H ave you ever taken an Uber across town? Rented a vacation home through Airbnb? Ordered dinner through Grubhub? If so, you have participated in the gig economy: a free-market system in which technology-driven companies engage workers to provide short-term services. While the media celebrates the innovative business models and skyrocketing revenues of companies like these, the experiences of the workers themselves are often overlooked. Until now.

Dr. Alexandrea Ravenelle, an assistant professor of sociology at Mercy College, recently wrote a book on the gig economy — also known as the on-demand, platform or sharing economy — based on interviews with almost 80 gig workers in New York City. “Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy” will be published in March 2019 by the University of California Press.

While running a small consulting business, Ravenelle occasionally hired workers through the platform TaskRabbit. She got to know one Tasker — as TaskRabbit calls its workers — named Jamal (a pseudonym) quite well over time, and he told her all kinds of stories about his TaskRabbit gigs. Once, he was hired to pick up a prescription, but on his way to the pharmacy, the client messaged him through the TaskRabbit app to say that she had moved to China and wanted the prescription sent to her there, without any customs paperwork filed. The prescription turned out to be a large bottle of amphetamines. When Jamal called TaskRabbit to ask how he should respond to this questionable request, the company told him to complete the job. He decided that he did not feel comfortable doing so, so the woman agreed to arrange for a friend to pick up the medication. While waiting for her to set up the meeting, Jamal carried the amphetamines around in his backpack because he thought someone might steal them from his hostel room. On top of that, he worried that he would be picked up by the police.

The media often makes the gig economy sound like a dreamy way to gain freedom, flexibility and unlimited earning power. However, stories like Jamal’s “really started to open my eyes,” Ravenelle explains. “I realized that the gig economy wasn’t the entrepreneurial utopia that it was made out to be but actually an exploitation of workers — that the money and stability were never there. Workers were finding themselves in questionable and even dangerous situations. Although there are entrepreneurship opportunities for people with high levels of skills and capital, the gig economy falls very short for many people in terms of its promises.”

Ravenelle’s book examines the stories of workers who use four online platforms: Airbnb, Uber, TaskRabbit and the now-defunct Kitchensurfing. One reason Ravenelle chose to focus on these companies is because they represent a range of gig economy platforms. Uber and Airbnb are large, successful companies. TaskRabbit was a smaller company that was struggling to define its identity and has since been acquired by IKEA. Kitchensurfing was a fairly new startup and has since closed down. These four platforms also require varying levels of skill and capital on the worker’s part. Working through Airbnb requires high capital, while working through Uber requires high capital but relatively low skill. Working through Kitchensurfing required low capital but high skill, while working through TaskRabbit requires low capital and relatively low skill.

At first, Ravenelle planned to use her research as the basis for a few journal articles and conference presentations. But as she began to see trends across interviews, she realized that there was a bigger story to tell. “I realized it was going to be a book — and an interesting one — when it became clear that this was not just a couple of stories but a really big trend of increased risk for workers that linked back to the history of the labor movement in the U.S.”

Ravenelle teaches the same methods she used to conduct interviews for her book in her Methodology for the Social and Behavioral Sciences course in Mercy’s School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. She uses a qualitative interview method involving a matrix, which results in a more conversational interview. In one memorable exercise in class, she sends a student out of the room to get coffee. The rest of the class creates a list of interview questions, and Ravenelle enters the questions into a matrix. When the student returns, Ravenelle asks every interview question before the student realizes what is happening. “Usually, we’ve gotten some really interesting tidbits about that student,” she explains. “And everyone else is astounded to watch the interview unfold.” Ravenelle’s students find her real-world experience in sociological research fascinating. Most of them have heard of some of the gig economy platforms, and many students have used services such as Uber and Airbnb. “All of a sudden, [what we’re
studying is] part of the real world, and they’re hearing my take on it as a sociologist,” Ravenelle adds.

The stories Ravenelle heard from interviewees ranged from strange to dangerous. At one point, Jamal was hired to clean out a pond in Brooklyn. When he arrived, he found that the pond had never been cleaned before. There was no cleaning equipment available, so he took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants, and climbed into the murky water to do the job by hand — with no knowledge of what lay beneath the surface. Another story involved an Uber driver who found himself involuntarily involved in a drug run. He picked up a group of young men who asked to direct the car without using the GPS. A passenger would jump out of the car every few blocks to shake hands with someone on the corner before jumping back in to drive to the next destination. The ride lasted two hours, and the driver was only released after he gave the men his cell phone number. There were other stories involving sexual harassment, discrimination and workplace injuries.

However, Ravenelle uncovered success stories as well. One Airbnb host has up to 25 guests per night in apartments he manages across New York City. And some Kitchensurfing chefs built successful catering businesses on the platform.

As she analyzed the gig worker interviews, Ravenelle began to see workers as typically falling into one of three categories: Strugglers, Strivers and Success Stories. Strugglers are workers who turn to the gig economy in desperation but struggle to earn enough money. Strivers turn to the gig economy to earn extra money outside of their stable jobs and salaries. Success Stories have generally created the lives they want with flexible schedules and consistent, often generous incomes. However, even their situations are somewhat precarious because they are still at the mercy of the companies and local governments. If New York City cracks down on Airbnb rentals, for example, hosts will still be on the hook for high monthly rents. Several interviewees also spoke of a company’s shift in policy or business model affecting their incomes.

Ravenelle sees a strong connection between today’s gig economy and the early industrial age. At that point, workers worked long hours, often in unsafe conditions, with few rights or options for redress. Today, Ravenelle writes, “workers find themselves outside even the most basic workplace protections regarding discrimination and sexual harassment, the right to unionize and even the right to redress for workplace injuries. The sharing economy is upending generations of workplace protections in the name of disruption and returning to a time when worker exploitation was the norm.”

Even so, there are some bright spots. Concierge service Hello Alfred and cleaning service MyClean pay workers as W-2 employees, give paid time off and provide access to insurance; MyClean even contributes to workers’ 401(k) plans.

As the gig economy continues to grow and change, Ravenelle hopes that “Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy” — the first book to examine the firsthand accounts of gig workers within the context of larger social structures — helps remedy the exploitation she has documented and create a new, more positive narrative around the gig economy.

Hustle and Gig is available for pre-ordering at www.ucpress.edu/9780520300569. Mercy alumni and supporters can get 30% off with coupon code 17M6662 when purchasing directly from the University of California Press.