
”To Have Money but Not to Survive”: Reconciliation Narratives Among European Microworkers

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) systems have become increasingly common in everyday life, academics and activists have made concerted efforts to shed light on the largely invisible and highly precarious human labor at the center of such automation (Gray & Suri, 2019; Irani & Silberman, 2013). Producing and verifying the data fed to machines, so-called microworkers perform essential work and yet they are forced to deal with a range of challenges. Paid per task, microworkers depend on the digital platforms that aggregate and display tasks. Such platforms and their underlying algorithms are opaque, leaving workers in the dark regarding how to make their income stable (Ahmad & Krzywdzinski, 2022; Fiers, 2024). In combination with the low pay per task, the repetitiveness in the work, and the limited options for interacting with fellow workers, these circumstances make that microwork is often characterized as stressful (Keith et al., 2020), precarious (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2021), and lacking stimulation (Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

Given the poor working conditions of microwork, it is surprising that the workforce is considerably sized (Deng & Joshi, 2016; Jiang et al., 2021). Building on prior work that focused on identity work among microworkers (Bucher et al., 2024), we examine the narratives that draws people into this line of work and keeps in them engaged. Such narratives may be understood as individual-level coping mechanisms through which microworkers grapple with and resist their position. The project leverages 136 semi-structured interviews with microworkers across 16 European countries. Our focus on the European workforce complements the common focus on the U.S. and India (e.g., Berg, 2016; Gray & Suri, 2019). In-person and online interviews were conducted January and October 2022. The sample is diverse in terms of workers’ sociodemographic background and their dependency on microwork earnings.

The interviews reveal that microworkers engage in narrative building through which they tactically weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the microwork in a way that justifies their decision given their personal circumstances. A desire for meaningful work beyond it an income-generating activity varies heavily across different reconciliation narratives. Common is the comparison of one’s experiences to their perceptions of others—both those who also perform microwork and those with more traditional jobs—as well as to their own past experiences. Taken together, these narratives provide an insight into the way people assign meaning and conceptualize their agency in the face of an exploitative and stressful environment.

Keywords: microwork, crowdwork, gig work, meaningfulness, narratives, reconciliation

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