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What dignity at work means

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For those in high-status professions, dignity and dignified treatment can usually be taken for granted, but it is often at risk for workers lower down the occupational hierarchy. If we are denied respect by others or, through no fault of our own, lack the things that are respected, it is hard to maintain our self-respect. Encountering disrespect can be harder to bear and more troubling for workers than low pay or job insecurity. As the historian E.P. Thompson (1963) argued, many political struggles, including the rise of the labour movement itself, were about gaining recognition and respect as much as about gaining more material wealth (see also Sennett and Cobb, 1973). Still today, many struggles which are presented as purely about remuneration and job security are actually motivated significantly by the pursuit of dignity and respect – better pay being taken to signify recognition. Dignity at work therefore matters to both employees and employers and needs to be discussed.

The most serious kinds of denial of workers' dignity have been highlighted recently by campaigns such as that of Britain's AMICUS union and the Department of Trade and Industry for 'dignity at work' in response to bullying and harassment. However, as I shall try to show, dignified work requires much more than just the absence of such treatment. It involves workers being respected as people and not being treated merely as means to others' ends, being allowed autonomy and not having others take advantage of their vulnerability, being trusted to act responsibly, being taken seriously and listened to, and having types of work which are not themselves demeaning. These, I argue, are the key elements or preconditions of dignity at work. In any situation, they are precarious, but they are especially so where there are durable

inequalities of power – whether they involve the stigmatisation of particular groups (sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.) or the internal inequalities of organisations – and where the instrumental goals of organisations are pursued at the expense of employees' well-being.

In considering what dignity involves, it is helpful to discuss it in relation to a number of other feelings and conditions, all of which have major implications for our well-being. Some of these, such as integrity, respect, pride, recognition, worth and standing or status, are positively related to dignity. Others, such as shame, stigma, humiliation, lack of recognition or being mistrusted or taken for granted, are negatively related to it. Moral concepts like these are fuzzy and shade into one another; we can understand dignity better in relation to these other concepts than in isolation. My own interpretation of dignity at work is based on a combination of empirical research and personal observation regarding inequality, and philosophical analyses of recognition and respect. I shall first set out the key elements and preconditions of dignity, noting how the instrumental character of economic organisations puts the dignity of workers at risk. I shall then discuss how durable inequalities tend to undermine the dignity of those in subordinate groups. These inequalities are argued to be of two kinds – 'identity-sensitive', such as those deriving from sexism, racism, homophobia and ableism – and identity-insensitive, such as those deriving from the nature of economic organisations in capitalist society. I shall then discuss the kinds of work which are seen as inherently undignified and propose a distinction between servile and service work, and conclude.

Key elements of dignity

To be dignified or have dignity is first to be in control of oneself, competently and appropriately exercising one's powers. Most obviously, then, dignity is about self-command and autonomy. As with so many other matters relating to moral sentiments, dignity is partly consciously, partly unconsciously signalled through the body – in our bearing, in how we hold ourselves. The closely associated sense of respect also implies autonomy, for to respect someone implies refraining from attempting to colonise or control their lives, and keeping a certain 'respectful' distance from them. From a normative point of view, it is important that what is respected in the other person includes not only what they have in common with us but what is different. For an employer to refuse to recognise the religion or culture of minority ethnic workers – for example, the need of Muslim workers to observe Ramadan – would be an affront to their dignity.[1] To have dignity and

to have one's dignity recognised is to be treated as an end in oneself, at least in part, and not merely as a means to someone else's ends, or as substitutable for someone else. It is hard to respect someone who has no autonomy, no distinctiveness or individuality, no will of their own and who passively obeys the will of others. They lack dignity.

It will already be apparent that dignity is an elusive quality depending not only on how an individual behaves but on how others treat her. It can therefore be a fragile thing because we are deeply *social* beings – vulnerable and dependent on others – physically, psychologically and economically – throughout our lives. If others treat us in an undignified manner, for example, by refusing to acknowledge us as ends in ourselves and treating us wholly as means to their own ends, then we may find we have to struggle to maintain our dignity in the face of this treatment, for example, by limiting acknowledgement of those who disrespect us, by concealing our hurt or by signalling our *indignation,* whether silently or verbally. If, on the other hand, they invariably respect our autonomy, then dignity may become something we can take for granted and do not have to work at. In both cases, dignity depends on both the actor and her others.

