

# **Working for Respect**

## *Methodological Supplement*

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Since the publication of *Working for Respect*, we have heard from a number of our colleagues about their interest both in using the book for teaching, and in constructing their own research action projects with students. Along these lines, they have wondered how we structured our partnership with the 20 students whose work—both interviewing Walmart workers and organizing alongside them—provided key elements of the empirical and narrative core of the project. In this Methodological Supplement we discuss the nuts and bolts of our work with the students with the hope that it helps other scholars understand the methodological choices we made, and that it inspires future projects both in the classroom and beyond.

### **Getting Started**

Our partnership with OUR Walmart—a voluntary association of current and former Walmart workers—was possible because of the relationships Adam already had to organizers adjacent to the OUR Walmart campaign. There was, of course, also mutual interest: OUR Walmart was looking for competent, capable summer interns, and was interested in ways to broadcast the stories and experiences of Walmart workers to new audiences; we were interested in finding an organizational partner that was doing exciting work with low-wage workers, was open to experimentation, and could help us manage a team of student participant-observers.

In Chapter 4 we note that Bob Moses described the process of organizing as “bouncing a ball,” embedding oneself strategically within the social networks one wants to turn. For this project the lesson applied to us as well. The networks of labor activists in which we were already embedded helped to provide the social infrastructure through which the project was possible; and a part of the project’s intention, in turn, was to build new kinds of collaborative ties between activists and academics, ties which have endured beyond the timeline of the project itself. Because we saw the project as part of a longer-term effort to work with and strengthen low-wage worker organizations, it felt

important that we not parachute into the field or helicopter out. The project emerged out of and contributed back to a set of relationships that endures to this day.

We also tapped our networks to find interested students. A colleague (Shamus Khan) connected us to students involved in Columbia-Barnard's labor action group Student-Worker Solidarity. This group of students invited Adam to present at their weekly meeting to the larger membership body, and it was at this presentation that we recruited most of our Columbia participants. Beyond Columbia, Adam circulated information about the project to colleagues at Brown, Adam and Peter's alma mater, as well as to colleagues at CUNY's Murphy Center. We also advertised the project on [idealist.org](http://idealist.org).

Interested students were asked to write a short essay outlining their previous involvement in community activism, as well as any experience they had conducting qualitative research. We then conducted interviews with applicants, mostly by phone, in which we asked questions about their previous experience and their comfort with the different roles they would be asked to play over the summer. Because time was tight (as we discuss in the introduction, we began discussions about the project in February, and the project launched in late May), we did not recruit as widely or as extensively as we would have liked. We wound up with approximately 40 applicants, out of which we selected our twenty participants. Of these twenty students, ten were white, four were Black, four were Latinx, and two were Asian American. Fourteen identified as women, five as men, and one identified as trans.

In reviewing the applicants, we selected mostly on students' demonstrated commitment to issues of social justice—a quality that was particularly important to OUR Walmart, and seemed like a prerequisite for success in the organizing work they would be asked to do. It was much harder to select on applicants' research skills, because very few applicants had had any previous research experience. This may have been the result of the way we advertised the project, which emphasized its activist rather than research dimensions. Or it may have been a result of undergraduates' general lack of familiarity with qualitative methods. But what it meant was that while we felt confident in the activist commitments of the students we ultimately selected for the project, we had less confidence in their capacity to conduct research.

The participants in the project were formally appointed as interns with the United Food and Commercial Workers, and UFCW provided their funding. In the book we estimated their compensation as \$15 an hour. More specifically, they were paid a salary of \$4,680, were given free housing for the eight weeks they were in the field (and the week of orientation/debrief), and were paid an additional \$40 per day during any period in which they did not have access to a kitchen. Depending on how one calculates the value of the housing accommodations, and how many hours per week the interns were working, their compensation was likely a bit more or a bit less than \$15 an hour.

The decision about whether and how much to pay students for their involvement in research is not entirely straightforward. In previous contexts (cf. *Doormen*) we have involved students in research as part of a class project without any payment. Theoretically we could have framed this summer project as an educational experience and provided Columbia course credit

rather than a salary. But there were both practical and ethical reasons why we felt it important to offer payment in this case. Practically, offering payment allowed us to recruit a group of participants that was more diverse, by race and SES, than we likely could have recruited for a voluntary effort. Ethically it felt important that, in a project premised on the importance of respect at the workplace, we recognize the activities in which students were participating as work.

