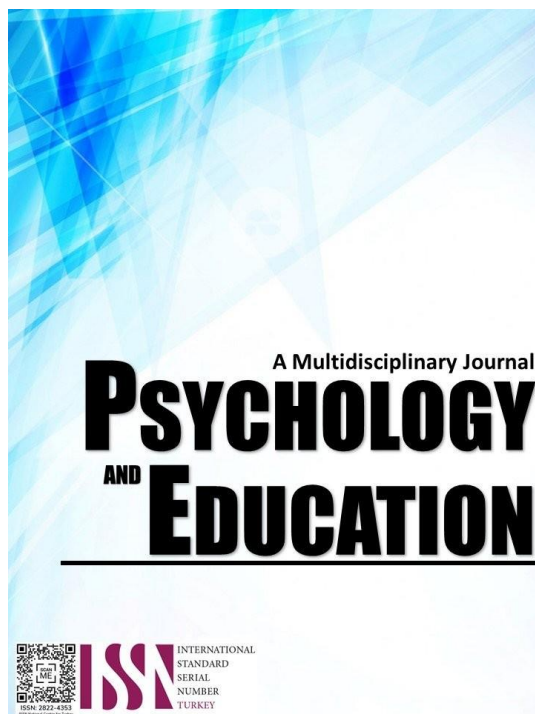


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Jack of All Trades: Unveiling the Narratives of Janitors

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Abstract

In the realm of public health and organizational operations, janitors are the unsung heroes, essential yet often overlooked. Their work is fundamental in maintaining the hygienic and safe conditions of society, promoting its effective functioning. This study explores the nuanced experiences of janitors, focusing on their life narratives, work challenges, and the impact of their work on their personal and social lives. The study adopts a narrative inquiry approach which includes in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six janitors from the National Capital Region (NCR) chosen through purposive sampling. The study revealed the janitors' personal and professional hardships, resilience and coping strategies, in addition to how their vital roles in maintaining school cleanliness contribute to fostering a sense of community. Ultimately, this research offers a distinctive viewpoint on the life stories of janitors and affirms the integral role of janitorial services in the overall well-being of the educational landscape and the larger community.

Keywords: *janitors, narrative inquiry, academic environment, social inequality, resilience*

Introduction

In the complex ecosystem of universities centered on the generation and dissemination of knowledge, there is a group of people whose contributions are often overlooked and underappreciated—the jack-of-all-trades, the janitors. These unsung heroes from the foundation of academia's hallowed halls, working for many hours and usually having no opportunity for downtime, uphold the maintenance of cleanliness and right order. Behind their cheerful smiles and optimistic demeanor, they hide the various challenges they have experienced silently, and the occasional sweat also conceals their hardships. These include mental health and emotional challenges (Smilie, 2022) caused by physically demanding work, stigma, social isolation, wages, and labor issues (Schwartz et al., 2021). Likewise, low wages can lead to job insecurity and exacerbate their lower socioeconomic status. This study attempts to shed light on these and other fundamental issues.

Hence, probing the life narratives of janitors becomes an imperative endeavor in the context of Philippine universities, where education and safety are held in high regard, especially during the time of the pandemic. These workers are undoubtedly part of the frontline workforce, yet the critical role they play in keeping facilities safe is often underestimated. The above issues must be addressed by listening to and amplifying their stories to provide insights and create a society where their hard work is recognized and appropriately compensated, just like in other professions. By amplifying their voices inside and beyond the campus, this endeavor can promote a greater sense of rapport and appreciation for their vital contributions to the academic community and to the society at large.

The nature of their work requires high-intensity physical labor. As posited by Cho (2019), janitorial work exhibits a rate of 2.7 times greater work-related absences than other professions, which is caused by heavy physical workloads. These often lead to muscle strain, fatigue, and long-term health effects. Physical losses can likewise exacerbate mental and emotional problems, leading to burnout. Furthermore, since they work in the spotlight, their efforts are often overlooked, and a low sense of self-worth hinders their career development (Estacio, 2021). Likewise, incompetent wages and salary issues lead to low income and affect their quality of life. Furthermore, Lee and Park (2019) stated that it also limits access to health care, thereby leading to a cycle of low socioeconomic status. As a result, their mental health is at risk. Most of these people are forced to work under unfair conditions just to feed themselves and their families. Essentially, their overall well-being is jeopardized not only by the issues mentioned above but also by factors such as abuse and injustice resulting from the nature of their work.

