

Working Paper

07

The study of dignity at work

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The study of dignity at work*

Luis Felipe Camacho Carvajal**

Abstract

This working paper explores the concept of dignity at work and its relevance to organizational researchers. Dignity at work is a complex and multifaceted topic that lacks consensus within the field of organizational studies. As a result, several key questions emerge for debate, including the definition of dignity at work, methods for measuring dignity, and appropriate approaches for studying this phenomenon. This paper aims to introduce and address these fundamental questions, providing a foundation for further exploration and understanding of dignity at work. By delving into these inquiries, the paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse and offers valuable insights into the intricate nature of dignity within organizational contexts.

Keywords: control-resistance dynamics; dignity; dignity at work; participatory management practices (PMP); workplace organization

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Introduction

Workplace organization is usually defined based on material and structural relations. For instance, the skills needed to perform a task, the efficient use of technology and resources, the timely response to clients or market demands, the extra effort needed to reach a milestone, or worker commitment to the organizational goals are some examples. Also, the long historical evidence of conflict of interests between workplace actors such as stakeholders, shareholders, workers, and managers have resulted in research on how these dynamics shape the well-being of workers in categories such as safety, health, solidarity, and stress. However, workplace organization studies have tended to ignore how human dignity impacts workplace dynamics. All human actors involved in the social production of goods and services have human dignity characteristics that must be understood and acknowledged.

Researchers in dignity at work agree that “Dignity is a wide-ranging concept of potentially universal application” (Hodgkiss, 2015, p. 129) as well as a “broad concept with multiple facets and implications” (Hodson, 2007, p. 129). Consequently, understanding the concept of human dignity in the workplace is a challenge in itself, making it unlikely that consensus will be found on what links human dignity to human work activities.

This working paper is divided into four sections and a final annotation. The first section discusses the concept of dignity at work. The second section reflects on the labor process theory as the traditional sociological method to study dignity in workplaces. The third section focuses on Hodson’s (2001) operational categories as proxies to measure

dignity at work. The last section observes a general perception of dignity at work from organizations.

What is dignity at work?

Dignity comes from the Latin word “*ignus*,” which means “worthy.” In past times, the term was related to a high position or legal title of a noble person (a dignitary). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines dignity as “formal reserve or seriousness of manner, appearance, or language; and the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The Oxford dictionary defines it as “a sense of pride in oneself; self-respect” (Oxford University Press, 2019). These definitions relate to the “very nature of being human” (Hodgkiss, 2015, p. 133). Accordingly, dignity at work refers to the human condition of worth inside the workplace environment.

The above definitions of dignity refer to 1) an intrinsic and inherent characteristic owned by any human, which is bestowed on a person’s character or position, and 2) a person’s ability to earn dignity through pride in their actions and themselves. Hence, dignity is attached to moral principles and human agency. From a moral perspective, human work and dignity have been conceptualized through “work ethics.” Work ethics is defined as “a belief in work as a moral good: a set of values centered on the importance of doing work and reflected especially in a desire or determination to work hard” (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Thus, work is presented as an end in itself—i.e., human morality links human dignity to the nature of work, or to what we do and how we do it. From a moral perspec-

tive, “hard” work “is intrinsically virtuous or worthy of reward” that reveals the character or characteristic of “human dignity” through work activities.

From a human agency perspective, authors such as Mitchell (2010) assume that normatively viewing the Declaration of Human Rights, in which work is declared a human right, is not sufficient to intertwine human work with human dignity. She argues that “studies of work and organizations are not a natural habitat for [studying dignity], it being better represented in fields of philosophy and ethics” (Mitchell, 2010, p. 20). Thus, organizational studies are a complex empirical discipline in which it may not be appropriate to measure what dignity “is,” but rather how it “comes to be.” According to Hamilton and Mitchell (2016), dignity traditionally is attached to the ideas of “Human rights” and therefore disregard “posthuman ways of seeing work.” Their perspective acknowledges and makes animal work (e.g., guide dogs, dairy cattle) equivalent to human dignity, abandoning the human-animal distinction on cognition and conceiving dignity as

[...] rooted in recognition of relational acting capacities... [therefore,] [p]receiving dignity as an emergent outcome of organization, we, therefore, argue that this term applies to the individual worth of nonhuman animals as it does to human animals. This is dignity as an outcome of relations, social processes, and interaction, not an inherent or ‘natural’ trait. (Hamilton & Mitchell, 2016, para. 2)

However, as they acknowledge, this perspective reduces empirical research to understanding work agency capacity just to the “intentionality of nonhuman animals... we can

never honestly know what ‘they’ are thinking (or indeed whether they are thinking)” (Hamilton & Mitchell, 2016, para. 7).

