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Cultural skills as drivers of decency in decent work: an investigation of skilled workers in the informal economy

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ABSTRACT

Over 61% of the world's population lives and works in the informal economic sector. However, workers in the informal economy are conspicuous by their relative absence in work psychology research and practice. Policy agendas inspired by economic research often combine skilled and unskilled workers into a single category, lacking the voice of the poor worker and a psychological understanding of work in the informal sector. Using grassroots-level field data from highly skilled artisans in rural India, this study unearths the person-centric inner experiences of informal work and examines the psychological foundations of Decent Work in a heretofore unexamined population of workers in the informal economy. Using inductive and abductive approaches, results reveal the affective, attentional, task and culturally embedded contextual characteristics of work in the informal economy, along with the psychological nuance behind key tenets of economic ideas around decency and choice in Decent Work. These experiences reveal core facets of well-being in the world of work in the informal economy, and an operational definition of psychologically sustainable work that is aligned with local values, aspirations and capabilities. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for incorporating psychology and the study's evidence-based findings into the International Labour Organization's Decent Work agenda.

KEYWORDS

Informal economy, decent work, workers in poverty, sustainable work, worker well-being, pottery and cultural skills

Over half of the world's population lives and works within the informal employment sector (International Labor Organization, 2018a). That is, more than 6 among every 10 workers, and 4 out of 5 enterprises in the world operate in the informal economy (International Labor Organization, 2020). Importantly, the informal economy has not diminished over time and is on the rise in many nations (International Labor Organization, 2020). In 2002, the ILO adopted a resolution to address the needs of workers in the informal economy who are unable to break the cycle of poverty, "with

emphasis on an integrated approach from a decent work perspective". Decent work is work that provides a fair income, dignity, equality, and a safe working environment (Ghai, 2003). Decent work refers to a set of aspirational universal standards proposed by the International Labour Organization (1999) that include: a) work that is productive and provides a fair income, b) workplace security and social protection for families, c) opportunities for personal development and social integration and, d) freedom to express concerns and participate in decisions that affect their lives. Thoroughly expanded in its amalgamation with the recent United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) 2030, the notion of decent work calls for decent working conditions that include locally sustainable and inclusive economic growth, rural growth, green jobs, productive employment, expanding skills and youth employability, and safe working conditions. Originally proposed and advocated in the econometric realm, these ideas have recently gained momentum in work and organizational psychology (for instance, Blustein et al., 2016; Carr et al., 2012; Saxena, 2015).

Simultaneously, a two-pronged state of disadvantage prevails in the real-world conduct of research and practice, as it relates to work in the informal economy. One, agendas to provide guidelines and mandates for decent work are created with a "top-down" approach, often lacking the voice of the poor workers who are mostly found in the informal economy. Two, empirical research exploring these issues within the discipline of work and organizational psychology is almost negligible (Saxena, 2017). Indeed, psychological research investigating the lived experience of workers in the informal economy is largely missing from mainstream scholarly and applied discourse in organizational sciences (for exceptions, see for example Schein, 2003).

This study examines the psychological nuances of decent work for workers in the informal economy in India (i.e. skilled artisans, specifically potters), discusses the findings in light of the theoretical implications, and provides practical implications on the consideration of these issues for global policy frameworks. Specifically, this study has three aims: First, it examines the work-experiences of individuals in the informal economy from an immediate, first-person, lived experience perspective. Second, it examines outcomes associated with worker well-being and the psychological foundation of *decency* and choice. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no study in work and organizational psychology (WOP) has focused squarely on the first-person felt experience of working and associated well-being and Decent Work outcomes for workers in the informal economy. In doing the above, the study answers recent calls in our field for a person-centric work psychology (Weiss & Rupp, 2012) and expands the repertoire of our field to include workers that are not a part of mainstream organizational research (Bergman & Jean, 2016). Finally, based on the empirical findings and in line with the science-practice model of our field, this paper presents evidence-driven policy implications for enhancing well-being and promoting decent work in line with the agenda for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (International Labor Organization, 2019).

A brief overview of the informal economy

Work, employment, and economic activity that is partially or fully outside government taxation, regulation, and observation but governed by customs or personal ties is known as the informal or undeclared economy (Godfrey, 2011;). The informal sector includes a variety of trades and activities that fall within two broad categories: a) *skilled workers* such as carpenters, potters, traditional weavers of clothes, carpets, and baskets, craftsmen and artisans (handicraft, wood-work, glass, and metal manipulators), ironsmiths, sculptors and so on, and b) *unskilled workers* such as those involved in manual labour in construction, agriculture, street vending, and so on (Godfrey, 2011; Saxena, 2017). Work in the informal economy is the most ubiquitous form of work – a pervasive and persistent feature all over the world. Due to the diversity of jobs that constitute this economy, it often functions in close interaction with the formal economic system. For instance, it is not unusual to find large businesses utilizing informal work as part of the organization's supply chain (Williams, 2014). Work in the informal economy is known to be associated with a variety of negative features: poor and unsafe working conditions, occupational safety and health hazards, low levels of choice for workers, low or irregular income, absence of rights, social and medical benefits, compulsory overtime, extra shifts, inequitable pay, ill-health, high rates of poverty, and the absence of living wages (International Labor Organization, 2014, 2018a).

While research traditions in sociology, anthropology, and development studies are conscious of the myriad variety of trades and occupations that operate in in the informal economy (for instance, Boisot & Child, 1996; Castells & Portes, 1989; deSoto, 2000; Tokman, 1982), application-oriented policy programmes and task-force reports often fail to separate different forms of workers in the informal sector (Andrews et al., 2011; International Labor Organization, 2018b; NSSO, 2014; Sanghi et al., 2015). Specifically, while policy frameworks distinguish between agricultural and non-agricultural work in the informal sector, the many types of skilled and unskilled work are typically lumped together into one broad category by intervention task-forces that aim at skill-development and employment generation (see for instance, International Labor Organization, 2018a, 2018b). In addition, practical frameworks of economic growth and prosperity that are modelled on industrial and developed economies can fail to be cognizant of the psychological nuances and contextual differences that exist in the core nature of work across the many types of work in the informal economy in different parts of the world. Furthermore, it has been noted that there is less research examining the rural informal economy which is different in the way that it operates and the work that it supports, from the urban informal economy (Sarmistha, 2015).

