



# Dignity Research Agenda

## Consensus Statement

Date: 7 November 2022

## **Dignity Research Agenda: Consensus Statement**

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This statement is co-authored by all the participants in the Dignity Research Agenda Symposium (12-14 September 2022), who jointly made suggestions for the most effective way forward. We especially thank Sarah Goltz of Sage Leadership for her facilitation of these sessions. The statement based on those inputs was written up by Tom Wein, who may be treated as the corresponding author: **Tom.Wein@IDinsight.org**

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### **About IDinsight**

The IDinsight Dignity Initiative aims to create a world in which the global development sector routinely acts respectfully towards those whom development seeks to serve.

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# Executive Summary

This consensus statement on the research agenda on dignity will serve as a reference for those in academia and adjacent research fields proposing to study dignity, respect and its related topics - especially as they relate to international development.

Many people study dignity, but they are relatively scattered across departments, disciplines and institutions. There is no home for the study of dignity, where new collaborations might be struck up and progress in its study be tracked. At least some reviewers treat it as a marginal or unhelpfully fuzzy concept.

The IDinsight Dignity Initiative can help address this. We hope this statement will help people coordinate, collaborate and recognise the value of studying dignity.

From 12-14 September, we organised a symposium on the research agenda. Many researchers on dignity attended. Sessions included keynotes from Dr Miriam Laker-Oketta and Dr Alicia Ely Yamin, as well as panel discussions on dignity's value in understanding social movements, state bureaucracies, and research ethics. During this symposium, we solicited input over several sessions as to the priority research questions that people hope a dignity research field will address.

## Five themes of dignity research

We agreed to organise these research questions around five themes, building on Wein (2020). The five themes are:

1. How is dignity to be defined?
2. How can respectfulness be measured?
3. How does dignity and respect operate?
4. What acts increase perceptions of respectfulness, and what are the consequences of that?
5. How do actors and sectors regard dignity and what actions will increase support for a dignity agenda?

**What happens now?** Use this agenda to guide you in selecting research questions, and cite it. Co-sign this work if you support this agenda. Connect with others studying dignity, and let us know when you do so.

# Statement of the agenda

**We, the cosigners and authors of this research agenda consensus statement, following discussions during the Dignity Research Agenda symposium from 12-14 September 2022, resolve that:**

- The research agenda should focus less on proposing a single conception of dignity, since many definitions have proven useful across disciplinary and cultural traditions and since this cannot be resolved. Instead it should make room to chart multiple conceptions building on existing work, with researchers clearly stating what definition they use and how it relates to the understanding of dignity used by their sample.
- Measurement is a vital part of the research agenda. While many measures currently exist, there are still important gaps where tools still need to be developed. We hold this even as we acknowledge that those measures must be used with due humility about what they can achieve.
- A large amount of work can be done to deepen our understanding of how people experience and enact dignity and respect in their lives.
- There are a great many ideas to increase the frequency of experiences that are respectful of people's dignity, and decrease the frequency of experiences that disrespect people's dignity. Only a handful have been tested in early-stage experiments, and almost none have been tested through experimental methods in real-world situations. There is initial evidence for many possible downstream consequences or correlated outcomes of respectful treatment, but almost none have been examined beyond the United States and outside laboratory or online survey contexts. A number of preliminary steps will help group and model these relationships.
- It is important to study the uptake and use (or lack thereof) of the dignity concept in different sectors. For some contributors, it is important to actively promote this. Studies, tools and public advocacy may have contributions to make here.

# Surveying the field

Where is the field of research on dignity at present? To inform the research agenda, we have built on the literature survey (Wein, 2022), which we summarise in the table below.

To do so, we offer a quick overview of progress in researching dignity by discipline, by stage of the research cycle, by geographical focus, by theoretical explanation of how dignity varies, by intervention, and by evidence on the consequences of experiencing respectful treatment.

## Shaping conclusions about future research

This suggests some important shaping conclusions about future research, which will likely apply to all five research themes and the research questions contained within them. Those conclusions are:

1. We have much to learn from existing work in philosophy, law and medicine, and more work should be done in economics, political science and other social sciences.
2. We can build on a strong existing base of theoretical and descriptive work, with more associational and experimental work.
3. There are particular gaps in our understanding of dignity in South America, Central and West Africa, Southeast Asia and East Asia, and we will need to significantly expand both new work and our citational practices.
4. We should look to develop all the main theories of how dignity varies, since the evidence is tentative here.
5. A huge number of treatments and interventions have been hypothesised as potentially increasing experiences of respect for dignity, and these need to be grouped, prioritised and tested.
6. A large number of consequences of experiencing respectful treatment have been observed. These need to be validated in new and more realistic research settings, and models developed to understand how they interrelate.

