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Abstract

In 2010, a cluster of suicides at the electronics manufacturing giant Foxconn Technology Group sparked worldwide outcry about working conditions at its factories in China. Within a few short months, 14 young migrant workers jumped to their deaths from buildings on the Foxconn campus, an all-encompassing compound where they had worked, eaten, and slept. Even though the language of workplace dignity was invoked in official responses from Foxconn and its business partner Apple, neither of these parties directly examined workers' dignity in their ensuing audits. Based on our analysis of media accounts of life at Foxconn, we argue that its total institution structure imposed unique indignities on its workers that both raised questions of their self-respect and self-worth, as well as gave rise to multiple episodes of disrespectful communication. We interpret our findings in light of the larger cultural context and meanings of work in China to understand more fully the experience of dignity of Foxconn's migrant workforce.

Keywords: communication, labor relations, migrant workers, organizational culture, total institution, workplace dignity

Introduction

Foxconn Technology Group—the Taiwanese multinational company that produces approximately 40 % of the world's electronics items—employs an army of workers currently estimated at 1.2 million (Duhigg and Barboza 2012). Its largest factory compound, dubbed "Foxconn City," alone employs more than 300,000 people. This densely populated industrial complex in Shenzen, China, is the place where many young migrant workers not only earn their paycheck, but also is where they eat (at company dining halls), sleep (in company dormitories), and play (in company-provided recreational facilities). For more than a dozen of these young people, Foxconn City also is the place where they ended their lives.

Within a period of fewer than 8 months during 2010, 14 Foxconn employees committed suicide, 4 more made failed suicide attempts, and 20 additional attempts were thwarted by company officials (SACOM 2010). Making this suicide cluster even more dramatic, the victims—all young migrant workers in their teens and 20s—ended their lives by jumping from the windows of buildings at Foxconn City. The suicide cluster generated an international media frenzy and created a major communication crisis for Foxconn. Journalists, labor activists, and concerned consumer-citizens around the globe demanded answers.

Whatever the explanation proffered for the suicides—from the harsh working conditions at Foxconn to the psychological vulnerability of the largely migrant workforce—a central theme that ran through the criticisms time and again was the denial of workers' dignity. A friend of one of the suicide victims reported to the press that the victim, as punishment for breaking some equipment, was taken off the production line and assigned to clean toilets. "He was very upset…. He told me that cleaning lavatories gave him no *dignity* and made him lose face. Sometimes he was given no gloves but he had to clean the lavatories all the same" (Jones 2010).

The Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM 2010) group conducted a 4-month, undercover investigation of Foxconn's organizational culture and concluded that "Profit maximization is the ultimate corporate principle, under which workers' *dignity* and well-being are of no concern" (p. 2). Likewise, a group of Chinese sociologists issued a report that expounded upon the problems of migrant work and appealed to the government to end polices that allow Foxconn and Foxconn-like manufacturers to prey upon the vulnerable. They described working conditions that characterized Foxconn as a "life without *dignity*." They continued, "From the tragedies at Foxconn, we can hear the loud cries for life from the second generation of migrant workers, warning society to reconsider this development model that has sacrificed people's fundamental *dignity*" (Yuan et al. 2010). Management scholars Ling et al. (2011) made several appeals to dignity when they critiqued the Foxconn tragedy through a corporate social responsibility lens, finding that workers' "right[s] and *dignity* are not being preserved but rather invaded by the company" (p. 14).

Accompanying the accusations was concern on the part of Foxconn's global business partners. Apple, one of Foxconn's largest customers, was particularly embroiled in the tragedy as the plants where the suicides occurred produce high-profile Apple products, including iPod music players and iPhone mobile phones. Prior to the suicides, Apple's (2010) Supplier Code of Conduct espoused the importance of dignity: "Suppliers must uphold the human rights of workers, and treat them with *dignity* and respect as understood by the international community" (p. 1). Following the suicides, Apple reiterated this belief, issuing a statement saying, "Apple is deeply committed to ensuring that conditions throughout our supply chain are safe and workers are treated with respect and *dignity*" (Ogg 2010).

Even Foxconn was concerned with issues of worker dignity. At a news conference responding to the suicides and accusations of sweatshop-like conditions, Foxconn spokesperson Louis Woo remarked, "There is a fine line between productivity and regimentation and inhumane treatment. I hope we treat our workers with *dignity* and respect" (Barboza 2010). Further, in conjunction with a raise in employee wages, Foxconn CEO Terry Guo issued a statement saying, "This wage increase has been instituted to safeguard the *dignity* of workers, accelerate economic transformation, support Foxconn's long-term objective of continued evolution from a manufacturing leader to a technology leader and to rally the best of our

workforce" (Culpan 2010). In its annual corporate social responsibility report, Foxconn (2010) described its efforts in response to the suicides as being made to "promote lifestyle diversity and employee respect, an atmosphere of trust, and personal *dignity*" (p. 1).[1]

Clearly workplace dignity is a central concern—for workers, scholars and activists, global business partners, and Foxconn leaders. But a chief problem in assessing workplace dignity is that it is an elusive and ambiguous term that, while appealed to as an ultimate value, rarely is defined with precision (Lee 2008; Sayer 2007). Furthermore, evaluating dignity becomes vastly more complex in cross-cultural contexts (Lee 2008). Perhaps this complexity is one reason why in Apple's public account of its independent audit of Foxconn facilities, the word *dignity* was conspicuously absent save for the opening statement that reasserted the company's commitment to worker dignity (Apple 2011). While Apple reported interviewing workers about job stressors and psychological health, workers' personal accounts of dignity or lack thereof remains largely silenced. Given the gravity of the Foxconn suicide cluster, worker dignity must be taken more seriously.

The point of this essay is not to assign blame for the suicides to Foxconn, nor is it to offer a detailed critique of Apple's response to the crisis. While these organizations certainly will be implicated in our analysis—and we would hope that they could draw lessons for more dignified approaches to managing the workforce and/or managing supply chain responsibilities—our main goal is to take seriously appeals to worker dignity. We do so by performing an analysis of worker dignity at Foxconn, particularly in light of the all-encompassing "total institution" (Goffman 1961) structure that characterizes the organization. To begin, we review relevant scholarship on workplace dignity, highlighting culturally embedded understandings of dignity. Next, we define total institutions and describe how they can serve to create a structure in which indignities are naturalized. We then detail recent changes to the meanings of work in China to provide a backdrop against which we sensitize our account of worker dignity at Foxconn.

Workplace Dignity

Dignity is an ultimate value that has long been called upon—both explicitly and implicitly—to understand the conditions of work and labor (Bolton 2007; Sayer 2007). For instance, the International Labor Organiza-

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1. Interestingly, there was no mention of the suicides anywhere in Foxconn Technology Group's (2010) corporate social responsibility report. However, the "Our Employees" section was filled with copy dedicated to psychological health, morale, and counseling services.

