



Speaking of Dignity: Interviews with Non-Unionized Adjunct Faculty Teaching at a Catholic Church-affiliated University

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Abstract

With the 130-year labor-affirmative tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (“CST”) in mind, this paper presents findings from interviews conducted during the summer of 2019 and answers the research question: *How do non-unionized adjunct faculty employed by an English Department in a Catholic Church-affiliated university describe their experiences of dignity and how do those faculty reflect on the meanings of those experiences?* In the introduction I briefly summarize the study and describe site and participant selection. I then review theories of workplace dignity derived from CST and secular sociology; describe the methodology and methods behind the study; introduce the participants; report participant experiences as interpreted through themes relevant to workplace dignity (*autonomy, citizenship, resistance, sociability*); and conclude with thoughts about how emerging themes (*vulnerability, marginality, boundaries, community*) comport with extant literature on the gigification of higher education faculty labor, and point to the responsibility of religiously-affiliated institutions to safeguard dignity in letter *and* spirit.

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Dignity is at the center of the Catholic Church’s labor teachings going back to Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical “on capital and labor,” *Rerum Novarum*, in which he writes that it is the duty of “the wealthy owner and the employer[] not to look upon their work people as their bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character” (par. 20). Dignity is also central to secular conceptions of work, including sociological studies of the role of dignity in the workplace (Barber; Bolton; Budd; Hodson), and also including a much broader set of texts that may not explicitly claim dignity as a focus but which focus on closely related issues like the experiences of underrepresented minorities in higher education (Wright II and Calhoun; Zambrana), the community-based approach of “bargaining for the greater good” (McCartin; Sneiderman and McCartin), and the working conditions and perspectives of part-time faculty overall (Berry; Coalition on Academic Workforce; Dubson; Gappa et al.; Gappa and Leslie; Lyons; US GAO).

Dignity is something all people experience, including in their work lives. Many religious doctrines and sociological theories attest to broad agreement that dignity is inherent to the human condition and that while it can be diminished or amplified, it cannot be taken away or bestowed. My purpose in the study² described here is to reconstruct experiences of a small group of non-unionized adjunct faculty teaching in the English Department at “Urban Catholic University,”³ and to interpret those experiences in terms of workplace dignity. I use the term “adjunct” to describe the part-time, short-term, non-benefitted faculty appointment of the study participants. (For more on typology and usage, see § II.C.)

Findings in this paper derive from nine interviews with three participants, which were conducted during the summer of 2019. The study asks: *How do non-unionized adjunct faculty employed by an English Department in a Catholic Church-affiliated university describe their experiences of “dignity” and how do those faculty reflect on the meanings of those experiences?* The interview method described below allowed participants to:

- give voice to formative home, school, and workplace experiences, specifically as they pertain to the question of how they each arrived in their adjunct roles;
- reconstruct a typical day in their role as adjunct English instructor at Urban Catholic University; and
- reflect on the meaning of their experiences in terms of dignity, and to recommend changes they believe would improve their sense of dignity in the workplace.

In the following sections, I review literature on conceptions of workplace dignity derived from Catholic Social Teaching (“CST”) and secular sociology, as well as literature on contingency studies; describe the

methodology and methods behind the study; introduce the participants in the study; report participant experiences as interpreted through several received themes; and conclude with thoughts about how emerging themes line up with extant literature describing the “gigification” of higher education faculty work (Tolley; Kezar et al.).

Brief Review of Literatures

A Catholic Sense of Workplace Dignity

Sison et al., pose a useful question to guide this brief review of the Catholic sense of human dignity: “What specific contributions could CST make to the understanding of human dignity and the dignity of work?” (504).

Among other meanings, dignity in the context of CST “refers to the intrinsic worth or value of every human being that distinguishes him from any other creature. This worth or value is often associated with the capacity for reason and autonomy or ‘self-determination’ through free choice” (506; paraphrasing Pope Paul VI, paras. 15-17). Modern notions of dignity in CST originate in a foundational document of the Catholic tradition of support for labor rights, *Rerum Novarum*, in which Pope Leo XIII insists on “a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man” (para. 45). From 1891 onward the tradition of CST is unequivocal with regard to the centrality of dignity to church teachings and is just as unequivocal about the central spirituality of dignity. Pope John XXIII, we are reminded, established human dignity as the “one basic principle” of CST and centered “individual human beings [as] the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution” (Sison et al., 506; quoting Pope John XXIII, paras. 219-220).

Adding to this certainty about the foundational aspect of dignity, several Popes also have a lot to say about its indelibility. Pope John XXIII suggests that even the starkest ethical lapses cannot separate a person from their dignity:

A man who has fallen into error does not cease to be a man. He never forfeits his personal dignity; and that is something that must always be taken into account. (para. 158)

Even in the face of inevitable human fallibility, Pope Paul VI reinforces the difference between moral fault and forfeiture of dignity, writing that “it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person” (para. 28). However, “[a]lthough basic dignity cannot be lost, nevertheless, it should be developed. And not everyone achieves this nor achieves it to the same degree, because it depends on free choices and actions” (Sison et al., 509). This development, again according to Pope Paul VI, involves individual responsibility and autonomy: “Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal

impulse nor by mere external pressure” (para. 17). But society also plays a role, in that “[h]uman institutions, both private and public, must labor to minister to the dignity and purpose of man” (para. 29).

