prior to their having joined Uber. In the third and final section, I illustrate how the work-structure of driving with Uber (e.g. prohibition against smoking in vehicles, dynamic pricing system, rating systems) triggered various behavioral responses among drivers (e.g. reduced alcohol consumption, reduced weekend partying, attentiveness to customer ratings).

### **Financial Projects**

Many drivers described their Uber experience as the first time they felt they were gaining control over their finances (e.g. debt) and accumulating wealth. This financial self-efficacy reduced uncertainty regarding the attainability of various personal-financial aspirations, resulting in drivers taking concrete steps toward realizing these aspirations. I will illustrate these themes through the cases of Abe and Lucas.

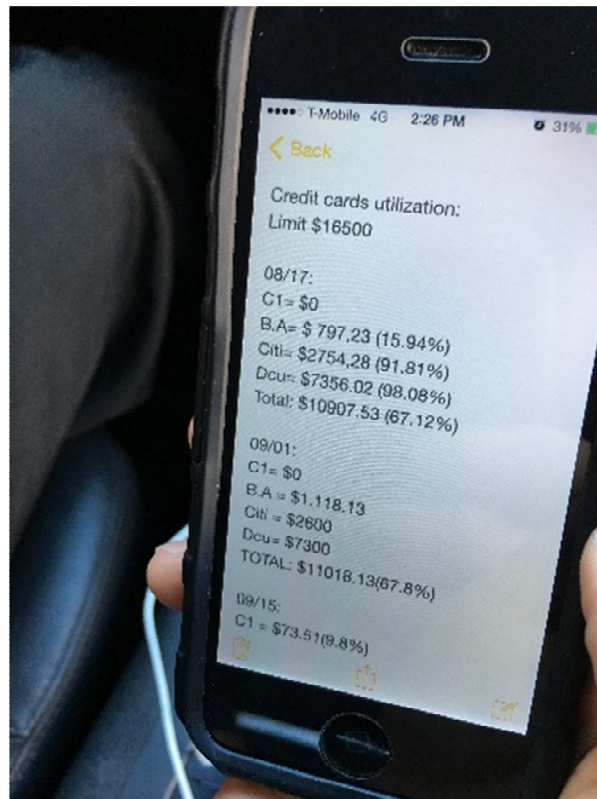
Abe—who was in his mid-50s, married with two children, and had immigrated to the U.S. about two decades ago—had been working with Uber for around two-and-a-half years, driving around 50 hours a week, and reportedly earning around \$55,000 in pre-tax income through the Uber platform. He had worked as a taxicab driver prior to Uber but described it as “paying less and [involving] more aggravation with the owners and riders.” He described the lure of Uber in the first few months as based primarily on pay, but over time, he increasingly came to value the autonomy that Uber provided, specifically the sense of *financial self-efficacy* (control) it gave him: “The way I see my job now is...now I control my finances better. I can control my spending so I can calculate my future... what I have in mind

to do tomorrow.” By this, Abe was expressing the relationship between being able to predict his earnings and the *motivation* to want to control his spending and his budget, which he described in detail: “I spend \$800 per month on my home... for food it’s about \$250 per month... car insurance is about \$380 per month. Gas is 15% less with Uber because of discounts, so about \$40 per week.” Abe had bought his current car through one of Uber’s auto-financing programs (see chapter one), describing it as his first “investment”: “This is a reliable car... not like my two cars before which would always break down. This is reliable. It’s \$24,000... It’s a great investment. I paid for it because I wanted a car in good condition so people like it and so it doesn’t break down. It’s clean, and I don’t have to just lease a car which is wasted money like I did when I was a taxi.” He went on to describe his savings in relation to the car purchase: “Now I have \$700 saved with no debt. I’ve made \$13,000 payment on this car... I have \$11000 more and I can do it in a year, and then I’ll be saving more money. I’m making about \$4500 [i.e. pre-expenses] a month now [pre-tax] and can make more by driving more if I want.” This built up to his plan after he has paid off the car: “Then once I’m done with this one [i.e. making payments on current car], I want to start a transportation business. I can buy other cars like this and lease them to drivers.” Abe wanted to buy a fleet of Uber cars and generate income on them by leasing the cars to other Uber drivers and teaching them how to use Uber most effectively.

Like Abe, Lucas also described Uber as giving him a greater feeling of control over his finances and his plans, particularly over his debt. Lucas, in his late 20s, had started driving with Uber part-time around six months ago to supplement his income so that he could pay off his credit card debt (he had five cards) faster. He currently had \$8000 left in these loans, ranging from 9 to 22 percent interest rates, and despite the high interest rates, he said he was extremely confident that he would be able to pay off this debt in the coming years: “the great thing is that with Uber I know I can pay off my credit cards by driving more... my other job [he worked at a dry cleaner during the day] is for during the day, it’s fixed... but here I can drive as many hours as I want to make more.” He was describing why he was not worried

about his credit card debt; he want on illustrate his strategy: “I make extra money here when I want to [i.e. through Uber] and I pay the highest interest rate card first, then the others...you know the snowball method. That’s what I do.” Lucas went on to describe that not only did Uber make him confident that he would pay off the principle and interest on his loan in the coming years, but that Uber had made him more meticulous in tracking his income and expenditures more generally: “when I got this Uber app and was seeing the weekly earnings, I wanted to track more of my expenses, so I got other apps that would let me see my progress... so I have this one [showed me Debt Tracker iPhone application] and this [Mywallet application], and I do calculations on credit cards here [pointing to his phone].” Figure 1 below shows recent notes Lucas had taken about his finances.

**Figure 1: Lucas’ Financial Notes on smartphone**



Yet, while Lucas had become more meticulous in tracking his finances, his broader project for himself was entirely recreational; Abe (described above), in contrast, used the financial confidence that Uber afforded him to plan steps to realize his vision for buying more cars to start a transportation

business through Uber. In Lucas' case, his newfound financial confidence and motivation to track his finances allowed him to save enough money to recently buy a boat he had been planning to buy for years: "Ever since I was a kid I wanted to buy a boat like this. I just love it so much. So I saved for it and realized I could do it by working more and bought it a few months ago." He went on to describe its significance for him: "It just feels so free and great to have it...I love the water and being out there and I've just always wanted it." He had spent \$1200 on it, and when asked why he did not put that money toward his substantial credit card debt given the interest rates, he said: "you see, I'm really not worried about the debt. I can just drive more hours when I need to. So it's fine."

Thus, the control these drivers had over their work-hours—and hence their ability to earn income when they needed it—generated a feeling of financial self-efficacy which rendered long-held personal projects (e.g. starting a transportation fleet, buying a boat) seem more realizable. This impelled them to meticulously monitor their finances and take concrete steps toward their aspirations. Abe was working long hours to pay down his car rapidly so he could start saving money toward possibly launching a transportation business, whereas Lucas had already bought his "childhood dream" boat. More generally, many drivers expressed a feeling of personal achievement at making regular payments toward ownership of relatively expensive vehicles (often above \$20,000 in blue book value). This feeling of building wealth, and the feeling of self-efficacy it created, tended to be strongest among drivers who were home-renters (rather than mortgagers) and those who were formerly vehicle-leasing taxicab drivers (e.g. Abe); such drivers described their cars as smart investments into their futures, toward asset accumulation, financial security, and possibly future investment income. Of course, vehicles depreciate in value over time and so there was, in my view, considerable errors in judgment in such descriptions of cars as investments, yet what was clear was that the feeling that they were gaining control over their finances valorized deeper personal projects and aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurship).

