

‘I felt sorry because you can’t even afford a leather bag’: Negotiating dignity, economics and disempowerment in post-globalisation India

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Increasingly, dignity is a concept invoked in development laws, policies and discourse. Yet, as this panel notes, the concept is rarely connected to the voices, experiences and relationships of those whose dignity is sought to be enhanced. Salman Akhtar (2015) points out that dignity is an elusive concept and I suggest that there is a need to flesh it out if we are to examine its achievement or diminishment under given developmental conditions and relate it to concepts of development. In this paper, therefore, I attempt to clarify some contours of dignity and the current development environment before examining their relationship through two brief case studies, using discourse analysis as a methodology. I show that the domination of the current discourse of development is breeding a tsunami of a hidden *psychological poverty*, described by Marx (1844) almost two centuries ago, which has demonstrable material consequences for the most vulnerable individuals. Touching upon a Gandhian model of development, as elucidated by the Gandhian scholar Douglas Allen (2019), I argue that to re-centre dignity in development requires a re-visioning of the meaning of development around a more sustainable ‘mind–body–heart/spirit’ (Allen 2019, p. 124) approach to our being human in this world.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 briefly elaborates on the constituent aspects of the concept of dignity; Section 2 does the same for the current concept of development; Section 3 presents the case studies and their discussion and, finally, Section 4 sums up with concluding thoughts.

Section 1: What is dignity?

Presenting to a meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in 2014, Salman Akhtar explained that the concept of dignity is an ‘elusive’ one. Drawing upon psychoanalysis and philosophy, he showed how the concept is ‘rife with descriptive and conceptual conundrums’ (Akhtar 2015, pp. 23–24). Quoting widely from a number of ancient and modern sources, he proceeded to distinguish certain defining characteristics that allow most of us to feel that a person has displayed the quality of ‘dignity’. These include:

- an ‘amalgam of respect, status, and restraint’ (p. 24)
- the qualities of
 - ‘self-respect’
 - ‘self-assertion’
 - ‘a sense of power and agency’
 - ‘a sense of justice’
 - “an amalgam of pride and humility” (p. 124)’
- the feeling of being ‘part of something important (p. 120)’ (p.28), and
- the ‘state of being worthy of respect, esteem, or honour (p. 136)’ (p. 29)

Crucially, he also gave significance to the ideas of Gabriel Marcel, for whom dignity was reflected in ‘integrity, autonomy, compassion, self-respect, courage, and a firm conviction in the sacred nature of life’ (Akhtar 2015, p. 30). Similarly, reporting on a survey carried out amongst refugees, Palmer and Warner (2022) say that dignity was found to be both ‘context and culturally specific’ but with two aspects being reflected across these differences: ‘respect and ...self-reliance’ (p. 17).

This catalogue of the characteristics or constituents of dignity is far wider in its reach and implications than improving material conditions of the poor alone, and relating dignity to a mere ownership of things or private property-based dignity, as is often argued for in development circles (Palmer and Warner 2022). Akhtar recognises that delineating the characteristics of dignity has ‘enormous sociopolitical implications’ (p. 33).

Section 2: What is development?

Historically, the idea of ‘development’ has been implicitly connected with removal of material poverty and the presumed drudgery of physical labour, which were, by implication, considered inimical to dignity by putting the

poor at the mercy of others or an implacable nature that prevented them from attaining the freedom or agency that are the hallmarks of a civilized, dignified human existence. Thus, poverty is a barrier that denies the poor the ‘power [to]... exert force and ... to endure force, to control and to resist being controlled’ (Marcovitz 2015, p.67) with respect to their environment. Marcovitz says that this kind of power is ‘interdependent’ with dignity. Modernisation, with its concomitant of industrialisation, was prized because it enabled human dignity through empowering the individual to gain power over their environment, to wring a more stable survival from it.

Mark McGillivray (2016) notes, however, that historically modernisation, the most common understanding of ‘development’ in national and international policymaking, and its now discredited predecessor, Progress, have been not only economic but, crucially, also social and cultural processes.

