Institutional logics of labor platforms – Fairness in different platform models

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Content

Introduction

The information and communications technology revolution of the early 1990s led to the ongoing digitalization of societies. In the 2010s, digital platforms have gradually spread to almost all sectors of the economy and created new forms of economic activities (ILO 2021). These platforms serve as mediators of products and services. In my dissertation, I will focus on platforms whose main mediated service is labor. I will examine digital platforms that serve as mediators and organizers of work tasks, creating new forms of work and work life activity. These digitally organized forms of work are called platform work.

Although certain aspects of this topic have gained public attention, in many respects, the phenomenon remains unstudied. Platform work still lacks established concepts, as it is difficult to unequivocally define it and all that it covers. Locally operating transportation sector companies such as Uber and Foodora are usually associated with platform work. Although they represent significant new forms of digitally organized work, they are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of all work-mediating platform companies and the forms of work that they convey.

My dissertation will contribute to the research on platform work, especially labor platforms and their operational logics. Platform work and labor platforms have mostly been studied in

international contexts. We know very little about platform companies and platform work in Finland. We know that platforms change the ways in which work and tasks are organized and shared, but we do not know exactly how different platforms do this. A pursuit for fairness lies behind the questioning of certain types of platform work, but we have no full understanding of what fairness really means in platform work. Does it differ in different platforms? What other things affect perceived fairness in platform work?

1.1 Platform work

Digitalization has significantly shaped organizations' structures and service models in the 21st century (Leiponen & Kotiranta 2019). New service models are often based on digital platforms. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019) defines digital platforms as digital services that facilitate interaction between two or more distinct but interdependent sets of users, who interact through the service via the internet. Platforms are, in this sense, places in which to interact, share, and provide peers with access to commodities. They can be referred to using the umbrella concept of a **sharing economy.** A sub-concept of this is the more market mechanism-bound intermediation of decentralized exchanges among peers through digital platforms. This is called the **platform economy**, (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinkse 2017) one of the exchanged services of which is labor.

Work shared through digital platforms is called either **platform work**, **platform-mediated work, gig work** or **crowd work,** depending on the context and the type of work emphasized (Seppänen, Spinuzzi, Poutanen & Alasoini 2021). Eurofound (2018) defines platform work as "a form of employment that uses an online platform to enable organisations or individuals to access other organisations or individuals to solve problems or to provide services in exchange for payment". This means that platforms serve as intermediators for temporary, contracted out, paid work tasks and services that are offered on demand. (Flarisson & Mandl 2018) The International Labour Organization (ILO) uses the term **labor platform** to refer to all work-mediating digital platforms (2021). Since I also investigate different varieties of work-mediating platforms in my dissertation, regardless of the way in which they operate and the work they convey, I will use the same term.

The employment status of platform workers has been a central question in the legislative issues of platform work, but the status itself is not usually the defining factor for whether something should be considered platform work or not. Often platform workers' status is self-

employed, but many also operate on platforms as employees. Employment relations also vary between standard and non-standard forms of employment (ILO 2021). In line with the ILO's definition, I will use the term "worker" in this plan to refer to all the parties who carry out the work tasks conveyed through platforms, regardless of their employment status.

Platform work is an emerging form of work in Europe (Flarisson & Mandl 2018). In the light of the most recent statistics, its scale is relatively small, but it is expected to grow rapidly in the near future (Pesole et al. 2018; Statistics Finland 2018; Graham & Woodock 2018). In 2018, the main job of approximately 2% of the European working-age population in 14 Member States was platform work (Pesole et al. 2018). National figures from a Finnish labor force survey estimated that 0.3% of Finland's workforce received a major share (at least ¼) of their income through platforms in 2017 (Statistics Finland 2018). Statistics have been extremely hard to compile, as no general definition of platform work exists, and its method of measurement has not been decided. Depending on the researcher, the numbers of platform workers and labor platforms in Europe range widely (see Huws, Spencer & Holts 2019; Heeks 2017).

