Dignity Among Palestinian Youth: A Pilot Study

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We the people of the United Nations determined[...] to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.

– United Nations Charter (Preamble)

Over the past year, there have been tumultuous changes and inspiring revolutions throughout the Arab world. One of the demands that has recurred and resonated during the revolutions has been the cry for 'a life with dignity.' Slogans that contain the word dignity [*karameh*] are also appearing in the Palestinian context; they have been used in public demonstrations and, most recently, in the open massive hunger strike waged by approximately 2000 Palestinian prisoners and detainees in Israeli prisons. The detainees' struggle to attain their demands – allowing family visits, ending prolonged solitary confinement, eliminating the practice of administrative detention, etc. – were placed firmly under the banner of "the battle for dignity." The Palestinian youth activist group, "Palestinians for Dignity", is another example of this trend.

In 2007, the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University published an article specifically examining the humiliation and loss of dignity which occur as a result of living under Israeli military occupation and being exposed to military violence (Giacaman et. al, 2007). The study indicated an association between loss of dignity, or humiliation, and negative health outcomes among Palestinian youth. It concluded that humiliation "induced by conflict and war-like conditions constitutes an independent traumatic event that is associated with negative health outcomes in its own right, regardless of exposure to other violent/traumatic events" and suggested that humiliation should be included as an indicator of mental health status (Giacaman et al, 2007, pp. 564).

Following in the same vein, the current study examines what constitutes the opposite of humiliation and loss of dignity. The study specifically aims to investigate how Palestinian youth understand the components of dignity and what factors lead to its growth or its reduction.

102 Palestinian students from the occupied West Bank were interviewed in the current study.[2] The participants were evenly split male and female, and ranged from 14-25 years of age. Four academic institutions were included: Birzeit University (34 participants, undergraduates), a private co-educational high school in Ramallah city (34 participants), and two governmental high schools (one for boys and for girls) in the town of Birzeit (18 female students, 20 male students).

Using a semi-structured interview tool, participants were asked open-ended questions about the definition of dignity, factors that increase and decrease dignity, the importance of dignity, and the difference between private or public humiliation or loss of dignity.

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[2] See Table 1 for a detailed breakdown of participants

Repeated readings and close inspection of the responses to the interview questions gradually led to the identification of themes and patterns. The themes were then coded systematically in thematic tables and clustered into domains.

Four main domains for dignity and loss of dignity emerged from the responses of the participants: respect for oneself and others; abiding by social norms, traditions, and customs; pride and honour; and personal and collective freedom and independence.

Dignity and its Components

Components of Dignity: Percentage of Respondents
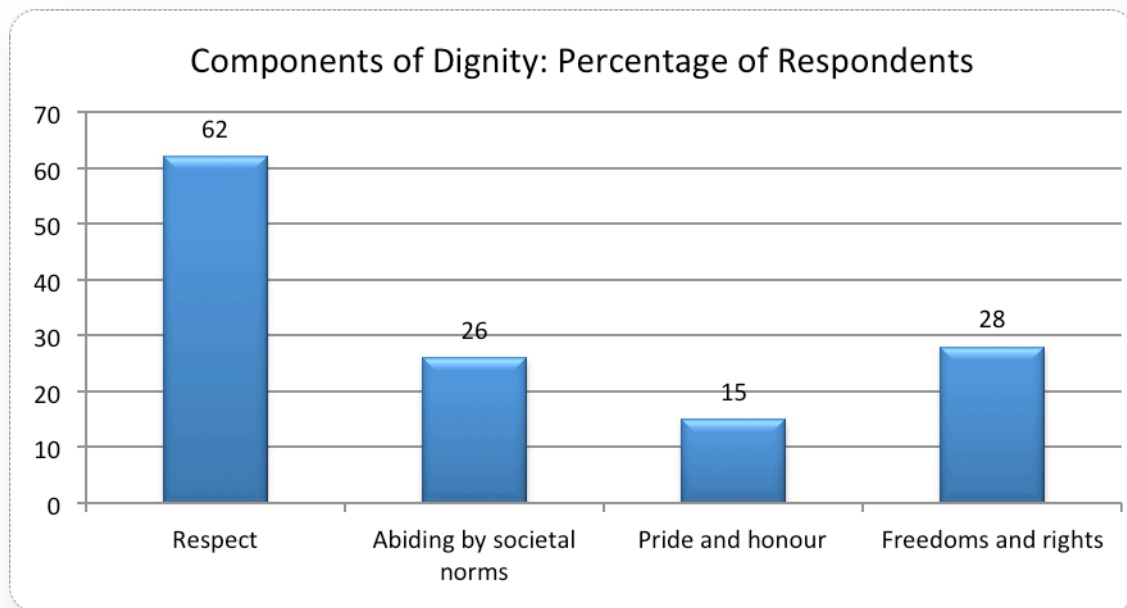
Figure 1: The components of dignity

The first domain - respect – referred to the respect for oneself and others, as well as being kind to people, helpful, and treating others well. When responding to the question about the components of dignity, 62% of responses included respect as a main component of dignity. One participant characterized dignity as follows: "To respect others, to be generous with others, to treat everyone in the same way without differentiating between people." Another suggested that "dignity is a feeling of presence/existence, to be heard, and to be respected for who I am and my opinion, and not to be marginalized."

