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Human dignity in concept and practice

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Abstract Dignity seems to be something that virtually all people want. It is a seminal expression of the human experience that gains authority through the convergent demands of people worldwide. Even so, the human dignity concept is in unhelpful disarray. Dignity is variously viewed as an antecedent, a consequence, a value, a principle, and an experience, from philosophical, legal, pragmatic, psychological, behavioral, and cultural perspectives. We ask which if any of these human dignity concepts will likely serve our global common interests best, as both common ground and policy diagnostic? We examine four broad themes: dignity as (1) a metaphysical justification for human rights and duties, (2) virtuous comportment or behavior, (3) a perspective of "other," and (4) a subjective experience of the individual, contingent on a broad and equitable sharing of values. We recommend viewing dignity as a commonwealth of individually assessed well-being, shaped by relationships with others, affected by the physical world, and framed in terms of values. Viewed this way, the idea of dignity accommodates the priorities of both individualistic and communitarian cultures. Conceiving of human dignity as a commonwealth of subjectively experienced value production and enjoyment has many practical policy implications.

Keywords Human dignity · Human rights · Commonwealth · Policy · Values · Lasswell

Introduction

Human dignity is an idea that is often invoked in human affairs. It has deep emotional appeal in diverse cultures worldwide (Howard and Donnelly 1986; Donnelly 1989) and in peoples'

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daily experience through notions such as honor and respect (Kamir 2002; Statman 2002). The widespread psychological and intellectual resonance of dignity may explain the frequent, forceful calls for the use of dignity as a concept and practice to guide and judge the conduct of individuals, organizations, and governments. Historically, dignity was a seminal idea in the Bible, the Qur'an, and the philosophical works of Cicero, von Pufendorf, Locke, and Kant. Contemporarily, it has been central to major national and international policies (see Lasswell and McDougal 1992, pp. 725–786). The ensemble "International Bill of Rights," the most authoritative international call for greater human dignity, consists of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, and its companion *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (Eckert 2002; Ritschl 2002; Weston 2008). Yet debate continues about how to understand and implement human dignity and rights instruments (Weston 2008; see footnote 13, pp. 322–324). More concretely, many people in the world today continue to live with indignity by anyone's standards—with hunger, fear, violence, or limited health care and education.

Our goal and method

Our goal here is to examine prevailing conceptions of human dignity for their usefulness as global common ground and as a diagnostic, practically, and at all scales (individual to international). We start by outlining major conceptions of dignity and then we highlight a concept of human dignity developed by Harold D. Lasswell and colleagues (Lasswell and McDougal 1992), which is based on ideas about values—their production, sharing, and enjoyment. We do not exhaustively review the range of philosophical perspectives in currency today. Instead, we emphasize and build on the dignity concept as articulated by Lasswell, hopefully in support of improved practical outcomes of policy processes everywhere. Our interest is also not in "rights," as such, although the concepts of rights and dignity are historically intertwined (see references in this paper). More fundamentally, we seek to clarify our own standpoint regarding the human dignity concept in ways that we hope are helpful to others. Our examination of human dignity is both informed and limited by our individual lived experiences.

We use the principle of sufficiency to guide our thinking about human dignity in concept and practice. Kaplan (1958) and Shils (1958) eloquently articulated pitfalls of ideology and the related urge by many people to specify concepts exactly and reach definitional closure. Ideological rigidity is insensitive to context and indifferent to the unique circumstances of situations and people, thus often resulting in incivility and indignity for many. Yet some degree of shared inter-subjective understanding of the world and its key symbols is needed in order for both policy participants and policy analysts to collectively orient to situations realistically. We seek balance between these two considerations in our provisional understanding of human dignity. We seek an understanding that fosters a collective orientation in the service of dignity-enhancing outcomes, yet allows those individuals affected to specify what forms dignity will take in specific contexts. In other words, we seek an understanding of dignity that is neither under- nor over-specified in concept (and definition) and is yet sufficient in practice to yield dignity in practical terms, in action.

The human dignity problem

Human dignity potentially serves as common ground in our efforts to identify and secure local to global common interests in an increasingly interconnected world. Human dignity comes as close as any notion to being a universal good (Schachter 1983). Logically, people need some shared understanding of human dignity if the concept is to serve instrumentally and practically as common ground. Appeals that simply rouse emotions can motivate and bring attention to issues, but such appeals may not provide enough orientation for people to negotiate widely supported and effective policies. Arousal by itself also does not entail discernment regarding the outcomes of behaviors, norms, and policies in people's daily lives. We assume that the global prospects for achieving a commonwealth of human dignity would be enhanced by a concept of dignity that allowed for broad participation and contextual sensitivity in application, yet was specific enough, transcending local contexts, to allow for a productive global conversation (see Weston 2008).

As we see it, the concept of human dignity is in such disarray that it does not provide even a minimally stable frame for global discourse and action (Freeman 1994; Ashcroft 2005; Caulfield and Chapman 2005). Much about this idea remains implicit or even contradictory, in the service of diverse and sometimes contra-dignity ends (Macklin 2003, 2004). Dignity is variously considered by diverse people to be an antecedent, a consequence, a value, a principle, an experience, and both a contingent and non-contingent exhibition. It is viewed from philosophical, legal, pragmatic, psychological, behavioral, and cultural perspectives. Some perspectives are marked by greater internal logical consistency than others. Some conceptions are more useful in practical terms as a policy diagnostic or as common ground in the pursuit of common interests. Despite the efforts of diverse authors to evaluate this body of thought on human dignity (e.g., Donnelly 1989; Freeman 1994), those involved in the global discourse about rights and dignity do not seem to be clear yet about which perspectives and conceptualizations might best serve dignity outcomes. We seek to aid, and hopefully, help clarify the concept and support meaningful, practical applications.

