RESEARCH REFLECTIONS

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Is Dignity Earned or Inherent? From Psychological and Philosophical Counselling to Dignity for All

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Abstract

'Dignity' is a pivotal concept in mental health, with contradictory meanings. A new taxonomy is recommended: 'respectability' for its ***realistic*** sense regarding the personal and social attitudes toward oneself and others; and 'reverence' for its ***idealistic*** sense of universally valuing all humans equally, so as to work toward the ethical goal of "dignity for all."

To promote 'dignity for all,' it is necessary to make psychological/philosophical counselling and teaching more accessible, eliminate poverty globally, promote cooperation instead of competition, fight against all forms of discrimination, and raise awareness about personal and social respectability and reverence. Humans could then devote more time to the creative work of beauty and leave drudgery work to artificial intelligence and robots - to answer Nietzsche's denunciation of the dignity of (hu)man and the dignity of work as *"the feeble products of a slavery that hides from itself."*

Key words:

Dignity, respectability, reverence, psychological/philosophical counselling, artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

'Dignity' is a crucially important construct in mental health, human rights, and social justice. Although 'dignity' is commonly conceptualized as inherent, inviolable, and universally possessed by all human beings from birth until death, this view has been contested by those who argue that dignity is neither fixed nor universal, but rather contingent on individual circumstances and societal structures. For

instance, former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon once asserted that “those at the bottom of the economic ladder lack dignity, and it is the job of the rest of the world to help give it to them.” (Glennie, 2015)

These contrasting views invite critical inquiry: Can dignity be restored or fostered through psychological and philosophical counselling? What, in fact, does dignity mean? Is “dignity for all” an achievable societal goal or a fanciful utopian aspiration? This paper seeks to explore and clarify these issues through psychological, philosophical, and socio-political lenses.

2. Psychological Counselling for Fostering Dignity

Olga Balabukha, as a psychotherapist, had the following case in her practice:

> *One client, whom I will refer to as Anna (a pseudonym), was a woman in her thirties with a long history of alcohol dependency. She was brought to therapy by her mother, a controlling and authoritarian figure employed as a manager at a large enterprise. Anna had spent her entire life living with her mother, had never been in a romantic relationship, and remained unmarried. Her professional life was similarly entangled—she worked directly under her mother’s supervision. During therapy, Anna disclosed numerous instances of childhood psychological trauma, two of which are particularly illustrative.*
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> *The first occurred when Anna was approximately ten years old. Her mother would give her a small amount of money for lunch each school day. Anna, having long desired a specific toy that her mother refused to buy, began saving the money by skipping lunch. When her plan was discovered, her mother punished her by shaving her head and declaring that she must “remember this lesson forever.”*
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> *The second traumatic event took place in Anna’s final year of high school. One November evening, she and a friend accepted a ride from an acquaintance. They were subsequently abducted and held for three days in an abandoned house, where they were subjected to severe (sexual) abuse by a group of young men. After managing to escape, Anna returned home - exhausted, traumatized, and physically disheveled. Rather than receiving empathy, she was met with contempt. Her mother, upon seeing her, responded: “Go back to where you came from. I don’t need a daughter like you.”*

In addition to these extreme incidents, Anna was subjected to daily emotional abuse and humiliation by her mother, which she had come to accept as her "normal" life. When confronted in therapy, the mother expressed no remorse and insisted that her methods were merely effective parenting strategies designed to instill discipline.

These cumulative traumas severely impaired Anna's capacity to develop a stable sense of personal dignity. She internalized feelings of worthlessness and unlovability, which ultimately contributed to her reliance on alcohol as a means of emotional escape. Thus, she demonstrated no genuine desire to pursue recovery. Her mother too never acknowledged her harmful behavior and was unwilling to change. Under these circumstances, it was not possible to meaningfully address Anna's alcoholism nor to foster her self-respect or social dignity. As Spanish psychiatrist Ben Wright et. al. (2025) stated in their comprehensive review of psychotherapy:

> *If the person chooses to value themselves, the therapist can then explore behaviours that are congruent with this value (speaking kindly to themselves, avoiding self-attack and self-harm, behaving in a caring way to themselves irrespective of how hateful they feel, etc.). This usually results in rapid clinical improvement.*

Given the widespread erosion of human dignity in contexts ranging from interpersonal relationships to global politics, many individuals unsurprisingly struggle to value themselves while grappling with existential dilemmas—with or without a diagnosed mental health condition. Consultation with philosophers, alongside psychotherapists, may offer additional avenues for insight and healing.

3. Philosophical Counselling and the Pursuit of Human Dignity

Philosophical counselling, also called clinical philosophy, is a contemporary movement that emerged in the 1980s as a distinct form of therapeutic practice, although its roots lie in the traditions of ancient philosophy. The concerns addressed in philosophical counselling span a wide range of human experiences: midlife crises, interpersonal conflicts, familial discord, occupational dissatisfaction, experiences of meaninglessness, and even symptoms resembling anxiety and depression. As Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) once put it, the task of philosophy is "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" - a metaphor that also captures the central objective of philosophical counselling: to liberate individuals from conceptual confusion and existential entrapment.

