The Show Must Go On: A Descriptive Single-Site Case Study of Dignity in the Work Place among Academic Theatre Collaborators

Work is both the way in which we bring the satisfaction of material rewards and upward mobility into our lives and our potential source of alienation and frustration because of the lack of dignity we receive on the job (Hodson, 2001; Hodson & Sullivan, 2002). Hodson (2001) defines dignity as the “ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others” (p. 3). Dignity is at the heart of quality purposive work (2001). Dignity at work requires the workers’ abilities to establish autonomy over the work and to feel proud of the job they have done (Hodson, 2001). When workers’ dignity is challenged by abuse, overwork or lack of autonomy, then workers create actions to maintain and defend their dignity such as acts of resistance against management or the creating of social relationships on the job (2001). The quality of life in the workplace impacts the well-being of each worker and, as theatre collaborators in higher education—creative individual artist/educators who form tight-knit work groups in order to produce live theatre in a college or university setting—they face the challenge of maintaining their dignity as individuals while working with each other and with students to create their art form. Thus, theatre practitioners in higher education offer an excellent opportunity for studying dignity and its resultant behaviors when dignity of the individual is challenged. The purpose of this descriptive single-site case study is to examine the dynamics and interactions of academic theatre production collaborators which lead to their individual definitions, behaviors and maintenance of dignity.

This study will examine three areas of research in order to explain the challenges to dignity and the maintenance of dignity in this collaborative work group. These areas include status hierarchies, gender inequality, and leadership development. First, status hierarchies simply defined (Collins, 1994)
are groups of people holding similar ideological and cultural outlooks who identify with each other in such a way that they form a distinctive group, which creates the potential for domination of some groups, or individuals within groups, over others. For the purposes of this study, status hierarchies will constitute the narrowly defined categories of jobs such as ‘director,’ ‘scenic designer,’ or ‘costume designer,’ etc., which have developed over time and have resulted in a rigid organizational structure (See organizational chart in Gillette, 1987, p. 6). Status hierarchy is typically understood and frequently present in educational theatre collaboration and may be a central factor in understanding the challenges to or maintenance of individuals’ dignity. Second, gender inequality and the impact of being male or female or being male working in a typically female gendered job or female working in a typically male gendered job may further explain some aspect of dignity in the collaborative process. And third, the role of leadership and its development as it affects the dignity of collaborators may provide further explanation for the challenges to dignity.