



AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF ALIENATION OF LABOUR IN A MARXIST SENSE

Mid Term Evaluation for EP526: Labour Economics under Professor Praveen
Jha



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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand the different types of alienation among workers based on Marx's analysis of the occupational causes of this alienation. The method that we apply involves analysis of the absence of alienation¹ as a function of the different possible conditions from which any alienation may arise (degree of supervision, expectation of the nature of work, unionisation or its absence, etc.). The data we use is a sample survey done in and around Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The respondents were security guards, mess workers, auto drivers and a few other workers. We conclude that self-estrangement is independent of the working conditions and is felt by the labour in and of itself; as a phenomena present in the way production itself is organised.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of alienation was formally philosophised first by Hegel who talks of the Absolute Idea (Absolute Mind), which is a dynamic Self engaged in a circular process of alienation and de-alienation. To attribute this alienation to man, "...it is an essential characteristic of finite mind (man) to produce things, to express itself in objects, to objectify itself in physical things, social institutions and cultural products; and every objectification is of necessity an instance of alienation: the produced objects become alien to the producer." (Petrovic, 1991)

This understanding of alienation was praised by Marx insofar as Hegel's views on "the self-creation² of man as a process, objectification as loss of the object³, as alienation and transcendence of this alienation". (Marx, 1844) However, Marx did not agree that alienation is identical to objectification. While objectification is a mechanical process, alienation is more post-Modern in the sense that the alienation is towards the spiritual, economic and social realm as well. Particularly in the economic realm, this alienation shows up in concept of value, surplus value, commodification of labour, capital, etc. By creating this alienation among parts of a 'whole', we are unable to see the interrelations in the 'whole'. Thus alienation as a metaphilosophical 'concept', was first propounded by Marx. (Petrovic, 1991) A philosophical (and even a metaphilosophical) 'concept' always has specificity i.e. it has direction. The specificity around the concept of alienation seems to be a revolution⁴ in the Marxist sense. However, it also helps us to understand Marxist themes in the economy, state and society.

"Concepts without precepts are empty; precepts without concepts are blind" - Immanuel Kant

An interpretation of Marx comes from Pappenheim who starts out by warning that conditions of an event are not identical to its causes. (Pappenheim, 1959) He analyses alienation (the event) on the parameters of technology, politics and finally, the capitalists' organization of social structures. He rejects technology as a cause of alienation since technology for him is neutral and needs to be put to specific use for alienation to come about. Bowles and Gintis have sharpened this argument by saying that technology is influenced by economic institutions; profit is determined by social division; and that technology is engineered by capitalism. Therefore, capitalism gives rise to use of

¹ "Alienation can only be grasped as the absence of unalienation, each state serving as a point of reference for the other." (Ollman, 1976) For Marx, the system is closed and there is an internal relation between alienation and unalienation : the absence of alienation is unalienation and vice versa).

² Man seeing himself in his product.

³ E.g. - Once labor sells his labor power, he is objectified.

⁴ Marx: Communism is 'the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished with the entire wealth of previous development.' It is 'the positive transcendence of all estrangement—that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e. social mode of existence' (Marx, Private Property and Communism, 1844)

technology to bring about alienation in order to build social institutions to perpetuate itself.

Now, politics has an inherent alienation which is apparent when a common man faces a politician. However, for Pappenheim, this disconnect of the people from their representatives is also not a cause for alienation, but merely an interaction where alienation makes itself apparent. Hence, we cannot claim it to be a causal relationship. While Pappenheim leaves the relationship at that, C. Wright Mills'⁵ work on social structure under capitalism also points that the basis of political alienation lies in capitalism.

Finally, Pappenheim turns to the cause of the alienation according to him. He speaks of how the ethos of community has historically transformed into ethos of society. The distinction between the two is that in case of a community, work is for the sake of work itself; when society evolves, it does so with deliberation and work (like everything) becomes a means to an end. Thus, the alienation is a historically created phenomenon which follows from communities becoming societies (and capital becoming the dominant social force).

