# Dignity in Self and Organizations

Understanding the Foundations of Respect, Identity, and Collective Well-Being

## The Unseen Force That Shapes Us

Dignity is one of the most powerful yet overlooked forces that shape human behavior, relationships, and institutions. It's the foundation upon which we build self-worth, navigate social interactions, and determine how we treat others. While we usually associate dignity with concepts like respect and honor, dignity extends beyond mere recognition—it's an **intrinsic right** that every individual possesses, regardless of status, actions, or accomplishments.

This article explores dignity on three levels: **personal dignity**, the foundation of self-respect and self-worth; **intersubjective dignity**, which dictates how we extend respect to others; and **processual dignity**, which influences how institutions uphold or violate human dignity on a structural level. By analyzing these dimensions, we can better understand how dignity—or the lack thereof—shapes individuals, workplaces, and society at large.

## What is Dignity?

To understand how critical dignity is to the health of the self and the collective, we must first define three distinct types of dignity.

### Personal Dignity

Personal dignity involves holding yourself in high regard, treating yourself with compassion, and forgiving yourself for mistakes and shortcomings. Personal dignity is extremely important to cultivate because it's the "gateway dignity" to treating other people with respect—yet in some ways, it's also the most difficult to cultivate.

At first, it almost feels narcissistic or self-indulgent to be nice to yourself, as if doing so means you're coddling yourself or hindering your growth. However, there *is* a difference between being nice to yourself and believing you can do no wrong. Above all, personal dignity means completely separating goals, ambitions, and achievements from

your concept of self-worth. *Everyone,* including you, deserves happiness, good health, and good fortune regardless of what success benchmarks they hit. A good way to reinforce this concept is practicing loving-kindness meditation, which includes sending messages towards yourself and helps you "see, learn, and be free of the habits of grasping, aversion, and delusion" (Salzberg).

Personal dignity can take many forms. It can look like acknowledging your inherent worth as a human being. It's celebrating your achievements and accomplishments, no matter how trivial the world may make them seem. It's appreciating yourself for respecting yourself and others. By building personal dignity, we maintain a strong self of individuality, live true to our values, and discover authentic desires rather than mimicking those of others.

Within personal dignity, there are four dignity sub-types (bear with me, dignity is going to stop sounding like a real word)—(a) Menschenwürde, (b) the dignity of merit, (c) the dignity of moral stature, and (d) the dignity of identity (Nordenfelt).

### (a) Menschenwürde

Menschenwürde is the dignity of existence. To practice this form of dignity, try taking one long, deep breath. Not necessarily while you meditate, nor with your eyes closed, but just at random moments throughout the day. Taking the breath will remind you that you are a miraculous biological machine—a divine creation, depending on how religious you are—designed to inhale the precious oxygen you're taking in. Your breathing, along with everything else that makes you human, serve as a reminder that you're allowed to simply *exist,* and you will still deserve the dignity and respect all humans should receive. Your worth depends not on your skills or productivity, but on your *being here at all.*

Some believe in exceptions to this principle for those who commit terrible deeds. Later in this article, I'll discuss why deciding the extent to which people "deserve" dignity might be more complicated than we think.

### (b) Dignity of Merit

This type of dignity involves rewarding yourself every time you finish something,

accomplish something, or even *attempt* something no matter how "trivial." Doing so helps you train yourself to keep being productive, not to mention it's just *fun* to celebrate yourself for achieving something. It helps reframe failures as lessons to celebrate right alongside the wins. This helps reinforce personal dignity by establishing not only your achievements as having worth, but your effort itself.

### (c) Dignity of Moral Stature

Dignity of moral stature basically means living by the golden rule: acting morally and ethically, at least to the extent you'd want others to act as well. Every once in a while, try reflecting on how you've acted recently and make a point to appreciate yourself for your behavior. Did you go out of your way to help someone in need, but then never told anyone because you thought it would be tacky? Journal about it and thank yourself for it. Your kindness deserves to be acknowledged, even by yourself.

On the flip side, if you think you've made mistakes—you unfairly criticized yourself or were inconsiderate to someone else—it also helps to reflect on why you might've done so, *nonjudgmentally* and *with curiosity*. Beating yourself up over mistakes doesn't help anyone, and instead of wallowing in the misery of your past, you can improve. Everyone loves a good character development arc.

