

Dignity, Esteem and Social Contribution: A Recognition-Theoretical View*

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Introduction

What are the social conditions of living a dignified life? Even though it is a common belief, shared by most people for many different reasons, that all human beings possess dignity in virtue of being human, most people also believe that one can succeed or fail to live a dignified life or a life with dignity. Posing the question of the social conditions of living a dignified life shifts the focus from conceptual and ontological considerations about what exactly dignity is and why all human beings possess it to phenomenological and sociological considerations about what it means to live a life with a sense of one's own dignity as an experiential quality. In this paper I argue for the recognition-theoretical view that living a dignified life requires two forms of social recognition: *respect* and *social esteem*.¹ Whereas respect recognises the personhood of the individual subject and is equally owed to every subject, esteem recognises a particular quality of an individual subject and is owed to all and only those subjects who possess the esteemed quality.² My argument in this paper is that the form of esteem that matters for dignity is *social esteem*, that is, the recognition of particular qualities of individuals insofar as these qualities can be recognised as capacities and achievements that contribute to socially shared goals.³ As a result, even though all human

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¹ This recognition-theoretical view is developed in Honneth 1996, 2003a, and in Anderson and Honneth 2005. In this paper I draw freely on Honneth's work, but I also depart from it when necessary. My aim is to make the recognition-theoretical view useful for the analysis of dignity, not to offer an "orthodox" Honnethian interpretation of dignity.

² For similar distinctions see also Darwall 1977; Sachs 1981.

³ Honneth 1996, p. 122.

beings possess equal dignity in virtue of being human, the ability to live a dignified life is distributed unequally among humans.

While the respect requirement is widely accepted in the philosophical literature on dignity, the social esteem requirement has received little attention so far. In what follows I will explain the distinction between respect and social esteem in more detail and argue that in modern capitalist societies social esteem is distributed primarily according to a subject's position in the social division of labour. Next, I will consider three phenomena which pose a threat to human dignity because they deprive subjects of social esteem: unemployment, precarious employment, and low pay. This will lead me to the interim conclusion that substantial social and economic reforms would be needed in order to enable people to live dignified lives. However, in the final section of the paper I will argue that attention to the social esteem requirement complicates appeals to human dignity as a social-critical concept, because it can be asserted as a positional good. When people assert their own dignity by comparing themselves favourably to others, who they claim are less dignified, dignity can prop up rather than undermine social hierarchies. As a result, the theory outlined in the first three sections does not give us the full picture, and dignified lives elude some people despite the fact that they make a contribution to socially shared goals.

1. Human Dignity, Respect and Social Esteem

Living a dignified life means living up to the dignity that one possesses as a human being. In particular, it means establishing a sense of self-worth that enables one to conceive of one's own, individual existence as having meaning and value. This sense of self-worth requires that subjects cultivate two forms of self-relation: self-respect and self-esteem. While self-respect assures the subject of its equal worth, that is, of its equal right to pursue its own conception of the good, to live its life on its own terms, self-esteem assures the subject of its possession of the capacities that are necessary to pursue its good and of the meaningfulness and value of that good. It is a central insight of the recognition-theoretical view that both

self-respect and self-esteem depend on social recognition. Self-respect typically depends on being respected, and self-esteem typically depends on being esteemed.⁴

The relationship between self-respect, respect, and dignity is often recognised. For example, according to Joel Feinberg, to have self-respect one must know oneself to be a holder of rights and therefore as capable of asserting claims that others must respect. At the same time, to have this “recognisable capacity to assert claims” is to have human dignity.⁵ Conversely, disrespect poses a threat to human dignity, particularly when it originates from an authoritative source. If respect is the interpersonal and institutional recognition of a person’s status as “an authoritative source of valid claims”, then denials of that status through subordination, marginalization or exclusion are forms of disrespect that typically undermine a person’s self-respect, because they undermine her sense that she is everyone else’s equal who competently shapes decisions that concern her. This is a threat to human dignity, because a dignified life requires a sense of authority and control over one’s own destiny. Jeremy Waldron’s interpretation of dignity as a legal status is one prominent approach to human dignity that addresses this threat, because on this interpretation the point of legal status is to protect the person from disrespect through the public assurance of her equal standing.⁶

The relationship between self-esteem, social esteem, and dignity is more complex. One reason for why self-esteem typically depends on social esteem is that most people need the reassurance of others in order to assure themselves of the possession of their capacities. A second reason is that the meaning and value of a person’s conception of the good or identity

⁴ Cf. Honneth 1996. This claim is backed up by research in social psychology. According to the leading researcher in the field, the importance of reflective appraisals for the self-concept, including its evaluative dimension, self-esteem, “can scarcely be overestimated” (Rosenberg 1979, p. 63).

⁵ Feinberg 1970, p. 252. For further discussion and critique cf. Meyer 1989.

⁶ Cf. Waldron 2007, 2012; also Habermas 2010. Perhaps it does not address it fully, because it focuses on legal standing rather than moral standing in general. The former is a vertical relationship, whereas the latter is a horizontal one.

are not purely subjective matters. In framing a conception of the good or identity people typically appeal to the shared social meanings of their society and compare themselves to relevant social reference groups, because it is difficult to pursue a life that is incomprehensible to others and therefore cannot be recognised as worthy of pursuit.⁷ Research in psychology has confirmed that people engage in such “reflective appraisals”, whether they are based on direct reflections, the perceived self or the generalised other, and in social comparisons to reassure themselves of their possession of capacities and skills and to establish the value of their conception of the good.⁸ As one recent study puts it: “Social skills, attributes, and identities lack absolute value and a clear evaluative metric. Thus other people serve as essential reference points for deciding what is normal and what is good, providing external standards by which people can comparatively assess their own merit or value.”⁹

To be sure, there are multiple determinants of self-esteem, and not all of them require the esteem of others. For example, people gain self-esteem through self-attribution, that is, the attribution to themselves of capacities based on their successful exercise of these capacities.¹⁰ Moreover, the determinants of self-esteem are hierarchically organised and vary in their psychological centrality. Rather than assigning equal weight to all components of the self, people tend to value the components in which they are strong. For example, people who succeed academically tend to value academic success more than those who do not. This is a

⁷ Again, it is not conceptually impossible to pursue a life that is incomprehensible to others, but it is so difficult to do that it becomes practically impossible for most subjects. Cf. Anderson and Honneth 2005, p. 136.

