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## **Human Dignity and Children: Operationalizing a Human rights Concept**

This is an exploratory study of perceptions of human dignity in childhood as recalled by young adults. Our goal is to discover the range of dimensions, sources and experiences, both those that supported and violated, of the concept of human dignity. This research, drawing on responses from over two hundred university students, may help to develop a language with which to explore the concept of human dignity in a broader, more systematic way. The approach taken here permits us to move beyond the 'legal' frame that often confines us to discussions of the extremes of child abuse and neglect, to a frame that frees us to explore the meaning and real life experiences with human dignity in childhood and the impacts on later life. Violating and not supporting human dignity in childhood helps produce a world populated by adults who, having been harmed as children, go on to harm and violate others as adults. If our goal is to have a world populated by children who were nurtured to flourish into child-centered adults who are empathic, intelligent and responsive and who have no need to hurt others, then our understanding of human dignity in childhood must be increased. This paper and the materials on which it is based seek to provide preliminary insights into the language of human dignity.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the world, literally hundreds of millions of children continue to be victims of the most egregious forms of exploitation, violence, abuse and neglect. Children are sold outright or forced into bondage to work off family debt; over one million children are trafficked each year; over one million children, predominantly girls, are exploited in the sex industry; "as many as 100 million women and girls alive today have been genitally mutilated"; hundreds of millions of children are still engaged in exploitive child labor, with close to 6 million of these children working in virtual slavery; children grow up in war zones-- facing death, maiming as targets or combatants in violence; millions of children are starving, homeless, living on the street, increasingly forced to witness or participate in horrifying acts of violence in war refugee camps; and, in their own homes, children are subjected to beatings, sexual abuse, neglect and domestic violence--forced to watch acts of violence between parents and other loved ones (UNICEF 2005; UNICEF 2000; ILO 1998; WHO 2002; Garbarino et al 1991).

As Harvard psychiatrist, Dr. Herman (1992:31) states, trauma, whether experienced in war or in one's own home, is associated with severe psychological consequences as "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning." Research in the United States and throughout the world document the numerous negative consequences of all forms of child maltreatment for the child, the adult they become and the larger society. Victims of child maltreatment are more likely to suffer cognitive deficits and lower IQ; suffer impaired social conscience and moral reasoning and have less empathy; have a higher incidence of psychopathology; have higher rates of substance abuse as teenagers and adults; are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior and become pregnant as an adolescent; commit more violent and nonviolent crimes as a teenager and adult; are more violent in interpersonal relationships as a child and later as an adult with one's own children and spouse; and suffer long-term health risks and problems (Myers et al 2002; Briere 1992; Coley and Chase-Landsdale 1998;

Felitti et al 1998; Perry 1997; Polonko, 2005; Straus 2001; WHO 2002).

The degree of impairment resulting from child maltreatment is related to many factors, for example, how early in life the maltreatment occurred; how severe and continuous the abuse was; how many, if any, adults served as "helping and/or enlightened witnesses" to the maltreated child; etc. However, all child maltreatment, even the "less severe forms" like spanking, harms the child and deprives the world of adults who are fully functioning, healthy, responsive, empathic and contributing members of society (Miller 1990a).

One of the bottom lines underlying all of these forms of child maltreatment is the fact that children constitute an oppressed group and are still not accorded basic human rights. One of these rights, addressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), is the *extension to children the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human community*. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the process of extending to children the right to be treated with dignity by engaging in a preliminary or exploratory analysis of how human dignity is defined and experienced.

## **Human Dignity and Children's Rights**

### ***United States Law***

In the United States, a country recently removed from the United Nations Human Rights Commission (Leopold, 2001) and one of only two countries that has not ratified the U. N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, the status and human dignity of children, as individuals or as a group, are not concepts respected in national or state law (Lombardo and Polonko, 1999; forthcoming) or in social custom or practice (Straus, 2001). A 'human rights' perspective, with the assumption that the individual has *inherent dignity*, is *not* something that comes easy to Americans who tend to have a functional and / or legalistic understanding of the concepts of rights and dignity of the person. Children are seen as inferior to adults in virtually every way. Dignity is not viewed as a birth right accorded all life, but rather an *earned* right accorded certain individuals for engaging in certain activities or possessing certain qualities.