With the advent of capitalism, the worker now has no role in deciding what to do (or even why). Alienation is not only from the products of his work, but also from the act of producing, from his fellow man and most importantly, from himself (his species-essence). By performing mechanical roles in a process organised by someone else, there is little that the worker can 'feel' about his work. To quote Bertell Ollman, "alienated man is an abstraction because he has lost touch with all human specificity". (Ollman, 1976)

To summarize, when the worker offers his labour power, he alienates his labour to the capitalist in order to secure a subsistence wage. The act of labour becoming external to him (commodification) and belonging to someone else is alienation of his self. "He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home". (Ollman, 1976) Our study tries to understand the nature of this alienation.

INDICES OF ALIENATION

Alienation is an extremely vague and imprecise term, as used in a socio-psychological sense. Before one hopes to discover adequate indices for measuring alienation in any context, one must accept two interrelated difficulties:

- A. Despite a general agreement that alienation involves estrangement from the larger social world and/or oneself, there is scant agreement on how large a segment of the orientational domain "alienation" should encompass. (Kohn, 1976)
- B. Any form of indices that attempt to measure alienation can at best be approximates of the true sentiment, i.e. partially useful proxies.

There are five general facets of orientation that the term has come to imply: powerlessness, self-estrangement, normlessness, isolation, and meaninglessness. (Seeman, 1959)

The current survey endeavours to focus on self-estrangement of a worker as a result of the nature of work he (all respondents were male) performs and the knock on effect of the conditions of the work place on the alienation of the worker from the process of work and the product of his labour.

Studies in this regard have employed extensive questionnaires that are put forth to numerous respondents for appreciable results. However, owing to the limited nature of this study, the questionnaire¹ consisted essentially of three parts:

1. The demographic questions

⁵ He highlights how people become 'masses' and how mass media also influences and manipulates how people feel in the system by constructing a mixture of information and values that need to be integrated into the social fabric of the capitalist system.

2. Questions to estimate the extent of alienation of the worker from the receiver of labour (apropos the product of labour in a service sector), from the director of labour (and hence the act of labour), from himself (indicated through the diversion in expectations of the worker vis-à-vis the actual process of labour) and other workers.
3. Questions to estimate the extent of alienation present in the working environment.⁶

Three different professions were chosen to be examined, all informal and unorganised to a certain extent: the privately contracted security guards in JNU (contracted through G4S Security Service), auto drivers and mess workers in JNU. In all, thirty people of each of these professions were quizzed. In addition to this, nine people self-employed workers like washer-men, cobblers, etc. and a student of MA were also evaluated for qualitative reasons.

The psychological aspects of the survey were measured through five point Likert⁷ type questions. The reason to choose Likert items over a Guttman scale was due to the inability to quiz a lot of people on a lengthy survey in a short period and that in professions with limited time availability for the same.

DESIGN OF THE MATHEMATICAL MODEL

A considerable amount of time was spent on deciding upon the validity and usefulness of the hypotheses. They were refined considerably through the course of this survey. We proposed to examine the following three questions:

- A. Is the alienation of self (self-estrangement) dependent on conditions of work or labour?
- B. What are the relationships between the three specific orientations of alienation (at/from/of work) being examined?
- C. Is it possible to identify the conditions that could lead a worker to voluntarily recommending his profession to a fellow man, with or without the coercion of socio-economic factors?

To this end, following hypotheses are being modelled:

Model I

To test for the dependency of indices of alienation on perceived quality of workplace environment measured through four Likert items:

- The ease of taking a leave
- The amount of supervision or reporting involved in the job
- The effort expended in the nature of work (hectic-ness of the job)
- The importance of union in the nature of work being performed

The above four questions were asked as five point Likert items and then consolidated as a single index which was then used as a continuous repressor. Although the absolute best way is to use the marginal likelihood method (J. D. Kalbfleisch, 1973) for combining ordinal scales, such a method can be computationally cumbersome and currently not within the skill set of the authors. There is also a method to lexicographically combine various ordinal scales (Likert items in this case) by way of generating a so called *u score* (Knut M. Wittkowski, 2004). However, it is acceptable to combine Likert items to generate a consolidated score provided each item is on the same scale and the scale itself is of five points.

