

# **Placing Dignity at the Center of Welfare Policy**

## **Introduction**

Various social, political and religious organizations, academics as well as social reformers have always upheld human dignity. Dignity is believed to be ‘the worthiest’ goal for a political or social movement (Klein, 1998). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) clearly states, ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’ Further, it is advocated that ‘everything must be made to hinge around the dignity of the human person’ (The Pastoral Letter of the Irish Bishops, 1999).

However, many well-developed economies like the US, UK, Canada, and Hong Kong have changed their social security policies in recent years. More stringent welfare measures such as cutting the level of benefits, requiring welfare recipients to report regularly to the social security offices and to do voluntary work as a condition of receiving welfare. Obviously, ‘workfare’ has become a new direction for formulating welfare policies (Prideaux, 2001). For example, under the New Labour Government (NLG), UK social policies are ‘aimed at people in work or are aimed at getting people into work’ (Grover & Stewart, 2000: 249). The issue of concern here is ‘whether such policies and their related ideologies are harmful to human dignity’. It is difficult to make a comprehensive assessment because the concept of dignity is still vague (Harris, 1997). More importantly, there are different views on the meaning of a dignified life (Howard, 1995) such as financial security in old age (Shipman, 1995), the provision of a minimum income for everyone (Wilson, 1994), users’ involvement

in the caring process (Carpenter & Sbaraini, 1997), the free expression of sexual orientation (Dignity, 1994), and ‘the optimal outcome of dying work completed’ (Poss, 1981: 3). Therefore, dignity is serving different masters for different purposes or is being used by moralists and even professional philosophers with little more than rhetorical effect (Harris, 1997). Moreover, little work has been done by using dignity to evaluate the impact of welfare policy on the well-being of recipients. Because of the confused concept on dignity and its limited application in social welfare, we are unable to have a clear welfare direction for facilitating human dignity. Against this background, this article attempts to fill this gap by exploring the contents of human dignity and discusses their implications for welfare policy.

## **Dignity and Its Four Elements**

Dignity is rooted in the Latin *dignus*, which means ‘worthy of esteem and honor, due a certain respect, of weighty importance’ (Novak, 1998). Klein (1998) defines dignity as a social phenomenon including two aspects: guarding one’s self-respect and accommodating the self-respect of others. Two issues emerged from this definition: one is about the basis of self-respect; another concerns the nature of social relationship involved in self-respect. Novak (1998) points out that the foundation of human dignity is free will and the capacity for insight and choice. As for the social nature of humans, Elshtain (1999) stresses that ‘the dignity of the self cannot be dehistoricized and disembodied as separate from the experiences of human beings as creatures essentially, not contingently, related to others’. To have dignity, according to Howard (1995), humans need autonomy, societal concern and respect, and equal treatment. The above discussion reveals that the focus of dignity is ‘a respectful life’

of which self-respect and societal-respect is fundamental. Self-respect is related to common human value, the right and ability to control one's life and to develop one's potentials. Societal-respect is associated with caring and accepting social relationships. In short, human dignity is about living respectfully, characterised by equal human value, the use of autonomy, self-respect, as well as positive mutuality. Details of these four elements of dignity are as follows:

### **Equal Human Value**

It is believed that the value of all human beings is the sharing of common essential qualities. Reasoning capacity, free will, emotions and feelings are widely considered to be some key features of human beings. To respect a person is to respect him for 'those features which make him what he is as a person and which, when developed, constitute his flourishing' (Downie & Telfer, 1969: 16). The commonalities of humans give rise to a sense of common identity, providing all individuals with equal worth. As the Commission of Social Justice in UK points out, the foundation of a free society is the equal worth of all citizens (Wilson, 1994: 1). That is the basis for people with different races, nationalities, classes, and gender to claim for equal rights, ask for equal treatment.

The concept of equal human value becomes the foundation for social organizations to formulate policies protecting their members. As the policy statement of the University of Exeter (2001) stresses, 'all individuals should be treated with dignity and respect whether at work or study'. It also forms the basis for the oppressed to fight for their rights. Seeing 'the life of Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation

and the chains of discrimination,' Martin Luther King (1963) demands 'the riches of freedom and the security of justice' for all Black people in America. In short, equal human value, associated with equal rights, status and opportunities, is the foundation of human dignity.

