

The  
**Dignity  
Project**

**Discussing  
Concepts and  
Definitions**

# Introduction

This draft concept paper establishes how we think about human dignity.

It is written in preparation for an effort to measure whether people's dignity is respected. We have taken as our particular focus whether it is respected by international development processes and programs, though it is hoped that the thinking here might be applicable to a wide array of social processes and programs.

We are grateful for all responses and extra perspectives. Please get in touch if you have something to add.

We offer heartfelt thanks to all those who have offered review and comments, and especially: Remy Debes, whose edited collection on the history of dignity has inspired much of this discussion; Michael Plant, whose skepticism has been invaluable; Sonia Muasa, who pushed for a deeper consideration of power; and Douglas Wanja and Samuel Wandera, of the Busara Center.

## Summary

In the paper, we make the following claims:

### Defining and describing the operation of dignity

- We are talking here about 'moralized' dignity, which is universal, characteristic, inalienable and entitles its holders to 'recognition respect'. In this sense, 'human dignity' refers to the inherent or unearned moral worth or status, which all humans enjoy equally.
- We are not talking about another common use of the word dignity, which is a 'merit-based' dignity that can be earned, forfeited or stripped away, and which is the object of 'appraisal respect'.
- Dignity is not exclusively rooted in reason, and is not rooted in stewardship or shared aristocracy. Each individual does not always have to be treated as an end in themselves.
- Respectfulness is shown by respecting autonomy, individuality and equality.
- Respectfulness can only be evaluated subjectively, and is rooted in people's expectations of what is sufficiently respectful.
- There remains scholarly dispute about which agents have dignity, but we do not attempt to resolve it here. Anyone who can take part in our research will be assumed to have dignity.

### Why measure respectfulness

- Dignity should be studied because it underpins egalitarianism, and because it is much discussed but rarely defined.
- We should study dignity as well as other possible topics, including happiness and capabilities.
- If respectfulness is to be studied, it should also be quantitatively measured.

Based on these principles, we hope to proceed to measure dignity.

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## **Defining and describing the operation of dignity**

**We are talking here about ‘moralized’ dignity, which is universal, characteristic, inalienable and entitles its holders to ‘recognition respect’. In this sense, 'human dignity' refers to the inherent or unearned moral worth or status, which all humans enjoy equally.**

- There are many definitions of dignity, and we sometimes mean several of them simultaneously, which is why it has been termed “multivocal” (LaVaque-Manty, 2017). Ideas of dignity draw on a whole host of intellectual traditions: Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic, Homeric, Augustinian and Patristic, Stoic, and Kantian (Debes, 2017). It is what Block (1995) has termed a ‘mongrel concept’. That may help confirm its importance as a topic of study, but we cannot measure all of these definitions at once, and we must pin ourselves to one clear definition.
- Conceptions of dignity tend to be either ‘merit-based’, or ‘moralized’. We are talking about moralized rather than merit-based dignity (Debes, 2017). The difference between these is discussed below.
- Dignity is a universal, characteristic quality of persons. It is universal in that everyone has it, all of the time. It is characteristic, in that it is one of the things that defines someone as a person (this draws on the definition offered by Sensen, 2017, and is discussed in more detail below).
- That a person has dignity has implications for how they should be treated by others. Simply because each person has dignity, they should be treated with respect. This respect is called ‘recognition respect’. It is the sort of respect due simply because you recognize a person’s dignity, and people do not need to do anything extra to earn that respect (Dillon, 2018).
- Recognition respect is thus a kind of deliberative deference. For example, I show you ‘recognition respect’ as a person when I give appropriate consideration to you in deciding what to do. That is, I appropriately circumscribe or revise my choices if they would affect you, and I do this precisely because of your dignity.
- Having dignity means that you can make a claim on others that you be treated with respect. You have the standing to make claims upon another. In that sense, it is ‘second-personal’ (Darwall, 2017). If they default on those claims by failing to treat you with respect, you can make an appeal to society to provide redress.
- Dignity is inalienable. Your dignity can be offended against, but it cannot be lowered or taken away, no matter how badly you are treated (Debes, 2017).

