Algorithmic Management and the Phenomenology of Constrained Agency:

A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Gig Economy Workers

Abstract

Algorithmic management systems—platforms that use machine learning models to assign tasks, evaluate performance, and discipline workers without direct human oversight—have become the dominant labor governance mechanism in the gig economy. While a growing body of literature documents the material effects of these systems (reduced earnings, surveillance intensification, opaque disciplinary procedures), comparatively little research has examined how workers themselves understand, interpret, and respond to algorithmic authority as a phenomenological experience. This study addresses that gap through a sequential mixed-methods design combining (1) a survey of 412 gig workers across three platform types (rideshare, delivery, and freelance knowledge work) measuring perceived autonomy, algorithmic awareness, and resistance behaviors, and (2) 28 semi-structured interviews analyzing workers' cognitive and narrative frameworks for making sense of algorithmic control. Quantitative findings reveal a significant inverse relationship between algorithmic opacity—workers' inability to understand or predict platform decision-making—and perceived occupational autonomy ($r = -.61$, $p < .001$), even after controlling for earnings volatility and hours worked. Qualitative analysis identifies a novel construct, which this paper terms constrained agency, a phenomenological orientation in which workers maintain subjective narratives of independence while behaviorally adapting to algorithmic imperatives in ways that functionally reproduce dependency. These findings contribute to labor process theory by identifying a mechanism through which algorithmic management perpetuates worker compliance without requiring explicit coercion, and carry implications for platform labor regulation and worker organizing strategies.

Keywords: algorithmic management, gig economy, labor process theory, worker autonomy, constrained agency, platform labor, mixed methods

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Introduction

In April 2021, a coalition of Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama, voted on whether to form the first Amazon union in the United States. Much of the subsequent media coverage focused on traditional labor concerns—wages, benefits, break times. Less examined was the workers' repeated references to a specific grievance: "the system." Warehouse employees described an algorithmic productivity tracking system, called the Time Off Task (TOT) monitor, that generated automatic disciplinary warnings and terminations with no human review. Workers reported modifying their behavior not in response to supervisory feedback but in response to their interpretations of what the algorithm might do. One organizer put it plainly: "You're not working for a boss anymore. You're working for a machine that doesn't know you exist" (Sainato, 2021).

This paper takes that observation seriously as a theoretical and empirical problem. The shift from human to algorithmic management is not merely a change in the technology of supervision; it is a transformation in the social relations of work that has yet to be fully theorized. Existing accounts in labor process theory (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979; Burawoy, 1979) were developed in the context of human managers and physical assembly lines. Algorithmic management introduces a form of control that is simultaneously more pervasive, more opaque, and more difficult for workers to contest than its human predecessors (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Veen et al., 2020).

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it provides the first large-scale quantitative measurement of the relationship between algorithmic opacity—workers'

subjective inability to understand platform decision-making—and perceived occupational autonomy across multiple gig economy platform types. Second, it introduces and empirically grounds the concept of constrained agency, a phenomenological orientation that, we argue, is the characteristic psychological accommodation workers make to algorithmic control. Third, it proposes a revision to Edwards' (1979) typology of control mechanisms that incorporates algorithmic control as a qualitatively distinct fourth type, irreducible to bureaucratic, technical, or simple control.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on labor process theory, algorithmic management, and the sociology of worker subjectivity. Section 3 describes the mixed-methods research design, sampling procedures, and analytical approaches. Section 4 presents quantitative survey findings. Section 5 presents qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews. Section 6 develops the constrained agency framework and its theoretical implications. Section 7 addresses limitations and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Labor Process Theory and the Problem of Control

Labor process theory (LPT) originates with Braverman's (1974) analysis of the degradation of work under monopoly capitalism. Braverman argued that the structural imperative of capital accumulation drives management to continuously separate conception from execution—appropriating workers' skill and knowledge and embedding it in machinery and procedure. Edwards (1979) extended this analysis by identifying three historical types of management control: simple control (direct personal authority), technical control (pace and procedure determined by machinery), and bureaucratic control (rules, procedures, and

hierarchical evaluation). Each successive type represented both a more sophisticated mechanism of control and a response to the contradictions generated by previous forms.