Ran Lahav (1993), an Israeli-born American philosopher and leading figure in the field, illustrates this

approach with a case titled “The Concept of Choice”:

> *A woman in her thirties presented with deep anxiety over her inability to choose a career. Having pursued multiple paths simultaneously—as an “eternal student” and an amateur artist—she felt trapped and paralyzed. She frequently expressed her predicament in terms such as “I don’t know what I really want” and “I don’t know what I ought to do.” Lahav observed that her language presupposed the existence of a pre-given truth about her destiny—an internal, discoverable desire or a moral obligation—and that her task was to uncover it. He suggested instead that her problem might not be epistemic (a matter of knowing) but existential: the challenge of creating meaning through choice, rather than discovering it.*
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> *Although initially unsettled by this reframing, the client eventually recognized that, absent an objective mandate, there was no “right” or “wrong” choice—only the opportunity to make a personally fulfilling one. The counselling process then shifted from identifying what she “should” do to exploring which path would be most meaningful. Over the course of six one-hour sessions, she came to clarify her options and engage more confidently with the process of self-determination.*

In reality, everyone is likely to encounter psychological trauma and challenging life decisions at some point. Even the most celebrated artists, writers, and intellectuals have struggled with existential despair, anxiety, and depression - some to the point of suicide (Stone 2020). Engaging in philosophical reflection to commit to what Socrates called “the examined life” can contribute not only to intellectual clarity, but also to emotional resilience, psychological well-being, and the cultivation of human dignity.

4. A Taxonomy of Dignity

In therapeutic settings, as the above examples show, ‘dignity’ has to be “mercurial” - fluid, variable, and dependent on context, as the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* aptly notes - so that those who feel their sense of dignity needs boosting can do so. The dominant normative framework, on the other hand, depicts dignity as inherent and equal in all persons, simply by virtue of their humanity. How should we then make sense of these different conceptions of dignity? Are they compatible, or are they contradicting each other? The following taxonomy is therefore proposed to clarify the two complementary yet distinct dimensions of dignity, using the term *respectability* for its realistic sense, and *reverence* for its idealistic sense.

a) Respectability: Dignity in the Realistic Sense

Respectability, or dignity in the realistic sense, is first and foremost an internal, emotional feeling or rational belief in one's self-worth and the importance of one's own being. It refers to the contingent, evolving aspects of dignity i.e. how individuals acquire, lose, or maintain their sense of self-esteem, identity, confidence, and respect throughout their lives. In contrast to this personal respectability, social respectability is concerned with how individuals manifest their dignity (or indignity) to others, or how dignity is affirmed or undermined by others.

These two personal and social domains are mutually reinforcing. As Nora Jacobson (2012) explained in *Dignity and Health*:

> *In these hard times of global financial peril and growing social inequality, injuries to dignity are pervasive. 'Indignity has many faces,' one man told Nora Jacobson… Yet dignity can also be promoted. Another man described it as 'common respect,' suggesting dignity's ordinariness, and the ways we can create and share it through practices like courtesy, leveling, and contribution.*

Dignity, in this realistic sense, is "a moral matter embedded in the choices we make every day." Yet many people - especially those from marginalized or vulnerable groups - are denied the basic conditions in which personal respectability can take root. As Polonko and Lombardo (2005) emphasized:

> *Throughout the world, literally hundreds of millions of children continue to be victims of the most egregious forms of exploitation, violence, abuse, and neglect… One of the bottom lines underlying all of these forms of child maltreatment is the fact that children constitute an oppressed group and are still not accorded basic human rights.*

A child's dignity does not spontaneously emerge at birth; it must be nurtured within a supportive micro- and macro-social environment - comprising caregivers, educational systems, media, and broader society. Without this foundation, the development of dignity may be stunted or delayed. However, as Finnish nursing scholar Katie Eriksson's ontological model suggests, the human condition is characterized by dynamic tension (Saeteren & Naden, 2021):

> *Life is movement. Human beings live in a dialectical movement between different binary opposites such as life and death, health and suffering, and dignity and indignity. To balance*

these opposites is the human being's responsibility and represents his personal life struggle.

Indeed, even in the face of immense suffering, everyone is responsible for finding meaning in one's own life. Frankl (1963) urges us to always retain the freedom to choose our attitude and how we respond to those circumstances. This is where philosophical self-reflection comes in. Mr. Bruce Muir's story attests to the possibility of such remarkable self-transformation:

