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Title

Leaving in doves from the orange groves: the Nepali-Bhutanese refugee experience and the diminishing of dignity

Authors

Dr. Susan Banki
Nicole Phillips

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Abstract

Refugee situations can pose a threat to dignity due to the loss of land and livelihood. This chapter however argues that dignity is dynamic, and that autonomy and normalcy can play a role in restoring dignity at different stages of the refugee experience. We begin by exploring two theoretical dignity dichotomies, and then examine autonomy and normalcy as two of dignity's overlooked antecedents. We proceed to the case of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees, and show how dignity, rather than remaining in a steady state, waxes and wanes over time. Before concluding we offer some thoughts as to how dignity can be restored in the post-resettlement context.

INTRODUCTION

‘I lost my self-respect and dignity. I lost all of my belongings. I lost the country of my birth.’

Nepali-Bhutanese refugee, Ambika Prasad Sharma¹

Protracted refugee situations – defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as ‘a situation in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for five years or longer in a given asylum country’ (UNHCR, 2014: 11) – can pose a serious threat to the dignity of refugees living in a state of limbo for a long period of time. And when return to the country of origin is not possible, and integration into the country where refugees have initially sought protection is not welcome, there are instances where countries of the Global North accept refugees into their own countries for permanent resettlement.

One might assume that resettlement offers a way to restore dignity to refugees who have been living in protracted refugee situations. But dignity may be elusive in the post-resettlement context. In the following chapter, we focus on those refugees who remain after others have resettled. Drawing on research about Nepali-Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal, we demonstrate that at different stages of the refugee experience, dignity has the potential to be threatened or restored, and that autonomy and normalcy can play a role in restoring dignity in protracted refugee situations. We begin by exploring two theoretical dignity dichotomies, and after establishing our own understanding of dignity, examine autonomy and normalcy as two of dignity’s overlooked antecedents. We proceed to the case of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, and show how dignity, rather than remaining in a steady state, waxes and wanes over time. Before concluding we offer some thoughts as to how dignity can be restored in the post-resettlement context.

DIGNITY DICHOTOMIES

Dignity is both an ambitious and an ambiguous concept. We posit that this ambiguity stems from two related dichotomies: dignity as restricted or universal and dignity as externally or internally sourced. From the Merriam Webster dictionary we know that dignity is defined as the ‘quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed.’ But what qualities make someone worthy, and who decides?

What makes someone worthy? Restricted vs universal

In the Roman era, dignity was accorded to those with elevated social status, suggesting that a person’s worth was determined by their merit and contributions to society, and was thus dependent on skills and abilities (Waldron, 2007: 221, citing Vlastos 1984). Since then, the concept has undergone a ‘sea change’ (Waldron, 2007: 221) and in contrast, today relies on a Kantian view of human beings as ends in themselves rather than a means to an end (McCrudden, 2008: 659) and connotes the ‘superiority of intrinsic worth of every human being that is independent of external conditions of office, rank, etc. and that pertains to *everyone*’ (Iglesias, 2001: 120).² This suggests an important dynamism: a person’s dignity can change over time because as one’s contributions to society change, so might one’s dignity. This dynamism is a point to which we will return.

The contemporary assumption of dignity as a universal marker explains its primacy in human rights discourse and human rights law (Donnelly, 1984; Moyn, 2010; Neier, 2013). The three cornerstones of international human rights law – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – all include the words ‘inherent dignity.’ The use of dignity in these contexts, used broadly and without an accompanying definition, was a strategic choice, an attempt to appeal to a wide swath of global polities and peoples (McCrudden, 2013; Schroeder, 2012). Yet while dignity’s inclusion in these and many other foundational legal documents can be seen to highlight the relationship between dignity and human rights, it has been cogently argued that the concepts should be separated so that the former does not detract from the latter

(Schroeder, 2012). That is, the justification for the universality of human rights should not rely on dignity, nor its particularly deistic associations.

