

# The Dignity Project: Respectful Development

PhD Research Proposal by Tom Wein

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## Summary:

Many development organizations state that they wish to treat their beneficiaries with dignity. How can we assess whether these efforts are successful? At present, there is not a standard measure of dignity in development. This project will develop new outcome variables to account for dignity in development.

Aid priorities follow what can be measured, so if there is something important to people's lives, we should measure it. We've made strides in measuring wellbeing, capabilities, and even stress. We talk about dignity all the time, and it is a crucial concept - the philosophical underpinning of egalitarianism and rights, and of many approaches to research ethics. Yet we rarely define it, and right now we don't measure it. This PhD will address those hurdles of definition and measurement. It will do so through conceptual and qualitative research, followed by the development of two survey measures and an incentive compatible behavioral game.

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## Motivation:

Development aims to give people better lives. In doing so, we mainly aim to increase wealth and health – in part because we can measure those outcomes with ease. But there’s more to a good life than spare cash and extra years. We’ve made strides in measuring wellbeing, capabilities, and even stress. If there is something important to people’s lives, we should measure it. After all, donors will fund only what we can measure.

One glaring hole stands out: we often ask each other if our programs respect people’s dignity – but do not ask those who actually use the program. When it comes to dignity, we could develop measurement tools to make that easy – but we haven’t, at least not yet. That’s in part because we often can’t even agree what dignity means (Wein, 2018a). This PhD will address those hurdles of definition and measurement.

## Research questions:

The principal research question is:

***How should the respectfulness of a development program be measured?***

Supporting this are a number of other questions:

1. How is dignity to be defined?
2. What are the principal routes through which respect for dignity is practiced?
3. How can proximate reactions to the respectfulness of a development program be measured?
4. How can a generalized sense of respectedness be measured through surveys?
5. How can a generalized sense of respectedness be measured through incentive compatible measures?

## Literature:

In the sections below, I discuss definitions of dignity, including those concepts that are commonly discussed but which do not form part of this study. I then discuss respectfulness as the corollary of dignity. I then offer a discussion from the literature on why we should study dignity, and finally why we should measure it, anticipating some likely critiques.

### Definitions of dignity

There are many definitions of dignity, and we sometimes mean several of them simultaneously, which is why it has been termed “multivocal” (LaVaque-Manty, in Debes, 2017). Ideas of dignity draw on a whole host of intellectual traditions (Debes, 2017). 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'. I am talking about moralized rather than merit-based dignity (Debes, 2017). 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, in Debes, 2017).

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, in Debes, 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).

I am 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'. '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 judgement about how much respect they are due (Debes, 2017). 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.

## Alternative conceptions of dignity

Many other conceptions of dignity have been suggested. Here I note several that I do not think should take priority for this project.

First, our conception of dignity is not particularly that of Immanuel Kant. While I recognize the strong tradition of grounding dignity in reason, Kant's conception is more merit-based than is commonly understood (Sensen, in Debes, 2017). I 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, in Grimm, 2017).

I do not believe that humans have dignity because of their role as stewards of the environment (Kateb, 2014). I 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).

## Pinning down respectfulness

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. 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, in Grimm, 2017). There are several possible ways of identifying when this has happened. We are inclined to tentatively suggest that this is done by recognising someone's autonomy, individuality and equality. However, determining this is an important question for this research project.

By saying that respectfulness is a matter for subjective evaluation, I am 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.

There remains scholarly dispute about which agents have dignity (Nussbaum, 2006), but I do not attempt to resolve it here. Anyone who has the capability to take part in our research will also be assumed to have dignity.