In the global educational settings, as well as in the local context, several studies have addressed the challenges faced by janitors. Despite this, resources to address these issues are generally considered

insufficient. For example, there are labor laws regarding what constitutes minimum wages and benefits (Lee et al., 2022). However, these workers still face wage issues. Likewise, there is growing awareness of mental health issues in the workplace, but this does not extend to cleaning staff. Furthermore, it is proven that janitors go through mistreatment, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Consequently, some organizations are suggesting that workers approach them to address the issues they are facing (Green et al., 2019). Research shows that cleaners lack the experience of working in a good working environment.

The distinct socio-economic landscape of the Philippines makes the well-being of the janitors particularly crucial. Following Alberto, Apolinar, Tomboc, and Lugay (2022), safety measures for cleaning staff have been implemented, such as the provision of personal protective equipment and health kits during the pandemic. However, the sustainability and persistence of these benefits are not enough.

As far as their working conditions are concerned, Cabrera and Estacio (2022) address the issue of low wages related to the nature of their work, where they find that they are underpaid. As a result, in some other countries, cleaners have formed unions and advocated for higher wages. In local contexts, however, they are perceived to lack the collective bargaining leverage to improve their conditions. Remarkably, despite the personal or professional difficulties they face, there is not a trace of negativity on their faces. The testimonials of all the students who were able to meet them and interact with them are a testament to the excellent service they provide to the school community. These unsung heroes are often known for their kindness, dedication, and hard work. There is no doubt that they play an important role in creating a safe, comfortable, and conducive place for learning.

The challenges faced by gatekeepers have fundamental consequences, especially in universities across the Philippines, where they play a vital role in maintaining safe and efficient operations. If these issues are not addressed, ongoing physical, emotional, and mental stress will not only impact their quality of life but also lead to staffing shortages and potentially reduce the effectiveness of the general cleaning staff. The reduced productivity may exacerbate economic struggles and could potentially have an adverse impact on other functional areas in the institution and the academic community. This study therefore aimed to investigate the multifaceted roles played by these campus space managers, beyond their traditional duties as janitors. The researchers endeavor to unearth their personal stories, experiences, challenges, and triumphs while acknowledging the diverse skill sets, they employ in their daily tasks and their unique role as "Jack of all Trades" within the academic institution.

Research Questions

The study aimed to determine the narratives of janitors about their work and how it affects dealing with faculties, students, and other people in the school premises. Specifically, this intended to answer:

1. What are the experiences and daily challenges faced by janitors working in a university, and how do these experiences shape their narratives and identities within the community?
2. How do janitors perceive their roles and contributions to the campus environment, and how do these perceptions influence their sense of belonging and engagement with the community?
3. What are the underlying social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence the narratives and stories shared by janitors, and how do these narratives reflect larger themes of social inequality and the intersectionality of identities within the context of higher education institutions?

Literature Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the experiences of the janitorial industry, focusing on the work encounters, issues, and demands. While prior research provides insight into the responsibilities, roles, and challenges encountered by janitors, a trend has emerged that emphasizes these roles in the realm of efficiency in organizations (Lee et al., 2022).

The existing body of literature maintains that janitors possess an essential role in the promotion of organizational efficiency by maintaining a clean and hygienic environment (Chobineh et al., 2019). Accordingly, recent data shows that the roles and responsibilities of janitors protract beyond cleanliness, as they are found to contribute to workplace culture and organizational work. (Chun-weng et al., 2022).

However, these studies have failed to recognize the lived experiences of janitors, highlighting narratives about their day-to-day struggles at work, and how it affects their personal and professional lives. The notion that the multifaceted nature of their work goes beyond their traditional responsibilities as cleaners, serves as a center of investigation to uncover personal stories and challenges, thereby emphasizing their roles as "Jack of All Trades" within the realm of academic institution. In line with that, recent work in the fieldwork suggests that janitorial workers in low-wage, low-control, and low-support jobs face unique stressors and subsequent mental and physical health declines because of workplace abuses such as discriminatory harassment and abusive supervision. In the study of Yragui et al. (2020), the findings presented participants' perceptions of their health, safety, well-being, and performance being harmed by mistreatment, harassment, and retaliation at their workplaces, mostly from managers and supervisors and less so from coworkers.