The psychology of decent work

Decent Work mandates are created in large part to provide decent living and working conditions to the aforesaid populations of individuals, i.e. workers in the informal economy. This is due to the precarious, unstable, and often vulnerable conditions surrounding employment in the informal economy. Access to work that is

decent is central to the UNSDGs 2030 (International Labor Organization, 2018c). This agenda encompasses world-wide research and policy efforts that are aimed at making work “decent” for millions of workers around the world, particularly those who bear the greatest burden of poverty and adverse circumstances.

The notion of decent work was borne out of the realization that most of our adult life is spent working and that work is a fundamental aspect of quality of life, social integration, and self-esteem (Anker et al., 2003). Efforts over the last two decades support these foundational ideas. Decent work is the core component of the “Decent Work Agenda” established by the ILO to, “sum up the aspirations of people in their working life” (International Labor Organization, 2020b). Work, within the Decent Work agenda is understood to be the core component essential to empowering individuals, societies, and ensuring sustainable economic and human development.

Recently, psychologists have argued that a mere cost-benefit analysis of economic subsistence may be insufficient to appropriately capture the nuance of decent work. Critiques of decent work have noted the overwhelming presence of market forces and the relative neglect of the psychological understanding of decent work experiences (Blustein et al., 2016). Carr et al. (2012) have noted that the quality of life and work are integral to a full, holistic understanding of the phenomenon of decent work. In this direction, psychologists from the fields of counselling and vocational behaviour have emphasized that decent work lacks the notion of meaning and purpose at work (Dejours, 2006; Di Fabio, 2014). Similarly, Deranty and MacMillan (2012) have presented compelling arguments for including meaningful work and for driving the concept of decent work through the perspectives and voices of working people themselves.

The psychology of working theory (PWT; Blustein, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016) was recently proposed as a framework to advance decent work agendas through the inclusion of psychology. The amalgamation of PWT with Decent Work proposes that the three basic human needs of survival and power, social connection, and self-determination can be fulfilled by decent work. The theory posits that well-being can be achieved through varying combinations of these needs, that multiple needs can be fulfilled by the same aspect of work, and that the fulfilment of one need can enhance the fulfilment of other needs. Blustein (2013) and Blustein et al. (2016) proposes that each of these needs can be met by different experiences that may vary from individual to individual. For instance, the need for survival may be met by access to work, living wage, and/or a sense of control and independence at work, among others. The need for social connection may be fulfilled through a sense of connection to society and to the world at large. Self-determination needs can be accomplished by the development of meaning, opportunities for autonomy, relatedness, competence, and value congruence with work. The authors suggest that by meeting the three needs of PWT, decent work can achieve its broader universal goal of human health, dignity, and happiness through work. Importantly, proponents of the theory make a key recommendation: qualitative,

discovery-oriented, narrative research that unpack lived work-experiences, particularly in precarious contexts are the way forward for expanding decent work to include psychological frameworks.

Decency in decent work

Decency in decent work can be best understood as the sum total of the core tenets of Decent Work. Based on the prevailing economic paradigms, work that is free from discrimination and exploitation would cater to the notion of decency (without including more explicitly economic indicators such as decent pay; Anker et al., 2003). This paper argues that first-person insights into notions of decency would expand current frameworks of decent work to deliberately include psychology. In this study, based on current economic definitions (Anker et al., 2003) and PWT (Blustein, 2013), decency is defined as an aggregate of work-experiences that promote: a) individual dignity; b) access, control and independence at work; c) value congruence, d) a sense of purpose and meaningfulness, and e) connection to society and nature. It includes a lack of exploitation and discrimination. Thus, work that takes away the possibility of growth, aspirations and meaning from the worker, and strips the worker of their sense of dignity, would be considered indecent. Contextualizing of “decency” in the local culture is of paramount importance. Cultures vary in what is considered “decent” and acceptable. Societies differ in ideas revolving around justice, fairness, and similar concepts that are core to Decent Work as a function of cultural and sub-cultural factors and the socio-economic context. Therefore, this study contends that a holistic understanding of decency in Decent Work can emerge upon considering cultural norms and embedding a study within the cultural foundations of a given society.

The role of choice in decent work

Because work that suffers from Decent Work deficits in the informal economy most often includes marginalized communities, those who are exploited and discriminated against, and forced to work in indecent work conditions, a common notion is that those who continue to work in the informal economy do so for lack of choice (Anker et al., 2003; Fields, 1975; Hart, 2006;). This coincides with narratives that support ideas of the informal economy as being illegal (Meagher, 1990), illicit (Venkatesh, 2006), and exploitative (Sassen-Koob, 1989). However, as has been widely acknowledged in management and social sciences (for instance, Godfrey, 2011), the sheer diversity of informal economies begs the question of whether many who continue to stay in the informal economy do so of their own willful volition. In other words, what is the role of choice for those who continue to live and work in the informal economy?

This paper is not the first to argue that the formal economic system is a by-product of the industrial labour movement and may fail to include and do justice to the organically evolved local economic structures that have been in existence for thousands of years prior, all around the world (Geertz, 1963; Godfrey, 2011; Lewis, 1954/1958). Thus, this

study aims to further investigate the notion of choice – do those in the present study continue to live and work in the informal economy out of their personal choice?