Table 1. Summary comparison of Asian versus Western understandings of dignity

	Asian	Western
Kim and Cohen (2010)	Earned, judged by others	Inherent, defended by the self
Lee (2008)	Relationally based, focus on duties	Individually based, focus on rights
Brennan and Lo (2007)	Meritocratic, degrees of difference	Democratic, equal
Consequence	Contingent, fragile, familial responsibility	Automatic, unassailable, individual status

tion (1974) positions dignity as a fundamental human right, asserting in its constitution that "all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and *dignity*, of economic security and equal opportunity." However, it has proved difficult to judge how dignity is being practiced, as it is a concept that lacks a precise definition (Lee 2008; Sayer 2007). To complicate matters further, understandings and enactment of human dignity vary dramatically across cultures. In this section, we outline basic definitions and theoretical considerations, highlighting key differences in conceptions of dignity in Asian and Western contexts.

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). Lee (2008) offers a similar definition: "the state of being treated with respect or honor, with a sense of self-worthiness and self-esteem resulting therefrom" (p. 5). Because work consumes such a large proportion of people's lives, the achievement of dignity at work becomes essential for overall self-worth (see also Bolton 2007). But achieving this sense of dignity is not easy. Sayer (2007) explains the fundamental contradictions in achieving a full sense of dignity at work. Citing a Kantian perspective, he explains that a necessary condition of dignity is being "treated as an end in oneself, at least in part, and not merely as a means to someone else's ends, or as substitutable for someone else" (Sayer 2007, p. 568). But because people are indeed hired to fulfill an instrumental role (i.e., as a means to an end), the achievement of dignity becomes inherently problematic in employment relationships. Therefore, the employment relationship always will be rife with potential indignities.

Words, deeds, and material conditions all impact the achievement of dignity (Sayer 2007). Several recent studies have demonstrated how individuals' dignity has been jeopardized in various workplace contexts. For example, Steimel (2010) shows how pink-collar workers' dignity was threatened when these women in subordinated service roles experienced abusive communication and outright questions of their competence from bosses and clients. Stuesse (2010) describes the fear, uncertainty, humiliation, anger, and worthlessness felt by poultry plant workers who were publicly and arbitrarily

terminated. And Dufur and Feinberg (2007) explain how the material conditions of an artificially restricted labor market adversely affected the dignity of professional athletes who were subjected to invasive recruitment tactics reminiscent of a slave trade.

What these studies demonstrate is that there are multiple ways in which employees can be made vulnerable to both micro-level interaction and larger organizational structures. Perhaps it would more accurate, however, to argue that employees are made vulnerable to the subjective effects of undignified workplace interactions precisely because of the objective and material constraints of the organizational structure in which they are embedded. In fact, Brennan and Lo (2007) express concern over the way that dignity-diminishing practices can be built into social institutions and structures. For instance, Hodson (2001) identifies four key categories of dignity-diminishing practices that contribute to the experience or denial of dignity at work. These include mismanagement and abuse, overwork, incursions on autonomy, and contradictions of employee involvement.

While Hodson's (2001) framework is the most robust theorizing on workplace dignity to date, it is important to point out that his typology is based on more than 100 English-language worksite ethnographies—almost all of which were situated in Western Europe or North America. Consequently, current theorizing has a decidedly Western bent. However, dignity still has an important place in Asian cultures, albeit a culturally specific version of dignity (Lee 2008). Several authors have begun to tease out the differences between Western and Eastern conceptions of dignity, which reveal a more fragile and contingent view of dignity. See Table 1 for a summary.

First, in Asian contexts, dignity is determined by evaluations made by others. Kim and Cohen (2010) explain that in Asian face cultures, an individual's worth is defined primarily by what others think of him or her. Therefore, one's performance, value, and success or failure are *judged* by others. Kim and Cohen put it succinctly: "In a Face culture, my worth is social worth, and my estimate of myself must align with the worth that others would recognize in me" (pp. 537–538). In the words of Brennan and Lo (2007), dignity "is at the disposal of others, to give or take away from us" (p. 43; see also Lee 2008). In contrast, in Western dignity cultures, an individual's worth is not defined by and dependent

upon others, but instead automatically granted simply for the sake of being. One's performance, value, and success or failure are thus *defended* by the self. This difference between face and dignity cultures does not dismiss the importance of self-worth and respectful treatment in Asian societies, but instead points to the more contingent and other-dependent nature of achieving dignity in face cultures.

Second, individuals in Asian contexts have relational duties to others to conduct themselves with dignity. Basing her argument in a legal framework on dignity as a pillar of universal human rights, Lee (2008) provides a detailed account of the ways in which notions of dignity are influenced by religious, cultural, and political commitments. Writing about Asian cultures that have communitarian characteristics, she says, "the underlying consensus in these societies is often one emphasizing relation rather than individuality, duties as much as rights" (p. 14). One of these duties is viewing dignity as a moral practice regulating people's relations with others. Another core duty is to uphold personal honor and moral obligations such that the dignity of an individual can carry forward to the family and community to which he or she belongs. Lee (2008) sums up this approach by saying, "When personal integrity, family honor and social respect are all part of the formula, human dignity is as social as it is individual" (p. 32).

Third, based on Confucian teachings, dignity in Asian contexts is hierarchical and meritocratic. Brennan and Lo (2007) provide a point of contrast for Western and Eastern views of dignity. They argue that based on the Confucian canon of self-cultivation, individuals strive to develop character traits worthy of honor—in essence, creating a disposition that induces esteem and dignity from others. It is understood that some individuals will cultivate this worthy disposition more fully than others. As such, some people will earn more "merits" and therefore be deserving of more dignity than others. This hierarchical or meritocratic view of dignity stands in contrast to the democratic notion of dignity in Western societies, which presumes that all individuals are entitled to equal dignity as a God-given right (Brennan and Lo 2007). Put another way, in the Asian context, dignity is not a quality that is shared automatically and equally by all.

Taken together, these Asian views of dignity point to a very different overall approach to understanding and experiencing dignity than the Western approach, which dominates current literature. In Western worksites, there is a sense of entitlement for dignity at work, which is subjectively and individually perceived. While there may be some talk about responsibilities to "act with dignity," focus tends to be on the employee as a recipient of dignity. Also, because dignity is inherent and expected, denials often are met with frustration or indig-

nation at the person who is denying the proper respect. On the other hand, in Asian contexts, the achievement of dignity is anything but expected. Employees understand that their experience of dignity is contingent upon the relationships they have with others in the workplace and that dignity is not guaranteed. This difference explains why denials of dignity often are met with shame or disappointment in the self for not earning the proper respect from others. Combined with the moral obligation to bring honor to family and community, the stakes for achieving dignity are high. In short, the vulnerability to potential indignities is heightened exponentially in Asian contexts.