In a sense, the workplace is one site common across human experience where these social and individual responsibilities join together to *develop* dignity, regardless of the type of work or nature of employment. As Sison et al., put it, “early Christian thinkers known as the Church Fathers [...] did not share the belief that work was an ‘*opus servile*’ (servile act); rather, it was as an ‘*opus humanum*’ (human act) worthy of honor” (512; citing Pontifical Council). Pope John Paul II agrees that there is something about the nature of work, the toil of it, that is honorable and that enhances the dignity of the worker:

in spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum*, in the terminology of Saint Thomas, this does not take away the fact that, as such, it is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. (para. 9)

CST describes labor as an experience that can and *should* be enjoyable and beneficial, a spiritual good sometimes borne of arduousness.

A Secular Sense of Workplace Dignity

In addition to helping answer the questions of dignity’s place in CST and as a religious concern, Sison et al., pose another useful question that might also guide a review of the secular sense of both human dignity and workplace dignity: “What is their value in a largely secular and democratic society and for people who do not adhere to the Catholic credo?” (504). One of the basic understandings conveyed in the article by Sison et al., is that one need not be a practicing Catholic, or even agree with any of the religious tenets of the Catholic Church—“belief in a Transcendent Being” (507) for instance— in order to agree to some of its positions on human dignity. The publication of an article on the CST foundations of workplace dignity in a secular journal of business ethics reinforces the sense that certain “secular warrants,” or “reasons accessible to non-religious persons,” (507) may be seen as overlapping with the Catholic assumption that God is divine, that God created humanity in His image, and that, therefore, humanity is inherently dignified. According to Catholic faith-based reasoning, “human beings are capable of entering into a unique personal relationship with God” (508); however, Sison et al., also note that we may “find ‘secular warrants’ of this relational aspect of dignity and personhood in the Aristotelian account of human nature as a ‘social’ or ‘political animal,’ a ‘rational animal’” (507; quoting Aristotle, 1253a). It

is possible, then, to consider the foundational relation of dignity to human life, including workplace experience, without recourse to the concept of *imago Dei*, which holds that “all human beings are made in God’s image and likeness” (505).

Budd (2004) observes: “Religious views on the sanctity of human life and respect for human dignity often closely resemble secular ethical conceptions of human dignity” (21). Springing as it does from the social teachings of the Catholic Church, my interest in the experiences of adjunct faculty in a Catholic- affiliated setting now seems, in retrospect, to have always been about dignity rather than strictly about labor law, metrics like job satisfaction, or the faculty labor market. Of course, these issues span religious and secular theories of workplace economics and ethics, as Budd notes when discussing the Catholic Church doctrine regarding labor and capital:

[The Catholic Church] roots this doctrine in the belief that labor markets fall short of the theoretical ideal of economics textbooks[...]. Consequently, employers and employees, capital and labor, are not equals, and unregulated market-based outcomes will favor employers at the expense of employees with the potential for abuse. (Budd, 3)

My interviews with the participants to this study reinforce the suggestion that market ideals are not in line with CST, and neither are the adjunct labor practices of Urban Catholic University.

Contingency Studies

Adjunct. Casual. Contingent. Contract. Temporary. Unbundled. Seasonal. Just-in- time. Many descriptors such as those above have been applied to part-time faculty in American higher education, constituting a typology that confounds comprehensive study (Kezar and Sam). The study of faculty and the ways their employment conditions may be impacted by political or other non-academic considerations fills out a robust literature going back as far as the 1915 founding of the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) and Veblen’s classic criticism of corporate and political influence in higher education, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*. Whether discussing two- or four-year, public or private, non- or for-profit, online or brick-and-mortar, secular or religious institutions, up and down the Carnegie Classification system there is evidence of the transformation of the professoriate from a predominantly tenure-holding or -eligible population to one marked by tenuous job security, poverty-level wages, benefits ineligibility, decreased access to governance structures, denial of due process, diminished academic freedom, and detachment from the communities into which they have been hired (Gappa

and Leslie; Hollenshead et al.; Kezar and Sam; Schneider; United States House Committee on Education and the Workforce).

By the mid-1970s (Ladd and Lipset; Berlow and Collos; Tuckman; Van Arsdale), there was already a good sense that American higher education institutions were relying on a more and more destabilized instructional workforce, with studies continuing over the following decades (Gappa; Gappa and Leslie; Kezar and Sam; Morphey et al., “Changes in Faculty Composition” and “Contingent Faculty Composition”). Many terms and typologies have been used to conceptualize the meaning and purpose of “adjunct” and “contingent” faculty in higher education; though preferring “non-tenure-track faculty” (“NTTF”), Kezar and Sam describe the variety of typology, titles, and institutional employment of those who constitute the “new faculty majority” (Maisto).

My focus on adjunct faculty in an English department was spurred, in part, by my own experiences as an adjunct and also as a full-time non-tenure-track lecturer teaching composition and literature courses at La Salle University. I was also encouraged in this line of inquiry by calls like the one Hammer (“Reframing the Discourse”) published in the pages of *Forum*, the journal of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, urging scholars “to begin studying how the physical, material, institutional, and economic marginalization formed by contingency creates complex barriers to instructor support and retention and further alters the quality of instruction” (A1).