Limited representation of all forms of work and all types of workers

Organizational sciences have a preponderance towards work that is largely contained within organizational structures and nested within formats of working that lie within specific economic, socio-political, and cultural boundaries. Recent calls in the literature have spoken to the urgent need to expand beyond the pervasive bias in our science towards Professionals who hold formal Office jobs enjoying relative Safety from discrimination while living in High-income countries (POSH bias, Gloss et al., 2017), which has overrepresented the typical managerial, salaried executive employee and underrepresented the true state of the labour market – including wage earner, first-line and contract workers (Bergman & Jean, 2016), and those who live and work in poverty (Saxena, 2017).

This overt neglect of about two-thirds of the world's work-force has serious ramifications for our field. It implies that our science may be inherently biased, have a myopic understanding of the full-range of experiences that define work psychology, leading to possible misunderstanding of key phenomena, theories, and the boundary conditions to our findings. Importantly, by studying only one form of work, we miss important socio-economic and environmental factors that affect the phenomenology of work. Drawing on cultural psychology, it has been noted that this oversampling of the one-third, leads to the worker who represents the two-third (the worker in the informal economy), being treated as different, alien, and negative (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Weis, 1995). The work-experience of POSH workers is treated as “normal”, with the onus of justification for using non-POSH samples on individual studies. This undermines our science, limits the generalizability of our findings, and reduces our ability to contribute to broader societal well-being.

To summarize, there is limited research in work psychology that directly addresses the work-experience of those in the informal economy. Therefore, there is little to no understanding of the psychological reality - the phenomenology of such work-experiences, particularly those of skilled workers in the informal economy. Research on the informal economy from other disciplines (such as developmental economics, labour, policy studies) also include fewer studies on the many types of workers, particularly skilled workers, in the informal sector (Sarmistha, 2015). The same oversight is evident in policy platforms – the Decent Work mandate being a principle vehicle – which tend to club together different skill levels and occupational types in the informal economy within one broad format of working (International Labor Organization, 2018b).

The present investigation

Cultural context

This study takes a cultural relativism perspective and focuses on highly skilled workers in the informal economic sector in India. Despite the global presence of workers in the informal sectors, emerging economies share a greater burden of the informal economy. Therefore, the Indian context was considered an appropriate site for the current investigation.

Specifically, nested within a relatively under-researched participant pool, this study considers work in a highly skilled community of potters in India and examines the presence of “Decent Work” per the International Labor Organization’s (2019) guidelines. India was chosen as the site of choice for multiple reasons. First, India (as well as South Asia) is a key part of the world that includes highly skilled work in the informal economy that is found on a large scale in rural areas (Kundu, 2017). Specifically, highly skilled work in the form of traditional occupations is still practiced by millions of people as a form of work and the main source of livelihood, practiced within communities and families for multiple generations for a large percentage of the population in parts of India. This phenomenon however, isn’t unique to South Asia. Native American tribes in the United States of America, hat makers in Peru, the silk industry in China, and Egyptian rug makers are all examples of highly skilled informal workers that are present worldwide (Saxena, 2017). Second, pottery is a large industry (after agriculture) in India, employing millions as part of a long-standing culture, an ideal location for exploring work-experiences outside POSH (Gloss et al., 2017) economic and psychological research contexts; making it relevant per ILO’s mandate for promotion of decent work.

By embedding the study within the local culture (Bergman & Jean, 2016), distinguishing between skilled and unskilled forms of work, capturing the voice of the informal worker to assess the nature of inner work-experiences (Weiss & Rupp, 2012), and examining decent work deficits and the role of choice from a psychological standpoint, this study makes multiple cross-disciplinary contributions that can inform key theoretical and important policy based practical outcomes.

Rationale and research questions

Inclusive growth and development are a core focus of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (International Labor Organization, 2018c). Government and international organizations along with academic disciplines such as economics and labour statistics have made consistent efforts directed towards social development and improving working conditions for the global working poor. As discussed in the aforesaid sections, given the centrality of work within these initiatives, the lack of work psychology research in driving these programmes globally is alarming. Indeed, work and organizational psychology can play a prominent part in promoting decent work and contextually aligned living wages for workers around the world.

To summarize the literature review and to restate the core ideas, this study is based on the following themes: One, the dominant idea in academic disciplines such as developmental economics and organizations such as the ILO and UN, is that there is an

urgent need to transition workers from the informal to the formal economy (Anker et al., 2003; International Labor Organization, 2018a, 2018b). While well intentioned, particularly due to the often-exploitative conditions in the informal economy, this guiding narrative is premised on the unchallenged and widely accepted postulation that lack of opportunities in the formal economy lead to a *lack of choice* and the absence of other means of livelihood *force workers to earn a living in the informal economy* (International Labor Organization, 2018b). Therefore, most informal to formal transition policy programmes assume that informal workers are low or unskilled, existing in the informal economy due to an inability to transition into the more formal jobs that rely on an industrialized, primarily western idea of economic growth. The implementation of such programmes takes the form of providing apprenticeship, and low to medium skills training (examples: computer repair, IT skills, mechanic and garage work; Agrawal, 2016; Automotive Skills Development Council, 2021, Oketch, 2007), in order to transition individuals to work in formal sectors.

Two, it is contended that the above premises are biased and presumptive at best. The policy that guides these narratives is based on the coalescing of the countless forms of work in the informal economy into one broad category (for e.g. carpenters, artisans, street vendors, toilet cleaners all form one broad category as *non-agricultural* work in the informal economy, International Labor Organization, 2014, 2018b; Williams, 2014). It is argued that there cannot be one guiding principle for two-thirds of the world's work-force in the informal economy, discounting the individual psychological experiences of the myriad forms of work in this category, nested within their unique cultural, socio-political, and environmental facets. In addition, the author(s) is not aware of any WOP study that undertakes a systematic evaluation of the psychological notions of choice and the phenomenology of work-experiences for individuals in the informal economy. Without an appropriate understanding of the different types of work in the informal economy, we run the risk of making many traditional occupations obsolete, forcing individuals to take on formal, industrial "jobs", and in the process neglecting the diversity of cultures and occupations that may seem "different" to the dominant POSH employee (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Gloss et al., 2017).

