

## The experience of dignity

Dignity is usually conceptualised as an abstract status that all human beings share. Often, theories of dignity start with the intuition that everyone has equal dignity, and that dignity is something very valuable that deserves protection. In order to ground this idea of dignity in a strong and secure way, most academics treat it as an inviolable and inherent status of individuals that is grounded in some human quality. Although this seems to be a plausible way to find a stable foundation for the concept, I will argue that it is too abstract, and therefore unable to make sense of the way that dignity is usually experienced.

When dignity is encountered in one's daily life, it is often experienced in lived realities as something that can be threatened or harmed and that is in need of recognition by others. First of all, the experience of indignity is phenomenologically often prior to the experience of dignity: we usually experience dignity when there is something wrong or at stake. Dignity is usually not experienced as a presence, but as an absence, or when it is experienced as a presence it emerges in contrast with its absence. This questions the way that dignity is theorised as a stable and inviolable status and shows that it can be much more precarious. Secondly, dignity is usually experienced in concrete, lived experiences. Most importantly, indignities are often experienced in an embodied way: indignities such as torture, rape, suffering extreme poverty or illness are often felt on the body or they vigorously confront us with our embodiment. These lived embodied practices, or embodied sufferings, of dignity challenge the conceptualisation of dignity as an abstract status. And finally, although dignity is attributed to individuals, it means little when it is not recognised by the communities that someone belongs to and this brings out the importance of its relational aspect, and the role the community plays in acknowledging (or denying) the dignity of the individual. This means that the presupposition of dignity as an inherent status needs reexamination, because we always need others to recognise, affirm, realise, sustain or witness our dignity.

These three aspects challenge the way that dignity is normally conceptualised and ask for a rethinking of dignity. At the end of the paper, I will briefly gesture towards how a performative theory of dignity is better able to capture the way that dignity is experienced because it is an embodied, contextual and dynamic concept.

Keywords: dignity, embodiment, relationality, vulnerability

Author information:

Dr Mirjam van der Heide  
NRF Postdoctoral Fellow in Political Theory  
University of the Witwatersrand  
visiting address: Office 57a, Robert Sobukwe Block, East campus  
postal address: Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa  
Tel: +27 11-717-4987  
email: [mirjam.vanderheide@wits.ac.za](mailto:mirjam.vanderheide@wits.ac.za)

Bio:

Mirjam van der Heide holds a PhD in Political and Social Thought from the Institute for Social Justice, ACU, Australia and an MA in philosophy from the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands. Her research focusses on theoretical political problems with a clear link to contemporary political realities, and more particularly on questions around inclusion and exclusion. She is currently working on reconceptualising dignity as a performative concept and on dignity and indignation in protest movements.