Of course, there are studies that predate Hammer’s (“The Need for Research”) coinage of a higher education workforce-focused “Contingency Studies,” including one described by Schell and Stock, who focus on the instructional staffing of lower-level and especially introductory composition courses. They argue that “composition studies may well be viewed as a canary in an academic mine in which contingent faculty have worked (at risk, underground, out of sight) to support others’ more visible, more attractive labor” (19). They add:

Composition studies is a particularly fitting vantage point from which to study the academy’s turn toward contingent employment as it has long been an instructional area staffed by non-tenure-track faculty. Most colleges and universities require first-year students to take one or two introductory composition courses, which are often staffed by non-tenure-track faculty and graduate teaching assistants. (20)

I also rely on a study by Trainor and Godley that recounts a process by which two campuses in a state university responded to a directive that all remedial courses, such as Basic Writing, were “relocated to local community colleges” (153). In one case, the university-level adjuncts who formerly taught those courses were replaced by “part-time instructors

hired through the local community college at salaries lower than those the university used to pay.” In addition to the lower wages, Trainor and Godley note that “these instructors have virtually no contact with the English department at State U-Oakdale, nor are they enfranchised members of the community college,” a set of labor conditions that shows just how precarious employment can be for adjuncts teaching in lower-level courses.

In setting the foundation and describing the impetus for their study, Schell and Stock cite studies conducted by Tuckman and Volger, Abel, and Gappa and Leslie, showing the longevity and growth of the faculty employment crisis. These studies, including their development of typologies intended to explain motivations to take a part-time adjunct position, suggest that the conditions of an adjunct’s employment affect their experience depending in part on whether one is looking at an English instructor aspiring for a full-time offer or at one who works as an author or editor but moonlights to teach a course every now and again.

One of the most compelling findings with regard to job satisfaction among adjunct faculty suggests the importance of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary part-time employment. Several studies that pinpoint this distinction have been conducted with a view toward “better understand[ing] the nuances in satisfaction among part-time faculty” (Eagan et al. 450). Such studies examine differences in satisfaction between voluntary part-time faculty—those part-timers who choose or prefer to work part-time—and involuntary part-time faculty—individuals who teach part-time but would prefer a full-time faculty appointment. These studies have found voluntary part-time faculty to be significantly more satisfied with various aspects of their academic work compared to their involuntary part-time colleagues. (Eagan et al. 450)

While some studies (Antony and Valadez; Antony and Hayden; Maynard and Joseph) report greater satisfaction among part-time faculty than full-time faculty on certain employment elements, they also show a difference in levels of satisfaction among part-timers based on voluntary or involuntary part-time status. Antony and Hayden observe that “job-fit analysis indicates that satisfaction for voluntary part-time employees will likely be higher than involuntary part-time employees” (704, citing Maynard and Joseph). Antony and Hayden add that “63 to 75% of those part-time faculty members who report the highest levels of satisfaction also indicate not preferring a full-time job” (705). Ott and Dippold reinforce the importance of disaggregating part-timers based on their voluntary or involuntary part-time-ness: “[R]ecent studies find between 49% and 60% of part-time community college faculty would rather have a full-time appointment” (190). Citing other studies, Ott and Dippold add that “researchers have also found part-time faculty who desire a full-time job are less content with compensation, advancement, recognition, and job security, at both two-year (Kramer et al.) and four-year institutions (Maynard and Joseph).” (191)

Bringing this discussion of motivation back to the cohort of participants I recruited, Gappa et al. report that “in 1998, only 15 percent of part-timers in the health sciences sought full-time academic jobs, in contrast to 65 percent of part-timers in the fine arts and 61 percent in the humanities, who reported that they were teaching on a part-time basis because full-time jobs were not available, either in academe or elsewhere” (95). Lastly, Gappa et al. dispel any notion that most part-time faculty are “satisfied” by their employment:

Although the part-time faculty is largely heterogeneous, made up of people with highly varied life circumstances and motivations for teaching, these faculty members’ employment conditions are not heterogeneous. Regardless of their performance, the length of their employment, their qualifications for their positions, or the needs of their institutions, part-time faculty in most colleges and universities are employed under exploitative practices. [...] In good circumstances, part-timers become valued and established colleagues despite the informality and insecurity of their employment. In the worst circumstances, part-timers remain marginal and are subject to capricious and arbitrary treatment. (p. 96)

In addition to studies focused on disciplinary employment trends and job satisfaction, studies published by Bettinger and Long (“Do College Instructors Matter?”) suggest that negative effects of adjunct instruction on student success and interest are more likely in the humanities than in professional or occupational studies:

in general, adjunct and graduate assistant instructors reduce subsequent interest in a subject relative to full-time, tenure-track faculty, but this effect is small and differs widely by discipline. We find that adjuncts negatively affect students in the humanities and sciences while positively affecting students in some of the professional fields, particularly in terms of success in subsequent courses. In many cases, adjuncts under the age of 40 account for the estimated negative effects suggesting that recent movements towards hiring young instructors, who are often inexperienced and have not completed doctoral study, is negatively impacting students. (4)

Indeed, there are several studies of student outcomes that suggest variable impacts depending on age and length of career, discipline, and motivation to teach in a part- or full-time role (Kezar and Maxey).

Methodology and Methods

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The study addresses the following research question: *How do non-unionized adjunct faculty employed by an English Department in a Catholic Church-affiliated university describe their experiences of “dignity” and how do those faculty reflect on the meanings of those experiences?* At the core of this investigation, then, is the sense individuals make of certain phenomena, and the contexts in which they make that sense. In this section I describe a conceptual framework integrating social construction with hermeneutic phenomenology, and also describe data sources including interviewee and document selection criteria. In the end, I believe I designed a study that was useful in discovering the meaning the participants attached to their experiences of a phenomenon—dignity—that has been theorized in religious and secular literature.