## Why study dignity

Dignity is much discussed. Claims are often made that particular initiatives or programs respect people's dignity – or fail to do so. Yet it is rarely defined, and many people mean many different things by it (LaVaque-Manty, in Debes, 2017). Consequently few of those claims can be properly assessed (Holloway & Grandi, 2018; see Wein, 2018a for a collection of examples). The idea of dignity underpins egalitarianism (Debes, 2017), which is one of the underlying moral assumptions of international development. Development processes and programmes have inherent power imbalances (Ferguson, 1990). 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 promising impacts. 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 (Debes, 2009). Dignity is less discussed in applied research ethics – it is not mentioned in the Nuremberg Code or Belmont Report, and is mentioned only once in the WMA Helsinki Declaration (HHS.gov, 2016). However, it or some similar concept is surely implicit in the general calls for respect for human subjects in all fields of research.

## Considering measurement

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 (Chambers, 2007). Some of the most prominent of these lines of research are capabilities and happiness (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 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 current measures do not capture enough of what is important to human flourishing (Coyle, 2014). 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.

## Methodology:

Beyond the literature review, there are three primary research components to this project. For each of these, the table below defines the associated research questions and a proposed method. Individual tasks and expected timelines are detailed in the following section, ‘Plan’.

Phase	Research Questions	Method notes	Main steps
Qualitative Research	<p>How is dignity to be defined?</p> <p>What are the principal routes through which respect for dignity is practiced?</p>	<p>The many inequalities in contemporary scholarship will mean that my literature review will inevitably focus on Western philosophical traditions, and may discount the perspectives of those who development seeks to benefit (Ampofo, 2016) - in ways that will damage the development of measures (Scott, 1999). To correct for that in developing definitions, I will conduct a qualitative research phase.</p> <p>I will conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with a number of Kenyans who currently benefit from an aid program, and a number of staff at organisations which explicitly espouse dignity as an objective in their work.</p> <p>I will be following the general procedure detailed by Hennink et al</p>	<p>Approximately 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 15 with those who benefit from an aid program.</li> <li>- 10 with those working in organisations that espouse dignity.</li> </ul> <p>Analysis through Grounded Theory.</p>

		<p>(2010). I will develop and translate a question guide, with interviews being conducted in Kiswahili by an experienced qualitative interviewer. Interviews will be conducted until theoretical saturation has been reached. They will be transcribed in English, and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz &amp; Belgrave, 2007). This approach will help fulfil the aim of correcting for biases in the existing theoretical frameworks by allowing codes, concepts and categories to emerge during the analysis procedure.</p>	
<p>Developing survey measures</p>	<p>How can proximate reactions to the respectfulness of a development program be measured?</p> <p>How can a generalized sense of respectedness be measured through surveys?</p>	<p>Following the guidelines laid out by Devellis (2016), for each of the two measures, I will draw on the theoretical foundations laid by the literature review in order to develop an item pool and validation items, and then review those items with colleagues and through 5-8 cognitive interviews (Collins, 2003) with low-income Nairobians.</p> <p>The resulting items would be translated and programmed, and then administered to a sample of approximately 300 low-income Nairobians. From the resulting data, I would calculate item-scale correlations, item variances and item means, and undertake factor analysis, allowing me to determine the main or leading items to be included in the scales. Then, I would test for reliability by calculating alpha. Where alpha is sufficiently high, I would then minimize the length of scale (Devellis, 2016).</p>	<p>Development of Survey Measure 1 and Survey Measure 2 item pool.</p> <p>Translation and back translation into Kiswahili.</p> <p>Cognitive interviewing and debriefs to assess and revise the survey measures.</p> <p>Programming of survey measures in ODK.</p> <p>Pre-testing of survey measures with 300 respondents.</p> <p>Validity and reliability tests.</p>
<p>Developing incentive compatible measure</p>	<p>How can a generalized sense of respectedness be measured through incentive compatible measures?</p>	<p>Survey measures can tell us much, but measurement is more accurate when it is 'incentive compatible' - that is, when people are incentivised to reveal their true answer. Behavioral games are often designed to elicit these true preferences, and are now widely used across experimental economics (Camerer, 2011) to address a huge range of research questions (Gintis, 2009). An incentive compatible measure of respectfulness can be used to diminish the strong social desirability bias associated with being asked to evaluate an aid-giver. Options are likely to include the range of incentive-compatible belief elicitation approaches surveyed by Schotter &amp; Trevino (2014).</p> <p>Construct and content validity will be assessed through a review of the method by those who took part in the qualitative research phase. Reliability will be assessed through a test-retest method in which participants repeatedly take the test until learning effects tail off, and then the final two tests are compared. Upon completion, they will also undertake an exit survey checking comprehension.</p>	<p>Development of incentive compatible measure.</p> <p>Validity assessment with qualitative participants.</p> <p>Translation into Kiswahili and backtranslation.</p> <p>Programming of survey measure in oTree. Development of accompanying lab administration protocol.</p> <p>'Dry' piloting to ensure it functions correctly.</p>