### (d) Dignity of Identity

Your dignity of identity is your level of comfort with who you are. Which might lead you to question… *Who am I, really?*

Existential philosophy aside, your **sense of self** probably exists as a mixture of who you are with other people, who you are when you're alone, and what your thoughts are—what you love, hate, fear, desire, and everything in between. To strengthen your sense of self, you need the free time to engage in activities that bring out your best self, your authentic self, *your whole self*—who you are when you don't feel like you're putting on a performance.

To get better at practicing this form of dignity, it helps to give yourself permission to take on *less*. This might mean saying no to extra hours at work even when faced with extreme pressure. Or giving yourself a break when you know you feel

overworked. Or even asking for help when you need it, which I definitely struggle with. Setting boundaries might be hard in the moment, but it's rarely *not* worth doing. People who are constantly busy and stressed rarely have time to reflect, pursue joy, or discover themselves through connection with others—in other words, they lose touch with *who they are*. Time is the most precious resource we have, one that is *constantly* depleting, and it makes sense for us to be more picky about how we spend it.

### Intersubjective Dignity

In a nutshell, intersubjective dignity is the intrinsic belief that all human beings are inherently equal. Sure, there are debatable exceptions—no one wants to think a serial rapist or a murderer is equally deserving of happiness and dignity as an upstanding member of society—but generally, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, occupation, or level of contribution to society, all humans deserve to be treated with equal amounts of respect and positive acknowledgment.

### Processual Dignity

Imagine a blindfolded king (or the highest status member of a society) has to throw a dart at a spinning wheel to randomly determine his future social status. This is meant to represent the concept of a "veil of ignorance," or the idea that whoever is in charge of designing a society or organization and its rules should make decisions as if their place or status in their social hierarchy will be randomly determined. For instance, if you were a king, you'd have an ethical obligation to design a society you'd be content living in if you were a peasant. A society that would have to grant even its "lowest" members dignity, respect, and happiness. The veil of ignorance embodies processual dignity well because it captures the selflessness required to implement it.

Unfortunately, as we all know, most people who pursue power aren't exactly the selfless types.

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## Organizational Dignity: A Case Study

For this article, I chose to analyze the Prison Creative Arts Project because of its unique approach to serving and uplifting a marginalized community whose suffering receives little attention: prisoners. The Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) is a program at the University of Michigan that brings people in prison and the outside world together through art. They run workshops in theater, writing, visual arts, and music inside prisons, giving incarcerated people a creative outlet and a way to share their voices.

They also put on an annual exhibition featuring art made by incarcerated artists and keep a newsletter going to stay connected, which our team visited this spring. At its core, PCAP is about human connection, self-expression, and the belief that art can create real change. After I learned about the mistreatment of Dalits and manual scavengers in India, I grew curious about organizations that focus on helping those who are not only less fortunate, but also widely disregarded by the rest of society—not to mention rarely on the receiving end of humanitarian efforts. I also wanted to examine how PCAP practices dignity in its work.

**PCAP Research**

Before attending a PCAP art exhibit, I conducted PCAP- and general prisoner rehabilitation-related preliminary research to learn more about how the organization achieves its goals. I learned that PCAP engages Michigan students by offering specific classes that teach literary review and workshop facilitation. The classes are not mandatory, however—people can join PCAP through out-of-classroom volunteer work as well. PCAP offers incarcerated people the chance to have their written works published in a magazine with free editing services, display their art pieces in physical and digital galleries, participate in workshops that teach a wide array of subjects (poetry, playwriting, dancing, music, and visual art), and tell their stories in a web series called *Living on Loss of Privileges: What We Learned in Prison*. This web series, produced with assistance of the Carceral State Project and A Brighter way, features “the stories of formerly incarcerated people who share lessons they have learned while isolated in prison” (Prison Creative Arts Project).