### **Self-Respect**

The possession of rational capacity and having freedom of action suggest that a person, unlike other animals, is able to kill himself whenever he wants. Having life values is crucial to humans because they not only provide an outlet for their reasoning capacity, but also give a sense of worth and satisfaction for existence.

Self-respect is based on competence and self-actualization. A person is a self-assessor, always evaluating his own performances. In Sullivan's words, the self is made up of 'reflected appraisals' (Quotes in Jersild, 1952: 12). Very often, a sense of respect is associated with one's ability to cope with life tasks, control life domains and, basically, meet daily necessities. Positive self-appraisal, therefore, is the result of competence and independence. Very often, a sense of inability and dependence is caused by some structural factors which weaken the economic security as well as limit the social and political participation of the disadvantaged groups. For example, an older person's financial ability, to a great extent, is affected by a country's social security system. The ability of a worker to take care of his family is also determined by the level of minimum wage set by the government and the bargaining power of his labor union. Dependence is likely to lower a person's self-esteem because of its association with incompetence and powerlessness. More seriously, it widens the life

chance and psychological distance between the rich and the poor, between the dependents and the independents. Because of the negative effects of dependence, some organizations aim at enhancing the independence and confidence of their clients. For example, the Arc of Ohio (2001) provides assistance for adults with developmental disabilities, offering them more opportunities to live, work and participate in the community. Clearly, the ability to control one's life and achieve a greater degree of independence is crucial to a positive self-image.

Human beings are social animals who not only require survival need, but also have to satisfy developmental need. According to Jersild (1952: 10), a healthy person develops potential resources of his 'real self' and uses them in a manner that is harmonious with a total way of life. In other words, being human fundamentally concerns with the quality of human life, which is related to the possibility of developing one's potentials. Such a need is essential to both healthy bodies and people with physical difficulties. For example, the key objective of Guiding Eyes (2001), a non-profit organization that trains guide dogs, is to facilitate the potentials of the blind by giving them more freedom and greater independence.

### **The Use of Autonomy**

The dignity of a person is his 'capacity for insight and choice' (Novak, 1998). Such a quality distinguishes humans from other animals. The suppression of one's free will implies the degradation of a person to be an animal or even a substance without thinking capacity. Moreover, the control of a person's will for serving the interests of a particular person or groups is, in fact, exploiting a person, using him as a tool

without respecting his life goals. As Williams (1965) points out, respecting a person should avoid suppressing or destroying a person's consciousness of himself who has a given role or who has purposes other than those of the role. Downie and Telfer (1969) also stress that to impair a person's abilities to formulate and carry out his aims and policies is, in fact, to destroy him as a person. However, the use of autonomy will be checked by authoritarian administrations, regulated by undemocratic laws, and limited by socio-economic oppressions. Regarding the economic oppression of Black people in America, Martin Luther King (1963) criticizes, 'the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.' Obviously, by talking about autonomy without providing preconditions like opportunities, resources, and skills for a person is, in fact, paying lip service to freedom. Hence, autonomy should be built upon social, economic, political resources and opportunities.

### **Positive Mutuality**

A person is a social being whose life is a process of social interaction and cooperation. It is only in social milieu that human beings find true identity (Downie & Telfer, 1969; Howard, 1995). Basically, a non-social individual cannot be accountable and will not be granted right because there is no person to be accountable to and to grant rights (McCall, 1990). More importantly, humans can be physically, mentally, or socially debilitated unless they receive or perceive signs from significant others that make them feel safe and valued (Wasserman & Danforth, 1980). Williams emphasises that 'we cannot live humanly, in self-awareness, without truthful and graceful relations with each other' (Quotes in Forrester, 1997: 229). Therefore, an abundant life requires meaningful social relationships and a caring community where

a person can be socialized to human forms of life, develop learning capacities, and find self-identity, respect, and values. Against this background, a caring community and intimate relationships are fundamental to human dignity.