Comparison of conceptions and perspectives

We look at four conceptions of human dignity for achieving enhanced common ground and improved policies: (1) a metaphysical justification for human rights and duties, (2) virtuous comportment or behavior, (3) a socially and psychologically rooted perspective of "other," and (4) a subjective and felt experience. All of these conceptions are shaped, in some measure, by the divergent highly variable contexts of two different kinds of cultures, individualist and communitarian (Howard and Donnelly 1986; Park 1987; Kitayama and Rose Markus 2000; Suh 2000). Our examination supports our concluding discussion on the implications for the effective practice of human dignity policy, worldwide.

View #1: dignity as a justification for rights

Numerous philosophers and authoritative policies have asserted that humans are imbued with *intrinsic* worth or value, reckoned as dignity (e.g., as summarized in Beyleveld and Brownsword 1998; Arieli 2002; Cancik 2002; Starck 2002; Shultziner 2003). Moreover, human dignity—our intrinsic worth—arises from the specialness of humans. Constructed this way, the specialness of humans becomes a focus of attention. What is the nature of our uniqueness and where does it come from? Philosophers have speculated at great length about this question and, at least in the West, have converged on a general answer. Those in the lineage of Cicero, Hobbes, Locke, and Kant link our specialness to our capacity for reason and morality and thus our unique degree of autonomy (Donnelly 1982b, 1989;

Gaylin 1984; Cancik 2002; Häyry 2004). More ancient and yet persisting, the Judeo-Christian tradition asserts that our specialness arises from being created in the image of God (Gaylin 1984; Freeman 1994; Stetson 1998; Starck 2002; Häyry 2004). We are imparted a measure of God's dignity by virtue of this similarity. Our autonomy and related capacity for choice and morality are claimed by this view to be uniquely afforded to us by God, in the image of God. By this reasoning, Western philosophers and theologians have arrived at a more-or-less shared understanding of human specialness, imparting dignity.

Philosophers and sociologists have adopted two basic perspectives on the relation between human rights and human dignity, at least in the Western tradition. According to one construction, dignity *justifies* the bestowing of rights (Beyleveld and Brownsword 1998; Dicke 2002). Simply by being human we are all intrinsically special, thus, we deserve rights, that is, entitlements. These rights or entitlements are described by some as inalienable or unconditional (Dicke 2002), by others as conditional yet still strong claims (Donnelly 1982b). For most, rights are primarily considered to be claims by individuals on "the state," rather than claims by individuals on each other (Donnelly 1982a; Howard and Donnelly 1986; Künnemann 1995). States are seen as uniquely positioned to harm people, with implications for peoples' dignity. According to another construction, rights are a *means* to the end of realizing human dignity (Donnelly 1982a). In other words, rights enable us to develop fully those uniquely human traits of reason, morality, and autonomy. Here again rights are claims against the state made to insure that humans exercise autonomy (i.e., freedom) consistent with the realization of reason, morality, and autonomy (i.e., well-being; Gewirth 1978).

Despite being widely embraced in the West, these perspectives about dignity have major potential shortcomings in terms of logic, as a diagnostic of policies, and as common ground (Rorty 1993). First, if human dignity is intrinsic and inalienable, it provides no logical basis for the granting of rights or any other authoritative policies (Gewirth 1978). By this reasoning, there is nothing that anyone can do to deprive a person of his or her dignity. On the other hand, if rights and other policies are seen as a means of *realizing* human dignity, then the notion that dignity is wholly intrinsic needs to be revised. By this construction, dignity is a potentiality, not a fully developed condition (Donnelly 1982a, 1989; Dicke 2002). The *potential* is intrinsic, not the realization. If so, then our capacity for morality, which is contingent on autonomy and freedom, not only distinguishes us, but is also the goal of dignity-focused policies. Construed as a potentiality to be realized or protected, human dignity can serve both as a diagnostic and as an orientation for those involved in policy processes.

But major potential problems remain. For one, although the Western conception of human dignity and its relation to human rights is embraced by individualist cultures of Europe, North America, and elsewhere, it is not widely accepted by people in communitarian cultures of Asia and Islam (Howard and Donnelly 1986; Donnelly 1989; Park 1987). Communitarian cultures tend to emphasize peoples' duties and obligations rather than their rights (Howard and Donnelly 1986; Suh 2000). Dignity arises from fulfilling these obligations, typically involving acknowledgment by others. Duties are often to the state, as an embodiment of *collective* dignity. Personal dignity is also typically constructed around notions of honor, which is subject to being violated through public acts that diminish the standing of the self, reckoned relative to others. All of this entails concepts of dignity different from those that prevail in the West, with implications for the prescribing of rights and duties. The constitutions of China and the former Soviet Union are prime examples (Donnelly 1982a). Western notions of human dignity are indeed Western and, when considered in detail, do not provide ready common ground for a global discourse.