⁸ The *locus classicus* for this research is Rosenberg 1979; cf. especially pp. 62–70.

⁹ Wells 2001, pp. 305–306.

¹⁰ Rosenberg 1979, pp. 70–73. People also may be esteemed in interpersonal relations as friends or lovers, or as parents or children, and gain self-esteem through this recognition. Finally, people can gain self-esteem through ego-extension, that is, the identification with esteemed people or groups, including their family or friends, their sports team or employer, or their racial or ethnic group. In materialistic cultures, ego-extension even may extend to inanimate objects, such as expensive consumer goods, which testify to the high social status of their owners (Rosenberg 1979, pp. 34–38; Wells 2001, p. 306).

powerful defence mechanism, which enables people to maintain self-esteem through selectivity in self-evaluation, including self-evaluation through social comparisons.¹¹

Nevertheless, there are limits to selectivity. People may adjust the importance that they place on a particular capacity if they do not excel in exercising it, but when this capacity becomes salient in their interaction with others or as a necessary means to an end they value, they cannot deny their lack of success. Likewise, people can choose who to befriend and with whom to socialise, but they cannot choose their neighbours, colleagues or employers. Finally, there are limits to value choice, because many of people's deepest values are acquired early in life or are inextricably linked with social role definitions and social group norms.¹² In the remainder of this paper, I will assume that most people in modern capitalist societies cannot avoid seeking social esteem from their peers, even though the centrality of social esteem to their self-worth may vary between individuals. The next step in my argument is to examine which activities attract social esteem in these societies, and how it is distributed.

The recognition-theoretical view uses the concept of a "recognition order" to analyse the distribution of social esteem.¹³ To conceptualise society as a recognition order is to consider it as a normative order that institutionalises the distribution of respect and social esteem and therefore expresses the social valuations that most people in this society see as legitimate. From this perspective the historical development leading from pre-modern Feudal society to modern capitalist society revolutionised our understanding of human dignity by breaking up the "alloy of legal respect and social esteem"¹⁴. In pre-modern Feudal society dignity was essentially honour, where an individual's rights as a member of society were directly related to the social esteem he enjoyed as a member of a specific class, performing a specific

¹¹ Rosenberg 1979, pp. 73–77, 265–69; Gecas 2001, pp. 88–89.

¹² Rosenberg 1979, pp. 277–78.

¹³ Honneth 2003a, p. 137.

¹⁴ Honneth 2003a, p. 135.

function in society. In modern capitalist society equal respect and social esteem became distinct recognition principles.¹⁵ In theory, this means that modern subjects enjoy equal respect before the law independently of the social esteem that they attract.¹⁶ At the same time the principle of esteem recognition underwent a revolutionary transformation. The individualization of lifestyles and the pluralization of conceptions of human flourishing and self-realization narrowed the range of collectively shared values that could orient the distribution of social esteem in pre-modern societies. Therefore, in modern societies social esteem typically tracks activities that still can be recognised as making a contribution to the realization of societal goals.¹⁷ They determine, in part, whether people can live dignified lives.

From this perspective it is not surprising that the distribution of social esteem is subject to permanent struggles for recognition. Esteem recognition, now distinct from respect recognition is a fundamental need of modern subjects, and their ability to live dignified lives is threatened if their contributions to socially shared goals are insufficiently recognised or misrecognised, or if subjects cannot or do not make such a contribution to socially shared goals. But since it is a matter of interpretation what counts as estimable activity, individuals and social groups are permanently engaged in cultural conflicts about the shape of the recognition order itself. They demand more recognition for their own activities where they feel that their social usefulness is undervalued, or they struggle for recognition where their contribution is not valued at all. Thus people's ability to live dignified lives depends on the balance of interpretative or symbolic power in society as much as on the balance of material power, because these power relations in society determine the normative standards according to which social esteem is distributed.

¹⁵ Honneth 2003a, pp. 139–40.

¹⁶ In practice, respect and esteem recognition remain interdependent. See my discussion in §2 below.

¹⁷ Honneth 1996, p. 122.

The recognition-theoretical view is descriptive and normative at once. On the descriptive level it aims to elucidate the standards through which respect and esteem are distributed in the modern capitalist recognition order. On the normative level it can offer an immanent critique of this recognition order by evaluating the extent to which its distribution of respect and esteem lives up to its own standards. Modern capitalist societies purport to distribute social esteem according to the normative standard of “individual achievement”, which ought to effect a meritocratic distribution of social esteem according to a subject’s contribution to society as a “productive citizen.”¹⁸ However, its immanent critique reveals significant ideological distortions that severely limit the kinds of activity that can be recognised as estimable. First, not all life projects that contribute to socially shared goals are best understood in terms of individual achievement, and, second, the standard of individual achievement used here is interpreted in an “ideological” and “one-sided” way, with the effect that many forms of work that clearly make important contributions to socially shared goals are either insufficiently esteemed or misrecognised.¹⁹ Conversely, some work that is highly esteemed in modern capitalist societies makes very little valuable contribution to socially shared goals. In general, what counts as “work” in modern capitalist societies is determined by substantive value judgments that undervalue or disvalue entire areas of activity, such as care work, childcare or housework, while valuing others, such as “investment in intellectual preparation for a specific activity.”²⁰

Given the narrow range of recognisable achievement in the capitalist recognition order, it is not surprising that paid work through regular employment is the principal activity through which subjects seek social esteem from their fellow subjects, and this has important implications for the self-image of individual subjects: “The majority of the population continues to attach their own social identity primarily to their role in the organized labor

¹⁸ Honneth 2003a, pp. 140, 141.