Second, to lack dignity is also to be unable to exercise the kinds of powers we associate with being a capable adult, both basic ones – controlling our bodies – and 'higher' ones involving complex tasks, especially in social situations.[2] Individuals who lose these powers, perhaps through illness or old age, may find it hard to maintain their dignity. We may also regard some practices which we are called upon to do as 'beneath our dignity', because they do not allow us to exercise those powers, or else are associated with bodily and other functions which are viewed with disgust or disdain; at worst, they might reduce us to no more than our animal status.[3] Being 'above' such things is a source of dignity.

Third, maintaining our dignity depends not only on how we conduct ourselves and whether others accord us respect for this, but on whether we *have* things which others regard as essential or normal ['the social bases of self-respect', as Rawls called them (Rawls, 1971)]. This is why people who have little income often engage in quite expensive conspicuous consumption – to show that they are worthy of respect.

Fourth, dignity is also associated with seriousness and being taken seriously. Someone who is never serious lacks dignity; if they are serious but are never taken seriously by others, it is hard for them to maintain their dignity and self-respect.[4] This includes being able to speak out and be listened to and have their views taken seriously. It is important both for individuals' self-respect and welfare and for the success of organisations that disagreements and criticisms can be

aired. An important aspect of dignity is being allowed to disagree (respectfully) with others without this undermining our position or inviting contempt from others. Allowing people to lose arguments or admit mistakes without loss of face or humiliation (i.e., allowing them to maintain their dignity) is important both for morale and for organisational learning.

Related to these characteristics of seriousness and autonomy, acting in a dignified way implies a measure of self-control and composure, including limiting displays of strong emotions, whether happy or sad or angry. Such behaviour is especially expected of professionals, as it helps clients to put their trust in them because they seem in command of themselves, or 'together', and hence more likely to be competent. Those kinds of work which involve a closer emotional engagement with others, such as counselling and nursing, involve a difficult balance between avoiding coldness and insensitivity on the one hand, and an unwanted or premature familiarity and emotionality which would indicate disrespect towards the client on the other. Again, respect implies a certain distance. What is now termed 'emotional work' includes consideration of individuals' dignity. The case of nursing is particularly striking because of the difficulty for nursing auxiliaries in maintaining their own dignity while carrying out tasks which would normally be regarded as undignified, such as wiping bottoms, and maintaining the dignity of patients whose autonomy and capacities are impaired. Sometimes, doing such undignified but necessary jobs may win them respect.[5]

Being treated not purely as a means to someone else's ends or as invisible, but as an end in oneself, a person in one's own right, is thus crucial. Yet of course in employment, the employee is not hired out of respect for them or charity but because of their usefulness to the employer. At the same time, earning an income is itself a source of dignity, in that it demonstrates autonomy and self-reliance, rather than dependence on others. The valuation of 'the dignity of work' and 'social usefulness' (Sennett and Cobb, 1973, p. 266) is a crucial motivation, one neglected by economists who imagine that it is in the self-interest of people to free-ride on others' efforts wherever possible.

In any relation of economic exchange, the purpose of interacting with others is in order to exchange money for goods or services. The instrumental nature of these relationships can threaten the dignity of the worker or seller unless respect for them as persons is signalled in some way. At the minimum, we may do this by simply saying 'hello'. Precisely because they signal respect, 'pleasantries' are not trivial and taking time out from the pursuit of the organisation's goals to acknowledge workers as persons with their own concerns can make

an important difference to the experience of work. To treat others as merely an object or instrument, as in the case reported by Hodson of managers who would take products out of the hands of the workers working on them without saying anything to acknowledge them, is to undermine their dignity (Hodson, 2002). Of course such 'courtesies' can be given merely instrumentally in order to gain favours, but recognition is valued precisely where the other does not have a personal instrumental interest in giving it.