Additionally, many sources indicate that art therapy significantly improves

prisoners' mental health and sense of agency. For instance, prisoners in California who participated in a program called "Arts in Correction" reported "increased self discipline, self-esteem, self-respect, sense of purpose, and reconnection with family as a result of the program. Participants also reported reduced racial tension in the correctional facility" (Brewster). Additionally, Iowa prisoners who participated in a singing program, along with program volunteers, "indicated that their participation afforded: "(a) means to a peak experience with momentary disappearance of stresses and (b) a sense of accomplishment. Inmates perceived more improvement in intrapersonal skills than volunteers while volunteers reported more success in identifying out-of-tune singing than inmates" (Cohen). Artistic intervention programs seem to benefit not only prisoners, but volunteers and those organizing the programs as well.

Overall, PCAP is successful in its mission to empower, rehabilitate, and offer a sense of agency to incarcerated people in many ways, from its art exhibits and workshops to projects like the Linkage Project, which offers "[formerly incarcerated persons] professional development and artistic workshops, a creative peer support network, opportunities to exhibit and perform, and other connections to the arts" (Prison Creative Arts Project). In particular, it's successful in connecting prisoners to the outside world and allowing others to appreciate their artistic storytelling.

**PCAP Art Exhibit**

After attending this exhibit, I'm convinced that prisoners are some of the most artistic people on the planet. I was mesmerized by beautiful, moving, and thoughtful pieces of art that ranged from paintings and sculptures to full-scale ship models and intricate tapestries. Each piece told a story. I've included eight of my favorites at the end of this article.

During the exhibit, I loved that I was able to look up which artists had created certain pieces and read personalized letters they'd written to their fans. The letters contained information about their creative processes, hobbies, and general opinions about time spent inside prison.

Then, I noticed a few people looking up the artists' names to see what crimes they had committed.

I'll admit that once we saw people doing this, I joined in—after all, I was curious to see whether my "guesses" for each work of art were correct.

This painting of a dolphin beach concert must've been a bank robber, right?

Nope, it was a serial axe murderer.

I continued to do this for a bit, reaping entertainment from it and treating it like a game, before I stopped and actually reflected on what I'd been doing. I'd been completely failing to separate the art from the artist, and in the process, starting to judge each piece based on the crimes of its creator. As much as I tried to deny it, as much as I told myself I wasn't being judgmental, I found myself viewing each work in a different light after looking up the crimes.

In other words, the knowledge of the crimes prevented me from being able to fully immerse myself in the art, especially after I started discovering that my favorite pieces of the exhibit had been created by child molesters.

Then, I questioned whether the art should've been anonymous. If the art was attached to a prisoner whose crime was always public information, the public would continue to disengage from the art and treat the art with less respect. But why did I care? Why did awful people's art still deserve respect? On the day of the exhibit, I witnessed many pieces that were *amazing,* that otherwise would have been bought (or at least complimented), getting joked about ("of course a pedophile would draw that" and "glad they're doing this instead of diddling children" type of jokes). Before being ignored altogether.

I felt conflicted. On one hand, I'd been part of the problem, and it was hard to muster much sympathy for the worst criminals of the bunch. On the other hand, encouraging prisoners to express themselves creatively produces captivating, *beautiful* art—pieces that capture emotions and experiences that are rarely explored.

Then I recalled why I chose to explore PCAP in the first place—I wanted to focus on an organization that helped a population that little to no one else wanted to help. An organization that emphasized *dignity for all*.

### The Case for Anonymity

Although you could argue that some of these people didn't deserve this level of consideration, I decided to still see them as marginalized and ignored people in need of

support. This was a harder truth to accept the more vicious the crimes became—again, I was tempted to draw the line somewhere, willing to extend this compassion towards some types of criminals instead of others—but ultimately, I can acknowledge that some people have done unforgivable things while simultaneously acknowledging their humanity. All criminals, even the worst ones, need the chance to move on from their crimes and try to rediscover their own humanity in the form of art. They also benefit from separating their pasts from their art, whether they want to use art as a form of self-expression, self-discovery, or mere escapism.

This is extremely controversial, and honestly, you could shut this entire claim down by discussing what certain criminals "deserve." Why do pedophiles and rapists deserve such mercy at all, or even happiness? Many believe they deserve death over life, and many would scoff at providing them with a way to process their emotions (and make money) through art. In all honesty, I wouldn't know how to rebut such claims because I have no idea how to truly assess what someone deserves.

Which begs the question: is it our place to assess what someone deserves?

