

## *The challenges of research in the field of human dignity*

*Seyed Abdosaleh Jafari<sup>1</sup>, Behin Araminia<sup>2</sup>, Hanieh Tavasoli<sup>3</sup>, Nafiseh Tavasoli<sup>4\*</sup>, Soheil Abedi<sup>5</sup>, Ahmad Fayaz Bakhshe<sup>6</sup>*

1. Researcher, University of Religions and Denominations, Research Center for Religions and Denominations; Researcher, Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
2. Researcher, Mental Health Research Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
3. Resident of Neurology, Faculty of Medicine, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.
4. Researcher, Endocrine and Metabolism Research Institute, Endocrine and Metabolism Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
5. PhD Candidate in Medical Ethics, Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
6. Researcher, Sina Trauma & Surgery Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

### **Abstract**

Research on human dignity is crucial for understanding the ethical foundations of human rights. Neglecting to address certain pitfalls in this area of research can lead to adverse effects, including the perpetuation of discrimination, the misrepresentation of dignity across different schools of thought, and the weakening of ethical standards in human rights discourse. The present study aims to identify such challenges by analytically examining outstanding research in this field. Our surveys have identified challenges and pitfalls that were categorized into two groups: challenges in the field of materials, and challenges in the field of methods. In terms of materials, researchers may fail to adequately consider the historical and cultural contexts that shape these views, while in terms of methods, they may overlook the diverse perspectives that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of dignity. Consequently, it is imperative for researchers to remain vigilant and avoid these pitfalls to ensure that their work upholds the true essence of human dignity and effectively advocates for the rights of all individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

**Keywords:** *Human dignity; Respect; Personhood; Human rights; Qualitative research; Bioethics.*

#### **\*Corresponding Author**

**Nafiseh Tavasoli**

**Address:** No.10, Endocrinology and Metabolism Research Institute, Jalal-e-Al Ahmad Ave., Chamran Highway, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

**Postal Code:** 1411713119

**Tel:** (+98) 21 88 22 00 38

**Email:** [ntavasoli238@gmail.com](mailto:ntavasoli238@gmail.com)

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## ***Introduction***

Human dignity is the most prominent aspect of the creation of human. It may seem like an easy topic at first glance, but is in fact quite complicated when discussed in detail, and numerous problems arise in the course of its implementation in the society. “Humans have dignity” is one of the most important statements in peoples’ lives as it defines humans’ prominent position. Human dignity is the basis of human rights and gives humans privileges over other creatures. In addition, there are few topics that are as comprehensive as this one and have relevance for all individuals, and at the same time are specific to humans and do not include other creatures (1, 2). Therefore, research in this field is a global and important need.

Considering the fundamental position of this subject in all branches of humanities and its wide-ranging impact, it is evident that there will be significantly diverse results. Most of the time, researchers approach pervasive and fundamental topics in a similar method. This union and harmony are a result of increased involvement with these topics and therefore growing attention. Contrary to expectations, discussions on human dignity reveal widespread disagreements. The diversities and conflicts among these views suggest that they are

not entirely due to natural disagreements, but may also be caused by deficiencies in the research method, incorrect comprehension of the subject, bias due to distorted assumptions, and reliance on local customs, resulting in conflicting conclusions (3, 4).

Facing this problem and the conflicting views in previous researches led us to take a step back and revisit the issue of human dignity in order to identify the challenges and pitfalls of the research path in this area regardless of the findings of the existing researches. Paying attention to these pitfalls can automatically eliminate many conflicts and bring us closer to reaching common or similar results.

In order to achieve this aim, we reviewed our previous researches as well as important and prominent studies in the field of human dignity to find potential pitfalls. It should be noted that this is an analytical study, and not a descriptive one. Therefore, we will not examine the previous studies one by one and try to extract the slips, but we will look at the possible slips according to the type of issue, which may well be present in the famous studies of this field.

## ***Discussion***

After finding different pitfalls in the field of human dignity research and examining them, we categorized the pitfalls into two groups of research materials and research methods, which we will examine in detail below.

### ***Challenges Related to Research Materials***

Research into human dignity presents a unique set of challenges that can significantly impact the integrity and applicability of findings. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing a comprehensive framework that not only defines human dignity, but also ensures its meaningful application in diverse societal contexts. Below are some key challenges that researchers face in this critical field of study.