At the macro level, human dignity can be realised in societies respecting human autonomy and promoting human development, especially collective resources can be used to meet basic necessities and develop humans' learning capacities. At the micro level, a person's dignity might come from positive relationships with family members, relatives, friends and colleagues from whom social, psychological and financial support is obtained. On the other hand, being rejected and isolated by significant others are a painful experience. For instance, a depressed person felt the loss of respect and consideration, because she had been rudely dismissed and ignored by her friends on some occasions (Louie, 1998). Thus, intimate relationships are also a crucial source of self-respect.

## **Welfare Directions Based on Dignity**

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, 'workfare' has become a new direction of welfare policy in many countries. By using Hong Kong social security as a case example, the following sections analyse the impact of 'workfare' on the dignity of welfare claimants and discuss the welfare directions for promoting human dignity.

## **The Direction of Institutional Dignification**

One of the obstacles to equal human value is lack of basic respect towards the poor in a stratified capitalist society. Although explicit discriminations in terms of race, sex, age and religion, to certain extent, are checked by democratic politics and mass media in an open society, institutional discrimination against the poor based on negative assumptions on their nature and characters is a common practice of many countries. As the Hong Kong government (SWD 1998: 15) openly declares,

‘We should aim to change the attitudes of the unemployed recipients who are less motivated by placing emphasis on their “social responsibilities” and the need to re-establish self-reliance, and helping them understand how employment contributes to the well-being of an individual, the family and the whole community’.

Obviously, the authority questions the morality of the poor who are believed to be ‘irresponsible citizens’ so that tough welfare measures are necessary and are beneficial to them and the whole society. Based on this argument, the Hong Kong government not only cut the standard rate for families with three members or more by 20%, cancelled some special grants and supplements for able-bodied adults and children like dentures and spectacles, but also required CSSA unemployed recipients to participate in a Self-Reliance Scheme (SRS) as a condition of getting assistance. According to the scheme, a job seeker has to apply for at least two jobs per fortnight, develop and update an individual work plan, write job-seeking diaries as well as attend regular work plan interviews. Further, he cannot decline any job offered on



account of the mode of work (full-time, part-time or casual jobs), working hours, or wages. Added to this, he has to do voluntary work such as cleaning country parks, gardening, collecting recycled paper, general counter duties, laundry work, etc. The government explains that 'voluntary work' helps recipients to enhance their self-confidence and develop work habits (Social Welfare Department, 2001a). Thus, 'involuntary work' has been argued as a means to promote the dignity of claimants.

The issues of concern here are whether welfare recipients have an equal and respected social status as well as the impact of 'workfare' policy on their autonomy. Contrary to an assault on the morality of the poor, the government trusts the morality of the employers in using public money, a subsidy of HK\$2,800 is given to those employing a worker aged above 40 (Labour Department, 2001). Similar policy has been adopted by the NLG in UK where an employer receives a weekly subsidy of £60 for employing a young unemployed person. The policy has been criticised as giving the impression that the capitalists are able to 'create new employment' (Grover & Stewart, 2000: 241). More seriously, the US's experience reveals that such type of assistance not only lowers the wages of workers and but also replaces the 'existing workers' by 'subsidised, low-waged workers' (Prideaux, 2001). Clearly, the poor, whose human nature is being questioned, have not been equally respected by the present welfare institution, whereas the morality of the rich is praised and their behaviours are rewarded.

Another issue is the impact of such policy on the autonomy of unemployed persons. It is clear that the unemployed recipients have little control over the nature of work offered but have to accept any jobs considered appropriate by welfare officers. The

Hong Kong government emphasizes: ‘The messages that we aim to get across are “Any job is better than no job”, “Low pay is better than no pay” (Social Welfare Department 1998). Added to this, the unemployed persons are subordinate to the control of welfare officers who arrange voluntary work and supervise job seeking. Thus, it is likely that the poor have been treated as ‘deviant citizens’ whose career plans and free time have been severely constrained. Obviously, this policy degrades the capacity of an autonomous person, whose weak economic position becomes the cause of losing his private domain.