That said, the fact that we offered a relatively good deal—at least relative to other similar summer programs—meant that some were attracted to the project who conceived of it as stopgap employment on the way to a long-term job. Akin to the differences we observed between those Walmart workers who considered Walmart a place to spend their retirement and those who depended on Walmart to support a family, those who came to our project in need of long-term work experienced it quite differently than many of those who were planning to return to school in the fall. This came to something of a head during orientation in New York City, when it came to light that we were not planning to pay participants for the time they spend at orientation (though we were paying food and lodging at a nearby hotel). A participant who had recently graduated from school began to circulate a petition demanding pay for the week. When we learned of the concern, we quickly relented and increased their pay to include the time they spent at orientation.

## Going to the Field

Students were organized into teams of four, then sent to five different regions of the country: Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Southwestern Ohio, and Central Florida. There was some thought to the structure we ended up with. Whether it was optimal is not something we can assess without other studies using different team strategies. We felt strongly that teams should have even numbers of members so as to avoid someone feeling left out if close pairs emerged. Teams needed to be able to travel together in a car, which set an upper limit of five students, unless we rented a van for the locales we were in. We had concerns about the carrying capacity of the various sites in terms of how many students they could usefully absorb. And we wanted to touch different parts of the country. These considerations pointed strongly to teams of size four.

We asked participants to rank order their location preferences and we sought to avoid assigning people to places they ranked last. It also felt important that in each site there was a participant who seemed mature enough—indicated by age and previous experience in leadership positions—to serve as a site lead, who could report back to us about emergent problems. We prioritized assigning Spanish-speakers to the Los Angeles and Central Florida sites, as we were told that the composition of Walmart workers in these regions was heavily Latinx. Finally, we accommodated the request of two students who asked specifically that they be placed together. Satisfying these constraints left few degrees of freedom.

In retrospect, we probably overestimated the importance of distributing “mature” participants across the sites, as our preliminary estimates of participant maturity were not particularly accurate. In retrospect we also probably

shouldn't have accommodated participants' requests to be placed together. Relationships changed quite a lot over the course of the nine weeks, given that no one knew each other particularly well beforehand, and the pair of students who requested to be placed together were estranged from one another by the end. If anything, we likely underestimated the importance of matching participants to the demographic, political, and cultural contexts of Walmart workers in different regions.

The UFCW secured accommodations for the participants in each site, though these varied widely across sites for reasons having to do with differences in cost and availability. In Dallas and Florida, the teams had their own shared houses. In Los Angeles, the team shared a rather cramped two-bedroom apartment. In Cincinnati, the team was housed in the cinder-block dorms of Xavier University, where they were divided into two separate suites that they shared with interns working at Procter and Gamble (one of Walmart's largest suppliers). And in Chicago, the students shared three rooms in a hotel by O'Hare Airport.

It's difficult to overstate the way in which these different living arrangements impacted participants' experiences, though the conclusions we draw from this experience are perhaps not particularly surprising. Those locations in which each participant had a room of their own seemed to have less conflict than those in which participants were unable to escape from one another at the end of the day. Those locations in which participants had access to common space in which they could hang out with one another (and only one another) seemed to generate a sense of collective identity in ways that other spaces did not. In short, the sites in which teams lived together in four-bedroom houses (Dallas and Central Florida) seemed, at the end of the day, to work the best for the purposes of the project. If we were doing it again, we'd probably spend more time making sure that we did not have to place teams in cramped apartments, dorm rooms, or hotels.

The five sites were chosen in large part because there was an active OUR Walmart chapter in each place. At each site, OUR Walmart designated a local staff-person who was responsible for the day-to-day work of the students, meaning that there was always someone in the area who could respond to urgent situations. It was good we had this person in place, as lots of things came up for which it was helpful to have an older adult nearby. We had a parallel structure in place for the research side of the project. In each site we designated a student "lead" who would report back to Adam about any emergent problems or concerns that the group was facing in their research. And we held weekly video chat sessions, in which the teams reported on their progress and problem-solved together. Finally, over the course of the summer, Adam and Terrell Frazier, an RA on the project, conducted site visits to the five locations (Adam to Ohio and Florida, Terrell to Chicago, LA, and Dallas) to check in with participants in person.