...And who decides? Externally or internally driven

In the Roman era, dignity was determined externally. That is, individuals did not confer dignity upon themselves, but instead had it conferred on them either by their contributions to society (evaluated by others) or by social status (determined by society's members). In contrast, universal understandings of dignity eschew outside evaluation. For this reason, there is often a link made between the universality of dignity and its intrinsic nature.

Yet there is still a question about whether the source of dignity comes from an outside source – such as society, an individual arbiter, or controversially, we note, human rights law itself, externally imposing dignity on everyone – or if dignity comes from within, in which case the variety of human experience dictates that there is no one rubric to guide what constitutes human dignity. Instead, a 'subjective experience' of dignity 'is something to be realized through the individual human experience of autonomous choice in the domain of the political; of happiness, well-being, self-esteem, and psychological integrity in the domain of the psychological; of belonging to a group or culture, adhering to a set of norms, with access to approval, respect, and recognition in the domain of the social; and of access to security, food, shelter, and physical integrity in the domain of the material' (Mattson and Clark, 2011: 309).

DYNAMIC DIGNITY

How do we reconcile the two dichotomies discussed above? Restricted or universal? Driven internally or externally? Our position on dignity is that it is dynamic: it can be diminished and it can be restored. Any empirical examination of our current world will reveal that 'many people in the world today continue to

live with indignity by anyone's standards – with hunger, fear, violence or limited health care and education' (Mattson and Clark, 2011: 306). Inequality, prodded by globalization and trade liberalization to new heights, has highlighted these indignities. So while the potential for dignity is universal, it is not ubiquitous (Donnelly, 1982). Dignity is not present in every person and it is not present all of the time. But because each person has the potential for dignity, it can be restored.

Further we assert that dignity is driven by a combination of external and internal sources. Peoples' sense of self as worthy can keep dignity alive when the external environment would suggest otherwise, but we also posit that the external environment shapes our inner subjective experience. Again, it may be that the contemporary global environment magnifies this phenomenon, because it is easier to know what we lack in our globalized world compared to others. Thus a person living in a slum with no running water may find it doubly challenging to maintain dignity when globalized technologies present that person with images of those living completely different lives.

In the refugee context, which we examine below, this is particularly the case. People whose identity markers are stripped from them do have their dignity diminished, and it would be disingenuous to suggest otherwise. But this does not suggest that every refugee lacks dignity.

REFUGEES AND DIGNITY

Refugees – who have been compelled to leave their homes with no knowledge of when they might return – fall easily into the category of those for whom the loss of dignity is a threat. The frequent accompanying losses of livelihood, community, family, and resources that refugees experience all point to a potential loss of dignity. And two further elements are worth noting because they link frequent commonalities of refugeehood with dignity: autonomy and normalcy.

Autonomy and dignity

The ability to control one's individual situation is not among the top conditions that have been noted to facilitate dignity. Yet scholars and policymakers alike have noted that a *lack* of personal control often leads to *diminishing* of dignity. For the elderly (Nordenfelt, 2003) [also, if relevant, add citation from chapter in this book], the disabled (Vernon and Qureshi, 2000) and the terminally ill (Chochinov, Hack, McClement, Kristjanson, and Harlos, 2002), situations of disempowerment – where individuals are not able to make their own choices – create threats to dignity.³

In the case of the refugee experience, a lack of autonomy is very much inherent in the daily lives of refugees, where the simple act of securing food for the family (Harrell-Bond, 1986) or moving from place to place (Banki, 2015) often requires careful planning or permission from authorities. There have been widespread critiques of the agencies that offer assistance to refugees and the control that they wrest from the populations they serve, particularly in refugee camps (Kibreab, 1993; Malkki, 1995).

One aspect of autonomy that is greatly challenged in the refugee context is self-reliance, which the UNHCR's Handbook for Self-Reliance defines as 'the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity' (UNHCR, 2005: 1). This is one of several international legal documents and guidelines that note the importance of self-reliance to the achievement of dignity (Hunter, 2009: 11).

