

A4: Crowdwork ethnography

For this assignment, you will go undercover as a member of the Amazon Mechanical Turk community. You will preview or perform Mechanical Turk tasks (called "HITs"), lurk in Turk worker discussion forums, and write an ethnographic account of your experience as a crowdworker, and how this experience changes your understanding of the phenomenon of crowdwork.

In traditional ethnographies, the researcher often does not have a specific research question in mind, or even a specific goal (other than “learn about this culture”). In a traditional ethnography, *research themes* emerge during the course of the investigation, and the researcher may choose to follow up on the themes that seem most interesting or important to understanding the culture as a whole.

This assignment is not a traditional ethnography. Although you will be exploring multiple aspects of the Mechanical Turk worker experience for this assignment, there is one aspect that I would like you to focus on in particular: **fairness**.

Specifically, I'd like you to consider what ‘fairness’ means—to turkers—in the context of Mechanical Turk work. When doing so, it may be useful to keep the following questions in mind as you perform the assignment:

- *What kinds of things do Mechanical Turkers consider to be fair, and unfair, about their work?*
- *What kinds of Mechanical Turk tasks are considered to be unfair, and why?*
- *What kinds of requester behaviors are considered to be unfair, and why?*
- *What aspects of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform are considered to be unfair, and why?*
- *What aspects of the [Mechanical Turk Participation Agreement](#) are considered to be unfair, and why?*

Assignment deliverable

The deliverable for this assignment will be a Google Doc. You will turn the assignment in by:

1. Sharing the doc with jmo25@uw.edu and okeyes@uw.edu
2. Submitting a link to the doc to the relevant Canvas submission form before the deadline of **4:59pm on November 23**.

The format of the deliverable is described below:

- Your deliverable should be in the form of a short essay or report.
- Your report should be at least 2000 words long.
- It should have your name, the date, and the assignment title at the top.
- It should contain the following sections:
 - a. A record of your prior knowledge of Mturk (step 1)
 - b. A description and reflection on what you observed when previewing HITs (step 2)
 - c. A description and reflection on what you read in the requester guidelines (step 3)
 - d. A description and reflection on what you read in the turker forums (step 4)
 - e. An overall conclusion and reflection about how performing this ethnographic research informed your understanding of the turker community, particularly how turkers understand and talk about the concept of 'fairness' as it relates to their work (step 5)

Assignment notes

- **You do not need to directly answer the example questions about 'fairness' that I listed above in your report!** I don't want you to turn in a report with a list of these specific questions, and your answers to them. Instead, I want you to use these questions to guide your observations of turk work and turker culture, and use them as a basis for writing your conclusion and reflection (step 5).
- **Your report should contain specific observations, examples, and quotes.** Try to avoid writing summaries like "I went to mturkforum.com and saw a lot of people complaining about bad requesters." Instead, describe an example of a thread where someone complained about a bad requester, what kind of behavior caused the requester to be considered 'bad', and how other people responded to that post.
- **Per the step-by-step instructions below: take lots of notes as you read.** You do NOT need to turn in your raw notes as part of the final report, but you will have a hard time writing the report if you don't take good notes.
- I realize that you may not have a lot of experience with kind of research, or this kind of writing. That is OK. Do the best you can, read carefully, take good notes, write detailed reflections, and ask me and Oliver questions if you're unsure about something. There are no right or wrong answers here.

Steps in the assignment

Step 1: Record your prior knowledge and assumptions

This should be done in class, via the [survey link](#) I provided in class and on Canvas.

Because the researcher's brain is the "analytical instrument" in ethnographic research, it's important to tune that instrument so that you can avoid, as much as possible, biasing your collection and interpretation of data.

For this part of the assignment, your job is to write down everything you can think of that you know, or *think* you know, or *believe to be true*, about the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform, Mechanical Turk tasks, and the people who participate as crowdworkers in Amazon Mechanical Turk.

You will have 20 minutes in class to complete this step. You will include what you write in the survey form as part of your final report for this assignment.

When you start writing, don't worry too much about spelling or grammar—you can fix that before you submit the report. Just try to capture as much of what you know right now as possible. This includes assumptions you have, or things you've heard, about the kinds of tasks that are available on Mechanical Turk, the kinds of people who contribute to Mechanical Turk, and the reasons that they contribute.

You don't need to Google anything or look it up, just write down what's in your head. You can include both what you knew before class, and what you learned in class.

Whenever possible, make sure to also record the source of your knowledge. The source could be something you've read about Mechanical Turk (even if you don't remember where you read it), or things you've heard from friends or colleagues, or your personal experiences as a Turk worker or requester (the people who post tasks for Turk workers to complete), or your personal experience performing other sorts of crowdwork.