Burawoy's (1979) Manufacturing Consent complicated this picture by demonstrating that workers actively participate in reproducing the conditions of their own exploitation. Through the game of "making out"—attempting to exceed production quotas as a source of shop-floor satisfaction—workers consent to the labor process even as it constrains them. Burawoy's insight was that control mechanisms work not primarily through coercion but through the manufacture of consent: systems that make compliance feel like autonomy. This concept will be central to our analysis of constrained agency.

More recent scholarship has examined how information technology transforms labor control (Zuboff, 1988; Sewell, 1998). Zuboff's early work on computerized workplaces identified a dual logic of automation and "informating"—IT systems that not only automate tasks but produce unprecedented flows of behavioral data that can be turned back on workers as a disciplinary resource. Sewell (1998) analyzed the panoptical dimensions of electronic monitoring, arguing that IT-enabled surveillance intensifies peer pressure and self-discipline in ways that extend managerial control without requiring direct supervisory labor.

Algorithmic Management in Platform Labor

The emergence of platform-mediated gig work has generated a rapidly growing literature on algorithmic management (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Kellogg et al., 2020). Rosenblat and Stark's (2016) foundational study of Uber drivers demonstrated that algorithmic systems produce a distinctive form of asymmetric information: the platform possesses comprehensive knowledge of drivers' behavior, location, and earnings, while drivers have minimal visibility into how the algorithm assigns rides, calculates surge pricing, or makes

deactivation decisions. This epistemic asymmetry, they argue, constitutes a form of "soft control" that shapes behavior through the manipulation of information rather than through direct instruction.

Kellogg et al. (2020) synthesize this literature into a taxonomy of algorithmic management practices organized around three functions: directing work (task assignment, navigation optimization), evaluating work (automated performance scoring, customer rating aggregation), and disciplining work (automated warnings, deactivation). Their review identifies what they call the "algorithmic control paradox": workers are classified as independent contractors and nominally free to set their own hours, but algorithmic incentive structures—surge pricing, acceptance rate thresholds, "streaks" and bonuses—effectively direct their behavior with greater precision than conventional employment.

A smaller but growing body of research examines workers' subjective responses to algorithmic authority. Veen et al. (2020) found that food delivery workers in Australia developed sophisticated interpretive frameworks—what they called "gaming"—for inferring the logic of algorithmic task assignment and manipulating their behavior accordingly. Importantly, workers who engaged in gaming reported higher subjective autonomy despite being more thoroughly adapted to algorithmic imperatives, a finding that anticipates our concept of constrained agency. Goods and Veen (2021) documented similar patterns among rideshare drivers in Australia, showing that workers' narratives of entrepreneurial independence persisted even as their behavioral freedoms narrowed under algorithmic intensification.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite this growing body of work, three significant gaps remain. First, most existing studies focus on a single platform type—typically rideshare or food delivery—making cross-

platform comparison impossible. It is not known whether the psychological and behavioral patterns documented for Uber drivers generalize to workers on freelance knowledge work platforms such as Upwork or Mechanical Turk, where the nature of work and the form of algorithmic control differ substantially.

Second, existing qualitative research, while rich, has not been systematically connected to quantitative measurement of the constructs it identifies. The concept of workers' "sense of autonomy" under algorithmic management has been theorized extensively but not operationalized or measured at scale. Without quantitative anchoring, it is difficult to assess the prevalence of different orientations or to test proposed causal relationships.

Third, and most importantly, the theoretical frameworks used to interpret workers' subjective responses remain underdeveloped. The observation that workers simultaneously experience themselves as autonomous and adapt to algorithmic control has been made repeatedly, but it has not been systematically theorized as a distinct phenomenological orientation with its own internal logic, developmental trajectory, or practical consequences. This paper addresses all three gaps.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) in which quantitative survey data were collected first to establish the distribution of key constructs across the study population, followed by semi-structured interviews designed to explain and elaborate patterns identified in the survey. The integration of methods occurred at both the design stage—interview question development was informed by preliminary survey

analysis—and the interpretation stage, where quantitative findings and qualitative themes were synthesized into the constrained agency framework.