Conceptual Framework

In conceptualizing this study, I have relied in the first place on the social constructionist theory articulated by Berger and Luckmann, “that reality is socially constructed” (1). In other words, the social construction theory construes meaning as derived not only from a person’s experience but also as informed by the social world(s) in which that person has had that experience; that meaning is constructed through an ongoing socio-historical process that varies across time and place, and which builds on culturally-received notions. This theory has been applied to organizational inquiry, with Ott arguing that “organizational culture is a socially constructed concept” (52; citing Berger and Luckmann, Holzner and Marx, and Mead). Similarly, Tierney differentiates between “objective” and “enacted” environments (9-13), with the former conception being based in a “rational, objective, ‘real’” (10) epistemology, and the latter assuming that “reality is defined through a process of social interchange” (12). Ultimately, a study designed to capture the voices and experiences of a particular organization’s members will require that I “enter the field with a theoretical framework based on the assumption that organizations are socially constructed” (15).

A good example of the application of social construction theory to the experience faculty have of a particular phenomenon is Kezar’s “Non-Tenure-Track Faculty’s Social Construction of a Supportive Work Environment,” which combines social construction with symbolic interactionism (rather than with hermeneutic phenomenology in the case of my study), attempting an understanding of the ways people make sense or meaning from their work world. As Kezar puts it: “The pivotal argument is that a person’s sense of reality is impacted by his or her social contexts and experiences” (6). My study takes that argument as granted.

In addition to the theory of socially constructed meaning, I also rely on a form of hermeneutic phenomenology for conceptual framing. Creswell writes that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (57). I would clarify that I am pursuing not *that*

phenomenology that “seeks a correct answer or valid interpretation of texts not dependent on the biographical, social or historical position of the interpreter” (Lavery, 27-28), but rather have practiced a hermeneutic phenomenology that “focuses on meaning that arises from the interpretive interaction between historically produced texts and the reader” (28). Hermeneutic phenomenology does not strive for a “correct” interpretation but rather one that has been constructed by the individual within their socio-historical context. Writing that “hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the *logos* of *other*, the *whole*, the *communal*, or the *social*” (7), van Manen approximates my own understanding. If the call to arms of Husserl’s phenomenology was oriented “to the things themselves” (Crotty, 78) then the rally of hermeneutic phenomenology advocated by van Manen might be oriented “to an interpretation of an experience of the things.”

Because I hold the ontological view that all persons share a world but that each has their individual world-view derived from experience and cultural inheritance, I will not attempt the kind of bracketing that is commonly associated with phenomenology (Crotty; Lindseth and Norberg; Kakkori; Creswell). The process is meant as a check on bias, but assumes, first, that there is some “essence” or “essential meaning” attached to the given, objective world, and second, that it is possible for a person to put aside or disentangle their socially constructed sense of reality in order to see things themselves from “the natural attitude” (Moustakas, 85; Giorgi, 91-92; Kakkori, p. 22). I disagree that an object of thought can be reduced to any essential meaning, and further disagree that it is possible to separate oneself from previous experience in order to see an object without any pre-conceptions or interpretive framework. I believe, with Bevan, that “total abstention is impossible” (138).

Above all, I have striven to interpret and present the participants’ reconstructed experiences and their other statements in a way that is consistent with their own interpretations. At two points following the interview portion of the study, I provided participants with drafts for their review, including demographic data and extensive quotation from the interview transcripts, and asked final consent based on that review. I received no requests to amend, remove, or otherwise change any aspect of those drafts.

Data Sources

Sources for this study include phenomenological interviews (Seidman, *Interviewing*) with adjunct faculty in the English Department at Urban Catholic University. I also reviewed institutional documents that constitute the structure of the working environment and conditions and help to clarify a sense of the organization’s culture and that culture’s values as they pertain to the adjuncts participating in my study (Urban Catholic University, *Faculty Handbook*; *Mission Statement*; *Orientation*

for New Faculty; University Statutes). Notwithstanding Urban Catholic University's mission statement and references made by the university to the intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church, the function of the institution as it pertains to the employment of its adjunct faculty is broadly indistinguishable from other colleges and universities with no religious affiliation at all, whether public or private.

While direct quotation is not feasible if I am to maintain participants' anonymity, relevant sections of the university's governing documents clarify the position and role of the adjuncts interviewed for this study. While allowing that some adjuncts may be hired on a full-time basis in the case of a research grant, for instance, university documents also note that those *full-time* adjuncts are to be referred to as non-tenure-track faculty, in line with typological study of faculty titles (Kezar and Sam), and that any part-time faculty, regardless of title, will be considered adjuncts and accorded the same limited rights and responsibilities.

Regarding this study's participants and others in similar positions across departments at Urban Catholic University, the institution views them as instructional staff on part-time and short-term appointments; does *not* require in-class observation for purposes of their reappointment (or non-reappointment); prohibits them from participating in university-wide committees; and establishes a grievance process separate from that available for full-time faculty on and off the tenure track. These guiding documents describe a tiered workforce with distinct boundaries proscribed around adjuncts compared to full-time colleagues. As noted elsewhere (Elliott and Steuben; AAUP, "1915 Declaration"), the absence of an expectation of continued employment as faculty undermines Urban Catholic's guarantees of academic freedom for adjuncts.

