

# 2

## A Review of Human Dignity

### 2.1 Introduction

Before introducing the theory of workplace dignity in depth, this chapter reviews the broader landscape of human dignity to establish a foundation for the new theory. A theory of workplace dignity is in important ways different from human dignity, but in equally important ways builds upon the rich tradition of writers and writings about human dignity and how it has been defined in terms of what it is to be a human being, and how it differs from non-human beings such as animals. It is needed to explicitly describe what dignity means, how it has been developed philosophically in the past, and how it is still relevant for contemporary society (McCrudden 2013). Discussing dignity is impossible without taking into account the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant, and it is his work that forms the primary inspiration for the use of dignity in the newly postulated theory. However, as recent research has shown (Lucas 2015), dignity not only manifests at work in a Kantian sense; there is also evidence for the existence of dignity in line with Aristotelian virtue ethics, where people feel that they have earned their dignity, or perceive others to be behaving in a dignified way (which

are not strictly Kantian views on dignity). All of these are important to understand the relevance of dignity at work, and thus how a theory of workplace dignity can be postulated.

### 2.1.1 Uses of Dignity Across Languages

Before reviewing historical conceptualizations of dignity, it is useful to mention the cross-cultural difficulties of using a concept such as dignity. Dignity is an English term which may have a meaning which is hard to translate into other languages and cultures. It is therefore imperative to define its precise meaning in the context of this book. However, dignity as it will be currently conceptualized is also translated from German and Dutch (which have a similar original term for dignity). In German, dignity is described as '*Würdigkeit*', while in Dutch dignity is described as '*Waardigheid*'. Especially the Dutch translation or foundation of dignity has particular meaning, as it encompasses different words in the term: waar (true), waarde (value), aarde (earth), and aardigheid (kindness). Compared to translations to German and English, the Dutch term offers a unique insight into the meaning of dignity, as it includes various elements of what dignity entails. Chapter 3 will discuss in more depth the various dimensions and implications of the term and how it can be used to formulate a theory of workplace dignity. The tradition of human dignity theory stems primarily from European perspectives (i.e., Greek Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Renaissance perspectives; Düwell et al. 2014), and more recently dignity has been influenced substantially by US perspectives. Hence, the use of dignity cannot be ascertained without taking into account the cross-cultural aspects of the concept, but also the use of it through economic-political dominance of the US. It is not surprising, for instance, how Pinker (2008) in his now famous critique of dignity, in fact only partly addresses the problematic nature of dignity as a concept, but foremost criticizes the *use* of dignity by the US Council of Bioethics to legitimize and defend a particular political agenda backed by a religious (i.e., Christian Neo-Conservative) doctrine. While Pinker argued that it was problematic that it was not explained what dignity was (in the view of the Council) and how it

should guide policies, his main critique revolved around the use (and abuse) of dignity, for instance in the use of dignity by totalitarian regimes (e.g., Žižek 2001). It is, in Pinker's view, through the conceptual vagueness of dignity that it can be used globally, not only to promote the good, but also to legitimize oppression in name of dignity of a people (Hollenbach 2013). For instance, through proclaiming the dignity of a particular ethnic group or nationality, it can be used to exclude and dominate other ethnic minority groups. In this sense, dignity is hijacked to legitimize oppression, in particular of dominant Western views towards the rest of the world (Žižek 2001). While this book does not aim to resolve this complex issue, and partly escapes this debate through postulating a different theoretical framework (i.e., of the workplace rather than general human existence), it is nonetheless important to take into account the various uses of dignity across the world, and the potential misuse of dignity to promote a certain political agenda, which does not necessarily have to be aimed at promoting dignity of all the people. The remainder of the book, and in particular while developing the theory, will take intercultural perspectives into account, and aims to allow for different cultural interpretations and uses of the term. First, the history of dignity is discussed to understand how it has been used and operationalized over time.

## 2.2 Historical Uses of Dignity

Dignity has been used throughout history to indicate a variety of attributions of human beings. It was during the time of Ancient Greece that the concept of nobility (which would now be understood as dignity) was described as something virtuous, or of noble rank, which was attributed to the aristocracy (Ober 2014). This was followed up on by Roman thinkers, such as Cicero, who used the term in similar ways. The term dignity indeed results from the Latin *dignitas*, which can be translated as glory or prestige. This is referred to as the aristocratic use of the term dignity (Schroeder 2008), and indicates that some people are more dignified than others as they deserve their dignity through their actions or superior rank. This aristocratic view is largely based on distinguishing