> *I was adopted by my adoptive parents at the age of 8 months, and yet the adoptive mother couldn't love me no matter how much I tried to please her e.g, to be a top student in my class or by excelling in sports. So, I knew I was unlovable and ugly as my mother told me. I began hiding and lying, feeling ashamed, and developed a severe drug and alcohol problem by the age of fifteen. I quit school and married by seventeen.*
>
> *Perhaps what saved me was that my parents instilled some wonderful values: to know how to work, never to quit, to be fiercely independent, and to love reading and music. Although I seriously contemplated suicide – by driving my car into a concrete bridge – I realized at that moment that I'd better pull myself out to make my life meaningful. I asked myself if I wanted to live, and the answer that came from somewhere deep inside of myself surprised me… "Yes, I want to live, but not like this. I cannot live like this!"*
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> *I decided to find out how I might live and entered drug and alcohol residential treatment. Eventually, I went back to school, completed a master's degree in counselling psychology, and became a successful psychological/existential therapist.*

b) Reverence: Dignity in the Idealistic Sense

The dominant conception of dignity as inherent, equal, and inalienable owes much to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who argued that human dignity arises from our status as autonomous, rational agents. Because we are capable of moral deliberation and self-governance, we must be treated as ends in ourselves, never merely as means. On this view, dignity is absolute, incalculable, and universal (Hill, 2014; Killmister, 2020; McManus, 2004; Debes, 2023).

Kant's theory undergirds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which declares:

> *…recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.*

Yet Kant's emphasis on rational autonomy excludes or marginalizes those who lack full rational capacity, such as infants or individuals with cognitive impairments. To account for such cases, philosopher Suzy Killmister (2020) conceives 'status dignity' as follows:

> *[Status dignity] does not come in degrees: everyone who holds status dignity in virtue of membership in a particular social category holds status dignity to the same degree…*

Realistically, however, status dignity may vary in practice, since, e.g., a 2023 British Social Attitudes survey found that only 54% of respondents viewed the monarchy as important, compared to 86% in 1983, suggesting that status-based reverence is culturally contingent. During his graduate studies, moreover, the author took a course with a professor who, despite his formal status, failed to command the respect of his students due to repeated tardiness, incoherence in lectures, and a lack of professionalism. Therefore, status dignity, like social respectability, can fluctuate depending on interpersonal recognition, cultural values, and social settings.

Nevertheless, it is important that the ideal of equal human dignity be upheld as a moral imperative. As Thomas E. Hill (2014) writes:

> *We must act as if we were both law-makers and subjects in an ideal moral commonwealth… In treating humanity as an end in itself… we give appropriate recognition to the autonomy of each person… The fundamental moral law that affirms human dignity has practical implications for both law and individual ethical choices.*

In this light, the universality of human dignity should be revered and actively promoted as a guiding ideal for human flourishing, moral action, and societal peace. This is not because all of us are rational, but because we live in an interconnected and mutually-impacting world with finite resources. The future of humanity depends on the degree to which this ideal is realized in the structures and relationships that shape our world.

5. Is Dignity for All possible?

In view of the dominance of individualism, neoliberalism, nationalism, authoritarianism, colonialism, etc., to incessantly engage in selfish power politics at all levels of human relations both domestically and internationally, it is not surprising that human rights, social justice, and economic security are constantly violated in many parts of the world. Dignity for all can thus be dismissed as "a pie in the sky."

There is a glimmer of hope, however. For instance, there has been a multi-partner, non-partisan Dignity for All campaign co-organized by Citizens for Public Justice and Canada Without Poverty between 2009-2018, with a vision to create a poverty-free and more socially secure and cohesive Canada. Eliminating poverty is definitely the first step toward the ideal of "Dignity for All," although eliminating homelessness, for example, needs to deal with complex individual (e.g., substance abuse, relationship conflicts and mental health issues) and structural (e.g., transitions from foster care and institutional settings into the community) factors - according to McGill University psychiatrist Myra Piat et al. (2014).

Then, there is a far bigger challenge for humanity to engage in a paradigm shift from competition to cooperation. However, as reported by the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights (2024), "Canada is failing to tackle its housing and homelessness crisis, and the international community is watching." In spite of the above, Darlene O'Leary (2019), the author of *10 Years of pursuing Dignity for All*, stated optimistically: "We *can* achieve dignity for all!" Until that happens, however, dignity for all will remain a pipe dream for us.

6. Conclusion

Dignity has many faces. It's necessary, therefore, to explicate a coherent taxonomy to show how to make sense of various meanings of dignity. First and foremost, 'dignity' is conceptualized descriptively and realistically as 'respectability' and relates to: a) personal emotional feelings and rational senses of self-worth, self-respect, self-knowledge and self-identity; and b) social aspects such as how one projects one's sense of dignity to others, and how others treat you with or without respect. Additionally, 'dignity' is also used normatively and idealistically as 'reverence' to denote how one should treat oneself and all others with universal respect, in order to promote the ideal of "dignity for all." In this interconnected and finite world, all of us should uphold this ideal moral principle for humanity, so as to promote "dignity for all" in the world where dignity is not universally valued.

Psychological and philosophical counselling and teaching should be made more accessible in order to foster human dignity. With the advent of automation and artificial intelligence, it becomes increasingly possible to delegate drudgery and dangerous/challenging works to robotics and intelligent machines, so that most of us could pursue our own creative work of beauty according to our personal interest and ability - as Nietzsche had urged us (Orwell1627, 2016). To make that happen,

we need to share our income and wealth more equitably, e.g., through universal livable income for all. That is the ethical challenge we must face, and the success or failure to meet that challenge will determine the future of humanity.

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