IFMR GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

WORKING PAPER WP20-012

DEFINING DIGNITY AT WORKPLACE

Ameesh Samalopanan
PhD Student, IFMR GSB, Krea University
ameesh.as@ifmr.ac.in

Vijayalakshmi Balasubramaniam
Professor, IFMR GSB, Krea University
vijaya.subramanian@krea.edu.in

Abstract

Waldron (2012) calls dignity as ''a principle of the highest importance" even though business research has paid "scant attention" to the notion of dignity. Dignity is an essential requirement for meaningful work, and contemporary society has evolved as such that work and workplace have become paramount. Focusing on dignity will allow companies to be organised more humanely and to be able to create a space where individuals flourish and will work in an intense and soulful way. Purpose of the study is to understand how managers define dignity at the workplace. The study tries to bring a conceptual framework for an otherwise vague construct of dignity at the workplace. While available literature defines dignity at the workplace as an individual phenomenon, current study approaches it as a combination of the individual and organisational phenomenon by adding a component contextual dignity.

KREA UNIVERSITY, 5655, CENTRAL EXPRESSWAY, SRI CITY, ANDHRA PRADESH 517646

DEFINING DIGNITY AT WORKPLACE

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Waldron (2012) calls dignity as "a principle of the highest importance" even though business research has paid "scant attention" to the notion of dignity (Pirson & Dierksmeier, 2014). Also, dignity is an essential requirement for meaningful work and society has evolved as such that work and workplace have become paramount (Cheney et al., 2008; Ciulla, 2000). Some researchers describe dignity at the workplace arises from the intrinsic factors of the individuals like Gender (Crowly, 2013), and Virtue of Birth (McCrudden, 2013) to name few. Another set of definitions about dignity defines it more in terms of a quality that one builds over time through actions at the workplace (Lucas, 2017), development of individual faculties (Hodson, 2001), communication (Lucas, 2015), participation in activities of the organisation (Honneth, 1992), or even how he resists against abuse in the workplace (Hodson, 2001). Researchers over the years condensed both the perspectives of looking at workplace dignity, defining it as a combination of both intrinsic and ascribed factors. Pirson (2017) opinioned that though both intrinsic and ascribed dignity might look contradicting, they are complimentary and intertwining. Dignity at the workplace is a combination of – intrinsically satisfying work, economic security, and fair treatment (Berg & Frost, 2005); or a balance between the spiritual, personal, and work self (Chalofsky, 2003). Dignity at workplace is often explained in terms of organisational respect and meaningful work. However, a study conducted by Thomas & Lucas (2019) proves that 'dignity at the workplace' explains variance in workplace outcomes above and beyond similar variables. Dignity becomes an interesting topic to explore as it has been defined in literature as "somewhat profane and sacred, newfangled and ancient, changeable and absolute, measurable and measureless" (Kovach, 1995: 5-6; Edlund et al., 2013: 851–860). Hodson's (2001) work, where he used ethnographical research methodology to explore varying workplace situations like hospitals, factories, restaurants, among others has been widely accepted as a pioneering working in the area of Dignity at Workplace. The significant finding of his studies was that several work conditions provided experiences of Dignity or Denial of Dignity. A very few studies have happened in the construct, even though focusing on dignity will allow companies to be "organised more humanely and to be able to create a space where individuals flourish and will work in an intense and soulful way" (Bal, 2017). The existing literature on dignity has two significant issues. One, the current studies on dignity at workplace indicates that researchers

had been majorly stuck to apriori assumptions, retrospective interpretations, and outsider judgments of dignity, instead of conducting empirical studies. (Lucas, 2011; Khademi et al., 2012). Second, most of the studies on dignity have been from the western world, which does not accommodate eastern world views on dignity (Santos et al., 2005). Hence there is a need for an empirical study that does not blindly accept the western view and tries to develop alternative concepts of dignity, without sticking to apriori assumptions