Foxconn as a Total Institution

Not only does culture at large impact understandings and experiences of dignity, but so too do organizational cultures. Whether intentional or not, organizations can increase worker vulnerability and raise additional barriers to the pursuit of dignity. This is especially the case for total institutions. Goffman (1961) defines a total institution as a "place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (p. xiii). As compared to civil society, where individuals work, play, and sleep in different places, in total institutions, individuals engage in all these activities in one central place under a single authority. Although Goffman focuses his analysis on clear-cut examples such as prisons and asylums, he also includes certain types of worksites in his definition of total institutions—such as army barracks, work camps, and boarding schools—where workers are encompassed in a bureaucratically organized system that controls work, sleep, and play activities for its members. Current research on total institution worksites have included examinations of cruise ships (Tracy 2000), boarding schools (McGuire and Dougherty 2008), and prisons from the perspective of the correctional officers who work there (Tracy 2004).

It can be argued that Foxconn is a total institution. While employees are not required to reside on campus, a large portion of them live in dormitories in Foxconn City, they eat in company dining halls, and they engage in recreational and social activities sponsored by the company. This colocation of all spheres of life expands the bounds of control to a round-the-clock coordination and/or surveillance of their activities. It is no wonder then why at least one critic has likened Foxconn to "prison barracks" and its employees to "inmates" (Alioti 2010).

Two key characteristics of total institution life are worth illustrating in detail. The first is the presence of physical barriers that inhibit communication with the

outside world. Barriers can include such objects as walls or fences around the property. While the gates around the Foxconn complex in Shenzen are not secured to the same degree as security fences around prisons, the gates present a symbolic expression of crossing into and out of the organization. Additionally, all needs—from sleeping quarters and dining halls to internet cafes and swimming pools (Balfour and Culpan 2010)—are provided within the walls. As such, there is no need to leave the physical space of the organization. In this sense, rather than being locked into the institution by bars, workers are pulled in by campus amenities. The second key characteristic is what Goffman calls "batch living." Total institution members live a batch existence, whereby their days are coordinated and their needs are fulfilled through the bureaucratic organization and control of blocks of people. Coordinated meal times, collective sleeping arrangements, and so forth limit freedom of movement. Institutional members' days progress in lockstep pattern with blocks of others.

While comparisons may be drawn between Foxconn and such highly regarded high-tech firms as Microsoft and Google, where employee cafeterias, cleaning services, and recreational areas are heralded as perquisites, a key difference emerges. In the latter, organizational control is limited to only the work sphere. Furthermore, the lucrative salaries of employees at these organizations presumably are used to pay for housing away from the work campus and to engage in a host of personal entertainment outside the scope of the organization. In the former, their time off of work still is spent within the walls of the organization. Their meager wages further limit possibilities—especially for young migrant workers far from home—to live a life apart from campus.

What is important for this analysis is that Goffman draws several connections between life in a total institution and dignity. In particular, he emphasizes the ways in which members are socialized into institutional life through a process of "degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self" (p. 14). Goffman provides a litany of physical indignities, indignities of speech and action, and indignities of treatment accorded by others that spur changes to sense of self-worth. These include loss of personal identification markers (e.g., name being replaced by an employee number), initiation rituals that include "obedience tests," revocation of identity kits (e.g., replacing personal clothing with standard-issue uniforms), requiring potentially demeaning postures of deference (e.g., standing at attention or bowing down to superiors), having to beg for small things (e.g., bathroom breaks), verbal abuse, and being required to provide humiliating verbal responses in social interaction. These various indignities serve to denigrate views of the self and therefore can be viewed as assaults on worker dignity.

Chinese Civil Society Considerations

Total institutions—although they may isolate their members—do not exist in isolation. Instead, they work in tandem with the larger civil society culture to regulate members' identities and sense of self. Goffman (1961) explains that total institution members come to the organization with a "presenting culture" from a "home world" (p. 12) that offers them a taken-for-granted sense of the world and their places in it. It is the tension between this home world and total institution that is leveraged to manage the members. Therefore, the "home world" of Chinese civil society must be taken into account to understand the meanings of work and career and how they are brought to bear on the experience of working for and living in Foxconn.

To begin, Westwood and Lok (2003) describe the basic sociopolitical orientation to work in Chinese culture as being based on a combination of two key orientations: a fundamental relational orientation and a pragmatic valuation of work. In this sense, the celebrated Chinese work ethic is based on the extrinsic reward that can be met by performing work. Specifically, the core meanings of work are tied to familial responsibility. That is, there is a strong moral and cultural obligation to contribute materially to the well-being of the family and this ability is inherently linked to dignity as it reaffirms social legitimacy and sustains a positive sense of self-identity.

Lair et al. (2008) maintain that massive socioeconomic change can bring about changes to meanings and meaningfulness of work. Therefore, the recent industrial and economic growth in China must be taken into consideration, particularly in regard to contemporary career expectations of young workers—both in urban and rural areas. As described by Westwood and Lok (2003), the shift from a Marxist–Maoist economy in the mid-twentieth century to a more market-oriented economy at the beginning of the twenty-first century is eroding many of the social securities linked to the "iron rice bowl" that once guaranteed employment and basic provisions. In the earlier historical period, the connection between work and dignity were predicated on self-sacrifice. Lucas et al. (2006) critique the slogans of the Maoist periods that included equality (each person's sacrifice is valued equally as that of others), devotion (one must sacrifice to be deemed worthy), and nobility (those who are noble sacrifice for the greater good, not for individual gain). As such, an orientation to serving society had been a central work value (Westwood and Lok 2003).

In more recent times, however, several influences on central work values have changed this Maoist outlook. Economic growth has created pockets of prosperity in mainland China, young adults have been influenced by Western media, materialism, and consumerism (Sun

and Wang 2010), and children have effortlessly absorbed new spirit of entrepreneurialism (Buzzanell et al. 2010). Thus, shifts have begun occurring in what constitutes good work—especially for the younger generation of people born after 1980. For example, there is a dramatic shift away from the notion that all work is of equal nobility and worth and toward the notion that the social status of particular jobs varies widely (Berkelaar et al. 2012). For young urban Chinese, their career paths are not mapped for them as they were for their parents' generation. But there is still a familial obligation as they chart their own course to pursue a "*ti mian* job" (Long 2012). *Ti mian* jobs are good jobs (typically white collar and in a reputable organization) that will enhance face and cultivate *suzhi* for oneself, family, and community. *Suzhi*—translated to "human quality"—operates as a kind of value coding of work (Berkelaar et al. 2012). To have high *suzhi* is to be deemed to be of high quality. Therefore, there is a strong push for achievement of careers that will bring honor and esteem.