¹⁹ Honneth 2003a, pp. 141, 142.

²⁰ Honneth 2003a, p. 147; cf. Sennett and Cobb 1972.

process.”²¹ This remains true, even though in post-industrial societies work has become less stable for many, and, as a result, the ways in which some people identify with their work has changed.²² Likewise, I do not wish to deny that there are other avenues through which people can gain social esteem. Clearly, many activities that people engage in outside of the workplace or instead of paid work contribute to socially shared goals and are recognised as such. Nevertheless, given the importance of work for subjects’ sense of their social identity, it is not surprising that work and the workplace are principal loci of struggles for human dignity, where workers stake the claim for the value of their particular contribution. Moreover, salaries, other benefits and even working conditions become media for the distribution of social esteem and proxies for its measurement, so that even where people have merely instrumental rather than identity-constituting attitudes to work, it nevertheless shapes their social identities, and ultimately their ability to live dignified lives, indirectly through the income and status that it provides.

This explanation of how work contributes to human dignity differs from two related arguments about the requirements of a dignified life. First, according to Avishai Margalit, all a dignified life requires is a meaningful occupation in the sense of “an occupation that confers meaning on the life of the one engaged in it.”²³ It follows from this that a decent society, that is, a society that does not humiliate people, “provides all its members with the opportunity to find at least one reasonably meaningful occupation.”²⁴ However, Margalit’s

²¹ Honneth 2010, p. 223.

²² For example, the traditional identity of the “male breadwinner” has come under strain where industry has given way to services, while women’s normative commitment to paid work has increased. Overall, a recent survey of the sociology of work concludes that “there has been no ‘revolution’ in work orientations or the meaning of work...Survey data suggests that non-financial commitment to work remains robust and provides no support for the idea of any decline in the work ethic over recent decades” (Grint and Nixon 2015, p. 322). André Gorz’s vision of a society in which “[s]ocially useful labour, distributed over all those willing and able to work, will...cease to be anyone’s exclusive or leading activity” (1982, p. 3), has not materialised. Of course, this is not to say that Gorz’s vision is not desirable. I will return to this point at the beginning of §4 below.

²³ Margalit 1996, p. 253.

²⁴ Margalit 1996, p. 254.

conception of meaningfulness is subjective in the sense that an occupation is meaningful for a person if and only if that person derives meaning from it.²⁵ Thus, a person can live a dignified life if she derives meaning from an utterly self-absorbed occupation, such as counting the blades of grass in her garden. In contrast, according to the recognition-theoretical view that I have developed here, living a dignified life requires an occupation that attracts social esteem, because it is recognised as a contribution to socially shared goals. It is not sufficient for an occupation to be meaningful in the lesser sense of being recognisable as an activity that is meaningful to the person engaged in it, because such an utterly self-absorbed occupation cannot attract social esteem, and, therefore, cannot ground the self-esteem that is a necessary condition for a dignified life. This is not to deny that a person can gain happiness, satisfaction or even self-realisation through an occupation that is subjectively meaningful in Margalit's sense. But a dignified life requires more than that. Living up to one's human dignity requires that one pursues an occupation that can be recognised as socially useful by others.

Second, the recognition-theoretical argument for how work contributes to human dignity also differs from the possible argument that a dignified life requires meaningful work in a much more substantial sense. According to Adina Schwartz and Beate Roessler, autonomy requires that meaningful work be complex and varied, allows people to draw on their skills and talents, and be organised in such a way as to give workers significant decision-making power about the organisation of the work and the direction of the enterprise as a whole.²⁶ While neither Schwartz nor Roessler explicitly argue that living a dignified life requires meaningful work in this substantial sense, one may think that durable violations of a person's autonomy undermine their dignity too. However, as stated, this claim is too strong.

²⁵ Margalit seems to claim that subjective meaningfulness is sufficient for self-esteem and self-worth (1996, p. 253). It is not clear to me why that should be the case, and the recognition-theoretical view raises some doubts about this claim when it points to the importance of social esteem for self-esteem and self-worth.

²⁶ Cf. Schwartz 1982; Roessler 2012. Schwartz does not refer to dignity. Roessler frequently uses "meaningless" and "undignified" in the same breadth, but it is unclear whether the latter follows from the former or is independent of it.

Clearly, many people live dignified lives while doing routine work that is simple and monotonous. A lot of care work is like this. And a lot of care work also does not require many special skills or talents, although it may require character traits such as empathy and patience. I believe that care workers gain dignity from their work precisely because it is obviously socially useful. On the other hand, when care workers feel that they cannot live dignified lives, this often is because of the organisation of their work, or its precarity, or the low pay, rather than the work itself. This seems to be true in general. Work is not meaningless or undignified when it is simple and monotonous, but when workers cannot see the purpose of such work or are not recognised for performing it. Similarly, it is implausible that significant decision-making power at work is required for a dignified life. To be sure, the requirement of equal respect, rather than that of social esteem, establishes limits to the power that others can exercise over us if we are to be recognised as persons. Thus, work may become undignified when the authority that others yield over us is arbitrary or excessive. However, according to the recognition-theoretical view, in many cases we can consent to work under the direction of others without sacrificing our dignity.

To be clear, I do not deny the influence of meaningful work in the substantial sense on self-esteem, human flourishing and self-realisation.²⁷ Its distribution may be a matter of social justice, especially since the ideological and one-sided way in which achievement is interpreted may mean that substantially meaningful work is more highly esteemed (see also §4 below), and its absence or erosion in modern capitalist society a legitimate object of social criticism.²⁸ However, I do not think that meaningful work in this sense is a necessary condition for living a dignified life. As I will show in the next section, unemployed people are

²⁷ In fact, research suggests that “occupational self-direction”, that is, freedom from close supervision and substantively complex tasks requiring a variety of approaches, is a source of self-esteem (Kohn and Schooler 1982; Schooler and Oates 2001).

