CHAPTER 3

Researching Alienation

3.1 Introduction

Manifestations of alienation tend to ebb and flow; mediated through specific contexts and triggered by specific events, they suddenly break the surface of seemingly tranquil waters. This creates a problem for researching the condition. This chapter describes one way to research Marx's approach to alienation that moves beyond the polemic to provide a method of collecting, analysing and presenting data without falling into empiricism. Many studies purporting to research alienation employ measurement tools, such as pre-determined self-reporting questionnaires which often incorporate the ideological and theoretical positions of the designers, but it can seem to participants that the questions are neutral. This approach relies on participant self-reporting which can describe the surface appearance of alienation without delving into its causes and triggers. Finally, participants exist as individuals rather than as part of a collective with a myriad of relations that are subject to constant change. Criticism of Marx's notion of alienation often focuses on the failure of the Marxist approach to resolve major methodological challenges associated with the need to find an accurate measurement of the levels or intensity of alienation. In doing so, such criticism lapses back to the Seeman positivist problematic.

My research sought to assess if Marx's approach can explain the lived alienated experiences in three distinct settings – ICT professionals, academics researching the ethical and societal implications of ICT, and end users – and several reasons informed my rejection of a positivist approach. Firstly, positivism views 'the world as being flat, undifferentiated and unchanging' (Bhaskar in Bhaskar and Callinicos 2003: 98), a criticism particularly pertinent to research within the field of ICT since both its subject matter, in terms of technology, and its relationship to human action are in a state of constant flux. Seeking to create a closed system of experimentation in an effort to identify influential variables

is problematic because it denies the notion that any one particular (or set of particulars) is 'modified and restricted in various ways because it's operating in relation to all sorts of other powers' (Callinicos 2004: 90). Positivism is unable to adequately deal with the relation between agency and structure which casts serious doubts on its effectiveness for researching alienation since such research deals precisely with an aspect of the world that is constantly changing and is essentially concerned with relations, albeit mediated through specific contexts.

A quantitative approach would also have been problematic since it would not have enabled comparative analyses between the three settings since any self-reporting questionnaire that drew upon Marx's theory of alienation to cover issues such as gratification obtained from work; separation from work and play; the fusion between work and play; the unity between planning and performance of work; and the relations between values and qualities developed in working and non-working periods; power relations; and creativity would have been almost impossible to devise. Such a questionnaire would have needed tailoring to the specific circumstances of both the ICT professionals and scholars consequently raising concerns over comparability between the two groups. Finally, it would not have been suitable for the end user activity with the Southwark Pensioners Action Group (SPAG). The inconsistencies associated with multiple domain-based research would have been compounded by a quantitative approach and would have rendered it impossible to meaningfully engage in a discussion about alienation both within and between the settings. Qualitative data gathering (QDG) based on interviews, groups sessions, and observation allowed for emergent properties to be more easily observed and explored. QDG permitted a greater exploration of underlying relations of alienation and the triggers for its practical manifestation which in turn facilitated the discovery of 'findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification' (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 17).

Critical realism (CR), developed within the school of critical social theory, provided an overarching frame for this study and argues the world exists independent from our knowledge of it and that our knowledge of that world can be fallible (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett 2010). Bhaskar also argues that seeing 'society rationally and emergent' and adopting a 'transformational model of social activity' helps overcome the dualisms prevalent in social science research (Bhaskar 1998: xiv) namely positivism and hermeneutics, individualism and collectivism, agency and structure, values and facts, reasons and causes, and mind and body (sometimes referred to as society and nature) by employing a 'modified naturalism' which recognises the difference between the natural and social worlds, yet also acknowledges their commonality on the 'connection between empirical investigation and theory construction' (Porter 2002: 62). CR emphasises four key points:

- the relationship between structure, action and context is complex and multi-layered;

- rigorous observational research is required to lay bare the 'interactions of individuals both at the level of action and motivation';
- the use of theoretical constructs is required to explain the pattern of action by individuals;
- an acceptance of 'the existence of structured, but non-determining social relationships' (Porter 2002: 70).