Moreover, when constructed as a *potential* condition, expressed in specific human traits or grounded in relations with the divine, human dignity is intrinsically *contingent*, which is antithetical to the universalist and *non-contingent* aspirations held by many in the West (Freeman 1994). The construction of dignity as a gift from God has been used to justify state intervention in private lives, under the claim that individuals have not fulfilled their obligations as trustees of their dignity, an outcome abhorrent to many who make non-deist universalist claims (Häyry 2004). And what happens to those people who adhere to different deities or none at all? Are they also irresponsible trustees to be suborned and disciplined? On the other hand, if dignity is derived strictly from our capacity for reason, morality, and autonomy, then what about those people who intrinsically have less capacity, such as infants, children, the mentally ill, the mentally handicapped, or even the physically disabled (Häyry 2004)? By our assessment, those who have tried to resolve these issues have engaged in complex logic that leaves them either expressly dissatisfied or in the end prone to triumphant but unconvincing leaps of logic (e.g., Gaylin 1984).

These aspects of Western concepts of human dignity have been resolved by policy makers in what may be a pragmatic fashion. In virtually all the international declarations, policy makers have cut the Gordian knot simply by declaring that all humans have dignity, or by asserting the ultimate "value" of dignity (Schachter 1983; Ishay 2004). The same holds for many national-level policies, including German law (Eckert 2002; Klein 2002). These assertions are axiomatic, without specifying where dignity comes from, its attributes in detail, or even its specific implications (Donnelly 1989; Igantieff 2001; Shultziner 2003). Moreover, dignity is typically used only as an over-arching rubric, explicitly referenced once or twice, without further specification in the details of the prescriptions or policies (see summaries in Ishay 2004). Used this way, dignity serves as a rallying cry and unifying aspiration largely because it is *not* specified (Igantieff 2001). This may have served the purposes of those involved in historic policy processes, but such ambiguity does not serve the purposes of policy analysts in judging the intent and outcomes of policies. Nor does ambiguity serve the purposes of those who would like to see human dignity serve a more expressly prescriptive purpose. We do not think that the notion of intrinsic dignity, as historically employed to justify human rights, offers much to those diagnosing policy or specifying universal common ground.

View #2: dignity as virtuous comportment

Dignity has been identified since ancient times with specific behaviors or comportments and also, more often historically, with certain roles and identifications (Cancik 2002; Häyry 2004). By this conception dignity is *earned* or *expressed* in terms that are socially and culturally relevant to others (Stetson 1998; Shultziner 2003). This kind of dignity is closely identified with virtue and virtuous conduct, signified by the esteem of others (Beyleveld and Brownsword 1998; Meyer 2002). In this sense dignity is socially constructed around the presentation of the individual's *self* and the reciprocal response of others. As to the general nature of dignified behavior, there have been attempts to describe it. Perhaps the most convincing of these has described dignity as a balanced exhibition of demanded rights and completed duties (Stetson 1998). In other words, a dignified person is neither obsequious nor ostentatious, neither slavish nor domineering. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King have been offered as examples (Meyer 2002). Those who advocate this concept of dignity claim that its widespread fulfillment would in fact make a better world for all, in part by granting equal standing to responsibilities and rights (Beyleveld and Brownsword 1998). This conceptualization is potentially prescriptive as well as contextual, in the sense that it allows for different cultural and societal notions about the dignified balance between entitlements and duties.

Conceiving of dignity as virtue also has significant limitations. It says much about the behavior of individuals and little explicitly about relations between individuals and the state. What are the duties of the individual to the state and of the state to the individual? It also offers little to inform or judge the efficacy of policy making, except perhaps to the extent that it can be used to judge whether policies might foster dignified behavior or punish its opposite. But still, is dignity only about human behaviors? Other understandings of dignity (see below) suggest that physical and psychological deprivations are very germane, as is society's distribution of power and wealth, whether or not it is directly attributable to the dignified or undignified conduct of individuals. Perhaps by stretching the point one could argue that indignities often originate somewhere in undignified behaviors. But this kind of stretching is perhaps more about defending a conceptual position than finding a useful and potentially unifying framework.

View #3: dignity as a perspective of other people

A third conception of dignity relates to the extent that *self* ascribes dignity to *other*, independent of others' conduct (Ritschl 2002). This is related to the first two conceptions, but it is worth differentiating because of its social and psychological implications. This perspective of others, based on the bestowing of dignity, is not the same as a philosophical stance (although potentially informed and sustained by one), nor is it the same as others earning dignity through virtuous conduct (Honneth 1992; Chochinov et al. 2004). It is about an initial, in some measure intrinsic, perspective of others that shapes social interactions and has significant implications for how people treat each other.

This concept of dignity is intimately related to group dynamics and the process of stereotyping. Dignity, or intrinsic worth, is often afforded to those with full standing as "humans," typically those who are part of a stereotypic in-group (Bandura 2002; Haslam 2006). Outsiders are typically considered less than fully human, with lesser claims to dignity. This group-delimited difference in a person's bestowal of dignity is often the basis for demonization and, ultimately, persecution of out-group members (e.g., Koonz 2003). The self-constructed denial or deprivation of others' dignity is typically part of the conditioning that allows soldiers to kill "the enemy" (Igantieff 1998) and torturers to distance themselves from their victims (Conroy 2000). This dehumanization has been described *ad nauseum* for notorious episodes of abuse, genocide, and torture, including the dynamics that prevailed in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, and more recently Rwanda and Darfur (e.g., Glover 1999).