In the US, the rights of children are often sacrificed in favor of the "rights" or power of parents and other caretakers. These parental "rights" include parents' power to treat children as they wish without any outside ("government") interference unless a gross violation of minimal caretaking standards has occurred (Polonko and Lombardo 2005). Here, except in extreme cases ('abuse' or 'neglect', as defined by law), the child is more often than not, the loser (Lombardo and Polonko, 1999). In addition, "family" responsibilities toward children are often the limit of 'social' or 'collective' responsibilities for protecting and supporting children. In a statement to country delegates, ambassadors and special representatives gathered for UNICEF's second preparatory meeting for the Special Session on Children on September 19, 2001, Ambassador E. Michael Southwick, US deputy assistant secretary of state for international affairs, emphasizes this theme of parents' power over children and the Bush administration's position on the 'human rights' perspective and its application to children when he said:

"The past decade has revealed new challenges, including HIV / AIDS, sexual exploitation, children affected by armed conflict, and the *erosion of parental authority*. The Convention on the Rights of the Child may be a positive tool for promoting child welfare for those countries that have adopted it. *But we believe the text goes too far when it asserts entitlements based on economic, social and cultural rights. The human rights-based approach poses significant problems as used in this text.*" [Emphasis added] (Anderson 2001).

Chart 1 highlights the differences between a "human rights" perspective as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and human rights' case law and the "colonialist" perspective on children and corporal punishment found in American statutory and case law.

Obviously, there is very little legal or political support for children's dignity found in the United States' legal approach. Not surprisingly, even in philosophical circles, the concept is discussed within the context of adults. For example, Egonsson (1998:3) writes that people in the West seem to think there is something special about being human, but " : it is not clear whether the thought is (1) that being human is important in itself, or (2) *it is important to be like a human being, that is, to have capacities which a normal grown-up human being has.* [Emphasis added]

### ***Human Rights Law and The Convention on the Rights of the Child***

In human rights' law and documents such as the CRC, it is assumed that every human being, including children, have *inherent dignity*. The key to a human rights approach is that children must be accorded the inherent dignity of all members of the human community. This not only addresses the unequal treatment that children are subjected to, but also anchors this in the larger understanding that inherent dignity is a quality of all life. Being treated with dignity and respect is not a privilege to be earned and guarded. It is a birth right of all members of the human community. In its Preamble, the CRC begins with the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...."

Throughout its preamble and in its articles, the CRC makes many references to concepts related to the idea of 'human dignity' and children. These provisions may be classified into two groups: (1) those provisions that attempt to ensure a 'social responsibility' for the *nurturing of human dignity in children* and (2) those that aim to *prevent violations of children's human dignity*. (See Chart 2).

Regarding the category of "nurturing dignity", the CRC states, for example, that the governments (State Parties) must seek to ensure the care necessary for the child's well being; that governments must use their best efforts to ensure that the best interest of the child is the basic concern of the parents; that children should be treated with humanity and respect; and that governments must take all appropriate measures to promote the recovery of victims of child maltreatment. Regarding the category of "protecting children from violations of dignity," the CRC states that all State Parties must take every measure-legislative, administrative, social and educational- "to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse"; and that State Parties shall ensure that "no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

## **Definition, Meaning and Experience of Children and Human Dignity**

For those of us concerned with the erosion of human dignity, especially in the context of children, the importance of extending to children the right to be treated with dignity and the meaning and relevance of this concept seems self-evident. In her afterword to the second edition of *For Your Own Good*, Alice Miller (1990) poignantly summarizes the benefits:

"People whose integrity has not been damaged in childhood, who were protected respected, and treated with honesty by their parents, will be--both in their youth and in adulthood--intelligent, responsive, empathic, and highly sensitive. They will take pleasure in life and will not feel any need to kill or even hurt others or themselves.... They will not be able to do otherwise than respect and protect those weaker than themselves, including their children, because this is what they have learned from their own experience, and because it is this knowledge (and not the experience of cruelty) that has been stored up inside them from the beginning."

Of necessity in terms of saving children's lives, research on children has and must continue to focus on documenting the ways in which are children are harmed, exploited and maltreated. However, as societies get more clear on the profoundly negative consequences of maltreatment and the equally profound benefits of raising our children with dignity and respect, the need to understand how to nourish and support the inherent dignity of children, of all life, will become more salient. As such, beginning the process of figuring out how to define and operationalize this concept, the meaning and experiences that children and adults have with human dignity, the filters that children and adults use to process meaning and experiences relating to dignity, and which aspects actually impact subsequent behavior and why, is important.