Survey Sample and Procedure

Survey participants (N = 412) were recruited through purposive sampling across three platform categories: (1) rideshare platforms (Uber, Lyft; n = 148), (2) food and grocery delivery platforms (DoorDash, Instacart, Shipt; n = 134), and (3) freelance knowledge work platforms (Upwork, Fiverr, Amazon Mechanical Turk; n = 130). Recruitment was conducted through platform-specific online worker communities and forums, with snowball sampling to supplement initial recruitment. Eligibility criteria required that participants had been active on their primary platform for at least six months and had completed a minimum of 50 jobs or tasks. The final sample was 58% male, 38% female, and 4% non-binary or gender non-conforming; mean age was 31.4 years (SD = 8.2); 44% identified the platform as their primary income source.

Survey Measures

The survey instrument measured five primary constructs. Algorithmic Opacity was assessed using a 7-item scale developed for this study (α = .83) measuring workers' reported inability to understand, predict, or contest platform algorithmic decision-making (e.g., "I understand how the platform decides which jobs to assign me" [reverse-scored]; "I know what would cause me to be deactivated from this platform" [reverse-scored]). Perceived Occupational Autonomy was measured using a 6-item adapted version of the Work Design Questionnaire autonomy subscale (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; α = .79). Algorithmic Awareness measured workers' knowledge of specific platform practices (e.g., whether they knew their customer ratings were used in deactivation decisions). Resistance Behaviors assessed engagement in platform-documented forms of resistance (e.g., logging off during surge periods to manipulate

pricing, coordinated rating inflation). Earnings Volatility was measured as the standard deviation of reported weekly earnings over the past three months, normalized by mean earnings.

Interview Sample and Procedure

Interview participants (n = 28) were selected from survey respondents who indicated willingness to be contacted for follow-up. Maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to ensure representation across platform types (rideshare: n = 10; delivery: n = 10; knowledge work: n = 8), income dependency (primary vs. supplemental), and levels of algorithmic opacity (high, medium, low as measured by survey tercile). Interviews were conducted via video conference, lasted 45–75 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' written consent. Interview protocols were semi-structured, covering workers' daily routines, their understanding of how the platform works, specific experiences with algorithmic decisions (including disciplinary actions), and how they describe their relationship to the platform in their own terms.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Initial coding was conducted inductively by the first author; a second round of deductive coding applied emergent themes to the full corpus. Intercoder reliability was assessed on a 20% subsample ($\kappa = .76$, indicating substantial agreement). Negative case analysis was used to identify and theorize exceptions to dominant patterns.

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics and Construct Correlations

Mean algorithmic opacity across the full sample was 4.21 (SD = 1.34) on a 7-point scale, indicating that workers on average reported moderate-to-high difficulty understanding platform decision-making. Scores varied significantly by platform type ($F[2, 409] = 14.32$, $p < .001$): rideshare workers reported the highest opacity (M = 4.68, SD = 1.21), followed by delivery

workers (M = 4.19, SD = 1.38), with knowledge work platform workers reporting the lowest opacity (M = 3.73, SD = 1.38). Mean perceived occupational autonomy was 3.89 (SD = 1.18), also on a 7-point scale, with similar platform-type variation ($F[2, 409] = 9.44$, $p < .001$).

Primary Hypothesis: Opacity and Autonomy

The primary hypothesis—that algorithmic opacity would be inversely associated with perceived occupational autonomy—was strongly supported. Pearson correlation between opacity and autonomy was $r = -.61$ ($p < .001$, 95% CI [−.67, −.54]), indicating a large effect size. This relationship held across all three platform types (rideshare: $r = -.58$; delivery: $r = -.63$; knowledge work: $r = -.57$; all $p < .001$) and was robust to the inclusion of covariates.

Hierarchical multiple regression examined whether the opacity–autonomy relationship persisted after controlling for earnings volatility, hours worked per week, income dependency, and platform tenure. In Model 1 (covariates only), earnings volatility ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .001$) and income dependency ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .003$) were significant negative predictors of perceived autonomy, together accounting for 14% of variance ($R^2 = .14$). Adding algorithmic opacity in Model 2 explained an additional 24% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .24$, F change = 138.7, $p < .001$), with opacity emerging as the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = -.52$, $p < .001$). The full model accounted for 38% of variance in perceived autonomy ($R^2 = .38$).

Resistance Behaviors and Awareness

Contrary to the prediction that higher algorithmic awareness would predict greater resistance, we found a non-linear relationship: workers with moderate awareness (middle tercile) reported the highest rates of resistance behavior (M = 2.34 on a 5-point scale), while both low-awareness workers (M = 1.56) and high-awareness workers (M = 1.89) reported less resistance. Post-hoc analysis suggested that high-awareness workers are more likely to engage in

individually rational platform adaptation ("gaming") rather than collective resistance, a pattern illuminated by the qualitative findings below.