Much research has been done on the economic and labor aspects of janitorial work and what may affect them, but little research has been conducted about the psychological and social impact of these roles to the janitorial staff. Most studies give emphasis on the impact of janitorial work on the respective organizations, rather than the mere workers (Harrison, 2016). For instance, despite their importance in maintaining the cleanliness of schools, there have been only a few attempts to study school janitorial staff in the Philippines. Moreover, the toil of the physically demanding work and labor issues and how it affects their mental and emotional health have not yet been probed, especially within the complex ecosystem of the university.

One of the few reported studies of this research is about a narrative study of a janitor working among front liners during COVID-19 (Perciano et al., 2021), which covered a limited range of experiences of people working janitorial services in hospitals during the pandemic. Janitors often have a high risk of occupational injury and illness due to a wide range of heavy physical workloads and chemical exposures experienced on the job (Anderson et al., 2021). With the lack of recognition of janitorial staff in Philippine academic institutions continues to exist, often resulting in a scarcity of opportunity for instruction with regards to proper training and scientific principles underlying their work and eventually leading to questionings on sanitation, as well as the inevitable occurrence of

discrimination and different types of harassment due to their undeniably low standing in institutions (Brown, 2018).

Despite these observations, the school janitors continue to have a variety of jobs that extend beyond cleaning. The question remains whether the reported high levels of job satisfaction in some studies are generalizable to the population of the janitors. Correspondingly, the scope of work of a custodian is cleaning, maintenance activities, carrying out heavy cleaning tasks, and doing minimal repairs (Kourmentza et al., 2022). However, there are institutions that overwork custodians and allow them to perform tasks that are not within their scope of work, putting janitors in danger of occupational injury and disease. Despite their awareness of the profession, individuals mistakenly believe that janitors do an all-around job in an institution.

As a result, their well-being in their workplace is ignored and neglected. The question likewise remains if janitors' well-being is being taken care of by the institutions they serve in. Their physical and mental health are not being investigated, thereby not being devoid of enough attention to be addressed. Overworking, extensive working schedules, and mistreatment are a few of the examples of the issues that the janitors experience in their workplace (Green et al., 2018).

Hence, additional studies of the lived experiences of the janitors in the Philippines are needed, to uncover their unseen work challenges. This juncture will amplify the stories of challenges and hardships they subvocally tell. Janitors indeed have stable jobs, however as most of them were not able to receive a formal education, they battle with issues such as low salaries, exclusion in the workplace, and extreme physical exhaustion (Chron Contributor, 2020). Their work is indubitably demanding and emotionally challenging.

It is desirable to carry out surveys of how these challenges affect their physical health since the non-physical workload components which are psychological factors that may contribute to injuries among janitors are not widely recognized. Workload is a complicated concept with a variety of potential factors, such as mental workload as well as psychological aspects that might correlate with work-related accidents. For instance, it has been demonstrated that psychological stress raises the risk of injury and task mistakes (Schwartz et al., 2021).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a narrative approach, specifically a narrative inquiry, to probe the life stories of janitors in a university. This approach allows for the gathering of contextually rich and detailed data, capturing their experiential roles and challenges within and beyond the educational setting. As per Ntinda (2019), the narrative inquiry approach characterizes gauging personal experiences over time, encapsulating the complexities of the participants' circumstances through a story-telling framework. Accordingly, by adopting a robust qualitative tradition through interviews, an in-depth exploration and understanding of the lives of janitors and other underlying themes were obtained.

Participants

This study comprised a total of six (6) participants selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling wherein participants were chosen in line with specific qualities to serve as suitable representatives of the study. The chosen participants were evaluated based on their (1) experience in the field, (2) familiarity with the work environment, and (3) willingness to contribute to the study. This method aimed to gather insightful perspectives from individuals who best represented the key characteristics of the target population.