In contrast, the inclusive granting of dignity to others by the individual has been equated by Shalom Schwartz with "a broad moral universe," motivated by valuing universalism (Schwartz 2007) and, according to Glover (1999), sustained by moral resources. Universalism has been associated with altruism, both humanistic and biospheric (Schultz 2000, 2001), meaning that granting dignity to others can be accompanied not only by a willingness to sacrifice oneself in the service of others, but also by affording dignity to other species. Some philosophers object to such broad endowment, reserving the notion of dignity for humans alone on the basis of principle (Stetson 1998). Yet, in practice the open and generous personality that is inclined to treat animals "with dignity" is also often the type of personality inclined to grant full dignity to all sorts of humans. Such a person's perspective is typified by respect for others, which, along with universalism, is a value that has been closely identified with the conditions that are necessary for the realization of human dignity (McDougal et al. 1980).

This notion of dignity is largely about psychologically-rooted perspectives shaping and being shaped in turn by social dynamics (Honneth 1992; Chochinov et al. 2004). Clearly, how we each afford dignity to others affects our daily behaviors and, if we are voters or policy makers, it also informs the content of our policies. However, this conception does not say anything explicit or diagnostic about the elements of others' dignity. As an analyst, one might consider the psychological and social dynamics of affording dignity to others to be critical. And, at the same time not be able to specify how people were constructing these bestowals, or what constituted dignity-granting versus dignity-depriving actions from the perspective of self, much less from the perspective of others. For those interested in promoting human dignity, the granting of dignity by states or by individuals to others seems more a desired outcome or effect rather than a useful diagnostic or basis for broad common ground.

View #4: dignity as a subjective experience

We find it interesting that although the notion of dignity as a subjective human experience is pervasively implicit to the discourse of human rights and dignity, it is rarely addressed outright. In fact, the subjective experience might be considered central to dignity, in that each human is the final arbiter, both as someone affecting others and being affected in turn (Honneth 1992; Johnson 1998; Igantieff 2001; Statman 2002; Pullman 2004). Given that our individual subjective experience is a key element of our ability to act and thus a key facet of what many consider to be human (Haslam 2006), it seems paradoxical to impose a notion of dignity that is wholly trans-subjective, that is, it ignores people's subjective experience, being based on principle alone. The very premise that philosophers, working from first principles, should construct a notion of dignity that is designed to shape policy with widespread implications for individuals seems, in itself, to disregard dignity (e.g., Igantieff 2001; Donnelly 2007).

The notion of the subjective experience of dignity is everywhere in writings about human rights. Dignity is something to be *realized* through the individual human *experience* of autonomous choice in the domain of the political; of happiness, well-being, self-esteem, and psychological integrity in the domain of the psychological; of belonging to a group or culture, adhering to a set of norms, with access to approval, respect, and recognition in the domain of the social; and of access to security, food, shelter, and physical integrity in the domain of the material (Gewirth 1978; Donnelly 1989; Dicke 2002; Downie 2004; Ishay 2004). Ultimately, all of this is about an emotional and cognitive experience, ineluctably an experience lived and felt by individual people (Damasio 1999). Viewed this way, dignity is not a principle, but rather a subjective integration of an individual's experience of the many facets of human life, and it is a judgment made by each person for him or herself, informed by culture, social interactions, and physical experiences (Honneth 1992).

As it turns out, many statements of human rights (e.g., Künnemann 1995), including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, address many if not all of these dimensions of a felt experience of dignity (Ishay 2004). Some might argue that this convergence of notions about rights has been driven by unified and compelling philosophical constructions of human dignity. But we find little evidence for this. More plausibly, one could argue that this convergence has arisen simply from evolutionary, social, and psychological givens of the human condition, manifest in humans collectively seeking in some measure to maximize perceived benefits for themselves, reckoned according to all relevant values (e.g., the maximization postulate, Lasswell and McDougal 1992; see also Gewirth 1978 and Cassin in Ishay 2004: p. 222). By this second argument, philosophical arguments about dignity are merely derivatives of preexisting givens, rather than the authors or arbiters of truth regarding this concept. Even so, all semantic constructions of meaning are grounded in precepts. The question remains, at least as framed by this analysis: Which precepts are more helpful as a basis for global common ground and for insightful diagnostics of policy processes?

Lasswell's conception of individual dignity and the commonwealth

A comprehensive approach to human dignity was developed by Harold D. Lasswell and colleagues, who offered a way of thinking about dignity as a subjective experience of the individual human, with direct relevance to finding common ground and judging policy processes (Lasswell and McDougal 1992). These authors organized their notion around the creation and sharing of values, which are directly related to human subjectivities, with practical implications for dignity-related outcomes.

A conception of human dignity in value terms

In this context, values are understood in a specific way, as "things" that people seek from the world at a functional level (e.g., enduring or over-arching goals). According to Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), these values can be understood as power, wealth, well-being, respect, rectitude, skill, enlightenment, and affection. Affection, respect, rectitude, and power have been called deference values, that is, values with particular relevance to social relations or the creation of social space within which people can realize their dignity. People seek and share these values through cultural and institutional arrangements, in ways that are shaped by their expectations, desires, and perceived needs. Lasswell and McDougal (1992) argued that dignity arose from people being able to access some optimal level of all these values and that political, cultural, and other institutional arrangements, organized around dispositions of power, largely governed this outcome (also see McDougal et al. 1980).