In contrast to urban workers who pursue *ti mian* jobs, the work performed by migrant workers is often deemed *shuzhi di*, or of low-human quality, because of its stigmatized nature (see Berkelaar et al. 2012). Whereas in earlier generations, all work would have been viewed as equally noble, that no longer is the case. Additionally, there have been changes in the meanings of work for migrant workers. In previous generations, migration comprised rural peasant farmers leaving impoverished regions in order to seek factory jobs in big cities (Migrant workers in China 2008). It was assumed that these previous migrant workers accepted their positions in life and work and served dutifully with little, if any, complaint. However, new generation migrant workers are more educated than previous generations and, as such, have higher expectations of the job (Wang 2010). Their higher expectations, when coupled with the lower value and stigma attached to factory work, create a barrier for achieving dignity at work.

Complicating matters further, China's *Hukou* system, or household registration system materially limits alternatives. The Chinese government instituted *Hukou* in the 1950s to control government welfare and resource distribution, migration control, and criminal surveillance (Migrant workers in China 2008). This system—which has been described as "divid[ing] the population in two: 'the haves' (urban households) and 'the have not's' (rural households)" (Rong 2007)—imposes strict limits, particularly on rural Chinese (Wang 2005). Under this system, rural and migrant workers are denied access to services such as health care, education, housing allowances, and pension insurance, making it far more difficult for them to attain a livelihood than it is for urban Chinese (Qin 2011). It also restricts access to certain kinds of jobs, thereby limiting migrants' options for obtaining different kinds of work or seeking employment alternatives.

Even though migrant workers in the cities are disadvantaged compared to urban peers, many remain motivated to work because of their familial obligations to materially support their families. For these workers, the ability to send money back home may provide a sense of accomplishment, pride, and purpose, because doing so fulfills their relational and pragmatic commitments and affirms a positive regard for self. For instance, a friend of one of the suicide victims recalled, "I remember the first time we get the paycheck, he had almost CNY 1,800 or 1,900 and he sent CNY 1,500 back home. I think he was very proud!" (A College Student 2010). The migrant workforce at Foxconn, then, can be described as individuals strongly motivated to fulfill familial duties to help provide materially for their family, driven for the desire for a job with some positive regard (or at least absent stigma), but materially limited in their alternatives for work that meets their needs. This backdrop informs our analysis of worker dignity at Foxconn.

Method

The data for this analysis are drawn from publicly available sources, published in Chinese and/or English. While there is an abundance of articles on the Foxconn suicides (an internet search reveals 1.4 million English-language websites that include "Foxconn" and "suicide"), we selected sources with an eye toward credibility garnered from being "on the ground." First, we included a range of Chinese media outlets that could provide first-hand accounts. *China Daily* is China's largest mainstream newspaper, which is published in both English and Chinese. *Southern Weekly* is a popular independent newspaper, which possesses high credibility in China for its investigative reports on domestic and international topics. *Fenghuangwang* (translated to "Phoenix New Media") is a new media company, which delivers a range of news, pop culture, and entertainment content to web, TV, and mobile device users. We also drew from *Taipei Times*, an English-language newspaper based in Taiwan, where Foxconn headquarters are located, and New York-based *Bloomberg News*, which had correspondents on assignment in Shenzhen.

Previous research has shown that Chinese media have largely framed the Foxconn suicides as a psychological deficiency in the younger generation of Chinese migrant workers rather than as a problem associated with the organization's culture (Guo et al. 2011). Therefore, we also turned to coverage of Foxconn provided by independent, non-profit organizations. *China Labor Watch* is an organization that collaborates with labor unions and the media to conduct in-depth assessments of factories and working

conditions in China. *Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior* is an activist organization that brings together students, scholars, activists, and consumers to advocate for improved working conditions of global labor. SACOM conducted a series of undercover investigations in 2010 and 2011, in which students took jobs in Foxconn factories to report on conditions first-hand.

We searched each source for articles relating to Foxconn, its organizational culture and management practices, and the suicides. Two of the authors independently translated the Chinese-language sources and then compared the translations for accuracy. We then reviewed the sources to identity concrete, observable interactions (e.g., stories, quotations, observations, artifacts) that offer insight into the Foxconn organizational culture. Finally, we judged if and/or how each of the examples fit into Hodson's (2001) four-dimension framework of workplace (in)dignity and critiqued how each of these dimensions was impacted by unique considerations of the total institution.

Admittedly, drawing our data from media accounts limits us in the richness we can present. The types of data that could be gathered from primary research such as participant observations, interviews, or focus groups with Foxconn workers would certainly reveal insights that go far beyond what can be captured in news stories. It also would allow us to provide an analysis that has not been pre-filtered through a lens of either Western media sensationalism or Chinese media censorship. However, given the vulnerability of the employees at Foxconn, pursuing this kind of primary data collection would raise its own set of ethical conundrums. Therefore, consistent with case study research that builds cases from all available sources of information, we perform an initial analysis that reveals important insights into workplace dignity at Foxconn.

Findings and Interpretation

In this section, we weave together evidence from our case study into Hodson's workplace dignity framework, specifically addressing the ways in which indignities are influenced by the total institution. We detail the ways in which indignities at Foxconn included (a) excessive overwork; (b) mismanagement and abuse; (c) incursions on autonomy; and (d) denials and contradictions of employee involvement. Furthermore, (e) the denial of positive coworker relationships—which have been shown to offset deleterious effects of indignity—further exacerbated conditions of indignity at Foxconn. These factors came together to foster an organizational climate rife with indignity.

Excessive Overwork

A central challenge to achieving workplace dignity is overwork. Hodson describes the consequences of over-

work as leaving people "physically and emotionally exhausted" and imposing great costs in terms of "human exhaustion and misery" (p. 115). Although standards of what counts as overwork vary across time and culture, it appears that Foxconn overworks its employees by nearly any account. Chinese labor law states that employees are to work no more than 8 h per day or 44 h per week, on average (China Labor Law 2005). Additionally, *Labor Law and the Provisions of the State Council on Working Hours of Employees* dictates that overtime hours cannot exceed 3 h per day or a total of 36 h a month. Yet, Foxconn employees regularly exceeded those legal limits.

Stories of overwork at Foxconn are the rule, not the exception, as overwork at the assembly line is normalized. SACOM (2011) published a photo of a Foxconn workers' paycheck. It showed that the employee recorded 98 h of overtime in a 1-month period, nearly three times the legal limit. One of the suicide victim's paychecks showed that he had worked 112 h of overtime the month before he jumped to his death (Barboza 2010). It is not just a problem of long days. Foxconn workers rarely get days off. Foxconn factory workers often work shifts of 10–12 h for seven consecutive days with only 30 min to eat and 10 min for bathroom breaks (Alioti 2010). Several additional sources report that workers typically work 13 days before getting a 1-day break.

Released on *Southern Weekly*, employees signed a "voluntary overtime affidavit," in order to waive the 36-h legal limit on their monthly overtime hours (Liu 2011). Even though this affidavit is purported to protect workers from involuntary overtime, an interview with a Foxconn worker tells a different story:

Interviewer:	Have you ever tried to decline overtime work due to exhaustion?
Employee:	Yes, I did. The company says overtime work is voluntary, but if I don't stay for overtime work, it will be regarded as work stoppage. (SACOM 2011)

After the suicides, Foxconn limited the monthly overtime work to 80 h, still far higher than the legal maximum of 36 h. Workers interviewed by SACOM (2010) reported that the newly introduced "overtime control," however, is resulting in falsifying overtime records rather than reducing hours worked. Put another way, overtime does take place, but it is not recorded or paid as such. Therefore, these overtime controls may be harming employees instead of helping them.

