

CHALLENGES IN ENSURING THE DIGNITY OF OLDER ADULTS IN INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the challenges of ensuring the dignity of older adults in institutional settings. Elderly social work clients, especially those nearing the end of life, are a particularly vulnerable group, so preserving and ensuring their dignity is of particular importance. Ensuring clients' dignity is important to clients themselves and their loved ones. The author of this article focuses on three main issues. First, the concept of dignity as an ethical-philosophical category is discussed. Second, the connection between social work practice and the preservation of clients' dignity is explored. Third, the main challenges related to ensuring the dignity of elderly clients in institutional settings are presented.

Keywords: *dignity, right to dignity, social work, social worker, institution, older adult, care.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism describes the characteristics of contemporary society, which lives under conditions of globalisation, rapid technological development, and technogenic civilisation. Social transactions in such a society are based on a humanistic approach that emphasises the value and dignity of every person, and social relations are grounded in this fundamental value.

Thus, dignity becomes a fundamental element in fields of science and practice that delve into social phenomena, and social work is no exception. Social workers recognise that the essence of social work as a profession is to help individuals solve their problems without violating their dignity [1]. In social work, the interaction between the social worker and the client is grounded in ethical and moral principles. One of the main tasks in social work is empowerment, which aims to reduce a person's helplessness and to recognise the value and dignity of every individual. This goal becomes particularly relevant at the end of a person's life, when they are no longer in their home environment but in an institutional setting.

Therefore, this article aims to discuss the challenges of ensuring the dignity of older adults in institutional care from a social work perspective, both theoretical and empirical.

To achieve this objective, the following tasks were formulated:

1. to discuss the concept of dignity as a value and an ethical-social phenomenon;
2. to highlight the relationship between social work as a profession and dignity;
3. to identify the challenges arising in social work practice when seeking to ensure the dignity of elderly clients at the end of life in an institutional setting.

The following research methods were applied in preparing the presentation:

- analysis of scientific literature and document content,
- systematic review;
- meta-analysis.

The article consists of three parts. In the first part, the author discusses dignity as a theoretical issue, delving into the concept of this ethical-philosophical category. The second part examines the relationship between social work as a profession and the safeguarding of clients' dignity. In the third part, the author highlights the challenges that arise in social work practice when seeking to ensure clients' dignity at the end of life in an institutional setting.

2. THE PROBLEM OF THE CONCEPT OF DIGNITY AS AN ETHICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORY

Finding an answer to the question of how to define the concept of “*dignity*” is not simple. Humanity has been attempting to conceptualise this concept since the dawn of civilisation. First and foremost, it is worth analysing what lies within the semantic field of this concept.

Human dignity is one of the most important categories in ethics and philosophy, occupying a significant place in both moral philosophy and contemporary human rights theory. Although this concept is widely used in political, legal, and social discourses, its definition remains complex and ambiguous. In the philosophical tradition, *dignity* is most often associated with the recognition of human worth, moral autonomy, and uniqueness. However, different philosophical schools offer varying interpretations of this category, raising the question of how exactly to understand dignity as an ethical and philosophical category.

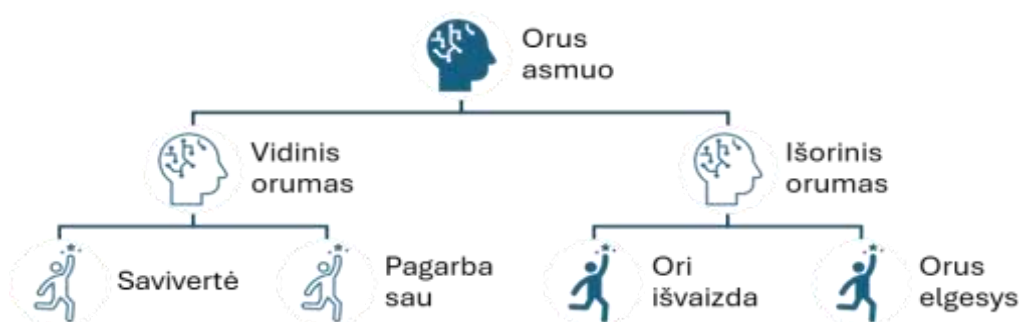


Fig. 1. Semantic concept of human dignity (source: Žodynas.lt)