This construction of dignity as a subjective experience organized around values poses some difficulties. If dignity is an individual experience, connected to gaining certain desired values, then how does dignity relate to collectives and policy processes? And what determines in practice—and perhaps even in principle—the optimal level of realized values attached to the individual's experience of dignity? One strong argument made historically against construing dignity as a subjective individual experience is that, by this standard, any behaviors, even those generally considered abhorrent, might qualify as being consistent with dignity, depending on the individual's standpoint (Stetson 1998). It is here that Lasswell's concept of a *commonwealth of human dignity* becomes central (Lasswell and McDougal 1992). Framed as a commonwealth, individuals are still the fundamental unit of experience, but dependent on others.

Expounding on the notion of a commonwealth, Lasswell and McDougal (1992: 740) state that the sharing of values carries two sets of meanings, one 'distributive,' the other 'formative.' The distributive is in reference to *participation in the control* of valued outcomes, described according to the degree of equality or inequality, which is essentially about dispositions of power. The formative meaning suggests that the amount of a given value available for sharing may be *augmented*. In general [they said], "…we are in favor of higher levels of outcome since we are concerned about the size of the cake as well as the proportional size of the slices." In sum, Lasswell and McDougal proposed that a commonwealth of human dignity is achieved when: (1) as many people as possible are involved in deciding what the community ought to produce in terms of both welfare and deference values, (2) the community is successful in producing these outcomes, and (3) the people of that community share broadly in the benefits. This was their formula for achieving dignity, not dignity itself.

Over the mid- and long term, dignity can, in fact, be understood as a co-created phenomenon contingent on the aggregate exchange of values among all members of a community (Donnelly 1989), and in modern times the community is increasingly interconnected and global. Viewed this way, not all value orientations or realizations at the individual level are consistent with attaining and sustaining a commonwealth of dignity. All individuals, including the privileged, have a stake (perhaps not always consciously appreciated) in this consideration because of the volatilities, instabilities, and related pervasive deprivations inherent in despotic governance dynamics. In this context, despotism can be understood as the on-going concentration of most values in the hands of the few at the expense of the many, typically established and perpetuated through inequitable distribution of power and wealth. From a pragmatic perspective, optimal value orientations, evidenced in people's personalities and behavior, would lead to experiences of dignity by the largest possible number of people (Lasswell and McDougal 1992). Dignity then is no longer about the ego in isolation but rather about the ego in the context of community, curbed by conditioning, conscience, and the superego (Gewirth 1978).

What is the optimal configuration of value orientations and realizations at the individual level, consistent with a commonwealth of human dignity? Lasswell (1948) and McDougal et al. (1980) speculated about this, phrasing it in terms of *democratic character*. Their perspective was Western and their emphasis was on respect. Respect engendered a fundamental recognition by the individual of the standing of others in collective value dynamics, that is, the "right" of others to access values. This self-imposed granting of opportunity to others can be based on a reasoned calculus, but more often it is presumably based on rectitude—our internal moral compass, expressed in habitual perspectives and behaviors that curb the self in accordance with our morally prescribed duties to others or to society (Bandura 2002). Seen this way, respect is perhaps more usefully understood as a self-imposed *deference* to others grounded in a moral stance. But not all forms of rectitude are equal in this regard, which, coupled with some ambiguity in the relations of Lasswell's values to dignity, allows for the possibility of clarifying and extending Lasswell's value-based conception.

Expanding and clarifying Lasswell's conception

The term "subjective well-being" (SWB) is common in the parlance of social psychologists, with some researchers further distinguishing "psychological well-being" from "physical well-being" (Oishi 2000). Psychological well-being typically means an emotional and cognitive assessment of one's overall life circumstances and experiences (Diener and Suh 2000). Defined this way, psychological well-being bears a striking resemblance to the concept of subjectively experienced dignity as well as to the suite of factors closely identified with human rights (Park 1987; Triandis 2000). People tend to experience greater subjective well-being when they are fed, sheltered, secure, and acknowledged; when they live within a family and a community; when they are afforded choice; and when they partake of a life of meaning—in other words, when they live a life