There is an extensive sub-literature of refugee studies that notes the importance of trying to secure refugees' autonomy through self-reliance, some of which mentions dignity specifically (Abdi, 2005; Hunter, 2009) and some of which simply notes that empowering refugees to help themselves is better for the individual and the community (Muggah, 2000; O'Kane, 2007). While refugee camps are frequently

cited as sites where the challenge of being self-reliant is particularly acute, Meredith Hunter demonstrates that dignity is threatened by a lack of self-reliance in both Kenyan camps and Ugandan refugee settlements. In the former, self-reliance is limited by refugees' inability to pursue any economic activity; in the latter, Hunter points to several factors that limit self-reliance for refugees: host country policies that limit refugee movement; UNHCR policies that facilitate the distribution of inappropriate farming land; and an absence of enforceable governance and tax structures among refugee leadership organizations (2009). In both Kenya and Uganda, Hunter concludes, even self-reliance strategies adopted by humanitarian aid organizations have failed to rectify a situation in which refugees are 'stripped of their rights and dignity' (2009: 2).

Normalcy and Dignity

Where autonomy is not possible, it has been noted that a sense of normalcy has the potential to restore dignity. The literature has been particularly strong in noting this phenomenon among elderly populations, where autonomy is often more difficult (Chochinov et al., 2002) [also cite any other chapters in this book that discuss normalcy]. Similarly, among traumatized populations, routine and consistency has been seen as a way to restore dignity and hope (Wheaton, Alumai, and Onyango, 2008). But one could argue that if deprivation is the normal state, anything which challenges that normalcy may improve the chances for dignity.⁴

Two articles of note examine the link between normalcy and dignity specifically in the refugee context, and come to diverging conclusions. Awa Abdi examines the limbo of protracted encampment for Somali refugees in Kenya and notes that the inability of refugees to fulfill their human capacity has the potential to deprive them of their dignity. Further, Abdi elaborates on the sharp transition between the emergency period when camps are first established to the care and maintenance phase, where the normalcy of rations and distribution in fact take more of a toll on dignity because refugees expect that they will be able to

engage in alternative livelihood strategies (2005: 7-8). The continuing dependency on outside assistance to the exclusion of their own independence, Abdi notes, diminishes their internal sense of self (2005: 9). One of Abdi's Somali interview subjects declares that a refugee is 'a person who is sitting somewhere as if he/she was handicapped! There are no men who are employed in this block, who go to work in the morning and who gain a living. They are sitting around the house. They are unemployed. Nowhere to find jobs!' (Interview quoted of Aliya S., in Abdi, 2005: 9).

In contrast, Rahul Chandrashekar Oka, writing about the same population of refugees in Kenya, finds that refugees' choice to engage in small-time consumption of non-essential items such as electronics and cosmetics – what Oka terms 'agentive consumption' (2014: 33) – lends normalcy to their lives and has the potential to restore dignity, at least momentarily. During his field research, a large scale rejection of resettlement applications by outside agencies led to significantly decreased morale in the camp, but at the same time refugees increased their participation in the commercial economy and purchased items for celebrations. When pressed as to why, refugees responded that 'When family and friends gather and we feast, we could think we were back in Somalia, when things were *caadi*, normal' (Interview quoted in Oka, 2014: 32). Oka notes that 'dignity was a direct outcome of the regular occurrence of feasting and other acts of food sharing and the building and maintaining of social ties through gift exchange and communal consumption sharing. Normalcy and dignity as desired outcomes of consumption tied people to memories of better days and to visions and hopes of brighter futures largely derived through momentary escape from the static refugee present' (2014: 32-33).

Abdi and Oka show us that normalcy can cut both ways when it comes to dignity, establishing routines that restore a sense of self, or magnifying difficult situations by offering little hope for change. In the refugee context, both of these scenarios are possible. But in the following section, we argue that the inability of refugees to go about their daily lives is the greater threat to dignity. And as the case of Nepali-

Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal suggests, both normalcy and a restoration of self-reliance can attenuate the difficulty of protracted refugee living.