Approach to studying dignity	Status of the evidence
Dignity by discipline	A wealth of work has been done in philosophy. A great deal has been taken up by legal studies. Medicine has made considerable progress in applying this. Other social sciences have perhaps done less. There is a fair amount of work in psychology, a little less in economics and political science. Very few contributions have been uncovered from anthropology, geography or sociology.
Dignity by research cycle (Lieberman, 2016)	Most work has been done in the theoretical and normative part of the research cycle. A fair amount of descriptive work has been done. Later stages of the research cycle have contributed far less to the study of dignity. There is almost no associational and predictive work, and almost no natural experiments have been studied. There are a number of good early stage experiments, though a great many hypotheses are untested, and there are not many late-stage experiments.
Dignity by geography	A great deal of work has been done in North America and Europe. We have some important contributions to understanding dignity in the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and East and Southern Africa. Far fewer contributions have been observed in South America, Central and West Africa, Southeast Asia and East Asia. We need to significantly expand both the coverage of the research and the citation practices we employ.
Dignity by source of variance	A number of hypotheses have been offered for how dignity varies. This evidence is tentative for now. We have some confirming evidence that dignity varies by place and by cultural syndrome. There is at least one investigation of how dignity varies by individualist and collectivist ways of being . There is some evidence that dignity does <i>not</i> vary importantly by gender or by age. All of these theoretical approaches would bear deeper investigation. Other possible sources of variance could be proposed.
Dignity by intervention	How might experiences of respect for dignity be increased? There are a vast number of potential hypotheses, very few of which have been tested. We list these in greater detail below.
Dignity by consequences	What are the consequences when people experience respectful treatment? A number have been observed, mostly in the laboratory or in online experimental studies, and mostly in the United States. Domains that may be affected by experiencing respect for dignity include wellbeing & emotions, self-efficacy, physical & mental health, democratic spheres, tolerance & partisanship, cooperation, service uptake, service satisfaction, willingness to pay, and willingness to recommend. No model exists for organising these consequences, or exploring which may precede another.

# 1. How is dignity to be defined?

**We resolve that the research agenda should focus less on proposing a single conception of dignity. Instead it should make room to chart multiple conceptions building on existing work, with researchers clearly stating what definition they use and how it relates to the understanding of dignity used by their sample.**

Dignity is a concept for which many approaches have been suggested; it has been called “multivocal” since we often invoke multiple overlapping meanings at once in using the term. A large amount of research has been done already to describe these differing approaches and traditions of dignity.

Ideally a definition would be generic enough to be universal, while not over-imposing values upon different cultures and peoples. It would be widely used, and pass Gerring (1999)’s tests of conceptual ‘goodness’. However, finding a single definition of this kind is unlikely to fully succeed; many definitions have proven helpful to different projects so far. It may be sufficient to employ dignity as an instrumental organising concept for a set of problems in the world we wish to solve.

A number of specific projects could deepen our understanding, including:

- Untangle the connections between dignity and personhood.
- Explore the interactions between ideas of dignity and other major constructs that speak to goals of human thriving, including antiracism, decolonisation, wellbeing; capabilities, participation, and empowerment.
- Explore the interactions between ideas of dignity and other major ethical impulses, such as love, compassion, generosity or altruism, and virtue.
- Explore the theoretical implications of adopting ideas of dignity that assign it only to humans, vs those that assign it to some wider group.
- Explore the theoretical implications of adopting ideas of dignity that suggest that dignity lives in individual persons, vs those that suggest dignity lives in groups, vs those that suggest that dignity lives in the relationships between persons.
- Record the similarities and differences between philosophical, theological and popular or indigenous understandings of dignity among different groups.
- Integrate ideas of self-respect, which feature heavily in many popular



definitions, to existing philosophical understandings.

- Create reflective accounts of experiences of translating key terms such as dignity and respect into different languages.
- Understand the relationship between people's expectations of treatment, their experience of the treatment itself and their evaluation of it.
- Understand the relationship between dignity experiences and material provision.
- Understand the relationship between dignity experiences and experiencing (an absence of) violations of human rights.
- Explore the relationship between dignity and power and status.

## 2. How can respectfulness be measured?

**We resolve that measurement is a vital part of the research agenda. While many measures currently exist, there are still important gaps where tools still need to be developed. We hold this even as we acknowledge that those measures must be used with due humility about what they can achieve.**

Anyone working on measures will need to wrestle with a number of thorny theoretical issues. The first is the definition they are employing (as discussed above). Another is the power relations among research participants, service providers and researchers, where measures employ self-reporting.