⁶ The entire survey questionnaire is present in the Appendix.

⁷ Please refer (USP 634 Data Analysis, 2013) for a general review on how to use Likert items for psychological tests and also the section on limitations of the study for further clarification.

Following six equations were modelled:

1. $Expectations^8 \sim Consolidated^9 + Experience + Education + Size.of.Family + Work.days.pm + Earnings.pm$
2. $Expectations \sim Consolidated.without.Union + Experience + Education + Size.of.Family + Work.days.pm + Earnings.pm$
3. $Satisfaction.from.Receiver.of.Labour^{10} \sim Consolidated + Experience + Education + Size.of.Family + Work.days.pm + Earnings.pm$
4. $Satisfaction.from.Receiver.of.Labour \sim Consolidated.without.Union + Experience + Education + Size.of.Family + Work.days.pm + Earnings.pm$
5. $Satisfaction.from.director.of.Labour^{11} \sim Consolidated + Experience + Education + Size.of.Family + Work.days.pm + Earnings.pm$
6. $Satisfaction.from.director.of.Labour \sim Consolidated.without.Union + Experience + Education + Size.of.Family + Work.days.pm + Earnings.pm$
7. $Expectations \sim Profession$

The final equation tries to ascertain if there are inherent conditions of dissatisfaction and alienation in the particular profession being undertaken by the person surveyed.

Model II

The three specific orientations of alienation being ascertained could naturally have interlinkages and feedback effects on each other. It is a strong possibility that the satisfaction derived from the people who receive the fruits of one's labour and those who are responsible for directing the course of this labour should reflect in the expectations about the nature of work that a person has from one's job.

Following are the mathematical models being tested:

1. $Expectations \sim Satisfaction.from.Receiver.of.Labour$
2. $Expectations \sim Satisfaction.from.director.of.Labour$
3. $Satisfaction.from.Receiver.of.Labour \sim Satisfaction.from.director.of.Labour$
4. $Satisfaction.from.director.of.Labour \sim Satisfaction.from.receiver.of.Labour$

Model III

The model III tests for the third question as mentioned above directly.

1. $Hectic.Job \sim Leave + Supervision + Expectations + Experience^{12}$
2. $Reccomend \sim Consolidated.wihtout.union + Experience + work.days.pm + Earnings.pm + Union$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first two results indicate that only the number of working days in a month are statistically relevant in having an impact on the divergence between expectations of work conditions as compared to the actual work conditions. The impact is negative as is to be expected. The coefficient by themselves is of considerable magnitude ($\sim .17$).

⁸ Expectations refers to the dichotomy between expectations from work as mentioned above.

⁹ Consolidated is the linearly combined Likert score, modeled once with and once without the answer on the perceived significance of union.

¹⁰ Satisfaction from receiver of labour is essentially the audience being catered in the service sector.

¹¹ Essentially the proprietor or organizer of the labour. Question not put up to those considered to be self-employed.

¹² The three Likert items are being used as separate ordinal variables in this case, owing to sufficient degrees of freedom.

The next two models have no significant p-values for any determinant or for the equation in general; this means that the satisfaction derived from serving the recipients of the labour is independent of the work environment, or at least the conditions being tested for.

The next two equations from the first model indicate that the consolidated work environment indices are significant at p-values of .05 and above, with a slope coefficient of ~.18 (~.21 when the perception of the effect of unions is removed). This indicates that the conditions of work indeed have some impact on the satisfaction derived from working under one's employer: the entity responsible for the quality of the conditions of work and working.