LEAVING IN DROVES FROM THE ORANGE GROVES: NEPALI-BHUTANESE REFUGEES LIVING IN NEPAL

While the situation of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees has been one of the most salient examples of a protracted refugee situation globally until recently, it has received scant attention by scholars and practitioners as compared to other refugee situations. Beginning in the late 1980s, the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, perhaps most famously known for ‘Gross National Happiness,’ began enforcing policies rendering ethnic minorities distinctly *unhappy*: ethnically Nepalese citizens of the southern part of Bhutan were held to strict language and dress codes that had heretofore gone unenforced (Banki, 2014). The resistance to these policies brought a more stringent response from the Bhutanese military, and as catalogued most comprehensively by Michael Hutt, led to an unprecedented situation in which Bhutan expelled up to one-sixth of its citizens, most of whom were from the ethnic Nepalese minority, also called the Lhotshampa (Hutt, 2003).⁵

From the early 1990s until 2008, nearly this entire population of refugees remained in camps in Nepal, where they were dependent on assistance from humanitarian agencies and restricted in their movements and livelihood pursuits (Banki, 2008b: 32). Multiple pressures from different stakeholders led the international community to agree to initiate a program of mass resettlement of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees (Banki, 2008b). From mid-2006 onward, tens of thousands of refugees who had been living in camps in Nepal since the early 1990s have resettled to countries of the Global North, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and several countries in Europe. As of September 2014, 92,000 Nepali-Bhutanese had resettled and about 24,000 remained in the camps.⁶ As of this writing, not one Nepali-Bhutanese has been able to return to Bhutan.

As noted, there is often an assumption made that resettlement provides a panacea to refugee populations, but it is important to note that in all situations of mass resettlement, there are some refugees who remain: either they do not qualify for resettlement or they do not want to resettle. Or it may be that they have not yet resettled, and because mass resettlement takes several years, they can remain in the camps a long time.

In July 2013, with 36,000 Nepali-Bhutanese refugees still remaining in Nepal, the authors set out to determine how mass resettlement was affecting those who remained. Nineteen participants shared their experiences in both written and pictorial form using a reciprocal research methodology developed by Hugman, Bartolomei and Pittaway (2011). All interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, so their responses below are recorded only as part of the group responses. This case study draws on data from those 19 participants as well as other primary sources reflecting on the refugee experience. We identify three distinct stages that demonstrate that dignity is indeed dynamic, and has the potential to ebb and flow over the duration of the refugee experience: flight from Bhutan, camp life over the intermediate term, and the post-resettlement phase. While the data are specific to this refugee population, similar patterns have been noted in other situations of mass resettlement (Banki and Lang, 2008b; Robinson, 1998).

Flight from Bhutan: Loss of livelihood and land

The majority of refugees who fled Bhutan were farmers, and the loss of their home and land caused by exile was something exceptionally tangible for them. With livelihoods destroyed, noted one refugee, ‘we started collecting food by begging from all Nepalese people who were living there and the local area. Then more and more people started arriving in Nepal from Bhutan and the crowd got bigger and bigger every day.’

While asking for handouts produced by the loss of livelihoods presented a challenge to dignity, even more so was the loss of an exceptionally strong connection to the land. Numerous writings about Nepali-Bhutanese refugees note the nostalgia with which they refer to the orange groves and cardamom trees that they used to own (Chatterjee, 1993). Lacking this connection created a profound sense of loss of *Ghar Bari*, of belonging, for this land-tied population (Khatiwoda and Haight, 2015).

In addition, the land that Nepali-Bhutanese tilled before they left Bhutan represented not only their external assets but their store of knowledge. One refugee described wistfully how he had taught his (non-Nepali) compatriots how to ‘tame the water’ and how to till the soil effectively. ‘We taught them how to grow rice, how to get rice out of it and how to till the land. We taught them everything we knew in the Bhutanese agriculture sector. But the reality is that we were kicked out of the country and organizations who are supporting us are begging for our life, begging for our day to day lives for our food and rice. Is this fair?’