Platform work has been the center of many public debates. Usually company specific, these debates have emphasized the subordinate position of workers in platform companies. At the center of these debates, in Finland as elsewhere, is platform companies' control over the work processes in relation to the employment status of workers, and the employer's responsibilities for the companies. Demand is high for companies and policymakers to regulate platform work and to make any necessary work legislation changes (see BBC 2021; TEM 2020; European commission 2021; ILO 2021; Schoukens 2020).

Fair treatment of platform workers has also been raised as an issue by trade unions, worker movements and other interest groups (Fairwork 2020; Juntunen 2017; Justice4couriers 2019; TEM 2020). In most cases, the fairness issues raised have concerned atypical work arrangements and employment relations, and the misuse of the migrant workforce, especially in taxi services and food delivery. Platform work includes a great variety of different jobs and ways in which to organize work (Flarisson & Mandl 2018). This is why it is can be assumed that the experiences of fairness and the themes related to fairness in platform work differ according to the different income and employment purposes for which people use them.

1.2 Dissertation topic

In my dissertation I will investigate labor platforms registered in Finland, the companies behind them and their institutional logics. The goal of my research is to classify the current field of labor platforms in Finland, while also recognizing that the field is constantly evolving under the influence of national and multinational organizations, regulations and laws, as well as the rapidly changing nature of the platform economy (European Commission 2018).

Many platforms operate on the multinational level and have workers from all over the world, including from Finland (Seppänen et al. 2021). My dissertation focuses on platforms registered in Finland and thus cannot cover all the dimensions and width of platform work. The aim is to respond to the growing interest in labor platforms at the national level and to provide knowledge regarding the labor platforms that operate under Finnish legislation and which are modified by the influence of the national institutions of the Nordic welfare state and its services. One key issue is understanding what fairness means in platform work and in different types of labor platforms.

The models of platform work can be classified in several ways. One common way is to look at what work skills the platform requires and what work is performed online or on location (Vallas & Schor 2020). Eurofound recognizes 10 platform work models, based on the scale of the projects or tasks, whether the work is delivered on location or online, the level of skills that the tasks require, the party that determines work allocation, and how the matching process works (Flarisson & Mandl 2018). One great difference between models is related to the degree of intervention of the platforms in work allocation. While some platforms have adopted a model of workforce marketplaces, some more hierarchical relationships also exist between platforms and workers in terms of autonomy, control and work organization (Flarisson & Mandl 2018; Vallas & Schor 2020).

To be able to determine what kind of fairness different "platform environments" create, we need to gain more insights into the characteristics and nature of labor platforms. The research will use the theory of **institutional logics** to describe labor platforms and their organizational structures, actions, strategies, identity, control, and internal and external interactions. My aim is to determine how platforms operate and what logics different platforms follow.

Earlier research has shown that fairness is affected by the relationship between the worker and the platform (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard & Wengronowitz 2020; Manyika, Lund, Bughin, Robinson, Mischke, & Mahajan 2016). How does a platform company position itself in relation to the worker and what are workers' expectations of the platforms? What are their relationship and power relations? To be able to analyze these dynamics I will conduct qualitative interviews of both platform representatives and those seeking work opportunities via platforms. The plan is to see how the workers perceive fairness and which aspects of fairness they experience in these platforms. To examine these aspects I will use the theory of **organizational justice**.

1.3 Earlier research on platform work

Much of the earlier research on platform work has emphasized its precarious aspects (Seppänen et al. 2021; Jesnes 2019). Precarious work is defined as "work that is uncertain, unstable and insecure and in which employees bear the risk of work and receive limited benefits and statutory entitlements". Precarious employment is a multidimensional construct composed of the various dimensions of instability and insecurity in work life (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018).

Much of the research builds around a narrative of precarious work, emphasizing themes such as the algorithmic control of platform companies, and non-standard forms of employment and governance mechanisms (Vallas & Schor 2020; Schor 2020; Pichault & McKeown 2019; Fieseler, Bucher & Hoffman 2017). In many studies, experiences of fairness are also attached to the precariousness of platform work. The way in which someone perceives fairness is subjective and it is greatly affected by, for example, workers' dependency on their revenue from the platform (Schor et al. 2020; Manyika et al. 2016; Ilsoe, Larsen & Bach 2021).