Perhaps the focus should be PCAP not on what prisoners deserve, but instead on PCAP's goal of allowing the public to appreciate their art.

What if the PCAP prisoner artists were made anonymous *by default, then* allowed to opt into attaching their true identity to their art? By making anonymity the default, plenty more of the art would be consumed as standalone art and protected from personal judgment. In addition to making anonymity the default option, PCAP could also educate prisoners on this practice and make sure they are all informed of the implications of attaching their real names to their work. This way, those who decide to use their real names will at least be making an informed decision.

If less crime-based art judgment occurs, prisoners will get a lot more positive feedback from the public (PCAP allows the public to send compliments to the artists) and sell a lot more of their work. Whether there's a petty criminal, serial killer, or pedophile who benefits from this boost in verbal and monetary praise doesn't matter. At the end of the day, the more positive reinforcement prisoners receive, the more self-actualization they will undergo, since it will encourage them to continue creating art. They'll be able to channel their energy and process their emotions through art

instead of resorting to self-destruction and harmful behavior.

Also, making it easier for prisoners to interact with the world anonymously gives them the chance to become something other than whatever it is that they originally were. This isn't to say that they will ever be free of their original identities or crimes, but the more they are encouraged to create and receive support (rather than judgment) from the public, the more time they will want to spend on art and hobbies in general. The more chances they will have to cultivate dignity towards themselves and others, a critical stage in harm reduction and prisoner rehabilitation.

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## Conclusion

Dignity is not a static principle—it's an *evolving practice*. It's a process that requires continuous reflection, reinforcement, and application. When you treat yourself with dignity, you engage in self-respect, self-compassion, and the rejection of conditional self-worth. When you treat others with dignity, it becomes second nature to honor the humanity of others, even in challenging or uncomfortable circumstances. Within organizations, dignity becomes a responsibility—one that demands ethical leadership, fairness, and the ability to uplift even those who have been cast aside by society.

The case study of the Prison Creative Arts Project illustrates the complexities of dignity in action, particularly when it challenges deeply held beliefs about justice and forgiveness. It raises difficult but necessary questions: Who deserves dignity? Can art exist separately from its creator? Should the opportunity for redemption be extended to all?

While we'll likely never reach a consensus on these matters, one truth remains—when dignity is upheld, individuals and societies thrive. When it is denied, alienation, harm, and disconnection follow.

If you only take one thing away from this article, let it be this: dignity is not just some abstract philosophical ideal. Rather, it's a force that actively shapes the world we live in—whether it be in your personal growth, your relationships with others, or the

social structures you occupy, committing to dignity means committing to a more just, compassionate, and humane world.

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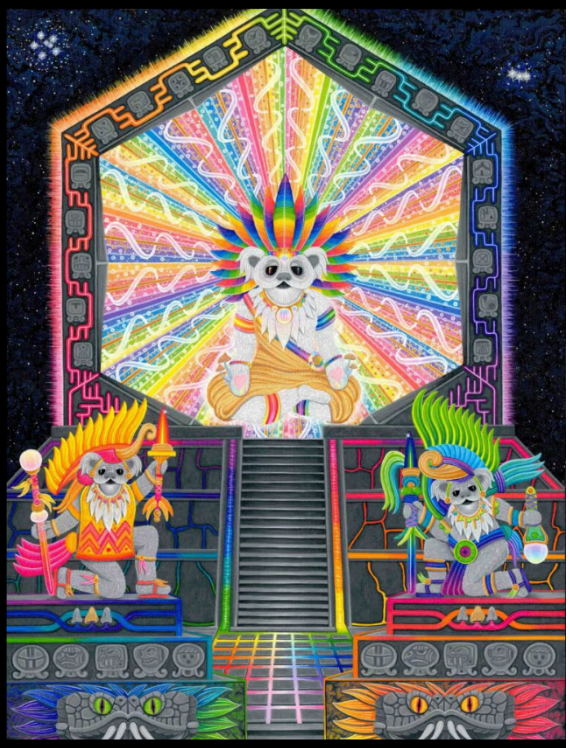
*Check out some of my favorite PCAP art pieces below.*

Sean Savage

Jazz Infusion

Consumed by Guilt

Montney

Melissa Flores

Daryl Rattew

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