Thus in this early stage of refugeehood, when Nepali-Bhutanese refugees lacked both autonomy and normalcy, dignity was a challenge.

Living in the camps: Establishing normalcy

As the emergency phase of camp life morphed into routine, a modicum of normalcy returned that brought with it dignity. For example, refugees began working for camp organisations or informally outside the camps, which offered a measure of autonomy. While these jobs paid significantly less than had they been Nepal citizens, refugees noted with pride that they were contributing to Nepal’s economy and having some control over their lives. One refugee, echoing Oka’s assertion about the importance of agentive consumption, noted that ‘when I have employment I can have money and when I have money I have access to different facilities and then I have less problems in life.’

Refugees were also able to use the normalcy of sending their children to camp schools to restore dignity. One refugee noted that ‘despite all of our persecutions that happened back in Bhutan, because of all the facilities we have in the camp in Nepal, we have... managed to have some better experiences than we had back in Bhutan. It is seen that many of our generation has been able to acquire a good degree of education and this is a matter of happiness for all of us.’ This quote reflects a community pride about education as a good for the entire refugee population, and indicates that during the time that camp schools ran regularly, dignity was maintained.

Through organizations established by camp members, many important initiatives facilitated moments of normalcy and dignity. One example is a program of ‘story time’ in which the elderly told stories of their past lives in Bhutan to youth who were born in the refugee camps and had never stepped foot in Bhutan. These are the stories of orange groves and cardamom trees, of Hindu rituals and *Ghar Bari*. From these stories, the elderly shared their memories and escaped from reality momentarily. ‘Children meet with the elderly to learn about Bhutan... to have the feeling that yes I belong to Bhutan.’ This restoration of the past, the reminder of what the elderly had and how they contributed to Bhutanese society, was widely seen as a way to sustain the dignity of this honoured population in the camps.

During the Resettlement phase: dignity diminished

Since 2008, when tens of thousands of refugees began leaving for permanent homes in countries of the Global North, refugees who remain in Nepal have had both their autonomy and normalcy, and thus their dignity, compromised. Some of the factors that were a point of pride in the past two decades have deteriorated in the advent of resettlement. Education for schoolchildren, for example, has witnessed its best teachers resettling and a significant reduction in morale for those teachers who remain (Banki, 2008a). A lack of motivation by students is also a problem in the camps today. Students are reluctant to

attend class because their friends have already resettled or resettlement processes conflict with school times. One refugee teacher noted that ‘What they think is all the others are resettling to the other countries so why should we stay back and study here? So all they do is they wait for the day when they can actually resettle in the other countries.’

A decline in motivation and morale, tied to dignity, has been noted by many. Refugees who used to take pride in their work at the Camp Management Committee (CMC) are ‘not motivated to work because their facilities have already been cut’ and turnover among CMC staff is quite high. Routine activities like repairing one’s hut has become more difficult because housing materials have been cut as well, making it difficult for remaining refugees to be autonomous.

Further, the ability to trade goods received through humanitarian agencies – a common practice that Oka links to agentive consumption and dignity – is increasingly difficult because rations have been cut. ‘The proportion of the green vegetables ... and even uniforms for small children has been cut off.’ While there is now increased cash in the camps because resettled refugees have sent back remittances to remaining family members, this has not necessarily translated into improved dignity for remaining refugees.

Additional spending money, it was noted by some of the refugees, has been spent on drugs and alcohol, and hazardous drinking among the refugees has been noted elsewhere (Luitel, Jordans, Murphy, Roberts, and McCambridge, 2013).

Perhaps the most difficult element of remaining refugees’ lives is that the normalcy of having their friends and families nearby has been destroyed. Social structures that were stable for two decades frayed in a matter of months. One refugee noted that ‘Since resettlement has started lots of things have been changing inside the camps. It has separated our families apart. While our wives are outside, the husbands are here, the parents are somewhere else, and their sons’ children are there. Everyone is separated. So that

is causing depression among the refugees and that has led to suicide, crime, and other tragic incidents inside the camp.’