people between those with and those without dignity. In other words, while some people have dignity as they are behaving according to their rank or status, others have no or little dignity. This exclusive approach to dignity may have been applicable in an era where it was justified to distinguish between people in society (such as slaves vs. noblemen), but it is not sufficient to apply to the contemporary workplace. However, it addresses an important notion about how dignity is sometimes perceived to be functioning in the world and the workplace, and how it may be attributed to leaders, as well as how dignity has been described in terms of those who live in circumstances where there is no dignity (e.g., in poverty). Dignity may be something which can be earned through having a particular status, and which may be related to the difference between a manager and a leader, the former resulting from a formal position while the latter results from having acquired a particular dignified status within a group. Hence, true leaders may reveal themselves through the dignity which comes with their position. It is noticeable how dignity has also been referred to as belonging to statesmen, both in ways of describing the position of statesmen as having some inherent dignity belonging to their position (Waldron and Dan-Cohen 2012), as well as a presupposition of their behaviors to be dignified, no matter what they in fact engage with. Yet, for the purposes of understanding how dignity can be used in the workplace, this is insufficient, as the notion of an aristocratic dignity may encompass a duty of leaders to be dignified but not necessarily implies one. In fact, an aristocratic notion of dignity may even legitimize the violation of it, as the implication of dignity as rank or status does not question the validity of the acquisition of the position, which may create a potential moral void in which leaders may freely act. For instance, the election of Barack Obama as the first black American president may have acted as an acquisition of his aristocratic dignity, which may have shaped the views of the global liberal public as being favorable towards him and his actions, thereby ignoring his willingness to engage in undignified actions, such as drone attacks involving killing of civilians across Yemen, Pakistan, Syria, Libya and other countries. Hence, this notion of dignity may undermine the idea of a leaders' duty to behave dignified, whichever this means in practical terms (e.g., the killing of innocent people to prevent potential

killing of a larger group of people, or the promotion of a certain political agenda of freedom in the name of liberal democracy).

However, the aristocratic dignity notion has not been the only one developed in history. Schroeder (2008) describes three other notions of dignity. *Comportment* dignity refers to a behaviorally achieved dignity which does not result from one's status or rank, such as it is the case with aristocratic dignity, but from one's behavior *despite* one's rank. In other words, people with a low status can still behave in a dignified way by responding to their predicament in ways not degrading themselves but lifting themselves beyond their status. Many stories about concentration camps show examples of comportment dignity, where some prisoners behave dignified in the most horrific circumstances (e.g., Levi 2014; Sjalamov 2005). Hence, it is in these horrific circumstances that the wonder of what it is to be a human being is exemplified. Primo Levi's work explains that very issue, as it shows situations which are completely stripped of any dignity, and where prison guards are destined to take away the prisoners' human face, and where prisoners are primed to act like animals in a quest to survive. It is in these places that human dignity surfaces, in its comportment form (Schroeder 2008). Sjalamov (2005) debunked the myth that it is only a thin layer of civilization that causes people to behave undignified, as he shows through his own experiences in the Russian Gulag camps that extreme violence, both physically and mentally, is needed to make people behave in such a way. At the same time, dignity can be even more manifest in these circumstances, in the ways people react and retain a sense of humanity in these circumstances, and how an individual's dignified behavior may also transfer and in a sense maintains the dignity of others (Žižek 2001). Hence, dignity is not purely individually relevant, as it plays a role in defining the social domain in which behavior is legitimized and exemplified for others.

Another dignity perspective is based on meritocracy (Ober 2014). In contrast to aristocratic dignity, where dignity results from having a particular position, meritocratic dignity is the product of one's behavior, and is primarily based on the work of Aristotle. An Aristotelian view of dignity includes a virtue-perspective, or the notion that through one's actions one become honorable, and thus deserves dignity.

Through respectable and praiseworthy actions, people obtain their dignity. Hence, in this view, dignity is not so much an inherent characteristic of a (particular) person, but only manifests itself through one's virtuous behavior. While this idea has some aspirational value, as it may direct one's actions and choices of how one should behave, it rather neglects the more problematic features of a direct link between behavior and dignity. As comportment dignity is about dignity despite of one's low status or misfortune, a meritocratic view carries an implicit assumption that people are able to exert agency, and have a free choice to engage in certain behaviors, while avoiding others. As our behavior is determined by our abilities to behave in a certain way, as well as determined socially by our environment, as human beings are part of social groups, the notion that dignity can only reside in a behavioral condition produces a too narrow perspective on the idea. A simple and often presented illustration is that of people suffering dementia, or people with mental disabilities, who are unable to exert agency over their own behaviors, and therefore dignity cannot be solely related to one's behaviors. Moreover, a meritocratic perspective begs the question whether children would have dignity, and whether criminals have lost their dignity, and hence, whether they should be treated as such. In response to these aforementioned views, a fourth perspective was offered by philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785/2012), who postulated dignity to reside within the human being, rather than being determined by one's behaviors. His conceptualization of dignity has been most influential in contemporary thinking about human dignity, and how it relates to various domains, such as human rights, bioethics, and theology. His thinking and explanation of dignity is particularly useful in forming a theory of workplace dignity, and therefore, will be explained in detail below.