There will be value in both self-reported and subjective, and observed measures of whether people are treated in a way that respects their dignity. Self-reports will allow researchers to understand people's subjective experiences, which is helpful given the rich variation in understandings of what types of treatment will respect someone's dignity. However, this subjectivity will also create an 'adaptive preferences' problem, in which those with the lowest status are likely to have the lowest expectations, meaning that those we might most want to help may be those who are least likely to report an issue.

For that reason, we believe that a suite of tools, rather than a single standard measure, is going to be most useful. As well as meeting the highest standards of academic validity, it will be important to consider the tools' usefulness for other sectors, with recommendations about the performance of much shorter versions of survey scales that can be readily incorporated into monitoring and evaluation efforts. For the same reason, as much as possible, tools must be made accessible, with clear guidance on their usage and interpretation.

A number of specific projects could deepen our understanding, including:

- Develop and validate a 'global' measure of whether people are treated in a way that respects their dignity in general in their lives, not specific to any one interaction.
- Develop and validate a shorter, more practical version of Mansur Lalljee's (2007) Respect for Persons scale to examine whether people embrace an ethic of respecting the dignity of others.
- Investigate ways to increase the incentive compatibility of existing

measures

- Validate the Felt Respect for Dignity measure (Wein, Khattry & Bhimani, 2022) with new populations.
- Consider how to elicit expectations of respectful treatment, in order to compare that with eventual treatment
- Consider whether the same measures should cover both negative and positive experiences of dignity in the same scale, or whether they should focus only on one of these.
- Examine whether the behaviour-focused measures developed in medicine align with local understandings of dignity and respect.
- Examine whether the scale of dignity experiences is a smooth line, or what the curves, thresholds and discontinuities are in how people experience (dis)respect.
- Review existing measures of self-respect and make recommendations about which should be incorporated into the suite of dignity tools.
- Consider what role open-ended questions and qualitative investigations should have in complementing quantitative measures, and how those results should be interpreted.
- Consider the possibility of a flexible dignity index that brings questions in and out depending on local definitions, capturing the important meanings connected to dignity in different contexts.
- Compare self-report and observational measurement tools to understand the validity and whether observational tools can capture subjectivity in understandings of dignity.
- Develop standard ways of coding dignity experiences in response to open-ended questions.
- Create a repository of tools, translations and validation performance for easy use. Translate tools into new languages, and share them.
- Create a flowchart for guiding decisions on which measurement tools to use.

### 3. How does dignity and respect operate?

**We resolve that a large amount of work can be done to deepen our understanding of how people experience and enact dignity and respect in their lives.**

Work will need to be done to survey and qualitatively interview people on their experiences of dignity broadly, and examine the demographic, psychometric and other correlates of this. There will be a need for specific studies in different sectors, including healthcare, the marketplace, work, research participation, and political engagement. In doing so, a number of theoretical questions can be examined about how dignity varies.

We note that a number of specific populations may have very different experiences of dignity, and special attention might be paid to their experiences. These might include people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, racial and religious minorities, LGBT+ people, migrants and refugees, caregivers, and children. This list should certainly be expanded.

A number of specific projects could deepen our understanding, including:

- Explore how individualistic ideas of dignity are popularly understood in cultures that tend to focus on ideas of dignity embedded in relationships, groups, or the ascription of personhood to non-humans.
- Explore class- and socio-economic status-based variation, to understand how much people care about dignity depending on how well their material needs are being met.
- Examine the relative value of negative and positive experiences of dignity, and recommend a balance of focus for research between eliminating negative experiences and promoting affirming experiences.
- Examine whether dignity experiences are mainly shaped by separable interactions (e.g. with service providers), ongoing relationships with that provider, or by deeper identity and relational processes of life in society.
- Examine whether the proposed 'Three Pathways' framework of how to respect people's dignity (those pathways being recognition, agency, and equality) holds up, especially beyond the US.