Every student on the project also had Adam's phone number, and he spent a non-negligible amount of time over the summer of 2014 fielding a variety of problems large and small. These problems ranged from bureaucratic delays in initiating the students' payments, which put some students in financial stress in the early summer; to interpersonal conflicts among team-members; to

tensions between the students and their UFCW supervisors; to problems and questions more directly related to the research; to the five minor car accidents in which our students were involved. One of the students most dedicated to the project only had her learner's permit during the summer of 2014. She decided one day, when her fellow teammates were otherwise occupied, to drive herself to an interview, and somehow managed to get herself pulled over and charged for driving without a license.

Because people were living and working together so intensely, problems were rarely neatly bounded to one domain. Conflicts that seemed, on the surface, to be about the difficulties of living together—dirty dishes in the sink, arguments about how to spend free time—were often associated with conflicts about the work itself: frustrations that teammates were shirking their responsibilities, or oriented to the work in fundamentally different ways. People's intellectual disputes about the work seemed to be heightened by people's everyday frustrations with living together. And dynamics in the field, like the racism and sexism that students experienced in their interactions with staff and workers, undoubtedly impacted the internal dynamics of the teams as well.

The various channels by which we kept in touch with participants in the field over the nine weeks meant that there were no big surprises upon participants' return. We were in touch with students collectively (during the weekly video check-ins and during our site visits), as well as individually (on phone calls, by email, and through one-on-one meetings during the site visits). We knew of interpersonal conflicts brewing, and people's frustrations with the work. Yet one lesson learned from the project is that there is no substitute for having research supervision on the ground. Our arrangement, in which day-to-day management of the project was led by OUR Walmart rather than by us, meant that the focus of participants' work wound up being much more heavily focused on organizing than on research. We had 20 students in the field for nine weeks. If each student did just one interview per week, that would have been 180 interviews total. Instead, we left the field with 126 interviews total, and 87 interviews with Walmart workers.

Participants knew they had responsibilities both as organizers and as researchers, but the local OUR Walmart staff only held them accountable for their work as organizers, and we were too far away to challenge this focus. If we were to do a similar project again, and had the resources to do so, we would send a graduate student research assistant with each team to counterbalance the supervision from OUR Walmart that they were receiving. While the OUR Walmart staff knew about and were supportive of the research in the abstract, it was never a priority for them, which made it hard for our students to prioritize it either.

It was not only about prioritization. Research demands an infrastructure distinct from the infrastructure required for organizing. It demands that interviewers have access to particular kinds of spaces within which to conduct interviews—spaces that are private without being intimate. It requires that interviewers be able to schedule interviews around the availability of interviewees—a difficult thing for our teams to accomplish, given that they had two cars for four participants. We did not think carefully about these require-

ments as we set up the project, and having done so might have yielded more interviews.

Teams also oriented differently towards the research dimension of the project. The Chicago team conducted 24 interviews total, more than twice the number conducted by the Dallas team (10). And while interview length and quality are not equivalent, of course, the differences in mean interview length across site is also noteworthy—the Los Angeles team conducted the longest interviews, on average (66 minutes), while the Florida team conducted the shortest (41 minutes). Interestingly, and again perhaps unsurprisingly, it was seemingly those places in which participants felt more estranged from their work with OUR Walmart (Los Angeles and Chicago) that they invested more heavily in the research dimension of the project. Like the workers we studied, who sought out pockets of meaning in their work wherever they could find them, our study participants seemed to turn more fully to the research only when it felt impossible to construct a sense of purpose around the organizing.

During the orientation we held in New York City at the end of May, Mary Marshall Clark, the director of Columbia's Center for Oral History, had led a session on oral history interviewing. And we had spoken at length with students about our hopes that the interviews might be used in public or scholarly work down the line. But we provided no set interview protocol, and students were not given extensive training in qualitative methods. In retrospect, given our participants' inexperience with qualitative research, we likely would have gotten better data had we provided a more structured interview schedule for them to follow. We wound up relying heavily on our students' natural skills—their ability to listen, to probe, to earn the trust of interviewees and encourage them to open up about their lives and experiences.