The final equation of model I – being based on dummy variables of profession – can only be interpreted qualitatively. If dichotomous expectations can be considered as a relevant proxy for self-estrangement and hence alienation from the work itself, then harder the profession is perceived to be, the greater the divergence. Security staff in JNU seem to experience the least amount of divergence in expectation, which increases progressively for mess workers, then followed closely by auto drivers. Those assessed in the 'other' category seem to experience the greatest disappointment in their profession and hence the greatest divergence. It could perhaps be that owing to the survey being conducted in the morning and afternoon, the result might be skewed due to the absence of night shift guards when the process of labour is tougher. The results on the dissonance between expectations and reality though being highest for the 'others' category, should be taken with a pinch of salt as ten observations can hardly be termed sufficient. It is interesting to note however that some of the least fortunate people by way of income were surveyed under this heading.

No significant relationship could be found that would indicate any impact of satisfaction from the receiver of labour or satisfaction from the director of labour on the divergence between the expectations about the conditions of work. This is to be expected as self-estrangement as defined in alienation of labour is monistic by itself. There was however seen a relationship between the satisfaction from the receiver of labour and that from the director of labour; indicating that satisfaction from the audience of labour (which could be said to be a determinant of the work environment) has a positive correlation with the perceived satisfaction from the employer.

The final model tries to ascertain the validity of the factors that could be said to have a correlation or possibly an effect on the conviction with which a person may recommend his job to another person. Number of work days in a month turned out to be the only significant factor at p-values of .05 or higher, with a slope coefficient of ~-.12.

QUALITATIVE ASPECTS OF THE STUDY

Though the study began with a fully developed questionnaire and pre-decided lines of queries, subsequent discussions with the people being surveyed helped us to better understand both the scope and limitations of our questions. The feedback thus received eventually got reflected in the statistical equations that have been sought to be modelled.

One of the most interesting things discovered was income distribution both within professions and across professions (bar charts for same are available in the appendix). The levels of education reported were also higher than expected.

Talking to security guards in general revealed that they tend to be satisfied with the effort required to perform their jobs. When asked about employer satisfaction, many divulged that owing to the timeliness of their salaries being credited and the well-defined work schedule and leave structure, they had not particular complaints from the employers except of course that the pay seemed to be too low to many of them. Given that many interviews with mess workers, domestic helps (in the others category), etc. revealed it generally costs about as much as their entire salary to live in Delhi, that is understandable, especially for those whose immediate families aren't based in Delhi.

Almost all auto drivers lamented that though the reward for their efforts on the road seemed more or less adequate to them, they still felt alienated primarily due to there being no respect in the profession. This could perhaps be a result of their hectic work

lives as well as frequent entanglement with traffic police and traffic laws as studies elsewhere have indicated. (Anitha Ramachander, 2015)

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As with any study on human behaviour that involves uncontrolled field experiments, some limitations are naturally encountered, some anticipated and compensated at the time of design and others while working in the field. Following are the major limitations that were faced by the designers of this particular study:

1. Our sample size was small and there is selection bias. For external validity, sample size should be large and the sample must be representative of the population. Our sample, however, due to time and resource constraints was limited to in and around JNU.
2. A study which uses Likert-type items, is prone to certain biases in responses (mathssupport, 2012):
 - a. Central tendency bias – Respondents avoid selecting extreme ends of a Likert item and tend to be closer to the centre.
 - b. Acquiescence bias – Respondents tend to agree with the statements presented by the surveyor. Hence, there is a need for framing the questions so as to not prompt them towards agreeing.
 - c. Social desirability bias – Respondents may give incorrect information on subjects such as income, age, experience, etc. to portray themselves favourably.
3. The need to not impinge exceptionally on the time of the participant (since they were at work) and encountering non-participation. This limited the number of questions that we could asked as the part of the survey.
4. The inability to quantitatively 'measure' the degree of alienation limits our model to only understanding the role of work-related and life-related factors on satisfaction (proxy for non-alienation).