**We are not talking about another common use of the word dignity, which is a ‘merit-based’ dignity that can be earned, forfeited or stripped away, and which gives rise to ‘appraisal respect’.**

- When we use dignity here, we are talking about the moralized form, not the merit-based form.
- ‘Moralized dignity’ is a concept of a universal, intrinsic and characteristic dignity, which entails the ability to claim recognition respect. By contrast, merit-based dignity is not universal. It is the honor or status one achieves or earns by actions, as for example, in the case of a medal-winning sportswoman. This kind of dignity is not the object of direct deliberative deference (i.e. ‘recognition respect’) but instead it is the object of a positive attitude or appraisal (i.e. ‘appraisal respect.’), and gives rise to appraisal respect. It is not universal, because it can be increased, decreased or stripped away entirely by certain experiences or actions. Correspondingly, it gives rise to appraisal respect, in which we make a judgements about how much respect they are due (Debes, 2017).
- When we describe some lordly ruler as having dignity, we are using the merit-based form. We make an appraisal of their conduct or their standing or their character, and decide how much respect they are due. In the merit conception, this ruler could be deposed, or act in some awful manner, and thereby be stripped of their dignity, and we would owe them no respect at all.
- Moralized and merit based dignity could operate simultaneously. Recognition respect is the basic minimum of respect that is owed to everybody; we may very well decide to accord additional respect beyond that minimum to certain people, based on our appraisal of them.
- Where that minimum level lies has important implications for measurement, and will require careful judgement in interpreting measurement results - but we can easily say that we prefer programs and processes that are more respectful over those that are less respectful.

**Dignity is not exclusively rooted in reason, and is not rooted in stewardship or shared aristocracy. Each individual does not always have to be treated as an end in themselves.**

- A number of other ideas are frequently suggested about dignity, which we specifically note here that we do not follow, in our conception of dignity.
- First, our conception of dignity is not particularly that of Immanuel Kant. While we recognize the strong tradition of grounding dignity in reason, Kant’s conception is more merit-based than is commonly understood (Sensen, 2017).
- We therefore have no special focus on it being essential to only address people with reasoned arguments, and believe that imagination and empathy play an important role in showing respect (Debes, 2018). We also note that few humans seem to actually succeed in exercising reason (Kahneman, 2011); if reason is essential to dignity, then that would suggest severe limitations on the prevalence of dignity.
- We do not believe that humans have dignity because of their role as stewards of the environment (Kateb, 2014).
- We also do not believe that moralized dignity is really just a manifestation of merit-based dignity, following a supposed great levelling up in which everyone entered into the aristocracy (Waldron, 2015).

**Respectfulness is shown by respecting autonomy, individuality and equality.**

- If recognizing that someone has dignity requires that we treat them with recognition respect, we must examine what may constitute respectfulness.
- What is considered respectful surely varies. It varies not just across cultures, but from person to person, and in different contexts. One person may consider a speedy, wordless

transaction at a supermarket till to be respectful, in that it does not intrude upon them or consume their time. Another person may feel that such silence is disrespectful in its failure to engage with them as an individual. Both people would probably consider the speed of a retail transaction to be disrespectful, if it came from the host of a party they were attending. Whether something is respectful depends on their expectations.

- There may be a consensus list of things that all people everywhere feel are disrespectful, but there would still be many things not on that consensus list, that a particular person may feel are disrespectful. There is consequently little point in attempting to create a comprehensive list of respectful actions, or respectful rules of interaction. Even something as extensive as granting the full list of rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may not be necessary (or sufficient) to ensure that someone has been treated respectfully – even though granting them those rights would be desirable, and would probably increase their sense that their dignity had been respected.
- Instead, we must say that someone's dignity has been respected when they feel that they have been respected. Or to put it another way, respectfulness is subjective.
- Respectfulness is manifested when people feel they have been recognized (Debes, 2018). There are several possible ways of identifying when this has happened. The literature has suggested several ways in which this can be done: autonomy, individuality and equality. We propose to include all three in a composite measure.
- Each of these are in themselves complicated and disputed concepts. We offer definitions and discussion below.
- **Autonomy:** Autonomy is defined as the extent to which a person has control over their environment, actions and body.
- We show respect for the autonomy of others both positively and negatively. Negatively, we must not reduce someone's capacity to choose, we must not interfere in their decisions and their pursuit of goals, and we must not force them or lie to them (Dillon, 2018). We can additionally respect their autonomy positively, by protecting them from threats to their autonomy, and by promoting the conditions that permit autonomy (Dillon, 2018).
- **Individuality:** Individuality is defined as the extent to which a person can formulate, display and have recognized their distinctive and separable personality.
- If each person has a separable dignity, then in order for that dignity to be respected then the person must be treated as separate from the mass. Even in collectivist societies, where people may derive much satisfaction from their participation in the group, they should have the chance to opt to be addressed as they choose, and to have efforts to support them be tailored to their needs.
- **Equality:** Equality is defined as the extent to which a person is treated as having the same social status as everyone else.
- We hold that there is a fundamental equality between people, manifested by their ability to make claims upon one another (Darwall, 2017). This does not mean that people are necessarily equal in capabilities or resources, but rather that all people participate in this system of mutual claim-making.
- To this we can add some direct investigation of whether people feel they have been shown the proper respect.
- By saying that respectfulness is a matter for subjective evaluation, we are noting that people with diminished expectations will be willing to accept poorer treatment without considering it disrespectful. Clearly this is not desirable – we would prefer everyone to receive superb treatment. However, we may assert that if they receive poor treatment, and they did not feel it was disrespectful, then any damage done by this poor treatment is not damage done to their sense of respectedness. Rather, if that treatment is damaging, it is damaging to some other aspect (such as, for instance, brusque health professionals yielding poor health outcomes [Gawande, 2015]).