### 2.2.1 Kantian Dignity

Kant's famous conceptualization of dignity in relation to the axiom that every human being should never be treated as a means, but always as an end in itself, has dominated research on human dignity over the years

(Düwell et al. 2014; McCrudden 2013; Rosen 2012). This is the core idea from the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785/2012), which summarizes his view of dignity, as contrasting previous theorizations. This axiom also puts the human being as central to existence at the earth, and thus counteracts the utilitarian perspective of the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The use of dignity (or *Würdigkeit/Würde*) by Kant was the driving force in his search for a supreme law of morality. By introducing a person-centered perspective on dignity, he basically introduced an egalitarian view of dignity (Rosen 2012), which means that every human being is in principle of equal worth, and all human beings have the same dignity, irrespective of one's behavior. All people have intrinsic worth which should not be violated, according to Kant. As explained above, the German (and Dutch) translation of dignity captures the term value in it (*Würde* or *Waarde*). Kant in fact distinguishes between two types of value: there is value which can be based on a market-price, and which can be exchanged between people. Goods have a certain value, and can be sold at the market to someone else for a particular price. However, there are also things which have a value which is incomparable and unconditional, and which cannot be estimated using market-pricing. Dignity is such an unconditional, incomparable value. Dignity resides in every person, and thus is a value that is attributed to every human being as inner and unconditional. Dignity is an existential value residing in every person, and in no way can be made subject to something else. Kateb (2011) complements this view by stating that essential to the idea of human dignity, is that people want to be treated as human beings, and that when people are no longer treated as individual, unique human beings, they perceive that their dignity is violated. Hence, the idea of dignity is contingent on the description of people as individual and unique, and that these characteristics should be honored as such. When people are merely treated as means, without unique individual characteristics, they are instrumentalized, and stripped of their dignity. This point is especially relevant for building a theory of workplace dignity.

Dignity, according to Kant, is deeply connected with autonomy, which is described by Kant as the ability to form self-given laws. As human beings are the only species on earth which are capable to

impose laws upon themselves and act accordingly, autonomy opens the way for morality, which defines the uniqueness of the human species (Kateb 2011). Moreover, Kant connects dignity to respect (Rosen 2012), and in particular respect as the result of the lawgiving nature of dignity, something that is inherent to a human being as the acknowledgement of status. However, this status is not to be earned or deserved, but inherent in every person. Hence, respect for one's dignity results from the notion that we are autonomous beings, capable to be ruled by self-given moral laws. However, this description of dignity is yet insufficient to explain human behavior, and that is why Kant added the categorical imperative to his conceptualization of dignity. As people are autonomous and thus are capable to impose laws or morality upon themselves, the question remains how people should behave. That is why Kant introduced the notion that one should behave in such a way that this behavior could also become a universal law. This categorical imperative opens the way to assess the meaning of dignity in Kantian terms, as it defines how dignity manifests: while it is an inalienable attribute of the human being, it obtains its relevance in relation to the other by directing one's behavior towards the categorical imperative, through which dignity not only is self-reflecting (i.e., guiding one's behavior and morality), but also relational, which is an aspect of particular importance for the establishment of a theory of workplace dignity. The relational aspect of dignity is also relevant according to Rosen (2012), who concludes his review of dignity conceptualizations throughout history, with the notion that dignity obtains relevance through its focus on duties. While duties have been somewhat absent from (contemporary) moral theory, Rosen (2012) argues that it is through the implication of duty resulting from inherent dignity that it directs human actions (see also Bayefsky 2013). Kant describes the most important duties as those towards oneself, and in particular the duty to act in ways that are both respectful and worthy of respect. As people have dignity, and are capable of morality, they carry the duty to act upon this, as duties result from personhood, and the freedom and independence to be lawgiving to oneself. This duty-perspective on dignity contrasts the more popular view on human dignity focusing on rights (e.g., McCrudden 2013), which has been dominant throughout



the twentieth century, for instance, through its focus in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the German constitution.

### 2.2.2 Human Dignity and Human Rights

A major influence of dignity in our contemporary language has been through its use in the legal domain, and in particular as part of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which reads:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

The global relevance of human dignity is clear from this article—it is the first article in one of the few globally acknowledged legal frameworks, and thus should not be understated in its relevance for the notion of global civilization. Hence, it is almost self-evident that dignity deserves detailed investigation as to its precise meaning and possible use throughout the world, as it has found its own relevance in the legal sphere. While there is no explicit description on what dignity entails in this Declaration beyond some implications for specific fundamental rights such as the right for education, there has been a lot of research on the further meaning of this (e.g., McCrudden 2013; Waldron and Dan-Cohen 2012). The primary use of dignity in the sense of human rights, has been in relation to the fundamental right of every human being across the world to be treated with dignity, and perhaps even more important from a judicial perspective, not to take away someone's dignity, or to violate one's dignity. While clearly a Kantian perspective shines through this declaration, it is however, unclear how this should be understood and in more practical sense enforced. It is Rosen (2012) again who critiqued the legal use of dignity, as it problematizes the status and meaning of dignity. Without a clear description of what dignity entails, it cannot guide a legal framework, and can only rely on jurisprudence. While some clear descriptions can be found of what violations to dignity include, such as torture and rape (Kaufmann et al. 2011), and thus which could be legally enforced as a violation of one's dignity, still two questions remain here. The first pertains to the relevance of