Amartya Sen (1999) too has brought out what he termed were ‘narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with modernisation, or with technological advance, or with social modernisation’ (1999, p. 3), and juxtaposed them with a broader approach to development. This broader approach is reflected in the Capabilities approach to development, which evaluates development in terms of judging what ‘substantial opportunity’ is made available for individuals to undertake the ‘activities [they are able]... to undertake (‘doings’) and [to be] the kinds of persons [they are able] ...to be (‘beings’)’. Arguing for a focus away from a mere ranking of living standards, the approach tries to demarcate a cut-off point below which deprivation may be said to occur and it also takes into account ‘subjective metrics’ under certain conditions (Robeyns and Byskov 2025).

Similarly, Estelle Derclaye and Tim Taylor (2015) have advocated a ‘well-being’ approach to measuring development. However, they point out that the meaning of achieving development that remains dominant is that of promoting the ‘maximisation of aggregate wealth and ... of allocative efficiency’ nationally (Derclaye and Taylor 2015, p. 200). Further, with the current neoliberal dominance, they say that development as wealth maximisation, with minimum government interference, is a goal that has been accepted by both Left and Right for some time. In this, Ben Fine points out that this view replaces an earlier view of development that was ‘based upon modernisation, welfarism and industrialisation’ (Fine 2014, p. 3).

Psychological dimension to development

What I want to stress here is that, since the very beginning, a psychological dimension to development has been recognised in the writings of thinkers on both Left and Right. Catherine Hall shows that, despite his many outdated assertions, Thomas Macaulay, in his 1848 bestseller *A History of England*, applauded the industrialisation and modernisation occurring in Britain due to “the new attitudes, the results of freedom” (Hall 2011, p. 35) rather than only to the material prosperity created.

Famously, Karl Marx, the fiercest advocate of changing material conditions to improve the lives of the have-nots, was only too alive to the degradation resulting from a pursuit of money as the sole aim of human existence, asserting that under the system of private property, the individual grows less free, more ‘needy’ and ‘poorer’ in actual fact (Marx 1844) as the number of objects available for consumption grows.

To Marx, it was the Socialist workers in France who represented a most ‘splendid’ existence engaging in ‘smoking, drinking, eating’ together for ‘association, society and conversation’, so that the ‘brotherhood of man’ made their ‘nobility’ shine through from ‘their work-hardened bodies’ (Marx 1844). This is akin to the power to exert force on one’s environment and withstand the force exerted by it. In a situation of relative equality that Marx describes, where the workers are not dependent on each other for their needs, the power they can exert on each other is also relatively equal. They then enrich their lives through association and conversation in which deprivation, dependence and power play can be kept to a minimum since none has too much power over another. Genuine development, therefore, is reflected and assessed in attitudes of felt power, camaraderie with others and the ability to have one’s basic material needs for survival met.

However, according to Fine (2014), in current development policymaking, despite the humane rhetoric of the Post Washington Consensus or PWC, the guiding philosophy of the most powerful financial interests in the world, the results remain a ‘poorly examined deepening of the process of “globalisation” but, presumably, with a human face and guiding hand’; despite it, what comes through in practice is little in the way of any ‘notion of development beyond growth and efficiency’ (Fine 2014, pp. 6–7). Jessica Whyte (2019, as cited in Vallier 2022) points out that due to the influence and reach of the Western elite, the consensus in Washington has been adopted by the elite in the erstwhile colonial countries and has ‘interfered with the democratic governance of developing nations, increased inequality, and made the poor worse off’. Despite lack of agreement on its

characteristics, the current economic and political drive of development work is usually taken to derive from neoliberal philosophical positions (Fig. 1).