Literature Review

. Different field of study approaches and defines dignity differently. For example field of nursing consider ensuring the dignity of nurses as a way to ensure better patient care (Stievano et al., 2013), the law looks dignity as a function of a fundamental right (Kalb, 2011) and recent literature in management considers the promotion of dignity in workplaces as an essential condition for humanistic management (Pirson, 2017). Studies were conducted on people from the service sector like bank employees (Santana et al., 2015), hospitality sector (CocburnWootten, 2012; Otis, 2008), physicians (Nedic, 2006), nurses (Walsh & Kowanko, 2002), teachers (Nelson & Lewis, 2016), and public workers (Vachon, 2018). Some studies were found on workers from the manufacturing sector like food industry (Thompson & Newsome, 2016), textile industry (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003) and some studies were on groups of workers like LGBTQ (Baker & Lucas, 2017), disabled (Walker, 2009), immigrants (Yu, 2016; Rathod, 2016) and daily labours (Sarkar, 2007). The review of the literature over various workgroups validates the observation put forward by Hodson (1991), "active workers" engage in behaviours that advance their agendas (in resistance to competing managerial/ coworker agendas) and protect their identities as autonomous adults, making them a more vulnerable group when it comes to protecting dignity, which means that people with more crowd facing jobs tend to experience a threat to dignity at workplace. Methodologies used were mostly review methods which intended to develop a new stream of understanding by synthesising existing literature from varied fields on a study like law (Chivvis, 2009; Wright, 2008) medical (Guo & Jacelon, 2014; Keisu, 2017), nursing (Stievano et al., 2012), philosophy (Gilabert, 2018), psychology (Otis, 2008), sociology (Friedman et al., 2015; Baxter, 2020), politics (Jose, 2004) and theology (Cloete, 2015). Qualitative studies have used case studies (Dufur & Feinberg, 2007) and ethnographies (Vachon, 2018) which used methods like focused group discussion (Thompson & Newsome, 2016), observations (Tadd et al., 2015) and interviews (Nelson & Lewis, 2016) as data collection tools. Content and thematic analysis methods (Baker & Lucas, 2017) are used to analyse data. Descriptive designs are used in quantitative studies and data collected through surveys and interviews (Sharma & Tiwari, 2019). Regression (Berg & Frost, 2005), exploratory structural equation modelling and factor analysis techniques (Thomas & Lucas, 2019) was used for data analysis. Hence, an approach that combines the goodness of both qualitative and quantitative work can be adopted for the study. We have collected detailed descriptions about various antecedents,

consequences and dimensions of dignity. To make it easy to comprehend, various factors that contribute or constitute dignity at the workplace are classified as Outside Organisation Factors (factors that are not present within an organisation, but is still present in the ecosystem the organisation belongs to), Organisational Factor (Factors within the organisation related to rules, governance and policies of the organisation), Interactional factors (Overt activities of the workers, by which they interact within each other), Individual Factors (intrinsic factors present within the employees). Using these factors, we intend to draw various dimensions of dignity, various antecedent factors affecting dignity and consequences of dignity. Dimensions of DignityA set of literature defines organisational dignity in terms of Organisational factors like recognition, autonomy, development, respect, equality and justice that one gets in an organisation. Domènec Melé (2014), had defined and explained human dignity at the workplace via various dimensions of human quality treatment: maltreatment, indifference, justice, care, development. Berg & Frost (2005) defined dignity in terms of economic security, intrinsically satisfying work and fair treatment by the employer. Tiwari & Sharma (2019) came up with a five domain definition of workplace dignity, namely, trust & respect, equality, self-esteem, fair treatment and autonomy. Interactional factors like communication and trust among workgroup and engagement are used to explain dignity. Lucas (2017) states that "communication is central to the experience of workplace dignity". Yalden & McCormack (2010) defined dignity at workplace as an environment that provides engagement. Dignity at workplace has been defined in terms of Individual Factors like a sense of achievement, self-esteem and happiness. The main themes identified by Stevano et al. (2012) in a study on nurses were: Dignity is perceived as an achievement and the recognition of dignity beyond professional roles. Need for StudyThomas & Lucas (2019) identified that dignity at the workplace includes dimensions like respectful interaction, competence and contribution, equality, inherent value and general dignity. Only Indian paper on the topic by Tiwari & Sharma (2019) defined it in terms of fair treatment, autonomy, self-esteem, equality and trust. However, both the papers try to understand dignity as a core construct similar to all sectors of work and positions their findings as a big theory that's valid across every workplace. The researcher intends to find out sector-specific dimensions of dignity at workplace, by just sticking on to one sector, and to find contradictions with existing literature.

Methodology

The researcher adopts an Intepretivistic philosophy and a constructivist approach. A mono method qualitative methodology with a grounded theory strategy is used for the study. In-depth interviews are used for data collection. The samples were selected based on variability factors including age, job role, organisations they worked, the language they spoke and the geographical locations they worked. Telephonic Interviews were done to collect data using a preset interview guide. Samples were collected until theoretical

saturation. Data were content analysed using the Straussian approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of Grounded Theory.