The second domain – abiding by societal norms – referred to societal norms, values and principles, and customs and traditions. One of the participants suggested that dignity is related to "social and human principles." It is "something developed within the community. In society, one's own behaviour could increase or decrease one's dignity." Another student stated that the "morals we live by have become part of our customs and traditions." She spoke specifically about how dignity "corresponds to gender," and "how some problems in society affect a young woman's dignity" more than a man's dignity.

The third domain— pride and honour – included such attributes as courageousness and chivalrousness. "One must defend one's honour" according to a male participant, because "honour encompasses everything, including dignity."

The fourth and final domain – freedoms and rights – included elements related to the individual, such as education, financial independence, and being able to make decisions for

oneself, as well as those related to the collective, such as freedom of movement, sovereignty, and respect for the human rights of the collective. As one of the participants articulated,

> "dignity is the ability to express one's ideas without oppression. To be like everyone else and to have all my rights. The dignity of a population is different from the dignity of the individual. As a people, our dignity has been violated because of Israeli military occupation, and because they took our land."

Factors that Affect the Increase and Decrease of Dignity
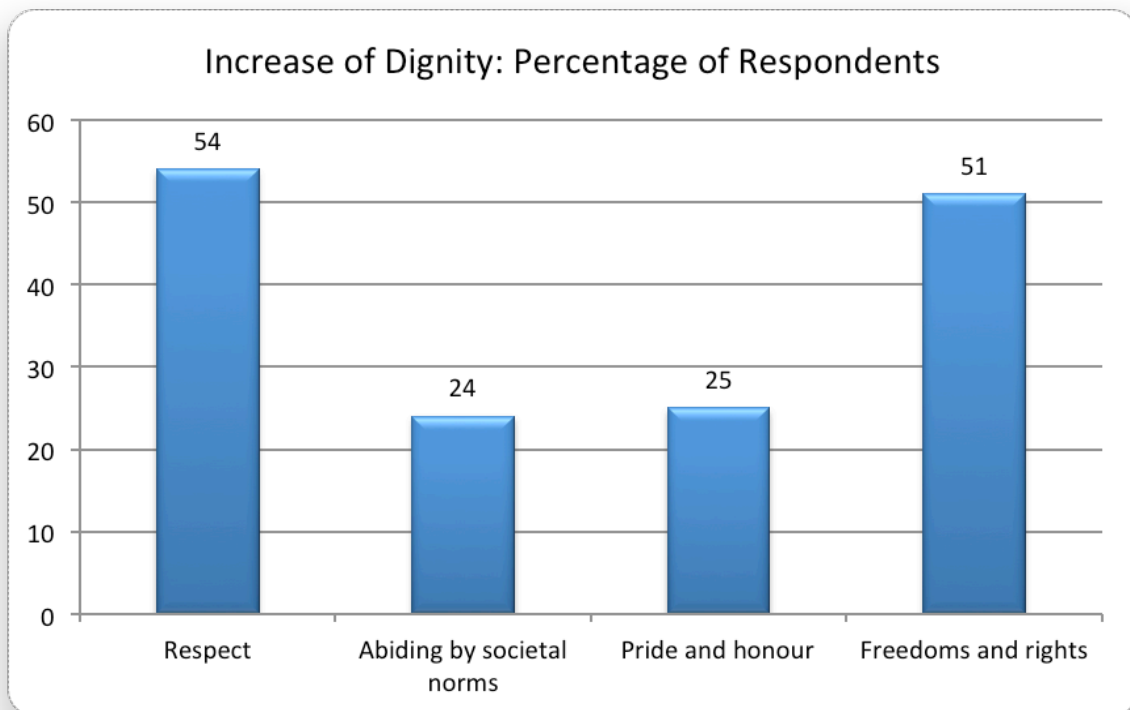
Figure 2: Factors that Increase Dignity

For questions related to the increase and decrease of dignity the same four domains were utilized to cluster the responses.

The following are some examples of how the four domains were expressed in the responses of the participants regarding the increase of one's dignity:

> Respect: "Doing good deeds, helping people, respecting the elderly, and responding to people in good ways" all help to increase dignity.

> Abiding by societal norms: "Upholding customs and traditions, respecting oneself in one's country, and having good relations with family.

> Pride and honour: "Helping others, and defending the dignity and rights of women, especially their honour in this country. Also, having good manners."

> Freedoms and rights: "When we watch television and witness the (Palestinian) prisoner exchange (we see that) Palestinians have dignity because they succeeded in releasing the prisoners."

For the most part, the responses related to factors that increase and decrease dignity were mirror images of each other, with the sole exception of honour and pride. The following are some examples:

> Lack of respect: "Speaking against someone or cursing them, teasing a fellow student who is beaten by a teacher, provoking someone for no reason."