Another way that employees can be overworked is by squeezing additional productivity from them by lengthening workdays or demanding additional output (Hodson 2001). At Foxconn, intensification of work is commonplace. According SACOM's (2010) undercover research reports, workers are "made to work like ma-

chines. They have to work continuously for more than 10 h a day. They cannot stop for a second" (p. 10). In periods of peak demand, already-high production quotas have been raised by as much as 20 %. Also, additional production is squeezed from employees by compensating them only for the time spent on the assembly line. Daily pre- and post-shift compulsory meetings are not paid.

In a total institution, overwork can be extracted from workers at any time. Because employees live within the walls of the organization, they can be summoned to work with far more ease than those employees who are sleeping in their own beds blocks or miles away from the factory. Heralded as breathtaking flexibility and commitment to customer satisfaction, Foxconn was praised for its fast response to retooling the screens of the Apple iPhone when a request came from Apple just weeks before the product was to be released:

> A foreman immediately roused 8,000 workers inside the company's dormitories, according to the executive. Each employee was given a biscuit and a cup of tea, guided to a workstation and within half an hour started a 12-hour shift fitting glass screens into beveled frames. Within 96 hours, the plant was producing over 10,000 iPhones a day. (Duhigg and Bradsher 2012)

While this immediate response may have been a boon for Apple and its product launch, it also serves as a vivid reminder of the unbounded expectations and opportunities for overwork in a total institution.

Mismanagement and Abuse

Hodson (2001) identifies mismanagement and abuse as a chief hurdle to achieving dignity at work. Bolton (2007) echoes this sentiment: "It is not the tasks workers perform, but the broader treatment they receive at the hands of management that determines the experience of worklife" (pp. 35–36). In the case of Foxconn, the harsh organizational culture obstructs employees' attempts to gain a full sense of dignity in their work lives, in large part, by treating them as subhuman.

To begin, Foxconn has created an overall organizational culture that has been described as "harsh" (China Labor Watch 2010), "machine-like" (Free Space Blog 2010), and "a culture of absolute obedience" (SACOM 2010).[2] Several of Foxconn CEO Terry Guo's maxims are displayed prominently throughout the compound and are used to indoctrinate and discipline employees: "A harsh environment is a good thing"; "Hungry people have especially clear minds"; "An army of one thousand is easy to get, one general is tough to find"; "Work itself is a type of joy"; "Out-

side the laboratory, there is no high-technology, only execution of discipline"; and "Work hard on the job today or work hard to find a job tomorrow" (Balfour and Culpan 2010; Duhigg and Barboza 2012; SACOM 2010). Together, these principles highlight the inherent contradictions to workplace dignity outlined by Sayer (2007): workers are positioned as a means unto an end, interchangeable, and replaceable.

Given this highly instrumental orientation toward workers, it should come as no surprise that Foxconn employees are treated as objects instead of humans, which itself is a threat to dignity (Hodson 2001). Foxconn employees work as part of a human assembly line. Because labor costs in China are so low, it is cheaper to have an army of 300,000 workers to assemble iPhones than it would be to build a high-tech assembly line to do the same work. In this sense, not only are workers positioned as machines, but also as cheaper (read: less valuable) than machines. A frontline worker shared her automated, machine-like experience at the assembly line. She said:

> I am the quality evaluator. I am placed in the iron chair, tied by static lines. When the reflow delivers me the cell phone motherboards, repeatedly, I take it with two hands, and then shaking my head from right to left, moving my eye from left to right, up and down. It never ends. If I found it is deficient or anything wrong with it, I will shout loudly, AOI or Iron board! Another *spare part of the machine like me* will immediately run to me and ask about the reason and then regulate the line. (Liang An San Di Research Team 2010; emphasis added)

Employees have expressed their dissatisfaction with this reduction in their humanity. In one photo in the SACOM (2010) report, workers hold a sign that reads, "Workers are not machines. They have self-esteem." Another worker reported that after a week of military-style training, "we concluded that at Foxconn, we shouldn't treat ourselves as human beings, we are just machines" (Carlson 2009). In another case, an employee described himself as worth even less than a machine, saying "I feel like a speck of dust" (Chan 2011). Overall, subhuman treatment is a form of abuse that takes a toll on employees and their quest for dignity.

While it could be argued that all work—especially assembly line work—is alienating, the impact of mismanagement and abuse is amplified in a total institution where control by the organization is exerted around the clock. To reiterate from above, Goffman (1961) identified several types of indignities that are experienced in total institutions, including physical indignities, indignities of treatment accorded by others, and indignities

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2. This was not the first time Foxconn was in the media hot seat. In 2006, a series of newspaper stories and blog posts exposed Foxconn's militaristic management style. See Frost and Burnett (2007) for details.

of speech and action. What is crucial about Goffman's framework is that each of these indignities is linked to changes in the sense of self and self-worth.

Physical indignities occur when employees are required to adopt a physical posture or engage in a movement that would be viewed in civil society as demeaning or conveying a lowly social status (Goffman 1961). At Foxconn, employee discipline regularly includes these kinds of postures. For example, one worker explained, "When a worker makes a mistake, when he talks or laughs loudly, he will be humiliated…. Sometimes you have to stand like a soldier in front of everybody. It is a loss of dignity and means an extra pressure for the worker" (Chamberlain 2011). Other reports have described employees being forced to stand in a corner of the shopfloor as punishment for transgressions such as talking and giggling (SACOM 2011).

Dignity also can be threatened by treatment accorded by others. This kind of indignity—which most often presents itself in the form of abuse—presents direct threats to a positive self-identity, both by the disrespectful nature of the communication and, often, the denigrating content of abusive messages. Foxconn employees regularly endure verbal abuse from managers. A large-scale survey conducted by Chinese university researchers revealed that nearly one-third of all employees had been insulted by management or security, and employees regularly are scolded in front of others (SACOM 2010). Ah Wei, a Foxconn frontline worker, explains, "We get yelled all the time. It's very tough being here" (Wong et al. 2010). It also has been reported that CEO Terry Gou likes to "test" his employees. If they fail to answer questions properly, they are scolded (Zhao 2010). Other reports reveal that production supervisors follow suit, setting "trap tests" for employees and punishing them if they cannot locate the mistake (Former staff of Foxconn 2010).