Three, based on the above, this study undertakes a systematic psychological investigation of workers in the informal economy to collect ground-level grassroots data on the work-experiences of those at the base-of-the-pyramid in the informal economic sector. Four, this study goes a step further by focusing specifically on *highly skilled* informal workers (as opposed to unskilled or low skilled informal workers where the bulk of research attention has been focused thus far, Godfrey, 2011). In doing so, it aims to provide a more granular and nuanced understanding of skilled work in the informal economy.

Recently, there have been calls in our field to explore inner experiences and personal narratives that underlie various employee experiences (Weiss & Ilgen, 2002; Weiss & Rupp, 2012). Responding to recent calls by scholars in work psychology to

have a person-centric examination of work experiences (Weiss & Rupp, 2012) and to focus on psychological process mechanisms behind different experiences (Spector, 2017), this study took an inductive and abductive approach to the guiding research question and analysis of the findings. In the absence of established theories for forms of work that have remained largely unexamined (such as a psychological understanding of work in the informal economy), scholars have strongly advocated for the use of qualitative methodology as a necessary first step to understand the perspective of the worker and context of the novel work phenomenon (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Blustein et al., 2016). Adopting a within-person stance, we take a deep-dive into understanding worker experiences from a first-person, lived reality perspective. Based on the above, this study aims to uncover the psychological experience of skilled work from the experiential perspective of the worker in the informal economy. Thus, the present investigation asks the following broad research questions:

Research Question 1. *What is the subjective, lived, first-person work experience of skilled artisans in the informal economy?*

Research Question 2. *What are the task and contextual characteristics of skilled artisan work in the informal economy?*

The questions above are designed to gauge the work context including the economic and environmental conditions in addition to psychological nature of skilled work in the informal economy. Further, the study seeks to examine the true nature and driving factors of decency of work in the informal economy. To explicitly address the notion of “choice” in continuing to work in a given occupation, the following questions were included.

Research Question 3. *Is work in the informal economy indecent?*

Research Question 4. *What is the role of choice in ongoing employment for skilled artisans in the informal economic sector?*

Method

Approach

In a sharp departure from the dominant research paradigm and following Spector (2017), inductive and abductive approaches to data-collection, identification of themes and their interpretation, and presentation of findings were utilized in this study. The inductive approach was considered appropriate for this study. The inductive research methodology is not limited by current theory or constrained by the existing state of the literature. Instead, the main objective is to, a) explore the phenomenon of interest *without* a strong tie to existing theory and, b) allow the *discovery* of new concepts and emergent features of lived work-experiences. In line with this approach, the present study is only partly based on current theory/empirical findings and instead emphasizes the discovery of new phenomena. Results are then explained and discussed in line with

Spector's (2017) recommendations. Using a systematic series of inductive steps, this study aims to build knowledge using explanations for the findings of the investigation.

Given that the central focus of this study was an exploration of the phenomenon at hand, a rigorous qualitative approach was adopted. For each emergent theme and sub-theme, findings are provided from an inductive standpoint. This is followed by an exploration of the said theme from an abductive standpoint. The same approach is utilized for the examination of the workers' inner experiences and notions of decency to extrapolate beyond the thematic aggregations and provide a greater contextual foundation to the nature of work that was observed in this study. This aspect is considered a critical focus of the investigation as it yields concepts that are unique to features of working within the boundary conditions of the informal economy.

Location and context

Data were collected from participants across multiple villages in India. Participants were engaged in the occupation of pottery. Each participant belonged to a community that was dedicated to highly sophisticated forms of pottery as a means of livelihood. Families within the communities were also dedicated to the occupation of pottery such that each participant's family lived and worked around pottery as an occupation. The site was fully outside typical "organizational" settings (Gloss et al., 2017) and was ripe for presenting unique psychological insights into the fundamental human experience of working (Weiss & Rupp, 2012).

Participants

Participants were 30 potters ranging in age from 25 to 60 years. All participants subscribed to pottery as an occupation through their family's involvement in this trade for several generations. Participants were men (100%), worked full-time, and had been engaged in pottery for at least 5 years at the time of data-collection. The key criteria for eligibility to participate in the study were: full-time work as a potter, work in the informal economy (as opposed to, for instance, in the formal economic set-up via cottage industry mechanisms or for a production house), pottery as the principal occupation (as opposed to being a part-time or supplemental source of livelihood). Those engaged in generational crafts are largely found in rural/semi-urban areas, with similar socio-economic conditions, and learn the craft through family-based apprenticeship outside of formal education systems. By and large, the current sample was representative of potters and similar artisans in India.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth sampling through local, verbal advertisements in the local language announced within the communities of informal workers. A semi-structured interview format was used in order to allow for exploration of individual narratives. Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 1.5 to 2 hours for each participant. Questions gauged

the life-cycle of pottery, nature of individual task units, levels of autonomy, task-interest, task-importance, economic, financial, social, and ergonomic hurdles, subjective first-person experience of work, and inner felt experiences of engaging in pottery including flow-states and the ebb-and-flow of emotion episodes. Qualitative narratives exploring personal well-being and happiness were also assessed. Informed consent was obtained prior to the data-collection.

Per specifications of inductive research norms, each interview began with *guiding interests* that developed into additional concepts and questions during interaction with each participant (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, each interview began with a broad set of open-ended research questions but organically shaped and developed based on themes that were relevant to the potter's experience of work within the informal economy (Berg, 1998, 2004). In order to ensure that the researcher's preconceptions did not bias the interviews, open-ended questions elicited responses that allowed probes to be created in real-time and explore potentially unaccounted phenomenology of the experience (Schonfeld & Mazzola, 2015). The guiding interest led to broad queries about the participant's experience of work, the psychological characteristics of work in the informal economy, the nature of their inner experience, an in-depth analysis of work characteristics, affective, and cognitive concomitants of working, and how these experiences shaped notions of decency of the observed work.