In all these aspects, we see the way in which dignity is established through a relation between the individual and others, and that while it depends to some extent on how the individual behaves, it can be confirmed or undermined by others. It exemplifies both our vulnerability and dependence on others on the one hand and our capacity for autonomy and self-direction on the other. Our self-respect is strongly dependent on whether others treat us with respect. It is both a highly personal matter and a matter of social standing. Dignified relations involve respect both for others' autonomy *and* their dependence on us, so that we do not take advantage of their vulnerability.

The relation between autonomy and vulnerability is evident in the way in which being trusted enhances our dignity: others allow us autonomy and discretion on the assumption that we will not betray their trust by taking advantage of the fact that they have made themselves vulnerable precisely by putting their trust in us. Trust signals recognition of our competence and probity. Refusal of trust, on the other hand, erodes dignity. In her report on undertaking low wage jobs in the USA, Barbara Ehrenreich notes the humiliating character of practices such as searching employees' purses (legal in workplaces in the USA) to make sure they have not stolen anything, and of requiring employees to take random drug tests. As she points out, many forms of surveillance of workers, or restrictions such as being banned from talking with other workers, are indignities (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 211). They signal lack of trust in workers' competence and probity, and lack of respect for them as persons. To be told how to do things that one would in any case do perfectly well of one's own volition, and to be constantly under surveillance, may be humiliating. This is one reason why service workers may resent having to use scripted conversations in dealing with clients. The refusal of trust and discretion is itself an indignity.

Lack of trust may 'crowd out' trustworthy behaviour, reducing people's willingness to make an effort to work well. Further, to assume, as management often does, that people will only work well for rewards, rather than doing a good job for its own sake, is demeaning and fails to respect their dignity. It overestimates their dependence on others

as a source of motivation and underestimates their capacity for acting responsibly. This is not to say that people will always be trustworthy, or that recognition and rewards are unimportant, but to treat an employee's actions as purely motivated by the expectation of reward is to reduce virtue and integrity to instrumental action for the purposes of exchange, and may have a demotivating effect (Brennan and Pettit, 2004; Frey, 1997; Le Grand, 2003). Doing some things for their own sake (e.g., working extra time to finish a job because it needs finishing) also seems more dignified and virtuous than doing them purely out of self-interest precisely because it implies treating those for whom the job is done as ends in themselves.[6] Of course, the point of employment for employees *is* to get an income, but it is not necessarily the only point. Their dignity also matters, and in being trusted to act well they are also being valued as persons, and not merely for carrying out some task properly. People need recognition too, but as responsible, capable people and not merely for specific actions that are useful to the organisation: if the recognition is given in a way which seems controlling by gearing it too closely to specific actions, as in rewarding a dog with a biscuit for obeying an order, it may seem demeaning rather than dignifying (Brennan and Pettit, 2004).

Although, from a normative point of view, respect for individuals' *rights* should be unconditional, respect for behaviour and character has to be conditional.[7] Making respect for others obligatory, no matter how they behave – the customer is always right, even when abusive – rather than conditional, devalues it completely and is hardly dignified or dignifying. To respect people's dignity is to treat them as responsible for their actions, and to respond positively or negatively towards them according to what we consider they deserve. It is not about engaging in compulsory niceness and refraining from judgement. 'A person who is punished for his [sic] misdeeds is held responsible for them in a concrete way' (Rachels, 1978, p. 159). Conversely, to treat them as not responsible for what they say and do is to undermine their dignity by refusing to acknowledge their ability to think and act for themselves, indeed it is insulting.

People may manage their emotional interactions with others, but this does not necessarily mean they are manipulative or taking advantage of them; indeed it may be intended respectfully, altruistically or 'philanthropically' (Bolton, 2005). But often, in work situations, workers are indeed expected to exercise their emotional labour in a more instrumental way for the good of the company ('pecuniary emotion management', to use Bolton's term) rather than the good of the customer or client. As Bolton suggests, because attending to people's needs and wants is a highly complex and subtle business, attempts to control

and script this may be clumsy and ineffective. By contrast, it may be service workers' gift of philanthropic emotion management, drawing upon tacit social skills and emotional intelligence, which actually enables good service. Suppressing the worker's scope for discretion in such cases may be undignified for both worker and customer.