Physical assaults of employees also have been reported. Stories abound of beatings at the hands of security guards. While interrogations and physical assault are particularly acute in cases where corporate espionage has been suspected (Yang 2010), assaults also have been reported for minor infractions, such as walking on the grass near the factories, littering, or jaywalking (Chan and Pun 2010; SACOM 2010). A *China Daily* article reported:

> "Security guards often assault workers in Foxconn. Workers are afraid of encountering them," said an unnamed Foxconn employee. "Workers call them the security management." Security management salary is not as high as a frontline worker but they have more power. They often abuse workers. The workers carry a silent resentment. The unnamed employee said that he was berated by an entry

guard. Also, his friend once came back to the dormitory late and was abducted into a room by security, where they beat him, and detained him in the room overnight. (Xinhuawang 2010)

The presence of guards is a distinctive characteristic of total institutions. In order to administratively control batches of workers, guards are hired to monitor behaviors and actions across all spheres of activity at the institution. The state of constant surveillance placed on workers (especially when abuse by guards is condoned by management) can put additional identity strains on employees who can be made to feel like veritable inmates and leave them in a state of chronic anxiety over making mistakes or breaking rules.

Perhaps one of the most damaging types of indignities outlined by Goffman (1961) is that of speech and action. In contrast to undignifying treatment accorded by others, indignities of speech and action require individuals to provide their own humiliating verbal responses. In total institutions, these mandated admonishments work against individuals' dignity by forcing them to speak against their own dignity and sense of self. Indignities of speech and action are rampant at Foxconn. There have been reports of employees being required to present self-criticisms in front of colleagues at staff meetings and to write confession letters in which their names, ID numbers, and photos must be included (SACOM 2010). One account gives more detail:

> After work, all of us—more than 100 persons—are made to stay behind. It happens whenever workers get punished. A girl is forced to stand at attention to read aloud a statement of self-criticism. She must be loud enough to be heard. Our line leader would ask if the worker at the far end of the workshop could hear clearly the mistake she has made. Oftentimes girls feel like they are losing face. It's very embarrassing. Her tears drop. Her voice becomes very small. (Chan 2011)

These types of humiliations are particularly harmful to employees' sense of self-worth as they are deeply personal and highly internalized. Rather than defending oneself against attacks by others, indignities of speech and action entail at least a perception of agreement with the degradations being presented. In this way, the total institution exerts total control over employees' sense of worth.

Incursions on Autonomy

Hodson (2001) defines autonomy as "the right and responsibility to make choices about the methods and techniques used for a given task" (p. 141). Sayer (2007) also addresses the centrality of autonomy in the

achievement of dignity. He explains, "to be dignified or have dignity is first to be in control of oneself, competently and appropriately exercising one's powers"; and conversely, "to be unable to exercise the kinds of powers we associate with flourishing human beings" is to lack dignity (p. 568). Brennan and Lo (2007) operationalize dignity as a combination of the capacity for making autonomous decisions and the ability to exercise that capacity. Because the assembly line work at Foxconn requires precision and uniformity, it would be unreasonable to expect worker autonomy over core work processes. Thus, workers' ability to exercise autonomy *on* the line is justifiably limited. However, practices that unjustifiably diminish workers' ability to exercise their autonomy *off* the line are problematic.

One particular incursion on autonomy at Foxconn relates to restriction of movement. For example, no one without a special permit can enter or leave the Shenzen factory, which is watched over by the more than 1,000 security guards (Chan and Pun 2010). All factory buildings and dormitories have security checkpoints with guards standing by 24 h a day. All employees, whether they are going to the bathroom or going to eat, must go through a tight security screening, including swiping electronic staff cards or scanning fingerprints on recognition scanners (Chan and Pun 2010). Body searches are not uncommon, either. Men reportedly must take off belts with metal buckles and women their underwire bras before they can pass the electronic security systems. Chan (2011) reports that interviewed workers "stressed how the multilayered electronic entry access system felt like a total loss of freedom."

Another way in which autonomy is challenged in total institutions is through pressure to surrender control—or at least suppress expression—of internal thoughts, feelings, values, and attitudes. In the outside world, individuals are allowed the autonomy to engage in a "margin of face-saving reactive expression" (e.g., articulating frustration, withholding signs of deference; Goffman 1961, p. 36) that can separate their compliance to an objectionable pressure from their personal attitudes toward the request. Through these expressions, individuals can protect their sense of worth and esteem under otherwise objectionable circumstances. However, in total institutions, in circumstances that are an affront to self and dignity, these face-saving reactive expressions are subject to discipline and control. For example, Foxconn workers are required to repress their frustration and express joy at the prospect of another long shift. One report describes the situation: "Before starting to work, management will ask the workers, 'how are you?' Workers must shout, 'Good! Very good! Very, very good!' No matter [whether] workers like it or not, they can only follow the instructions from the man-

agement" (SACOM 2011, p. 9). Foxconn (2010) also heralded its speech and debate program as a grand success. The theme of the debate series in 2010, following the suicides, was "I love the company, the company loves me" (p. 23).

Incursions on autonomy also extended beyond working hours. Goffman (1961) explains, "Total institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his presence that he has some command over his world—that he is a person with "adult" self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action" (p. 43). Furthermore, in civil society, control by the employer ends at the receipt of a paycheck, as workers are freed from the institution and possess the agency to spend their money of their own volition. Therefore, the authority of the workplace is kept bounded to working hours. However, in total institutions, where essential needs are provided (such as cafeterias and dorm rooms), company authority extends to other spheres of life. For example, Foxconn has punished and controlled employees when they were not working. There are reports of employees being disciplined for breaking curfew in the dormitories, for blow-drying their hair in their rooms, and for not finishing their meals in the compound cafeterias (Carlson 2009; SACOM 2010; Yinan 2010). And personal autonomy has been restricted further as other parts of their personal lives have been scheduled for them by the company. Chan (2011) explains, "Food and drink, sleep, even washing are all scheduled tasks like those on production lines" (p. 2). In short, Foxconn's restriction of workers' autonomy *off* the line is stripping employees of their individual agency and impinging upon their basic desire exercise their capacities for autonomous decision making.

Contradictions of Employee Involvement

The final challenge to workplace dignity is contradictions of employee involvement. Hodson (2011) explains that, on one hand, increased involvement has been shown to be linked to dignity, as participatory organizational settings can increase employees' perceptions of autonomy and pride in their work. However, on the other hand, increased involvement has been tied to work intensification and concertive control. Within the total institution structure at Foxconn, the concern for worker dignity is the extent to which contradictions of employee involvement arise during off hours.