Given the nature of the research site, vastly different work and cultural context, participants were instructed to provide as much detail as possible about their experiences and the thought process behind their behaviours. In order to get to the phenomenological reality and in keeping with the spirit of qualitative inquiry, this approach helped foster candid conversations about the issue at hand. Questions was adapted to the local cultural context in accordance with local norms and customs (Schein, 2012). All interviews were conducted in the local language and in keeping with cultural sensitivity necessary for investigations of this nature.

Data analysis

Three broad steps were followed to analyse the data: a) transcription, b) thematic analysis, and c) translation. These are described in detail as follows: Each audio recording was verbatim transcribed independently by three trained personnel. The verbatim transcriptions were then compared and all discrepancies in transcription were discussed and resolved to obtain a final set of interviews that was analysed to generate and explore themes.

A phenomenological approach was taken to data-analysis. Inductive thematic analysis was adopted in order to understand how skilled workers in the informal economic system make sense of their experiences of work-experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibson, 2004; Gill, 2014; Rice & Ezzy, 1999; Van Manen, 1990). In thematic analysis, the data is searched for themes that can emerge from interviews that are key to the description of the phenomenon at hand. This involved familiarizing

oneself with the data as the first step. Next, the data was searched for themes that stood out and initial codes were generated (inductively). Themes were reviewed through an iterative process by continuously comparing existing codes to the data until no new themes were found in the data. This allowed new and emergent themes to be recognized. The themes that were considered relevant to the phenomenon were labelled and defined. The coding process also involved deriving sub-codes in a hierarchical manner to establish relationships within the bigger nodes, yielding sub-themes that were nested within the broader thematic categories (Charmaz, 2006; Gibson, 2004; Kreiner et al., 2006). New themes and subthemes were identified until theoretical saturation was reached. All steps were followed in accordance with qualitative data analysis techniques and associated best practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibson & Hanes, 2003; Van Manen, 1990).

Four criteria were applied in order to establish the validity or trustworthiness of the data and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, *credibility* was checked by ensuring that the lived experience of the workers in the informal economy was adequately and authentically represented in the data. Steps taken to ensure truthfulness and completeness of representation of the phenomenon under investigation included using open-ended semi structured interviews that allowed space for deep exploration of the felt experience of working as a potter in the informal economy, recording of participant narratives, and verbatim transcription within the local language (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Next, *transferability* refers to applicability of the findings to broader social-psychological experiences. This was ensured by providing rich descriptions of workers' inner experiences, relating the aforesaid to the local context of the phenomenon under investigation including the occupational nature, characteristics of the work, and the socio-psychological context of pottery as a means of livelihood. Further, per the recommendations of transferability, the current set of findings have been discussed in the broadest possible sense – for the occupation of pottery and for skilled informal workers, and have been related to policy frameworks wherever possible, based on evidence-driven findings of this investigation to ensure a complete bottom-up transferability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Third, *dependability* or the reliability of data coding can be achieved by demonstrating consistency of coded categories across coders. Two trained personnel initially provided codes independently. All discrepancies were resolved following discussion of narratives. Finally, the principle investigator went through the same process. Complete agreement was obtained at each stage and based on information by each coder (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009).

Lastly, in order to achieve *confirmability*, this paper attempts to be as transparent as possible about the method and analysis that were undertaken in order to provide information for replicability by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a combined final step and in taking the recommendations a step further, post-hoc analysis was undertaken using focus-group discussions based on the methodology identified above to provide

further evidence of the trustworthiness of the findings of the investigation. Each participant had anywhere from 6 to 10 family members. Family members were part of follow-up focus groups and interviews.

Results

Five overarching themes and multiple sub-themes emerged in the investigation. These describe the experience of work (Weiss & Rupp, 2012) including salient affective (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and attentional states, work-characteristics, and contextual features including environmental factors and occupational safety hazards for skilled work in the informal economy. Results explain how the emergent themes impact participants' physical and psychological well-being (OECD, 2017). The discussion that follows includes policy implications of the results. The following themes emerged in this investigation.

Theme 1: Work-task and contextual characteristics

Characteristics of the task and work context emerged as an important theme. Given little is known about this form of work, this was deemed to be a central theme of the present investigation. This theme broke down further into the following sub-themes:

(1) Highly skilled intergenerational work

The form of work under investigation in this study emerged as being reliant on the highest levels of skills on part of the worker (Su et al., 2015). 100% of the sample mentioned and demonstrated advanced skills that were fundamental to the craftsmanship involved in pottery. Skills were found to be related to both procedural and declarative aspects of knowledge and had involved intentional deliberate practice to achieve expert performance (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson, 2018). Participants revealed that the skills were learned within the family through multiple modes of learning (for instance, observing, practice, behaviour modelling, and so on) and had been passed on through multiple generations in their family. The following quotations illustrate these concepts further:

“This is not something I could do overnight. It has taken many years of observing, interaction, and continuous practice ... I got better over time ... many years starting when I was a child I would watch my grandfather ... This (showing one of the finished products) is the outcome of years and years of hard work, dedication, and practice.”

“I specialize in making a specific type of oil lamp ... ”

“My speciality is in making (elongated) earthen pots ... the nearby village has those who specialize in the rounded kinds.”

For each participant in the study, in addition to the core task of product creation, skills pertaining to the single-handed management of the product life-cycle also emerged as a

central aspect of this informal work. In addition, the work involved manual components reliant on advanced levels of physical labour, and cognitive components reliant on cognitive effort and maintenance of long periods of attentional focus.

“This is a physically strenuous job ... it’s physically laborious ... ”

“I cannot break my attention, if my concentration were to break even for a second, I will lose my pot ... ”

“I imagine what I need to create. Creativity comes to me from as I sit on my wheel, it’s become natural over time ... I bring to my hands, what I see in my heart (mind) ... ”

Some scholars have noted that lack of research in our field on skills and skill development in the developing country context (Gloss, McCallum, & Foster, 2016). An understanding of skills is critical as it can help distinguish between the different forms of work undertaken to make a living wage in informal economies. This can lead to a deeper dive into cultural skills and forms of work that have currently not entered the space of work and organizational psychology.