## Familial Aspirations

Finally, Uber drivers with families commonly used Uber to realize familial aspirations tied to (1) strengthening relationships with children (e.g. gift-purchases, quality time), (2) more effective spousal coordination (e.g. division of parenting responsibilities) and expressions of love, and (3) planning to start a family, in ways that were otherwise cumbersome for them prior to joining the Uber platform. To these ends, drivers re-organized their lives around Uber on the basis of the (1) relative stability (predictability) of Uber's wages and (2) the autonomy (i.e. control over hours, no direct boss) it affords drivers (see chapter one for the core functional characteristics of driving with Uber<sup>338</sup>).

First, with regard to predictable wages, drivers described the following routine they used to strengthen their relationships with their children (especially children living with ex-wives) and their wives: exercised (ad hoc) their ability to earn roughly predictable extra income through additional hours worked in order to make targeted gift-purchases for their children and partners.

Christopher—who was in his late 30s, immigrated to the U.S. a little over a decade ago, and had been driving full-time with Uber for just under a year—had married twice and had two children with his first wife. In order to stay close to them (they lived with their mother) and on the basis of knowing that he could predictably earn extra income by driving more hours, he described the extra-work-income-for-gift-purchase pattern: “When I want to buy them a thing they like, I determine to drive an extra hour or two and then buy it for them...I just go home a bit later then.” He went on to contrast Uber with his prior two jobs: “when I worked at the car dealership and at [major retailer], getting extra hours was not so easy as it is with Uber.” Christopher described gift-buying as a way of

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<sup>338</sup> In chapter one I described four functional characteristics of driving with Uber: relative (1) stability (predictability) of wages; (2) autonomy (i.e. control over hours, no direct boss); (3) low level of required procedural skills; and (4) low “switching and setup” costs.



staying close to his children: “I buy them things for their phone and other kinds of stuff...they really those things from me.” Abe (described above) described a very similar patten; he also had two biological children who were living with his ex-wife and with whom he sought to show his affection: “I buy my kids things they need like clothes and school supplies, but sometimes I know they like other things like electronics, so for those things that I need extra money for I just drive more hours some night and buy them...its good for when I don’t get to see them. They always ask for stuff, you know.” Gift-purchasing allowed Christopher and Abe to both stay generally involved with their children’s lives—that is, because the children’s mothers tended to be more accommodating when the fathers brought gifts—and also to show their affection to their children. Critically, it was the *knowledge* that they could generate extra income with little hassle, by simply, for example, starting work a bit early or returning home a bit later, that motivated them to structure their relationships with their children this way. It was also quite common for drivers to use the same routine to curry favor with their wives. For example, regarding his girlfriend, with whom he had been in a relationship for almost ten years and was planning on marrying soon, Abe said: “I also do the same thing with my girlfriend... I drive a few more hours and buy her gifts for the kitchen... and you know, lingerie [he laughed] and things like that.”

Second, the relative autonomy that Uber afforded drivers made much more realizable a variety of familial aspirations, including improving the quality of childcare, coordinating vacation times with one’s spouse, and spending more time with children. Lucas (introduced above) described how he joined Uber—part-time, above his full-time job at a dry cleaners—not only to supplement his income but also because he and his wife preferred that his wife take care of their children rather than a baby sitter: “I think it’s much better this way [wife taking care of kids] because she can focus better on them, she doesn’t have to worry about work...also the baby sitter is expensive and, you

know, my wife is better for that.” For other drivers, a substantial benefit of controlling their own hours was that they could more effectively carve out recreational time to pursue their hobbies and/or spend more dedicated time with their wives. For example, Sisi (introduced in chapter four)—whose wife worked for a state agency—described how prior to Uber, it was always difficult to coordinate some time with his wife where they could go on short trips together, but that now he is able to do so: “a year ago before I started, it was so hard to go on vacation with my wife because of our schedules. But now I work whenever I want to whenever she has free time we can go.” Additionally, nearly all drivers with kids described how they now find it much easier to find time to spend with their kids. This was usually realized in the form of parenting obligations like driving their kids to school rather than stopping work early to go specifically spend time with the kids.

Finally, both predictability of wages and relative autonomy were critical to more life-changing plans such as having a baby. Pedro—who was in his mid-30s and married but with no children—described how he always wanted to have children but was worried about ensuring that he and his wife (who worked) had the financial stability and time to manage it, and that Uber ensured both: “it’s also much easier for me and my wife to have kids now. Because she works. So I can stay with the kids when she works. And I can work more if we will need more money... We’re gonna have a baby soon.” He went on to describe how he felt that the stress associated with his prior jobs in the restaurant and construction industries made the prospect of starting a family difficult: “Roofing work is stressful. You deal with a lot of craziness. It pays good, but I actually like what I’m doing now so I’m much happier. So it makes me feel I can move forward with plans [referring to building a family] since my job is good.” Thus, the relative wage-predictability and work-autonomy (i.e. taking care of the kids when his wife is at work), and the personal satisfaction he experienced when driving with Uber (undoubtedly tied to the wages and autonomy), made it

much easier for Pedro to move forward in realizing a plan (i.e. having a child) he had had for many years.

Overall, for all these drivers, the Uber experience—by dint mainly of relatively stable (predictable) wages and autonomy (namely control over work-hours)—facilitated personal aspirations involving family, specifically the strengthening of their relationships with children (e.g. gift-purchases, quality time), better coordinating schedules with their spouses (e.g. vacations, dividing household work efficiently), and starting a family.

### **Behavioral Regulation**

A quite unexpected behavioral pattern observed among drivers was self-regulating various behaviors by dint of Uber's work-structure. Below are the most common illustrations of this process involving (1) cigarette and alcohol consumption, (2) fewer "recreational" weekend nights (usually drinking), and (3) intentions to service riders with excellence.

Several drivers described Uber as having helped them wean off excessive use of cigarettes or alcohol, largely given rules against cigarette-smoking in the car (i.e. to not disturb riders with "second-hand" smoke) and federal laws against drinking alcohol while driving. Adil—who was in his early 50s and had been driving full-time with Uber for two years (he also drove for other on-demand platforms)—described how these rules reduced his alcohol consumption: "I just can't drink as much because I'm driving so I buy less beer than before Uber." While Adil noted that this change has resulted in cost-savings, saving him roughly \$100-150 per month, he did not seem especially pleased with this behavioral change, viewing it as simply a given aspect of driving with Uber. This should be contrasted with Jamal—who was in his late 20s and had been driving full-time with Uber for 9 months—for whom the rule against cigarette-smoke in the vehicle seemed to have a slightly more substantial behavioral and cognitive effect. He was a quite heavy smoker: "I smoke a couple packs everyday but I can't do it when driving because of the passengers. Because I want to drive more hours to make money, I just don't

smoke as much as I used to before.” When asked how this has affected his life, beyond very briefly mentioning health effects, he described substantial cost-savings: “[before Uber] I was spending...maybe \$1000 [a month] on smoking. Now I spend less... maybe half that.” This amounted to roughly \$500 per month in cost-savings, which was roughly 40 percent of his monthly rent. When asked what he was doing with these cost-savings, he said: “I pay off credit debt. I have about \$15,000 of it so it’s helping me focus on paying that.”

Relatedly, Jamal also noted an aspect of driving with Uber that I observed to be quite common among particularly younger drivers: given that peak demand for rides tends to be on Friday and Saturday nights in Boston (which increases wage rates), most Uber drivers tended to spend weekend nights working—often earning \$250-\$350 per night—rather than engaging in more recreational activities. Jamal said: “I don’t really spend nights at the bars anymore. Before this [Uber] I would go out drinking with my friends usually on weekend nights, but that is the best time to drive because everyone else is out drinking with *their* friends.”