**Respectfulness can only be evaluated subjectively, and is rooted in people's expectations of what is sufficiently respectful.**

- We assert that people have a concept of their general sense of the extent to which the world, or a particular encounter, is or was respectful of their dignity.
- This allows us to develop measures that can compare one program or process to another, and avoids the thorny ground of external evaluations and of respectability politics.
- In doing so, since respectfulness is context-specific, they will inevitably be judging how respectful an interaction was against their expectations for how such an interaction ought to proceed. We will ask whether they felt an interaction gave them *enough* autonomy, enough equality and enough individuality. There is no point providing more of those qualities than people are asking for, and indeed to do so may harm their sense of respectedness.
- This means that those who, for reasons of poverty or limited experience, have diminished expectations may feel that something is sufficiently respectful, when an outside observer may feel that in fact it was disrespectful. There is no attractive way around this trap of diminished expectations, except to defer to those who have the greatest involvement – if they feel respected, we do not need to correct them.
- We note additionally that we do not hold that respect for dignity constitutes a complete moral code. Doing something to someone may be wrong, even if it is done in a way that they find respectful of their dignity. We must simply ground our objection in something other than dignity, which must be subjective.

**There remains scholarly dispute about which agents have dignity, but we do not attempt to resolve it here. Anyone who can take part in our research will be assumed to have dignity.**

- To have dignity is to be admitted to the community of those who may demand respect.
- There are endless debates to be had about who is to be admitted, and who is not (Nussbaum, 2006). Debates are frequently had about the many edge cases. It is possible that non-human sentient beings should be included, or that humans who have done awful things should be excluded.
- For the purposes of this work, we are not much interested in those debates. As a working principle, anyone who has the capability to take part in our research will also be assumed to have dignity. Others may have dignity too, but we do not need to resolve that here.

## Why measure respectfulness

**Dignity should be studied because it underpins egalitarianism, and because it is much discussed but rarely defined.**

- Egalitarianism relies on the idea that each individual has something about them that gives them a fundamental equality in relation to all other people. We hold that this special characteristic is dignity (Debes, 2017).
- Dignity is much discussed, in development and elsewhere. Reports and headlines often invoke dignity. Claims are often made that particular initiatives or programs respect people's dignity – or fail to do so. Individuals are often described as dignified – or undignified (Wein, 2018).
- Development processes and programmes have inherent power imbalances, and frequently are interwoven with histories of domination and colonialism. They consequently pose a particular challenge in terms of delivering interactions that are respectful of people's dignity.
- Some of the development programs that we care most about are frequently discussed in terms of their potential impact on dignity. In particular, cash transfers make up an

increasingly large share of development and humanitarian assistance, and seem to have high impacts on many outcome variables. It is a claim of cash transfer proponents that their approach respects people's dignity (see for instance Hochfeld & Plagerson, 2011).

- Dignity is sometimes said to be the quality in all humans that grounds human rights. For example, dignity is much-discussed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In the German Grundgesetz the explicit claim is made that we have rights in virtue of our dignity. Similar uses include the the Constitutions of India (1949), the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference (1975), Portugal (1976), and South Africa (1993), to name a few (Debes, 2009). In short, it is often treated as a foundational concept for egalitarianism – if we believe that all humans have a basic relationship of equality, it is because we believe they all share some basic quality or status - what we call here “dignity.” (Darwall, 2017).
- Dignity is less discussed in applied research ethics – it is not mentioned in the Nuremburg Code or Belmont Report, and is mentioned only once in the WMA Helsinki Declaration. However, it or some similar concept is surely implicit in the general calls for respect for human subjects in all fields of research.
- For all its importance in these different areas, and for all the frequency with which it is discussed, dignity is rarely defined. Many people mean many different things by it (LaVaque-Manty, 2017). This gives rise to confusion. We have attempted to provide a definition above.