The participants were, with some notable exceptions, not natural interviewers. This fact does not distinguish them from most students, or, for that matter, most people. But it may not have helped that we selected participants based primarily on their commitment to workers' rights and social justice, in that strong political commitments may be inversely associated with the capacity to elicit people's life stories in the way we were asking them to do.

In addition to the 87 interviews they conducted with Walmart associates, students conducted 39 interviews with a range of other actors who were broadly connected to the organizing work in which the students were involved over the summer: their own union supervisors; local union leaders, and leaders of other social movement organizations in the area; and workers from allied worker organizations. Several students also interviewed veteran civil rights leaders when they travelled to the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer at Tugaloo College. While *Working for Respect* draws occasionally on these community interviews, the book relies much more heavily on the interviews that students conducted with workers. As in all research projects, one ends up collecting more data than is possible to integrate into a coherent whole.

## **Making Sense of What We Learned**

After the project concluded in early August, ten students expressed interest in continuing to reflect on and think about the work they had done over the

course of the fall. Of these ten, seven were still undergraduates at Columbia University, and so were able to receive independent study credit for the work they did. Adam led weekly sessions in which he worked with the students to construct a coding scheme for the interviews, after which point the group undertook the arduous work of coding. We used Dedoose, an online coding software that facilitates collaborative coding. In our weekly meetings we then discussed the themes that we saw emerging from the interviews we had coded, as well as any memories that the coding had sparked from the summer.

Unfortunately, we did not ask students to take field notes while they were participating in the project. In retrospect this was a mistake, as it would have been useful to have recordings of students' more immediate experiences and impressions of the work they were doing during the summer of 2014. On the other hand, we were already asking quite a lot of them. They were working long days organizing for the UFCW, conducting interviews when they could, and writing blog posts for a public-facing website that was intended for public consumption, but which very few members of the public consumed. Our guess is that if we had asked them to write field notes on top of these other responsibilities they might have told us to get lost, which was a downside of trying to embed the research in a project that demanded so much practice. A compromise measure would have been to conduct weekly semi-structured interviews with each of the student participants, so we could get rich data about students' experiences without requiring them to write it down themselves.

Nevertheless, several students had written down memorable experiences on their own, or were able to reconstruct them out of their blog posts, or were able to jog their memories through group discussions in the fall of 2014. A series of writing exercises during the independent study yielded retrospective accounts of interactions from the summer—certainly not as good as field notes written in the immediate aftermath of events, given the rapid deterioration of ethnographic memory, but useful supplemental material nonetheless. Much of the participant writing in the book, which is distinguished from direct quotes by italics, came from these writing exercises—like Beth's first encounter with Anthony that opens the book, and Kevin's account of organizing in the Franklin, Ohio store.

As we began the writing process, we struggled a bit with how central to make the voices of students. On the one hand, we wanted to include their perspectives on the project—what they took away from their time in the field, what they learned about Walmart and those who work there. So we considered including student essays and reflections as stand-alone pieces, scattered throughout the book. But we wound up abandoning this idea for a few different reasons. Stylistically, it would have been cacophonous, a hodgepodge of arguments and reflections and perspectives. We wanted a single authorial voice to tie the disparate strands of the analysis together (even if this voice was the melding of our two voices).

More fundamentally, we realized that while students' experiences and reflections were important to our story, we wanted the book to be able to reflect critically on these experiences and reflections rather than present them in an unmediated form. This was related to a third consideration, which was that we wanted the experiences of our students to be presented on the same

analytic level as the experiences of the Walmart associates alongside whom they worked. To give students a more direct authorial or editorial voice would have meant that the experiences of Walmart workers were mediated through the worldviews of our students. Instead, we decided we—as authors—would mediate the experiences of both. So the final manuscript treats both workers and students as analytic objects; and it uses pseudonyms in its references to both.