A vivid contradiction of participation came following the suicide cluster in mid-2010. Foxconn management hosted anti-suicide rallies, entitled "Treasure Your Life" (which were orchestrated by its public relations firm Burson–Marsteller). Employees wore costumes and T-shirts with pro-Foxconn sentiments, marched in pa-

rades, and chanted slogans. One group of workers carried a large poster of CEO Terry Guo with "Love you, love me, Love Terry" written on it, while others carried large heart shapes. But the irony of this rally is that—in true total institution fashion—employees were *required* to attend. "Institutional theatricals" (Goffman 1961, p. 101) such as these rallies are common in total institutions and serve as a way to present a positive organizational identity to the public. This notion was not lost on Geoffrey Crothall, spokesman of *China Labor Bulletin*, who remarked, "I don't think today's event is going to achieve anything except provide a bit of theater" (Foxconn holds rallies 2010). Perhaps that is why one of the iconic photos of the rallies became photojournalist Bobby Yip's (2010) shot of a group of Foxconn workers wearing pink "I ♥ Foxconn" T-shirts with solemn, distant expressions on their faces.

SACOM (2010) also reported that the union (which is a corporate arm of the company as compared to an independent bargaining unit) does offer a variety of social events for employees to attend, such as charity events, day trips, performances, and intramural sporting events. But unlike a retreat from work, company-sponsored recreation serves to keep members moving in lockstep batches and to keep them tethered to the control of the organization. As a result, these activities can be draining instead of rejuvenating. One employee complained that "we are exhausted from work, and have no interest in those events" (SACOM 2010, p. 20).

Not only does company-sponsored "fun" create contradictions of participation, but these events also have a material effect on workflow, creating additional problems for overwork. An HR employee voiced concerns employee participation in these special events:

> Every time, it caused lots of trouble. Each department has to commit 10% of workforce to attend these events. At the same time, the production line has to maintain the production target. We have to make announcements and bring them to the events. These make us weary. We dislike the trade union, as there is no overtime premium for these mass mobilisations. (SACOM 2010, p. 21)

Regardless of the intent or the festive tenor of the events, requiring attendance of recreational or extra-curricular activities further expands the control of the total organization into presumable "off time" and limits workers' autonomy.

Lack of Meaningful Co-Worker Relations

Hodson (2001) argues that while coworkers can present challenges to workplace dignity, they also can be important resources for (re)claiming dignity, as coworkers help provide meaningful work and a basis for group

solidarity. Bolton (2007) emphasizes the importance of coworker relations by saying, "often it is only the non-material rewards—for example, the social connections and moments of humour and humanity—that make work bearable" (p. 5). Coworker relations can provide important armor against indignity, including providing for solidarity and mutual defense, resisting authority, and affirming occupational, class, and gender identities (Hodson 2001). In other words, coworkers can be the glue that holds employees' sense of identity and dignity together. But cultures of indignity initiated by management disrupt the entire workplace, including relations between coworkers.

Unfortunately, workers at Foxconn, by and large, are lacking these important positive relationships and are unable to reap the benefits of finding meaning in work through the sharing of work-life experiences and friendships. Moreover, the organizational policies and practices at Foxconn systematically disrupt opportunities for establishing coworker relationships. First, communication on the job is forbidden (Zhang 2010). Foxconn actively discourages social interaction among its workers and strives to ensure that they focus on work and nothing but work throughout their shifts. The only person to whom they are allowed speak is their supervisor, and that conversation usually is top-down. Second, a large number of Foxconn frontline workers have to wear masks when working on the assembly line, creating conditions of anonymity. According to Lin, a frontline worker, "And for coworkers on the same site, even though I worked with these people for three or four months, no one knows each other because we wear masks at work" (Gao et al. 2010).

Third, meaningful social relationships are prevented by limiting communication with dorm mates. Even though there are as many as 10 workers living in each dormitory room, these individuals tend not to know each other well. They do not share dorm rooms with people who work in the same departments, nor are they matched with friends or people from a shared hometown. Also, there are strict rules in the dorms for lights out time, limiting the communication that can occur in the little non-working time that is left at the end of each day. One interviewed employee, when asked about his dorm mates said, "Our room accommodates six persons. I only know two of them. The others I haven't met them at all. When I am on day shift, they are on night shift, vice versa" (SACOM 2011). SACOM (2010) described the dorm room situation this way:

Workers in the same dormitory room are usually from different departments, different province origins, and even different shifts. Their different backgrounds help to keep them isolated in the Foxconn environment, perhaps, as a way to keep them more vulnerable, less capa-

ble of mutual help, and less likely to organize themselves. Roommates are like strangers to each other. (pp. 18–19)

Finally, workers are often too physically exhausted from overwork to engage in socializing. SACOM (2011) described the scene of a typical shift break:

> During recess, workers sit on the floor of the department to rest. Unlike recess in school which usually has lively atmosphere, workers generally sit on the floor and take a nap, play with cell phone or smoke alone. There is not much interaction between them. (p. 16)

The accompanying photograph depicted an endless row of workers, all with their knees up and their heads hung down. Liu (2011), an undercover reporter from *Southern Weekly*, summed up Foxconn's indifferent climate. He writes:

> Foxconn workers find difficult to relate to each other because they are always wearing identical work uniforms and performing the same tasks every day. They have no interesting topics to chat about because all they do is work. If an employee becomes too stressed, they often have no one with which to share their feelings or to approach for help solving their problems.

The total institution puts additional constraints on the development of meaningful relationships. Because total institutions are part formal organization and part residential community (Goffman 1961), it means that not only are *workplace* friendships limited by these practices, but *personal* friendships—those made outside of work during personal time—also are effectively limited. That is, because Foxconn workers are all working, living, and playing in one centrally controlled organizational site, cutting off friendship ties in one domain, cuts them off in all domains.

Discussion

In summary, our analysis reveals that Foxconn's organizational culture is one that denies worker dignity in multiple ways. The excessive overwork, mismanagement and abuse, incursions on autonomy, and contradictions of involvement experienced by the young people who work for and *live in* Foxconn both contributed to mortifications of their self-worth and self-value and accounted for numerous episodes of disrespectful treatment by others. More than a series of disconnected injurious interactions and merciless management practices, the indignity of life within the walls of Foxconn City was systematized by its organizational structure of a total institution. By bureaucratically administering all spheres of workers' lives—from working to sleeping to eating to socializ-

ing—Foxconn curtailed workers' ability to exercise their capacities for autonomy at every turn.

Placed into the larger cultural and economic context, the picture becomes even grimmer for Foxconn workers. As explained above, China is undergoing significant economic and social change that is influencing the expectations and meanings of work, which consequently is exacerbating the experience of indignity at Foxconn. Whereas previous generations of workers in China believed that everyone was called upon to sacrifice for the greater good and, thus, that all jobs were equally noble, that no longer is the case. Today's younger generation is influenced by rapid industrial growth, Western consumerism and materialism, and a new cultural push for entrepreneurialism (Buzzanell et al. 2010; Sun and Wang 2010). For young Chinese, these changes mean they are seeking jobs that will bring honor to themselves and their community (Long 2012). But the very acknowledgment of differentially honorable jobs means that the factory work performed at Foxconn is no longer seen as an equally noble and worthy sacrifice. In fact, it is deemed *suzhi di* (of low human value). Therefore, we see a growing chasm between expectations and reality: The younger generation has a higher expectation for the meaning and esteem drawn from work, while simultaneously the particular kind of work performed at Foxconn is seen as less worthy than before. This chasm only can serve to aggravate the difference between the ideal and realized self—and therefore threaten feelings of self-value, worth, and face, all of which are intimately tied to dignity.