Clearly, welfare requirements have reduced welfare claimants’ power over their own lives. In fact, before cutting welfare benefits, research studies already pointed out that the amount of CSSA was inadequate for claimants leading a decent life (MacPherson, 1994; Liu, Yue, & Lee, 1996; Wong & Choi, 1996). Recipients’ control over the amount of resources having and their freedom on spending money are further limited by the recent welfare cut. More importantly, their choice on using their free time and employment is further restricted by the SRS. Since equal status and autonomy are two basic elements of dignity, the present ‘workfare’ policy has severely suppressed the dignity of welfare claimants. In response to the threat on autonomy, some recipients give up welfare rights and lead an extremely hard life. It was found that salaries of former CSSA recipients, who stopped receiving public benefits, were too low to provide them with a subsistence level of living (Wong & Choi, 1998). Similar findings were reported in the U.S. For example, by investigating the conditions of claimants who left the W-2 rolls of Wisconsin, it was reported that four out of five were out of work. Further, most of them had difficulties in feeding their children and paying fuel bills (Prideaux, 2001). Therefore, the use of unpleasant measures as a

means of reducing welfare dependency only forces many recipients out of the society's safety nest, making them live and work in an extremely poor condition. Against this fact, it is wonder 'workfare policy' can truly promote human dignity as advocated by some academics and politicians. However, some governments still argue that rights and duties cannot be separated (Blair, 1998; Hong Kong Government, 1998), welfare measures like doing voluntary work should be an obligation of welfare recipients. However, the obligations discussed above involve the stigmatisation of poor citizens who ultimately give up welfare rights in order to defend their autonomy. That is the social cost of aversive welfare practices. It seems that the present civil duties fell on the poor are beyond their capacities, suppressing their rights and endangering their well-being. Also, it is hard to make an accurate calculation on a welfare program based on rights and duties. The present social security requirements have, actually, forced some unemployed citizens to fulfil additional civil duties without taking account of their tax contributions before unemployment.

The above discussions reveal that forced independence in the form of oppressive measures might not be an appropriate means, because such policies, in practice, have weaken or even destroy the foundation of independence. That is, they not only reduce one's sense of control over life but also lower his self-esteem. Another issue is that a welfare claimant has actually been pushed to the labor market without providing him/her tailor-made as well as comprehensive programs for learning new skills and improving problem solving ability. Thus, enhancing competence and self-confidence, rather than forced independence, will be more appropriate to be key objective of social security policies. This suggests that, instead of punishment, empowerment and reinforcement are better means to achieve the goal of independence. In this way,

social welfare is able to serve two purposes: providing assistance for the poor on the one hand and increasing their capacities on the other hand.

The degree of autonomy and sense of competence are also related to the opportunity of participation in the process of making welfare policy. Very often, welfare recipients cannot determine policies affecting their lives. In the process of evaluating CSSA, for example, only senior government officials and members from both the Executive and Legislative Councils were able to express views (Social Welfare Department, 1998). Thus the CSSA recipients were completely excluded from the process of policy making. The recipients' limited power is also revealed in the process of receiving benefits. For example, a welfare claimant once applied for two sets of school uniforms for her child. However, the social security assistant only gave her one. Another applicant applied for full-time schooling for her child, but only half-time schooling was permitted (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 1995). Welfare recipients' sense of powerless and low esteem are further strengthened by the negative attitudes of poorly trained social security assistants and the lack of privacy of interviewing rooms where, very often, two or more recipients are being interviewed. Obviously, an authoritarian and bureaucratic welfare system has created more frustrations to recipients as well as limited their power over life management. In short, recipients' autonomy and competence have been suppressed in the process of getting benefits.

Thus, by placing dignity at the center of human welfare, institutional dignification will be a key direction. This means that welfare recipients' equal value and status as that of other citizens should be respected, their competence be enhanced, their

participation on decision-making be facilitated, and a human-oriented welfare administration should be established.

