Human Dignity, Higher-Order Needs, and Spiritual Leadership Theory

John W. Kyle, Tracey Wond, and Joanne Carlier

University of Derby

INTRODUCTION

The theory of spiritual leadership rests on an assumption that leaders can positively impact the well-being of followers while also producing positive results for stakeholders, society, and themselves (Fry, 2003). The primary aim of this paper is to advance the theory of spiritual leadership by demonstrating human dignity, as an expression of human value, to be one of its implied philosophical foundations. To this end, this paper explores the conceptual connections between human dignity, higher-order needs (Maslow, 1943), and spiritual leadership theory.

Management researchers, here distinguished from leadership researchers, have made efforts to explore human dignity as a basis for workplace standards. The emphasis has been on "good work" movements, and other matters such as worker's rights, health, occupational safety, compensation, and severance policies (Ackroyd, 2007; Barber, 2007; Barrett and Thompson, 2012; Bolton, 2010; Coats, 2007; Gilabert, 2016; Philpott, 2007; Vettori, 2012). In exploring connections between human dignity and management theory, researchers have largely focused on lower-order needs of subsistence and safety rather than higher-order needs of self-actualization and belonging (Maslow, 1943). Many of these efforts have emphasized the Marxian tension between workers and employers.

Many contemporary organizational leadership theories emphasize the value and needs of the individual balanced with the organizational benefits of teaming and shared-objectives.

Elements of these theories can be tied to higher-order needs as well as the concept of human dignity as a representation of human value. For example, Maslow's higher-order needs of self-actualization and belonging (Maslow, 1943) are key aspects of the theory of spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003). It is these higher-order needs that also provide a framework for exploring the human dignity connections within spiritual leadership. In this paper, three conceptual connections will be discussed: rational autonomy, universal dignity, and human flourishing.

BACKGROUND ON HUMAN DIGNITY

Human dignity has been explored as a philosophical, theological, legal, and cultural concept for centuries. At its core, it is an expression of human value. In social science discourse, it is often seen as an antecedent of human rights. As such, it is often framed as an ontological reality with normative implications (e.g. all humans have dignity, therefore every people group and individual should be treated with respect). Human dignity is sometimes tied to idealistic notions of human capacity (e.g. to love and accomplish great things).

There is not a universally accepted definition of, or philosophical basis for, human dignity (Meyer, 1992; Waldron, 2009). The lack of a common and precise definition often leads to difficulty in the study and application of human dignity (Riley, 2010). While it may not have a universally accepted definition, human dignity is not without meaning. Human dignity has colloquial familiarity that Riley (2010) describes as "intuitive universality" in which the words honor, respect and dignity are often used interchangeably. Hicks (2011, p.3) notes, "Most of us have a gut feeling about the word

dignity, but few of us have the language to describe it." Rodriguez (2015) has proposed that human dignity is an "essentially contested idea", a legal notion that allows an idea to stand even though there is debate about its philosophical underpinnings. A recent qualitative study by Lucas (2015) has shown human dignity to have both ontological and phenomenological relevance for individuals in the organizational context.

Most views on human dignity fall into four categories (Kyle et al, 2017):

1. Human dignity as a matter of social rank
2. Human dignity as a matter of inherent worth
3. Human dignity as normative behavior
4. Human dignity as a bogus concept

Many ancient philosophers considered human dignity to be a matter of social rank. Aristotle, for example, believed some are born into nobility while others into servitude (Aristotle, 2001a; 2001b). Cicero and other philosophers held similar views (Cicero, 2000). This hierarchical view was reinforced in the medieval period by feudal concepts and the divine right of kings, which allowed royalty to live beyond the reach of public accountability and the rule of law (Burgess, 1992). Dignity as a matter of social rank is less acceptable in modern culture because of its emphasis on differences, rather than similarities of people (Dierksmeier, 2011; Düwell, 2014, Meyer, 1992; Neuhäuser and Stoecker, 2014; Waldron, 2009).