The characteristics of platform companies have been studied from the perspective of relatively low-skilled work in the transportation sector (Cohen, Hahn, Hall, Levitt & Metcalfe 2016; Jesnes 2020; Hall & Krueger 2017). Examples are taxi service platforms such as Uber and food delivery platforms such as Foodora. We also have insights into multinational freelancing platforms such as Upwork and their characteristics (see Seppänen et al. 2021; Lehdonvirta 2018, Corporaal & Lehdonvirta 2017; Jesnes & Oppegaard 2020; Kuhn & Maleki 2017).

These studies elevate the algorithmic control and data use of platforms, the characteristics of workers, the operational models of online platforms and their versatility, workers' flexibility on platforms and the employment statuses and their effects on workers autonomy and satisfaction with platform work. These themes are more or less related to the interrelationship and power relations between workers and platforms and focus a great deal on what the platforms control and how this control affects workers.

The emphasis is on platforms that have visible, large-scale control over work processes. It is understandable why these platforms have gained the most attention in research, but in reality they do not represent the overall story of platform work. As a field, platform work is highly heterogenous and many aspects of it remain unstudied (De Groen, W., Kilhoffer, Z., Lenaerts, K. & Mandl, I. 2018). For example, locally operating high-skill labor platforms and forms of labor platforms that combine the characteristics of temporary working agencies have received less attention (see Söderqvist 2018). The complexity of labor platform models and platform work has been recognized, but research still lacks in-depth knowledge of these forms.

2. Theory

2.1 Institutional logics

Many of the described forms of the control, versatile models and characteristics of platforms remain detached if they are treated as separate features of the same phenomenon. Just as the levels of control vary across platforms, so do their functions. Some features cannot be located in the visible structures of platforms, for example, user interfaces and work methods; they live within inner rules, norms and interactions (Schor 2020). To be able to understand the functions and directions of platforms' actions, a conceptual framework is needed, which gathers all these unattached elements, interprets them, and explains what kind of logics they follow.

The theory of institutional logics has gained popularity in organizational research but has featured less in the research of platform organizations. The much used description of institutional logics is "The socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality"

(Thornton & Ocasio 1999). Institutions consist of both material and symbolic elements that constitute and support them and give them legitimacy. These may be regulative rules and laws, normative expectations, or culturally supported actions, and this means that institutions are always interconnected with other societal sectors, levels and institutions (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury 2012).

The concept of institutional logics refers to the interrelationships between individuals, organizations and society. It views institutions as supra-organizational patterns of material practices and symbolic systems that produce their material lives and render their experiences meaningful (Thorton & Ocasio 2008; Friedland & Alford 1991). Every institution has its own way of structuring its actions and creating meanings for its operations and actors, but every institution is also attached to societal sectors based on certain norms, culture, and rules and their activities often have a common direction: in other words, logics (Thornton et al. 2012).

Ideal types of institutions are an important tool in a study of institutional logics. They give descriptions of the ideal types of institutions in different societal sectors. Thornton suggest seven societal sectors with key institutions. These institutions are markets, states, corporations, professions, families, religions, and communities (Thornton et al. 2012). These institutions have ideal types of logics that describe their identity, norms, strategies, control mechanisms, and source of power and legitimacy (Thornton et al. 2012).

The institutional logics framework views platform organizations as part of different intersecting institutional ideals. Institutional logics serve as a conceptual framework for evaluating organization actions and the logics they follow. For example, how have the market and the state modified their actions and shaped their current forms? We know that platforms look and act differently from each other. What are the driving forces of their organizational models and ways of operating?

Online labor platforms create tensions between two competing institutional logics: the market logic, which legitimizes profit-making through free, unregulated competition among self-employed workers; and the corporation logic, which legitimizes market share and revenue growth through the coordination and control of workers by platforms (Frenken, Vaskelainen, Funfschilling & Piscicelli 2018; Meijerink, Keegan & Bondarouk 2021). Frenken et al. suggest that some platforms have features of community logics in which actors create

the rules and meanings of the actions. In community logics, legitimacy comes from reciprocity and authority is decentralized and based on shared values and norms. Actions are controlled by personal status in the community (Frenken et al. 2018).