²⁸ On meaningful work and social justice cf. Muirhead 2004; Moriarty 2009; Arnold 2012. For a social critique of work in contemporary capitalism cf. Gorz 1982; Sennett 1999.

primarily worried about being seen as useless, as not making a contribution to socially shared goals, rather than about having substantially meaningful work.

2. Unemployment and Human Dignity

The importance of work as an individual's contribution to socially shared goals has been noted in the sociological literature on work. Thus, in his classic report of working life, *Working*, Studs Terkel writes that work "is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book."²⁹ People seek work that is meaningful to them, but that meaningfulness derives from their conviction that it is socially useful and recognised as such. Hence the reference to immortality, and to being remembered. The same idea is at work in Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's classic study *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Cobb's "Afterword" explains this attitude to work particularly well when he discusses one of their interviewees: "the worthiness granted a person, and that he sometimes accepts as his own, is not an abstraction all-internal to the self, nor a purely relative issue of different personal abilities, but stems from the social value placed on his labors."³⁰ Again, people think about the meaning and value of their work, and therefore of the dignity of their lives, in terms of their usefulness to others. This importance of work also explains why forced unemployment is experienced as humiliating and a severe threat to human dignity.

Ever since Marie Jahoda and her colleagues studied the unemployed of Marienthal in 1930, research has testified to the social-psychological, as well as the monetary, cost of unemployment for individuals and society as a whole.³¹ Curiously, the language of dignity is

²⁹ Terkel 1974, p. 1.

³⁰ Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 264.

³¹ Jahoda et al. 1972.

largely absent from more recent sociological research. In some cases, this absence may be due to an attempt to capture the negative experience of unemployment through objective indicators, such as correlations with ill health, disability or divorce. In other cases, researchers focus on subjective wellbeing and psychological adjustment, but they do not report in detail on people's own assessment of how unemployment affects their sense of self-worth and therefore their dignity.³² Nevertheless, some important studies lend support to the thesis that unemployment threatens human dignity, even though they describe the relevant phenomenology in other terms.

For present purposes the relationship between unemployment and social esteem is of central importance. If dignity requires respect and social esteem, and in modern capitalist societies social esteem recognises an individual's contribution to socially shared goals, then being unemployed means being excluded from a principal source of social esteem. This consequence of unemployment is confirmed over and over again in sociological and psychological studies of unemployment.³³ In particular, the relationship between being useful to society, making a contribution to society, and social esteem is very apparent. Thus, summarising research on unemployment during the 1930s, Jahoda writes "the unemployed during the great depression suffered from a sense of purposelessness. The phrases repeated in virtually all studies are: being on the scrap-heap, useless, not needed by anybody."³⁴ She also notes the loss of social status and personal identity, both of which are defined to a large degree by one's job.³⁵ There are no reasons to believe that these experiences have lost their relevance today³⁶; indeed, similar experiences are reported elsewhere in the literature.³⁷

³² Gallie et al. 1994.

³³ Jahoda 1982; Marsden 1982; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Warr 1987.

³⁴ Jahoda 1982, p. 24.

³⁵ Jahoda 1982, p. 26; cf. Warr 1987, p. 224.

³⁶ Jahoda 1982, p. 83; cf. Gershuny 1994.

³⁷ Marsden 1982, pp. 206–207; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985, p. 72.

While these studies do not discuss unemployment in terms of human dignity, I want to argue that the experiences they describe exhibit its conceptual structure. Unemployed people lack self-worth, because they feel that they cannot contribute anything of social worth and be recognised for their contribution, and that their lives have no meaning and value because of this. The esteem dimension of recognition, split off from the respect dimension, remains integral to the way in which the unemployed person constructs his or her own dignity.³⁸

More generally, the problem of unemployment illustrates the persistent interdependence of respect and esteem recognition in the social construction of dignity. On the one hand, many struggles for recognition in the sphere of social esteem, including struggles for social-welfare benefits for the unemployed, but also for better working conditions, have been transformed into struggles about social rights, so that unemployment benefits and decent working conditions are no longer seen as expressions of esteem for the social contribution of workers but of respect for their equal rights.³⁹ In fact, Honneth conceives of this boundary-shifting between recognition spheres as a form of moral progress, because it decouples social rights from the need for justification in terms of individual achievement.⁴⁰ This seems right, because the legal guarantee of social-welfare entitlements establishes the social minimum as something that one is due as everyone's equal, rather than as a social inferior.⁴¹

On the other hand, however, the demonization of the unemployed as skivers and the attempts to curtail their social rights are obvious examples of the erosion of respect based on a prior erosion of social esteem. The "social stigma"⁴² of unemployment cuts across the

³⁸ Moreover, unemployment makes subjects dependent on others for support, and others see them as so dependent. This further undermines the human dignity of the unemployed where being self-reliant is an important part of being dignified (Sayer 2007, p. 570; see also LaVaque-Manty 2009, pp. 114–17, on overcoming vulnerability).

³⁹ Honneth 2003a, p. 149; cf. Marshall 1992.

⁴⁰ Honneth 2003a, p. 188.

⁴¹ Cf. Anderson 1999.

⁴² Honneth 2010, p. 224.

respect and esteem dimensions of human dignity. Once a class of subjects is characterised as useless and replaceable and therefore not worthy of social esteem, their ability to exact the equal respect that is due to them as citizens in the form of social rights is undermined, too.⁴³ Social-psychological research also confirms this interdependence of respect and social esteem. Kelvin and Jarrett write

[T]here is a taken-for-granted assumption that whatever other differences there might be between individuals in a democracy they are nevertheless equal as citizens. Unemployed people, on the other hand, frequently feel that they are treated as ‘second-class citizens’: and when one examines the conditions for obtaining welfare benefit, especially means-related benefits, it is quite incontrovertible that these involve invasions of the privacy of claimants which would be deemed intolerable in relation to ‘ordinary’ men and women.⁴⁴

The threat to human dignity through the denial of equal respect to welfare-benefit claimants has been noted in normative political philosophy⁴⁵; the recognition-theoretical view adds the insight that there is a substantive relationship between lacking social esteem and being able to claim one’s rights. Once a person is no longer seen as making a contribution to socially shared goals, her ability to insist on her equality with others in other areas of life is also threatened. Moreover, where mutual esteem is no longer possible, dignity can be asserted as a positional good. This is the case when workers assert their superiority over the unemployed as a means to articulate their sense of dignity. I will return to this thorny issue in §4 below, but before that I want to discuss how human dignity can be threatened in employment as well as in unemployment.