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: The Algorithm as Inscrutable Authority

Across platform types, workers consistently described the algorithm as an authority figure whose decisions were final, opaque, and impossible to contest through normal channels. A freelance data annotator with 18 months of experience on Mechanical Turk described the experience as follows:

> "There's no one to call. There's no email that actually goes to a person. I got a quality score that dropped out of nowhere and it cut my access to the better-paying tasks in half. I submitted three feedback forms. Nothing. You just have to figure out what you did and fix it, except you don't know what you did. So you change everything and hope." (Interview 12)

This passage captures what appeared across interviews as a distinctive form of epistemic frustration: not simply the absence of recourse, but the absence of the information necessary to know what recourse would even mean. Unlike a human manager whose displeasure can be interpreted and responded to, the algorithm offers no social cues, no negotiating surface, and no explanation. Workers across all platform types described developing extensive informal theories about algorithmic logic—often shared in online communities—that served as practical guides to behavior in the absence of any official transparency.

Theme 2: Constrained Agency in Practice

The most theoretically significant theme to emerge from the qualitative data was what we have termed constrained agency: a phenomenological orientation in which workers maintain

active narratives of autonomous self-direction while their behavioral repertoire has been substantially shaped and narrowed by algorithmic imperatives. The key feature of constrained agency is not false consciousness—workers are often acutely aware of the constraints they operate under—but rather a cognitive and narrative strategy for preserving a meaningful sense of self-determination within those constraints.

An Uber driver with four years of experience described this orientation with unusual clarity:

> "People ask me, don't you hate not having a boss? And I say, are you kidding? I love it. I set my own hours, I work when I want, I go home when I want. And then I catch myself—okay, I work Sunday mornings because that's when surge is good, I don't go home when I want because I'm two rides from a streak bonus, I drive toward downtown because the app is showing me where demand is. So am I actually choosing any of that? I don't know. But it feels like I'm choosing it, and that matters." (Interview 3)

This passage exemplifies constrained agency's defining structure: the simultaneous acknowledgment of algorithmic constraint and the subjective insistence on autonomous choice. Critically, this is not mere self-deception; the driver's reflection demonstrates genuine insight into the mechanism of his own compliance. Constrained agency is not blindness to constraint but accommodation to it—a working peace with algorithmic authority that preserves psychological equilibrium by reframing adaptive behavior as chosen behavior.

Theme 3: Platform Type Variations

While constrained agency was present across platform types, its specific form and intensity varied. Rideshare workers showed the most elaborate forms—long tenure, high stakes

(vehicle investment), and high opacity combined to produce sophisticated phenomenological accommodations. Knowledge work platform workers showed more polarized responses: some had developed highly rationalized, instrumental relationships with the algorithm ("I treat it like weather—plan around it, don't fight it"), while others reported acute alienation and exit intentions. Delivery workers showed the greatest variation, likely reflecting the heterogeneity of this category, which includes both workers treating delivery as supplemental income and those for whom it is a primary livelihood.

Discussion

Constrained Agency as Theoretical Construct

The concept of constrained agency as developed here is distinct from several adjacent constructs in the literature. It differs from Burawoy's (1979) manufactured consent in that workers exhibiting constrained agency are not primarily motivated by shop-floor game-playing or peer competition; their consent is structured by their relationship to an opaque algorithmic system rather than to a social game with rules they can understand and manipulate. It differs from learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) in that workers exhibiting constrained agency do not report reduced motivation or initiative; they remain active agents who experience themselves as making meaningful choices. The distinction is phenomenological: constrained agency involves the active construction of an autonomy narrative around a behaviorally constrained repertoire, not the passive acceptance of constraint.

Constrained agency also differs from Giddens' (1984) structuration theory account of agency-within-structure, which treats all human action as simultaneously enabled and constrained by structure. The specificity of constrained agency lies in the phenomenological dimension: the subjective experience of autonomous choice that workers actively maintain in the

face of recognized algorithmic control. This is closer to what Archer (2003) calls "reflexive deliberation"—the internal conversation through which agents navigate structural constraints—but with the specific feature that the structure in question is both more opaque and less socially negotiable than the structural contexts Archer analyzed.