The most common contemporary view of human dignity is that it is a matter of universal and inherent human value. This view stems from ancient religious teachings and Enlightenment philosophy. The Judeo-Christian view of human dignity, for example, is rooted in the biblical passage of Genesis 1:26-29 which indicates that humans were created in God's "image" and "likeness". In this tradition, humans share a universal,

equal, and inherent dignity that is rooted in God's dignity rather than in human traits and behaviors (Hoekema, 1986, Kilner, 2015). Seeking a philosophical, rather than theological, understanding of human dignity, Immanuel Kant made an argument for inherent and universal human dignity based on the human capacity for reason and moral decision-making (Kant, 1785; 1797). He introduced three important ideas about human dignity that have largely persisted into contemporary thought. First, all humans have inherent and equal dignity based on the idea that humans are autonomously rational. Second, Kant defined human dignity as infinite economic worth, meaning nothing can be traded or exchanged for it. Third, Kant argued that since humans are autonomous, rational, and of infinite value, everyone should be treated with dignity. In the second form of his famous categorical imperative, Kant (1785; 1797) argued that humans should never be treated as means to ends, but only as ends in themselves. Contemporary philosophers have taken exception with various aspects of Kantian ethics. Some, such as Debes (2009, 2012), while taking exception with Kant's approach, still support the conclusion that humans have inherent and equal value.

A third view considers human dignity as normative behavior and reflects the idea that one's dignity is dependent upon one's conformity to certain behavioral standards. Human dignity as a matter of normative behavior can be understood in the word *dignified*. The phrase "acting in a dignified manner" implies that the person involved is successfully meeting the standard of established norms such as courtesy, thoughtfulness, and resoluteness (Meldon, 1992). An essential aspect of this view of human dignity is that it is not inherent, but must be earned (Dierksmeier, 2011). Relativism and postmodernism would seem to be incongruous with a universal normative ideal. Even so, contemporary

human rights literature is predominantly supportive of human rights based on normative behaviors that honor the dignity of all humans (Gewirth, 1992; Meldon, 1992; Meyer, 1992).

Even though human dignity is widely accepted as an expression of human value (Schachter, 1983; Riley, 2010), some consider it to be an unhelpful and bogus construct. For example, Rachels (1990) argues that the concept of human dignity runs counter to a Darwinian understanding of life. Others have declared human dignity to be bogus, or at least unhelpful, because of its vague meaning (Macklin, 2003; Pinker, 2008). And still others have criticized the philosophical arguments supporting human dignity, particularly in the model of Kantian ethics. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer considered human dignity to be "the shibboleth of all empty-headed moralists" (Schopenhauer, 1995). Somewhat ironically, Schopenhauer argued that the proper posture of one human toward another is that of compassion. For these and other reasons, the nature and validity of human dignity has been the subject of many extended debates. Even though some scholars disagree with the notion of human dignity, its acceptance is essentially ubiquitous in the social sciences (Riley, 2010). In the context of this paper, the authors assume that human dignity is a real aspect of human existence, which opens the door to critical exploration of its implications for leadership research and practice.

BACKGROUND ON SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Many contemporary leadership theories incorporate implicit references to human dignity concepts. To limit the initial scope of this research, the authors have chosen to focus on the theory of spiritual leadership developed by Fry (2003). Spiritual leadership addresses

the organizational need for good financial outcomes while also addressing the need for the organization to contribute positively to the well-being of its employees, stakeholders, customers, and society at large (Fry, 2003). The theory of spiritual leadership consists of three components: intrinsic motivation, intermediate outcomes defined as spiritual survival, and ultimate outcomes measured by the triple bottom line.