## ***The Need for a Child Centered / Child Situated View of Human Dignity***

In addressing the area of human dignity and children, an *adult-centered or colonial perspective* simply *assumes* that children are inferior to adults, that inherent dignity does not apply to children, that it is not a birth right of all living beings but something to be *earned*, and that the meanings and experiences of children have little importance. This is the paradigm that has dominated much of the law, politics and research in the US and throughout much of the world.

The need for and validity of a *child-centered perspective* on the human rights concept of human dignity is a reflection of a growing realization and concern with the oppression of children as a group, and the missing voices of children's experiences, feelings and perspectives from our adult understandings of issues related to children. These related points on children's inequality and their missing voices in research, has been discussed in work in sociology (Thorne, Polakow), education (Adan), psychiatry (Miller), and developmental psychology (Coles, Blum). A child-centered perspective acknowledges and challenges the oppression of children and sees adults attempt to deny children dignity as one symptom of this oppression. It demands that we acknowledge the losses suffered from violating children and looks for ways to support children. A child-centered perspective also demands that we respect and acknowledge the value of children's experiences. It places us (adults) in the world from which the child is making meaning, developing responses and perceptions that will shape the rest of her life. The potential power of the meaning that childhood experiences can have is poetically reflected in James Agee's (1969:289) quote, as he observed the lives of children of poor agricultural workers in the American South in the 1930's:

*Every breadth his senses shall draw, every act and every shadow and thing in all creation, is a mortal poison, or is a liberator, or is liberty itself, depending entirely on his understanding: and understanding, and action proceeding from understanding and guided by it, is the one weapon against the world's*

*bombardment, the one medicine, the one instrument by which liberty, health, and joy may be shaped or shaped towards, in the individual, and in the race—*

## **Research**

### ***Using a Child-Centered and Human Rights Framework***

In summarizing the preceding, it is clear that extending to children the inherent right of all human beings to be treated with dignity not only is a moral and ethical imperative, but also yields substantial benefits to individuals and society. Although it is not clear from prior work how to operationalize this concept, human dignity is often discussed in the literature in terms of respect, integrity, worth and wholeness among other things. This applies to a sense of all life in general and to one's self in particular as having respect (again, respect for other human beings and for one self), as having worth, "as mattering," having integrity, wholeness, value. Moreover, this dignity is anchored in a way that is independent of specific situations, that is understood to be a birth right. One understands that all life has worth, that one's self has worth, not because you or another has a particular skin color or particular genitals or is a certain age or is smart or tall or rich or athletic, but because we exist in this beautiful web of life to respect and be respected, to honor and be honored.

In our preliminary analyses, ideally we would want to interview young children before they are harmed and develop defenses and adult-centered filters in making sense or meaning of their experiences. As the bulk of research and insights from psychologists and psychotherapists make clear, the experience of child abuse and neglect results in trauma which interferes with the maintenance of a coherent sense of self, among other things (Briere 1992,2002; Herman 1992; Miller 1983; Perry 1997). As summarized by Briere (1992:46) in referring to the impact of abuse on the child's self-reference (self):

"...any phenomenon that alters ongoing conscious awareness during this critical period is likely to have an impact on the child's sense of coherent "me"ness. The presence of depersonalization, derealization, compartmentalization, and so on may produce splits or shifting boundaries in the child's sense of self--a fragmentation that, given the role of self as an organizing entity, is likely to persist and elaborate into adolescence and adulthood. Thus, for example, a child whose sense of self includes discontinuous memories of childhood, whose identity is variable according to outside experience, or whose affective experience fluctuates as a result of intrusive or avoidant symptomatology is unlikely to develop a stable point of reference or home base from which to address the world. In the words of one angry (but articulate) adolescent survivor: "Don't you understand? There's nobody inside here to hear what you say. I'm empty. I just do what happens."

Since the experience of dignity is in reference to *self* (as well as others), if for many individuals, childhood trauma has resulted in at least some degree of fragmentation in one's sense of self (self-referent), then for many a "sense of inherent dignity" or "sense that one matters or has worth" may not be something that they have experienced or be relevant to how they organize, filter and make meaning of their world. Other filters may operate such as daily survival, guilt or inherent sense of self as bad and having no worth, projection or sense that others are inherently bad and have no worth, approval seeking and so forth. These then could become the filters through which concepts such as human dignity are either redefined or literally no longer exist on a conscious level.

Implications of the above for our preliminary analyses suggest that individual's definition of and experiences with the concept of human dignity may be child-centered or adult-centered. Also, for some, difficulties with elaborating examples of how their dignity was supported as a child may reflect the fact that it was not well supported and/or that there isn't a stable self referent yet from which to experience this as having meaning. Theoretically, this concept of inherent dignity would be difficult for one who does need see him or her *self* as mattering or having value or worth. Also, individuals could differ in the way they perceive worthiness of others vs. self.