Furthermore, because China uses the *Hukuo* household registration system, migrant workers are materially limited in their options for viable employment (and housing) in cities where they are not registered. Therefore, migrant Foxconn workers are thrust into a deeper level of disadvantage: They effectively are bound to the company for their job and for their shelter, among other things. Add to this the moral obligation they have to provide materially for their respective families and there is a perfect storm for feeling there is "no way out." In short, the state-system of *Hukuo* works in tandem with wider cultural norms and the total institution of Foxconn to institutionalize a system of indignity from which there is virtually no escape.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to scholarship. First, by putting the literatures on workplace dignity and total institution into conversation with one another, both research areas are bolstered. In regard to research on total institutions, previous studies have focused almost exclusively on psychiatric asylums and prisons; far fewer have examined employment-based organizations. Therefore,

this study provides new insights into the complexities of total institutions where members are voluntary employees (as compared to committed patients or incarcerated inmates). In particular, by focusing on workplace dignity, this study has fleshed out Goffman's (1961) coverage of the indignities embedded in total institution life. The Foxconn case provides empirical evidence of the ways in which employees systematically are exposed to a variety of dignity-diminishing behaviors that mortify their sense of self, of how an organizational culture of employee disrespect is created and sustained, and of how the control of various life domains (e.g., eating, sleeping, recreation) restricts employees' autonomy and limits their attempts to defend their dignity.

Likewise, the conversation between the two literatures enriches the research on workplace dignity. Previous research on workplace dignity has emphasized micro-level interactions that have injured worker dignity (Lucas 2011; Steimel 2010; Wood and Karau 2009) or ways workers have constructed dignified identities in the face of stigma (Chiappetta-Swanson 2005; Stacey 2005). This study foregrounds the interplay between micro-level interactions and practices and macro-level organizational structure. By looking at social institutions as key sites for creating conditions for diminishing (or protecting) dignity, rather than at individuals and individual behaviors within organizations, we demonstrate the ways that workplace dignity is organizationally (re)produced. Therefore, dignity is not a result of a problematic individual, or even a wider organizational or workgroup culture, but instead is a phenomenon that is embedded within the very structure of organizations and manifested in interaction.

Another key contribution of this study is that it presents an account of workplace dignity in a non-Western context. As mentioned above, dignity as both a philosophical concept and as an area of scholarship tends to have a strong Western orientation (Lee 2008). The bulk of the theory and empirical research on the topic has come from Western research sites, particularly from the United States and United Kingdom, where much of the research on dignity is centered (Bolton 2007, 2010; Hodson 2001; Sayer 2007). In the present study, we not only examine dignity in a Chinese context, but also take note of cultural considerations in theories of dignity and apply cultural meanings of work to interpret our findings. A notable implication of this research is that although dignity is a term not used as widely in China as it is in other cultures, it nevertheless is an important driver of human experience. Furthermore, given the increasing globalization of business and the assimilation of attitudes considered more Western (Long 2012; Sun and Wang 2010), dignity is likely to become even more important for the Chinese workforce in the future.

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications that can be drawn from this analysis. The focal contribution relates to improving conditions of workplace dignity for employees at Foxconn. While Foxconn and Apple repeatedly upheld dignity as an ultimate value, their internal (Foxconn) and independent (Apple) audits were mute about dignity. This analysis offers a framework by which the experiences of workplace dignity can be evaluated more directly. Furthermore, the analysis drawn from media accounts lays the groundwork for an initial plan to institute new practices that can effect real change. In broad terms, Foxconn could do much more to limit working hours and to transform the management culture to one where abuse is not tolerated. During off hours, it could loosen its grip on employee control by allowing individuals more autonomy in non-work spheres of their lives—even for those living on campus. By allowing a little more freedom in the dormitories (e.g., allowing hairdryers, giving employees the option to choose their roommates) and by making participation in company-sponsored recreational opportunities truly voluntary, Foxconn could make important strides toward upholding employees' dignity.

Given Hodson's (2001) argument that—in the case of factory work in particular—life satisfaction often comes through personal pursuits outside of work, another way to boost workers' esteem and dignity is to encourage them to participate in affirming extra-curricular activities. Granted, Foxconn offers a variety of recreational options: talent competitions, intramural sports, picnics, and dating shows, to name a few (Foxconn 2010). However, given the all-encompassing nature of total institutions, counselors, managers, and peers might be wise to encourage workers to create some semblance of a life outside the walls of Foxconn City. Even acts as simple as going off campus for meals or entertainment are ways workers can escape temporarily the bounds of company control and gain some autonomy over their lives.

This study also points to practical implications for bolstering the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility efforts related to global supply chain management. To its credit, Apple has taken positive steps in this regard, beginning with asserting the importance of workplace dignity (Ogg 2010), conducting independent audits of Foxconn facilities (Apple 2011), having Apple CEO Tim Cook personally visit Foxconn factories (Wingfield 2012), and inviting the Fair Labor Association to conduct audits of Foxconn facilities (Apple 2012; Fair Labor Association 2012). These inspections address important labor issues: underage workers, violations of overtime regulations, and occupational health and safety concerns. However, because dignity is an ambig-

uous and imprecisely defined concept (and one that is contextually embedded and enacted), it is not easy to get to the heart of worker dignity with such universal, objective metrics of labor policy compliance. As such, there is a real risk that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to assess dignity and to hold organizations accountable for more subjective or personal violations of worker dignity. Sustained attention must be given to finding a feasible way to develop and uphold a shared set of ethical labor principles that protect workers' dignity.

As these principles are developed, it will be important to balance tensions between universal rights and local enactment of dignity (and other subjective labor rights) for workforces across the planet. In an age of increasing global outsourcing—especially in pursuit of cheaper labor pools—risks of people mistreatment and labor violations increase dramatically. As organizations manage their global supply chains and communicate their corporate social responsibility efforts to their various stakeholders, they must prepare themselves to understand the larger social institutions and cultural forces that uniquely impact each workforce in its supply chain. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that supplier demands for better treatment are not merely putting downward pressure on manufacturers, but instead are truly sharing the responsibility for ensuring safe and dignified working conditions (see Yu 2008).

Conclusion

In closing, this analysis offers important insights into the plight of the new generation of Chinese migrant workers, their quest for dignity, and the challenges they face along the way. We echo Qiang's (2010) words: "China's workers, who have made great contributions to the country's economic development, must be able to work with dignity and enjoy the fruits of their labor." We encourage multinational organizations to take more seriously their claims of supporting workers' rights to dignity. By defining dignity, exploring the structural and cultural constraints, and by locating ways in which organizations can implement practices that work on a local level, we may move one step closer to having dignity across the global supply chain.

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