1. **Intrinsic motivation built upon shared vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love**. Spiritual leadership seeks to tap the inner interests and values of followers and leaders through the formation of shared vision and shared objectives. When practicing spiritual leadership, leaders create a cultural environment that is conducive to the adoption of vision and objectives that have inner meaning for both leaders and followers. By working toward a vision and set of objectives that have personal meaning for them, leaders and followers experience a sense of self-actualization and belonging in the organization (i.e. "I believe in what we do here and I think it is important"). They apply themselves to the work at hand, with passion and with hope/faith that their individual efforts will make an accretive contribution to the outcomes. Leaders and followers are intrinsically motivated because they not only believe in the work, but see that their individual efforts contribute to its success. Believing that the outcomes will produce not only profit, but broader social well-being, leaders and followers experience a transcendent sense of purpose that they are contributing to something greater than themselves (Fry, 2003; 2005; Fry and Cohen, 2009; Fry and Slocum, 2008; Fry et al, 2010). Specifically, Fry argues, leaders and followers are motivated by altruistic love toward those with whom and for whom they

work. Together, these three elements, vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love, form a triad of internal motivation that is imbued with connections to higher-order needs of followers and leaders.

2. **Intermediate outcome of spiritual survival**. Self-actualization and belonging developed in the intrinsic motivation experience, leads to a sense of calling, fulfillment, and organizational membership. Together, these elements contribute to a form of spiritual and emotional well-being Fry calls "spiritual survival." These outcomes, recursively reinforce commitment to the vision, objectives, the work itself, and the organization (Fry, 2003; 2005; Fry and Cohen, 2009; Fry and Slocum, 2008; Fry et al, 2010). Within these intermediate outcome, the higher order needs of self-actualization and membership are addressed for both leaders and followers.

3. **Ultimate organizational outcomes measured by the triple bottom-line**. Unlike the single bottom-line (i.e. profit), the triple bottom-line consists of profit, people, and planet. It includes societal benefits for followers, leaders, customers, and stakeholders consistent with tenets of socially responsible management (Slapper and Hall, 2011). The hypothesis is that organizations whose followers and leaders are intrinsically motivated and experience elevated levels of spiritual well-being will reap elevated ultimate outcomes. Studies have shown that the practice of spiritual leadership has positive results on the triple bottom-line (Fry 2003; 2005; Fry and Cohen, 2009; Fry and Slocum, 2008; Fry et al, 2010).

The three components of spiritual leadership work together to address, at least partially, the higher-order needs of leaders and followers (Fry, 2003). These components also

provide a framework for considering human dignity as an implicit, philosophical assumption of the theory as well.

HUMAN DIGNITY, HIGHER ORDER NEEDS, AND SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Bolton criticizes spiritual leadership by suggesting, "We are in danger of missing the material realities of work – in a sense, we are putting the cart of higher-order needs before the horse of lower-order necessities" (Bolton, 2010). She argues that low-wage workers are too "exhausted, exploited, and disengaged" to create the "space and energy" (p. 160) to experience self-actualization and belonging. Bolton (2007; 2010), Hodson (2001), and Gilabert (2016) largely consider human dignity in the workplace to be a matter of labor human rights (LHR) and lower-order needs, citing the need for "good work" standards in such areas as compensation, safety, working hours, and paid time off.

Based on these criticisms, should the benefits of spiritual leadership be ignored until all lower-order needs have been met by workers in the world? With respect for the legitimate concerns raised about working conditions at the lower-end of the wage scale, the authors propose that a thorough and critical approach to leadership theory requires attention to both lower-order *and* higher-order needs of followers and leaders. To this end, the authors propose that there is room in the discussion to also consider the conceptual and philosophical connections between human dignity, higher-order needs, and leadership theory. Although the phrase *human dignity* is not used in Fry's (2003) description of spiritual leadership, Kyle et al (2017) have shown that it provides a suitable foundation for exploring these conceptual connections. The authors propose three initial, conceptual links between human dignity, higher-order needs, and spiritual leadership theory: the

rational autonomy connection, the universal dignity connection, and the human flourishing connection.