CR argues the world is 'a pre-existing condition for intentional agency' and that 'society is both the condition and outcome of human agency and human agency both reproduces and transforms society' and that society is a 'pre-given for individuals who never create it but merely reproduce or transform it' (Bhaskar 1998: xvi). CR acknowledges 'actors' accounts (are) both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills, and unconscious motivations' but recognises that 'actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point of all social enquiry' (Bhaskar 1998: xvi).

Several further core elements underpin the critical realist approach including the notion that there is 'an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform' (Bhaskar 1991: 76). CR accepts that social situations should be subject to a multilayered investigation involving the relationships between the layers and will involve the development of abstractions that are drawn from 'the real stratification (and ontological depth) of nature and society' in an attempt to 'grasp … precisely the generative mechanism and causal structures which account in all their complex and multiple determinations for the concrete phenomena of human history' (Bhaskar 1998: xvi). Further, the world consists of intransitive things that exist and act independently of our knowledge of them, and transitive objects that are 'artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day' (Bhaskar 1998: 11). CR research recognises the dynamic interaction between three layers: the real, the actual and the empirical. The real is the world as it exists; the actual is that part of the world as we experience it; and the empirical is that part of the world we can research and capture. Looking at ICT, Mingers (2004) argues that whenever someone uses a computer, she is accepting that there is an existing set of 'structured, intransitive domain resources, concepts, practices and relationships' (Mingers 2004: 386).

Employing Bhaskar's notion that 'illusions are in one sense real and in another sense unreal' (Bhaskar and Callinicos 2003: 104) it is possible to conceive of a situation where the illusion, for example of a person believing they are not alienated, can be real and unreal at the same time creating a contradiction where illusion and reality inhabit the same emotional and intellectual space. The focus then becomes how this contradiction can be resolved which does not necessarily mean the contradiction is resolved by the recognition of the illusion. It can also be resolved, even if temporarily, by the power of illusion impacting on reality by taking the form of a concrete action. Bhaskar refers to the 'spontaneous, unpaid creativity of the workers' that enables workplaces,

be they production lines, offices or call centres, to keep going (Bhaskar and Callinicos 2003: 105).

In echoing several themes outlined by Marx in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1970), Margaret Archer (2010) developed an approach to CR that centres on 'processes which tend to elaborate or change a system's given form or state' (Buckley 1967: 58 in Archer 2010: 274) and where events leave a condition unchanged. Involved in this perspective are considerations associated with actions and/or structures that constrain or enable change. Archer also contends that a double morphogenesis can occur where 'actors themselves change in the very process of actively pursuing changes in the social order' (Archer 2010: 274).

The process used for the research was one that:

- recognised the depth of analysis research on alienation requires;
- coped with notions of mediation;
- incorporated potential and existing relationships between people and objects;
- handled relationships between people;
- accommodated the ebb and flow of manifestations of alienation;
- searched for the generative mechanisms that create expressions of alienation;
- was amenable to managing results that are non-linear and changing;
- encouraged the researcher to embrace the reflexive capabilities of research participants;
- appreciated the creative input of those who participated in the research;
- could relate to notions such as powerlessness and estrangement as they are interpreted in Marx's approach to alienation.

The theoretical framework used for this research gave voice to the agent while recognising that this voice was conditioned by context and articulated experiences without fully appreciating the nature of the external causes of those experiences. Research driven by CR echoes Marx's own approach to understanding the world. Simply observing and recording activity and material conditions of life do not enable us to comprehend how these conditions and their attendant relations work or are generated. The task is to distinguish between the outward appearance of things and their deeper essence (Callinicos, 2012). To facilitate this process Marx uses the power of abstraction to strip away all an object's or a relation's specific concrete attributes to reveal their essence and thus to develop a general concrete abstraction. This process, focusing on mediation, involves three phases: recognising that the world as it presents itself to us is its appearance, not its total reality; to engage in an intellectual activity of abstraction which involves breaking down appearance into manageable parts for investigation; and finally, to reconstruct our understanding of reality using abstractions that enable an examination of the material world.