(2) *Micro entrepreneurial units*

Each potter operated as a micro-entrepreneur with a highly specialized skill-set, with the supporting role of the entire family unit. Thus, 100% of the sample operated as an independent micro-entrepreneur.

“I do everything myself – it begins with getting the clay from near the lake ... (to) ... setting up my stall at the bazar for the final sale.”

“My wife sometimes helps with drying the pot in the sunlight and baking.”

The work revolved around the entirety of the manufacturing and sale life cycle including physical procurement of raw materials (clay), preparation of potter’s clay/mud, work on the pottery wheel that involved physical manipulation of heavy stone wheels, forward bending for several hours at a time to prepare highly nuanced clay items, guarding against inclement weather (the size of the wheel mandated placement in open spaces), drying, decoration, and physically bringing the finished product to local bazaars for sales. The outcomes or products that were created serve purposes beyond aesthetic or decorative goals. They include dishes, vases, wares, utensils, and a variety of objects needed for daily living.

(3) *Occupational safety and health hazards*

100% of the participants indicated the presence of some form of occupational safety hazards associated with their work. The two dominant forms of safety hazards that emerged included: a) *ergonomic hazards*: lower and upper back aches due to bending over the wheel for prolonged periods of time (ranging between 4 to 10 hours in a day), muscular aches due to physical manipulation of the potter’s stone wheel

weighing many tons (“My back hurts often due to rotating the heavy stone wheel”), and physically carrying the raw material to the site of work (ranging between 1 to 7 kilometres); b) *inclement weather*: Participants were found to be working in extreme weather including hot and humid conditions in the summer months (average temperature around 50 degrees Celsius) due to placement of the potter’s wheel in open air (“It’s very hot and humid due to the monsoons; I tire easily ... ”)

(4) *Economic tenuousness and poverty*

All participants (100%) worked in challenging circumstances under conditions of economic deprivation. Economic tenuousness was a core element of their experiences. Participants had both low total money available and irregular flow of money (Bergman & Jean, 2016). They had limited savings and were mainly reliant on daily sales from their wares in local bazaars (“I’m worried if I will make a sale today and get money for my wares ... ”). However, participants revealed that the flow of money and sales are sufficient during Indian festivals (“I have a lot of work during festival season, that’s the time I earn well; I keep busy and earn decently during Diwali ... marriage season ... Naag Panchmi ...”). Diwali and Naag Panchmi are Indian festivals. This confirmed the precarious nature of earnings and indicated a high degree of financial stress on part of the participants during off-festival times.

(5) *Eco-friendly work and production*

Participants revealed that all aspects of this work, including individual work-tasks along the operational chain, the raw materials utilized (for instance, “I only use sacred clay from the lake nearby ... ”), tools and machinery for manufacturing, to the consumable end products were environmentally sustainable by virtue of being non-polluting, hygienic, and completely biodegradable. Participants revealed that the “products” that emerge out of the occupation of pottery as practiced from a traditional stand-point leave no negative environmental footprint (for instance, “ ... (this pot) is made of local soil, it becomes one with the soil after it has been used”) unlike disposable plastic-ware. Participants revealed that the raw material was the soil and the fully bio-gradable end-products terminate in soil. It was discovered that no industrial equipment, recycling machinery, and factories were required anywhere along the supply chain.

Research in indigenous studies have established that indigenous communities tend to be strong proponents of sustainable economies and living in tandem with nature (McGregor, 2004). Aligned with this broader understanding of human occupations from an ecological standpoint, the current finding sheds light on the connection with nature and sustainability of human work and occupations. Having evolved over millennia of cultural evolution, it appears that pottery in the present scenario became aligned with local ecology and nature.

Theme 2: Identity

Participants had strong, thriving personal narratives that were embedded within their occupational identity. Potters and their families had psychological identities that were deeply intertwined with their work and occupational identity. In 100% of the sample, participant's sense of self and agency derived deep levels of meaning and empowerment from their work-based identity as a potter.

"I thoroughly enjoy this. This is who I am and this is what I do. I want to make the best clay item that I can. Everyday I strive to do better than yesterday. I think about new ideas and more innovative products."

"It's in my blood. My family has been doing this for generations. It is my job, my work, my identity, and I enjoy it from my heart."

A particularly poignant quote that represents the ethos and the philosophy behind the work is as follows:

"We come from the land (earth element/soil/mother nature), our bodies are made of the same (earth element); in this body derived from the earth element, divinity will ignite life, but we are the creators of that body."

This alignment was deeply steeped in local cultural values and provided meaning in their role in society as a potter. Traditionally, pottery items play a critical role in the social and cultural set-up of Indian and South Asian society; pottery-wares are fundamental for critical life-events including birth, marriage, death, and various ceremonial events (Saraswati B. 2015). This is an interesting finding given the absence of organizational employment and structural labels surrounding this work; a strong and thriving sense of occupational commitment was dominant across all participants. This theme speaks to the calls by scholars to expand the concept of living wages to include a psychological capabilities perspective (Carr et al., 2015).

Theme 3: Intrinsic motivation and choice

There are significant difficulties involving physical, economic, and psychological strain that are experienced by potters in their day-to-day lives. Despite these extremely challenging circumstances, there was no dearth of motivation to work or desire to continue working in pottery. An important theme in this investigation – psychologically, potters saw the onus of the continuity of tradition and occupation entirely upon their shoulder.

"I do this for the benefit of society. I do this to ensure the continuity of tradition. How will society manage life's milestones if I stop doing what I am doing?"

"I do this to continue tradition and I want to keep doing this ... "

"If I stop, how will the next generation learn our skilled craft and our beautiful heritage ... "

"Why would I do anything else? I do this for society. Then who will do this?"