1. **The Rational Autonomy Connection**. Kant (1785; 1797) suggests human dignity is rooted in the ability to engage in autonomous, rational thought and to act morally upon those thoughts. In the first form of his categorical imperative, Kant suggests humans are at their best when they establish and live by norms that apply to the entire community. In other words, an appreciation for inherent dignity is the antecedent of normative, moral behavior toward others. Referring to the theory of spiritual leadership, Fry (2003, p. 720) makes the first connection to higher-order needs and opens the door to the concept of human dignity: "Spiritual leadership through vision, hope, faith, and altruistic love thus provides the basis for strong intrinsic motivation through task involvement and goal identification because it meets the higher order needs of individuals, such as self-efficacy, and provides a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness."

    In this statement, Fry (2003) clearly identifies one of the connections between spiritual leadership and the needs of self-actualization and belonging. While not referring to it explicitly, the connection to Kantian human dignity can also be seen in his reference to autonomy. As followers and leaders bring autonomous thoughts and experiences to the workplace, they participate in decisions about shared objectives. Individually, they make decisions about the work itself and whether or not it means something to them. They determine if their contribution will make an accretive impact and speculate that the outcomes will serve something greater than themselves. In each of these elements of spiritual leadership's intrinsic motivation model,

followers and leaders are engaged in autonomously rational decision-making. And, in community, they choose the standards of success and performance, and by extension the norms of behavior, that apply to everyone in that community.

2. **The Universal Dignity Connection.** Power structures and chains of command are unavoidable in the workplace. Owners and stakeholders appoint leaders and expect them to hire people and make decisions. Concentration of power in the upper layers of the organization can, at times, lead to organizational strife (McClelland, 1975). Spiritual leadership assumes the presence of workplace hierarchies but seeks to minimize negative impacts by encouraging follower inclusion in vision-casting, objective-setting, and task assignments (Fry, 2003). This not only addresses the need of belonging, but also reinforces the idea of universal human dignity since leaders and followers are working together for shared purposes.

   By inviting followers to be part of vision-casting and the setting of objectives, leaders make an implicit statement about the value followers bring to the organization. It is a recognition that the followers have unique contributions to make that the leaders themselves may not be able to make. This not only creates an environment of intrinsic motivation as noted by Fry (2003), but also serves as an acknowledgement of the intrinsic and unique value (i.e. dignity) of every member of the organizational team.

3. **The Human Flourishing Connection**. Spiritual leadership is not solely concerned with individual flourishing in the workplace, but also with organizational and societal outcomes as measured by the triple bottom line (Fry and Slocum, 2008). These

broader outcomes are tied, as noted above, to the sense of working for a greater purpose. In economic terms, this aspect of the spiritual leadership model reflects a desire to put self-interest in balance with the interests of others. The argument is that altruism in the workplace leads to a deeper sense of calling and membership which are directly linked to the needs of self-actualization and belonging. In these ideas, one also finds echoes of the second form of Kant's categorical imperative, that humans should not be treated as means to ends, but as ends in themselves (Kant, 1785; 1797). Fry et al (2010) make this statement about the role of the triple bottom line in the theory of spiritual leadership: "The purpose of spiritual leadership is to create vision and value congruence across the individual, empowered team, and organization levels and, ultimately, foster higher levels of organizational commitment and productivity whereby human well-being, corporate social responsibility, and organizational performance (the triple bottom line) cannot only coexist, but be maximized." (Fry et al, 2010). This emphasis on broad-based human well-being and corporate social responsibility form the essence of the human flourishing connection of human dignity in spiritual leadership theory.

CONCLUSION

Human dignity has been the subject of intensive thought and writing for centuries. It is a ubiquitous concept in most realms of social science. It has been considered by intellectuals, philosophers, and theologians across widely differing religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions. To a large degree, this work has been in the spirit of finding common ground rooted in the ideas of human value and purpose. And yet, human dignity is not yet a common theme in the realm of leadership studies.

By exploring connections between human dignity, higher-order needs, and the theory of spiritual leadership, this paper has sought to offer an initial view into some of the connections that exist between human dignity and contemporary leadership theories, such as spiritual leadership. Other connections have also been shown to exist, such as the role of meaning making as leaders pursue their own sense of calling (Kyle et al, 2017). It is hoped that further critical analysis, along with qualitative and quantitative studies, will establish a comprehensive, philosophical foundation of human dignity as an expression of human value in leadership theory and practice.