Many labor platforms have these same logics, but their effectiveness varies. Some platforms strive to create marketplaces with their own sets of rules and access requirements, but they do not actively control the actions of the workers and clients. In other platforms, the provision of work, working times, pricing, or work itself can be highly controlled by the platform company (Frenken et al. 2018; Meijerink et al. 2021). Many platforms have also based their ideas on communities and common values. This was the starting point for the whole sharing economy (Schor 2020), and we can assume that these ideals also live in these organizational models. My dissertation will focus on these three: market, corporation and community logics, and study how they appear in labor platforms.

The institutional logics usability in this research is based on the concept's flexibility and the explanatory power of different external and internal influences on these organizations and their actions. It also provides tools for conceptualizing the various organizational practices and gives them motivations and meanings. The logics include all the norms, values, forms of control, and levels of freedom that have been at the center of the platform work debate (Vallas & Schor 2020; Mattila 2019; Fairwork 2020). For this reason, I believe it has the explanatory power to describe various elements of the multi-dimensional field of platform work, including different employment forms, required skills, formats of work, and industries.

2.3 Organizational justice

I assume that fairness will appear in completely different ways in different platforms, as platforms have different ways of controlling work processes and positioning themselves in relation to workers (Pichault & McKeown 2019; Bellini & Lucciarini 2019). People´s life situations can also be explanatory factors in fairness experiences (Schor et al. 2020; Ilsoe et al. 2021).

The dissertation will draw on the theory of organizational justice. This theory recognizes three aspects of justice: distributional, interactional and procedural. Distributional justice refers to the fair distribution of inputs and outputs, including rewards and project possibilities. Interactional justice covers all the interaction fairness in a platform, including respectful

communication and the right to receive correct, accurate information. Procedural justice refers to fair and ethical operations and decision-making. It includes the transparency of actions and channels for workers to influence their own rights (Fortin, Cropanzano, Cuguero-Escofet, Nadisic & Van Wagoner 2019; Heeks 2017; Baldwin 2006).

Some studies consider platforms practically, like employers or workers (see Fairwork 2020). Organizational justice theory has a similar view of organizational structures and their fairness. Studies have shown that crowd workers indeed perceive injustices in their work arrangements in areas such as planning insecurity, lack of transparency in performance evaluation, lack of clarity in task briefings, and low remuneration (Pfeiffer & Kawalec 2020).

Not all the dimensions of fairness in the platform work may be achieved from the angle of the platform being an employer or based on a theory developed for circumstances of more traditional companies. The issue of defining labor platforms and their ecosystems and how they should be understood on the basis of work organizations is present in both organizational fairness and in the modelling of the platform organizations, as well as in how the roles of actors and organizational arrangement should be outlined. Understanding platforms' logics helps us understand the context in which fairness is experienced.

At the same time as I conduct my research, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) will facilitate a literature review of platform work fairness. This review will be utilized, in addition to organizational justice theory, to help detect fairness aspects in my research interviews. My research complements the idea of platform fairness and helps further research and development of the fair principals of platform work.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

In this section I introduce the research questions and provide short descriptions of their backgrounds and how I have planned to investigate them.

1. **What kind of work do labor platforms promote in Finland?**

This question will allow me to focus on the characteristics of work mediated through platforms; the things that platforms, as mediators of tasks, bring into these tasks and projects. These are, for example, work relations, the nature of projects and tasks, the targets of

advertisements, whether the work has rating mechanisms, what services are offered to workers, what kind of skills the work requires, what is required of workers to access the platforms, the sectors in which the platforms operate, and how the platforms organize work gigs.

The question looks at platform work from the perspective of the companies mediating work. Basically, how they describe the work they mediate and to whom they offer either work or the opportunity to receive work, and under what conditions. The platforms' website texts and terms of service, and the interviews of platform representatives such as owners and leaders will form the data units of the study.

On the basis of these characteristics, I will classify the platforms, using similarities and differences in work content and worker groups. This classification is to support the selection of case platforms in later parts of this dissertation research and to describe what kind of work the different platforms promote and which worker groups they target. In this question, the concepts of atypical work and institutional logics provide support for interpreting the results, but the question itself is not built on any strong theory.