The work of Seeman and Blauner and their problematic approach to alienation highlighted the need to ensure that researching alienation does not lapse into an investigation simply concerned with satisfaction within a given context, such as occupation. It demands an appreciation of movement and influences at a deeper stratum than, say, job satisfaction. An alienated condition need not always be apparent to those experiencing alienation because it can seem part of the 'natural' order of things. In the language of CR, alienation can reside in the real layer not readily recognisable or observable. This study therefore required a set of tools that enabled expressions of an alienated condition to move through to the actual level thus allowing for empirical observation and it made use of a qualitative approach that embraced CR and participatory action research (PAR). Operating in tandem, they provided a range of options that allowed for the generation of activities that encouraged expressions of alienation to bubble to the surface. As will be seen in the analyses of the settings chosen for this study, adopting these research strategies and fashioning them into whole approach enabled access to apparently contradictory experiences and facilitated the exploration of these contradictions as well as providing an explanation for their existence. Marx's theory of alienation highlighted the way to using CR and PAR.

3.2 Data Collection Process

The data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group sessions and a series of hands-on ICT training sessions all of which drew upon Marx's theory of alienation to structure focus group, interview and hands-on session activity. The focus group activity for the ICT professionals was conducted at their workplace. Follow-up interviews were undertaken online using Skype. The interviews with the scholars were undertaken online using Skype. All the activity with the SPAG participants was carried out face to face. The duration of the interviews varied but almost all took over an hour with some lasting much longer. In the context of this research, I do not consider that the online environment had an adverse impact on the data collection. The data collected from the three settings have been integrated into wider contexts as they relate to the specific settings.

There can be difficulties associated with qualitative interviews such as ambiguity of language, constructing knowledge, and interviews going wrong (Myers and Newman 2007). Sensitivity to these problems ensured that none were encountered during data collection and the process ensured that the principles and priorities such as minimising social dissonance, representing various voices, flexibility, and confidentiality, were not undermined.

The group interviews used in the ICT and end-user scenarios were designed to enable in-depth discussion involving a set of between six and twelve participants. Resource-low, yet data-rich, group interviews can point in directions that perhaps results from the single interview can miss and can help 'lift

the veils covering the sphere of life than any other device' (Blumer (1969) in Flick 2018: 255). However, there can be problems with this technique such as the dominance of discussion by a single or small group of participants; internal group dynamic; and researcher-mediated interventions (Smithson 2008). Awareness of these issues helped develop appropriate ways of working that minimised their adverse effects on the research. Thus, the data gathering activity concerned with the ICT participants consisted of a group discussion supplemented with follow-up individual interviews which required to bring to the surface how the professionals felt about ICT and therefore choices had to be made about what questions, both in terms of form and content, needed to be asked and the balance that was required to meet the demands of the research task. The protocols designed for the group sessions and individual interviews were informed by four key imperatives: the need to collect raw data directly associated with the priorities of this research study; the desire to encourage an opening up of the discussion to facilitate data collection; to bring to the surface attitudes otherwise hidden from view; and to encourage a reflective process during the discussion itself.

The three settings facilitated an approach that focused on resonance through 'transferability and naturalistic generalisations' rather that statistical generalisation (Tracy 2010). The 'stories' this book relates create transferability by connecting with readers and evoking within them 'the idea that they have experienced the same thing in a different arena' (Tracy 2012: 845). Naturalistic generalisation is realised when we reflect on how the stories of alienation within the book speak to us and connect with our own experiences. In doing so it helps us identify and clarify the causes and expressions of our own alienated condition. A multi-group approach also enabled triangulation, the application of differing methodologies in the collection and analyses of data in the study of the same phenomenon, as it is related to data validity, thus buttressing the scientific rigour of the research project. Flick (1979) argues that in qualitative research, triangulation can employ the use of multiple comparison groups and refers to the within-method which 'essentially involves cross-checking for internal consistency reliability' and the between-method 'which tests for the degree of external validity' (Flick 1979: 603). While triangulation often focuses on data collection validity, in the context of this study triangulation is related to the effectiveness of Marx's theory of alienation. Each setting is supported by the reference to existing research as well as the material conditions experienced by the participants.