Interview Design

In a 2017 conference presentation, Seidman stated the issue clearly: "At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth in and of themselves and because they have something to say to your inquiry" (slide 5). The interview protocol under discussion was Seidman's phenomenological interviewing guide, which I have used for this study. The guide calls for the researcher to interview each participant three times, for 90 minutes per session, with the following goals for each session:

- Interview One: Focused Life History: "In the first interview, the interviewer's task is to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time." (Seidman, *Interviewing*, 21)
- Interview Two: The Details of Experience: "The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the

participants' present lived experience in the topic area of the study. We ask them to reconstruct these details." (21)

- Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning: "In the third interview, we ask participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience." (22)

The process of making sense or making meaning has already begun by the time the participant puts experience into words, and likely starts in earnest during the period between recruitment and sitting for the first interview. The final interview helps to clarify the meaning that has been constructed by the participants, but "can be productive only if the foundation for it has been established in the first two [interviews]" (22).

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Following from Maxwell, I adhered to "purposive selection" (97) of interview participants. In this method of selection, participants "are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant" to the study's questions. Among the goals for purposive selection, Maxwell begins with the goal of "achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected" (98). As the literature suggests, the "typical" adjunct in an English department is likely employed part-time to teach lower-level courses and is more likely than not to be interested in full-time employment with one institution.

The names and contact information for current adjuncts in the English Department at Urban Catholic University are all listed on the Department's Web pages, which simplified the recruitment process and nullified any need for identifying gatekeepers, or "persons who hold the key to access and entree to a particular field site" (Magolda and Weems, 494). I planned to select participants for interviews on the basis of the following criteria:

- part-time faculty in the English department;
- primarily teaching introductory or lower-level courses;
- interested in full-time faculty employment.

To the extent possible, I sought a cohort of participants at different points in their teaching careers and who represent diverse gender and racial and ethnic categories. However, with a pool of only twenty possible participants in the department, I had little control or influence over the demographics of the participant group. That said, the three participants, all of whom identified as white women, made up 14.2% of the adjunct population of the department. The participants were at various stages of their respective careers, with one participant having taught at Urban Catholic for eight years, another for closer to two years, and one who taught one semester as a doctoral student and one semester as an adjunct before taking a full-time non-tenure-track position at another institution. None of the participants were practicing Catholics, nor were they required to be for employment purposes.

One last aspect of the selection process involved determining an appropriate site. My original plans for the study involved interviewing a unionized cohort of adjuncts, but at the time I was developing the study there were only eight examples of adjunct faculty unions at Catholic-affiliated colleges or universities across the nation (Catholic Labor Network). With only one in the region where I could reasonably expect to be available for in-person interviewing (a typical and relatively uncomplicated expectation in 2019), I ran into the ethical question of whether I could offer effective anonymity to participants without the added protection of masking their employer institution's name. Determining that I could not make such an offer, I endeavored instead to seek participants from the much longer list of non-unionized Catholic Church-affiliated institutions.

Adjunct Policies at Urban Catholic University

At the time of my study, there were two policies at Urban Catholic University that applied specifically and only to adjunct faculty on part-time, short-term, non-benefitted appointments. The first grants adjuncts access to the university's medical and dental benefits after teaching four courses each academic year, five years in a row. (As one participant noted in interviews with me, the health benefits are not automatic and must be opted into by the adjunct, which I confirmed through review of the policy.) The other policy limits adjunct faculty weekly working hours to 29 to avoid triggering Affordable Care Act requirements to offer healthcare to full-time employees working at least 30 hours per week. This standard equates to a two full-credit course load for adjuncts to qualify as part-time, at Urban Catholic and elsewhere. This two-course norm derives from a rule promulgated by the Internal Revenue Service that relied on testimony provided before the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce. In that final rule the IRS determined that institutions of higher education will

credit an adjunct faculty member of an institution of higher education with (a) $2\frac{1}{4}$ hours of service (representing a combination of teaching or classroom time and time performing related tasks such as class preparation and grading of examinations or papers) per week for each hour of teaching or classroom time (in other words, in addition to crediting an hour of service for each hour teaching in the classroom, this method would credit an additional $1\frac{1}{4}$ hours for activities such as class preparation and grading) and, separately, (b) an hour of service per week for each additional hour outside of the classroom the faculty member spends performing duties he or she is required to perform (such as required office hours or required attendance at faculty meetings). (IRS, 8552)

As one participant noted in interviews with me, the health benefits are not automatic and must be opted into by the adjunct, which I confirmed through review of the policy. All three participants noted that the two-course “cap” appears to be incredibly flexible in the sense that the department frequently offers a third course to adjuncts, who must sign a waiver of full-time recognition and attendant benefits. Two of the participants had repeatedly been hired as mentors and advisors above and beyond their two-course-per-term teaching appointments, but the IRS rule does not count the non-instructional and instructional duties in combination.

It is possible, in other words, for adjuncts to work a full-time equivalent across several functions at Urban Catholic without gaining recognition, pay, or benefits commensurate with a full-time position, whether comparing to a full-time non-tenure-track or tenure-track position. And the university is in compliance with federal regulations when it knowingly limits adjuncts’ hours in instructional roles in order to avoid triggering the healthcare requirement, while simultaneously offering additional part-time opportunities like advising that are traditionally bundled into a full-time faculty position, especially if that position is on the tenure track.