There are no right or wrong answers. Your goal is to record as MUCH of your thoughts, opinions, reflections, and background knowledge as you can in the time allotted.

Step 2: Preview or complete at least 10 Mechanical Turk HITs

To complete this step, you will need to have an Amazon.com account. You can use an existing account if you have one, or create a new “dummy” account associated with a throw-away email address. You do *not* need to provide Amazon with any personal information, or payment information, to complete this part of the assignment.

- Once you have your Amazon account you want to use, go to <https://www.mturk.com/mturk/welcome> and sign in as a worker (upper right corner).
- On the next page, click “View Available HITs”. This should take you to a page that contains a list of potential HITs. You can preview any of these hits by clicking the “preview” link.

These previews provide a lot of information about the task at hand. Your job is to read through the previews of at least 10 different HITs, and take notes. I suggest that you don't just read the first 10 in the list. Instead, take some time and page through the list and pick HITs that seem interesting.

Things to think about, and take notes on, when selecting HITs to examine:

- Based on the title, is this a HIT that you would be interested in working on if you were a turker? Why or why not?
- Based on the title, does this HIT represent the kind of task that you thought (before this assignment) were available on Mechanical Turk? Why or why not?
- Based on the title, does the \$ reward for this HIT seem fair? Is it higher or lower than you expected? Why?

Now open each of the selected HITs in a separate window or tab. The read through the preview of each HIT carefully.

Things to think about, and take notes on, when previewing HITs:

- What kind of work is the HIT asking you to perform?
- What kind of knowledge or skill is necessary to perform this HIT successfully?
- Based on the preview and the time allotted (which is listed in the upper right corner of the preview page), does the \$ reward for the HIT still seem fair?
- Based on the preview, does this HIT represent the kind of task that you thought (before this assignment) were available on Mechanical Turk? Why or why not?

- Are the instructions provided clear? Do you think you would be able to complete this HIT correctly (and quickly!) based on these instructions? Why or why not?
- Based on the preview, is this (still) the kind of work you would be interested in doing on Amazon Mechanical Turk? Why or why not?
- Most HITs are part of a larger set of related HITs, and Turkers often have the option of performing multiple HITs for the same task set and the same requester in sequence. Would you be willing to work on 10 HITs like this one in one work session? How about 100, or 1000? Why or why not?
- Is there anything about the work required by this HIT that seems unreasonable or inappropriate to you (beyond the \$ reward or the time allotted)? Are you being asked to do something, see something, or say something (for example, give personal information) that you find unpleasant or uncomfortable? If so, why?
- Is the PURPOSE of this HIT clear to you? Do you feel you know why you're being asked to perform this work, and how the data you create will be used?

If you would like to actually perform HITs, you will be required to provide Amazon with your bank or possibly credit card information, as well as additional personal information about yourself. This is *not required* as part of the assignment, HOWEVER if you are interested in learning more about the turker experience, performing HITs is a great way to do so—be sure to take notes! We will be interested in learning about your experience as a ‘turker for a day.’

When you are done reading through the previews of these HITs and taking notes, and **before you move on to the next step of the assignment**, write a short reflection about what you learned about Mechanical Turk, its workers and requesters, their motivations, priorities, and activities from previewing these HITs. A couple paragraphs is fine.

When writing your step 2 reflection, make sure you are providing *specific* details about your most important observations, rather than just summarizing everything you observed. Refer back to your notes when writing this—that’s what your notes are for! The things you talk about in your reflection should be things that you have included in your notes (hint: specific examples are great!)

Step 3: Read the documentation of how to be a good requester

‘Requesters’ are people who post paid HITs (“human intelligence tasks”) for Turk workers to complete. A group of Mechanical Turk workers and academic researchers collaborated to create a set of documents that describe best practices for making requests, interacting with workers, and paying workers for their work.

Please read the following documents carefully, and take notes about what you notice while reading them.

- http://wiki.wearedynamo.org/index.php/Basics_of_how_to_be_a_good_requester
- http://wiki.wearedynamo.org/index.php?title=Fair_payment
- http://wiki.wearedynamo.org/index.php?title=Guidelines_for_Academic_Requesters

Note: you are welcome to read the additional wiki pages that are linked to from these three pages, but you are not required to do so.

As you read these documents, your job is to gather data. In ethnographic research, that means taking detailed notes about things that you think are important for your understanding of the turk community—especially things you read that inform your understanding of how turkers think of the concept of ‘fairness’ with respect to the work they do. When taking notes, pay special attention to (and write down!):

- Things that you didn’t know already, that surprised you.
- Things that contradict your previously-held assumptions (see step 1).
- Key terms that seem important, especially if they are terms that you are unfamiliar with or that are being used in a very specific way.
- Direct quotes from the documents that seem interesting, relevant, or representative.
- Anything that you think informs your understanding of Mechanical Turk, turk workers, turk requesters, or the kinds of things that turkers consider ‘fair’ or ‘unfair’.