3.3 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

A basic premise of PAR is the discovery of voice by adhering to the view that participants can project their own voice rather than have the researcher act as spokesperson for their concerns. Here, participation becomes part of a shared

activity with participants sharing decisions, organisational tasks and obligations. PAR researchers can intervene in the research arena rather than simply withdrawing after completion of the research leaving the situation unchanged. Although a relatively recent addition to the research toolbox, PAR has developed a rich tradition within social sciences for investigating issues of exclusion, marginalisation and disadvantage, and requires collaborative research in which participants actively engage in, and possibly help shape, the research agenda. The collective reflection of participants is highly valued as is their inclusion in the planning, action and observation phases of a research project. The aim of PAR is to move beyond suggesting changes that arise from research to 'incorporating methods for translating the knowledge gained directly into practical decisions and/or practicable courses of action' (Fournier et al. 2008: 2). There are however issues associated with the authenticity of outcomes arising from research using PAR since the researcher is not an impartial observer (if such a thing is possible!) but becomes involved with the subject of the research and thereby can directly influence events. The 'concerns of conventional researchers about objectivity and controls are replaced in action research by concerns of relevance, social change, and validity tested in action' as Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire (2003: 25). PAR also questions the separation of theory production and theory application and involves the participants in processes seeking to establish the validity of research outcomes. The belief that there may be doubts about the veracity of findings from research using PAR is strongly influenced by the positivist tradition. The immediate issue was then to ensure that enough rigour had been employed in the research process to realise results that have credibility, dependability and transferability (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The CR perspective also adds that results are the nearest approximation to reality and are therefore by implication fallible. Recognising the potential pitfalls of a research programme using PAR is of itself the first step towards applying appropriate rigour.

PAR requires that participant involvement reaches beyond that experienced in more traditional research activity. The tone, style and manner of decision making adopted at the start of the research are critical for engendering a positive attitude towards PAR from participants. Since participants should be involved from the start, they should be able to meaningfully influence the choice of research tools to be used. Moreover, if the spirit of PAR is applied in practice, and as the research was concerned with ICT and alienation in different contexts, the specific research methods and/or priority of method would vary since the participants in the different contexts expressed different aspects of alienation because of the relationship between totality, mediation and immediacy.

There was also a need to adopt an appropriate practical way of working supported by a range of relevant tools that allowed for the generation of appropriate data; and a recognised need to create environments that encouraged the researcher and the participants to develop a close, shared working relationship.

Thus, the sentiments underpinning PAR were signposts that guided the direction of the research activity. PAR was not utilised in full in the three scenarios but it was particularly effective with the end-users' hands-on sessions and was partially employed in the setting concerned with the ICT professionals since it resulted in the production of a paper circulated to their own trade union. PAR was not effectively used in the setting associated with the scholars although a draft of the relevant chapter was circulated to all the scholar participants for comment and discussion.

One element of the research involved a close working relationship with members of the SPAG. This took the form of numerous 2-hour hands-on sessions with the objectives of the sessions being discussed and identified during pre-session conversations. Consequently, while I was intimately involved in forming the shape of the sessions, their priorities, content and purpose of each session was driven by the SPAG participants. This is a relatively unusual, but not unique, approach to research in this area but it proved to be effective in focusing on alienation.

3.4 Target Group: ICT Professionals

Chapter 1 identified the theme of the research which was to engage with participants experiencing ICT in a variety of very different contexts and in different ways, to examine the relationship between alienation and ICT. The following outlines the rationale for, and the processes related to, the selection and involvement of participants for this part of the study. ICT professionals rarely feature prominently in research concerning ICT and alienation. The limited research is often of a quantitative nature, never involving a collective approach, drawing upon the problematic approaches adopted by Seeman and Blauner thus being primarily about job satisfaction rather than alienation. Making ICT professionals within a collective environment an integral part of this study addressed this weakness. My focus on a large-scale ICT company in the United Kingdom offered four benefits:

- it would employ ICT professionals across a range of skill sets;
- there would be a much greater possibility of finding a suitable group of subjects;
- the geographic location enabled reasonably easy access to the potential participants;
- it provided a set of participants with shared interests.