Revising Edwards' Typology

Our findings support the argument that algorithmic control constitutes a qualitatively distinct fourth type in Edwards' (1979) typology of control mechanisms. Simple control operates through direct personal authority; technical control through the physical pace and routing of machinery; bureaucratic control through rules, procedures, and documented evaluation. Algorithmic control shares features with all three—it is impersonal like bureaucratic control, embedded in technology like technical control, and capable of individualizing responses like simple control—but is irreducible to any of them.

The distinctive feature of algorithmic control, we argue, is what we call behavioral inference: the use of machine learning models to infer worker states, predict behavior, and adjust incentive structures accordingly. Unlike bureaucratic control, which applies uniform rules, or technical control, which regulates pace, algorithmic control dynamically adapts to individual workers in ways that workers cannot observe or predict. This produces the opacity–autonomy relationship documented in our quantitative findings: the more fully workers are subject to behavioral inference, the less able they are to understand or contest the system governing them, and therefore the lower their perceived autonomy.

Implications for Labor Regulation

These findings have direct implications for ongoing debates about gig worker classification and platform labor regulation. The constrained agency framework suggests that the

conventional distinction between employment (subordination to employer direction) and independent contracting (autonomous self-direction) fails to capture the distinctive governance structure of algorithmic work. Workers subject to behavioral inference are neither conventionally employed nor genuinely independent; they occupy a novel legal-phenomenological category that existing frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

The quantitative finding that algorithmic opacity is a stronger predictor of perceived autonomy than earnings volatility or hours worked suggests that transparency requirements may be an important regulatory lever—not merely as a matter of worker information rights, but as a mechanism for restoring the conditions under which meaningful autonomy is possible. Workers who understand the algorithmic systems governing them are better positioned to contest those systems, organize around them, and exercise genuine rather than constrained agency.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study merit discussion. First, the survey sample was recruited through online worker communities, which likely overrepresents workers who are engaged and articulate about their platform experience relative to the broader population of gig workers. Workers who have exited platforms, who use platforms only very occasionally, or who are not part of online communities may have different relationships to algorithmic authority. Future research should use administrative data partnerships with platforms, where available, to reach more representative samples.

Second, this study's cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. The negative relationship between algorithmic opacity and perceived autonomy is consistent with the interpretation that opacity reduces autonomy, but it is also consistent with the interpretation that workers who feel less autonomous attend more closely to algorithmic opacity (or that both are

caused by a third variable, such as degree of economic dependency). Longitudinal designs tracking workers across changes in platform algorithmic systems—which platforms periodically modify—would allow stronger causal claims.

Third, our qualitative sample, while theoretically saturated for the purposes of developing the constrained agency framework, is limited in its geographic scope (primarily U.S.-based) and in its representation of workers from underrepresented groups. The experience of algorithmic management may differ substantially across racial, gender, and class lines in ways our sample is not powered to detect. Intersectional analyses of algorithmic control represent an important direction for future research.

Conclusion

This paper has documented, measured, and theorized a distinctive form of worker subjectivity under algorithmic management. The quantitative findings establish that algorithmic opacity is inversely and strongly associated with perceived occupational autonomy across multiple platform types, and that this relationship holds independently of material conditions including earnings volatility and hours worked. The qualitative findings identify constrained agency as the characteristic phenomenological accommodation workers make to algorithmic control: an active construction of autonomous self-narrative within a behaviorally narrowed repertoire.

These findings contribute to labor process theory by identifying behavioral inference as a qualitatively novel control mechanism irreducible to Edwards' three historical types, and by specifying the psychological mechanism—constrained agency—through which this mechanism produces compliance without requiring coercion. Workers under algorithmic management do not simply obey; they adapt, rationalize, and in many cases genuinely experience their adaptation as

choice. Understanding this mechanism is essential for anyone seeking to organize, regulate, or otherwise contest the conditions of platform labor.

The Bessemer Amazon worker who said he was working for a machine that didn't know he existed was, in a precise technical sense, correct. Algorithmic management systems do not know their workers as persons; they know them as behavioral data streams from which predictions can be extracted and incentive structures calibrated. The central finding of this research is that workers know this, and work with it anyway—and that the specific form of that working-with has consequences for autonomy, resistance, and the future of labor in algorithmic capitalism that we are only beginning to understand.

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