Another quite general finding was the personal satisfaction that drivers derived when they had high ratings and how it impelled them to, at the very least, state that they intended to continue to serve riders with excellence. While Dwayne—who was in his early 30s and had been driving full-time with Uber for almost a year—had noted that he felt he was eating *less healthily* because he would frequently get lunch or dinner at fast-food restaurants during his driving hours, he (and many other drivers) noted how pleased he was with his high Uber rating: “I like it when my the people I pick up appreciate the service I provide them. My great rating makes me know I’m doing a good job and treating them right and they appreciate that.” This sentiment was especially common among former taxicab drivers. Sayeed, who had been driving full-time with Uber for about a year and a half and previously worked as a taxicab driver in New York City, said: “in the taxicab industry, you know, these guys [passengers] just come in and out, and you know, you’re taking them where they want to go when they need to go there.

So you're doing them a service, and yes they pay you, but it is good to know that they are happy with the service, so I try harder as well." He went on to describe how he maintained a clean car so passengers would feel comfortable on their trips.

Generally, in the above cases, it was the work-structure of driving with Uber—specifically, rules against smoking and alcohol consumption, fares proportionate to demand and peak demand on weekend nights, rating systems—triggered behavioral and emotional changes among drivers: Adil reduced his alcohol consumption; Jamal smoked less (saving money doing so) and now only rarely went out drinking with his friends on weekend nights; Dwayne and Sayeed expressed a deeper pride in their work (due to ratings), with Sayeed deliberately stating that with Uber he paid greater attention to rider “customer service” than he did when he was a taxicab driver. These situational triggers were mostly directed (arguably coercively) at specific behaviors; the slight exception is Uber’s “rating system” which tended to influence a broader set of behaviors tied to interactions with riders (e.g. conversational politeness, keeping the car clean).

## **DISCUSSION**

This chapter has aimed to enrich our understanding of creative action by examining how Uber drivers re-organize their lives (e.g. personal aspirations) around the work they perform, given the structural properties of on-demand work (e.g. wage dynamics, work-hours, rules). I advanced three ideal-types of creativity which I termed “slack,” “responsive,” and “projective” creativity; specifically, I aimed to deepen our understanding of *projective creativity* by contrasting it with responsive creativity, which is by far the most common conception of creativity in the literature (including the pragmatist literature). Consistent with the pragmatist action theory described in chapter two, I viewed all forms of human creativity are inextricable from “habits” or cultural configurations; that is, *all* creative action (e.g.

purposes to which they are oriented) partly<sup>339</sup> reflects embodied cultural knowledge (e.g. belief, skills, values). I argued that projective and responsive creativity capture quite distinct social processes. I defined responsive creativity as action oriented toward *maintaining* (or reconciling) one's narrowly-conceived interests or goals in relation to a problem-situation; it tends to be observed when a problem-situation (anticipated or unanticipated) disrupts normal functioning by imposing a new or enduring *constraint* on the actor. In contrast, I defined projective creativity as action oriented toward *realizing* (or actualizing) one's core values (e.g. ultimate values) in relation to a problem-situation; it tends to be observed when the problem-situation is harmonious with the actor's sense of normality *and* avails the actor to opportunities to realize personal projects or develop capacities. Thus, these two kinds of creativity differ in their social-situational antecedents and consequences; responsive creativity is triggered by the imposition of disruptive constraints and results in the actor *maintaining* their lower-order wants, whereas projective creativity is enabled by harmonious actor-ecological experiences which orient actors toward self-actualizing or attaining higher-order wants (e.g. realizing core values). These distinctions are critical at least partly because they bear directly on questions of social change and stability; while responsive creativity tends to *reinforce* (or maintain) social relations and experiences, projective creativity tends to *transform* (or alter) the status quo.

Overall, I found that the social processes underlying Uber drivers' actions and plans (e.g. behavioral regulation, financial plans, familial aspirations) collectively generated both projective and responsive creative actions. These social processes can be usefully understood as co-determined by (1) the work-structure (e.g. behavioral rules, dynamic pricing) and functional characteristics (e.g. predictable wages, autonomy) of driving with Uber and (2) the drivers' particular cultural configurations (e.g. values, routines), with different patterns of actor-ecological interactions generating different kinds of creativity. I expand the discussion of these findings in three sections; the first two sections make

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<sup>339</sup> Human creativity is also defined by an actor's ecology, as well as idiosyncratic components of behavior.

descriptive inferences about the social processes underlying projective and responsive creativity (respectively), and the third section offers some final remarks on how the findings can improve our understanding of “human agency,” emotional achievement, and unanticipated novelty. The first discussion section (on projective creativity) is based on the first two sets of findings, and identifies a social mechanism (Gross 2009) organized around the concept of “specified attainability” (Winship 2015). The second section (on responsive creativity) is based on the third set of findings, and identifies a simpler mechanism in which work-structure-constraints trigger behavioral changes. The third section discusses how: (1) the construct of projective creativity adds clarity to the sometimes-muddled concept of human agency by capturing how actors select into problem-situations, (2) responsive creativity can trigger emotional achievement to the effect of shaping practices and forming new values, and (3) novelty—and hence micro-level social change—is quite often generated as an unintended consequence of creative action.

### **Specified Attainability and Projective Creativity**

In the first two sets of findings, I described several observations of Uber drivers engaged in creative action that can be usefully characterized as *projective*.

First, I observed that many drivers experienced a feeling of financial self-efficacy regarding their current financial situation and futures, a feeling that they attributed directly to Uber, often describing their Uber experience as the first time they felt they were gaining control over their finances (e.g. debt) and accumulating wealth (e.g. car-ownership). For example, Lucas, Uber meant that he could generate additional part-time income from Uber whenever he needed it (e.g. consumption smoothing, accelerating debt payments); for Abe, the main difference between working as a taxicab driver (his former job) and working as an Uber driver was the financial security he felt with the latter. For both drivers, the financial self-efficacy they experienced through Uber was unanticipated; that is, they had joined Uber for different reasons. Abe had disliked the “aggravation” of dealing with taxicab owners and

riders, and Lucas needed extra income to pay off his debt. Yet, with this newfound financial self-efficacy both drivers had the impetus to move forward in realizing long-held personal-financial projects. For Lucas, this was a long-held “dream” to buy a boat. Far from an “impulse buy,” this purchase had deep emotional significance to him. Through Uber, he felt he could finally make this purchase—despite having around \$8000 in debt—largely because he knew the path (i.e. driving extra hours) to resolving his debt constraint. Abe’s aspiration was to own a transportation business (e.g. a fleet of Uber cars); the path was to pay off this principle on his car as quickly as he could, save up enough money, buy a second car, and lease out his first (or his second). For both drivers, the feeling that the path to their projects was realizable provided the impetus to begin meticulously tracking their finances; Abe described now being able to “calculate [his] future” and Lucas, after enjoying seeing his weekly earnings through Uber, began using financial tracking software (e.g. Debt Tracker).

Second, among drivers with families, I also found a pattern of using Uber to realize familial aspirations involving strengthening relationships with children, improving spousal coordination and communication, and starting a family. Drivers emphasized that these aspirations, and the core values that underpinned them, had always been important to them, but prior jobs made sustained commitment to them cumbersome. Two functional characteristics of Uber’s work-structure were especially critical to the changed experience: (1) the stability (predictability) of supplementing one’s income through additional work-hours and (2) the relative autonomy of the work, particularly the control over one’s work-hours. The predictability of supplemental wages enabled drivers like Christopher, who are divorced, to stay close to their children, even providing some kind of legitimation for visits. The relative autonomy of driving with Uber enabled drivers (e.g. Lucas) to re-organize their familial lives in ways that allowed to improve childcare quality, coordinate vacation times, and spend more time with their children. Further, Pedro described how this wage-and-autonomy dynamic impelled he and his wife to believe that now is the right time to build their family by having their first child.