introducing dignity on top of human rights, as the establishment of certain human rights should suffice to enact a legal sphere without necessarily introducing another legal term (i.e., dignity) to complement. The second one is whether dignity can be understood at all from a legal point of view, when we take into account the tension between autonomy (not necessarily from a Kantian view, but from a legal perspective), which postulates that people should be free to behave in ways that they want to, and the violations of dignity which are not directly legally enforceable but which are within the discretion of an individual human being. Rosen (2012), for instance, presents the (true) case of a mayor of a French village who prohibited a dwarf-tossing competition in a local discotheque. The dwarf, who earned a living for this work, claimed to be independent and voluntarily engaging in this job, and thus should be freely allowed to engage in this work, which the mayor of the village claimed to be a violation of one's dignity. Two issues arise here which are of relevance to understanding of dignity. First, is it possible to legalize or criminalize actions which are in itself dignity violations, but nonetheless the individual choice of a person? The case of the dwarf-tossing represented a large grey area in which we may or may not establish the occurrence of a dignity violation, which arises from the perception that a human being is instrumentalized, or, being treated not as a unique human being but merely as an instrument. It is insufficient to describe felt pain, be it physical or emotional, as the criterion for a dignity violation, as pain is unavoidable in life (and thus every time someone may get hurt, it could represent a dignity violation), and felt pain is not always present in a dignity violation. Moreover, humiliation and being insulted may be profoundly painful experiences, but are not necessarily violations of one's dignity; being insulted by another person may exemplify the humanity in interactions, as it is impossible to insult an animal. Yet, it may only be salient within the person who is insulting, given his or her inability to treat the other with the necessary dignity.

In the context of work, this is important, as workers may feel obliged to work in degrading circumstances, just to have a job in order to survive, and may even engage in activities in which they are merely treated as an instrument rather than a mean in itself. Work as such may be instrumental for many workers, as a job is only an instrument for a

company to make a profit, while instrumental for a person to earn some money to live. With that job may come the circumstances of work, such as the humiliation of dwarf-tossing at the expense of people on a night-out at the club. However, as Rosen (2012) also explains, putting dignity in a legal framework seems impossible, as it would indicate that dignity violations would have led to prosecution and sentences. The existence of a law implies that the law must be maintained, and that violators of the law are prosecuted. While the Declaration of Human Rights presents the opportunity to do so, it is not enough as dignity violations do not allow themselves to be constrained within legal frameworks. Moreover, as Žižek (2001) explains, dignity also results from the duty as an intervening force in redefining what counts as reality. Thus, dignity as purely described in terms of the law presents a rather static view, neglecting the mutual relationship of reality and dignity, where the former is essentially redefined by the other.

More fundamentally, the issue pertains to whether the free choice that resides in people should be made subordinate to the principle of human dignity. The dwarf claimed to have a free choice in his decision to be tossed for money, and the mayor's decision to prohibit these activities in his village presents a hierarchical decision over someone else's dignity, or more positively formulated, the decision to protect the dignity of others. The question that follows this issue is not so much whether it is possible to reach an agreement over what can be perceived as a violation of dignity, but whether a decision over what constitutes a violation of dignity can be imposed upon a person, thereby overruling his or her own free choice. As explained above, felt pain is insufficient to describe a dignity violation, as it may be present or absent depending on personal or cultural circumstances. This issue becomes even less relevant when we take into account the possible explanations a person may give to defend his or her own behavior. For instance, a prostitute may claim that she is fully aware that her dignity is violated, and that she is merely treated as an instrument without intrinsic worth, but that she is willingly and voluntarily doing this to earn money, and thus exerting her own free choice. She may even defend her own behavior by reasoning that if she would not have done this, she would be homeless and poor, and thus living in even more humiliating and dignity-violating circumstances. This example shows how difficult

it is to resolve the tension between free choice and dignity, and in some ways represent the choice for many workers to be treated as an instrument, thereby accepting humiliating circumstances, in order to make a living and to avoid further humiliation and poverty. However, the deeper issue here is to understand how such a situation can come into existence; as societal flaws prevail (such as explained in Chap. 1), people enter situations in which they perceive to be forced to make a choice between different levels of undignifying actions, which in reality may be no choice at all, as agency is already taken away from the person. Moreover, it also takes away the duty, or responsibility of the actor, being the visitors to the nightclub, the management of the club, the employer ensuring work circumstances, and the visitor of prostitutes.

In postulating a theory of workplace dignity, it is therefore important to resolve this paradox at least partially and to take a position on the role of dignity vs. free choice of the individual human being, and the responsibilities of people. In sum, while human dignity has been used extensively to defend and interpret universal human rights, it is insufficient to postulate dignity as residing in a legal framework only, as it conflicts with the individual choice for instrumentalization which cannot be criminalized legally, and the limitations of dignity in terms of separating between what should be enforced legally (e.g., prevention of rape and torture), and what is to the discretion of society (e.g., humiliation and degradation). Hence, this leaves with a purely philosophical conceptualization of dignity which will be used in the remainder of this book, rather than taking into account a perspective of dignity to be regulatory, and thus prescribing legal frameworks, and regulation towards corporations and workers. While human rights and rights for workers can be regulated by governments, and enforced, this is beyond the scope of the book. While touched upon in some instances throughout the book, the main focus will be on how workplaces can be organized in a dignified manner.