⁴³ Cf. Honneth and Stahl 2013, p. 283.

⁴⁴ Kelvin and Jarrett 1985, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Cf. Wolff 1998.

3. Employment and Human Dignity

Recent media reporting has drawn attention to two phenomena which can be experienced as threats to human dignity in employment: precarity and low pay. In what follows I want to show that the recognition-theoretical view explains why they can be so experienced. Of course, I do not claim that precarity and low pay are the only threats to dignity at work. A quick look at research in the sociology of work concerned with dignity reveals a concern with abuse, bullying and harassment, and dirty, dangerous and demeaning work.⁴⁶ However, while I agree that dignity is threatened in all of these phenomena, abuse, bullying and harassment are forms of disrespect and humiliation, rather than consequences of the absence or withdrawal of social esteem, and it is the relationship between dignity and social esteem that I am interested in here.⁴⁷

The conception of modern capitalist society as a recognition order provides the key to understanding why phenomena such as precarity and low pay should be understood as threats to human dignity, because the recognition order institutionalises the distribution of respect and social esteem. Of course, any given recognition order is open to contestation, and struggles for recognition are struggles about how recognition principles are to be applied. However, broadly speaking, the existing recognition order expresses a normative view about how respect and esteem ought to be distributed. From this perspective the labour market is not an anonymous market mechanism where supply and demand determine the cost of labour and the terms and conditions under which it can be employed. Rather, the labour market is a complex social institution in which “efficiency considerations...are inextricably fused with cultural views of the social world”, which determine the social value of a

⁴⁶ Hodson 2001; Bolton 2007; Sayer 2007. There also is some concern with the right to meaningful work in the substantial sense that I discussed in §2 above.

⁴⁷ This response simplifies the complexity of these phenomena. As I noted in §2 above, there are many cases in which the erosion of respect is based on a prior erosion of social esteem, and this dynamic may well explain many instances of abuse, bullying and harassment.

particular job or profession.⁴⁸ Until recently, in modern capitalist societies labour markets were tightly regulated, and these regulations expressed these societies' understandings of desert and justice and of the specific vulnerabilities to which workers are exposed: "From the perspective of those affected, the social-legal constraints of the employment contract represent not merely a functional safeguard of their capacity to work, but a moral guarantee of the social recognition of their dignity and status."⁴⁹ If this is right, then precarity and low pay have an expressive dimension that subjects experience in addition to the economic dimension. To see this, consider them in more detail.

Recent discussions about the rise of the so-called precariat have drawn attention to the experience of precariousness as the defining feature of many people's lives.⁵⁰ As Guy Standing has pointed out, the insecurity that is characteristic of precariousness has many dimensions, which can be contrasted with seven forms of traditional labour security, including employment security, job security and income security.⁵¹ The less security subjects

⁴⁸ Honneth 2003a, p. 156.

⁴⁹ Honneth 2003b, p. 253.

⁵⁰ LaVaque-Manty 2009; Standing 2011.

⁵¹ Standing's seven dimensions of security are:

Labour market security – Adequate income-earning opportunities; at the macro-level this is epitomised by a government commitment to 'full employment'.

Employment security – Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules and so on.

Job security – Ability and opportunity to retain a niche in employment, plus barriers to skill dilution, and opportunities for 'upward' mobility in terms of status and income.

Work security – Protection against accidents and illness at work, through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, as well as compensation for mishaps.

Skill reproduction security – Opportunity to gain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training and so on, as well as opportunity to make use of competencies.

Income security – Assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement low incomes.

Representation Security – Possessing a collective voice in the labour market, through, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike." (Standing 2011, p. 10)

enjoy in these dimensions of labour security, the more precarious their lives are. Subjects adopt instrumental and opportunistic attitudes toward work and may experience anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation in the face of their precarious existence.⁵² This experience is not limited to low-skilled workers, or migrants or women, though these groups are disproportionately affected; neither is it limited to the private sector, though it is more pronounced there. But whatever distinguishes members of the precariat, they are trapped in jobs that do not offer them a stable future and, as a result, they do not identify with their jobs or their labour, and they do not profit as much from the rewards of their labour as they would, if they had stable jobs.⁵³ As Standing puts it: “Those in the precariat lack self-esteem and social worth in their work.”⁵⁴

The recognition-theoretical view is well suited to explain why precariousness or precarization – the process through which subjects’ lives become precarious – can be experienced as a threat to human dignity. The threat arises from a dialectic of autonomy and dependence. On the one hand, humans are autonomous agents and to treat them as mere means disrespects them. On the other hands, humans are interdependent and find meaning and value in being useful to others, in fulfilling others’ needs.⁵⁵ On the recognition-theoretical view, the division of labour in modern capitalist societies institutionalises the ways in which subjects use their specific abilities and skills to make a contribution to the common good. However, this division of labour can be experienced as legitimate only if it respects subjects’ autonomy as well as their interdependence. This requires an organisation of labour that enables workers to gain self-esteem through their work.⁵⁶ Neither the exercise

⁵² Standing 2011, pp. 12, 19–24. In fact, one recent study has found that “those men who are in insecure employment at the disadvantaged end of the labour market suffer approximately the same level of psychological disadvantage as the unemployed themselves” (Burchell 1994, p. 207).

⁵³ Cf. Wolff and de-Shalit 2009, pp. 63–73.