> Not abiding by societal norms: "Disregarding customs and traditions, theft, and not respecting religious principles."

> Lack of freedoms and rights: "Beatings, violations of rights[...] usurping of a country. Those who decrease our dignity most are Israelis because they take things that are not theirs and they imprison anyone."
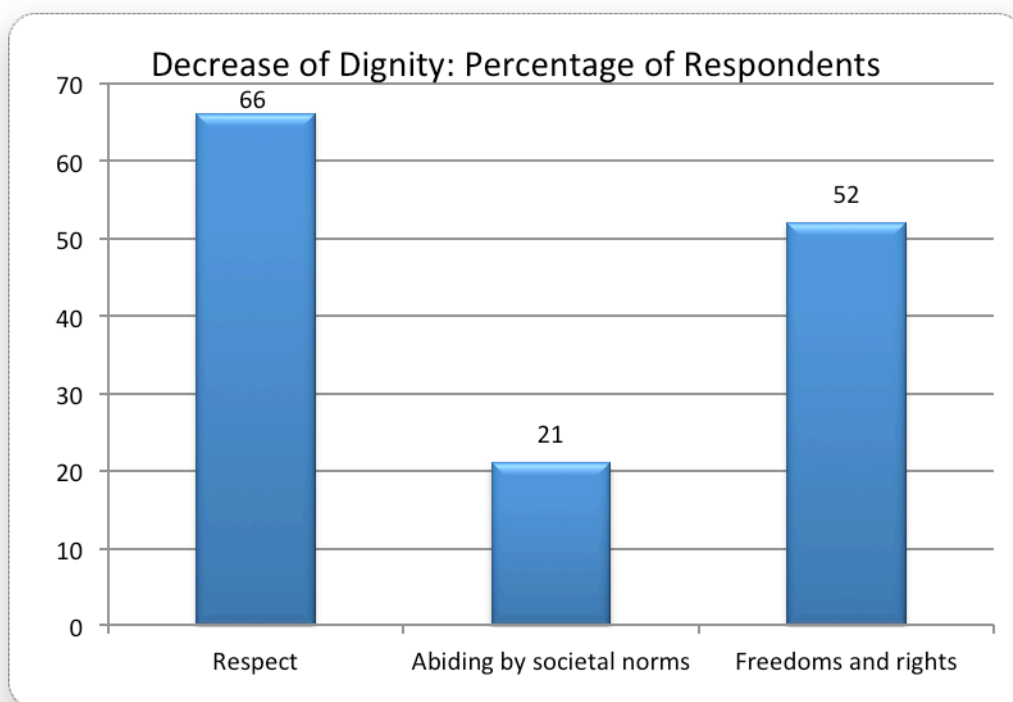
Figure 3: Factors that decrease dignity

The loss of dignity was expressed using two terms in Arabic: *Ihaneh,* and *thul. Ihaneh* was usually described as a personal feeling of humiliation during or following an incident related to the individual, which can generally be overcome (such as being humiliated by your parents or siblings). In contrast, *thul* was described as much larger than *Ihaneh*, affecting the collective rather than the individual. *Thul* cannot usually be overcome. An example is, the *thul* people experience in crossing Israeli army checkpoints.

Conclusions

The study found some minor trends associated with factors such as age, gender, locale (urban, rural, refugee camp), and academic institution. Older students (18-24 years old)

reported that the lack of freedoms and rights, personal and collective independence were an important component in decreasing dignity. While more research is needed to draw firm conclusions, the results of this pilot study identified trends which merit further investigation. These trends include:

- More male students than female students reported that lack of respect for oneself and others decreases dignity.
- More students from camp and rural areas reported that lack of respect for oneself and others decreases dignity.
- More students from governmental schools emphasized that lack of respect for oneself and others decreased their dignity, compared to students from private schools and universities.
- More students from the university reported that their lack of freedoms and rights, personal and collective, decreased their dignity.

The findings of this pilot study show that dignity is an important construct for Palestinian youth, linked to a range of outcomes. Dignity is associated with the material, social, psychological, and political contexts surrounding Palestinian youth. These associations and the overall findings of this pilot study will be employed to construct a quantitative measure of dignity to be used in further research.

Appendix:

Table 1: Participants' characteristics

		Percent
Identity card	Jerusalem	12
	West Bank	88
Locale	Urban	51
	Rural	43
	Refugee Camp	6
Region	Northern West Bank	16
	Southern West Bank	2
	Jerusalem	5
	Central West Bank	73

References

United Nations, Charter of the United Nations, available at:
http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/preamble.shtml

Giacaman R., Abu-Rmeileh N. M.E., Husseini A., Saab H., Boyce W. (2007) Humiliation: the invisible trauma of war for Palestinian youth. *Journal of the Royal Institute of Public Health. 121*, pg 563–571. doi:10.1016/j.puhe.2006.10.021