This was exemplified by an expressed desire to continue working in the face of adversity. An intrinsic desire to continue working in pottery within the informal framework was expressed by all participants (100%). This finding was counter to assertions by traditional economic perspectives that claim work in the informal economy as governed by lack of choice and opportunities in the formal economy.

Theme 4: Pride as a self-descriptive emotion

100% of the sample mentioned experiencing deep levels of pride in the work they did along with deep levels of satisfaction. Potters experienced their occupational role as a vital part of societal well-being. This is steeped in multifaceted local customs where pottery and its' products enjoy an especially elevated status in traditional customs and festivals (often involving life's key milestones: death, birth, and marriage unions). Despite living in financial challenges, potters displayed a sense of responsibility in continuing to manufacture their items due to the fundamental need for social processes to carry on and the ritual vacuum that would be created in the absence of clay pottery items to fulfil social customs.

“Pottery is important. I feel pride in what I do. I fulfil an important role in society. Important human milestones are dependent on my pottery wares. How will these milestones occur if there is no pottery ware?”

Related to the previous theme, this theme became particularly prominent when probed as to why they continued this occupation despite low financial remuneration. Thus, there was a sense of sacrifice for the overall good of the society.

Theme 5: Inner felt experiences

Each potter had his own expertise in pottery-craft and it was found that when working on the wheel, potters experienced a deep sense of *flow* – a state of psychological oneness with the task at hand, where the experience of the passage of time ceases and the individual becomes one with the work that they are attentionally engaged in (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Further, participants reported lack of mind-wandering and complete attentional dedication to the potter's wheel.

“I become one with the item on the wheel. There is no other way on this wheel. A split second distraction will explode the pot.”

Upon emerging from each work episode, potters expressed positive emotions and feelings of fulfilment. Interestingly, this was concomitant with high levels of expressed cognitive and physical fatigue. These results suggest that this may be a format of work that is not yet fully understood and warrants serious future investigations to replicate the findings of the current study.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of this investigation was the first-person examination of the psychological experience of work in the informal economy. The aims of the present study were to: a) reveal the inner work experiences of skilled informal workers, b) understand the work context and task-characteristics, c) examine notions of choice on part of the worker, and d) explore the notion of decency in skilled work in the informal economy. Using rigorous inductive and abductive techniques, the study collected data directly from skilled workers in the informal economy, while embedding the investigation within local cultural contexts. Results validate certain forms of Decent Work deficits in this form of work (financial precariousness and occupational safety hazards), and contradict other aspects of assumed deficits through the revelation of novel, heretofore, under studied phenomenon (positive affect, flow states, well-being, social and environmental integration, skills and entrepreneurship). The latter are discussed in greater detail in this section.

Contrary to previous assertions (International Labor Organization, 2018b), highly skilled pottery work in the informal economy was the occupation of choice for all participants, who were found to experience strong pride, derive deep meaning, and a thriving sense of identity based on their role in society as a potter. Potter's work tasks benefitted from highly specialized skills that had a generational component to them, and were facilitated by positive affective states, flow, and deep levels of engagement and attentional focus. The occupational identity of the potter was an important aspect of their integration with society. This cultural continuity of work and skills triggered deeply meaningful world views, personal narratives based on harmony with nature and society, and resiliency schemas that facilitated overall well-being and states of thriving that appeared to buffer against the more conspicuous presence of certain decent work deficits. This nuanced psychological understanding of work in the informal economy is counter to many previous, mainly economic notions of the aforesaid (International Labor Organization, 2018b, 2020a).

A key advantage of qualitative studies is the emergence of new phenomenon that are derived from inductive observations of data and participants and often abductively synthesize the findings into a first step for new theory-building (Spector, 2017). Indeed, a crucial aspect of qualitative research is the *discovery* of new concepts that add to the knowledge base of the field, guide future research, and may initiate novel conceptual frameworks or the first steps for new theories (Spector, 2017). Recently, organizational scholars have lamented the lack of "discovery" in favour of deductive exclusivity – the dominant hypothesis and theory testing approaches (Cucina & McDaniel, 2016; Locke, 2011). In light of this, increasingly, work and organizational scholars have made loud calls for the value of research that is openly exploratory (inductive), deliberately moves away from a-priori theory testing (deductive), and is openly abductive (referring to the process of explaining qualitative results) (Fanelli & Scalas, 2010; Spector et al., 2014), thereby revealing phenomenon that have been discovered in the field without the limitation of a-priori theory, and synthesize and explain field observations. Such discovery-oriented research that captures how people

experience their work has also been called by scholars who realize the limitations of the decent work paradigm (Blustein et al., 2016; Burchell et al., 2013).

The present investigation responds to the above-mentioned calls and takes an explicitly inductive stance (without a-priori hypothesis and theory) using transparent post-hoc and abductive explanatory mechanisms (Spector, 2017). Aligned with this approach, this study discovered new phenomena and developed theoretical explanations for these phenomena. Specifically, as discussed in the Results, the field examination discovered a number of novel positive outcomes that were associated with the occupation of generational pottery that demonstrated an interwoven and interconnected existence of work, human values, well-being, and harmony with nature and society that was founded on the sustained transfer of skills through an unbroken chain of intergenerational cultural continuity. Despite living outside of formal work and education systems, participants cared deeply about nature and the environmental impact of their work. Their identity was profoundly intertwined with the occupation that their family and community had pursued for generations. The unbroken chain of cultural continuity of the skills that had been passed on for millenia was associated with participants' innate sense of higher purpose and social responsibility. Indeed, they considered their finished products (the pottery items) the foundation and cornerstone of important societal milestones. Their intrinsic desire to continue working in this field (despite deficits such as low income) were an act of service to society and provided a personal impetus that was psychologically healthy and intensely motivating and buffered against many strains that come with work itself.