Results, Conclusion and Discussion

The content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed the presence of nine distinct dimensions that contribute to dignity. There were 89 first-order codes, which were grouped into 13 subthemes, out for which nine were again grouped into a common theme of dimensions of dignity namely Autonomy, Competence, Respectful Interaction, Equality dimension, Fair treatment, Recognition, Opportunities, Inherent values and Contextual dignity.

References

Baker, S & Lucas, K. (2017). Is it safe to bring myself to work? Understanding LGBTQ experiences of workplace dignity. Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences. 34. 133- 148. 10.1002/cjas.1439.

Berg, P., & Frost, A. (2005). Dignity at work for low wage, low skill service workers. Industrial Relations (0034379X), 60(4), 657-682.

Chalofsky, N. (2003). An emerging construct for meaningful work. Human Resource

Friedman, S., Rossi, D. & Ralón, G. (2015). Dignity Denial and Social Conflicts. Rethinking Marxism. 27. 65-84. 10.1080/08935696.2014.980675.

Gilabert, P. (2018). Dignity at Work. 10.1093/oso/9780198825272.003.0004.

Guo, Q & Jacelon, C. (2014). Integrative review of dignity in end-of-life care. Palliative medicine. 28. 10.1177/0269216314528399.

Hodson, R (2001). Dignity at Work. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

Hodson, Randy. 1991. "THE ACTIVE WORKER: Compliance and Autonomy at the Workplace." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 20(1): 47-78.

Kalb, J (2011). Litigating Dignity: A Human Rights Framework. Albany Law Review. Vol. 74, No. 4

Keisu, B. (2017). Dignity: a prerequisite for attractive work in elderly care. Society, Health & Vulnerability. 8. 1322455. 10.1080/20021518.2017.1322455.

Lucas, K. (2011). Blue-collar discourses of workplace dignity: Using outgroup comparisons to construct positive identities. Management Communication Quarterly, 25, 353-374. doi:10.1177/0893318910386445

Lucas, K. (2015). Workplace dignity: Communicating inherent, earned, and remediated dignity. Journal of Management Studies, 52, 621-646. doi:10.1111/ joms.12133

Lucas, K. (2017). Workplace dignity. In C. R. Scott & L. Lewis (Eds.), The international encyclopedia of organisational communication (Vol. 4, pp. 2549-2562). Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Mahalingam, R., Jagannathan, S. & Selvaraj, P. (2019). Decasticization, Dignity, and 'Dirty Work' at the Intersections of Caste, Memory, and Disaster. Business Ethics Quarterly. 29. 1-27. 10.1017/beq.2018.34.

McCrudden, C. (2013). In pursuit of human dignity: An introduction to current debates. In Proceedings of the British Academy, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Melé, D. (2014). "Human Quality Treatment": Five organisational levels. Journal of Business Ethics, 120(4): 457–471.

Nedic, O. (2006). [Restoring dignity and respect to health care workers]. Medicinski pregled. 59. 515-21. 10.2298/MPNS0612515N.

Pirson, M. (2017). Humanistic management: Protecting dignity and promoting wellbeing. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pirson, M. A., & Dierksmeier, C. (2014). Reconnecting management theory and social welfare: A humanistic perspective. Academy of Management Proceedings, 2014(1), 12245.

Pirson, Michael & Lawrence, Paul. (2010). Humanism in Business – Towards a Paradigm Shift?. Journal of Business Ethics. 93. 553-565. 10.1007/s10551-009-0239-1.

Thomas, B. & Lucas, K. (2019). Development and Validation of the Workplace Dignity Scale. Group & Organization Management. 44. 72-111. 10.1177/1059601118807784.

Thompson, P. & Newsome, K. (2016). The Dynamics of Dignity at Work. 10.1108/S0277-283320160000028008.

Tiwari A and Sharma RR (2019) Dignity at the Workplace: Evolution of the Construct and Development of Workplace Dignity Scale. Front. Psychol. 10:2581. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02581.

Vachon, T. (2018). A Big Win in Smalltown: Demanding Dignity in an Era of Neoliberal Austerity. Qualitative Sociology Review. 14. 10.18778/1733-8077.14.3.03.

Waldron, J. (2012). Dignity, rank, & rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.