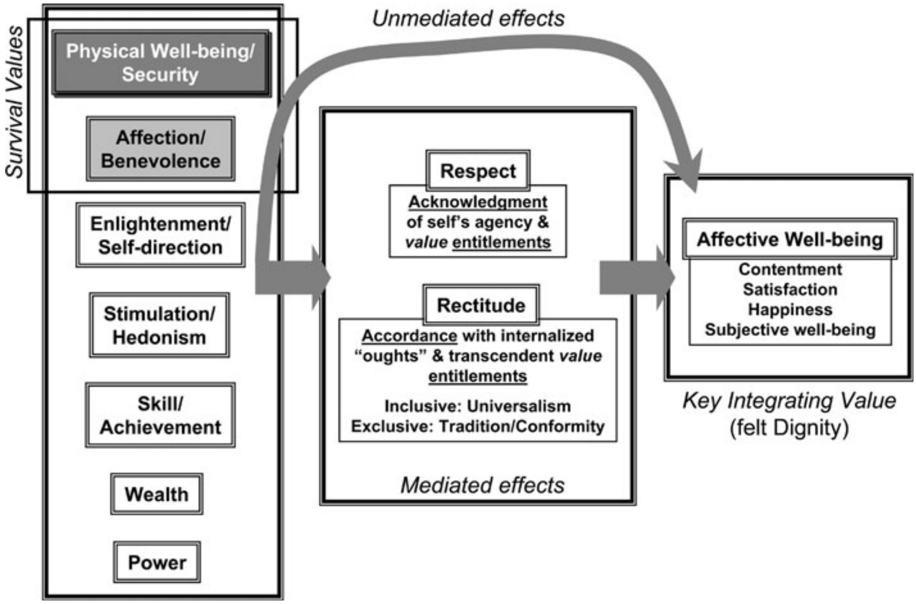
Survival Values
Physical Well-being/ Security
Affection/ Benevolence
Enlightenment/ Self-direction
Stimulation/ Hedonism
Skill/ Achievement
Wealth
Power
Unmediated effects
Respect
Acknowledgment of self's agency & value entitlements
Rectitude
Accordance with internalized "oughts" & transcendent value entitlements
Inclusive: Universalism
Exclusive: Tradition/Conformity
Mediated effects
Affective Well-being
Contentment
Satisfaction
Happiness
Subjective well-being
Key Integrating Value
(felt Dignity)

Fig. 1 Values and their potential relations to human dignity, indicated by Psychological Well-being, mediated through the values of Respect and Rectitude. According to this conception, values are in some measure hierarchical, with many value dynamics experienced by individuals through the mediation of Respect and Rectitude. According to Lasswell and McDougal (1992), all values shown can be sought both as ends (scope values) and as means (base values). Value categories follow Lasswell and Kaplan (1950) and Schwartz (1992). See text for further descriptions

of *collective dignity* (Fig. 1). These concordances suggest that the well-established and globally-applied idea of SWB (e.g., Diener and Suh 2000) may be a useful means of inter-subjectively assessing and monitoring the realization of a commonwealth of human dignity. SWB is by no means perfect and is thought to contain Western bias, but still it is a potentially useful metric and notion.

Lasswell's well-being value subsumes both the physical and psychological components of well-being as used by social psychologists (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950), which makes it significantly less useful than SWB in certain contexts. Worldwide, SWB is strongly influenced by material conditions (manifest in food, shelter, and health, and necessarily tied to income) *only up to a point*, after which SWB essentially uncouples from these more physical factors (Diener and Oishi 2000; Inglehart and Klingemann 2000). In other words, peoples' aggregate experience of dignity seems to be strongly influenced by wealth, and the access to other values provided by wealth, largely under conditions of poverty. But once people are no longer living in poverty, experiences of dignity seem to be dependent largely on other values related to self realization (Inglehart and Klingemann 2000). These empirical observations have been interpreted as supporting the often disputed but perhaps fundamentally important points made by Abraham Maslow in the 1950s (Maslow 1954) that people experience a hierarchy of "needs" that play a role in shaping their experiences of dignity under different conditions (Corning 2000, 2003; Diener and Oishi 2000; Farmer 2005). For all these reasons, we find it useful to distinguish between the values of physical well-being and psychological well-being, with psychological well-being most closely identified with the integrative experience of dignity (Fig. 1).

Lasswell's rectitude value also suffers to some degree from being overly broad, especially when applied to dignity-related considerations. There are all sorts of rectitude, which vary along one key gradient of being more or less inclusive, with implications for the prospects for a global commonwealth of human dignity (Sagiv and Schwartz 1995; Schwartz 2007). Rectitude that creates and maintains hard group boundaries and is organized around traditional rules typically grants full human status and related opportunities to realize dignity only to those within a favored group; everyone else is considered less than human and less than fully deserving. By contrast, rectitude that fosters a sense of duty or responsibility to all people, engendering rights, is clearly more consistent with a globally-realized commonwealth of human dignity. Given this distinction, we have found it useful to employ Shalom Schwartz's schematic of values (1992, 1994), which differentiates the ethical value stance of universalism (inclusive rectitude) from the ethical value stance of tradition (exclusive rectitude, Fig. 1).

Lasswell's respect and rectitude values have a potentially complex but important relationship with each other and with all other values in the discourses and experiences of dignity (Fig. 1). Respect and rectitude both expressly relate to the "oughts" and "shoulds" of life. Respect more closely aligns with the self-perceived entitlements, or unconditional value demands, that we feel the world owes us (Dworkin 1977; McDougal et al. 1980; Dicke 2002). Rectitude also pertains to unconditional demands, but unlike entitlements expected for self, rectitude shows up partly in the form of self-imposed obligations or duties to others. As *unconditional* demands arising from self, respect and rectitude are perhaps closer than any other values to existential psychodynamics and the mechanisms that all people erect to resolve their fears and anxieties related to meaning, responsibility, isolation, and death (Yalom 1980). Thus, when people perceive that others or even themselves have violated respect or rectitude demands, it is likely to have far greater impact on their dignity compared to deprivations of any other value, short of severe physical impairment (Schachter 1983; Honneth 1992; Wilkinson et al. 1998; Fig. 1). Respect and rectitude also, logically, mediate how people experience deprivations or indulgences of other values in that these other value dynamics are often cast in terms of self-perceived entitlements, for example, when others owe us monetary payment for hours worked under contract.