### **2.2.3 Other Conceptualizations of Human Dignity**

A prominent way dignity has been used throughout time other than in aforementioned ways, has been by defining the special place human

beings occupy in the world. Pico Della Mirandola (2012) in his posthumously published 'Oration on the Dignity of Man' described the dignity of man, as given by God, which ensures the free choice of people to act in dignified ways. Man is free, and this freedom is given by God, which entails both a responsibility and a right, as people ought to act upon religious law as well as having the freedom to decide how to live. While most contemporary research on dignity tend to be more secular, it cannot be denied that human dignity has arisen over the centuries in relation to the special relationships between people and God. It was Kant as well, who acknowledged that the ultimate source of dignity was divine, and while contemporary thinkers such as Kateb (2011) conceptualize dignity in a secular way, building the fundament of human dignity on humans' unique characteristics as compared to animals, the question remains as to where dignity comes from. Religious accounts offer some justification for the ultimate source of human dignity but at the same time, religious accounts of dignity may also contradict current perspectives of dignity. More specifically, religious dignity conceptualizations may presuppose a dignity received by God, through which the human being becomes subordinate to God, serving him in every action (Rosen 2012). For instance, labor becomes a tool through which dignity is manifested, but labor is to serve the divinity of God, and the dignity of the human being is only revealed in human labor, which again legitimizes practices in which the individual human being is no longer a free agent, having an independent choice, but constraining him- or herself through following divine orders. In other words, labor is again instrumentalized, and conducted not necessarily out of free will, but to follow a dictated, religious order.

While in principle there should be no apparent contradiction in dignity and religion, and people should have the principle freedom to express and live according to their faith, religion in its cultural, political dimension should not be used to ascertain an exclusive approach towards dignity, and thus establishing a conditional dignity on the basis of contributions made. Another problem with religious accounts of dignity is that on the basis of a holy book, such as the Bible or Quran, the powerful within a religious stream may use their authority to distinguish between what can be seen as dignified behavior and what not.

As a consequence, theological dogmas may claim that homosexuality is undignified and therefore to be condemned, which may violate the dignity of homosexuals. While homophobia may partly result from dominant cultural norms, it raises the issue what exactly dignity entails, in relation to freedom (in the workplace), and how it should be defined. In Chap. 3, this will be discussed in-depth.

Beyond a rights vs. duty distinction in the legal sense, it is also relevant to mention the distinction made by Milbank (2013), who described internal and external dignity. While the former refers to the capacity to choose and to have autonomy which resides in every human being, external dignity refers to the acceptance of the external environment of which we have no control over. This touches upon the distinction between Kantian and aristocratic dignity, with the latter still having some added relevance in the sense that it is not only Kantian views of dignity that have survived over time, but also the idea that one can earn dignity, and that part of our dignity resides in our behavior, not just as something that purely exists within us. However, it is important here to refer to Kant's *Groundwork* (1785/2012), where he discusses the notion of dignity in relation to behavior. Kant explains that morality does not result from a purpose of an action, or the actual action itself, but from the will, or the motivation, that inspires the action. That will, or motivation, is only good, according to Kant, when it results from duty, not from a natural inclination. Hence, external dignity (Milbank 2013) thus results not from the position of accepting one's environment as it is, but from the good will that leads one to accept it. External dignity is important as it contrasts a purely agentic view on dignity as residing in the person and which is action-based. External dignity is thus also related to non-action, an aspect of dignity which is not Kantian, but which resonates with non-Western perspectives on dignity. Non-action as dignity is resonated for instance in traditional Chinese Daoism (Qing-Ju 2014). While Daoism is essentially non-Kantian, in that dignity is found through one's actions, it also offers another perspective on what dignity entails. Daoism proposes that dignity is achieved through non-action and abstinence. When one reduces his or her desires so there is less conflict with one's environment, the person becomes more dignified. Life should not be about striving for more possessions, but rather to refrain from desiring more.

Beyond this notion of abstinence, Daoism is also about a non-anthropocentrism, and thus essentially non-humanistic (Qing-Ju 2014); it is not solely humans who have dignity, but dignity is all around, and is also present within the ground on which all exists. All things on earth have dignity, according to Daoism, because all things are unique and possesses a unique value. This opens the way for a theory of workplace dignity, as dignity not only resides within human beings, but can be part of any object in the world. The dignity of the workplace can therefore be the object of one's actions or non-actions, similar as to a Daoist perspective on ecology, which postulates that due to the dignity of our natural environment, it is important to abstain from action, and thus to preserve natural resources in order to protect the dignity of the earth.