⁵⁴ Standing 2011, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Sayer 2007, pp. 569–70; cf. Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 266.

⁵⁶ Honneth 2010, p. 231.

of specific abilities and skills nor contribution to the common good is an atomistic act; abilities and skills must be developed and nurtured, and contributions to the common good unfold over a period of productive activity.⁵⁷ Precarization undermines the self-esteem that subjects gain through their work, and therefore, threatens their dignity, because it abstracts from these social and temporal dimensions of labour. Treating labour like any other commodity, precarization disembeds it from the moral norms which render the modern division of labour legitimate and reduces it to its monetary exchange value. The increasing use of fixed-term contracts is the most obvious example of this; it reduces the fixed costs of labour through a transfer of risk from employer to employee.⁵⁸ The erosion of non-monetary benefits, such as health insurance and pensions, is another example of this re-commodification, rendering subjects more vulnerable to the risks of ill health and old age poverty.⁵⁹ At the same time, the precariously employed are made acutely aware of the fact that their social contribution is held to be of a very low value.⁶⁰

Similarly, I want to argue that the existence of poorly paid work threatens the human dignity of those who do this work. This is particularly true of work that does not pay a living wage, that is, that does not pay well enough for the worker to live off it. To see this, consider the findings of Lisa Dodson, who has analysed the personal and social consequences of low-paid jobs in the US, focusing on their detrimental effects on children and health. Her most

⁵⁷ The threat to dignity that precariously employed workers face is exacerbated by the constant need to reassert their abilities and skills to potential employers (Standing 2011, p. 49).

⁵⁸ Honneth 2010, p. 232; Standing 2011, pp. 31–36.

⁵⁹ Standing 2011, pp. 41–42.

⁶⁰ Of course, this brief analysis does not cover all precarious employment. As Standing also notes, some precariously employed workers are highly skilled and compensated. They may not experience precariousness as a threat to their dignity but as freedom. But they are in the minority.

Moreover, precariousness is experienced negatively against the background of social expectations associated with traditional labour security. As a result, precariousness may pose less of a threat to people's ability to live dignified lives, if precarious employment becomes more common and more commonly accepted. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *JPP* for alerting me to this.

intriguing findings concern the moral conclusions that ordinary Americans, low-paid and better-paid, draw from the existence of jobs that do not provide a livelihood for those who do them, and who leave low-paid workers to juggle impossible workloads with care obligations. There is a widespread sense that the economic system responsible for these effects is unfair, and that the right thing to do in these circumstances often is to break the rules and to help low-paid workers. Many managers risk their own jobs to help their employees, be it by padding pay cheques, manipulating hours, ignoring infractions, or by giving them food or clothes to take home.⁶¹ More importantly, Dodson argues that the unfairness of the economy leads many Americans to doubt the value of work.

What most people explained, in story after story, was that even during the wealth-boom years there was always another America. There were always millions of families with earnings so low they struggled to pay for heat, food, transportation, childcare, and health care [...] And they went beyond personal stories; they analyzed how economic mistreatment degrades the very value of work in America. Why should *those* people cherish jobs that the larger society holds in such low regard? *Would you?*⁶²

This analysis goes to the heart of my concern in this section. People in low-paid jobs cannot cherish their work, *because* they know that it is not socially valued. And they know that because the low value that society places on it is expressed in the low pay they receive for doing it. Money is a medium of social esteem, and therefore pay is an expression of the value of one's work to the organisation, to society and, ultimately, to the worker herself.⁶³ Where pay is so low that it does not provide a livelihood for the worker, she is essentially told that

⁶¹ Dodson 2009, pp. 17–25.

⁶² Dodson 2009, p. 190.

⁶³ Geoghegan 2007, p. 236.

her capacities are not worth the cost of keeping her alive. Clearly, it is very difficult to maintain a sense of self-worth and therefore dignity under these circumstances.

This connection between low pay and a lack of dignity sometimes has been recognised. The demand that there be a national minimum wage, “so that men [sic] may live in dignity”, was one of the demands read out at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom right after Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in August 1963.⁶⁴ More than 50 years later, President Barack Obama expressed support for the same argument when he told an audience at a Laborfest rally in Milwaukee on Labor Day that “[a]ll across the country right now, there’s a national movement going on made up of fast-food workers organizing to lift wages, so they can provide for their families with pride and dignity.”⁶⁵ And in one 2014 survey 58% of respondents agreed that a job that does not cover basic living expenses cannot give a person dignity.⁶⁶ The recognition-theoretical view explains why that is.

Note that this explanation for why low-paid work threatens human dignity does not imply that low-paid workers cannot find any dignity in their work. The persistence of a “work ethic”⁶⁷ in modern capitalist societies means that workers may find some self-worth in their ability to work at all, to be self-reliant, to earn money and to be useful at all.⁶⁸ However, such assertions of dignity often are directed against those who do not work and serve to bolster the dignity of those who assert it through a favourable comparison with people who are worse off than they are. This phenomenon points to problematic aspects of the struggle for dignity.

4. Dignity and Comparative Worth

⁶⁴ Allegretto and Pitts 2013, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Finnegan 2014.

⁶⁶ Swanson and Delaney 2014.

⁶⁷ Bauman 1998, Chap. 1 and 4.

⁶⁸ Sayer 2007, p. 570.

So far, I have argued that unemployment, precarity and low pay are threats to human dignity, because they undermine the sense of self-worth that people derive from the work they do. If this is right, an interim conclusion suggests itself. In order to protect the dignity of their members, societies must do more than grant them equal legal standing before the law. They also must strive to achieve full employment, protect employment security and ensure that workers are decently paid in order to afford them the opportunity to lead lives in which their contribution to socially shared goals is recognised. And, given the structural changes in the labour markets of post-industrial societies, these societies also would do well to broaden the range of estimable activities in which citizens can engage outside of the workplace or instead of paid labour.⁶⁹ This is a significant result, because it shows that the protection of human dignity requires substantial social and economic reform. However, in the remainder of this paper I want to suggest that matters are more complicated still, and that these reforms may not be enough. The comparative nature of social esteem in modern capitalist societies means that the theory outlined in §§1–3 above does not give us the full picture, and even those who do contribute to socially shared goals may not be able to live dignified lives.