Mitchell (2010) proposed a human agency conceptualization of dignity at work, which focuses on “worker performance” as a proxy to identify the presence of dignity as something continually done through workplace relations. Perspectives that emphasize efficiency and organizational productivity often promote “management practices to create the conditions for dignity at work” (Bolton, 2011b, p. 372).

On the other hand, the sociological understanding of human agency in relation to dignity at work does not solely focus on organizational productivity. This perspective critiques the idea that performance is the only mechanism to identify the presence of dignity at work. Furthermore, the sociological perspective recognizes the complexity of the concept of dignity at work, making it difficult to reach a consensus. However, it does acknowledge that advancing dignity at work is connected to organizational efficiency and productivity criteria. Sociological premises argue that using workers’ performance as the sole indicator denies the need for “interesting and meaningful work as a route for dignity at work” (Bolton, 2011b, p. 372). The identification of indignities through managerial abuse creates the impression of pre-rational workplaces based on arbitrary personal power (Thompson & Newsome, 2016, p. 79).

Sayer (2008) attempts to summarize specific features or elements that are prerequisites for dignity at work. Dignity at work goes beyond the absence of mistreatment. It requires workers to be respected as individuals, to have autonomy without exploitation of their vulnerable condition, to be trusted and taken

seriously, and to engage in forms of work that are not demeaning. Therefore, dignity encompasses positive feelings and conditions such as integrity, respect, pride, recognition, worth, and status. Conversely, indignity involves negative feelings and conditions such as shame, stigma, humiliation, and mistrust.

Various elements can either undermine or enhance a worker's experience of dignity at work, including the control strategies implemented by managers, the workplace environment, and the prevailing political, economic, and social arrangements (Burris, 1998). For instance, Boreham et al. (2008) compared patterns of institutional relations in the global economy and found that the denial of dignity at work in many developing countries is likely to present more barriers to overcoming conditions of indignity compared to developed regions. However, this does not imply that developed countries can easily overcome conditions of indignity.

Studying labor processes as a method to understand (in) dignity at work

Research on labor processes and the organization of workplaces tends to be based on historical, case study, or ethnographic research methodologies. According to Creswell (2013), the selection of a specific research methodology is based on the research objectives, levels of analysis, the emphasis given by a specific instrument to data collection, and the number of steps needed to develop the research. However, the data collection approach is the most important factor that differentiates the research strategies.

Braverman is considered an academic reference for Marxist work about labor processes. His research focused on the analysis of the structural and organizational transformations of the labor process and the forms of control that result from the advance of the capitalist system. Braverman concludes that labor processes reduce worker activities to the minimum intellectual development or deskilling trajectory – i.e., worker activities are fragmented into limited tasks that can be observed through repetitive movement, and intensive machinery and continuous production processes reduce workers' value (skills) in the production process.

For Braverman (1998), managers' close relation to capitalists arose from the owners'/managers' difficulty in controlling workplace organization when the centralization of employment was difficult. Capitalists assume that the functions of managers are something granted in response to their ownership of the means of production. As a result, management, in theory and practice, is an instrument to control the labor process that produces a close relationship and identity between both capitalists and managers. The managers role is one of privilege given their primary duty is to guarantee the control of the labor process.

Consequently, there is a social relation that distinguishes who manages from who executes (Zuboff, 1988). Indeed, managers' and owners' attachment does not mean they do not create their own cultural identity. Management as a theory and practice of science has transformed how the labor process is controlled. There is a mix of strategies or modes of control over the labor process that range from the coercive or unilateral decision making to participative strategies. Table 1

shows some of the most common tools used by management to exercise modes of control which are examples of the control – resistance dynamic in workplace relationships.

Table 1. Examples of modes of control

Direct supervision and monitoring
Technology
Job growth
Teamwork
Self-organized teams
Bureaucracy and regulations
Participatory practices
Team Quality Management (TQM) and Just in Time (JIT)
Technical control and scientific management
Bureaucratic control
Employee empowerment
Assembly line
Hierarchies and authority

Source: own preparation.

On the other hand, Thomas (1994) argues that structures of work are better understood when researchers focus on why technology selections were not made. Indeed, history accounts for recognizing the selected option, but misses insightful information of the forwards and backwards related to selecting a technology in a cultural setting. Contemporary Labor Process Theory (CLPT) focuses on power relations during individuals’ interactions in team situations or events. When an argument is settled, an actor who holds the highest power tends to dominate the other individuals by imposing a decision supportive of his/her arguments (Thomas, 1994). When observing workers’ interaction in teams fo-

cus on their types of participation individuals tend to shift from an expected type of participation as a mechanism that allows them to leverage their struggle to manage/safeguard their dignity.