2. **How do different institutional logics appear in and shape platform companies' operations?**

This question is strongly guided by theory. It aims to determine what operational logics platform companies have and how they appear in platform practices. Institutional logics will create an image of whether labor platforms follow certain logics or whether they are more like hybrids of different logics. This will be done by focusing on companies' control mechanisms, sources of authority and legitimacy, rules, norms, sanctions, motivations, strategies, and identity. Simplified, the question seeks to discover what labor platforms do: why and what kind of platform models these actions and logics create. However, it is possible that these platforms also have functions other than work-mediating ones. In these cases, it is not necessary to describe whole ecosystems of complex platform models, but better to focus on the process of work and all the functions around it.

The answer to this research question will be based on the interviews of the representatives and workers of the selected labor platforms. The case platforms will be selected according to the previous phase, during which platforms were classified on the basis of the work they

convey. The selected cases will represent different groups. The number of the cases will be determined by the number of groups and their content. Approximately five to eight cases would be realistic.

At this point, although the review of the terms of services and websites will have offered preliminary information on these companies, the interviews will deepen this knowledge and illustrate these organizations' actions and reasons for the assumed differences in their models and ways of operation. This information, together with the face-to-face interviews of the platform representatives and workers seeking work in these platforms, will provide requisites for building models of these companies' actions and for describing their differences.

3. **How do platform companies define fairness and how do they implement it in their practices?**

By answering this question, I will determine how platforms and their representatives define fairness and how they implement fairness in their practices. At this point we will already know the case platform models. To answer this research question, I will use the same interviews of the platform representatives that was used in the earlier phase and I will encode the material, again searching for codes referring to fairness. My aim will be to determine how organizational justice is present in the speech of the representatives, what type of justice and fairness they refer to, who the target groups are in terms of fairness, and with which practices of the platforms fairness is associated: basically, how platforms seek to implement their vision of fairness and unfairness in their organization´s practices.

The models of platforms formed in the earlier phase will be used as a framework for analyzing fairness in different platform models with different institutional logics. The aim will be to compare how fairness is built and understood in different platforms. Through this research question and research phase I will strive to find models and solutions to how fairness can be promoted in labor platforms. These models and solutions will be used in the co-development of fair work practices in the REITA project's workshops.

4. **How are platforms' practices perceived by platform workers in terms of fairness?**

The fourth and final research question changes the angle from the representatives to the workers who use labor platforms to find work. The aim of the question is to determine how workers themselves see work in the platforms and how they perceive fairness. Are they

satisfied with the platform's services? What is particularly fair in the platforms they use and what feels unfair?

To answer this question, I will use in-depth interviews of workers who used the earlier selected case platforms. Each case platform will have two to three worker interviews. For clarification, these workers are not necessarily employees of the platform companies. They use these platforms to get clients to order work tasks, but they do not work for the platform or its maintenance. To answer this question, I will also use quantitative material from a Statistics Finland survey and qualitative material from FIOH´s previously (2017–19) conducted interviews of freelancers of the platforms Upwork, Wolt and Foodora.

Workers´ experiences of fairness may also be associated with things other than platforms' services and actions. As many work as freelancers and entrepreneurs, experiences of unfairness may also involve; for example, difficulties with the social security system. Satisfaction has been related to income dependency, which may also be one factor that affects the experience. The aim of the research is to find which platform practices are perceived as fair or unfair, what kind of fairness this is, how experiences differ in different platforms, and whether the experience of fairness is associated with one's personal life situation or external influencers.

3.2 Material and methods

1. **Website and terms-of-service texts of labor platform companies registered in Finland.**
   - Qualitative content analysis of text. Coding of expressions of work; the content of work; workers' qualities, relation to platforms, demands, rights and rules of action; and what platforms offer workers. Clustering into categories based on work characteristics and worker groups.
   - Material will be used in articles 1 and 2.
   - Creates classification of labor platforms that will be used to select case platforms.

2. **Face-to-face interviews of platform representatives of selected work-mediating platforms.**
   - Theory-guided content analysis of institutional logics of labor platforms. Data-driven content analysis of representatives' perceptions of fairness.
   - Material will be used in articles 2 and 3.

- Together, the websites, the terms of service and the worker interviews will create models of labor platforms from the perspective of institutional logics to help build an image of platform work fairness and fair models and solutions to promote fairness in platform work.