		<p>The development and testing of the laboratory measures will most likely be done at the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics - my former employer. They have a pool of approximately 12,000 respondents from low-income areas of Nairobi, who can be invited to take part in sessions. Their approach is described in Haushofer et al, 2014. It would most likely be programmed in oTree (Chen et al, 2016).</p>	<p>'Wet' piloting with subjects to assess reliability, with comprehension checks.</p>
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## Plan:

There are five phases to this proposed project:

1. Project Management
2. Literature Review
3. Qualitative Research
4. Developing measures
5. Writing up and communication

A 36-month plan is summarised below, with task breakdowns for each month provided in the accompanying [Google Sheet Gantt chart](#).

Phase	Year 1								Year 2								Year 3																											
	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug								
1. Project Management	[Red bar]																																											
2. Literature Review	[Yellow bar]																																											
3. Qualitative Research																	[Green bar]																											
4. Developing measures																	[Blue bar]																											
5. Write up & communication																									[Orange bar]																			

## Ethical considerations:

As with all human subjects research, this project would involve certain risks, as well as benefits, to the participants. These are briefly outlined below; naturally this will be further expanded in applying for IRB and local governmental approvals.

Participants would have the opportunity to reflect and express their feelings about aid and its processes. They would also have the chance to influence international development in a way which is more respectful of their needs.

**Risk 1:** However, in doing so, they might be reliving incidences of humiliation or disrespect. This could compound those experiences. This will be principally addressed through additional training to interviewers in building a sympathetic rapport and a proper debriefing period, as well as alerting participants to any currently available 'helpline' or support resources.

**Risk 2:** Participants may be being invited to criticise powerful aid organisations, on whom they may depend. Research must be conducted by independent researchers, with proper anonymization procedures in place before any data is shared.

**Risk 3:** I may fail to respect the dignity of our participants in the course of our own research. Quantitative measurement will necessarily mean looking at the average experience of many people. In conducting our research, I will need to take steps to ensure that I myself properly respect participants.

## Outcomes and impact:

Dignity is undervalued in international development practice and research. By developing measures of respectfulness, there is the an opportunity to change international development practice. Demonstrable impact on research and practice are essential to my own criteria for judging the project's success, and I have budgeted time to pursue that.

Though outcomes and impact can be hard to predict, I expect four main effects to flow from this research:

**Outcome 1:** A clear definition of dignity has the potential to significantly clarify academic and practitioner debates in international development.

**Outcome 2:** A definition of dignity and an approach to measurement of respectfulness which incorporates the voices of aid recipients has the potential to ensure such debates are centred on the frames and experiences of aid recipients.

**Outcome 3:** Simple to use measures of respectfulness have the potential to greatly increase the inclusion of respectfulness as an outcome in academic research and M&E for development programs.

**Outcome 4:** Widely used measures of respectfulness have the potential to move development towards greater respectfulness.

## Author background:

I have been leading social science research in developing countries for ten years. In total, I have led 18 mixed methods social science research projects and contributed to 14 more. At the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, I led large teams in a six-country portfolio of research worth \$1.7m. At the same time, I also won \$1.5m in new funding, and wrote widely. I hold degrees in War Studies (1st, KCL, 2009) and in Communication for Development ('A', Malmö University, 2018).

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Some of the key citations I will be drawing on in the course of this project are:

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