Introducing the Participants

“May”

May identifies as a white woman, holds an undergraduate degree in the social sciences and an MFA in creative writing, and as of August 2019 had taught as a part-time English instructor at Urban Catholic for sixteen consecutive semesters, not including summers: eight years, during which time she sometimes also taught in similar roles at other nearby institutions of higher education. Urban Catholic repeatedly employed May as a student adviser over the summer months and school-year, and even offered overload courses. Just these basic contours of May’s employment indicate the problematic nomenclature that distinguishes between full- and part-time faculty members: May has been hired into a nominally part-time teaching role, asked to teach more than the two-course adjunct load on more than one occasion, and also been hired to conduct advising duties. In another scenario, May might be hired to teach on a full-time contract, as is her stated preference. Even without a doctorate, May was still qualified for a non-tenure-track annual contract that would likely include up to four courses per semester and could also include advising or other institutional service responsibilities. Instead, as a means to reduce commitment to a long-time employee, and to avoid providing benefits or paying a regular salary across nine or twelve months, Urban Catholic offers unbundled portions of the tripartite role of the traditional faculty position: teaching is separated from advising and other service, and research or other scholarly production is not an expected part of the arrangement. Given the apparent holding pattern of her career at Urban Catholic after 8 years, May was in

the process of reconsidering her options for the future when we concluded our final interview.

“June”

June identifies as a white woman, holds undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in English Literature and as of August 2019 had taught as a part-time English instructor at Urban Catholic for ten consecutive semesters, not including summers: eight while writing her dissertation; two part-time as a post-doc. Her graduate degrees were also earned at Urban Catholic. During that span of time, including graduate teaching, she sometimes also taught at other nearby institutions of higher education and directed or co-directed pedagogical trainings and conference proceedings. Urban Catholic repeatedly employed June as a student adviser over the summer months and school-year, and even offered overload courses. Just these basic contours of June’s employment indicate the problematic nomenclature that distinguishes between full- and part-time faculty members: June has been hired into a nominally part-time teaching role, asked to teach more than the two- course adjunct load on more than one occasion, and also been hired to conduct advising duties. In another scenario, June might be hired to teach on a full-time contract, as is her stated preference. Instead, as a means to reduce commitment to a long-time employee, and to avoid providing benefits or paying a regular salary across nine or twelve months, Urban Catholic offers unbundled portions of the tripartite role of the traditional faculty position: teaching is separated from advising and other service, and research or other scholarly production is not an expected part of the arrangement.

“July” (JOO-lee)

July (JOO-lee) identifies as a white woman, holds undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in English literature, and taught first-year writing at Urban Catholic University for three semesters: two as a master’s student at Urban Catholic, and one as a part-time instructor. In between those two stints, July pursued her doctorate, returning to the same region as Urban Catholic after receiving the degree. July’s path to teaching as a part-time faculty member involved re- connecting with a professor she knew from when she’d earned a master’s; this experience mirrors both May’s and June’s pathways to their positions, which were arbitrary and reliant on personal connections with faculty in the department. Alongside the part-time role at Urban Catholic, July simultaneously held a similar role at another university closer to her residence, and considered her teaching to be her full-time career, desiring a full-time role at one institution. July left her role at Urban Catholic when she was hired into a full-time non-tenure-track position at that other university.

Participant Experiences of Workplace Dignity

I met with each participant for about 4.5 hours over a series of three open-ended 90-minute interviews begun and completed in the month of August 2019. For the first two interviews I provided skeletal preparation, though prior to the third interview sent detailed descriptions of Hodson's themes of workplace dignity, discussed below. The prompts for each session were:

- First interview: *How did you come to be employed as an adjunct at Urban Catholic University? Please reconstruct any home, work, or educational experiences you believe led you here.*
- Second interview: *Could you reconstruct your typical work day, or related work routines, as an adjunct in the English Department at Urban Catholic University?*
- Third interview: *Given what you have said about your life before you became an adjunct at Urban Catholic University and given what you have said about your work now, how do you understand your experience of dignity in that role?*

Participants all expressed frustration in the ways the institution, from the level of the department on up, failed to support them in their pursuits of dignity. At no point did I provide a definition of the word "dignity" to any participant, letting each (re)construct her own sense of the phenomenon in the process of talking about work experiences.

I have organized the following subsections according to the four themes Hodson derived in his analysis of the means by which employees maintain or enhance their sense of workplace dignity: *autonomy, citizenship, resistance, and sociability*.⁴ Hodson's themes derive from a sociological review of more than one hundred workplace ethnographies, and the themes he derived from that study are broadly compatible with notions of dignity described throughout CST and relevant literature.

Autonomy

Workplace autonomy is inseparable from the common understanding of professionalism, but that expectation is inverted in the adjunct work described by participants. Given what the participants to this study have said about their worry over student evaluations of their work, it appears that the organizational scheme under which they work is in some sense better described as one of supervisory fiat and not professionalism. More than that, the supervisory apparatus described by the faculty I interviewed is staffed neither by the adjunct faculty member's professional colleagues nor their actual supervisors, but by students who complete end-of-semester course evaluations, often the only review an adjunct receives for their work in the classroom. Even while "valid, reliable, and unbiased" (Esarey and Valdes), student evaluations of teaching ("SETs") have dubious effectiveness as a measure of faculty quality or student learning (American Sociological Association; Uttl et al.), they have also been shown to mirror broader social biases that negatively impact evaluations for women in particular (Mitchell and Martin). This reliance on student evaluations is

quite distinct from the classroom observation by a peer or supervisor explicitly required in order to review full-time non-tenure-track faculty for renewal at Urban Catholic University (*Statutes*). In the absence of a rigorous scheme for promotion or renewal, such as what is provided in the case of tenure-track and even non-tenure-track faculty on one-year or other term appointments, the rationale for requiring peer observation falls away for adjunct faculty; but the import of the student evaluation ominously remains.