- Examine in detail cases when respect to some norms means disrespecting the dignity of another, and the clashing claims and trade-offs that this implies.
- Gather empirical evidence to test Gesa Lindemann's theory of individualism–collectivism for explaining variance in ideas of dignity (Lindemann; Düwell et al, 2014).
- Examine existing data sources that have collected evidence on respect. These include the European Social Survey, Gallup World Poll, and community surveys by many police services (which will need to be collated). This builds on existing work examining correlates in Afrobarometer and Twaweza data.
- Continue to examine whether initial findings that gender and age are not significantly related to experiences of respect really hold up, given the priors that these would be important factors.
- Implement the CUPS framework (Culture, Person, Situation) in studying dignity to understand the full range of variation (Leung & Cohen, 2011).
- Create historical accounts of dignity's use in social movements, and in the construction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Examine values statements and other promises to respect dignity by organisations, and how this relates to everyday practices and people's actual experiences of interacting with those organisations.
- Create ethnographies of organisations that have wrestled with building cultures of dignity (building on initial case studies of Partners in Health, GiveDirectly, Goonj, ATD Fourth World and Tostan; Wambua & Wein, 2022). Create further ethnographies of noted failures to be respectful of people's dignity.
- Use the Day Reconstruction Method or random text prompts throughout the day to deepen our understanding of the specific contexts in which people have dignity experiences.
- Develop toolkits collating common lessons on the operation of dignity and respect, with specific geographical advice, and share it with those who would value it.

## 4. What acts increase perceptions of respectfulness, and what are the consequences of that?

**We resolve that there are a great many ideas to increase the frequency of experiences that are respectful of people's dignity. Only a handful have been tested in early-stage experiments, and almost none have been tested through experimental methods in real-world situations. There is initial evidence for many possible downstream consequences or correlated outcomes of respectful treatment, but almost none have been examined beyond the United States and outside laboratory or online survey contexts. A number of preliminary steps will help group and model these relationships.**

To develop hypothesised interventions and actions for testing, we should solicit ideas from the relevant populations, and learn from organisations that are already working in a respectful way. Researchers may find the list of possible ideas in the table below helpful. Many techniques have been studied in the participation, community-organising, prejudice reduction, social norms and abuse prevention spaces that will need to be thoughtfully integrated into this agenda.

Extensive work is necessary to classify and prioritise among these possible interventions. It may be helpful to think of classifying them by whether they act at the individual, institutional or systemic level, or whether they meet people's need for recognition, agency or equality. A distinction might be made between interventions to increase positive experiences, to decrease negative experiences, and to raise expectations and demands for dignity. It will also be helpful to distinguish between interventions that aim to make a particular interaction more respectful, and those that aim to increase the level of respect for dignity a person receives in their life in general. This classification exercise will additionally help uncover gaps where new ideas are particularly needed. Delphi exercises may be helpful here also. To prioritise among them, forecasting exercises are likely to be particularly valuable.

In developing interventions, it will be important to consider how to balance autonomy and standardisation, to consider whether ‘manualised’ dignity interventions can avoid the depersonalisation they are trying to address, and to incorporate reflections on the problems of scale.

A number of thorny theoretical issues should be considered in this work. Consideration will have to be given to how such interventions may generalise. Where the impacts of such interventions are heterogeneous, where clashing dignity claims exist, where there are important material arguments for intervening even when a population considers it disrespectful, where safety and safeguarding issues interrupt dignity efforts, or where respectful action is costly and reduces the total resources available, researchers will have to offer guidance on difficult judgments.

This supports a general point that it is valuable to develop and accrue evidence around general and cross-cutting principles of what makes for an intervention that respects people’s dignity, and what consistent features there are between successful interventions.

A great many consequences of treating people in a way that respects their dignity have been observed. These are listed in the second table below. All of these will need to be tested in a wider range of real-world situations. Research will need to build on correlational work to identify and test a wide range of other imaginable consequences. Considerable value may be added by developing a more formal model that groups the various consequences that have been observed and explores the interrelationships among them.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, more sophisticated models will go beyond a linear relationship from intervention to increased experiences of respect for dignity to consequences, charting further how improvements in those ‘consequences’ outcomes may feed back to changes in expectations and experiences of respect for dignity, and interact with the need for, success and failure of the interventions.

#### **An incomplete list of possible ideas to increase experiences of respect for dignity**

- Consciousness raising, anti-stigma, self-respect and self-talk interventions
- Collective action, relational community organising, and ensuring people can collectively challenge aspects of delivery that are not working for them
- Rigorous preference elicitation (and polling) of what types of aid or services people would most welcome
- Legal protections against discrimination and other guarantees
- Affirmative action recruitment programs

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<sup>1</sup> One version of this might group them as returns to the individual, returns to the intervener, and returns to wider society. No doubt many others can be suggested.