Dignity in and against inequality

The word 'dignitary' hails from an earlier age of aristocratic privilege and authorised inequality, but it reminds us that dignity was once seen as the preserve of the dominant. While that privilege no longer has authority, current forms of inequality, equally undeserved, have taken its place, such as those of class, gender and race, and obstruct the pursuit and maintenance of dignity.

There are two kinds of inequality that are relevant here. The first, 'identity-sensitive', exemplified by sexism, racism, homophobia and ableism, are forms of unwarranted unequal treatment which respond to certain constructions of people's identities (Sayer, 2005). A crucial element of all these ills is treatment of members of the relevant groups in ways which are undignified: typical forms are mistrust, underestimation of their ability and probity, refusal to take them seriously, and worst of all, taking advantage of their vulnerability, including the special vulnerability which derives precisely from their stigmatisation, as in sexual and racial harassment. In addition, these social groups are often denied normal access to the 'social bases of respect' – the resources and practices which are seen as valuable in the wider society.

The second kind of inequality is structural to modern economies in both the nature of the employment relation itself and the internal hierarchies or inequalities of economic organisations. Although these inequalities may correlate with, respond to and reinforce inequalities arising from identity-sensitive mechanisms of sexism and racism, they can exist even in the absence of the latter. They are products of 'identity-insensitive' economic mechanisms (Sayer, 2005). The employment relation is itself unequal in that the employee usually has fewer options than the employer, and the latter is dominant and indeed normally dominates. In turn, there are inequalities among employees in terms of pay, security and working conditions, and indeed in all the respects which we noted as important for dignity. There are further inequalities in relation to consumers and clients, often but not always in favour of the latter. The very existence of inequalities and relations of domination means that, objectively, individuals' autonomy and dependence are unequal, and although this does not rule out the

possibility of dignified employment, it means that some will find it easier to maintain their dignity than others.

There is a world of difference between claiming or being accorded respect for one's conduct and claiming or being accorded it merely for one's social position, particularly where we do not deserve that position, or 'deserve' it as a result of having taken advantage of an inherited advantageous social position. (Inherited advantages are not a thing of the past: no-one deserves the class position that they are born into, yet it has a considerable effect on their life chances and the kind of people that they become.) Amongst equals, the granting or refusal of respect is responsive to how people actually behave. But where there is inequality, respect may be demanded by the dominant, and refused to the subordinate, irrespective of whether such expectations are merited in terms of behaviour. Inequalities of power distort and inhibit recognition, for as Hegel identified in his discussion of master–slave relations, the dominant can never get adequate recognition from subordinates, because the latter are not in a position to give their honest view without prejudice to their own security, and are also likely to lack the information and training to be able to give an informed opinion. Their expressed opinion therefore cannot be taken seriously. Recognition is most valuable when it comes from equals who are free to say what they really think, and/or from those who have the expertise to evaluate the behaviour in question. Deference to superiors that is expected and merely based on undeserved differences in standing is, at least to some degree, humiliating for the subordinate, though they may become thoroughly accustomed to it. If the service worker cannot treat the customer as an equal, which implies being able to sanction rude and unreasonable treatment, and has to accept uncritically whatever they say or do, then this may be seen as sacrificing their dignity. 'Where the customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display. The ledger is supposedly evened by a wage' (Hochschild, cited in Bolton, 2005, chapter 1). Conversely, where the employee is in a position of authority or expertise in relation to the user (as in the case of lecturer–student or doctor–patient relations), it may require some care to make sure the user is respected at the same time as he or she is evaluated or advised.