Finally, implications for our analyses of what to expect and how to interpret the categories of violations of human dignity are complex. Theoretically, a child-centered or human rights perspective on the "*inherent* dignity of all members of the human community" implies that while one can be harmed and mistreated, another cannot "take away" or "violate one's dignity" since this is an inherent birth right independent of any given situation. (As the words to a popular song go--no matter what you do to me, "you can't take away my dignity.") From this perspective, the perpetrator demeans and degrades *him or her self* when he or she acts in a way that harms or disregards the worth of self or others, acting in a way that is "less than human." (In contrast to a culture where dignity is a privilege to be earned and based on some measure of status, then the oppressor who has status is thought to be able to take away that dignity from another.) However, child rearing in most cultures is based on adult definitions, meanings, filters and treatment: children are told they have no right to dignity and respect but they must treat their parents with dignity and respect; children are told by parents who harm and shame them that they deserve the maltreatment and should feel shame and humiliation (as opposed to understanding that the parent should feel shame or remorse for the harm

perpetrated);and finally, childhood experiences often interfere with the development of a secure sense of self which can anchor one's sense of worthiness and value as the child negotiates the world. As such, violations to one's dignity could be experienced as harm that *you do* to self or others, or as harm that is *done to you*; as harm to a specific sense of accomplishments external to self or to a more generalized sense of self as having no worth.

## ***Methods***

In seeking to contribute to our understanding of how human dignity is defined and experienced, we analyze personal statements by university students about human dignity, its definition and experiences of support and violation. Other authors have also used personal stories to explore and explain moral and ethical dimensions of the lives of children. For example, Robert Coles (1997:4-5) discovered the importance of personal stories in looking for a definition of 'moral intelligence' from Rustin McIntosh, a medical school professor, referring to young children who "... had an evident desire to be tactful, courteous, generous in their willingness to see the world as others saw it, to experience the world through someone else's eyes, and to act on that knowledge with kindness." Alice Miller (1998: x), in *Paths of Life*, also uses personal stories:

"The reader will become acquainted with a number of personal stories in the following pages. One thing that they are designed to illustrate is that the traces left by our childhood accompany us not only in the families of our own we have as adults, they manifest themselves in the very fabric of human society, all the way up to the outsize personalities who (again, for better or worse) have left their imprint on the course of history."

Students were asked to recall and describe situations from their childhoods where their human dignity was supported and violated. In order to develop data for the exploration of child-centered experiences of human dignity students in 1 course each semester were asked to write out responses to three simple questions:

1. What is your definition of 'human dignity'?
2. Describe three examples from your childhood where you felt your human dignity was supported. (Human dignity nurtured)
3. Describe three examples from your childhood where you felt your human dignity was violated? (Human dignity violations or prevented)

For this analysis, student responses to these questions for the past three years (1999-2001) for over two hundred university students provided the narrative data that we analyze and present here. Students included males and females, of all marital statuses, but mostly single, and ranged in ages from 17 to 59. The use of stories and narratives provide opportunities to discover the range of forms and contexts from which operational definitions that inform more structured research efforts might develop. In this way, this qualitative work is a starting point in the development of 'operational definitions' that will permit linking childhood human dignity experiences with adult life situations. Since these responses are asked of adults recalling their childhood through various filters, we may find some insights into the issues raised above relating to an adult-centered vs. child-centered, human rights approach to human dignity.

## **Findings**

### ***Definitions of Human Dignity***

In our analysis of student responses to the question "What is your definition of 'human dignity'," definitions reflecting adult-centered/colonial as well as child-centered-human rights emerged. Examples of definitions consistent with a *human-rights or child-centered model* include, among others, the following:

- "valuable, worthy, deserving of respect";
- "the right of everyone, regardless of race, class, gender...to have the respect of everyone else";
- "that you are somebody. You are not worthless";
- "that it matters that you are here";
- "Worthy...Having respect for every human life on earth....Being alive, having life, deserves respect.";
- "Having self respect. Respect for others";
- "a person who has character, integrity and is considerate";
- "compassionate, able to forgive self and others";
- "having compassion. It is treating everyone with the respect that they deserve. It is being able to empathize with those who have it rough. And, it is displaying kindness, even to those who are not as kind.";
- "all forms of treatment that comes from the heart that shows love and respect for another...";
- "self respect. Believing in oneself regardless of accomplishments and failures. But that respect cannot be obtained,

it is a natural right as a person";

- "I believe human dignity to be the quality of being worthy. At times honor and dignity may seem to parallel each other, but there is a distinct difference between the two. Honor is a characteristic that is granted to us as a result of our good deeds. A good name, or a good reputation. Dignity is given to us as a natural right at birth. All humans possess dignity and no one has a right or the ability to take that dignity away."