**Narrow Focus:** Researchers usually have initial knowledge about their research topic and gather additional information through evaluations and discussions with experts. The pitfall lies in the researchers' assumptions. They mistakenly believe there is no need to push the boundaries of their abilities, and they also think it is sufficient to examine only a few points of view. This approach overlooks the importance of thoroughly exploring evidence, opinions and perspectives from different schools of thought. Some researchers may focus

only on a certain aspect of the topic and leave other parts out. However, addressing a subject like human dignity that requires a comprehensive understanding cannot be achieved through such an approach. The astonishing breadth of the topic and the fact that all schools of thought have more or less been compelled to express their views on it make the task even more challenging (5, 6). Additionally, since the topic of humanity and therefore human dignity are the foundation of humanities, investigations of these areas demand great precision. From the very beginning, researchers must know and accept that human dignity is not a quick-return venture (7).

**Misguided Interpretations:** In various schools of thought, there have been instances where instructions have been given regarding the concept of human dignity that contradict the intended purpose and undermine the fundamental and intuitive understanding in this field. It seems that the proponents of these instructions have overlooked the essence, purpose and general principles of their own school of thought before presenting their doctrines and instructions. For example, in the interpretation of "right", we consider it two-sided. As Imam Ali stated, "There is no obligation without its corresponding right,

and there is no right without its corresponding obligation.” It means that every person has a right over others, and in turn, others have a right over them (8). This statement seems to have been derived from the Quran: “Women have the same rights against their men as men have against them”<sup>1</sup>. This universal and rational religious principle can serve as the foundation for the formulation of relationships among all human beings (9). However, it is unfortunate that even among Muslims, the rights of followers of other faiths are sometimes neglected, causing Al-Ghazali (1058 - 1111 CE), a prominent Islamic theologian and philosopher, to emphasize ethical treatment and justice for all individuals, including non-Muslims, in his work (10 - 13). Therefore, before turning to jurisprudence, one must explore the worldviews and anthropology of religions. Sometimes, a closer examination of jurisprudential interpretations can also lead to significant changes. Sadly, even some philosophers have gone so far as to negate many obvious truths (14).

Neglected Context: Scholars and sometimes even jurists have failed to pay attention to customary practices, sentiments and the minimum commonalities depicted in religious narratives

(15). For instance, if we consider wisdom as a criterion for human dignity, it cannot be the only criterion and other criteria should be taken into account as well. For example, prisoners of the battle of Badr were released on the condition that they would teach ten Muslims how to read. This shows that Prophet Muhammad considered knowledge important enough to be a source of dignity and a reason to be freed (16). Failure to pay attention to this issue in research and especially in practice can be a serious hindrance to human dignity and consequently, implementation of human rights.

Fundamental Dignity: It seems that the lowest level of dignity that can be assumed for any entity is that its existence be accepted and respected. Therefore, the minimum amount of dignity for humans is respect for their life and existence. This is the minimum requirement that is derived from human existence and is applicable to everyone from the beginning. It is inherent and not something that is given or bestowed. This type of respect demands that no one's existence and life be challenged and at least no one's existence be considered a sin. Regarding other living beings, the minimum degree of dignity implies that their lives should not

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Quran, Surah Baqarah, Verse 228*

be endangered or threatened. Paying attention to the fact that this level of dignity is constant and common for all human beings and that people can increase their level of dignity by acquiring characteristics during their life should be noted by researchers. However, researchers should also bear in mind that benefiting from human dignity requires having certain characteristics. What this feature is and how it can be verified has been discussed by many researchers, and there are different views in this regard (17).

**Definitional Clarity:** The next pitfall in human dignity research pertains to offering an accurate definition for “human”, one that is inclusive and separates humans from other beings, just as human dignity is inclusive and specific to humans. Many differences of opinion regarding human dignity are due to this heterogeneity in the definition of human. One will surely face problems and limitations in the process of providing a definition, but this can also be very useful in discussions related to human dignity. Since human is the main subject of many sciences, numerous definitions have been offered. The definition of human is different from the point of view of biologists, jurists and humanities researchers (18 - 21). It is vital that researchers in this field choose a suitable

definition and be aware of the reason for their choice and its effect on human dignity (22).

**Self-Defined Dignity:** Can humans claim ownership of dignity? Does the fact that they consider themselves deserving of respect more than other creatures make them more deserving of it? Does honoring yourself create legitimacy for it? Or does it need to be defined from a higher position? Ignoring these questions is certainly a major slip. The exploration of whether humans can define themselves as owners of dignity is not merely academic; it has real-world implications for how dignity is understood, respected and upheld in the society. Addressing these questions is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable understanding of human dignity that transcends individual perceptions and aligns with universal principles of respect and worth (23, 24).