3. **Face-to-face interviews of workers seeking work in selected platforms.**
   - Theory-guided content analysis of platforms´ institutional logics. Data-driven content analysis of workers' fairness experiences.
   - Material will be used in articles 2 and 4.
   - Opens the institutional logics of labor platforms. Helps locate problem areas of platform work fairness and determine what things needs to be developed in order to improve the position of platform workers in different platforms and in society.

4. **Labor force survey ad hoc 2022 (Statistics Finland) statistics of platform work in Finland. Quantitative information on platform work fairness.**
   - Methods of analysis permitted by the material and its possibilities.
   - Material will be used in articles 3 and 4.
   - Offers numerical information on platform work to be generalizable at the population level. Also enables reaching wider sample of platform workers and gaining numerical data on platform work fairness.

5. **Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) interviews with workers in Upwork and Foodora platforms.**
   - Methods of analysis permitted by the material and its possibilities.
   - Material will be used in article 4.
   - Expands the sample of platform workers. Helps more widely perceive platform work fairness from perspective of workers. Covers workers who receive gig work from multinational platforms.

3.3 Article ideas

1. First article (2021): Labor platforms in Finland: What kind of work do they promote and for whom?

The first article will be based on research on the terms of service and websites of Finnish labor platforms. The aim of the article will be to cluster platforms based on the work they convey and the worker groups towards which they are directed. Another aim will be to present

different profiles of platform work and highlight the heterogenous nature of platform work in Finland. It will examine what kinds of work life activity labor platforms in Finland create and what kind of employment can be promoted using different solutions. Institutional logics theory and atypical work will be used as background concepts to explain the differences observed in work organization and forms of employment.

2. **Second article (2022): Institutional logics of labor platforms.**

The second article will be based on interviews of platform representatives and workers and the review of websites and terms of service. In this article I will describe the case platforms´ organizational models on the basis of institutional logics. The aim will be to create a model for each platform based on their market, corporation and community logics features. The purpose of the models will be to create a framework for future studies and offer a theory-bound description of labor platform models and their different actions, control methods, power relations, etc.

3. **Third article (2022–2023): Fair principles in platform work: How do labor platforms perceive and promote fairness?**

Based on the interviews of the platform owners and leaders and on data from Statistics Finland, in this article I will introduce representatives' views of fairness and how labor platforms promote these views through their actions. The article will be based on the modelling in article two, and will use the theory of organizational justice to classify and describe the components of fairness. The aim will be to determine the practices that promote different types of fairness in digital labor markets.

4. **Fourth article (2023): Platform workers' perceived fairness**

The last article will also be based on the models of platforms created in article two. This article will dive into the workers' experiences of fairness in the selected platforms. When examining fairness, it will focus on not only the structural elements of the platforms, but also expand on the context-dependent aspects of fairness. In this article, I will examine not only the way in which platforms can promote fairness; I will also look at other institutions and highlight their role in developing fairness in the platform economy and platform work. What are the problem

areas that workers experience and how can they be improved on the national level by external organizations and actors?

3.4 Timetable

1 – 6/2021	- Dissertation plan - Validated list of platform companies - Contacts for interviews (already started) - Finalization of interview forms - First article: material collection, literature and analysis - Interactive platform work list
7 – 12/2021	- Writing and submission of first article - Completion of interviews of representatives and workers - Second article: material collection and literature review of institutional logics and fairness
1 – 6/2022	- Analysis of interview material - Analysis and writing of second article - Checkpoint for dissertation plan - Literature review on fairness
7 - 12/2022	- Submission of second article - Third article: literature and analysis - Fourth article literature as well as third article - Writing of principles of fairness in platform work
1 - 6/2023	- Writing and submission of third article - Finalization of Statistics Finland material - Plans and applications for further funding - Compilation of theories for dissertation - Beginning of REITA report
7 – 12/2023	- Completion of REITA report (project ending) - Writing of fourth article - Acquiring funding for 2024 - Advancement of dissertation's theory section
1 - 6/2024	- Pre-inspection of dissertation - New platform work studies - Submission of fourth article
7 – 12/2024	- Graduation

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