Overall, student definitions that fell within this model stress: *respect, value or worth, integrity, authenticity* and *compassion/decency* for self and others. There is a clear acknowledgement that dignity is inherent, not earned; that dignity is inherent in all beings, self and others; that dignity is a constant over time anchored in an authentic respect for self and other life, anchored in an authentic self that is whole.

Examples of definitions more consistent with a *colonial or adult-centered model* include, among others, the following:

- "what a person makes of themselves";
- "feeling of worth, being needed";
- "high moral standards, religious morals";
- "pride in hard work and determination...";
- "pride in ones self, heritage and race.";
- "being proud....and strong willed";
- "having a reputation of strength. For someone to lose their dignity is to appear cowardly or as a failure";
- "not letting anyone see you get knocked down."

Overall, student definitions that fell within this model stress: *accomplishments, pride in something about self* (one's work, one's race, not showing vulnerability), following specific *religious morals, appearance of strength*. In this sense, there is a message that dignity is earned not inherent; that dignity is not assumed to be accorded to all beings, even self, independent of accomplishments and other criteria; and that therefore, dignity is not a constant over time, anchored in an authentic self, but something external to self. As an aside, it is interesting to note that in Webster's dictionary, while one definition of pride is a reasonable self respect, other definitions of pride include inordinate self esteem and a delight from *act or possession*.

Finally, in their definitions, just a few students mentioned "the respectable feeling one gets when one is not hurt or rejected" or "the undeniable right and privilege of every human being to be free from physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse," i.e., dignity is not having others violate your dignity. From another view, a few students stated that human dignity "is realizing that *your actions* have an effect on everyone and (dignity) gives you the knowledge and insight to make your actions be one that will respect and help others" or "to never do or say anything that would make the other person feel belittled or unworthy" i.e., one's own dignity depends on never violating self or others. This is a subtle but important difference. The former is consistent with a more colonial model of defining dignity in terms of the ability of another to violate or "take away" your dignity, while the latter is consistent with a more human rights model of defining one's dignity in terms of one's own actions that one must take responsibility for. In that sense, the perpetrator, not the victim is the one who loses their dignity.

### ***Experiences Perceived as Supporting Human Dignity in Childhood***

The majority of examples that students gave of experiences they felt supported their dignity in childhood involve parents/adults praise, pride and support for the child's *accomplishments*. Accomplishments cited most commonly related to grades and school achievements, but also to sports. Examples in this category of *accomplishments* include:

- "When I answered questions correctly in class, citizen of the month award, my parents were proud of me because of good grades";
- "completed high school with an advanced diploma";
- "My dignity was supported as a child, when I got good grades (my parents would praise me, making me feel good)....Same thing goes for when I was successful in sports, there's nothing like having your father brag to his friends about you. It really makes a child.";
- "My parents always supported me in everything I did when I was a child. When I played little league baseball and hit the winning run, they constantly reminded me that whatever I do I could be the best at it. Or when I graduated top in my class. They showered me with praises and how smart I was...";
- "Reward with money for good grades....";
- "When I was a child, my human dignity was supported when I got good grades. Grades were the most important achievement. My parents positively reinforced high grades. For example, for every A I would get money...My human dignity was also supported when I did my chores when I was supposed to. My parents would say things like 'good girl' I really liked that. Last my human dignity was supported when I was nice to my sister and we got

along";

- "My teachers used to tell me how bright I was....";
- "Through my race, my talents, my intelligence I was seen as the kind of person I set out to be: smart, caring, responsible, dependable and in control."
- "An old lady thanks me when I help her cross the street, my mom kissed me when I did not bother her when she's doing her house work, and everyone loves me when I'm being good."

Notice that in these examples, feeling that one's dignity was supported was contingent on doing something well such as grades, sports, chores. This applied to both descriptions of self and other accord of dignity. The message of the colonial perspective is that dignity is external to self and must be earned, which in turn means that it can be taken away. Other categories of examples of perceived support for dignity that are related to being or doing something include a *show of strength*: "(My parents told me to stick up for myself" or "my parents told me I was smart, friends told me I was strong...) or *religious involvement* ("when I was saved -religion-" or "my parents encouraged me to go to church at a young age).