The online dictionary *Žodynas.lt* [2] provides the following definition of the word “*dignified*”: a dignified person feels their own worth and respects themselves. It is noted here that a person can possess dignity not only internally—that is, as a dignified personality—but dignity can also be observed externally: one’s appearance or behaviour can be dignified. Thus, when conceptualising the notion of dignity from a philological perspective, one can find a close connection in the semantics of this concept with such notions as *respect* and *value/self-worth*.

Respect is a feeling of esteem expressed by one person toward another. This concept is derived from the word “*honour*,” which means glory and a good reputation. *Žodynas.lt* states that honour must be earned: a person can earn it through their actions or achievements. It can be assumed that not everyone is honourable; a person must earn this recognition from society or the community. Meanwhile, *value* is defined as a positive quality; significance. The concept of *self-worth* is understood as a person’s inner sense of their own value.

The concept of dignity has a Latin equivalent, *dignitas*, which has several meanings: self-respect and dignity; worth and significance; grandeur and majesty; high rank;

decency; beauty; luxury [3]. Thus, the definition of the concept of dignity suggests that *dignity* and *worth* manifest as a person's inner experience, as a personal characteristic. In contrast, *honour* more often manifests as an external factor, as the positive treatment of a person by those around them.

After analysing the concept of dignity from a philological perspective, the question arises: how do other academic disciplines define it? Dignity is closely linked to honour, and both are considered moral categories [4]. M. Andrašūnienė [5] defines the term "*dignity*" from the perspective of social work. The author asserts that dignity is a person's internal sense of self-worth that develops as the individual reaches a certain age, and that this internal sense regulates the person's appropriate and honourable behaviour. Educator L. Jovaiša [6] notes that a person's internal sense of self-worth develops when they feel valued while working, interacting with others, i.e., participating in social transactions.

According to A. Meškauskienė [7] argues that the contemporary concept of *dignity* is based on the philosophy of I. Kant, which links the notion of human dignity to the concept of freedom. The author argues that human dignity is linked to a person's rights and freedoms as a human being and/or as a citizen, and that the only social system capable of protecting human dignity and freedoms is democracy. It is precisely autonomy and freedom that make a person a person and endow them with dignity.

One of the most important developers of the concept of dignity is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his moral philosophy, human dignity is linked to rationality and moral autonomy. Kant argued that a person possesses dignity because they are capable of acting in accordance with a moral law that they establish for themselves. According to Kant [8], a person cannot be treated merely as a means to an end but must always be regarded as an end in themselves. This idea has become one of the fundamental principles of contemporary human rights philosophy. In the Kantian tradition, dignity is a universal quality inherent to all human beings, independent of social status, abilities, or other external factors.

According to N. Mažeikienė and J. Ruškė [9], dignity manifests itself as a fundamental characteristic of the person. The semantics of this concept include such meanings as worthiness, self-respect, personal autonomy, and a person's ability to command respect from others.

Another important contemporary interpretation of dignity is associated with Martha Nussbaum and her capabilities theory. M. Nussbaum [10] emphasises that human dignity is linked to the ability to realise essential human capabilities, including thinking, emotional expression, social relationships, and political participation. If a person is not provided with the conditions to realise these capabilities, their dignity is violated. This theory expands the traditional concept of dignity and links it to social and political conditions.

V. Šlapkauskas [4] argues that a duality can be observed in the conceptualisation of dignity: first and foremost, dignity is a person's sense of their own worth, which is established through their relationship with society. On the other hand, society, through its relationship with the individual, expresses respect for them and honours their dignity.