Synthesizing these findings, each of these cases illustrate *projective*, rather than responsive, creative action; the distinction is, again, best captured by considering both antecedents and consequences. With respect to antecedents, these drivers were not *triggered* into taking particular steps to ensure personal survival as, for example, did the extremely poor (e.g. donating blood plasma for cash) described by Edin and Shaefer (2016). They were not beset by anticipated or unanticipated situational *constraints* to which they needed to respond in order to protect their material and/or emotional interests. Rather, given Uber's work-structure (e.g. wage-predictability, control over hours) and the "experiential normality" of their work-situation, these drivers were enabled to realize their personal aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurial projects, family planning) in ways that reflected the *projection* of their values onto their experiences. Importantly, while in many cases these drivers were enduring severe material constraints (e.g. credit card debt, several dependents), they were nonetheless able to manage and plan out paths toward their aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurship, strengthening familial relations); this contrasts with the contemporary view that creativity is stifled by scarcity (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). This is not to suggest that creativity cannot be constrained by material or other kinds of deprivation, but consistent with the literature on projective creativity (Dominguez 2011; Patterson 2015; Fosse 2015; Edin and Kefala 2005), creative action is quite robust to material circumstances; "slack creativity" is mostly, to use Beck's and Beck-Gernsheim's (2001) phrase, a "zombie category." With respect to consequences, these drivers' actions were *not* oriented toward *maintaining* their (narrowly-conceived) interests or goals (i.e. lower-order wants), in the face of imposed situational constraints; rather, they were oriented toward realizing core values (e.g. desires to be an entrepreneur or experience kinds of consumption, moral commitments to familial life including having a child) in ways that altered social relations (I elaborate on this point below). The upshot was that their actions altered their practices (e.g. meticulous financial tracking); to the extent that those alterations reverberated

more broadly (e.g. entrepreneurship among on-demand workers), then such projective creativity can also have a transformative effect on social relations more broadly.

Common to both these sets of findings (i.e. financial and familial aspirations) regarding projective creative action is a behavioral mechanism involving Uber's work-structure and the certainty it inspires in drivers with respect to *how to attain desired outcomes*. Winship (2015) has described the *opposite* of this behavioral circumstance as *unspecified attainability*, a circumstance in which the constraints (e.g. uncertainty about costs or risks of a particular action) are unknown (or weakly known). I argue that the practice of driving with Uber tends to imbue *particular types of drivers*—those who experience on-demand work as “situationally normal”—with *reduced uncertainty* regarding the attainability of particular expectations of actions (i.e. beliefs about the likelihood that actions will result in particular outcomes). From these findings, I infer the following social mechanism (i.e. sequence of events or processes; see Gross 2009<sup>340</sup>) as implicated in projective creativity:

Uber's work-structure (i.e. non-diminishing wage-returns with incremental hours worked + autonomy or control over driver's work-hours) → (causes) drivers who experience on-demand work as “situationally normal” (due to cultural configurations) to have reduced uncertainty regarding the attainability of their personal aspirations or projects (e.g. entrepreneurship, major consumption, having a child) as well as reduced stress regarding their social situation → (causes) drivers to orient their actions (e.g. financial tracking, “hyper-saving,” gift-purchasing, family planning) toward achieving these purposes *irrespective* (within bounds) of material constraints (e.g. credit card debt, many child dependents) → (causes) alters social practices → (causes) social-selection into new kinds of problem-situations

### **Situational Constraints, Responsive Creativity, and Complications**

The third set of findings regarding behavioral regulation can be usefully understood as responsive creativity, with some important qualifications that complicate this characterization.

Overall, I observed that various aspects of the work-structure of driving with Uber—specifically, rules against smoking in the vehicle, federal laws against drinking under the influence of alcohol, fares

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<sup>340</sup> Gross (2009: 364) defines a social mechanism as: “a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which—in certain circumstances—some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations. This sequence or set may or may not be analytically reducible to the actions of individuals who enact it, may underwrite formal or substantive causal processes, and may be observed, unobserved, or in principle unobservable.”

that are proportionate (non-linearly) to demand and the incidence of peak demand on weekend nights, and driver rating systems—triggered behavioral changes among some drivers. Adil reduced alcohol consumption; Jamal reduced cigarette-smoking (cost-saving by around \$500 per month) and spent fewer weekend nights drinking with friends; and Sayeed (and to a lesser extent Dwayne) became more committed to excellent customer service. It was somewhat surprising that while Adil and Jamal were pleased with the cost-savings that resulted from curbing alcohol and cigarette use (especially Jamal), they did not show much enthusiasm regarding their behavioral change beyond that. Adil’s alcohol-consumption seemed like a controlled, enjoyable pastime, and my impression was that if he stopped driving with Uber, he would revert to prior consumption patterns. Jamal’s cigarette use was quite extreme, and so he did expressly recognize the benefit of reducing his cigarette use by half; yet, it also (understandably) seemed to have been a stressful behavioral change for him, to the extent that he mostly highlighted the cost-savings, with health consequences seeming almost like an ancillary benefit. Nonetheless, the shift was so substantial for Jamal that he did seem to not want to slip back on his progress. For Sayeed and Dwayne, the satisfaction derived from high customer ratings did seem to result in more attentiveness with respect to performing their work with excellence, yet it is likely this change is specific to Uber-driving, and would not manifest itself more generally in other work experiences. Nonetheless, in all these cases, the *longer* new behavioral practices persists—that is, they longer they drive with Uber—it is likely the more procedurally routinized they will become, resulting in more deep-seated effects.

Synthesizing these findings, these cases illustrate *responsive*, rather than projective, creative action; this can be recognized when reflecting on the situational antecedents and consequences. With respect to antecedents, these behavioral shifts were caused by situational triggers that imposed constraints on the actions of the drivers; as long as these workers wanted to continue driving with Uber, abiding by these rules was necessary. This is also true of driver ratings; in some city-markets Uber had

suggested<sup>341</sup> to drivers that their accounts would be deactivated if their rating fell below a certain threshold. While Adil and Jamal recognized that reduced cigarette and alcohol was generally favorable (at least for financial reasons), these behavioral changes were not personal aspirations the drivers held prior to joining Uber; rather, they were imposed on them. With respect to consequences, both Adil and Jamal generally adjusted to these constraints by trying to *maintain* their lifestyle; they merely reduced their alcohol and cigarette use, and expressed little personal satisfaction as to the changes that had occurred. For Dwayne and Sayeed, the consequences are less clear; they both declared that ratings made them more committed to perform their work with excellence. Further, neither of them mentioned trying to stay above a minimum threshold rating so they would not be deactivated from UberPartner; rather, they simply wanted as high a rating as possible. Thus, while minimum rating requirements could be interpreted as a situational constraint that helped drivers realize deeply-held aspirations to perform their work par excellence, a more precise interpretation is that the continuous rating-scale induced some emotional, likely effervescent, exhilaration at the thought of performing better, rather than worse. From these findings, I infer the following social mechanism (Gross 2009<sup>342</sup>) as implicated in responsive creativity:

Uber's work-structure constraints, including behavioral rules, wage-rate peaks on weekend nights, and rating systems → (cause) drivers to adjust their behaviors (e.g. smoke less, clean car more often) while nonetheless maintaining their lifestyle

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<sup>341</sup> Several years ago, Uber indicated to Boston drivers that they should maintain a rating of at least 4.5 out of 5. Yet, this has never been explicit given the legal-dimensions of "controlling" drivers in this way. I have encountered many Uber drivers whose ratings were below 4.5, although the majority have higher ratings.