Moving away from accomplishments, other categories of support for dignity involve *freedom to make choices, being defended, being believed, having a voice* and *unconditional acceptance*. Compared to those involving accomplishments, these categories were relatively infrequent. And, to some degree, these categories overlap.

Examples of *being defended* include: "My parents took up for me when an adult was degrading me and trying to lower my self-esteem"; "When my parents did not let anyone beat me in a corrective way, because they were older. When my parents would come to my aid if I were wrongly accused in a situation"; "When my teacher told people or other kids not to make fun of me"; "my grandfather called me a brat. My mom stood up and grabbed by the arm. She said 'you may have talked to your children like that, but you will not talk to mine that way.'" Not only do these involve protection, at least in certain situations, but also these actions reflect adult concern for the child--the child matters in these contexts.

Examples of *being believed* include "my mother taking up for me when she found out that my grandfather was touching me. She mad me feel special because from then I know I could trust her with anything. My parents coming to school and confronting the teacher who smacked me"; "when I walked out of the store with gum that I thought my mom had paid for, she believed me." Many of the examples in the categories of being believed and being defended overlapped.

Examples of *having a voice* include "My mother did not look upon me as if I was nothing. My ideas and feelings were respected and taken into account"; "my dad would listen to my opinions regarding my family decisions such as travel"; "When an adult listened to an idea I had or something I had to say."

Examples of *freedom* range from "when I was a child my human dignity was supported by being able to make my own decisions like where I wanted to go to school, what I wanted to wear and whom I wanted to be friends with," to " when I was able to pick out my own school or play clothes" and "when I got my way."

Finally, there were a few responses that fit into a category of *unconditional acceptance*, broad enough to fit most closely with a human rights perspective. Examples include: "When my parents told me I could be whatever I want. When my parents said they loved me no matter what"; "I was loved, even when I was bad"; "I was brought up by both my parents who constantly told me that I was loved. I was always encouraged to do things that I was interested in. Was blessed to have always had people in my like that constantly told me that I was important and that I would never be left alone"; "When I was a child, I feel that my human dignity was very well protected. For example, I was treated with love and respect. I was encouraged to be unique; to myself. I was supported in anything I wanted to do"; "...The look in my grandfather's eyes. I do not know how to explain it, it was unconditional love." In another example, "My parents encouraged me to develop a reverence and respect for nature," the child is provided with transcendent links seen as a support of human dignity.

Clearly while far less frequently mentioned as experiences supporting dignity than the categories of accomplishments, these latter categories point to less conditional support, to treatment with respect even if only in very specific contexts. The last category falls most closely into the human rights model supporting the concept of inherent dignity. Regarding this model, one of the over 200 responses actually referred to their own behavior as indicative of support for their dignity: "things like telling the truth when I did something wrong and if I saw someone else do wrong, and I told..."

It is also important to note that while most students cited examples involving parents, other persons mentioned included other family members, relative, teachers, and peers.

### ***Experiences Perceived as Violating Human Dignity in Childhood***

While several students could not recall an example where their dignity was supported, at least 2 of the 200 students could not recall an experience where it had been violated. Of the rest, examples fell into a number of broad categories. The most frequently referred to as examples of violations of dignity include being physically, sexually

and/or emotionally *abused as a child*. A few examples of physical abuse referred to include:

- "I was whipped for speaking my opinion. I was whipped because I had a disagreement with my teacher";
- "Being spanked and when I was yelled at";
- "When I was hit by my father, when I was yelled at";
- "I was spanked as a child";
- "My dad when he demanded me and hit me for doing something wrong and not living up to his expectations";
- "When I was a child, I was spanked...I feel this violated my human dignity because I didn't receive respect from my parents that they gave each other";
- "I was sexually abused by a cousin when I was young....I did not have a voice. I used to get a beating for voicing my opinion";
- "My mother became frustrated with me and homework. She sat me in our hallways and began quizzing me. After numerous question I still could not answer the problem so she began to physically punish me";
- "My human dignity was also violated when my Mom would me hit me in public. Also when my parents would tell me to go to my room. I would ask why and they say because I told you so. It was like I wasn't really important enough to get a real reason."

