

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF WORKPLACE DIGNITY

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Abstract

Extant research on dignity at work has revealed conditions that contribute to indignity, employees' responses to dignity threats, and ways in which employees' inherent dignity is undermined. But while dignity – and specifically indignity – is theorized as a phenomenon subjectively experienced and judged by individuals, little research has privileged workers' own perspectives. In this study, working adults reveal how they personally experience and understand meanings of dignity at work. I describe three core components of workplace dignity and the communicative exchanges through which dignity desires commonly are affirmed or denied: inherent dignity as recognized by respectful interaction, earned dignity as recognized by messages of competence and contribution, and remediated dignity as recognized by social interactions and organizational practices that conceal the instrumental and unequal nature of work. Based on theoretical insights drawn from examining the relationships between these components, I argue that workplace dignity is a phenomenon theoretically distinct from human dignity.

Keywords: communication, competence, dignity, inequality, instrumentality, respect

INTRODUCTION

Dignity is a phenomenon that, at once, evokes deep desires and deep injuries. Its complexity and its salience in the human experience can be seen in the multiple ways it is described. In some cases, dignity is a psychological or cognitive outcome whereby people achieve a 'sense of' dignity. In this way, dignity may be experienced, felt, perceived, realized, pursued, or even lost or found. In other cases, dignity is a quality of interaction. People may or may not be treated with dignity, treat others with dignity, carry themselves with dignity, or act with dignity. In still other instances, dignity is something intrinsic to individuals; it is a vulnerable and valued part of their being. Dignity may be protected, defended, maintained, safeguarded, or taken back by the self. It may be respected or acknowledged, yet injured, violated, wounded, or denied by others. Regardless of whether it is considered an outcome, a quality of interaction, or the essence of one's humanity, dignity plays a role in how individuals experience and make sense of their place in the world.

MATERIALS REVIEW AND THEORY

Dignity generally is defined a personal sense of worth, value, respect, or esteem that is derived from one's humanity and individual social position; as well as being treated respectfully by others. [1] There are four core theoretical foundations of workplace dignity that are of particular import for understanding dignity in workplace contexts, and which collectively undergird the growing body of empirical research on workplace dignity. The first foundation is that there are two distinct meanings to dignity: inherent dignity and earned dignity. Inherent dignity is the belief in an unconditional God-given dignity, whereby all people have an intrinsic and equal value simply as a consequence of being human. [2, 43-58] This meaning is sometimes referred to simply as 'human dignity'. Notably, the depiction of dignity being God-given is made independent of any particular religious tradition; instead, it references more broadly the conviction that human value is absolute and accorded to all without exception. In fact, Brennan and Lo maintain that secular and religious conceptions of human dignity are highly compatible as secular underpinnings carry an 'ethical residue of the traditional religious world view' of god-granted dignity[12]. Earned dignity is a belief that dignity is conditional; due to differential qualities, abilities, and efforts, some individuals will secure for themselves greater dignity and privileges than others. In this sense, dignity is meritocratic and self-generated. Particularly in workplace contexts, earned dignity is linked to value and esteem that comes from performing work [3, 22] and deriving self-value from instrumental contributions. These two meanings offer different routes to achieving dignity at work or, alternatively, different routes by which dignity pursuits can be blocked.

The second foundation is that dignity is subjectively experienced and judged by the individual. Lee explains, 'the starting point [of dignity] is either an individual's or a group's own perception as opposed to that of an outsider's'. [4, 283-313] To say dignity is subjectively experienced and judged is not to say it cannot be vicariously experienced or externally judged. Nor is it to say dignity is experienced in a vacuum. Individuals may apply commonly-held standards of interaction to make judgments about the dignity of others, they may feel emotionally aroused or called to action by witnessing the indignities of others, or they may compare themselves against societal standards and/or salient others to arrive at a sense of what is acceptable. [5] Ultimately then, what it means to say that dignity is subjective is that it is a deeply personal experience and the ultimate arbiter of dignity affirmations and denials is the individual and not 'objective' outsiders.

The third foundation is that dignity is inextricably tied to normative expectations, as evidenced in its roots in Christian theology, Kantian philosophy, and business ethics. [6, 40] Specifically, there is a moral imperative that dignity will be upheld and, therefore, all violations are deemed to be problematic[13]. This normative perspective dovetails with the fourth foundation, namely

that the nature of the employment relationship is frequently at odds with achieving dignity. On the one hand, employment is a social relationship that holds promise for contributing positively to one's identity, self-esteem, and flourishing; on the other, it is an economic exchange relationship organized by structures of power and control that constrain agency, heighten risks of exploitation, and potentially dehumanize workers. [7, 50] Given the normative expectations of dignity, the economic exchange basis of the employment relationship becomes a central focus of understanding how workplaces are organized and, in turn, how dignity is experienced and/or violated at work.

For instance, one key concern arising from the economic exchange relationship is that workplaces are instrumentally-driven[14]. The very nature of the employment relationship is one where people are hired as a means to an end, which runs counter to the belief that people should be treated as ends unto themselves. [8, 81] Workplace instrumentalities are evidenced in several ways: employees are viewed as narrowly delimited role occupants, assumed to have no other interests or priorities than work, positioned as readily replaceable by someone or something that serves the organization better, and regarded as 'bundles of human capital rather than as conscious, freely choosing agents'. [9, 48] Another concern is that workplaces are rife with inequalities – from unequal distribution of material rewards, to asymmetrical power relationships and rules of interaction, to limitations on opportunities to engage in meaningful work, to disproportionately allocated space (privacy, safety, and comfort), and more. [10]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One domain of life in which dignity plays a particularly salient role is the workplace, as it is a site where dignity can be both achieved and put at risk. To this point, Bolton maintains that dignity is a productive way to understand contemporary work, explaining that dignity 'encompasses issues that have exercised scholars of work for decades and offers a holistic lens through which workplace issues might be examined'. However, this holistic lens is far from crystal clear[15]. Despite management scholars long having used the word dignity when expressing concerns about work, they rarely have made dignity itself a focal point of attention or have defined it precisely. [11, 66] While dignity tends to be presented as a self-evident term that needs no explanation, conceptual clarity is essential for advancing research. Moreover, dignity is not just a scholarly term, but one that is personally significant for people in the workforce, as it is imbued with 'real world' meanings that reflect how dignity is experienced and understood. As such, greater knowledge of workers' perspectives can influence organizational efforts to foster dignity, as well as provide a basis for considering dignity implications of organizational practices, workplace encounters, and the like. Therefore, for

purposes of both research and managerial practice, it is important to seek a full and robust understanding of dignity, particularly one that privileges workers' perspectives.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have presented the results of a study examining three core dignity desires and the communicative exchanges through which those desires commonly are affirmed or denied – each of which we position as an essential component of workplace dignity. Based on theoretical interrogation of these components and the ways they intersect, we argue that workplace dignity is more complex than simply locating basic human dignity within a workplace context. Instead, workplace dignity is a phenomenon theoretically distinct from human dignity.

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