These were important aspects since they enabled access to a robust sample which facilitated the successful completion of the data gathering. The challenge was to find a group of participants who would be prepared to discuss their roles within an organisation in a group interview; who would feel comfortable

in such a discussion; and some of whom would be prepared to be interviewed on an individual basis. An approach to Human Resource departments was rejected for three reasons. It was an inefficient way to contact the target group since it depended on several factors beyond immediate control, such as HR departments having the time and commitment to provide contact names and email addresses. There would be no guarantee that the resulting contact group would show enough interest in the research programme or indeed would have the internal coherence to facilitate a free and frank exchange of views in a group interview.

The second reason for rejecting this approach flowed from the need to engage with an existing internally coherent network that would help clear away many of the problems associated with establishing group confidence. Finally, rejecting this method stemmed from the nature of the research project itself with its strong emphasis on a 'bottom-up' approach to contacting the target group. Rejecting more formal approaches to ICT professionals via management structures opened extremely fruitful avenues for developing contacts which proved to be very efficient in providing ICT professional participants.

An email to branch organisers (as opposed to full-time officials) of trade unions representing ICT professionals in the United Kingdom outlined the nature of the research programme and asked if they knew of interested members. One of the organisers circulated details of the project to several contacts and put together an interested group. This group consisted of participants who all worked for the same organisation and already knew and worked with each other, thereby meeting some of the critical criteria identified above for group participation. The union organiser was prepared to convene meetings of this group. Adopting a method influenced by PAR resulted in effective access to one of the target groups required for this aspect of the research. The next section discusses the scholars' setting.

3.5 Target Group: Scholars

Several reasons contributed to the choice of the second group of participants. The first was to undertake the research in an apparently benign environment where it seems that scholars have a significant measure of control over their activity and are highly motivated by their work because of their strong commitment, sometimes dedication, to the subject. The second reason was directly connected to the work of these scholars. If it emerged that the way they undertake and publicise their research is flawed or compromised, arising from alienated conditions, there are significant implications for the way they are researching and publishing on ICT itself.

This part of the study also needed a range of participant profiles: those who have had a long involvement in the area; those who were considered relative newcomers to the field; and finally, the need to obtain a spread by gender and

locality. Contacting potential interviewees for the first group via the editorial boards of journals was most effective since membership indicates a proven track record in the field; points to participation in a relatively stable academic network; involves knowledge of current developments in the subject; and signals an appreciation of the scope and history of the ethical and/or societal implications of ICT. Two further advantages of using editorial boards is they do have a good spread in terms of nationality and gender.

Finding a selection of potential interviewees for this group involved reviewing articles in journals and/or papers to conferences as well as approaching research units to identify those researchers whose contributions to the subject area are relatively recent, did not reside in any one location and were of different genders. It was also recognised that a Eurocentric bias within this setting could undermine the possibility of generalising any following analysis and it was decided therefore to seek participants from a range of continents. Although scholars from Asia had agreed to participate in the study, it was not possible for them to be interviewed because of logistical reasons.

As with many areas of activity involving academics, and particularly research scholars, those involved with ethics and/or the societal impact of ICT, tend to form part of networks often clustered around journals such as *Ethics and Information Technology*, the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* and the *International Review of Information Ethics* or events such as the Ethicomp and the ICTs and Society conferences. These journals and conferences are often based within academic institutions such as the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility at De Montfort University, UK; the Department of Communications at the University of Pretoria; and the Institute of Philosophy at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. On occasion, as with the 3TU Centre for Ethics and Technology, the research centre can be formed by two or more academic institutions. While there can be a significant overlap between the two broad areas, research concerned with ICT ethics and that focused on the societal impact of ICT, the relatively recent explosion of research in these areas, as witnessed by the breadth and depth of topics covered by conferences such as Ethicomp, means there is a wide pool of people to approach for research of the type covered by this study particularly for researchers who are new to the field.