Examples of emotional abuse are also commonly referred to and cover many different dimensions of maltreatment. In the scientific literature, examples of emotional abuse include: (1) *spurning*— e.g. critical, hostile aggressive parenting which includes showing contempt for, verbal aggression such as yelling or screaming at, belittling, degrading the child; (2) *terrorizing*—e.g. threatening or perpetrating violence against the child or child's loved one, family member, object or pet; (3) *isolating*; (4) *exploiting / corrupting*; (5) *denying emotional responsiveness*—e.g. indifference, ignoring infant's cues and signals, especially cries and pleas for warmth and affection, failure to meet the child's emotional needs and provide support and stimulation, lack of parental involvement Hart et al (2002: 81-82). Many of these were reported by students as examples of dignity violation including:

- "I was insulted for my weight";
- "I kept trying to help and my Mom kept yelling at me";
- "When I was made fun of during elementary school";
- "Peers would ridicule me and others when reading aloud"
- "When I was six, my mother told me that I was stupid. She was probably mad and didn't mean it, but that is something that I have never forgotten";
- "My mother always pointed out the negative and criticized the things I did, but she rarely ever saw the positive things I did";
- "When my sister would tell people how I used to pee in my bed";
- "My coached yelled and screamed at me for nothing";
- "When I wasn't told my cat had been killed just because they thought I wasn't old enough they undermined me and lied to me";
- " Being told constantly that I was stupid or that I was hated. Having to sit at the dinner table until all my food was gone. When my mom got mad at me in the car and told me to get out. She dropped me off on the side of the road on a very busy highway and I was forced to walk several miles home";
- "To hear my father call me things like stupid, idiot, and annoying. The fact that my father never listened to me, whatever was on TV always seemed to be more important to him. Whenever my brother was around it was like I did not exist to my parents";
- "Throughout my childhood... my father was an angry, bigoted, violent, abusive, drunk. I remember feeling terrified through much of my childhood. I recall feeling as though I walked on eggshells all of the time. I love(d) my parents, but my father hurt me and my mother failed to protect me. Most of the time there were oblivious regarding my life and what I experienced. It was as though I disappeared. I grew to like being invisible";
- "I was beaten, yelled at, I wasn't allowed to choose anything for myself. My parents made me sometimes feel like I wasn't wanted";
- "When I was made to feel that my existence was nothing but a burden to those responsible for my upbringing."

Another category of emotional abuse, mentioned frequently by students as one of their most degrading experiences, involves having to expose what children are taught to be their "private parts" to others or having an adult take total control over a child's bodily functions often resulting in the child losing control and vomiting or urinating on themselves, for which they then receive further punishment.

- "When I was sick, my mom made me drop my pants for her friend who was a nurse because the bottom is one of the first places that the pox marks appear";
- "Having to call my mother after using the bathroom so she could wipe me";
- "When your teacher won't let you use the restroom when you needed to";
- "my grandmother insisted that I undress and bathe in front of her";

- "I accidentally peed on myself when I was in third grade because the teacher wouldn't let me go to the restroom...If I put too much food on my plate, I would have to eat all of it even if I felt like I was going to throw up";
- "I hated vegetables. ...I was forced to swallow my food down without any drink at dinner. My stepfather would sit, watching me until I finished everything on my plate. I used to pray that I wouldn't vomit when I gagged";

Other categories included *infringements on freedom*, i.e., being forced to do something that they didn't want to do (e.g., forced to hug someone or go to church) or not allowed to do what they want (e.g., go to the movies, see a friend). Students also referred to *not being allowed to have a voice*--not being believed, not being allowed to have an opinion without being punished.

Sadly, students' list of experiences with violations of their dignity include physical, sexual and emotional abuse--beatings, whippings, yelling, shaming, belittling, controlling a child's bodily functions, lack of freedom and voice, and making the child feel that they have no worth. Of course, not one student thought to frame these experience in terms of the abuser violating and losing their dignity. In a childhood, where yelling and public humiliation and hitting is common, where children are not accorded dignity, experiences are filtered through shame and pain with obvious negative implications for the development of a stable self referent or place to anchor one's value and esteem, the knowledge that you matter, that it matters very much that you exist.

## Lessons and Implications

The concept of human dignity can be framed within the larger context of a Colonial or adult-centered vs. Human Rights or child-centered perspective. (See Chart 3) Results from this preliminary analysis suggest that most students interpreted the world from the framework of a colonial model where dignity is defined as a right to be earned, based on things external to self. Not surprisingly, this definition appears to be anchored in childhood experiences where support for dignity was most likely to be based on accomplishments and experiences of violations supported filters of self that are based in shame and pain. When such adult-centered / colonial filters are established early in life, the challenge of building and restoring child-centered human dignity becomes a daunting one. Understanding these dynamics provides information on one more piece of the cycle of pain over generations.