Given the aforesaid, such traditional, informal skilled work is hereafter referred to, as sustainable work. Sustainable work here refers to work that is psychologically sustainable, that *gives* (more than it takes) to the community, environment, and nature. Psychologically sustainable work is defined as that which provides inherent meaningfulness, a sense of purpose, innate dignity, identity alignment with local cultural values, and instils contentment and hope. Psychologically sustainable work is free from the inherently depleting aspects of modern-day work that lead to negative occupational health outcomes such as burnout, mental exhaustion, and cognitive weariness. It is argued that psychological sustainability of work ought to be a core component of decent work and living wages. The form of work discovered in this investigation resonated with a form of psychological engagement with working that modern work often seems to be bereft of.

An important purpose of this research was to evaluate whether work in the informal economy is indecent and relatedly, if people continue to be employed in this sector due to absence of other opportunities or lack of choice. For purposes of this paper, and from a psychological lens indecent work was defined as work that stripped individual dignity, was exploitative, discriminatory, and took away the possibility of growth and aspirations from the worker. Results revealed that participants felt an innate sense of pride and dignity in their work, had autonomous access and control over their

work, deep integration with society, and intergenerational pottery was not exploitative and discriminatory. Multiple themes (Theme 2, 3, 4, and 5) suggest that participants work and occupation is highly decent and includes personal choice and a deep desire for continued engagement in their generational occupation. Participants demonstrated an intrinsic desire to continue working in their generational occupation and the psychological empowerment that emerged from engagement with pottery provided resiliencies that buffered against many other ill-effects. Indeed, it would not be a leap to suggest that severing links of pottery and attempts to take participants away from their generational work may lead to adverse consequences in terms of their psychological health, well-being, and personal narratives around their social integration and role in society. Thus, in the present investigation, work in the informal economy was not found to be indecent (R4) and contrary to dominant ideas around force and lack of choice for workers in the informal economy (Venkatesh, 2006), the results suggest that personal choice for continued engagement in traditional work was an important and thriving aspect of participants' work-life.

Policy recommendations and future directions

Based on the findings above, policy recommendations are provided in this section. These are broad implications based on ground-level work psychology research. In the spirit of the decent work mandate's, "summing up the aspirations" of the global working poor (International Labor Organization (ILO, 1999), the following are practical recommendations and directions for future research that are derived based on the current study's findings.

First, the notion that formal economy is inherently better than the informal economy is simplistic and can whitewash the diversity of life and work experiences that have organically evolved in the informal economy (Godfrey, 2011). As suggested by the study's findings, there are local contexts and traditions that hold meaning and importance in the context of work and occupations that provide fundamentally empowering experiences for workers in this sector. Thus, policy frameworks should adequately consider target populations' current work and aspirations before implementing interventions.

Second and relatedly, findings suggest that there are a variety of social and psychological dimensions to work in the informal sector that can be targeted to improve well-being, possibly without the need to switch from the informal sector to the typical formal sector POSH job. The study found that there are critical positive psychological health, well-being, and work indicators that may be associated with traditional work. Similar investigations that capture the voice of the worker in-situ, conducted prior and as part of policy-making endeavours, may provide meaningful insight into the human nuance associated with different types of work in the informal sector and aid more culturally appropriate policy development.

Third, this study makes a strong case for the inclusion of psychological criteria in Decent Work paradigms. Without an examination of psychological indicators, policy and research in this important area of sustainable development may continue to remain lopsided. While not intended as part of the original study, the findings revealed important occupation specific well-being aspects that support sustainable engagement with work that is in harmony with nature and society. Future studies would do well to replicate and validate these findings using quantitative methods and by expanding to the other cultures, skill-levels, and occupation types that exist as a source of livelihood in the global informal economy. Areas that are particularly ripe have to do with task-analysis and occupational skill profiles of pottery. Fourth, work and organizational psychology has thus far engaged in limited research in the areas of indigenous skills and traditional forms of work and life. As this study revealed, perhaps the study of indigenous and traditional work will reveal novel understandings of work that can broaden the repertoire of our field, beyond the currently dominant paradigm that rests on industrialized and western-centric forms of work.

The field of WOP has since its inception, tried to create inner psychological states while working that mimic the findings of the current sample (high intrinsic motivation, attentional focus, pride, fulfilment, and meaningfulness). Indeed, the current findings are akin to examining work in a vacuum. Ironically, despite continuity in these traditional occupational globally, they constitute “vulnerable work” today and tend to be ignored in organizational and labour sciences, policy frameworks, and governmental initiatives. The “voice” of the vulnerable worker is lost in GDP’s and high-level numerical data that fails to account for day-to-day workings and experienced realities of these workers. Addressing living wages based on the framework specified above, the four pillars of the ILO Decent Work Agenda can be addressed: promoting jobs and enterprise, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection and promoting social dialogue (International Labor Organization, 2018a). These can reduce inequalities and can be developed through social dialogue per ILO’s recommendations (International Labor Organization, 2014), and thereby promote sustainable economies and improve worker well-being globally. If amalgamated into policy frameworks, at a proximal level, findings may facilitate effective outcomes aligned with the decent work agenda and the UN SDGs. At a distal level, these may have a positive impact on poverty alleviation and aid economic development of economically weaker nations.

Conclusion

In a first study of its kind in mainstream work and organizational psychology, the findings present the “voice” of a highly skilled community of workers in the informal economy. These first-person experiential accounts of traditional work and associated outcomes can help inform decent work agendas that seek to improve the living and working conditions of workers in poverty. Theoretical outcomes including the discussion of psychologically sustainable work can guide future investigations in indigenous skills and traditional work. By discussing the role of local cultural skills in promoting decent

work and leading to long-term, sustainable changes for providing meaningful work experiences and positive psychological outcomes for the skilled, rural poor this study contributes to the new and increasingly important humanistic and humanitarian foci in work organizational sciences. Additionally, this investigation uncovers and introduces novel evidence-based concepts in order to provide best practice policy recommendations geared towards decent work mandates. Overall, the findings of this study can influence positive psychological outcomes for the working poor around the world through local engagement and research efforts.

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