### **The Direction of Community Respect**

The dignity of a welfare recipient is highly associated with the degree of community respect. Welfare measures can affect public attitudes on social security and, more crucially, shape the relationships between welfare recipients and non-recipients (Chan, 1998a). The Hong Kong government, for example, has directly or indirectly created a negative image on welfare recipients. Firstly, the government always stresses that high levels of social security assistance will reduce recipients' work incentives. Consequently, as mentioned above, welfare benefits for family cases were cut and special allowances cancelled. Secondly, the Social Welfare Department always releases typical fraudulent cases to the mass media, creating a dishonest image on the welfare recipients. Thirdly, a hot line was set up and the public is encouraged to report suspicious cases. Fourthly, a special team investigating fraud has been established. Fifthly, the unemployed and new immigrants have been said to be the main cause for increasing the public's welfare burden.

Because of the government measures, several messages might have been conveyed to the public. In the first place, welfare recipients' work incentives can only be maintained by low levels of assistance. Further, people living on welfare have a tendency to abuse public money. This not only discredits the integrity of recipients but also justifies the state's use of harsher welfare measures. In addition, those increases the public burden should be blamed. Against this background, an

atmosphere of distrust and suspicion towards welfare claimants and a culture of blaming for the poor are likely to have been produced. For example, by exploring the welfare attitudes of the general public, the Hong Kong Policy Viewers (1998) concluded that the Hong Kong government had negatively influenced the public's attitudes on CSSA. Its findings showed that the majority of respondents (66.4%) believed that receiving CSSA was stigmatising. Most respondents also believed that the unemployed persons were the largest group among CSSA recipients. In fact, the largest category was older people (58%), and only 10% of recipients were unemployed cases (Social Welfare Department, 2001b). The negative community atmosphere is likely to stigmatise recipients and enhance their feeling of impotence. This explains why many social security recipients said that receiving benefits was stigmatising and unfortunate (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 1995). Obviously, welfare recipients have lost self-respect and community-respect in a hostile society.

Thus, a supportive, respectful and caring culture is essential to increase recipients' competence and promote positive mutuality. This implies that one of the basic duties of the state is to create a caring and accepting social environment for the deprived groups. The general public also has to learn how to help and respect those in need in processes of social interaction. For example, in order to create an atmosphere of equality, the use of words with respect is essential. Words like learning disability/mental retardation/development delay seem to be more appropriate than words like slow/retard/lazy/stupid/underachiever (Paraquad, 2001). The need for a caring community also suggests that more empowering work for welfare recipients be

done in order to encourage them to express needs, to facilitate mutual understanding among social classes, and to shape a community's welfare culture.

### **The Direction of Human Development**

The existence of reasoning ability and the need of exercising it imply that one of the key welfare directions is to develop a person's intrinsic capacities and facilitate self-actualization (Chan, 1998b). However, lack of adequate resources for developing social and cultural life in a market-dominated society is a great barrier to human development. For example, the amount of CSSA in Hong Kong can only meet recipients' survival need, ignoring their social and psychological needs. As a result of lacking resources and opportunities, the poor find it difficult to develop inner capacities and to lead a normal social life. Thus, the provision of sufficient resources for the poor utilizing inner capacities and pursuing self-actualization is another direction of welfare policies.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed in this article, equal value, self-respect, autonomy, and positive mutuality are four elements of human dignity. However, recent social security reforms in many countries have institutionally suppressed the dignity of their poor fellow citizens. As Howard (1995: 8) points out, a community that degrades some of its members is 'a community in need of change'. This article suggests that institutional dignification, community respect, and human development be the directions for promoting human dignity. Since human dignity is human-oriented and

related to the well-being of all social classes, its ideologies are contradictory to those of an authoritarian regime and a free market economy, which mainly serve the interests of political and economic powerful groups. In this way, the pursuit of human dignity has to face great challenges from various social, economic and political forces. Also, although the four elements proposed in this article might help assess the degree of dignity of a welfare system, more empirical work is required to develop concrete and measurable indicators.

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**Abstract:**

In response to the vagueness of human dignity and its limited application in social welfare, this paper attempts to explore the contents of human dignity and discuss their implications to welfare policies. Dignity concerns living respectfully to which having equal value, self-respect, autonomy, and positive mutuality is essential. This paper argues that institutional dignification, community respect, and human development are three welfare directions for facilitating human dignity.