### **We should study dignity as well as other possible topics, including happiness and capabilities.**

- There have been many initiatives to expand the range of things that we discuss and measure as social aims. All of these begin from the starting point that we miss something essential about human flourishing when we attempt only to increase wealth or health, or only to meet basic needs. Some of the most prominent of these lines of research are capabilities, desire satisfaction, and happiness (see for instance, Alkire, 2015; Hills & Argyle, 2002).
- Advocates for focusing on capabilities and happiness claim that these are intrinsically valuable, and are important in themselves. This claim implies that measures of instrumentally valuable things – such as dignity – would be encompassed by their measures, and that any improvement in dignity would be detectable in increased capabilities or increased happiness.
- There are two theoretical counterarguments, and one practical one.
- The first theoretical counterargument is that we may be interested in measuring more than only intrinsically valuable things. Dignity may be a mechanism for reaching those intrinsically valuable things. To the extent that we accept that happiness or capabilities are truly intrinsically valuable, and that dignity is at most a means to those ends, we should still be interested in dignity, because it may be one among several competing explanations for how we reach those ends. Just as we measure hunger, income and violence, we should also measure dignity.
- The second theoretical counterargument is that dignity and other outcomes sometimes clash. We can certainly imagine situations in which people are unhappy, or lack capabilities, even while they are treated in a way that respects their dignity. Perhaps more practically, we can easily imagine programs that increase income, but diminish dignity. When they do clash, we can say that we are willing to prioritize one over another, but without a completely convincing argument that one takes primacy over another, we can only do so with a careful understanding of both. Thus we should measure dignity too.
- The fourth, practical, counterargument is that by studying dignity, we have a high chance of moving development beyond measuring only health, wealth and the meeting of basic needs. Advocates for capabilities, happiness and dignity can all agree that single measures

of wealth (or health) do not capture enough of what is important to human flourishing, and that additional measures are needed (Coyle, 2014). To the extent that we believe such a movement is valuable, and to the extent that development evaluation is a fragmented world of individual M&E professionals drafting measures in a hurry, many different measures that help achieve this aim should be available. Concepts which are already common in the development discourse – such as dignity – are more likely to gain traction as topics to be measured.

**If respectfulness is to be studied, it should also be quantitatively measured.**

- Dignity is simply a characteristic; it cannot be measured. Our dignity means that we should be shown recognition respect. We should measure the extent to which people feel they have been shown that respect.
- Since dignity is a feature of persons, and since people differ widely across places and cultures and times, we need to examine dignity not merely as we ourselves experience it, or not merely through careful argumentation, but also through empirical investigation of how others experience it.
- This is particularly true if we intend to understand how different development programs and processes relate to dignity, since only some people experience those programs, and since those people may not be in a position to make comparisons with the experiences of others.
- It is a commonplace of research methods debates that qualitative and quantitative methods each have their own strengths. We hope this argument persuades others to investigate dignity through all sorts of methods, including qualitative ones. However, we are particularly attracted to quantitative measurement.
- Quantitative measurement will allow us to compare experiences across different programs and different contexts.
- As a practical matter, favoring quantitative measurement also acknowledges that quantitative measures are favored by the development sector, and that we are more likely to achieve change in development if we can associate their programs with a change in a quantitative measure.
- Determining how to measure dignity quantitatively depends greatly on how one defines it, which we describe in the preceding section.
- Quantitative measurement will necessarily mean looking at the average experience of many people. In conducting our research, we will need to take steps to ensure that we ourselves properly respect the individuality (and autonomy and equality) of our respondents.

## **Preparing to measure dignity**

This concept paper has been prepared in order to provide the definitions and supporting arguments necessary to develop measures of dignity. Once we have reached a definition that attracts sufficient consensus, we can begin to develop those measures. In doing so, a range of challenges loom. Multiple measures will be needed, including a questionnaire that assesses people's reactions to a particular interaction, a questionnaire that allows for a self-evaluation of whether people feel they are generally treated in a manner that is respectful of their dignity, and ultimately an incentivized-response measure. Treatment that is respectful of dignity may vary by culture, and we will have to carefully contextualize measures – and then carefully translate them. More challenges will surely present themselves along the way. Solving them is the next phase of this work.

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