- Community entry and exit protocols, greetings and farewells
- Contact theory interventions
- Staff training programs. Contextual reminders and nudges. Incentives, rewards and recognition for staff
- Public messaging about entitlement to be treated well
- Therapy
- Local groundedness, local recruitment and selecting organisations and people who have existing individual or imagined-community links to those they serve
- Compensation practices
- Narratives and messaging of empowerment, including representation in visual imagery
- Cash transfers rather than in-kind aid
- Greetings and farewells, and adopting and constructing rituals around delivery of aid/services
- Mobility-increasing interventions
- Adjusting the amount of time spent on an interaction
- Feedback loops and complaint processes
- Consent processes and ensuring that activities are opt-in
- Elections and other representative-selection processes
- Member checking and other post-activity feedback actions
- Community-driven development, co-design, human-centred design and participation activities
- Transparent and fair selection and eligibility procedures. Unconditionality of aid/service provision. Universality of aid/service provision.
- Apologies and accountability actions when disrespect or other failures occur
- Addressing people by (preferred) name
- Privilege and reflexivity statements to make plain inequalities
- Policies and interventions to combating harassment, bullying or abuse
- Transparency and clarity of processes; signposting and communication
- Removing visual, physical and other markers of status, authority and inequality
- Tailoring aid to individual or group needs and preferences
- Providing opportunities to share personal stories, specific circumstances, such as through open-ended questions
- Reducing power asymmetries, removing status markers, and materially improving conditions
- Listening, engaging in conversations, and maintaining ongoing relationships of care
- Subgroup analysis and targeted research to understand specific barriers and hear the voices of particular groups
- Providing physical and psychological ease and comfort during interactions
- Privacy protections during interactions and for data collected
- Providing physical and psychological security during interactions
- Delivering aid/services in a timely manner, and providing choices over when that should be
- Data protection
- Citizenship and ensuring people have stable legal standing, and sense of belonging and recourse to remedies. Legal empowerment and support from paralegals
- Public commitments to values and standards of service
- Analysis and reflection on power relations. Asking the person with the least power for their guidance



**An incomplete list of possible consequences of respect for dignity**

- Physical and mental health
- Income
- Education
- Access to credit
- Productivity
- Social cohesion
- Wellbeing & emotions
- Self-efficacy
- Democratic engagement
- Tolerance & reduced partisanship
- Cooperation with others
- Service uptake and satisfaction
- Willingness to return and customer loyalty
- Willingness to pay
- Recommendation of services

## 5. How do actors and sectors regard dignity and what actions will increase support for a dignity agenda?

**We resolve that it is important to study the uptake and use (or lack thereof) of the dignity concept in different sectors. For some contributors, it is important to actively promote this. Studies, tools and public advocacy may have contributions to make here.**

In discussing this, many of our contributors had a particular focus on the international development sector, although many such recommendations will equally apply to public services, healthcare, the marketplace, or a great many other relevant groupings.

A number of specific projects could deepen our understanding, including:

- Survey attitudes to dignity among leaders and staff in different sectors, and especially among 'gatekeeping' institutions such as funders and professional standards bodies.
- Gather evidence of the impact that increased respect for dignity has on programmatic outcomes that these intervenors are motivated to achieve.
- Conduct ethnographies of organisations that have tried to build cultures of dignity (building on case study work by IDinsight of Partners in Health, ATD Fourth World, Goonj, GiveDirectly, Tostan; Wambua & Wein, 2022).
- Validate and reflexively study IDinsight's new 'Dignity Audit' method as a tool for building dignity within an organisation.
- Develop standard approaches to co-design that can generate recommendations for dignity-enhancing improvements to services and products led by those who will be their end-users.
- Study the needs and hopes of particular professional groupings for this concept - especially those working on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, and on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and related concepts.

- Create accessible toolkits, guides, repositories of case studies and other relevant summary materials communicating the evidence collected around dignity.
- Test and get feedback from those development serves on the Dignified Storytelling principles developed for communications professionals by Dubai Cares.
- Test messages to discern the most persuasive arguments and framing to increase support for the dignity agenda.
- Examine how social movements make claims about dignity, and explore how they are viewed by observers such as governments, media, and the wider public.
- Connect evidence on dignity with bodies charged with ensuring ethical conduct, such as institutional review boards, human resources departments, or professional standards bodies.
- Study the progress of the dignity agenda through the global issue prioritisation frameworks offered by Jeremy Shiffman (Shiffman & Shawar, 2022), and identify likely barriers to impact.
- Examine existing definitions of dignity, linguistic and content analysis of how they are employed in such sectors, with careful consideration of the ways in which such terms have previously become buzzwords drained of real impact.
- Conduct archival work to understand how the conference that drafted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights came to agree on dignity as the principle that underpins human rights, and the debates and political positions that informed this.
- Ensure that research around dignity is conducted in as ethical a way as possible, incorporating the preferences of research participants about how to do so.

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