Implications for human dignity as a concept and practice

Dignity seems to be something that virtually all people want (Schachter 1983; Donnelly 1989; Caulfield and Chapman 2005). This aspiration plausibly emerges as a seminal expression of the human experience, and not because philosophers have defined the concept and exhorted its importance from first principles. We contend that the notion of dignity has gained authority by the convergent demands of people, not by the arcane haggling of philosophers (Donnelly 1989). Our collective aspirations to dignity plausibly arise from our biological evolutionary past and from our confrontation with existential concerns that have accompanied the emergence of human consciousness (Yalom 1980; Damasio 1999). In some measure, philosophers have been helpful in identifying autonomy, reason, and morality as central to dignity. But we would argue that these human traits are not somehow a justification for affording humans dignity, but, rather, highly developed features of our consciousness that make virtually all cognizant humans yearn for a dignified life. Based on what people do and say, dignity seems to be a condition signified by a sense of contentment, satisfaction, and wellness—an integrative evaluation of our lives and circumstances. Inherent to the very notion of dignity is the idea that dignity is ultimately reckoned by each individual for him or herself. But dignity obviously does not arise in a vacuum. It is shaped not only by our relationships with ourselves, but also by our relationships with others as well as our interactions with the physical world (as well-being, see Kitayama and Rose Markus 2000). Viewed this way, each person's experience of dignity is inextricably coupled with that of others through the health and vigor of the commonwealth, which may arise, in part, from the unique extent to which human biological fitness is contingent on the institutions that we develop (e.g., Bowles et al. 2003).

Cultural and contextual relativism

We have provisionally concluded that key facets of a useful dignity concept include subjective reckonings inextricably linked to collective experiences in a physical world of real constraints. This framing of dignity is capable of encompassing the priorities of individualistic cultures, featuring individual welfare, as well as the priorities of communitarian cultures, featuring group welfare, or at least individual welfare strongly couched in terms of group considerations (Howard and Donnelly 1986; Park 1987; Kitayama and Rose Markus 2000). Of relevance to policy, this framing also brings into focus the importance of determining the balance between rights owed to individuals by those entrusted with group power, and duties owed to others by individuals, often as interests aggregated to the group level. Both are plausibly important to creating conditions that foster widespread experiences of dignity (Gewirth 1978; Donnelly 1982a; Schachter 1983; Beyleveld and Brownsword 1998; Shultziner 2003). To achieve this end, the balance between rights and responsibilities will necessarily reflect physical, cultural, and social contexts. Although this logic suggests that there is no a priori right mix of rights and responsibilities, it does presume that the people who are affected will have maximal opportunity to shape relevant policies, that is, to participate in shaping their own lives in ways reckoned to be culturally authentic (Igantieff 2001; de Sousa Santos 2002). In practice, achieving authentic political expression is complex and dependent on many factors; even in democratic societies individuals give up much of their standing for pragmatic reasons alone, through the device of electing representatives.

For those who seek universal truths based on first principles, such cultural relativism is perhaps an anathema (Gaylin 1984; Stetson 1998). For many people active in the discourse about human rights, the fear seems to be that relativism opens the door to convenience, especially the convenience of those who currently hold power (Ishay 2004). Universalist concepts are apparently seen as the only authoritative way to hold despots' feet to the fire, figuratively speaking. At root, this is an argument about power and politics, not principle or rectitude (Rorty 1993), which begs the question: How does one in fact go about making the world a better place for people? In order to answer this question, the "problem" is perhaps better recast in terms of value despotism, which is almost always linked to gross inequalities in the distribution of power and wealth nationally and internationally (e.g., Massey 1996; Wilkinson et al. 1998). Resolving this problem self-evidently requires pragmatic processes and solutions, but, according to the conception of dignity that we have developed here, the focus would necessarily be on alleviating poverty and empowering the powerless (Gready 2003). Rights have an important role to play, primarily to counteract the advantages held by power and wealth despots. But, by most conceptions, rights are also about fostering a subjective human experience shaped by specific physical and cultural circumstances, and they therefore necessarily reflect context (de Sousa Santos 2002; Donnelly 2007). Without sensitivity to the contingencies of real people in real contexts, activists run the risk of a different kind of value despotism, organized around acontextual rectitude (Igantieff 2001). Unfortunately, this kind of despotism has a history of being either politically ineffective or highly destructive in practice (Gott 2002).