## 2.3 Critics of Human Dignity

It is without doubt that human dignity is a contested concept (Gallie 1956), of which there is no single definition that is agreed upon across the various disciplines in which it used and theorized upon. It is therefore particularly important to understand the bases on which critique on human dignity is formulated, in order to incorporate in a theory of workplace dignity. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was one of the first critics of human dignity, who called it an empty concept and a façade. While dignity served as a term to be used to promote humanism, it also reflected to be a dangerous concept, as it legitimized certain practices in its abuse of the term (Macklin 2003; Pinker 2008). In other words, and referenced above as well, dignity can be used to promote a totalitarian agenda aiming at protecting the dignity of a particular group of people without protecting, or even systematically violating, that of others. A more work-related critique stems from thinkers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche (Lohmann 2014; Rosen 2012). Nietzsche questioned the possibility that there could be a positive existence of both work and dignity of work (Rosen 2012). Nietzsche argues that human existence only obtains value through culture. As art in itself is unproductive, this means that others have to work (e.g., produce food),

so that artists can live and produce art. Nietzsche distinguishes himself from the idea of dignity of labor, as he perceives labor as a necessity, which was made attractive (e.g., through the Church who proclaimed the dignity of labor) as a consolation for the fact that many people have no choice whether or not to engage in work, thereby enslaving themselves to their employers. Nietzsche concludes his argument by stating that slavery is fundamental to work, as it allows a small minority to engage in art, and thus to show what it really is to be a human being. He argues that it is only through exclaiming the dignity of man and labor that people accept that work in reality is nothing more than slavery. The relevance of this argument which takes place at the extreme end of the scale (where one perceives that work can only be conducted in slavery), is that it can be questioned whether work can have any dignity at all, as an engagement of two parties whereby a power-position is created which by definition may entail an aspect of dominance, or slavery. If that is the case, dignity is indeed a façade, thus something that can be used to legitimize the status quo of current workplace practices, under a new theoretical framework which in reality adds no real new dimension at all. Chapter 3 discusses this fundamental argument, and based on the idea of human interaction, postulates an answer to this tension.

A contemporary of Nietzsche, Karl Marx, was similarly reluctant about the potential of human dignity (or dignity of labor). He posited that dignity (and human rights) were primarily expressions of self-interests of the middle-class bourgeoisie (Lohmann 2014; Rosen 2012). However, at the same time, Marx should be understood as a great advocate against dignity violations, and in particular the exploitation of the workers, degradation, deprivation of rights, and use as mere instruments for company profits. As such, while critiquing the notion of dignity, Marx was the primary thinker who understood the inherent notion between capitalism and exploitation, and thus the direct link between the contemporary economic-political paradigms and the dignity violation that many workers experience (Hodson 2001). Marx takes a primary negative approach towards dignity, indicating that he was concerned with the violations of dignity, or instances where dignity was absent in the workplace. It has been argued elsewhere that dignity



is easier to observe through the violation of it (Kaufmann et al. 2011). Indeed, most of the research on dignity at work is found in the sociological and industrial relations literature, who have primarily investigated dignity through the absence of it (e.g., Berg and Frost 2005; Hodson 2001). Thus, an important question also arises, that concerns the difference between negative and positive approaches towards dignity, or whether perspectives on dignity vs. dignity violations differ fundamentally, and represent different theoretical mechanisms. This is also an aspect to be discussed in the theory of workplace dignity (Chap. 3).

A more contemporary critique of human dignity came from Macklin (2003), who claimed that dignity was nothing more than respect for autonomy. While Macklin positioned her critique within the field of medicine and bioethics, and thus should primarily be understood from that point of view (and also as a primer for Pinker's critique), the essential criticism pertains to the vagueness of the term, and the mere use of dignity as a slogan, rather than having a specific meaning with a practical use in medicine. This may be the result of the different philosophical perspectives on dignity, which allows for different interpretations of the term. Moreover, a virtue-based perspective implicates that dignity can be earned, or deserved, and as a result, dignity may be something that is freely used without too much constraint in terms of the definitory nature of the term (Rosen 2012), through which it ultimately becomes conceptually meaningless. This is a danger for every scientific concept, and allows any user to have an idiosyncratic interpretation of the term. Hence, the use of the term dignity has to include a specific description of what is meant with the term, or how it should be perceived upon within the context of its use. In any other circumstance, a conversation about dignity may trigger conceptually different connotations, which may lead to confusion and unclarity regarding the potential contribution of the term.