**Criteria for Dignity:** In discussions related to human dignity, we should not overlook one very important question, that is, what are the criteria for human dignity? Human dignity is the reason why people enjoy human rights. Ignoring the reason for this advantage over other beings can cause disturbances in the application of human rights in the society. It is equally crucial to understand the reasons behind the concept of human dignity and

its connection to human rights. By engaging in deeper discussions and establishing a solid foundation for human dignity, we can promote a more consistent and effective application of human rights, protect vulnerable groups, and strengthen the overall discourse surrounding these fundamental principles (17).

Source of Dignity: Where the criteria for human dignity come from and this criteria creates dignity, are other questions that need to be answered. Neglecting to consider the origins of the criteria for human dignity can have several significant consequences. First, it creates ambiguity in the application of rights, causing inconsistencies in how human rights are upheld. Second, it increases the potential for discrimination, as certain groups may be prioritized over others based on arbitrary characteristics. Third, it erodes ethical standards, weakening the principles of justice and equality that guide behavior and policy. Fourth, it leads to fragmentation of the human rights discourse, hindering collaborative efforts to address global challenges effectively. Lastly, it poses legal implications, complicating the interpretation and enforcement of laws related to human rights and potentially undermining the rule of law. Addressing these foundational questions is essential for fostering a just society where human

dignity is universally recognized and upheld (17, 25).

Potential vs. Actual Dignity: Can potential criteria create actual dignity? There are cases that support a positive answer to this question, for instance the dignity of the fetus. If so, dignity will be a matter of contract. The exploration of whether a potential criterion can create actual dignity is fraught with philosophical, ethical and practical challenges. The distinction between potential and actual dignity and the implications of treating dignity as a contractual matter both contribute to a nuanced understanding of this concept. Addressing these issues is vital for ensuring that dignity is recognized and upheld in a manner that is consistent, equitable and reflective of the worth of all individuals.

#### *Challenges Related to Research Methods*

These challenges are multifaceted and can significantly hinder the effectiveness and reliability of findings. Researchers often grapple with defining clear criteria for dignity, navigating subjective interpretations and ensuring that their methodologies are robust enough to capture the complexities of the concept. Additionally, the lack of consensus on what constitutes human dignity can lead to inconsistencies in research outcomes, making it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions. Addressing these methodological challenges is

crucial for advancing the discourse on human dignity and ensuring that research contributes to practical applications that uphold and promote dignity.

Criterion Selection: One of the most important steps in research is separating acceptable documentation from irrelevant or less valuable data, which is possible through selection of a set of criteria for data evaluation. Advanced search will then be based on these criteria to make progress in the research. There are various methods to determine the criteria, for instance empirical tests or referring to customs, logical arguments, authoritative texts and the views of experts in the field. It is obvious that failure to determine the criteria or doing so without sufficient investigation can divert the research from its right path. It should be noted that the researcher's choice of criteria should explain the problems caused by applying other criteria.

Clearly, the issue of human dignity is not initially empirical and testable, but after reaching a concept or belief, it can be tested through its implementation in the society, although caution should be exercised against repeated experiments. All reports of crimes against humanity can be our documented evidence in the experiment.

Referring to customs (26), reasons (14) and texts (27) is also evident in the development of the concept of human dignity. Many prominent perspectives in our time are rooted directly or indirectly in customs. When a perspective only focuses on explaining its own viewpoint without argumentation or reference, it has implicitly or unknowingly relied on customs. Today, in most countries, laws and regulations derived from customs and common behavior have become the basis for action. In the global community, efforts to create a majority and rely on it against opposing views are also seen. Although resorting to common or customary views is one way to resolve practical conflicts, it is not considered an acceptable reference in theoretical disputes. After all, it is not uncommon for a point of view to change throughout history, among different countries and at the hands of different scholars, and sometimes even be turned completely upside down. It seems that belief in inherent dignity is one of the subjects that has been explained rather than debated or even justified. Followers of this belief consider it self-evident and therefore point to common or customary references in different eras, locations or schools of thought (28, 29).

Reference to authoritative texts is an acceptable

method of resolving disputes in legal matters as well as in religions. The reason why this is standard practice in legal issues is that, after accepting a religion, doctrine or custom, the law explains that premise and does not oppose other legal systems; this is, however, not the case in religions, and religious scholars should pay attention to this important and fundamental point. The concept of human dignity applies to all individuals and is not merely an internal religious matter. Acceptance of religions occurs after defining the essence of human beings, recognizing their values, and understanding their general principles. How can someone who has not yet recognized or defined themselves, and does not consider themselves to have any inherent worth, comprehend and embrace a specific religion and believe in its inherent values? The audience of our discussion on human dignity includes all human beings and not just followers of a particular religion. In this context, we are not solely searching for the establishment of a legal system for followers and peers of a particular religion, as is the case in religious jurisprudence. Religious scholars, even if they achieve such a system within the realm of their religion, will face significant challenges due to their disregard for the relationship between their doctrine and other doctrines. This oversight

prevents them from presenting a global framework that is acceptable to humanity.

