

Dimensions, Divisions and Denials of Dignity

Some Reflections

A focus on dignity at work is hardly a new way of looking at work – the concept of dignity lies at the heart of the study of work and has informed endless studies of humanity and work. However, throughout various analyses there are two different approaches to the notion of dignity and work. Though all express concern for the human condition and the ambition that dignity will be achieved by all, some see it as an inherent part of the human condition that is achieved and protected by individual endeavour; it is reliant upon an individual's character whether they achieve dignity or not and that dignity is a relative term; what may be dignified to some may be undignified to others. Others take the view that dignity is indeed a fundamental requirement of humanity but the potential for its achievement relies far more on factors external to the individual, (it is to be afforded to individuals, rather than enacted by individuals) – do they receive adequate pay, are they involved in interesting work, do they experience reasonable conditions, have they security of tenure? A more useful multi-dimensional approach might recognise that dignity may be a subjective experience and as such it may be experienced differently by different social groups and occupations but that there are some core conditions that contribute to and support its achievement in work (Bolton, 2007; Hodson, 2001; Sayer, 2007).

This is not to deny that dignity may be experienced by people in unfavourable conditions – for how is it that people in poverty are able to carry themselves with dignity, or people who engage in dirty work see their work as special and dignified (Ackroyd, 2007, Bolton, 2005)? Such an observation highlights dignity as a social experience rooted in a moral economy (Sayer, 2005, 2007). The experience of dignity relies on the material conditions of 'decent work' *and* the support of human ties that generate respect and is very different than simply making the best of a bad job and generating a positive attitude to work, as some commentators would see it. In recognising its dimensions, divisions and denials, dignity at work becomes a political issue; a means of analysing the experience of contemporary work through a broad lens.

A complicating factor in this understanding is that some aspects of dignity *in* work are experienced positively despite dignity *at* work being absent. This has been shown through examples such as people who work in caring occupations (personal services) who report high levels of satisfaction but poor material rewards. However it must be understood that in these cases the achievement of dignity *in* work is due to the active agency of individuals and the strength of human ties rather than good management practice or effective policy.

Making this argument raises important, structural concerns. The argument is that dignity has material components – pay, security, gender equity - that too often take second place in the contemporary construction of work. Too often it is assumed that the achievement of dignity *in* work is a good enough form of reward – such as caring as a vocation. In the extreme, this view would go so far as to infer that to provide decent pay and conditions would be seen as damaging to the vocation; reductive of the social worth of the work itself; as a recent report states:

Other things being equal, a lowly paid nurse is more likely to have a vocation, and so over-perform in his role, than a highly paid one. This accords with our intuition that a higher wage may attract the ‘wrong sort’ of person (Heyes, 2005).

Such a view provides a clear example of how dignity is perceived purely as an entirely subjective experience, implicitly endorsing poor compensation and legitimising the reliance on the individual to provide their own dignity *in* work.

On the other hand, this argument must be careful to risk a reduction to dignity as material reward. It is not *either* material reward (dignity *at* work), or dignity *in* work that is required, but both; not either/or, but *and*. Ample empirical studies, and our own experiences of work, highlight how dignity *in* and *at* work have subjective/value based *and* material dimensions and that only a small minority of the working population, safely sequestered in professional and managerial occupations, experience both dignity *in* and *at* work whilst the majority often experience denials of dignity. However, even those privileged few who enjoy ‘decent work’ are at risk of denials of dignity as they may be cash rich but are time poor and denied the ability to ‘balance’ their lives (Bunting, 2004).

Thinking about dignity in this multi-dimensional way offers a ‘human standard’ for work that can contribute to a broad understanding of the realities of work in all tiers of the Knowledge Economy. As the divide between the haves and have-nots (Cotell, 2005; Toynbee, 2006) grows, dimensions of dignity *in* and *at* work is a concept to be taken seriously by policy makers and ‘allows the low-level hum of grumbles from the silent majority’ (Wylie, 2005) to become something of a roar.

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