In accordance with the recommendation of Sebele-Mpofu (2020), a smaller sample size is more pertinent for qualitative studies for a better and deeper analysis of the themes and narratives.

Instrument

A researcher-made semi-structured interview was utilized for the collection of data developed to give emphasis on the occupational experiences, perceptions of responsibilities related to work, and its impact on their mental and emotional health, along with their socio-economic status. The interview was validated by three experts in the field of qualitative research who were involved in the assessment and evaluation of its content validity. This was done to guarantee that the research objectives were effectively addressed.

Procedure

The data collection follows a specific qualitative process involving three phases (pre-data gathering, data gathering, and post-data gathering procedures). In the pre-gathering phase, the prospective participants were identified by the researchers through the administrative office of the university, following the distribution and collection of informed consent forms. In the subsequent data-gathering phase, each of the selected participants was interviewed in a conducive and private setting inside the university. The interviews with the participants were recorded with their consent and field notes were taken to gauge further context. Finally, the post-gathering procedure involved transcription of verbatim audio recordings where participants were given the privilege to review them.

The obtained data were subsequently analyzed through thematic analysis which involved code assignments and categorizations. The adherence to these phases ensured the systematic procedure for producing a valid and sound qualitative study.



Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association to guarantee the rights of the participants and maintain the integrity of the study (Corts & Pratt, 2019). The ethical considerations are outlined below:

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection where they were directly and explicitly informed of the study’s purpose, their corresponding rights in the study, and the implications of their participation.

Privacy and Confidentiality: All data collected from the participants were kept strictly confidential. The access to the raw data was exclusive for the research team only. The participants were likewise assured that their corresponding responses were anonymous.

Respect for Participants: The questionnaire was designed with respect to the participants, avoiding any potentially inappropriate content. Additionally, it was kept manageable in length to minimize the burden on their parts. The participants were likewise given the flexibility to choose when and where they wished to accomplish it.

Transparency: The research team ensured an open line of communication and transparency with the participants by sharing the findings of the study upon its completion.

Through the strict and rigorous adherence to the above-mentioned ethical considerations, the researcher ensured the protection of the rights and dignity of the participants along with the integrity of the research findings.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. *Emerging Themes*

<i>Superordinate themes</i>	<i>Subordinate themes</i>
Role of work experiences on shaping one’s persona	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encountered challenges ● Coping mechanisms ● Attitude and behavior of other school stakeholder ● Sense of inclusion and appreciation
Understanding one’s role and engagement in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pivotal role as service-oriented personnel ● Maintenance of school cleanliness ● Positive role modeling ● Sense of belongingness ● Sense of appreciation ● Impact on one’s personal life ● Knowing one’s significant roles and contribution ● Work benefits
Social narratives and inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Significant work encounters ● Social differences within the institutional landscape ● Fair and equal treatment ● Work sentiments

Table 1 presents the findings according to the study’s research questions. The table shows three superordinate themes that come from the main research question. As per superordinate themes, it includes multiple subordinate themes that emerge from the answers of the participants during the interview.

The first row of the superordinate theme the “Role of work experiences on shaping one’s persona” explores the encountered challenges, coping mechanisms, attitude and behavior of other school stakeholders, and sense of inclusion and appreciation. Under the “Understanding one’s role and engagement in the community” it tackles the pivotal role as service-oriented personnel, maintenance of school cleanliness, positive role modeling, sense of belongingness, sense of appreciation, impact on one’s personal life, knowing one’s significant roles and contribution, and work benefits. The last theme is “Social narratives and inequality” which covers the significant work encounters, social differences within the institutional landscape, fair and equal treatment, and work sentiments.

The study reveals how job experiences shape the personal identities of janitors at the university. They develop coping techniques and resilience because of their daily challenges, which influence their self-perception and persona. This observation is consistent with Cortez and Lynch’s (2015) findings, which emphasize the relevance of work experiences in substantially impacting personal identity. As observed by Nugroho, and Wahjoedi (2022), who investigated how workplace environments impact employees’ self-concept, the attitudes and behaviors of other stakeholders giving a sense of inclusion play a critical part in this process. These stories emphasize the significance of the work environment in their personal development.

