

ECONOMIC DIGNITY

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Overview

- Starting with the Capabilities Approach
- So what is economic dignity?
- Dignity as intrinsic
- Dignity as status
- Dignity as function
- Dignity as bearing
- Bringing it all together

Starting with the Capabilities Approach

- Developed from the Capability Approach to human welfare, pioneered by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.
- In the Capability Approach, the central concern is: *‘what are people plausibly able to do and be?’*
- People encounter many constraints on the choices that they can make, and on the options available to them.
- A key idea is that *structures*, as well as people, can cause harm.

So what is economic dignity?



So what is economic dignity?

- Economic dignity: the dimensions of a person's dignity that are linked to their economic context.
- Economic dignity draws on four different types of dignity:
 - *Dignity as intrinsic*
 - *Dignity as status*
 - *Dignity as function*
 - *Dignity as bearing*
- A concept to help understand the economic lives that people live. Especially in relation to:
 - *The constraints that people face*
 - *The options that people have available to them*

Dignity as intrinsic

- The dignity people possess by virtue of being a person.
- Generally tied to the idea of agency, and the notion that people are autonomous.
- All persons deserve to be treated with respect.



Dignity as intrinsic

- For economic dignity, this means ensuring that people have a range of economic choices that they have reason to value, and that they have control over the important financial decisions that they make.
- Structures are important for this, because often our social, political, or economic structures can:
 - *Constrain the choices available to someone*
 - *Fail to support someone adequately*
- Policies or programs that prevent or restrict choice can be harmful to a person's economic dignity, by positioning them as incapable of exercising their agency.
- Important to recognise that choice here is choice in an informed context (it may require information, support, and guidance).

Dignity as status

- The dignity associated with holding a position of high social standing.
- Comes from historically hierarchical societies.
- Historically tied to notions of service (usually in a military or public service context), increasingly tied to wealth.
- People can also be stigmatised based upon their status.



Dignity as status

- For economic dignity, this means understanding how different people are treated based upon their economic and social position.
- Supporting economic dignity as status requires active efforts to resist stigmatising low-income households and those in poverty.
- Approaches that ignore this aspect of economic dignity can be paternalistic in nature, often treating the person as the cause of their position, rather than recognising the role that our structures play in constructing their position.

Dignity as function



- The dignity found in properly fulfilling a role (the dignity in work).
- Can be both paid and unpaid roles.
- Particularly valuable functions are praised.

Dignity as function

- In terms of the idea of economic dignity, this means actively valuing the work that people undertake in an environment that is safe.
- Supporting economic dignity as function also means ensuring that people have employment options that they have reason to value, in environments where they feel safe.
- In the pandemic we have seen a significant number of people lose their employment (or have their hours reduced), and other people be forced to work in contexts where they might not feel safe (particularly in the early stages of the pandemic).

Dignity as bearing

- The dignity attributed to someone who acts in a dignified manner.
- Often understood through the idea of ‘doing the right thing’.



Dignity as bearing

- For economic dignity, this means understanding how economic circumstances can place people in positions where they must make impossible choices.
- Being forced to choose between essential needs like housing and healthcare compromises a person's economic dignity, and can be harmful to their sense of self.
- It forces a person to actively choose a situation where they go without something important, and it can make them feel like they are not entitled to the essentials.

Bringing it all together

- Supporting economic dignity requires policies and programs guided by these key ideas:
 - *People should be treated as being capable of making decisions and acting freely.*
 - *People should not be stigmatised based upon their economic situation.*
 - *People should be able to do work that is meaningful to them in safe and fair working conditions.*
 - *Economic contexts should not place extreme stress on people.*

Applying it to a policy context – the response to COVID-19

- Intrinsic dignity can be used to understand how actively programs support individual agency and autonomy.
- Dignity as status highlights the consequences of treating different sectors and types of employees differently.
- Dignity as function helps to understand how losing their job can be harmful to a person.
- Dignity as bearing reveals the significant impact that difficult choices can have on our sense of self.

Thank you for your attention

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