REFERENCES

Ackroyd, A. (2007) Dirt, work, and dignity. In S. Bolton, ed. 2007. *Dimensions of dignity at work*. Amsterdam, Elsevier.

Aristotle (2001a) Trans. Ross, W.D. Ethica Nicomachea. In R. McKeon, ed. 2001. *The basic works of Aristotle*. New York, Random House, Inc., pp 925-1112.

Aristotle (2001b) Trans. Jowett, B. Politica. in R. McKeon, ed. 2001. *The basic works of Aristotle*. New York, Random House, Inc., pp 1113-1316.

Barber, B. (2007) Foreward. In S. Bolton, ed. *Dimensions of dignity at work*. Amsterdam, Elsevier.

Barrett, J., & Thomson, L. (2012) Returning dignity to labour: Workplace safety as a human right. *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, 37 (1), pp 82-89.

Bolton, S. (2007) Dignity in and at work: Why it matters. In S. Bolton, ed. 2007. *Dimensions of dignity at work*. Amsterdam, Elsevier.

Bolton, S. (2010) Being human: Dignity of labor as the foundation for the spirit-work connection. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*. 7 (2), pp 157-172.

Burgess, G. (1992) The divine right of kings reconsidered. *English Historical Review*, CVII (CCCCXXV), pp 837-861

Cicero (2000) Trans. P.G. Walsh. *On Obligations*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Coats, D. (2007) Respect for work: Just how good are British workplaces? In S, Bolton, ed. 2007. *Dimensions of dignity at work*. Amsterdam, Elsevier.

Debes, R. (2009) Dignity's gauntlet. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23, pp 45-78.

Debes, R. (2012) Adam Smith on dignity and equality. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 20 (1), pp 109-140.

Dierksmeier, C. (2011) Reorienting management education: From the homo economicus to human dignity. *Humanistic Management Network*, 13 (05).

Düwell, M. (2014) Why a handbook on human dignity?. In M. Düwell, J. Braarvig, R. Brownsword and D. Mieth. 2014. *The Cambridge handbook of human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp xvii-xxii.

Fry, L.W. (2003) Toward a theory of spiritual leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14, pp 693-727.

Fry, L.W. (2005) Introduction to the Leadership Quarterly special issue: Toward a paradigm of spiritual leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, pp 619-622.

Fry, L.W. and Slocum, J.W. (2008) Maximizing the triple bottom line through spiritual leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 37 (1), pp 86-96.

Fry, L.W. and Cohen, M. P (2009) Spiritual leadership as a paradigm for organizational transformation and recovery from extended work hours cultures. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84, pp 265-278.

Fry, L.W. Matherly, L.L., and Ouimet, J.R. (2010) The spiritual leadership balanced scorecard business model: The case of the Cordon Bleu-Tomasso Corporation. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 7 (4), pp 283-314.

Gewirth, A. (1992) Human dignity as the basis of rights. In M.J. Meyer and W.A. Parent, eds. 1992. *The constitution of rights: Human dignity and American values*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Giacalone, R.A. and Jurkiewicz, C.L. (2010) The science of workplace spirituality. In R.A. Giacalone and C.L. Jurkewicz, eds. 2010. *Handbook of workplace spirituality and organizational performance 2nd edition*. New York, M.E. Sharp.

Gilabert, P. (2016) Labor human rights and human dignity. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 42 (2), pp. 171-199.

Hodson, R. (2001) *Dignity at work*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Hoekema, A.A. (1986) *Created in God's image*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmanns.

Kant, I. (1785) Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals. In M.J. Gregor, ed. 1996. *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp 37-108.

Kant, I. (1797) The metaphysics of morals. In M.J. Gregor, ed. 1996. *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp 353-604.