From a research perspective we have learned that there is much understanding and pedagogical value in having adult students reflect on their childhood experiences in terms of their relation to human dignity. First, such reflection often highlights the dangerous separation adults make from their childhood and serves to reestablish a connection. Second, such reflections provide a basis for identifying dimensions and contexts, grounded in the experience of childhood, for understanding the impact of more 'objective' indicators of children's well being. Funding for education, healthcare, child development, and provisions permitting or abolishing corporal punishment are not abstract. They affect experiences of families, school personnel and children as they interact in the world from which the child makes meaning and structures self-definitions and behavior patterns.

Our research into the dimensions and contexts of the experience of human dignity in childhood supports the observations of Robert Coles who writes:

We grow morally as a consequence of learning how to be with others, how to behave in this world, a learning prompted by taking to heart what we have seen and heard. The child is a witness; the child is an ever-attentive witness of adult morality --or lack thereof~ the child looks and looks for cues as to how one ought to behave, and finds them galore as we parents and teachers go about our lives, making choices, addressing people, showing in action our rock-bottom assumptions, desires, and values, and, thereby telling young observers much more than we realize. (p.5)

Human dignity experiences can tell children about themselves in the deepest way. As children engage in their work of making sense of the world and their place in it, the experiences they confront whether the trauma of war, being sold in slavery, genital mutilation or being degraded in a variety of other ways challenge their ability to develop a sense of self on which an understanding of the *possibility* of human dignity can exist. It has been observed that an overload of trauma can damage a child's connection with its own sense of identity and its ability to order experience (Stettbacher 1993: 10). If we can begin to understand the dynamics and meaning of human dignity in childhood, perhaps we adults can be more attentive to the world of pain and suffering we too often create for children.

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Chart 1

**International Human Rights and United States Law Perspective on Children and Corporal Punishment**

International Human Rights Law	United States Statutory and Case Law
<p>Children have a right to physical integrity                      Children have a right to be treated with human dignity</p> <p>Corporal punishment is a form of violence</p> <p>Harm to children extends beyond the physical to subjective experience</p> <p>The state has a responsibility to take all measures to protect children from all forms of violence, exploitation and neglect by the parents or other caretakers.</p>	<p>Children have no right to physical integrity                      Children's human dignity may be degraded and violated</p> <p>Corporal punishment is not violence</p> <p>Harm to children is almost exclusively observable and substantial physical injury</p> <p>The state has a responsibility to protect children only from the extremes or 'abusive violence' and to protect parental / teacher/caregiver rights to inflict violence on children to 'discipline' children</p>

Chart 2

Human Dignity Related Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Provisions aimed at Supporting Human Dignity**

Article 3.2	to ensure the child such... care as is necessary for his or her well-being...
Article 12.1	views the right to express those views [of the child] freely in all matters affecting the child
Article 13.1	Freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds
Article 23.1	Physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child's active participation promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child's active participation in the community
Article 31.1	..right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in playful and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts
Article 37 (c)	Every child deprived of liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, and in a manner that takes into account the needs of persons of his or her age
Article 39	States parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; or armed conflict.
Article 18	State Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child....The best intents of the child will be their basic concern.

**Provisions Aimed at Preventing Violations of Children's Human Dignity**

Article 3.2	..to ensure the child such protection. ...as is necessary for his or her well-being...
Article 16.1	No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.
Article 19.1	...to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
Article 32.1	...the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.
Article 34	...undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.
Article 37(a)	No Child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Chart 3

**Human Dignity and Children as seen from an Adult –Centered or Colonialist Perspective  
and a Child Centered or Human Rights Perspective**

<i>Adult Centered or Colonial Perspective</i>	<i>Child Centered or Human Rights Perspective</i>
Children are inferior to adults	Children and adults share a common humanity and mutuality of status
Children are rightfully controlled by adults	Children are an oppressed group
Children do not deserve equal rights	Children, as members of the human family, have rights
Dignity is not an inherent characteristic of children	Dignity is inherent in all life, including children
Age, gender, class and achievement are markers of ones human dignity	Age, gender, class and achievement are not related to a person's human dignity
Others have the power to bestow or take away ones human dignity	No one can take bestow or take away ones human dignity
Those who take away another's human dignity are rewarded with power	Those who take away another's human dignity violate their own humanity
The meanings children attach to their experiences are of little importance	The meanings children attach to their experiences are of the utmost importance