APPENDIX I: Survey Questionnaire

16/04/2016

Survey to study Alienation of Labour

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***Required**

1. Profession of the participant

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ G4S Guard
- ☐ Auto Driver
- ☐ Mess worker
- ☐ Other: _____

2. Age of Respondent *

3. Number of years of experience in the same profession

4. Education Level

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ No formal education
- ☐ Primary (up to class 5)
- ☐ Secondary (up to class 8)
- ☐ Matriculation (up to class 10)
- ☐ High School (up to class 12)
- ☐ College and above

5. Size of Family *

6. Number of working days

7. Earnings per day or per month

8. How comfortable/happy/satisfied do you feel with the people you serve?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Dissatisfied	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very satisfied

9. How comfortable/happy/satisfied do you feel with your employer?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very dissatisfied	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very satisfied

10. Would you recommend this work to someone close you know?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly not recommend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Recommend

11. How easy or difficult is it to take a leave from work?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very easy

12. Do you think there is too much or too little supervision/reporting in your work life?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Too much supervision	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Not a lot of supervision

13. How hectic is your work life?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very hectic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very light

14. How close are your expectations from your work life to your actual work life?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very negative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very positive

15. Are you part of any union?*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

16. How important do you think a union is for keeping a healthy work environment?*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Ineffective	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very effective