June's sense of autonomy in the class is complicated, as it is for the other interviewees. By way of showing how compromised her sense of autonomy is, she describes her experience of what could be coined the "proxy management" of adjunct faculty by the students in their courses who complete end-of-term evaluations. Even though the work she has been hired to do has clear boundaries in terms of written expectations of office hours availability, both colleagues and, to a greater extent perhaps, students see her time as unbounded and consider her available all the time:

[I]t's weird though because in the regular construction, with like production and things like that, it's like the manager is who you're resisting. That is, the hierarchical person above you. So, part of what makes teaching unbounded, what you're pushing against, for example, when you're like: "No, this is my time. I'm not going to respond to those emails or whatever it is." Like you're pushing against students.

While she recognizes and finds great value in the flexibility and autonomy available to her when it comes to designing assignments, she also recognizes that a lack of peer observation may amount to something other than autonomy in the classroom. In my interpretation of June's thinking, autonomy in isolation is more akin to oblivion, in the sense of "being forgotten." The theme of autonomy is even more complicated by the knowledge that students and colleagues expect constant attention to their requests on part-timers' time, as noted by June, but also in the literature: "It is the unbounded nature of the academic career that is the heart of the problem" (Gappa et al. 69).

The theme of autonomy also came through in May's discussion of professional vulnerability:

[Interviewer: *Why is vulnerability something that stands out to you as lacking in those infrequent sorts of encounters or that helps build in those encounters that are more frequent? What is the, the value is not the right word, but what is the...*] The different, like what is the quality? [Int.: *The quality of that vulnerability that's important?*] I think safety would be one. So, you have some trust that whatever you expose to somebody, you're not going to be rejected. Especially if you're talking about work and you're

having a really hard problem and you're in a tenuous position, you're an adjunct. Are you going to get work the next semester? Everybody's fighting for whatever, it's like survival. You're fighting for whatever classes you can get [and] that is not conducive to being honest about what's hard for you as a teacher. So, you would have to feel like people have your back and they're not going to use something that they know about you, against you, to their own advantage.

Citizenship

May spoke of wanting to create programs like those she participated in as a graduate student at another institution:

So, for example, let's start a program where we get undergrads to be involved in an English language learning program with the maintenance workers and staff workers. Let's pull some of our resources and give our grad students teaching experience and offer free creative writing to high school students because we see that that's a lack for them. That creative expression and self-expression and self-advocacy.

Pursuit of such a program of community engagement and development, May believed, was right in line with CST. The problem: such programming would almost certainly require more time and energy than a part-timer could commit without risking financial ruin. And July recalls the real tension that exists for adjuncts who would like to participate in citizenship behaviors by volunteering for department events:

But I was kind of constantly thinking like, "You're such a dumb ass, like, why are you here, spending hours?" And I was working on my dissertation at the time and I was like, "You should not be here. You should be doing your actual work that you get paid for. Or working on your dissertation or like doing something else for you as a person. Because you need to take care of yourself as person."

While the example here relates to July's experience of volunteer work while teaching at another institution, it gives tremendous insight into her sense of citizenship as it pertains to her career teaching English at the postsecondary level, but also spotlights the tension that exists between wanting to volunteer service, whether for the sake of students or to fill out a CV for future faculty applications, but also feeling like the "ask" is too much given the part-time role.

Resistance

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Resistance can seem like the opposite of citizenship, as in a refusal to go above and beyond the job description, but many examples of this kind of behavior are responses to basic job requirements or processes. June minces no words in describing her feeling that the student evaluation of teaching serves as a proxy tool of management in lieu of proper peer observation and even serves management when exercising the power to employ (or not):

I think of myself as notorious for the kind of high standards that I hold students to. I feel like I mentioned this before that like on every course eval, at least one person talks about how I grade too hard. I talked to [students] about it that I do have high standards and they're not—it's because I have seen students meet them. I know that they are possible for them. That it's not some random standard or one time one student got an A or something. Even though sometimes I make them work harder and I ask a lot of them and they don't all like that, but I don't do it—I do it very thoughtfully and I asked a lot very thoughtfully. There is something, like it feels at this point like resistance in some way. Because I'm getting feedback that students want something else and I know that they have an impact on me being hard, me being asked back and I'm like, 'No, I'm not [...] budging, I'm not going to tell you that you're awesome if you're not awesome. I'm just, I won't do it.'

What this example calls to mind is the platform-based gig work of Uber or Lyft drivers, where the companies have removed themselves from the typical employer evaluation process, inserting customer reviews instead:

While earning money by using a platform (instead of having a traditional employer) arguably offers freedom and flexibility to workers, at the same time, many platforms monitor and manage their “independent” workers through the opinions of customers. They deputize customers to serve as “middle managers,” evaluating the services they received, which can lead to disciplining or discharging workers. (Maffie and Elias, 19)

Whereas “[p]rofessional and craft organizations lessen the need for close supervision of work” (Hodson, 76), the adjunct situation embeds close supervision and deputizes students to perform management’s role without content expertise, pedagogical training, or proper anti-bias preparation.

July, too, speaks about frustration with constant calls for service that go out to all staff and faculty of the department:

I kept on kind of reminding myself that like, “Yes, it's great that you're doing this. But these other people are getting paid to like,

be here. You, on the other hand, are getting paid”—at the time, it was like \$5,000 per course—“you are getting paid for your time in a course, and this thing that you're doing now is totally outside of that, that realm of what you need to be doing.”

This frustration quickly led to July’s absence from future volunteer events and efforts: “I mean, there are lots of volunteer faculty opportunities at that institution and I did not participate.”