The capitalist recognition order distributes social esteem unequally, because it purports to track a person's contribution to socially shared values, and not everyone can or does make an equal contribution to such values. Moreover, the capitalist recognition order understands this contribution in terms of "individual achievement." Thus it closely ties together a person's ability and her social usefulness. But not everyone has the same ability to achieve socially useful things, and not everyone can develop such ability to the same degree. As a result, the capitalist recognition order issues in a social status order in which social esteem is unequally distributed between people. This would be true, even if this order were to track genuine social contributions and to reward genuine achievements. In reality, where the capitalist recognition order is ideologically distorted and one-sided, the distribution of social

⁶⁹ Cf. Gorz 1982. It would be desirable if people could make social contributions outside of the organised division of labour, which always involves an element of heteronomy.

esteem reproduces and legitimises the existing hierarchies of social class and prestige. And in such a hierarchical class society, many struggle to establish dignity in their lives, as dignity becomes comparative and positional in nature.

To see this, consider the struggles for dignity of the Bostonian working class men interviewed in Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class*.⁷⁰ The central contradiction of their lives is that in order to be recognised as equals they must demonstrate individual achievement, but in order to do so, they must assert their superiority over others in competitive ways. They see college-educated, white-collar, upper-middle-class people as their social superiors and as a threat to their own dignity, because they perceive these people as possessing a culture and education that enables them to live their lives with a sense of self-control and independence that individualises them in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. In contrast, the working class men see themselves as part of the masses. A worker “has to want upward mobility in order to establish dignity in his own life”, because that will individualise him and distinguish him from the masses.⁷¹ However, the men who have achieved upward mobility feel very ambivalent about their successes. While educated upper-middle-class people seem naturally entitled and suited to work at complex tasks or direct others, the working class men feel like impostors, and they do not value the powers and privileges that come with their success. For example, they do not value directing others. Thus the esteem that they receive from others does not translate into self-esteem, because they do not believe it to be rightfully theirs.⁷²

Moreover, while working class men do not feel that they deserve their upward social mobility, they do feel responsible for failing to achieve such mobility. To be sure, they

⁷⁰ Sennett and Cobb 1972. In what follows I cannot do justice to Sennett and Cobb's complex argument. Instead, I focus on aspects of their discussion that support my argument in this section.

⁷¹ Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 22.

⁷² Sennett and Cobb 1972, pp. 22–23.

recognise the injustice of some people being given the opportunity to be educated and to develop their capacities while others are not and insist that individuals should not be judged on the basis of their social standing.⁷³ However, at the same time they wonder whether it is not really their own fault that they have not made the most of their opportunities and, therefore, should be judged as inferior after all.⁷⁴ This existential insecurity about their worth as persons prevents them from politicising their struggle for dignity. In this situation workers are reduced to wrest their dignity from personal sacrifice. They will take on extra work, work longer hours, deprive themselves of the joys of family life, and adopt authoritarian parenting styles in order to enable their children to escape from a working class existence. Just like the men who have gone to war, working class men feel that their personal sacrifice individualises them and give them the right to judge others.⁷⁵ Of course, this personal sacrifice leaves them vulnerable to disappointment; if their children do not choose a respectable career path or are unsuccessful, their parents' dignity will be imperilled along with their own.

At this stage of the argument, one crucial question is whether relationships of solidarity within the working class can replace the feelings of injured dignity that working class men experience in their lives. Is it possible to develop a “counterculture of dignity”⁷⁶ amongst working class colleagues or neighbours? A study by Michèle Lamont suggests that workers “strive to maintain a sense of self-worth and dignity, and to achieve this, they develop alternative measuring sticks that can be viewed as key elements in a culture of resistance.”⁷⁷ In particular, they elaborate a value system around hard work, personal integrity and traditional morality⁷⁸, and elaborate a critique of upper-middle-class life that shows this

⁷³ Sennett and Cobb 1972, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁴ Sennett and Cobb 1972, pp. 94–97.

⁷⁵ Sennett and Cobb 1972, pp. 149–50.

⁷⁶ Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 83.

⁷⁷ Lamont 2000, p. 147.

⁷⁸ Lamont 2000, p. 51.

class as wanting when it comes to living up to these values.⁷⁹ However, one major obstacle to such a counterculture is the fact that the attitude that workers take toward upper-middle-class ideals is fundamentally ambivalent. While they criticise these ideals in terms of their own values, they aspire to make possible such a cultured and educated existence for their children to the point of sacrificing their own freedom and happiness. This suggests that the traditional morality is mostly defensive, rather than a genuine alternative avenue to dignity.⁸⁰

Most importantly, though, the dignity of working men does not transcend the comparative and positional way in which dignity is asserted in class societies. While this may look like a legitimate strategy of resistance when it is directed at a privileged class, it is morally problematic when it is directed at a class, gender, ethnicity or race that is perceived to be inferior. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence for such assertions of dignity against vulnerable groups. Thus Sennett and Cobb interpret the widespread hostile attitudes of Bostonian working class men toward welfare recipients and single mothers as a corollary of their sacrifice mentality. They only can assert their dignity through personal sacrifices, but this assertion only can succeed if these sacrifices are necessary for their families to survive and thrive. The existence of welfare recipients who live without work and of single mothers who live without male breadwinners threatens the self-conception of working class men, because they undermine the idea that their sacrifices are necessary.⁸¹ Likewise, the workers interviewed in Lamont's study show contempt for welfare recipients and other groups that they consider their inferiors, because their value system is built around ideas of hard work, self-sufficiency and individual responsibility, and they blame the poor, the unemployed and the homeless, amongst others, for their predicament. In fact, some of these workers

⁷⁹ Lamont 2000, p. 147.