Kilner, J.F. (2015) *Dignity and destiny: humanity in the image of God*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmanns.

Kyle, J., Wond, T., and Carlier, J. (2017) *Human dignity and meaning making in spiritual leadership*. Paper presentation at the Tobias Leadership Engagement and Discovery Conference. April 20-21, 2017. Indianapolis, Indiana.

Lucas, K. (2015) Workplace dignity: communicating inherent, earned, and remediated dignity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 52 (5), pp 621-646.

McClelland, D.C. (1975) *Power: the inner experience*. New York, Irvington Publishers, Inc.

Macklin, R. (2003) Dignity as a useless concept. *British Medical Journal*, 327, pp 1419-1420.

Maslow, A.F. (1943) A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, pp 370-396.

Meldon, A.I. (1992) Dignity, worth and rights. In M.J. Meyer and W.A. Parent, eds. 1992. *The constitution of rights: Human dignity and American values*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Meyer, M.J. (1992) Introduction. In M.J. Meyer and W.A. Parent, eds. 1992. *The constitution of rights: Human dignity and American values*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Neuhäuser, C. and Stoecker, R. (2014) Human dignity as universal nobility. In M. Düwell, J. Braarvig, R. Brownsword and D. Mieth. 2014. *The Cambridge handbook of human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp 298-309.

Philpott, J. (2007) Is good work productive work? In S. Bolton, ed. 2007. *Dimensions of dignity at work*. Amsterdam, Elsevier.

Pinker, S. (2008) The stupidity of dignity. *The New Republic*. May 28. http://www.newrepublic.com/article/ the-stupidity-dignity.

Rachels, J. (1990) *Created from animals: The moral implications of Darwinism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Riley, S. (2010) Human dignity: Comparative and conceptual debates. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 6 (2), pp 117-138.

Rodriguez, P. (2015) Human dignity as an essentially contested concept. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28 (4), pp 743-756.

Schachter, O. (1983) Comment: Human dignity as a normative concept. *American Journal of International Law*, 77, pp 848-854.

Schopenhauer, A. (1995) Trans. E.F.J. Payne. *On the basis of morality*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company.

Shultziner, D. and Rabinovici, I. (2012) Human dignity, self-worth, and humiliation. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 18 (1), pp 105-143.

Slapper, T.F. and Hall, T.J. (2011) The triple bottom line: What is it and how does it work? *Indiana Business Review*, 86 (1), pp 4-8.

Vettori, S. (2012) The role of human dignity in the assessment of fair compensation for unfair dismissals. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal*, 15(4). Available at: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2184711

Waldron, J.J. (2009) Dignity, rank, and rights: *The 2009 Tanner Lectures at UC Berkeley*. http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/w/Waldron_09.pdf

AUTHOR BIOS

John W. Kyle (corresponding author and presenter) is the chief operating officer of the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics. Previously, he spent more than thirty years in the high-performance computing and software industry with companies such as EMC, Silicon Graphics, and Cray Research. Mr. Kyle is a doctoral student in the College of Business, Law and Social Science at the University of Derby. His primary research interest is in the connection between human dignity and leadership theory. He holds a BSc in computer science from the University of Kentucky and an MBA from Heriot Watt University.

Tracey Wond is a senior lecturer in the College of Business, Law and Social Sciences at the University of Derby. She is also the chair of the research committee for the college. Prior to her current post, Dr. Wond held senior lectureships at the University of Teesside and the University of Wales, Trinity St. David. Her primary research interests include public sector efficiency and austerity, public sector evidence and evaluation, and public sector leadership development. She holds a PhD in Business from Teesside University.

Joanne Carlier is a senior lecturer in leadership and organizations at the University of Derby. She is also a leadership development specialist with the consulting firm Knowledge Work, Ltd. She served as the head of the Centre for Leadership Development at the University of Derby from 2012 to 2014. Dr Carlier is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development . Her research interests include knowledge workers and their relationships with organizations and leadership development. She holds a PhD in Management from Aston University.