Sociability

This theme comes through mostly as an absence rather than a positive or negative experience for all three participants, though there are some notable and important relationships that June identifies. Many of the social interactions, though, occur in passing, as with administrative staff in the department, or with other part-timers in shared spaces. This is largely a function of class scheduling and also the need for other employment on days when June is not teaching at Urban Catholic. July, too, notes the limited role of interaction with colleagues:

I had social interactions, ones that I valued, ones that I enjoyed during that semester. But it did make me wonder, seeing [sociability] framed like a core pillar of dignity, it does make me wonder if I would’ve been more tempted to take on more work there if that had been part of my experience all throughout.

The fundamental features of adjunct work, as all three participants observed and which May addresses here, make even basic collegial interactions a challenge:

We all understand that this is not easy work and that we’re going to have challenges and we’re going to help each other try and sort out those challenges, as simple as that. And that, there has to be some way that the community is kind of deliberately formed, I think in this case. I don’t think that’s true community generally, but in this case where we’re teaching and we’re employed and we’re at an institution where adjuncts who are there at different days of the week and different times, we’re working at other places. We’re in and out, that’s not going to happen organically. It was very unlikely to happen organically.

Conclusion

From the first interview to the last, all four elements from Hodson’s analysis were readily apparent to me; my sense that *autonomy*, *citizenship*, *resistance*, and *sociability* would be useful terms through which to interpret the participants’ experiences persisted throughout the entire interview process with all three participants. This was the case despite the

fact that I waited until just before the third interview sessions to identify those themes for the participants. When I did reveal those themes, the participants were all quick to recognize them in their own constructions of past experiences and workday routines. Even though May, June, and July could all speak about obstacles and struggles for dignity in the role as adjunct English faculty, they were all certain that their work in that role was dignified and dignifying—they each found dignity in that work.

The participants spoke of the difficulties of overcoming or embracing *vulnerability* in order to develop trust in the workplace with colleagues and with students, as well as the concomitant challenges posed by adjunct faculty *marginality* in the context of the organization. They lamented the lack of *boundaries* around their limited role, again in terms of both students' and colleagues' time demands. And they aspired to more thoughtful scheduling and other intentional arrangements that might encourage the development of *community* by making their participation more feasible. These challenges, and aspirations, have everything to do with the nature of the adjunct position, which is separated from other faculty positions by UCU policies and by job function. Taken together these emergent themes reinforce another theme present in recent literature: *gigification* (Tolley; Kezar et al.; Maffie and Elias).

Though working for the same *organization* (i.e., institution), the adjunct faculty interviewed for this study were employed under a unique workplace *organization* (i.e., set of policies and practices) as compared to their full-time non-tenure-track and tenure-track colleagues. In making this claim, I stand in opposition to the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals majority's assessment in *Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit v. NLRB* that “the dissent errs by asserting that adjuncts are somehow more like non-faculty employees than they are like faculty” (836), and in agreement with the dissenting opinion that “the terms of employment of adjuncts make clear that they are not necessarily equivalent to the permanent faculty” (842). May, June, and July are professionals, yes, but professionals organized under both bureaucratic rules and supervisory fiat that may previously have been unexpected outside the context of low-skill work (Hodson) but which are now increasingly relevant within higher education's contingent ranks, especially for adjuncts.

May, June, and July are faculty in a nominal sense, but in many other senses exist separately from the “real” faculty in terms of job description, performing unbundled aspects of the traditional full-time role for a cut-rate wage. And in terms of rights to due process, access to levers of governance, or expectations of academic freedom, they have more in common with app-based drivers and delivery workers than their full-time faculty colleagues down the hall. It is instructive that descriptions of the gig economy and conditions for gig- platform workers (United States House Committee on Small Business; Weil) transfer so effortlessly into the discourse about adjunct faculty (Tolley; Kezar et al.). Gig workers often lack due process or grievance rights by dint of their classification,

rightly or wrongly, as contractors or service-providers employed for brief and self-contained projects (Maffie and Elias), just as adjuncts often lack rights afforded to their full-time colleagues.

As Edwards and Tolley (“Do unions help adjuncts?”) note of higher education more generally, the purpose of these institutions to “develop skilled, thoughtful citizens capable of contributing in meaningful ways to society [...] will never be realized with a professoriate composed predominantly of instructors who work without the protection of real academic freedom, and have no role in shared governance, no job security, no benefits, low wages, and no real hope of ever finding a full-time position” (n.p.). Above and beyond that general purpose, Urban Catholic University and other institutions place before themselves an additional burden to meet the letter *and* spirit of their mission statements, which tend to include professions of Catholic identity as well as calls to apply Catholic wisdom to culture and scholarship, model fidelity to the Gospel within the Catholic tradition, serve church and community to alleviate suffering, and explore and transmit Catholic heritage and culture (Estanek et al. 203). Regardless of mission, “the financial decisions of Catholic colleges and universities often end up in tension with their commitments to the dignity of work and workers” (Herr et al. 70). According to the participants in my study—whose frustrations we should understand in the context of their institution but also in light of the fact that religiously-affiliated employers like Urban Catholic have broad, perhaps growing, leeway to ignore the labor and employment rights of their employees (Garden)—their university has failed in its commitment to the dignity of its own adjunct workforce.

Notes

¹ Much literature of Catholic Social Teaching centers the experiences of “man” or “men.” Reproduction of quotations without amendment to gendered, exclusive terms does not indicate approval of this usage.

² Approved by the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board (reference #8106).

³ I refer to the institution and participants using pseudonyms. “Urban Catholic University” is a Catholic Church-affiliated university in the northeast United States of America.

⁴ Whereas Hodson uses the term “co-worker relationships” I use “sociability.”

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