Within the separation of families, the most spoken about issue was the separation of the elderly and younger generations, because the latter tend to remain behind. One elderly refugee said ‘Our religion say that it is our morality and our ethics to look after our parents and the problem is because of the resettlement process our children and grandchildren have not been able to look after us. ... We elderly people are left behind in the camps alone, we do not have our children or grandchildren along with us.’

This separation from family and friends as a toll on dignity is not to be underestimated. Remaining refugees have adopted a narrative – borne from a lack of autonomy and normalcy – of being victims. ‘We could have done a lot of things which we are not able to do now and we are the victims of the separation... all are separated now, someone’s wife is not here, someone’s husband is not here, someone’s daughter is not here, someone’s son is not here. And it is all because of resettlement. Who will be looking after them?’

MOVING FORWARD: RESTORING DIGNITY

For remaining Nepali-Bhutanese in the camps in Nepal, dignity remains a challenge. But as we argued earlier, external factors can improve the chances to restore dignity since it is dynamic. Just as autonomy and normalcy were taken away, so they can be restored.

First, refugees can secure their dignity in Nepal by being given the opportunity to be contributing honest members of society. One noted with pride ‘We the refugees... have to stay under the standards of international conventions and law. And we understand that we have to make sure we don’t break the law of the country where we are living now.’ Work options in Nepal that would give refugees the legal right

to work would ensure self-reliance and allow refugees to be law abiding, both of which increase the potential for having dignity present.

Second, education for remaining children would help offer dignified solutions for the problem of low morale and boredom of refugee school children. Since Nepali-Bhutanese are both ethnically and linguistically similar to Nepalis, permitting the refugees to study in Nepali local schools could advance dignity not only for their children but for the entire community

Third, encouraging systems that allow dispersed families to maintain social ties with their families and friends could bring normalcy to the everyday lives of those left behind. A fine example of this system is *Bhutan News Service*, an online news outlet jointly published by diaspora Nepali-Bhutanese and those who remain in the camps. While internet is not available widely in the camps, access is possible nearby. Other initiatives that link dispersed Nepali-Bhutanese together have the potential to inject a sense of belonging to all Nepali-Bhutanese, wherever they are physically located.

Finally, for Nepali-Bhutanese who hold on to the hope of returning to Bhutan, who have longed for their orange groves for more than two decades, the yearning for some to return to their homeland should not be ignored by the international community. Efforts to encourage the Government of Bhutan to permit some refugees to return to Bhutan – even if a small number – should be sustained.

CONCLUSION

The resettlement of refugee populations is often considered a linear good: those who move from countries neighboring conflict to a resettlement country of the Global North are assumed to have a higher likelihood to achieve autonomy and normalcy, and following that, dignity.

But by focusing on the lesser-studied experience of those refugees who remain in camps, this article has shown that threats to dignity are also a concern for refugees left behind after mass resettlement has occurred, as the potential for education, agentive consumption and social ties deteriorates. While this unintended consequence of the international community trying to improve the lives of refugees is important to note, we can take some hope from the fact that dignity's dynamism allows for the hope of its restoration.

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² However see Waldron (2007: 211-214), for an alternative take on Kant's treatment of dignity and worth.

³ However, see Matthews (2011) for a different take on dignity and the profoundly disabled.

⁴ *In Life and Death in Shanghai*, for example, Nien Cheng describes how, by creating arguing with guards and making difficult requests, she rejected the normalcy of her situation and reasserted her dignity during 6 ½ years of solitary confinement during China's Cultural Revolution (1987).

⁵ Discussions with refugees themselves have revealed that most prefer not to be referred to as Lhotshampa, because this is a name that was used to differentiate them from other Bhutanese while they were living in Bhutan. Instead, many indicated that they prefer the term 'Nepali-Bhutanese.'

⁶ <http://www.unhcr.org/50001f3c9.html> [accessed 4 September 2015].