Despite differing interpretations, most philosophers agree that dignity is closely linked to the principle of respect for the individual. This idea is also reflected in contemporary declarations of human rights. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and

rights. This indicates that dignity is considered a fundamental principle upon which the entire system of human rights is based.

Nevertheless, it is worth questioning whether dignity, as a moral or social characteristic, can be attributed solely to humans. E. Venckienė [11] argues that the term “dignity” describes not only humans; God can also be considered such an object. Furthermore, dignity as a quality can even be attributed to a thoroughbred horse or a work of art. Nevertheless, from a theological and biological perspective, dignity does not depend on an individual’s behaviour or will; it is not a social phenomenon. The essence of dignity consists of the biological characteristics of the individual; that is, one acquires the right to dignity not because of the social role one plays, but because the very fact of human birth grants this right [11].

Thus, the problem of dignity as an ethical-philosophical category arises due to its differing interpretations. Some philosophers regard dignity as a universal quality inherent in human nature, while others associate it with social conditions and the realisation of human capabilities. Despite these differences, dignity remains one of the most important concepts in moral philosophy, helping to justify the recognition of human value and rights. An analysis of this concept allows for a better understanding of the foundations of moral norms and the place of the human being in society.

Having discussed the various positions of authors conceptualising dignity, it is worth examining the relationship between dignity and social work as a profession.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AS A PROFESSION AND THE PRESERVATION OF CLIENTS’ DIGNITY

Social work as a profession is closely linked to the protection of human rights and human dignity. Social workers work with various vulnerable groups in society, such as people living in poverty, people with disabilities, seniors, children, and/or families at social risk, among others. Therefore, one of the most important principles of this profession is the recognition and preservation of the client’s dignity. The protection of dignity in social work means respect for the person, their autonomy, rights, and individuality, regardless of their social status or life circumstances.

When discussing the relationship between dignity as a moral category and the social work profession, one first encounters the field of law. The law does not speak of dignity, but of a person’s right to dignity. The law does not define the concept of dignity, but national and international legal acts emphasise that a person’s right to dignity is protected.

No one grants a person the right to dignity; the state does not grant it either; this right is inherent to the very essence of the person [12]. The right to dignity exists regardless of a person’s gender, race, or nationality, or their social status. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the human right to dignity is recognised as a natural right. The Declaration establishes that the dignity of all people is the foundation of freedom, universal justice, and peace [11]. In a democratic society, a person is considered valuable, but this value is not tied to any specific activity; rather, it is a matter on which modern society has agreed. Therefore, it is the duty of every democratic state to protect the dignity of every person, regardless of their mental or physical condition [11]. The enshrinement of human dignity and human rights in legislation can be viewed as a mandatory “minimum standard of social morality” [4].

A. Vaišvila [12] notes that legal documents do not define the concepts of dignity, the right to dignity, or decency, which leads to misunderstandings regarding this nuance in legal practice. V. Šlapkauskas [4] suggests treating a person’s right to dignity (and

other rights) as tools that define the relationship between a person and another person, and that characterise the content of a person's general dignity.

We will now discuss how dignity is treated in social work practice.

In social work, social transactions centre on the relationship between the social worker and the client. In this relationship, the client's needs become the cornerstone—the identification and addressing of needs ensure the success of social assistance. In this context, the relationship between the social worker and the client is a crucial factor, as the social worker acts here as a professional with authority, while the client is a person in need of assistance and support, whose dignity and self-esteem are often compromised. This raises the question of what professional requirements are placed on the social worker to ensure the client's dignity is not violated.



Fig. 2. Ensuring client dignity in social work practice (source: IFSW, 2018)

Social work theory emphasises that human dignity is a fundamental principle of professional ethics. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) states in its ethical principles that social work is based on respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the human person. This means that social workers must act in ways that prevent clients from being discriminated against, stigmatised, or devalued. In professional practice, this is manifested through ensuring confidentiality, involving the client in decision-making, and respecting their choices.