The literature in the sociology of work shows a consensus around the historical increase of a mix of control strategies used by managers to appropriate the labor process. These processes reveal evidence of the tensions faced by workplace actors that stem from their different identities and interests as well as their workplace behaviors (Van Elteren, 2017). Consequently, the increasing modes of control by managers over workers, exacerbated by different identities and interests, point towards the overall degradation of work in the capitalist system. However, research is moving beyond the deskilling/upskilling debate in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of workplace behaviors relating to worker resistance or consent (Burawoy, 2009).

How to measure dignity at work?

There are at least two problems with identifying and measuring dignity at work. First, the accurate identification of poor conditions (or indignities) is not the same as identifying dignity-relevant elements through empirical evidence. Second, studies on dignity at work reflect a contradiction between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ dimensions of what dignity in the workplace environment means.

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim “conceptualize increasing industrialization as entailing a possible denial of dignity” (Bolton, 2007b, p. 3) at work. This perspective assumes that a

worker's "intrinsic" human dignity is affected by the power relations embedded in the capitalist system – i.e., in the labor market and organization of the workplace – where individuals surrender certain rights as humans. For instance, workers in a capitalist system can experience a lack of freedom and autonomy. Marx explains how workers are alienated by a lack of ownership of the means of production. Durkheim defined anomie or normlessness through the undeniable trajectory of pursuing economic efficiency. Weber pictures bureaucratic rationality as an inescapable invisible energy shield. Lastly, Braverman describes how through the labor and workplace organization, individuals are deskilled. All authors reference how an individual's dignity at work is devoured and "identify the mechanism by which the ideal of human dignity can be forsaken" (Hodgkiss, 2015, p. 130). Consequently, the struggle for dignity at work is challenged by the notion that work is either "intrinsically rewarding or inherently demeaning" (Hodgkiss, 2015, p. 129). In other words, workplace structures can limit or undermine a worker's identity and dignity, and at the same time provide opportunities to safeguard their identity and dignity (Hodson, 2001).

Bolton (2011) and Hodson (2001) agree that dignity at work is denied by events such as bullying and harassment, as well as conditions such as demeaning jobs, low paid jobs, unsafe workplaces, and overwork. These events undermine workers' human sense of respect, worth, self-esteem, equality, autonomy, meaningful work, and freedom of communication.

These objective and subjective factors might be usefully thought about as dimen-

sions of dignity. Dignity in labor via interesting and meaningful work with a degree of responsible autonomy and recognized social esteem and respect may be understood as dignity in work; structures and practices that offer equality of opportunity, collective and individual voice, safe and healthy working conditions, secure terms of employment and just rewards would lead to workers attaining dignity at work. (Bolton, 2007a, p. 8)

According to Hodson (2001), there is a relation between workers' dignity and social resistance activities that workers pursue to release themselves from managerial and technological control. These resistance activities can be seen as qualitative variables proximate to conditions that reflect (in)dignities at work. Practices that enhance meaningful work can reveal a path to dignity at work. Indeed, meaningful work reflects that workers are experiencing self-worth and self-respect.

Hodson (2001) makes the point that mismanagement and abuse, overwork, inclusion on autonomy, and contradiction of employee involvement challenge the ability of workers to work with dignity. In other words, it is what Rothschild (2004) refers to as the "sociology of management citizenship or, if looked at the other way, of management abuse." Indeed, Hodson (2001, p. 20) highlights the "complex interaction of structure and agency." Furthermore, despite his skepticism, Hodson thinks that competent and respectful managerial behaviors not only impact organizational well-being but also support dignity at work.

Certainly, dignity is a problematic concept to operationalize, mainly because of its subjective nature. While the intensity of the 'struggle' may vary across workplaces, re-

search shows that the characteristics of this struggle may hold evidence on the ability of workers to exercise agency. Hodson (2001) warns that a “worker’s capacity to draw dignity from their life of work” may reside in the agency they obtain through resistance and from appropriate participatory management practices that ensure and restore dignity (p. 4). Therefore, participatory management practices may lead to beneficial results from the capitalist systems, rather than undermining dignity.