⁸⁰ This also may be due to the limits of psychological selectivity discussed in §1 above. Lamont's workers cannot avoid entirely social comparisons with other members of the society in which they live.

⁸¹ Sennett and Cobb 1972, pp. 135–36.

explicitly assert their own superior status by comparing themselves to these groups. Moreover, many white workers associate poverty and unemployment with black people and offer racist explanations of their own superiority.⁸²

Once there is a “contest for dignity”⁸³, it is costly to consider one’s colleagues and neighbours as equals, and it becomes even harder to see poor and unemployed people as one’s equals. Fraternity and solidarity with others threatens one’s own individuality and social status, rather than securing it. The price of one’s own dignity may be the denigration of others as inferior. The problem is that this contest for dignity seems to be a necessary consequence of class society. As soon as social esteem is distributed according to social contribution, and that contribution is individualised, people cannot help but compare themselves to others, and where class differences exist, members of the working class will draw on the achievements and ideals of their class in order to defend their dignity in light of their ambiguous attitudes toward their perceived social superiors and sharply distinguish themselves from those who they perceive as their social inferiors. The need to distinguish oneself from the masses makes it impossible to gain self-worth through non-comparative achievement. Is it possible to disarm this threat to human dignity?

A brief passage in Rawls’ *Justice as Fairness* suggests that it may be disarmed, as long as the right background conditions are in place. In particular, Rawls suggests that under his preferred social and economic regime, property-owning democracy, ownership of productive assets and human capital (education, skills) will be widespread, and fair equality of opportunity will be secured. Under these conditions, even the least advantaged should be able to lead dignified lives. He writes: “Although they control fewer resources, they are doing their full share on terms recognized by all as mutually advantageous and consistent with

⁸² Lamont 2000, pp. 131–36.

⁸³ Sennett and Cobb 1972, p. 147.

everyone's self-respect."⁸⁴ In other words, in a property-owning democracy, even the least advantaged should enjoy social esteem for their contribution to socially shared goals, and it does not matter that the more advantaged may enjoy more social esteem. While an equal distribution of social esteem is utopian, due to the fact that people differ in their abilities and inclinations, and therefore cannot or do not contribute equally to socially shared goals, in a well-ordered society there is a threshold of social esteem that is sufficient for a dignified life which even the least advantaged can meet, so that nobody falls below this threshold and must live an undignified life.

It is difficult to judge the plausibility of Rawls' suggestion, because the highly idealised circumstances of property-owning democracy differ so much from modern capitalist societies. In particular, it is impossible to know whether the members of this society in fact would enjoy the social esteem that they should enjoy, and would be less likely to engage in the contests for dignity that Sennett and Cobb and Lamont describe. Rawls notes that significant economic inequality may lead to social status harms⁸⁵, and he seems to believe that the lower degree of inequality under a regime property-owning democracy coupled with the widespread dispersal of ownership of productive assets would facilitate a distribution of social esteem that avoids such harms to the least advantaged.⁸⁶

However, there are reasons to be sceptical. Recent research in social psychology suggests that social comparison and status-enhancing consumption may depend less on the level of equality between potential competitors than on whether they are primed for competition and

⁸⁴ Rawls 2003, p. 139. It has been noted in the literature that Rawls does not always consistently distinguish between self-respect and self-esteem (cf. Moriarty 1999), and even where he does, his distinctions work differently from mine. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in this passage Rawls writes about what I have called self-esteem: the least advantaged are recognised for their contribution to socially shared goals.

⁸⁵ Rawls 2003, p. 131.

⁸⁶ O'Neill 2014, p. 89.

are located in a competitive environment.⁸⁷ If these results can be generalised, it is not clear that Rawls' suggestion will solve the problem of positional struggles for social esteem. Since property-owning democracy remains a competitive economic system in which both production and consumption are organised through market mechanisms, it is plausible that citizens would engage in "conquests for dignity" like the Bostonian working class men did under a system of welfare-state capitalism, although it may be less pronounced if the degree of competition is limited by other principles, such as democratic corporatism.⁸⁸ In fact, the dispersal of productive assets among citizens may increase competitiveness among them, because it would make all citizen shareholders and incentivise them to maximise their income.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that living a dignified life requires social esteem as well as respect, and that social esteem is the esteem that we are owed for our contribution to socially shared goals. Next, I have argued that in the modern capitalist recognition order people gain social esteem through their work and, therefore, depend on it for their self-worth. This explains why forced unemployment, precarious employment and low paid work are experienced as threats to human dignity: they suggest to those who experience them that they are of little social usefulness and value to society. Therefore, my interim conclusion was that in order to protect the dignity of their members, modern societies must strive to achieve full employment, protect employment security and decent pay, and broaden the range of estimable activities in which citizens can engage in outside of the workplace or instead of paid labour. This is an important addition to the philosophical literature on dignity, which usually limits itself to the respect dimension and ignores people's need for social esteem from their peers.

⁸⁷ Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011. This also suggests that conquests for dignity are not limited to capitalist societies or class societies but are likely to occur in all societies in which social relationships are characterised by social competitiveness.

⁸⁸ Cf. Hussain 2014.

However, my argument in the final section suggests that this may not be enough, and that struggles for human dignity in the competitive environments of modern capitalist societies also have a dark side, because individuals tend to assert their dignity in a comparative and positional way which secures the dignity of some at the cost of the dignity of others. As a result, the appeal to the universal equal worth of each human being is turned into a competitive quest for self-worth as an experiential quality that props up rather than undermines social hierarchies. If my suggestion in the final section is plausible, then we should be sceptical about whether people can live dignified lives in societies that are characterised by a high degree of social competitiveness, such as modern capitalist societies. At the same time, it calls for more research in philosophy, sociology and social psychology, because if the argument of this paper is right, then we urgently need to know how to design social institutions and to foster social practices that enable people to articulate and maintain a sense of human dignity that does not rely on *competitive* struggles for social esteem.

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