The important connection between social work and human dignity is emphasised in international and national legal documents. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (United Nations, 1948). This principle also applies in the field of social services, where the aim is to ensure that every person receives assistance without losing their self-worth.

The Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania also emphasises that social services must be provided with respect for human rights, dignity, and autonomy [13]. The Code of Ethics for Social Workers in Lithuania [1] states that social work is based on a system of values, with *respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people* listed as the foremost value. A social worker aims to empower the client to solve emerging problems on their own, thereby strengthening and even restoring the client's damaged dignity and self-esteem.

R. Prakapas [14] asserts that a social worker dedicates themselves entirely to the client's needs, i.e., the professional relationship between the social worker and the client is grounded in the principles of professional ethics, specialised skills, and professional knowledge. In order to show respect for the client and not violate their dignity, the social worker acts in the professional relationship with dedication, empathy, concern for the other's well-being, sincerity, devotion, commitment, and clear communication.

R. Tidikis [15] asserts that social work practice is grounded in ethical principles and presents *humanity* as the first and most important principle. According to the author, this principle encompasses such personal qualities as "sociality, spirituality, solidarity, compassion, kindness, goodness, honesty, and justice," among others. Assistance to the client is grounded in respect for them and the upholding of justice.

According to R. Ozelis [16], the goal of social work as a profession is to defend the human person as a value. Assistance is provided to everyone in need, as all individuals are treated with equal dignity.

In social work practice, the preservation of dignity is often linked to the principle of empowerment. This principle means that the social worker not only provides assistance but also encourages the client to actively participate in solving their own problems. According to M. Ayne [17], empowerment helps people regain control over their lives and strengthens their self-esteem. In this way, social work becomes not only the provision of assistance but also a process of strengthening human dignity.

However, in practice, social workers often encounter situations in which the client's dignity is threatened. This can occur due to institutional constraints, bureaucratic procedures, or societal stereotypes about recipients of social assistance. Therefore, a social worker's professionalism is demonstrated by the ability to balance institutional requirements with the principle of respect for the individual. Scholars emphasise that in social work practice, it is important to adhere to ethical standards continually and reflect on one's own activities [18].

In summary, social work as a profession is inseparable from the protection of human dignity. Social workers must be guided by ethical principles, legal documents, and professional values that ensure respect for every client. Preserving dignity in social work means not only providing assistance but also strengthening a person's self-esteem, independence, and active participation in society.

Thus, social work is a profession whose foundation lies in human relationships grounded in ethical principles. Assistance is provided to anyone who needs it, as everyone is considered dignified and worthy of respect.

4. CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN ENSURING CLIENTS' DIGNITY AT THE END OF LIFE IN AN INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The end-of-life period is one of the most sensitive stages of a person's life, when it is particularly important to ensure respect for the person's dignity, autonomy, and emotional needs. In social work practice, this most often occurs in institutional settings—such as nursing hospitals, nursing homes, or palliative care facilities.



Fig. 3. Challenges in ensuring the dignity of clients in institutional settings

In such institutions, social workers face various challenges that can make it difficult to preserve clients' dignity at the end of life. These challenges are related to:

- the limitations of institutional rules,
- ethical dilemmas,
- a lack of resources,
- complex emotional relationships with clients and their loved ones.

When working with clients in an institutional setting, social workers must adhere not only to ethical principles but also to administrative and regulatory requirements (R. Tidikis, 2002). Although in such a context the social worker is bound by legal and administrative frameworks, they cannot disregard the moral principles of humanity, as in such cases their assistance is ineffective.

Authors N. Mažeikienė and J. Ruškė [9] note that in social work, it is essential to deeply understand the dignity that individuals in disadvantaged situations perceive and experience. Only then can social workers better understand their clients and be more empathetic.