Hodson (2001) argues that workers develop strategies to protect and maximize their dignity in the workplace. These strategies focus on protecting workers from abuse while constructing personal space in which workers can develop their identity. These strategies are “autonomous behavioral agendas” (Hodson, 2001) that (1) target individual or small groups to mitigate/resolve claims made by management or co-workers, (2) include a range of strategies from industrial sabotage to withdrawal of cooperation, and (3) defend work practices of autonomy in order to retain or give meaning to work. Workers’ resistance strategies are attempts to defend or regain dignity. Hodson (2001) criticizes measures of job satisfaction because they do not reflect the active role of workers and overlook workers’ agendas and meanings. Finally, he finds that autonomy - related to redesigning a technology or giving suggestions on how to implement new technological processes - enhances the dignity of workers. In other words, he finds that potential technological problems may open communication channels with managers, through which a solution to a problem can be found in a way that brings dignity to the workers through their freedom to speak. The ability of workers to freely ex-

press their opinion, organize, and participate in the decisions of a production process may result in a collective sharing of dignity in their workplace.

According to Hodson (2001), “Employee involvement is associated with increased skills and autonomy, reduced mismanagement and abuse, and greater pride and citizenship at work” (p. 196). Moreover, “the effects of employee involvement appear to be more pronounced regarding improved citizenship concerning reduced resistance” (Hodson, 2001, p. 196). Lastly, “Increased employee participation results in significant improvements in the quality of work-life across a wide range of organizations” (Hodson, 2001, p. 262). Notwithstanding this last conclusion, Hodson (2001) acknowledges the contradiction embedded in employee involvement or participatory management practices that make it difficult for workers to obtain a sense of dignity and to observe indignities at work.

Working with dignity ultimately requires the right to participate actively in all aspects of work life, through both formal and informal means. Dignity rests on the opportunity to exercise agency - to operate purposefully and effectively in one’s environment. For this reason, we have focused on the dynamic behaviors of resistance, citizenship, and coworkers relations. Dignity, however, depends not just on the agency but also on the realization of specific goals that define the lived experience of work. These goals are in essence the “bottom line” for employees. They include job satisfaction, a livable pace of work, and creativity and meaning in work. (Hodson, 2001, p 237).

Hodson (2001) identifies four subcategories that capture instances where a worker's dignity is denied: mismanagement and abuse, overwork, limits on autonomy, and contradictions. These subcategories reflect the challenges workers face in managing their dignity and align with Marx's concept of alienation. On the other hand, Hodson (2001) proposes four subcategories that highlight workers' efforts to safeguard their dignity: worker resistance, citizenship, meaningful participatory systems, and coworker relations. These categories represent strategies and factors that contribute to workers' ability to experience dignity or their ongoing struggle for dignity. Table 2 provides an overview of these categories and the variables that help capture the dynamics of dignity or the lack thereof in the workplace.

Table 2. (Sub)Categories and variables relating to a worker's struggle for dignity

Category	Subcategory	Variable Measurement
Safeguard Dignity	Resistance	Effort bargaining
		Absenteeism
		Withhold enthusiasm
		Work avoidance
		Playing dumb
		Machine sabotage
		Procedure sabotage
		Social sabotage
		Subvert particular manager
		Quits
		Turnover
		Making up games
		Alternative hierarchy
		Making out
		Smooth operator

Category	Subcategory	Variable Measurement
Safeguard Dignity	Citizenship	Job satisfaction
		Cooperation
		Commitment org goals
		Pride at work
		Extra effort
		Extra time
		Peer training
		Insider knowledge
		Good soldier
		Loyalty particular manager
	Meaning Systems (work related identities) or Group Relations	Act independent production rituals
		Generosity among coworkers and gift
		Experience of creativity
		Experience of self-respect
		Experience of identity
Deny Dignity	Mismanagement	Organization of the production
		Leadership
		Communication
	Overwork	Repair
		Freedom of movement
		Difficult pace
		Steady pace
		Comfort work area
		Skill
		Creativity
	Autonomy	Meaningful work
		Employee involvement

Source: adapted from Hodson (2001).

How workplaces organization observe (in) dignity at work?

Codes of ethics and conduct are designed, developed, and implemented to regulate relationships with employees and third parties in terms of workplace environment including staffing, child labor, books and accounting, conflicts of interest, market competition, confidentiality, and inclusion and human dignity. Inclusion and human dignity specifically pertain to issues of discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. Workers are encouraged to participate by reporting any behaviors that attempts to or violates the principles outlined in the company's code of ethics and conduct to their superiors in the chain of command. Human resources is responsible for investigating such behaviors, following the internal chain of command. Following the chain of command shows examples of how dignity was restored to workers.

Corporations often partner with organizations like Global Navex to provide employees with a confidential reporting tool, enabling them to anonymously report any behaviors or actions that violate the company's code of ethics and conduct. The platform facilitates the documentation of various forms of misconduct, including fraud, abuse (such as discrimination and sexual harassment), and other workplace misconduct reported by whistleblowers.

