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Dignity at Work

Human dignity, the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to enjoy the respect of others, is necessary for a fully realized life. Working with dignity is a fundamental part of achieving a life well-lived, yet the workplace often poses challenging obstacles because of mismanagement or managerial abuse. Defending dignity and realizing self-respect through work are key to workers' well-being. Insuring the dignity of employees is equally important for organizations as they attempt to make effective use of their human capital. In this book Randy Hodson, a sociologist of work and organizational behavior, applies ethnographic and statistical approaches to this topic, offering both a richly detailed, inside look at real examples of dignity in action, and a broader analysis of the pivotal role of dignity at work.

How do people attain and maintain dignity in the face of assaults on dignity at work? How can management within organizations help to preserve dignity and thus enhance workers' social relations, organizational integrity, and productivity? This book sheds valuable light on the mechanisms by which workers become satisfied and committed employees. Hodson's exploration of these questions includes ethnographic detail from diverse settings, ranging from automobile manufacturing, to medicine, to home-based sales and temporary clerical work. He focuses on four problems that deflate morale and create conflict: outright mismanagement and abuse, overwork, limits on autonomy, and contradictions of employee involvement. He also analyzes strategies that workers use to maintain and defend their dignity: resistance, citizenship, the creation of independent meaning systems, and the development of social relations at work.

Hodson offers a valuable picture of the causes, consequences, and patterns of workers' efforts to maintain dignity. He finds that even in workplaces where abuse is common and mismanagement makes pride in accomplishment difficult, workers still find ways to create meaning in work and to achieve self-respect. He uses his findings and analysis to reevaluate contemporary workplace theories, including those based on the traditions of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Foucault, and feminist theories of the workplace. Hodson's conceptual model of human agency and dignity contributes broadly to our understanding of the nature of work in advanced societies.

Randy Hodson is Professor of Sociology at Ohio State University. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including the forthcoming *Worlds of Work: Building an International Sociology of Work* (with Daniel Cornfield) and *The Social Organization of Work*, third edition (with Teresa A. Sullivan).

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To workers everywhere
whose dignity can be challenged
but cannot be denied.

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Preface

Working with dignity is a foundation for a fully realized life. Despite many denials of dignity faced daily in the workplace, people still strive to do their best, to take pride in their work, and to defend themselves against indignities from employers, and sometimes from coworkers. New challenges are constantly being created for working with dignity by the inexorable process of technological and organizational change and by the unrelenting drive of market systems for profit maximization.

In spite of the centrality of the quest for dignity at work by billions of workers around the world, the pursuit of dignity is rarely a central focus of scholarly writings on the workplace. The challenges to workers' well-being posed by technological, organizational, and market forces are sometimes a focus. However, rarely do we consider the very serious business of how workers respond to these challenges on a daily basis in the office suite and on the shop floor. The creative and purposive activities of employees to achieve dignity at work are the central focus of this book. I hope that by considering these activities we can gain a better understanding of the daily struggle for dignity at work and the central place it occupies in workers' lives.

I rely on data from a systematic analysis of the population of organizational ethnographies. These data provide an empirical base for studying the quest for dignity. The in-depth observations offered by workplace ethnographies provide a unique source of information on organizational life that has previously been underutilized.

The inspiration for this book was provided by the work lives and the quest for dignity of many different people. These people include friends, family, acquaintances, employees at offices and factories where I have worked, visited, or toured, and the many students with whom I have discussed workplace issues including our own and other's quests for dignity at work. I hope this book will be helpful to those who read it and who may see their own struggles reflected in it.

The efforts of many people combined to make this book possible. I would like to thank the men and women in the accounts analyzed here

who allowed themselves to be interviewed and who spoke candidly and eloquently about their lives at work and their struggle for dignity. I would also like to thank the ethnographers who spend so many months and years observing work life and reporting on it in clear and often moving terms.

A special thanks goes to the research staff and students of the Indiana University Sociological Research Practicum who worked on the research project in which we coded the organizational ethnographies. Their probing questions, good will, and enthusiasm resulted in the sort of collective intellectual experience that is too rare in the hurried world of university life. I would like, in particular, to thank Sandy Welsh, Sabine Rieble, Sean Creighton, and Cheryl Sorenson Jamison.

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This book contains new material and also represents an expansion and synthesis of some of my previous work. Earlier versions of some material have appeared in: "Is Worker Solidarity Undermined by Autonomy and Participation?" (with Sandy Welsh, Sabine Rieble, Cheryl Sorenson Jamison, and Sean Creighton) *American Sociological Review* (Vol. 58, 1993); "Worker Resistance," *Economic and Industrial Democracy* (Vol. 16, 1995); "Dignity in the Workplace under Participative Management," *American Sociological Review* (Vol. 61, 1996); "Group Relations at Work," *Work and Occupations* (Vol. 24, 1997); "Pride in Task Completion and Organizational Citizenship Behaviour," *Work and Stress* (Vol. 12, 1998); "Organizational Ethnographies," *Social Forces* (Vol. 76, 1998); *Analyzing Documentary Accounts*, Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, #128, (Sage 1999); "Organizational Anomie and Worker Consent," *Work and Occupations* (Vol. 26, 1999); and "Management Citizenship Behavior," *Social Problems* (Vol. 46, 1999).

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