One of the most important challenges in this context is balancing institutional requirements with the client's individual needs. Institutional settings often have strict procedures and rules designed to ensure the organisation and safety of services, but these can limit a client's autonomy. According to S. Banks [19], social workers often face situations where administrative requirements or organisational structures may conflict with the ethical goal of respecting the client's individuality and freedom of choice. At the end of life, it is particularly important for a person to maintain a sense of control over their life; therefore, overly strict institutional regulation can threaten their dignity. At any stage of life, it is very important for a client to feel respected and accepted, and for their opinion to matter.

J. Charenkova [20] notes in her article that it is not easy to preserve clients' dignity in an institutional setting. Care facilities are often criticised for human rights violations, a paternalistic attitude of staff toward the elderly, and an environment that limits clients' initiative. Often, a client nearing the end of life is treated as a passive service recipient, lacking agency and their own wishes.

Another significant challenge in this context is the ethical dilemmas involved in decision-making about treatment or care. Social workers often have to mediate between clients, family members, and medical staff. Sometimes, family members may have a different opinion from the client, while medical staff may be guided by professional criteria that do not always align with the client's wishes. In such situations, the social worker must defend the client's interests and promote respect for their autonomy. The World Health Organisation emphasises that the goal of palliative care is not only to alleviate physical pain but also to ensure a person's psychological, social, and spiritual well-being [21].

Ensuring a client's dignity at the end of life also involves respecting their privacy and preserving their self-esteem. In an institutional setting, a person often loses some privacy because life takes place in shared spaces and daily care is provided by others. Therefore, social workers must strive to preserve the client's personal space as much as possible and respect their habits, cultural, and religious values. This is also emphasised in the Law on Patients' Rights and Compensation for Damage to Health of the Republic of Lithuania, which stipulates that a patient has the right to respect for their dignity, privacy, and autonomy [22].

Another significant challenge is the limited human and financial resources in care or treatment institutions. Care or nursing facilities often face staff shortages, so social workers and nursing staff must care for a large number of clients. As a result, it can be difficult to provide sufficient individual attention to each person. Research shows that time constraints and heavy workloads can reduce the ability to provide personalised care and emotional support to clients [17]. However, it is precisely individual attention, respectful communication, and listening to the client's needs that are essential elements of preserving dignity at the end of life.

Thus, when providing end-of-life care in institutional settings, complex challenges arise in ensuring that individuals' dignity is not compromised. In summary, ensuring clients' dignity at the end of life in an institutional setting is complex in social work practice due to a range of organisational, ethical, and social factors. Social workers must constantly seek a balance between institutional requirements, client autonomy, and family expectations. Despite these challenges, professional ethics and legal principles oblige social workers to strive to ensure that every person at the end of life is treated with respect, maintains their self-worth, and experiences the highest possible quality of life.

5. CONCLUSIONS

1. An analysis of the scientific literature and document content suggests that dignity is a multifaceted concept open to interpretation. Dignity is a person's perception of their own worth in society. Some philosophers view dignity as a universal trait inherent in human nature, while others associate it with social conditions and the realisation of human potential. Despite these differing perspectives, dignity remains one of the most important concepts in moral philosophy, helping to justify the recognition of human worth and rights.
2. Social work as a profession is inseparable from the protection of human dignity. Social workers must adhere to the principles of professional ethics, legal documents, and professional values that ensure respect for every client. Preserving dignity in social work means not only providing assistance but also strengthening a person's self-esteem, independence, and active participation in society.
3. Although the primary goal of social work as a practical activity is to preserve an individual's dignity and respect their rights, when a person enters an institutional

setting at the end of life, significant challenges arise. In institutional settings, one encounters situations in which a person's dignity is disregarded, there is a lack of space for privacy and individuality, and respect is absent. In institutional settings, social connections play a significant role in preserving a person's dignity and serve as a prerequisite for a high-quality, fulfilling life.

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