APPENDIX III: Basic Descriptive Charts

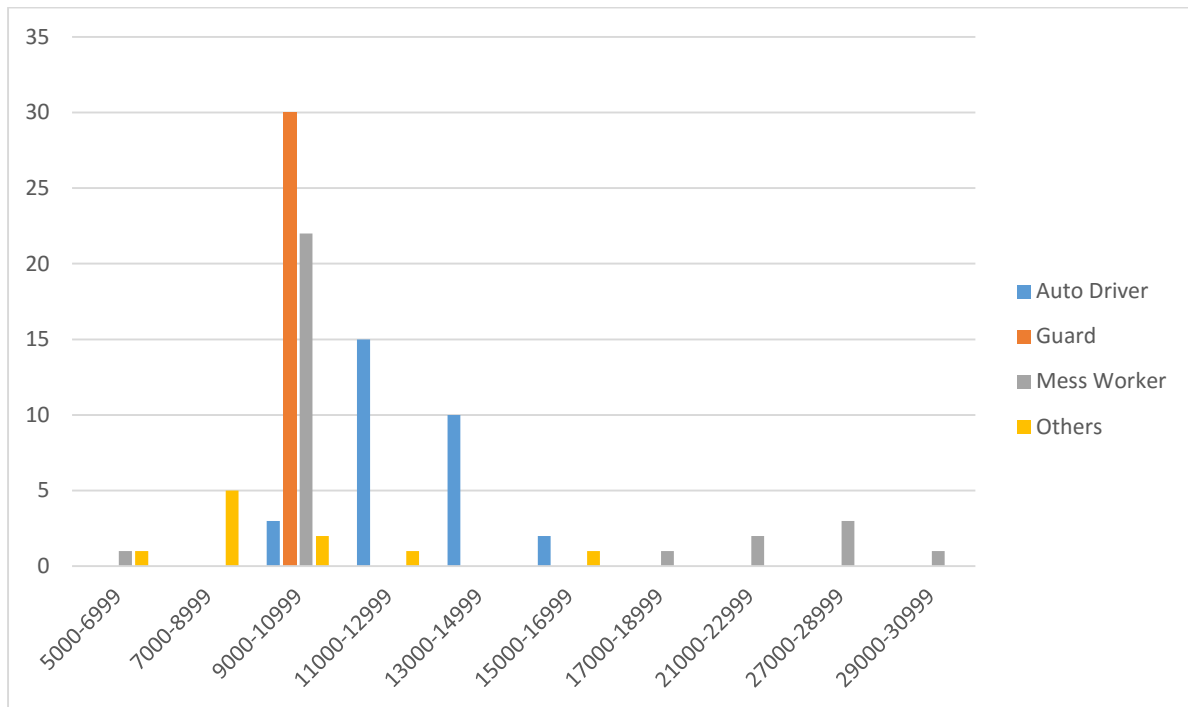


Chart 1 Distribution of monthly income across professions

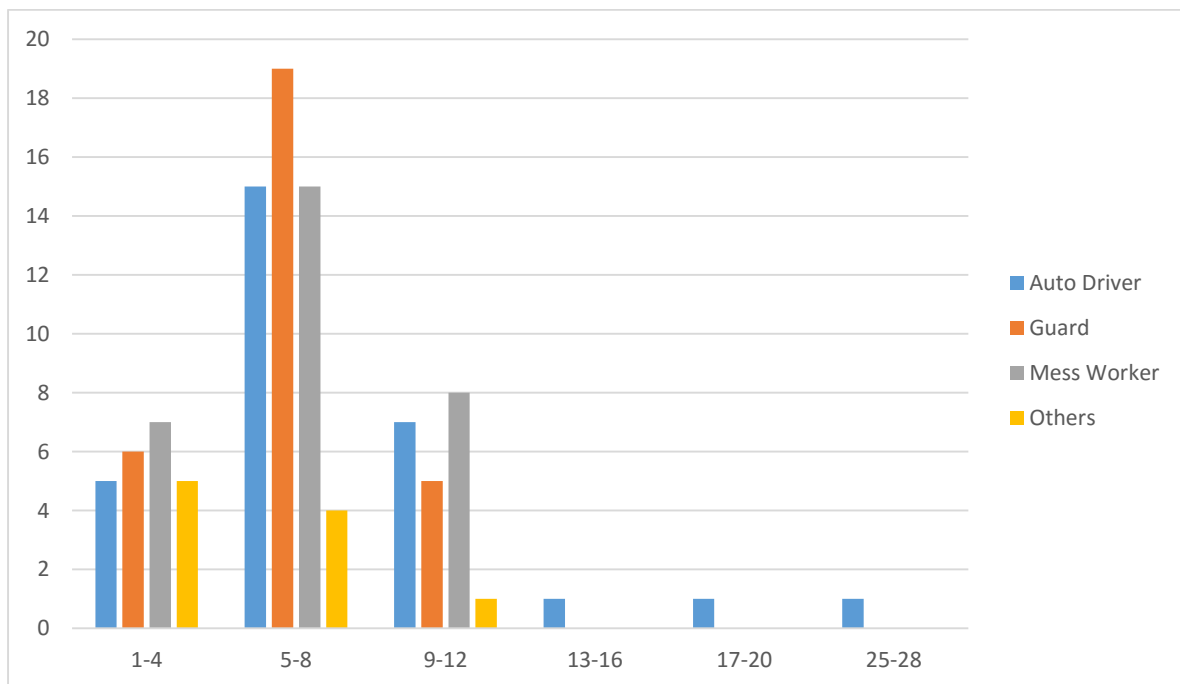


Chart 2 Sizes of Family

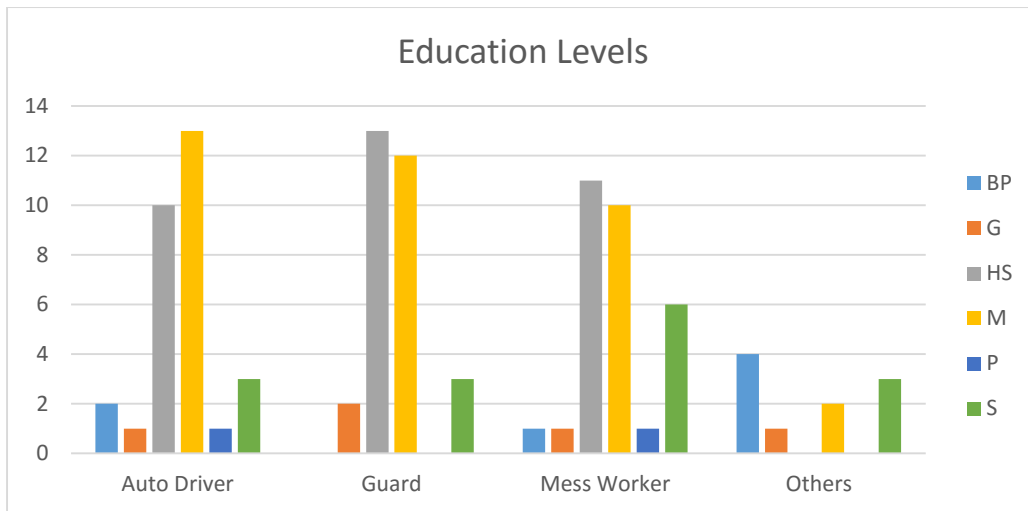


Chart 3 Education Levels across professions BP=Below Primary, G=Graduate and Above, HS=High School, M=Matriculation, P=Primary, S=Secondary