Nonetheless, there are inherent contradictions involved in the conceptualization of dignity. One such a contradictory element pertains the role of freedom. Freedom is an essential aspect related to upholding one's dignity, as will be postulated more extensively in Chap. 3. Without ensuring the freedom of the individual person to express

him- or herself, dignity cannot be guaranteed, as it would imply a coercive stance stemming from a hierarchical position towards an individual, as for instance would be the case in terms of perceiving dignity of labor having its particular place in the social order, as described in the Catholic *Rerum Novarum* during the reign of Pope Leo XIII (1891). It is through this hierarchical ordering of dignity as being made subject to a higher order (e.g., the will of God), that the abuse of dignity can take place, which essentially means that the free choice of the individual as underpinning of dignity is contradicted. However, having freedom is paramount to dignity, but not overruling dignity. Freedom implies that an individual has an independent choice to violate one's own dignity, for instance through degrading oneself, and being drunk etc. (Rosen 2012). However, even though such a violation to oneself may be minor, as is the case with drunkenness, there are certain limits to the freedom one has, as Kant explains why even freedom is subject to one's dignity. As a person is not free to sell one's own kidney on the market, even though a human being has two and needs only one to survive, this should be understood as the principle on which Kant distinguishes the duty of the individual towards protecting one's own dignity of the human being, indicating that a person does not own its body, but merely has duties towards him- or herself. Hence, dignity presupposes certain obligations which do not directly benefit the human. It is in this sense that Kant's dignity construction is not just humanistic, but goes beyond this by stating that duties to serve dignity are higher than striving for human flourishing, agency and freedom. Humanism does not equate human dignity, according to Kant, as in a humanistic philosophy agency and freedom prevail as foundations for the establishment of a social order. However, this does not take away the inherent limitations of one's freedom in a dignity paradigm. The relationship between freedom and duty implies that the former is constrained by the latter, and thus the latter should be described such that it guides the former. It is only through this exploration that an emerging theory can become explicit in describing dignity and its operation in the social space.

## 2.4 Dignity at Work

Dignity has received hardly any attention in management studies, and despite some studies throughout the last decades, there is still very little understood about the role of dignity at work. However, in the recent years, and due to the global unrest following the economic crisis, there is renewed attention for how dignity can play a role in forming an alternative paradigm for organizations (Donaldson and Walsh 2015; Pirson and Lawrence 2010).

While dignity has been largely absent from the management literature, it has been used in sociology and industrial relations, most notably in the work of Hodson (2001). His work is important for the establishment of the importance of dignity at the workplace, but at the same time is primarily concerned with the violations of dignity without strictly conceptually defining dignity as it would be applicable to workers in organizations (see also the book of Bolton 2007). Hodson's (2001) first page of his book "Dignity at Work" discusses multiple ways in which dignity can manifest at work, including both aristocratic, Kantian, and comportment views of dignity, beyond defining dignity primarily in Kantian ways. His empirical work (e.g., Hodson 1996; Hodson and Roscigno 2004) is lacking direct measurement of dignity of work, and only uses some proxies, such as pride in work and job satisfaction. This is not uncommon in other sociological and industrial relations research, where the lack of direct measurement impedes a clear understanding of dignity at work (see e.g., Agassi 1986; Berg and Frost 2005; Stacey 2005). Notable here is the Neo-Marxist view which assesses dignity through its absence, or through the violations of dignity in the workplace, such as exploitation and alienation from work. Moreover, these studies point to the pathways through which workplaces can become more dignified, such as through strong trade unions (e.g., Agassi 1986), which are important but nonetheless not informative in terms of the precise meaning and function of dignity at work. The problem is that indicators or conditions of dignity do not directly establish evidence that dignity is really present. For instance, through

means of cognitive dissonance, one can be fully satisfied with a job, yet being fully used as an instrument without intrinsic worth. Part of the explanation resides in the observation that dignity is not just observed publicly, but is also manifest in the deeper structures of organizations and society.

The work of sociologist Durkheim is also important (Lindemann 2014), as it explains individual dignity as a defining feature of modern society. Assaults on individuals, according to Durkheim, are therefore perceived to be assaults on what is the center of modern society. It is not surprising to observe that terror attacks in Western countries are perceived to be much stronger violations of the norms of dignity than terror attacks in the Middle-East, or Asian and African countries, revealing an implicit assumption of the Western countries as being more modern societies, in which such attacks are not just individual assaults, but threatening society as such, as it undermines the dignity of individuals. Hence, it is striking to observe how dignity through its violations manifests in society, but at the same time is used to distinguish cross-culturally, thereby implicitly implying a much more non-egalitarian view on dignity as Kant proposed, and confirming a performance-based approach towards dignity in line with Durkheim. It is not surprising to see how dignity is also used to describe the rise of the bourgeois society, alleviating people out of poverty but also (again) distinguishing between people with and without dignity (McCloskey 2010).

A similar focus on violation of dignity is found in the work of (Lucas 2011, 2015; Lucas et al. 2013), which focused on particular dignity violations at work, such as found in the Foxconn factories in China producing I-phones (Lucas et al. 2013). This research is particularly important, as it introduces a notion of reciprocity in dignity. As their research was conducted in Chinese factories, non-Western cultural factors play a role in determining what constitutes a dignity violation. As Asian cultures more strongly stress the manifestation of dignity in the evaluations of others, this implies a more meritocratic understanding of dignity, or something which has to be earned and respected by others. However, in this context, the researchers found many workers with little power to be systematically violated of their dignity. Hence, they were treated without the necessary dignity, which not only was accepted by employees as

they perceived to be without dignity and self-worth, but which also led to the confirmation of their status of having little intrinsic dignity, enabling the status quo. However, the work of Lucas is important in other ways as well, as it shows that dignity manifests in multiple ways at work. Her research among mining workers (Lucas 2011) revealed how dignity is important for the formation and preservation of work identities, and is revealed in the daily interactions between people at work, in how both managers and coworkers treat each other. Subsequent work (Lucas 2015) showed how workers experience inherent (Kantian) dignity, earned (meritocratic) dignity, and remediated dignity (which occurs after one has experienced a violation). Her work is one of the first that convincingly shows that dignity, in its various ways it has been used in the past, has a meaningful role to play at work, and hence there is a notion of validity of dignity in the workplace, as well as an additional contribution of dignity beyond existing frameworks of justice and fairness.