Value-based framing of dignity

We find a value-based frame to be useful in understanding the subjective experience of dignity, to crafting policies to foster a commonwealth of human dignity, and to evaluating policies and practices, both before and after they have been implemented. This was one of Harold Lasswell's many important insights (see also Freeman 1994). Values and value dynamics provide a functional framework for talking about the experience of dignity, because they encompass convergent forces arising from the common human experience (e.g., existential concerns) as well as divergent forces arising from different contexts. Psychological well-being constitutes an integrative value that captures the experience of dignity, also potentially denoted by the widely-used psychometric of subjective well-being. Respect and rectitude relate to internalized rights and responsibilities, and as such they not only potentially mediate the experience of many value dynamics, but they also plausibly govern experiences of self-worth and self-esteem, which seem to be central to experiences of dignity (Suh 2000). Respect and rectitude are thus likely to be critical not only to individual experiences of dignity, but also to realizing the commonwealth. Wealth also mediates many value exchanges, with a unique ability to be concentrated. Such concentration is often profoundly detrimental to those on the margins, most importantly because poverty affects self-respect and access to resources such as food, shelter, and healthcare that are central to physical well-being (Massey 1996; Wilkinson et al. 1998; Wilkinson 2004). Both physical well-being and affection plausibly constitute a sort of dignity bottom line as survival values (Fig. 1; Schachter 1983; Honneth 1992; Corning 2000, 2003). Sustained and widespread deprivations of either have profoundly negative consequences for both individual dignity and the commonwealth (e.g., Kagan and Moss 1983; Sirgy 1986; Diener and Oishi 2000; Harper et al. 2003; Farmer 2005).

Power is a particularly important value in shaping dignity outcomes. More than wealth, dispositions of power have perhaps the greatest impacts of any value dimension on dignity-relevant dynamics (Lasswell and McDougal 1992; Veenhoven 2000; Igantieff 2001). Power relates to notions of freedom, choice, and autonomy that have been central to the discourse of rights and dignity (Dworkin 1977; Gewirth 1978). Power is about who has the opportunity and authority to make what decisions about which matters. As a value power is ultimately rooted in physical strengths and the socially sanctioned option to use violence to enforce a decision. On a personal level power over one's physical person is profoundly important to one's dignity (e.g., Honneth 1992; Hobbes in Ishay 2004). Torture is clearly an extreme deprivation of a person's power over his or her physical integrity (Glover 1999). Power then is plausibly central, primarily for instrumental reasons, which is why people with a high need for power not tempered by other-oriented rectitude can be profoundly destructive to the commonwealth of human dignity (e.g., Lasswell 1948; De Jouvenel 1948; Lasswell and Kaplan 1950).

Personality is clearly important to the realization of individual and collective dignity. Peoples' value orientations matter. Achieving a match between what people want and what the world provides, for all values, is logically part of the experience of dignity (Triandis 2000). At a personal level, extreme orientations toward any value likely result in chronic discontent and resultant dissonance and anxiety (Ratzlaff et al. 2000). This is conceivably as true for values such as rectitude and skill as for values such as power and wealth.

Reasonable concurrence between aspirations and opportunities plausibly define the prospects for emotional health and psychological well-being. But this all relates to the immediate subjective experience of dignity. Some suites of value orientations are clearly more compatible than others with creating and sustaining a dignity *commonwealth*. A well-developed orientation toward deferential respect and universalist rectitude is perhaps of greatest importance (McDougal et al. 1980; Schwartz 2007). But we suspect that valuation of deference and universalism also needs to be coupled with a temperate orientation toward power and wealth, as well as realizable orientations toward all other values.

A value-based subjective conceptualization of human dignity, framed in reference to the commonwealth, potentially fulfills the standard of sufficiency. This notion allows for the diverse ways that individuals experience dignity in different contexts as a subjective phenomenon, but contingent on social interactions and the experience of dignity by others as a commonwealth. As such, a value-based conception offers a potentially stable global frame that invokes broad-spectrum functional values, including values related to duties and physical well-being. Such a concept explicitly links to human rights, human social psychology (e.g., subjective well-being), and non-Western perspectives that include attaching greater weight to duties and obligations and less to individual entitlements and freedoms. And yet this conceptualization potentially yields standards that transcend specific contexts. It is hard to imagine any group of people experiencing a commonwealth of human dignity when they have been excluded from participation in creating dignity-relevant policies and practices, experienced widespread degradation, and been chronically deprived of basic necessities such as shelter, food, and healthcare.

Conclusion

Human dignity, defined as a subjective experience of well-being contingent on the collective sum of (inter-)individual experiences of values, has obvious implications for policy. Following Donnelly (1989, 2007), rights are perhaps most usefully understood as a means to the end of a commonwealth of human dignity, focused expressly on protecting those who are vulnerable from abuses by those holding disproportional power and wealth. Virtually by definition despots control the state (governance) apparatus, and thus rights are logically constructed in terms of the individual vis-à-vis the state; although the implicit goal is to curb *people* who are uniquely privileged by formal institutional arrangements. Given this consideration, institutions include not only nation-states, but also other authoritative social groups such as families (Igantieff 2001). In addition to rights, a subjective notion of human dignity facilitates engaging with potentially *all* aspects of policy, including decision-making process outcomes and effects. Given the potential contingency of dignity on the full spectrum of value dynamics, one could judge virtually all policy making by whether it enhances or degrades the dignity commonwealth. Unlike rights, a value-based understanding of dignity has potentially universal relevance as a frame for appraising policy. It also has considerable utility for discourses about identifying and securing local to global common interests. But exact configurations of the dignity commonwealth, as well as policies designed to bring it about, almost certainly vary with culture, physical environment, and historical circumstance—there are unique contextual considerations. Even though a value-based notion of dignity can help frame policy questions and practices, it is self-evidently true that only real people in real places can provide the answers and actions (e.g., Igantieff 2001; Donnelly 2007). In the end, the local to global community will determine through deliberation and negotiation which conceptions best serve their own various ends (Donnelly 1989).

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