We did, however, offer opportunities for feedback from a variety of participants in the project. In early September of 2016, more than two years after the end of the summer project, we invited participants back to Columbia for a reunion and reading of an early draft of the manuscript, paying for the travel expenses of those who lived elsewhere. Seven of the 20 participants in the project were able to attend, as well as Anthony, the worker whose story opens up the book. During the day-long gathering, participants toggled back and forth between reminiscing about the summer and making editorial suggestions about the book. As a whole, participants pushed us to clarify the “point of the book,” and the audiences we were hoping to reach. They felt like we were trying to weave together lots of different themes, and were doing so only partially successfully. These were, and are, all fair criticisms of the book. But we were somewhat surprised by the limited extent to which they reacted to our accounts of their experiences. Perhaps it was because two years is a long time, particularly in the life of someone in their early 20s, and they did not feel entirely identified with the people they were during the summer of 2014. Or perhaps it was because we were back in a classroom and they related to the material as though it was a book assigned for class.

Additionally, there was selection at work in who returned to our reunion in New York—our guess is that those who had good experiences over the summer were more likely to show up. Two participants, who read the draft but did not attend the reunion, wrote to Adam together to say that they had some concerns. On a phone call the following weekend, they expressed discomfort with the way we had written about the evolution of participants’ relationship with one another over the course of the summer. In our early drafts of the book, we explored in more granular detail the evolution of participants’ relationships over time, how participants’ relationships with one another shaped and were shaped by their experiences in the field. Participants sometimes joked about the summer project being like a reality television show: “The Real World: Social Justice Edition.” But the two participants felt like publishing this material would be an invasion of their and other students’ privacy, and that it was too far from the project itself to warrant inclusion. So we ultimately decided to remove this material from the manuscript. This decision played an important role in shaping the ultimate structure of the book. As we let go of our earlier idea to weave the social dynamics that were going on within teams into our story about labor organizing, more was lost than just an account of team change. Although the student story remains an important element of the book, it lost some of its centrality.

A year later, in the fall of 2017, we also showed a draft of the manuscript to Andrea Dehlendorf and Dan Schlademan, the co-directors of OUR Walmart (now United for Respect). On an afternoon in September, they met us at our

offices at Columbia in order to give us their perspective on what we had written. Such a process, as one might imagine, was a little uncomfortable. There are places in the book in which we were critical of certain dimensions of the organization, and Dan and Andrea disagreed with some of our interpretations and conclusions. But such a meeting also helped us deepen our argument in important ways, particularly when it came to our understanding of the Walmart discussion board. After the conversation with Andrea and Dan, Adam conducted two more interviews with key worker-leaders involved in developing OUR Walmart's online to offline strategy, and our analysis grew more nuanced. In fact, one of the more recent collaborations on which we have embarked with the organization is an experiment to better understand the impact of the organization's model of online worker organizing.

The fMRI dimension of the study, largely relegated to our appendix, was the setting in which students were most clearly research subjects as opposed to researchers. And we did our best to create a firewall between students' participation in the summer program and their participation in this piece of the project. It would have crossed an ethical line for us if participants felt like they had to hop into an fMRI machine in order to partake in the summer program. So we were not involved in this part of the project during the summer. Noam Zerubavel, a postdoctoral researcher at INCITE, led a presentation about the study. He indicated that it was separate from the work they would be doing in the summer, and that they were absolutely free to refuse to participate in it. We were not in the room when students consented to participate (or did not), and we did not know which students volunteered to take part. In the first round of scans, eighteen out of the twenty students participated. One declined outright, and a second had a medical condition that made participation impossible. At the end of the summer, one additional person declined to be re-scanned, and so we conducted seventeen scans in total.

While the book grew out of the student summer project, in the process of writing we came to the realization that the students' experiences alone—the interviews they conducted and experiences they had in the field—were insufficient to telling the broader story we wanted to tell about Walmart and low-wage work. While some of the interview data was rich and evocative, much of it was not. And while we wanted to communicate the experiences of individual Walmart workers, we also wanted to put these experiences in their larger social, political, and economic contexts in ways our interviews did not allow us to do.

The interviewees were, overall, a rather selective group of Walmart workers. Most obviously, they were much more likely to be members or supporters of OUR Walmart than Walmart workers as a whole. Given that much of our argument concerns the challenges to labor organizing, this selectivity likely makes our findings conservative; presumably the challenges we identify are only more challenging among Walmart workers as a whole.