Further, where there are durable inequalities, double standards often appear, so that the same behaviour (e.g., absenteeism and theft of company property) is seen more critically in the subordinate than the dominant (Sayer, 2005). Often the double standards are gendered, so that what is seen as beneath the dignity of men (e.g., simpering compliance and making the tea) is expected of women. When we criticise

someone for imagining that some task is 'beneath their dignity', while others do the same thing without complaint, it is because they assume that they are somehow more worthy than others, indeed 'above' them. In other words, we suspect them of arrogance, snobbery or sexism. Again, dignity can easily be confused with rank and dominance.

However, equality or inequality of respect and access to respect is not just a matter of expressions of attitudes and interpersonal relations. If employers make pronouncements about treating everyone with equal respect, but in their actions, and in the conditions which they provide for their employees, treat them unequally, then their words are likely to be seen as hollow, as being contradicted by their deeds. Expressions of equality of recognition which are not backed up by equality of treatment and distribution of resources, including job security and the provision of working conditions, are likely to appear hypocritical. Again, these are part of the social bases of self-respect. The micro-politics of distribution and recognition are thus intimately related (Honneth, 1995; Sayer, 2005).[8]

We might say that it ought to be possible for all to be treated with dignity *despite* inequalities, but the 'despite' is significant. And just because people at the bottom often do not complain does not mean that there's no problem; the effects may be embodied in the form of low self-esteem and low expectations. Alternatively, they may resist, as Hodson (2001) emphasises, and this may help them maintain their dignity, though it is important not to romanticise the picture by overlooking cases where resistance is absent. Even where dignity derives from sustained resistance to disrespect, it is clearly a compensatory assertion of dignity, in that it substitutes for the absence of respectful treatment. Without palpable recognition, reflected in circumstances and treatment as well as verbal expressions, maintaining one's dignity is merely a way of holding oneself in the face of indignities – a matter of fortitude and forbearance. This may itself elicit respect, but then that respect may also reduce feelings of guilt or shame on the part of those who benefit from such inequality (echoes of the noble savage sentiment).

Sometimes the resistance may be direct and explicit but often it takes the form of increased efforts to assert autonomy, self-control and respectability as in the moral self-discipline and valuation of hard work of the American working men studied by Lamont, though as in all pursuits of respectability, it can involve a kind of self-repression too – a theme often noted in literature on working-class life. Alternatively, resistance may take the form of pursuit of status in spheres the dominant cannot affect, such as efforts to dress up where the dominant dress down and to demonstrate pride, style and 'class' (Lamont,

2000; Skeggs, 1997). However, for those who adopt this strategy, it is often not only a matter of establishing worth relative to the dominant but about distinguishing themselves from those who are even more disadvantaged (showing they are 'above' them); snobbery, racism and other forms of undignified treatment are not limited to those at the top. In either case, those in subordinate positions may be in a Catch-22 situation, where maintaining their dignity allows the more fortunate to assume that there is nothing wrong with their situation, while failing to maintain their dignity invites contempt and casual assumptions that they deserve their fate.

If we take matters of dignity and respect seriously, then because of the way in which recognition of worth and distribution of wealth are so closely related, we have at some point to confront the problem of undeserved inequalities. Expressions of respect between dominant and subordinate which merely accommodate these inequalities are devalued and deferential for the former and condescending and consolatory for the latter (Sayer, 2005). Without tangible improvements in the distribution of the social bases of respect – which must mean both significant reductions in economic inequality and restraints on the tendency of instrumental behaviour in economic life to override respect for persons – demands for recognition of dignity risk inviting facile, token responses in the form of mere espousals of equality.

Dignified and undignified work

Particular kinds of work may be seen as dignified or undignified in themselves, or at least, in the latter case, as difficult to do in a dignified way. The distribution of dignified and undignified work varies strongly by class, gender and race and tends to be taken as confirming the status of those who do it. Again, just what is seen as dignified or undignified tends to be seen in terms of double standards based on class, gender and race; for example, serving others may be seen as undignified in men and as dignified in women.