Humanity is a trans-religious concept, and human dignity is a pre-religious issue that is broader than the scope of religions. However, in the process of establishing a global understanding of human dignity, certainties of religious belief can serve as guides and mediators among believers.

The above-mentioned points indicate that there have been methodological flaws in the selection of criteria for research. Therefore, to achieve a universal definition of dignity, we need an impartial and comprehensive investigation among the explicit and implicit beliefs of all human beings, regardless of their inclinations. The key to unraveling this complexity and a reliable criterion for this research is reason and wisdom.

Lexical Origins: Another issue that should be considered by researchers is the lexical translation and root of the word dignity. Dignity is a subjective concept and has no objective manifestation. Therefore, in order to understand each other, we must explore the meaning and root of the word dignity. Over the course of time and across different languages, "dignity" has acquired various meanings and has been associated with different concepts in different languages. The Farsi word for dignity is "keramat", and it seems that its root can



be traced back to the word "gerami" (honorable), and is also closely related to the word "hormat" (respect). However, the European counterpart of the word is more synonymous with the term "position" (30, 31). The Farsi version could imply a higher status for humans and the influence of Islam in our lexical culture, even though "karamat" is mostly used in the Quran in the sense of benefiting from divine blessings (32). Also, examining the root of this word shows us that dignity is beyond the lowest human position and is secondary to accepting an honorable status for humans. Therefore, one should first ask if it is possible to interpret the human position as human dignity, and whether it is a suitable example for dignity? In order to deal with this issue without bias, it may be better to call it "human position" from the beginning, and in doing so, the way to examine dignity will also be paved.

**Dignity Spectrum:** Another issue that can be problematic in human dignity research is failure to separate the lowest human status from the maximum human dignity. In some approaches to the matter, we face a zero and one definition of human status and dignity, but accepting the maximum and minimum level of human dignity indicates acknowledgement of a spectrum, or various degrees of dignity. Scholars of religions

and mystics have paid more attention to the maximum levels of human dignity and less attention to the rights of the general public, which are product of a minimum amount of dignity. Secular views have focused more on the rights of common people and the lowest level of human status, as they do not seem to care or believe in a maximum level of dignity.

The highest imaginable level of dignity for a human being is to become divine. Sometimes this means achieving victory over God or becoming the active manifestation of His will. In Islam, this maximum level of dignity is to become God's vicegerent on earth (33). Research on human dignity must explore and determine the position of humans within this spectrum and not take it superficially.

**Doctrinal Integrity:** Some researchers try to covertly bring the historical background of their doctrine closer to the dominant viewpoints in the world, and one of the mistakes in human dignity research may well be lack of caution in this regard. Sometimes, researchers do not mention the basic tenets of their doctrine in their writings, and they put forward rare ideas that are somehow closer to universal views. Also, the criteria accepted by any given doctrine are those beliefs that have been emphasized and insisted upon and can be

understood first hand from the clear texts of that doctrine, since several views can be derived in a secondary way from ambiguous texts. This does not mean that the mentioned doctrine is devoted to that point of view. Insistence of a school of thought on a viewpoint is definitely needed and it will not suffice to simply touch upon it in passing, especially when those references are new and appear after the insistence of other schools of thought. Nowadays nearly every belief system claims to uphold and promote human dignity. It should also be noted that although the individual views of scholars of any school of thought can be constructive, they cannot be generalized to the whole school, unless they have created a significant trend in that school of thought and are not in conflict with the views of other scholars of that school. Therefore, in order to understand a doctrine, one must first refer to original texts and set aside contemporary writings that align with the preferences of the majority or present personal attitudes (34, 35).

Minority Perspectives: Another pitfall in human dignity research is neglecting the fact that the lowest position of humans, legal human dignity or human rights pertains to minorities and marginalized groups, as these populations are often subject to discrimination. Honoring the great

figures of a school of thought is an indication that they are convinced of their own superiority rather than human dignity. The views of a school of thought on dignity are revealed when people benefit from this dignity without being judged according to their apparent commitment to the beliefs of that school of thought. The shortcomings in the definition of dignity in homogeneous societies (in terms of composition or religion) are reflected in the diminution of the rights of minorities, because they do not have enough means and power to protest and assert their rights. Scholars who have lived in heterogeneous societies or are part of minority groups are naturally more aware and mindful of these matters; they have investigated the issue of dignity, and have developed opinions that are most enlightening and valuable in research on human dignity (36).