While Lucas' work shows the multiple ways in which dignity may manifest in the workplace, it may also be reflective of the status of dignity in the workplace, being somewhat obscured by a lack of uniformity in its meaning. This may give rise to ways in which dignity is used as a term that encompasses different 'good' management practices, such as representation for workers and meaningful work (Hodson 1996, 2001), but at the same time also lead to cultural views on dignity that describes a more individualistic notion of the term (see e.g., Aslani et al. 2016). Aslani et al. (2016) in their study on negotiation differences across cultures, attributed the US to be a dignity-culture, which represented an individualistic view of dignity as the tendency among people to be more concerned with self-respect than whether others have respect for the person. While self-respect is central here, it profoundly dissociates itself from Kantian descriptions of the importance of relational aspects of dignity. In this sense, dignity is downgraded towards mere individualism, and the consumerist notion of identity as revolving around the individual person without taking too much notion of the other (Gabriel 2015). It is through making these distinctions in the relevance of dignity across different cultures, and thereby describing American consumerism as focused on individual dignity that the term is obscured, giving way for misuse of the term.

Thus, it is important to feature the contours of how dignity can be conceptualized in the workplace. The theoretical work of Sayer (2007) is important here, as it describes the specific roles dignity has at work, and how it is different from non-work circumstances. For instance, as work comes with structural power differences, concepts such as earned dignity are subject to the relative positioning of an individual. As workers are dependent upon the recognition and rewards of their superiors in order to conduct and continue their job, earned dignity becomes a feature of this power-relationship. Without a recognized form of dignity towards the worker, the relationship is undermined, and recognition and rewards (financial or intrinsic) are essentially meaningless in the context of absence of dignity. Hence, Sayer (2007) argues that in order to have dignity manifesting in the workplace, it is needed that workers have control and autonomy, are in possession of conditions that others regard as normal (i.e., that one does not live in relative poverty), that one is serious and being taken seriously, and that one has self-control. Hence, from this description, dignity is again manifest through both inherent and earned ways, and in particular has a strong behavioral component. Sayer provides an explanation of this in the comparison between the household cleaner and the plumber, with the former doing work that could be done by the householder, while the plumber conducts specialized work that could not (easily) be done by a householder. Hence, the cleaner is in a subordinate position, and thus conducts work that is below the dignity of someone who is able but unwilling to do this her- or himself. Here, we observe another use of dignity in the treatment of others, employing them on the basis of a self-regard that permits oneself to be excluded from certain tasks, handing this over to another person who lacks such self-regard in the need to earn money. It is this subordinate relationship without a basis of needed expertise that Sayer (2007) shows to be a distinctive element of dignity abuse, or separation on the basis of differences in dignity between people (i.e., an aristocratic notion of dignity on the basis of honor).

In sum, while dignity has been present throughout the last decades in some management publications, it is hardly developed theoretically and empirically. However, in line with the reasoning in Chap. 1, the recent global economic crisis and the underlying reasons for the malfunctioning

political and economic order, have spurred a rethinking of dominant paradigms, which amongst others have led to the reemergence of dignity, such as the editorial by Hollensbe et al. (2014) published in the prestigious Academy of Management Journal. A more elaborate inclusion of dignity has been presented by Donaldson and Walsh (2015), in their ‘Theory of Business’, which represents a theoretical alternative to the dominant economic neoclassical perspective on the role of business, or the view that business can be organized around the principles of people as self-interested, economic agents, and shareholder value as the key outcome of the business. Instead, Donaldson and Walsh (2015) introduce a theory of business, including dignity and the dignity *threshold*, or the minimal standards in terms of respect and protection of dignity, and remedy of violations of dignity, that every organization should adhere to. While the authors argue that it is not the prime responsibility of organizations to solve poverty across the world, there should be minimal standards as to how organizations should operate, and in particular the recognition of individual dignity of workers, and treating workers not as mere objects or instruments, but to respect their intrinsic worth (Donaldson and Walsh 2015). The rise of these publications taking dignity explicitly into account when formulating possible alternatives to current dominant business models shows that there is a strong need for further development of how dignity can be integrated with management theories. Chap. 3, therefore, will introduce a theory of workplace dignity, which takes into account all the published studies on the role of dignity at work, and formulates a coherent view on how dignity manifests at work, and how it can play a role in the establishment of the organization.

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