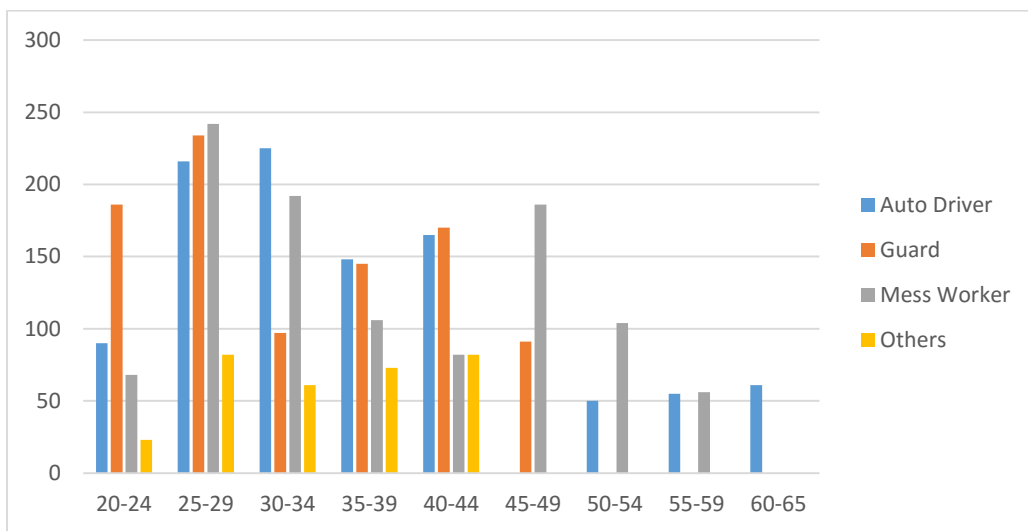


Chart 4 Age groups across professions

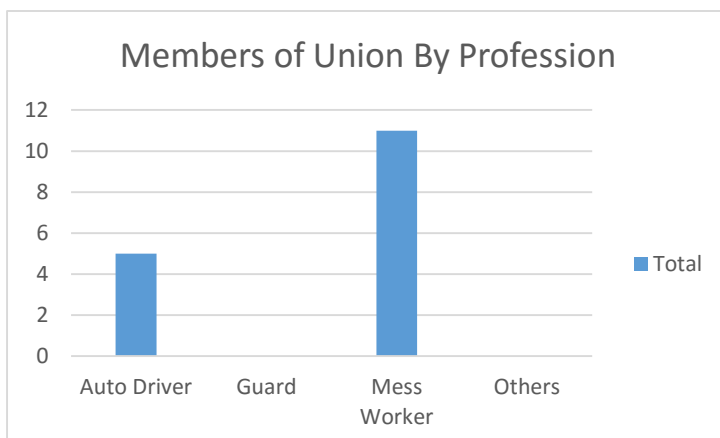


Chart 5 Members of Union by profession

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ⁱThe survey was conducted verbally and the same questions were framed differently while talking to the people being interviewed in order to keep the questions relevant per the profession of the person being interviewed. For example, those who were self-employed (auto drivers) were not asked about their satisfaction with their employers; the person being ferried is essentially both the receiver and the employer of labour. For supervision purposes, auto drivers were asked about their relationship with their source of credit (mostly informal credit) or the person from which they hired their auto on a daily basis. People from other self-employed professions were asked if they faced any difficulties in exercising their professions from the administrative staff and/or the security staff.