Global Navex's ethics and compliance services division collaborates with thousands of organizations across different industries and sectors worldwide, establishing an open channel of communication to safeguard and maintain a positive (free of threats) workplace environment from the perspective of corporate and subsidiary upper management. As a

result, specific information reports from partners are securely shared only with designated individuals within an organization during investigations. Nonetheless, Global Navex produces an annual report for its network, which will be briefly discussed below.

According to Figure 1, the highest median reporting rate per industry was observed in 2017. Figure 2 shows the median reporting rate of HR, diversity, and workplace respect complaints and compliance through the incident management hotline from 2012 to 2017 for Global Navex's entire network. Since 2012, the average report rate for harassment cases has been 72%, with the accommodation and food services industry exhibiting the highest levels at 85%. Technological platforms like Global Navex serve as a proactive management practice strategy that utilizes new technologies to promote the conditions that balance power relations as well as discover workers' struggle for dignity in the workplace. However, it is important to conduct a more detailed analysis of these strategies and tools, and exercise caution, as claims are investigated without workers' participation or consideration, and data is solely disclosed to upper management positions in corporate and subsidiaries.

When examining the services provided by Global Navex, it is not clear how workers can escape the imbalance of power relations. There is a blurry line when defining the restoration of workers' dignity. The code of ethics and conduct emphasizes claims regarding specific behaviors, even though it invites workers to report any type of claim. The packaging firm's code of ethics and conduct evaluates behaviors differently and promotes a specific agenda that aligns with their perception of workers' dignity. Moreo-

ver, the code of ethics and conduct outlines specific behaviors that cater to the interests of the organization or its managers. One evi-

dent example is the strict regulation imposed on whistleblowers who challenge established company procedures.



Figure 1. Highest median reporting rate per industry, 2017
Source: Penman (2018).

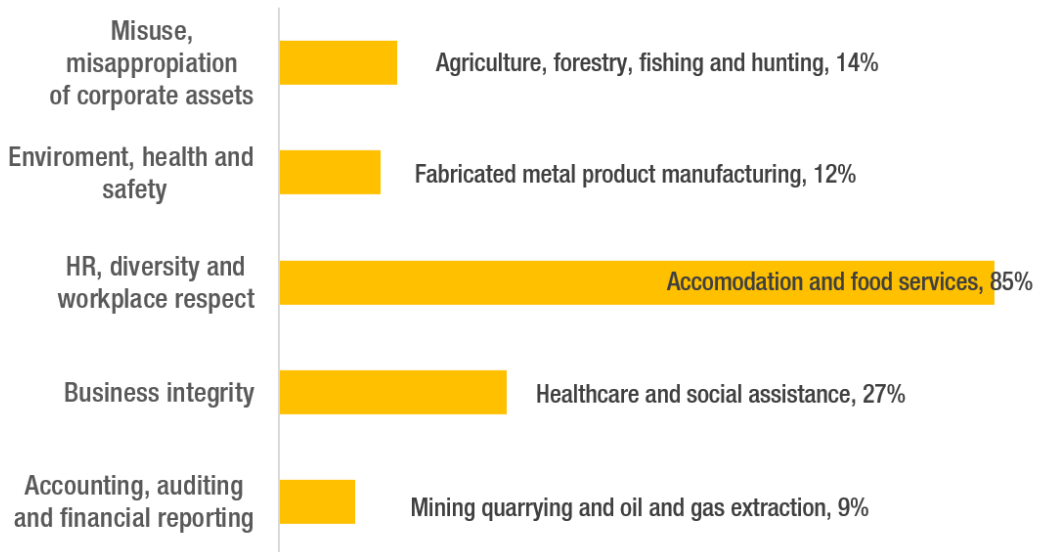


Figure 2. Median percentage of HR, Diversity, and workplace respect 2012-2017
Source: Penman (2018).

Final annotation

One of the challenges in addressing how participatory practices influence workers’ dignity is defined by what we are measuring and

how to measure it. One way to operationalize dignity is by considering the workers’ subjective experience of dignity in the workplace. According to Mattson and Clark (2011), “[d]ignity is not a principle, but rather a subjec-

tive integration of an individual's experience of the many facets of human life, and it is a judgment made by each person for him or herself, informed by culture, social interactions, and physical experiences" (p. 309). In other words, a worker's personal experience of dignity in their workplace goes beyond the idea of performance. The opportunity for personal fulfillment as a human being is one of the paradoxes to be more studied in the context of connecting participatory management practices to a worker's sense of human dignity. It is through a worker's subjective experience of work that they can determine whether participatory management practices are influencing their sense of human dignity at work.

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