

Human Dignity Across the Lifespan

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Summary of Discussion by:

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Our discussion of human dignity and humiliation across the lifespan identified a number of overarching processes that intersect providing opportunities for supporting human dignity and / or generating experiences of humiliation. First, experiences of *visibility / invisibility* apply at all stages of life with the possibility of inclusion (supporting human dignity) and exclusion (generating humiliation). All other “isms” and negative stereotyping (other creation) based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion or disability exacerbate this temporal component of invisibility. Second, *notions of power* play themselves out in different ways across the lifespan with individuals using their power to empower others, thus supporting human dignity or using power to control others, producing humiliation. Third, the dynamics and practices of human dignity promotion and humiliation generation *change across the lifespan* as reference group identity changes in relation to the groups one ages out of and into. For example, as one moves from childhood to adulthood, or from middle age to elderly the group one leaves and the group one enters carries different expectations in relation to the group one has left. Forth, practices of human dignity promotion and humiliation across the lifespan *build on childhood experiences* that form templates for ones approach to practices of human dignity and humiliation. Finally, *contexts / social roles and expectation* regarding dignity and humiliation *vary as one ages* into and out of groups. In early childhood, it is the family; later childhood, schools and peer groups are added; in early adult life relationships and work contexts play a greater role, still later one status in the elder community provides contexts.

In order to identify practices of Dignity to Empower and Practices of Humiliation to Maintain power across the lifespan we designated 5 lifespan categories: Children, Teens, Young Adult, Mature Adult, and Elders. In each category we attempted to identify some behaviors to practices linked to human dignity support and to humiliation. For *children*,

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human dignity support can be linked to the concept of “mutual moral education” which reflects the idea that adults can learn moral principles and practices from children just as children can learn from adults. Humiliation practices related to children are many: corporal punishment, physical and sexual abuse, child labor, “being seen and not heard”. For *Teens* practices to support dignity by those interacting with teens include “choosing to ‘respect’ teens views; discussing with open ended questions to provide avenues for expression; ‘youth in government programs’ to encourage empowered participation. Practices promoting humiliation included: problems finding meaningful employment; anti-group congregating signs in public places; lack of participatory activities in educational process. For *young adults* especially in the workplace dignity can be prompted through leadership opportunities. Humiliation can be practiced when supervisors who are younger than their subordinates fail to recognize contributions of older employees. In the *mature adult* context a free and active job market and job / career stability are important for maintaining dignity. Disrespect of mature adults (over 40) in the job market by younger (20 and 30 year olds) reduces opportunity to obtain positive meaning from work. For this group, fear of coming bodily changes also produces feelings of humiliation. For *Elders* developing ‘*councils of elders*’ in communities can provide opportunities to channel wisdom and link younger generations to the ongoing narrative of communities thus providing opportunities to experience dignity. Practices of humiliation for elders are often reflected in disrespectful language, being treated as ‘babies’ and their fear of their own aging.