The subordinate themes emerge as the encountered challenges, coping mechanisms, attitude and behavior of other school stakeholders,

and sense of inclusion and appreciation of the participants. Janitors deal with a variety of difficulties, such as physical exhaustion, emotional strain, and occasionally social isolation. Their coping mechanisms, such as creating a community of support among themselves and looking for recognition from the larger school community, are essential to their wellbeing. The study shows that janitors have a sense of belonging despite these difficulties. As an instance, participant 1 said, "Maganda rito sa *** hindi ka nila parang tinatratong ibang tao... parang hindi ka tinatratong janitor, yung parang tinatratong bilang kaibigan." This goes against the widespread belief that they are marginalized and undervalued.

Furthermore, the study underlines janitors' understanding of their role and engagement in the institution. Their work extends beyond mere cleanliness; they are viewed as excellent role models, adding to a sense of belonging inside the campus. This reflects the findings of Haldane et al. (2019), who discovered a comparable influence of service roles on community participation and reinforces the critical contributions and functions of janitors.

The subsequent subordinate themes comprise pivotal roles as service-oriented personnel, maintenance of school cleanliness, positive role modeling, sense of belongingness, sense of appreciation, impact on one's personal life, significant roles and contribution, and work benefits of janitorial services. A pleasant learning atmosphere is mostly fostered by janitors. Inadvertently, they act as role models and are responsible for maintaining cleanliness, both of which are essential for a good learning environment. As said by participant 2, "malaki ang responsibilidad ng pagiging janitor kasi anytime na... 'pag dating sa cleanliness, janitor talaga yung kailangan.'" This interaction affects their personal lives by giving them a sense of appreciation and belonging. The research highlights the requirement for just recompense and acknowledgment by illuminating their awareness of their noteworthy functions and efforts.

In the interim, the study uncovers the issue of social narratives and inequality, focusing on the janitors' experiences with social differences within the institution. The study investigates how the dynamics of fair and equitable treatment influence janitors' work attitudes. Kevins and Lightman's (2019) finding of large social inequalities among service workers and how this affects their job satisfaction and impression of justice supports this result. These tales offer a way to address larger challenges of social inequality in the workplace and outside the institutional structure.

The subordinate themes include significant work encounters, social differences within the institutional landscape, fair and equal treatment, and work sentiments. Significant work contacts that represent social inequalities and disadvantages inside the university are revealed by janitors' experiences. Contrary to popular perceptions of inequity, the study reveals that the janitors generally feel treated fairly, despite the difficulties. As an illustration, participant 5 said, "Wala pa ako na encounter na ibababa ka nila dahil janitor, janitress ka lang talaga. So maayos pa ang pakikitungo ng mga tao." Consequently, their opinions regarding their jobs, including their successes and struggles, offer insights into the dynamics of the institutions as well as the reflection of treating them fairly and recognizing their important roles.

Conclusions

The main findings of the study show that the narrative of janitorial lives at the university influences how they perceive their self and persona. It indicates the experiences the janitors had encountered has shaped their personal views in terms of work-related matter, the behaviors and attitudes of people around them and the sense of belongingness in a community where there is no discrimination towards the working class. According to the interview results that the researchers conducted; the researchers can say that the janitors inside the campus experienced a well-supportive environment. There is no exclusivity concerning the treatment and behavior towards them by faculty members and the students. The study introduced new learnings on the life of janitors that several individuals are unaware of, such as their life struggles and how they cope with their stressors. Every one of us always encounters our everyday conflicts because of our job. It has been concluded that despite the stigmatized idea that janitors are undervalued and ignored in prestigious institutions, this research has provided data and resources that neglect the claims of many. In brief, the janitorial role of work experiences, social narratives and their engagement in the community inspired and enlightened the researchers and other people to access better knowledge in understanding their personal narratives.

The researchers can provide recommendations to future researchers for additional longitudinal or exploratory research based on the study's presentation of diverse janitors' thoughts on their way of life. Because the complexities of the interview questionnaire hampered the researchers' capacity to assess in-depth and thorough responses from the participants, the researchers recommend conducting a complete review and drafting interview questions that the janitors can easily and quickly grasp, allowing for more comprehensive and extensive findings.

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