The workers our students interviewed were also demographically dissimilar from Walmart workers, and other retail employees, nationally. We did not systematically collect demographic information from the 87 workers that student interviewed. But since we did conduct "life history" interviews, which covered many different aspects of workers' lives, we are able to impute

some—albeit incomplete—statistics about the interview sample. Among the workers our students interviewed for whom we were able to impute demographic information, the average age was 39, 56 percent were women, and the vast majority (67 percent) were non-white (almost exclusively Black and Latinx). In terms of age and gender, this is somewhat comparable to the population of those working in “General Merchandise Stores” (a category that includes all retail stores that sell a number of different lines of merchandise). According to the 2015 American Community Survey, the average age of a general merchandise worker was also 39, and 61 percent were women. Where our sample differs most starkly from the ACS sample is in terms of race. In the 2015 ACS sample, 71 percent of general merchandise workers were white. This disparity is likely driven by three separate factors. First, our field sites tended to be in or near large metropolitan areas. Second, all things equal, workers of color were more likely to be involved in OUR Walmart than white workers, meaning that our students were more likely to be in touch with them. Finally, white workers may have been less likely to talk with students of color, who were fifty percent of our student participant observers.

Because we wanted to look at the problem of work at Walmart from a variety of different scales and perspectives, we extended out from the students’ fieldwork to collect and analyze a range of different data about Walmart and those who work there. A first step was to survey those who work at Walmart. We went about this in two different ways. First, on October 23rd, 2016, we fielded a survey of Walmart workers using email addresses of workers provided to us by OUR Walmart. We emailed 19,672 people; 697 workers started the survey and 554 completed it. Second, between November 29 and December 29 of 2016, we surveyed Walmart workers using targeted advertisements on Facebook. Approximately 115,000 Walmart workers were shown the advertisement; 5,424 workers started the survey and 3,414 completed it. Like the interviewees, survey respondents were also a non-representative group of Walmart workers, though—based on demographics—the selection process into the survey was radically dissimilar from the selection process into our interviews. The sample of workers who responded to our survey was older (an average age of 51) and more heavily female (85 percent) than either the sample we interviewed or the population of general merchandise employees as estimated by the ACS. 61 percent of the survey sample was white, which was a higher percentage than those we interviewed but still lower than estimates from the ACS.

We obtained a different slice of data about how Walmart think about their jobs by scraping reviews from the online review site Glassdoor.com, using Python and the Selenium WebDriver. We did the scraping in September of 2015, and obtained 10,714 unique non-manager reviews that had been left on the site since the first review of Walmart was made in June of 2008 (the month that the company began its employee ratings site). We used a similar technique for scraping the 35,114 unique Yelp reviews left about Walmart between March of 2005, the earliest Walmart review on the site, and July of 2015. And we used an API to scrape the 661,507 posts and comments left by 23,019 unique users on a Walmart discussion board between March of 2011 and March of 2017. We argued in the preface that multi-method research is more than mixing

qualitative and quantitative approaches. Without a multiplicity of standpoints from which to look at a topic as complex and multivalent as Walmart, one risks flattening the field setting artificially. The goal here was to reveal the complexity of the field site from very different perspectives.

None of these views into the lives of Walmart workers—neither the interviews, nor the survey, nor the Glassdoor reviews nor discussion board posts—were representative of the population of Walmart workers. Unobserved, and likely quite different, selection processes were at work in generating the different sorts of data we analyzed. Our approach was to triangulate across the different sources of data; our confidence in insights gleaned from one source of data was increased when we found support for them across others. Variation in the selection processes by which different sources of data were produced was an asset when these different sources of data pointed in similar directions.

In an Author Meets Critics session at the American Sociological Association Meeting in August of 2019, Erin Kelly said, “My reading is that it was perhaps a challenge to tie things up in one package. But maybe it is not the time to tie things up but to open them up.” This nicely captures the spirit of the book, and also helps to answer the question that our students posed when we first showed it to them: Who, after all, is such a book for? We had multiple audiences in mind. We hoped it would be for social scientists interested in Walmartism, and in the new control systems that shape the experience of work for many Americans. We hoped it would be for field researchers thinking about ways to gain insight into complex multivalent settings. And we hoped it would serve as an academic contribution to a conversation with the audiences from which the book itself emerged: a conversation with labor organizers and labor organizations, on the one hand; and a conversation with progressive-minded students, on the other, as we together rethink work and reimagine worker power in the 21st century.