Whether work seems dignified or undignified is also related to skill and the difference between service and servility. The dignity of skilled work derives from the respect and self-respect which is conditional on proficiency in carrying out demanding tasks that those who need them doing could not do themselves. Other things being equal, a skilled job brings more respect and is a stronger source of dignity than one which anyone can do. Imagine I were to hire a cleaner, despite being an able-bodied person capable of doing the same work myself. On the same day that the cleaner comes, I hire a plumber to deal with a burst pipe.

I may treat both civilly, with unconditional respect for them as persons, but the plumber finds it easier to maintain a sense of dignity because he or she[9] is doing something we both know I cannot do. Although the cleaner might find some respect in doing the job well, it is more difficult, because we both know that I could also do the job as well or nearly as well, and the only reason I am not doing it myself is that our incomes are sufficiently unequal for me to be able to afford to pay them to do it. Thus, low-skilled work that is done for others who could perfectly well do it themselves is not in general a source of dignity, beyond that which derives purely from having a source of income rather than being dependent on state benefits. The household cleaner's job signals *servility* – and is properly called servant labour – while the plumber is providing a specialist, skilled service (see Cox, 2005; Ehrenreich 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Tronto, 2002). However, serving others may be a source of dignity where it provides something for others that they could not easily provide for themselves and where it does not require compulsory deference.

There are also more problematic forms of indignity deriving from work involving dirt or practices which have some kind of taboo or stigma attached to them. With regard to the example of gynaecology nursing, Sharon Bolton comments:

> 'In its connection with 'dirty work', the work of the gynaecology nurse can be classified as 'physically, socially and morally tainted' . . . Physically tainted due to its association with the body, death and abnormality (in the form of aborted foetus); socially tainted through the regular contact with patients who are stigmatised for choosing to terminate a pregnancy, and morally tainted because what should remain private and invisible is made public and rendered visible' (Bolton, 2003, p. 8).

Those who have to do undignified work often try to distance themselves from the task and, as we have already noticed, engage in what might be termed 'compensatory respect work', making an effort to maintain their dignity and standing in the eyes of others. They may also use various coping mechanisms such as humour and other ways of 'letting off steam' when out of the gaze of supervisors and clients (Bolton, 2003).

The crucial issues here are: first, just what tasks should properly be regarded as undignified; second, if they are indeed properly regarded as undignified, whether they are avoidable (can they be eliminated or at least ameliorated); and third, if they are unavoidable, that they should not become the special preserve of a particular social group, thereby reinforcing their disadvantage with the stigma of dirty or servile work.

Conclusion

Maintenance of dignity is far from being a minor concern in daily life, and employment in particular, and for those for whom employment is an undignified experience this may trouble them more than other, more economic circumstances like low pay and lack of job security, although these too tend to be seen by others as indicators of lack of worth. Workers' dignity can be supported where they have autonomy and trust, are respected and not bullied, harassed or otherwise have their vulnerability taken advantage of and where they are taken seriously and listened to. The elimination of sexism, racism and equivalent forms of discrimination is important in this regard, but economic organisations are in any case unequal and structured by relations of domination and subordination which distribute the social bases of respect unequally. Further, such organisations are instrumental in character, not only inevitably treating their employees as means to their own ends but frequently, especially under pressure of competition, allowing this to result in lack of respect for their dignity. As I hope to have shown, both of these fundamental characteristics mean that for many employees, dignity at work is lacking or can only be maintained by strategies of resistance which by their very existence acknowledge the problem.

Finally, there is a more radical implication. As Samuel Scheffler has put it, 'equality is not, in the first instance, a distributive ideal [. . .] It is, instead, a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another' (Scheffler, 2003). Partial or wholesale refusal of dignity seriously contravenes this moral ideal, and within contemporary society this happens on a large scale. But if the whole structure of the formal economy is based on forms of organisation which reproduce inequalities in the relations in which people stand to one another, then that implies a complete solution must lie in the development of a different economic system, one founded on equality. That we do not have an available alternative that is clearly feasible and less bad than capitalism does not invalidate the critique which we have developed, and there is still room within a capitalist framework to make significant improvements in the enabling of dignity at work.

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