<sup>342</sup> Gross (2009: 364) defines a social mechanism as: "a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which –in certain circumstances—some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations. This sequence or set may or may not be analytically reducible to the actions of individuals who enact it, may underwrite formal or substantive causal processes, and may be observed, unobserved, or in principle unobservable."

## A Few Conceptual Frontiers for Future Research

I conclude with some final remarks on human agency, Peirce's semiotics, emotional achievement, and unanticipated novelty.

### Human Agency

First, the social process through which values are *projected* onto experiences and actions adds some clarity to the otherwise often muddled concept of "human agency"; it does so by capturing how actors can *select into problem-situations*. The classic theoretical challenge is to grasp how human action can have an altering effect on social relations, simultaneously recognizing that in the strictest sense all human action is constrained by social-ecological (structural) circumstance. The construct of projective creativity offers theoretical leverage in this regard by recognizing that *human projects* are culturally-grounded yet born of "human powers."

To elaborate on this point, on the one hand and as emphasized throughout this dissertation, all creativity is grounded in cultural configurations (habits) which become embodied through knowledge-acquisition channels tied to group-level process (e.g. class, immigration; see chapter two for theoretical basis and chapter four for empirical illustration). For example, in order to understand why entrepreneurship (e.g. owning a transportation business) was meaningful to Abe whereas certain kinds of consumption (e.g. owning a boat) were meaningful to Lucas, we would need to investigate their cultural configurations (among other considerations). In economic terms, Lucas' work-leisure tradeoff had crossed the inflection point on a backward-bending labor supply curve; given that Uber (and his other job) satisfied his income concerns and his values, he preferred substituting leisure for additional paid work. For Abe, the inflection point was much higher due to his cultural configurations. The key point is that the difference between the two is grounded in cultural knowledge "structures." Similarly, to understand why starting a family was a meaningful project for Pedro, we would need to better understand his values and their formation (e.g. immigrant or religious influences). Thus, any conception

of action as *momentarily* extricated from ecological processes is just that, a pragmatic “conception” or analytic category.

Nonetheless, it is quite clear that the cognitive capacity to synthesize information and plan, *project*, and calculate action that accords with one’s cultural configurations is robust to even often-extreme material constraints (as discussed above); this is precisely what the concept of projective creativity captures. It describes how actors can project meaning that is central to their identity onto their experiences and ecologies, to the effect of altering or *transforming* practices and social relations in ways that strongly comport with commonsense understandings of human agency. In contrast, responsive creativity, inasmuch as it is born of disruptive (sometimes coercive) situational triggers, and is oriented toward the *maintenance* (rather than the *actualizing* or *transforming*) of wants, is arguably incongruent with intuitive understandings of agency. Yet, even if responsive creativity is understood as a qualitatively distinct kind of agency (broadly defined), its “effects” are different from those of projective creative actions; responsive creativity tends to imbue actors in their ordinary situational practices and the kinds of problem-situations that they tend to select into and that tend to beset them, whereas projective creativity tends to create “horizon changes” for actors, altering the kinds of problem-situations they select into and that tend to beset them. In this way, by theorizing projective creativity we can move toward understanding the processes through which actors socially select into problem-situations.

### Peirce’s Semiotics

Second, the distinction between projective and responsive creativity—particularly their different antecedents and consequences—adds a causal structure to Peirce’s semiotics. As Tavory and Timmermans (2013) have noted, “Peirce’s semiotics does not tell us why, in a specific case, meaning making operates as it does, only to think of meaning making’s constituent parts.” As described in chapter two, Peirce’s framework offers a useful way to understand how actors with different cultural

configurations and facing different problem-situations will experience sign-objects (e.g. a sign like the word “inequality” which signifies objects like material resource distributions and/or ideas of justice) *differently*; that is, *variations in interpretants*, which are the effects produced by the interpreter’s interpretation of the sign-object. In some circumstances, sign-objects can have a commanding *power* over the interpretant; in these situations, actors can be viewed as malleable to the power of the sign-objects with which they are interacting. This quite strongly evokes the concept of *responsive creativity*, because actors’ creative scope is strongly limited to the imposing power of their social interactions. For example, Uber’s cigarette restrictions are sign-objects which strongly constrain drivers’ interpretive experiences, resulting in generally homogenous responses. Yet, in other cases, the actor (interpreter) possesses a commanding power over the sign-objects they interpret; that is, they are able to interpret their situation liberally and use it to realize personal projects or aspirations. This quite strongly evokes the concept of *projective creativity*, because actors’ creative scope is quite expansive as it emanates from one’s personal values rather than narrow situational dictates. For example, drivers often experienced Uber’s wage and work-schedule rules (i.e. sign-objects) in ways that allowed to generate different kinds of interpretations about how they can re-organize their lives (e.g. aspirations) around Uber. Most importantly, without these concepts, Peirce’s framework is *purely descriptive*, as it offers no insight about when interpretants will be constraining or freeing; yet the concepts of responsive and projective creativity imbue the framework with some causal-explanatory structure.

### Emotional Achievement

Third, while responsive creative actions do not bring to fruition long-held aspirations, they can potentially generate “social flows” (Dominguez 2011) that culminate in the formation of new aspirations. One way in which they can do so is through “small successes” that resulted in self-validating experiences, or what Yang (2000) has described as “emotional achievements.” For example, it is quite possible that by being structurally coerced into reducing his cigarette use, that Adil may over time

continue to “flow” into other social influences (e.g. encouragement from family and friends) and practices (e.g. physical fitness goals) that could, over time, reduce the material and emotional value he attaches to cigarette-smoking. Indeed, Dwayne and Sayeed both experienced emotional achievement by having their assiduous attention to customer service validated by their high ratings; it is quite possible that such emotional achievement can result in the formation of a “value for excellence,” which in turn, can be reinforced through personal norms (Schwartz 1977) in ways generate more long-lasting effects. Future research would benefit from examining whether work-structure situational triggers (e.g. cigarette rules, rating stars) have more permanent behavioral effects by identifying such mechanisms and understanding their “break points.” All else equal, it would be expected that the *longer* the above workers continue to work with Uber, the more likely these new behaviors will become embodied routines.

#### Unanticipated Novelty

Fourth, it is important to recognize that in all the illustrations of creative action we have considered, the general pattern was that novelty of some kind was generated as an *unintended consequence*. Both drivers who used Uber to restructure their lives around projects (e.g. entrepreneurship, family planning) *and* those who adjusted their behaviors in response to work-structure situational triggers *did not anticipate* that they would change in these ways; indeed, they joined Uber for various reasons usually involving escaping unfavorable jobs or supplementing their income to make their expenditures (e.g. debt payments). Nonetheless, since joining Uber, their actions unfolded in new directions that represent forms of everyday novelty which, in aggregate, are the stuff of social change.