There is no minimum or maximum limit for how long it should take you to read through these documents, or how many times you should read through them. I suggest reading each document at least twice (read through all three, then read through them all again in the same order).

There is also no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ number of notes to take about each document. I suggest reading through the first time very carefully and highlighting things that you find interesting (for any reason), and then, in your second read-through, focusing more carefully on the passages you previously highlighted, and taking notes about what they make you think of, why they are important or interesting, etc.

It may be helpful to print these wiki pages to PDF, so you can highlight important passages in a PDF editor like Preview (Mac), or print them out on paper. You can

export the page to PDF using the “Download as PDF” option under “print/export” in the left-hand navigation of each page.

When you are done reading these documents and taking notes, and **before you move on to the next step of the assignment**, write a short reflection about what you learned about Mechanical Turk, its workers and requesters, their motivations, priorities, and activities from reading these documents. A couple paragraphs is fine.

When writing your step 3 reflection, make sure you are providing *specific* details about your most important observations, rather than just summarizing everything you read. Refer back to your notes when writing this—that’s what your notes are for! The things you talk about in your reflection should be things that you have included in your notes (hint: direct quotes are great!)

Step 4: Read posts from at least 2 Mechanical Turk worker forums

For this part of the assignment, your job is to investigate how turkers talk about their work among themselves. Listening to how a community of people talk to one another about their shared experience is one of the best ways to understand their motivations, values, beliefs, attitudes, and what their experiences mean to *them*.

Your first step is to **select two of the four** turker forums listed below to examine.

- <http://mturkforum.com/forum.php>
- <http://turkernation.com/>
- <https://www.reddit.com/r/mturk/>
- <http://www.mturkcrowd.com/>

Once you’re on one of these forums, start reading through posts. You don’t have to read through the most recent posts, or read the posts in any sort of order, but I suggest you read through *at least 10 different discussion threads*. Pick the ones that sound interesting or relevant to you, based on what you’ve noted so far in your research.

Since part of your goal for this assignment is to understand how turk workers understand the concept of ‘fairness’, you may want to focus on threads that seem to be related to fairness—for example, the thread is about a bad requester who does not pay workers fairly, or promptly. You may even want to use the forum search feature to look for terms like ‘fair’ or ‘unfair’ in threads. Your sampling strategy is up to you, but it would be useful if you describe the process you used to identify the threads you chose to analyze in your reflection.

When taking notes, pay special attention to (and write down!):

- Things that you didn't know already, that surprised you.
- Things that contradict your previously-held assumptions (see step 1).
- Key terms people use that seem important, especially if they are terms that you are unfamiliar with or that are being used in a very specific way.
- Direct quotes from the threads that seem interesting, relevant, or representative.
- How the kinds of messages posted to the two different forums differ (if they differ).
- Anything that you think informs your understanding of Mechanical Turk, turk workers, turk requesters, or the kinds of things that turkers consider 'fair' or 'unfair'.

Most of these forums provide some sort of user 'profile' page or display other user metadata (such as an avatar, number of posts, or date joined) attached to each post. Examine some of these. What kind of information do turkers provide about themselves in these profiles? Why do you think they present themselves this way in the forum?

When you are done reading these forum threads and taking notes, and **before you move on to the next step of the assignment**, write a short reflection about what you learned about Mechanical Turk, its workers and requesters, their motivations, priorities, and activities from reading these forums. A couple paragraphs is fine.

When writing your step 4 reflection, make sure you are providing *specific* details about your most important observations, rather than just summarizing everything you read. Refer back to your notes when writing this—that's what your notes are for! The things you talk about in your reflection should be things that you have included in your notes (hint: direct quotes are great!)

Step 5: Write a summary reflection

Your summary reflection is intended to provide a report on what you learned from this assignment. It should cover three areas:

1. How this assignment did (or didn't) change the way that you understand the work of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, their motivations, their concerns, and their lived experience (i.e. what it's *like to be a turk worker*)
2. How this assignment informed your understanding of what turk workers think is 'fair' and 'unfair' about their work, and why.

3. How this assignment did (or didn't) change how you, as a potential requester, will conduct research that involves using Mechanical Turk *or other microtask marketplaces* in the future—and *why*.

This reflection should include quotes from your notes, hyperlinks to web pages or forum posts that illustrate or back up the points you are making, and a discussion about which of the things you have read and observed in the course of your ethnographic investigation made the greatest impact on your understanding of the social situation and/or culture of turk workers.

Each of the three areas described above should be addressed *in at least one paragraph of text*. Realistically, you will probably need to write several paragraphs to provide a detailed description and analysis of each of the three areas.