3.6 Target Group: End-Users

The choice of the Southwark Pensioners Action Group (SPAG) for the third setting was informed by the need to research a setting that contrasted with the other work-based settings and focused on end-users. The scenario focused on age, alienation and ICT revolved around participants who would be prepared to engage in the research from a PAR perspective; were prepared to commit to the research programme for an extended period; were interested in discussing

at length the issues covered by the research; and would undertake an activity that would provide a rich source of data. The specific choice of the Southwark Pensioners' Action Group was driven by several favourable factors. SPAG was local and has easy access to premises containing a purpose-built computer suite. Membership exceeds 100 and it has an active programme of meetings and events focused on raising awareness and campaigning on issues that affect the health and independence of older people on a range of topics. Consequently, it has an internal coherence in terms of structure and mutual support. Many of its members also belong to other groups such as the Southwark Pensioners Forum (SPF) and the Southwark Explorers Club (SEC), resulting in a friendly, active and lively group.

SPAG campaigns have included opposing the closure of the Maudsley Hospital Felix Post Unit, a specialist mental health service for older people; challenging changes to Accident and Emergency Services which reduced specialist emergency treatment for people with mental health issues; regularly lobbying local and national politicians about the erosion of the value of the old age pension and the position of many older women who receive significantly less income than men. SPAG used the premises of the Southwark Pensioners Centre (SPC) which offers a range of services and activities to people over 50 in the London Borough of Southwark. It enables older people to enjoy a good quality of life into healthy old age by providing services, information and a community resource centre working to promote choice and opportunity for the diverse population across the borough. Over 800 people are in contact with the SPC and it has 20-plus affiliated groups and community organisations. In the learning sessions with SPAG it became apparent that participants had several objectives and a range of motives most of which were directly connected to the roles they had in organisations such as charities.

For the researcher, working with a group like this can help avoid the problem of 'wrenching people out of their social milieu' (Forsey 2013) and it helps promote and facilitate communication between participants. Further, there was a motivation to engage in a supportive, collective environment that would facilitate an exploration of the idea that certain conditions could ameliorate the negative impact of alienation. The decision to adopt PAR, as far as possible in the research, also influenced the decision to use SPAG. While the administrative infrastructure of SPAG relies on ICT, many of the elected officers had limited expertise in ICT. In addition, it had many members with little or no experience of ICT and therefore offered the potential of providing a group of people with varied ICT skills but within an overall supportive environment.

For ease of reference, a full description of the research process along with details concerning the coding for each of the settings is available within the original PhD research. (See bit.ly/3kWy4vO: relevant appendixes are G to N). The file fully describes the development of the research project and contains a number of diagrams showing the trajectory of the research and how general and context specific codes were developed as well as the descriptive codes used

in the analyses for each of the three settings. The coding diagrams indicate how the activity was driven by the precepts derived directly from Marx's theory of alienation as well as the desire to embrace a CR perspective.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Social research needs to recognise and meet the ethical standards increasingly demanded by academia and society. This especially so at moment when, as will be discussed in chapter 5, there are numerous problems associated with falsified data, questionable analysis, the effectiveness of peer review and the proliferation of predatory journals. There was no organisational or institutional imperative or pressure, financial or otherwise, influencing the goals of the research, the methodology followed, or the analysis and ownership of the results of the research. The publication of this book within the academic commons confirms a commitment to the view that access to all academic discourse should not be subject to financial constraints.

At a deeper level however, a possible conflict of interest may have arisen between my needs as researcher to complete the research project and the objectives of the research participants. This was particularly so for the setting involving the pensioners from south London. There was an imperative for me to disengage from the activity whereas for the participants the activity was viewed as an ongoing engagement. At the heart of this contradiction was the need to fully grasp the notion that any participant in any research programme must not be considered simply as means to an end. A further ethical issue arising from the collection of data concerns guaranteeing the confidentiality of the participants given that all interviews and parts of the hands-on ICT training sessions were to be recorded for later analysis. This was addressed by asking each interviewee before the interview if they agreed to be recorded; at the same time, it was stressed that their anonymity would be respected in the publication of the findings and chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 indicate an unconditional adherence to this commitment.