## **Chapter Six – Conclusion: The On-Demand Economy’s Social Reverberations**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the on-demand economy’s significance for contemporary social relations, particularly what it means for workers in the United States. Given that this is a question about



understanding discontinuous social change and interpreting the significance of a novel phenomenon, one useful approach for structuring these reflections is to ask whether the on-demand economy is best interpreted as, in Padgett's and Powell's (2012) terms, an "innovation" or an "invention," a pair of constructs which help conceptualize the social significance of novel organizational forms. While both innovations and inventions represent new "combinations and permutations of what was there before" (4), they differ fundamentally in the "the degree to which [the novelty] reverberates out to alter the interacting system of which it is a part" (5). Innovations are novelties which "improve on existing ways (i.e. activities, conceptions, and purposes) of doing things," and *inventions* are novelties which "change the way things are done."<sup>343</sup> Some innovations "cascade out to reconfigure interlinked ecologies of 'ways of doing things,'" but most innovations do not do so, i.e. they do not become inventions. Inventions necessarily transform social relations by "[restructuring] biographies" (11), or in terms of the pragmatist framework described in chapter two, altering actors' (individuals, organizations) social practices (e.g. what is produced) and cultural knowledge (e.g. routines).

With these concepts defined, it is quite clear that Uber meets the (minimum) "threshold" of being an *innovation*, given its discernable effects on consumers, technology, law and policy, industries, among other domains of social life. With respect to consumers, it has substantially expanded markets by reducing their internal transaction costs and increasing their liquidity, to the effect of dramatically driving down prices (e.g. UberPool and UberX) and wait-times<sup>344</sup>; these changes ushered in what could be described as a "democratization of consumption,<sup>345</sup>" availing millions of individuals (riders and drivers) to new opportunities and experiences. Indeed, many of Uber's millions of riders did not

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<sup>343</sup> They note that they use these terms differently than Joseph Schumpeter famously did.

<sup>344</sup> For example, in Cambridge, MA, riders can request a few-mile ride from Cambridge to Somerville for as little as \$2.75 per trip (with Uberpool) and within five minutes of their request.

<sup>345</sup> It is democratized in the sense that quite clearly results in expanded access.

regularly use for-hire transportation services (e.g. taxicabs) prior to Uber, and relatedly, for-hire transportation markets multiplied in size in the post-Uber period, particularly with the advent of UberX in July 2012. More broadly, millions of consumers now regularly use a range of on-demand services for housing (e.g. Airbnb), food deliver (e.g. UberEATs, Fodler), grocery delivery (e.g. Instacart), home tasks (e.g. TaskRabbit, Handler), etc. As described in chapter one, on-demand businesses have attracted millions of workers worldwide, with Uber attracting roughly 0.3 percent of the American labor force. Further, Uber has also contributed to technological improvements in artificial intelligence (e.g. driverless cars), urban transportation (e.g. Movement platform), and other areas. It has also advanced the legal-policy frontier, particularly surrounding worker-classification issues. It has triggered imitation processes in a variety of industries (see chapter one), or what has been called “uberization” or the “Uber for X” phenomena, as well as a concomitant business literature on on-demand and comparable organizational models (e.g. Baxter 2015). Further social reverberations could be identified.

The more challenging and consequential matter is to what extent has the on-demand economy generated historical discontinuities in “how things are done”, i.e. is it an innovation *that has cascaded into an invention*? In order to address this question concretely, it is important to specify our analytic bounds by asking *for whom and what* has the on-demand economy changed “how things are done”; further, it is important to recognize that, with respect to this question, this dissertation’s findings bear most directly on the domain of social relations that is *workers’ experiences*. Nonetheless, it is also useful to offer some preliminary extrapolations about Uber’s broader social reverberations to help shed light on the particular ways in which the novelty that is the on-demand economy could be considered an invention.

To these ends, I proceed in two sections. First, I address what the on-demand economy means for changing work relations and social inequality. I argue that with respect to “restructuring the biographies” (Padgett and Powell) of workers, the on-demand economy is usefully understood as an

invention. I also reflect on the on-demand economy's normative implications for social inequality.

Second, I offer some remarks about broader social reverberations often associated with the on-demand economy, mainly arguing that very few of these reverberations can be usefully understood as rooted in the on-demand economy.

## **THE ON-DEMAND ECONOMY, CHANGING WORK-RELATIONS, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY**

With respect to workers, this dissertation's findings suggest that the emergence of the on-demand economy is indeed an invention that has restructured the biographies of workers, with important implications for our normative understanding of changing work-relations and social inequality. At the most basic level, among myriad on-demand firms, Uber has itself generated work-income for around 1.1 million workers globally, of whom roughly 500,000 are in the United States, representing approximately 0.3 percent of the U.S. workforce. As described in chapter one, this is largely due to the relative wage-stability and autonomy that Uber provides, as well as the ease with which workers can join the platform (i.e. low-procedural skills, minimal requirements, auto-financing programs). Critically, among Uber's U.S. drivers, roughly half of them (~250,000) had no prior work-histories in the transportation sector, which is partly a reflection of Uber's tremendously heterogeneous workforce (e.g. education, age, country-of-origin), an empirical fact that has been critical to making sense of workers' experiences.

### **Worker-Biography Restructuring**

It is important to recognize that an organizational novelty that generates a substantial quantity of jobs is not, in that fact alone, an invention; rather, we must ask if Uber created, in Padgett's and Powell's (2012) words, "new people," i.e. if it exemplifies "relations [creating] actors" (2012: 2). Chapters four and five suggest that for workers who use Uber transitionally (e.g. distaste for the work given preferences and scripts) toward various ends (e.g. a specific goal such as income or consumption smoothing), Uber has *not* had a substantial biographical effect; yet for other drivers, particularly those for whom Uber's work-structure fits with their values and personal norms, Uber has indeed restructured

their biographies. Many of these workers experienced Uber as an opportunity to reorganize their lives in ways that better aligned their experiences with their values. I observed drivers who were motivated by their Uber experience (e.g. wage-predictability, viewable income history) to start diligently tracking their finances for the purpose of realizing their personal financial and lifestyle aspirations (e.g. entrepreneurship, major consumption). We observed other drivers re-organize their familial lives by using Uber to make additional income whenever they needed it (e.g. gift-purchases) and leveraging their work-autonomy (e.g. control over hours) to mitigate against risks associated with starting a family. For drivers who had extensive negative labor market histories—such as those who had experienced the rentier practices in the taxicab industry—the possibility of leaving Uber to find more traditional employment was simply irrelevant; they had become expressly committed to Uber and structuring their lives around it. Given that relations tend to create actors over long time-frames, it would be expected that over many years of conceptual and procedural priming, Uber’s effect in altering these drivers’ practices (e.g. financial diligence) and structures of interaction (e.g. vis-a-vis family, entrepreneurship, etc.) would become increasingly entrenched; that is, Uber would have “restructured biographies” (Padgett and Powell 2012: 11) by altering drivers’ cultural configurations (e.g. cultural foci, configural availability, social identity, etc.; Patterson 2014).

### **The On-Demand Economy’s Countervailing Effects on Social Inequalities**

We can begin to grasp the relationship between on-demand workers’ experiences and pressing normative questions related to changing work-relations and social inequalities in the contemporary U.S. by recognizing that the combination of (1) Uber’s distinct work-structure and (2) its heterogeneous workforce generates *countervailing* effects on social inequalities. These effects can be understood as generated *via different drivers’ work-experiences*; that is, quite broadly, Uber can be understood as both *reducing* and *increasing* social inequalities *through* the disparate experiences of different sub-

populations of drivers<sup>346</sup>. I will discuss these effects in turn, and conclude with some more general comments on Uber and social inequality.