Framework of Thought: In examining perspectives, one should ask what framework of thought they offer, how they define the boundaries of their beliefs, resolve conflicts, justify exceptions, and make their beliefs comprehensive and universal. All scholars believe that they have a lot to say on the matter of dignity, and their various beliefs, each in its own way, are connected to and enlighten this discourse. However, we find that so far, scholars have only pondered on those aspects of human

dignity that they prefer and generally have not acquired a comprehensive and critically examined perspective on the subject. Sometimes scholars' opinions on human dignity differ in various fields, for instance law, jurisprudence or philosophy, and their views may not even seem very coherent in the field of philosophy. The differences are huge when we investigate the views of various scholars, even within the same school of thought. The fact that each point of view presents its strengths and ignores its weaknesses greatly lowers the value of any research. A point of view should be criticized and questioned, and researchers should seriously pay attention to this matter in their proposed framework.

**Intrinsic vs. Relative Dignity:** It is essential not to leave unanswered the question of whether dignity is intrinsic or relative and rational. Does dignity derive its identity through comparison with other things, or does it have its own intrinsic value or measure? Intrinsic human dignity is not conferred by others or dependent on social status, but is inherent to the human condition itself. This is similar to the concept of mass in physics, that is, each object has a certain mass that does not need to be compared with others in order to be measured. This view holds that human dignity is an intrinsic, inalienable value that every person possesses

simply by virtue of being human, regardless of their attributes, abilities or circumstances (37). The relational perspective suggests, however, that human dignity is not absolute but rather exists in relation to others and in the social context. From this standpoint, dignity is not solely intrinsic, but is shaped by how one is perceived and treated by the society. There is an innate link between the right to one's own dignity and the duty to respect the dignity of others (5). This matter provides an important clue to the intrinsic or contractual nature of dignity. However, considering dignity to be measurable does not necessarily align with accepting a spectrum with levels of human dignity, even though such correlation can be observed externally, because differences in degrees may only exist between humans and other creatures.

**Innate vs. Acquired Dignity:** Another point that must not be overlooked in human dignity research is the question of whether dignity is innate or acquired. Can anyone raise their dignity? Does good or bad, knowledge or ignorance, etc. have no effect on dignity? Can someone's dignity be taken from them? Another way of looking at this issue is that the lowest level of dignity is innate and the maximum achievable. If we assume this to be true, we should answer the question of how these two positions differ. Being innate makes dignity

permanent and being an achievement makes it temporary and conditional. Many philosophers believe human dignity to be inherent, inalienable and possessed equally by all people, which is reflected in key human rights documents (38). Immanuel Kant argued that human dignity derives from our capacity for rational autonomy and moral agency. This inherent worth means that we must always be treated as ends in ourselves, never merely as means (39). In contrast, some philosophers have argued that dignity is not inherent but rather an acquired status based on merit, virtue, social rank or other contingent factors (40).

**The Criteria for Being Human:** Another problematic issue is failure to address the question of how to derive the criteria for being human from examples. The definition of "human" encompasses a complex interplay of biological, psychological and philosophical dimensions. While biology emphasizes evolutionary traits and genetic continuity, philosophy explores deeper questions of consciousness, morality and the essence of human nature (41, 42). These differing approaches highlight the multifaceted nature of humanity and the challenges in trying to define it universally. After specifying the criteria for being human, we should explain how they can be identified in

humans. Are they subjective or abstract? Can they be considered intuitive? If so, will intuition be a third category?

**Practical Application of the Criteria for Being Human:** The next issue is neglecting the practical implementation and follow-up of the criteria for being human, which can significantly impair research and discussions on human dignity. It is essential to move beyond theoretical discourse and focus on actionable strategies that ensure these criteria are effectively integrated into societal norms, policies and practices. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and dignified world for all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances.

### ***Conclusion***

It seems that the above-mentioned points are issues that every research on human dignity faces, and paying attention to them will have a desirable effect on the strength of the research. Critiquing the ideas of scholars and exposing their weaknesses will provide opportunities to present new or more comprehensive perspectives. The opinions expressed in this study may not bring together the views of different scholars, but at least they can show the places of disagreement more clearly and simplify their components by harmonizing the will

structure of the research. One can hope that this help scholars in the process of removing the obstacles in the path of upholding human dignity worldwide.

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