### **Reducing Inequalities**

Uber *reduces inequalities* through a work-structure that creates a range of pecuniary and non-pecuniary “resources” that are highly valued by a subset (arguably a majority<sup>347</sup>) of Uber drivers, relative to available work-alternatives. These workers tended to fit into two broad groups: (1) they were college-educated *and* tended to be (a) immigrants, (b) have strong familial commitments, and/or (c) have core friendship networks comprised of mainly individuals whose work did not necessitate their formal-educational skills; and (2) irrespective of formal-education, they were workers who had extensive negative experiences in more traditional work arrangements, particularly in the low-wage service sector (e.g. trucking, taxicab, restaurants, delivery). For both groups, on-demand work was experienced as “normal” and fitting to their circumstances, and in turn, the possibility of working in the future in traditional kinds of work was orthogonal to their everyday practical considerations. Beyond relatively favorable wages (i.e. ubiquity of work, stability, satisfactory wage per hour especially given dynamic pricing), for these drivers in particular the relative *autonomy* that Uber provides was highly valued. While nearly all Uber drivers (e.g. goal-focused, transitional drivers) attested to the *practical flexibility* that Uber provides, these more committed Uber drivers described their autonomy in terms of the positive *freedom* of being able to control their own hours, the *power* of being their own boss, and the *dignity* of organizing their lives as they choose. Beyond the incidental benefits of practical flexibility (e.g. coordinating leisure time with friends), the *freedom* many drivers experienced reflected a subjective self-actualization realized in part through the projection of core values onto practical experiences. These

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<sup>346</sup> Of course, I am using these terms (i.e. reducing, increasing) in a quite generic and undifferentiated sense; these effects could be understood as transitory or more permanent (i.e. long-term).

<sup>347</sup> Most of the Uber drivers I sampled fell into this category, but of course, my sample is not nationally representative.

work-structured experiences of freedom<sup>348</sup> are captured in the broad, *qualitative* understandings of human *utility* (or “value”) described by John Dewey (1929; 1939a; 1939b), Amartya Sen (1999), among others. Thus, insofar as we take a more critical approach to understanding social inequalities by capturing not only “harder” social goods like income but also “softer” ones like freedom and dignity, then our findings suggest that Uber and the on-demand economy, from the perspective of workers’ experiences, reduces social inequality.

### **Intensifying Inequalities**

Yet, with respect to another set of drivers, Uber’s work-structure can be viewed as *intensifying inequalities*. These drivers are typically single, young men with U.S.-based college degrees, who valued Uber as a transitional source of income but felt “out of place” performing on-demand work. The autonomy that Uber provides these workers tended to result in a “freedom” to make costly mistakes. Dewey (1910b) described this aptly in *How We Think*: “While the power of thought frees us from servile subjection to instinct, appetite, and routine, it also brings with it the occasion and possibility of error and mistake...it opens to us the possibilities of failures.” These errors and mistakes take the form of excessive *exploratory*<sup>349</sup> behavior that results in actors spending less time deriving direct value (e.g. income and its benefits) from their labor, which is a sub-optimal tradeoff between “foraging” and “searching.”

Thus, Uber’s autonomy is double-edged, generating countervailing effects on social inequalities; however, Uber’s effect on social inequality should also be understood in more contingent terms, specifically involving successful transitions from on-demand to mainstream kinds of work arrangements. The longer the duration over which workers drive with Uber, the less likely it is that they will make a

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<sup>348</sup> Of course, Patterson (1992) reminds us that understandings of freedom vary widely across social-ecologies and thus should be understood as a historical, cultural-structural development.

<sup>349</sup> The psychology literature on learning and decision-making distinguishes between “exploration” versus “exploitation”/“foraging.” Similar ideas are found in computer science search algorithms (see “local exploitation” versus “distant exploration”).

successful transition to becoming a more “traditional employee” (i.e. regular hours, hierarchical organization with “bosses,” etc.) for several reasons: (1) the requisite procedural skills required for traditional labor may become less accessible over time; (2) drivers may develop new “tastes” for work without direct supervision, which may also entail a distaste for most traditional employment; and (3) they may suffer a “status penalty” given that employers are more likely to judge workers with substantial histories performing on-demand work (relative to other kinds of workers) as less suited to more traditional employment. On the other hand, a longer-duration Uber experience may also help drivers cultivate certain procedural skills (e.g. conversational skills, certain kinds of client-based professional, personal endurance or resilience) that may improve their labor market prospects, as well as protect them from the usually-more pernicious effects of unemployment; yet, these conferred advantages are likely to be applicable to only a narrow category of jobs (e.g. high-end chauffeur service). Thus, overall, it would be expected that driving with Uber long-term would dampen workers’ chances of transitioning to mainstream work post-Uber. However, the extent to which this is problematic itself depends on various contingencies, such as: (1) the risk of become involuntarily displaced out of on-demand work—for example, due to personal reasons (e.g. negative health event) or exogenous shocks (e.g. new government regulation, emergence of new job categories)—(2) trends in the quality of traditional jobs (e.g. greater workplace protections), i.e. weakened chances of switching to jobs that are of low-quality will not effectively exacerbate inequalities, and (3) national policies that provide social-insurance mechanisms to individuals irrespective of their employment (e.g. universal health care), i.e. such policies would dampen the significance of Uber drivers having difficulty transitioning to mainstream work because of the obviated social-insurance differential between on-demand and mainstream work.

## Freedom and Power on the Fringe

Finally, concluding this section, a broader comment about the emergence of on-demand work and social inequality is merited. The social-organization of work in the U.S. is undoubtedly changing, with substantial polarization in recent decades in both job-quality (Kalleberg 2011) and employment growth—e.g. growth in both high- and low- skill and –wage jobs, with a hollowing out in the middle (Autor 2010); workers have also become increasingly decoupled from traditional employment relations and have been increasingly shifting into certain nonstandard work categories, especially in the past decade. Such polarization and decoupling often evokes a general narrative of workers being “left out” of the promises of neoliberal prosperity, as being new victims to a capitalist logic that finds novel social-organizational models through which to extract labor value from workers to the benefit of capitalist interests (see chapter two). Yet, investigating the lives of Uber drivers, I have discovered that in being decoupled from the mainstream, many workers experience a *freedom on the fringe*. As has already been noted, the majority of these workers were not involuntarily displaced into on-demand work; indeed, only 8 percent of them were unemployed prior to joining Uber (Hall and Krueger 2015). Due to various cultural factors described in chapter four and work-structural factors described in chapter five, I found that a substantial segment of these workers experienced improved quality of life in the on-demand economy.

Of course, as described in chapter one, there is a hierarchical relation between Uber’s management and its drivers characterized by considerable power imbalance; however, as argued in chapter two, the Bourdieusian conflation of power with domination is problematic and my findings reveal why. Certain social processes are indeed generating social inequalities. For example, that on-demand workers lack employee-based benefits and protections (e.g. health insurance, retirement-savings programs) does indeed exacerbate inequalities and instabilities; indeed, it also arguably *normalizes* the privatization of household risk in ways that could potentially destabilize the lives of more



traditional workers as well (e.g. restructuring employee benefits to cut costs, reduced corporate spending on in-house skilling, etc.).

Yet, other social processes, such as those underlying technological and entrepreneurial action, are not only providing *private* means of mitigating against economic insecurity (e.g. income and consumption smoothing) but are also *redefining* the nature of those inequalities by redistributing social power. On this point, it is important to recognize that the taxicab industry is highly regulated, with deeply entrenched institutional practices (e.g. medallion system); Uber effectively redistributed this “incumbent power” from medallion-owners to both its shareholders *and*, to some degree, its drivers. Given (1) that “all of the net employment growth in the U.S. economy from 2005 to 2015 appears to have occurred in [nonstandard work categories]” (Katz and Krueger 2016), (2) how internally differentiated the “nonstandard work category” is, and (3) that Uber has arguably created more work in the nonstandard work category than any other single organization, it is especially critical to recognize that changing work-relations in the contemporary United States are *not driven by any single sociological process*; some of these processes are polarizing work outcomes whereas others—like the social processes underlying the on-demand economy’s emergence—are generating new, qualitatively distinct work-experiences that cannot be understood as part of a broader functionalist-capitalist logic that continuously worsens inequalities. These processes avail “fringe workers” to newfound freedoms and opportunities to project their values creatively onto their situations. Thus, overall, to propose that on-demand workers are part of a group of disgruntled nonstandard workers that are a “class-in-the-making” as many have (e.g. Standing 2011) is simply a distraction that provides little to no insight into contemporary work-relations and social inequalities.

## THE ON-DEMAND ECONOMY’S BROADER REVERBERATIONS

Finally, what is the future of the on-demand economy and its broader consequences? Will its reverberations cascade outward across ecologies as a veritable social invention does? Indeed, as Padgett

and Powell (2012: 11) have noted, inventions occur through a “slower process” than do innovations, and thus, any answers to the above questions will by definition be largely speculative and hence kept brief. Various domains of social life and many contingencies could be considered (e.g. driver-owned competitor platforms; see Vaiana 2016), but I will focus on (1) individual consumers, (2) industries, corporations, and technology, and (3) legal-policy developments.

### **Individual Consumers**

First, there is the question of what is Uber’s effect on consumers: has Uber, or the on-demand economy more generally, created “new consumer persons” with new modes of interaction and cultural configurations? Overall, it is not particularly useful to view the on-demand economy as having had this effect. Consumer demand for rapidly-provided goods and services is a novel phenomenon but it is part of a much broader communication-technology transformation related to the advent and mass consumption of the internet (e.g. Amazon, E-bay) and smartphone devices (e.g. iPhone); it should not be viewed as directly the result of the on-demand economy’s emergence. Even *on-the-go consumption*—which is arguably much more closely tied to the emergence of the on-demand economy—existed in various forms prior to Uber’s emergence (e.g. pay-per-view television). Undoubtedly, the on-demand organizational model has accelerated and expanded these consumer trends. However, even if these changes in consumption could be attributed to the on-demand economy, is there evidence that they have altered modes of social interaction in ways that have generated persistent and far-reaching social reverberations? There is little evidence of this to date. For example, if it could be shown that on-demand food delivery has reduced communal eating among friends or family, then that would arguably constitute a far-reaching effect. If the convenience (e.g. short wait-times) and low cost of Uber and competitive platforms is leading urban consumers to substantially alter their social practices and lifestyles by, for example, interacting with new kinds of people in new ways (e.g. people from more distant neighborhoods or social networks), then that would also arguably constitute a far-reaching

effect. Yet, there is little evidence of such reverberations to date; although the on-demand economy is only eight years old.

### **Industries, Technology, and Corporations**

Second, with respect to industries, technology, and corporations, the evidence of far-reaching reverberations is slightly stronger. A substantial segment of the taxicab industry has reorganized to combat the emergence of on-demand transportation companies like Uber. Beyond engaging in regulatory battles, taxicab companies have reorganized in many major cities to strengthen their competitive position against Uber and others—despite being relatively undercapitalized (Gray 2016)—with many taxicab businesses merging and launching their own joint on-demand mobile applications (e.g. see Lomas 2015 on Easy Taxi and Tappsi). Yet, it unclear how these effects extend beyond this particular industry.

With respect to technology, while several corporations (e.g. Google, Ford) have been interested in the development of self-driving vehicle technology, undoubtedly Uber has rapidly accelerated this line of research. As early as 2013, Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick reportedly excitedly stated the following after a meeting with Google Ventures executives: "The minute your car becomes real, I can take the dude out of the front seat... I call that margin expansion" (Stone 2017). Undoubtedly, this self-driving vehicles will have significant effects on private transportation, particularly in urban areas, yet it is unclear whether it will fundamentally alter social interactions. However, even if its effects are socially profound, it is not particularly useful to view the on-demand economy as having been critical to the development of this technology, as it is largely an "old idea" whose realization has simply lagged behind advances in artificial intelligence and other areas.

Another salient development has been the "Uber for X" or "uberization" phenomenon, characterized by entrepreneurs in a wide range of industries having adopted the on-demand organizational model (see chapter one for details) in their respective businesses. Yet, despite this

widespread imitation process, very few of the hundreds of “Uber for X” on-demand companies has grown to scale, and indeed, most have already failed for a variety of reasons<sup>350</sup>. Further, while major corporations have recognized the growing consumer demand for *immediacy* in service-provision, these corporate changes are only tenuously connected to the emergence of the on-demand economy. For example, the development of Amazon Prime—a membership service created by Amazon that provides customers with various privileges (e.g. rapid delivery) and which has been critical to how Amazon has restructured its businesses practices in the past decade—is almost entirely orthogonal to the emergence of the on-demand economy, as ecommerce companies have *always* recognized that consumers will pay a premium for rapid delivery. Another interesting development on the corporate-level is the emergence of for-profit educational companies that sell immersive “bootcamp programs” which teach consumers in-demand skills (e.g. data-science, mobile-application programming); these programs are partly premised on the growing demand for technical workers with particular skillsets (e.g. user experience research, app design, machine learning) in the on-demand economy. These companies have become important players in the education market, rivaling university summer school programs. Yet, this development cannot be meaningfully tied to the on-demand economy, but rather, is rooted in a more general demand for technical skills. Finally, as noted above, it is possible the salience of the on-demand economy is *normalizing* a “1099 economy” (i.e. “independent contractor” economy) which may make it easier for corporations to cut back on workplace benefits for their employees; yet, there is little evidence that any such changes that have occurred can be attributed to the on-demand economy.

### **Legal-Policy Restructurings**

Third, we ought to ask: has the de facto emergence of the on-demand economy altered legal categories involving worker-classification and relevant regulations and policies? In my view, beyond the on-demand

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<sup>350</sup> Much has been written about how the on-demand organizational model is only relevant to a subset of service areas, particularly those where marketplace liquidity can be readily created and for which consumers highly value *immediacy*.

economy's restructuring of worker biographies (described above), this is plausibly the weightiest and most far-reaching potential reverberation of the on-demand economy.

There is strong reason to believe that Uber was the *critical* factor in legislative developments across the U.S. (and many other countries) involving worker-classification issues. The most telling illustration of this is the case of Seattle. Due to various federal regulations, it is difficult for states and cities to pass legislation that allows "independent contractors" to unionize; thus, advocates of on-demand workers have tended to focus their strategies and tactics toward classifying Uber drivers as "employees," which would avail them to various benefits and protections (see chapter one). Yet, in Seattle, city officials have tried to push for a "third way," as described by Seattle councilman Mike O'Brien, who advanced legislation that would allow independent contractors to gain collective bargaining rights *without* being classified as employees: "We're trying to be innovative on behalf of workers here to give them some leverage in negotiations...They don't fit neatly either as the employee or the independent contractor...I think it's possible that we need more classes of employment, but that may be years in the making" (Wogan 2016). This ordinance has been vigorously contested since its passing in December 2015, and is still not in effect. Somewhat relatedly, in New York City, a "guild" of drivers called the "Independent Drivers Guild" was also formed, which although less novel, can also be viewed as a "third way" between workers having no collective rights and having union-based bargaining rights. The key point is that the emergence of the on-demand economy has quite directly led to these sorts of legislative and organizational novelties, in ways that could plausibly have dramatic effects on not only workers' experiences but also on the incentive structure of businesses interested in using independent contractors to provide their core services.

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