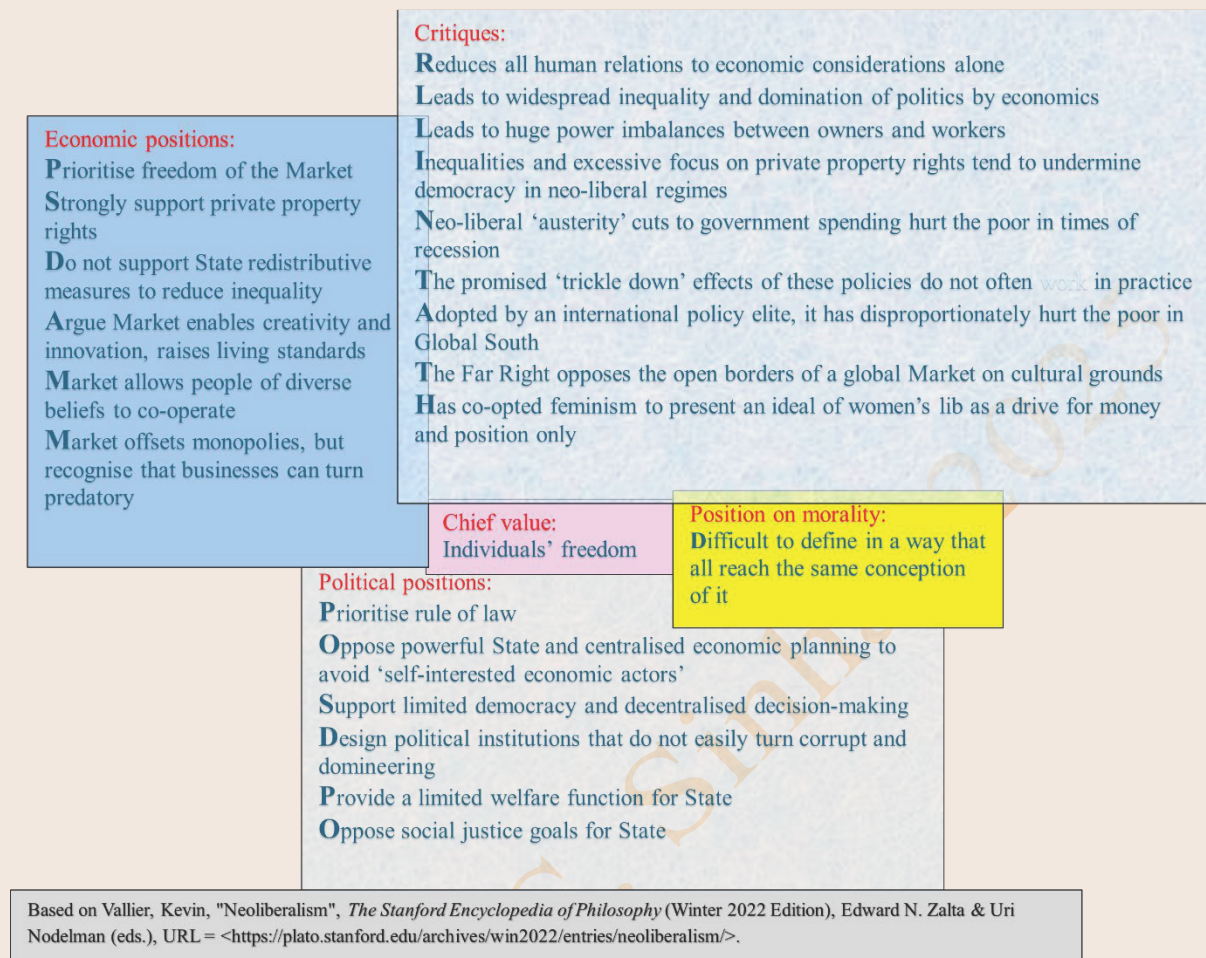


Figure 1: Neoliberalism: Main positions and critiques (based on Vallier 2022)

Influenced by neoliberalism, the rather radical, theory-driven changes experienced at the level of the individual, since the 1980s, have involved a 'redefinition' of the role of the State, where it has indiscriminately been cast as a source of corruption and rent seeking in all cases. This State is juxtaposed against the 'free' individual seeking, and able, to satisfy her 'self-interest' in a freed market.

Crucially, these formulations have pushed out other developmental discourses so that it is not only in economic and social development, but through a complete neo-liberal philosophy of being-human-in-the-world, that entire lifeworlds across the globe have become subject to neoliberal ontological assumptions. This is increasingly driven by a societal discourse characterised by its ability to make the coercions and power imbalances of a free Market economy more opaque and amorphous through its deployment of discourse terms and categories that posit the subjective as the primary grounds of development and the individual as its chief owner and driver. Barbara Cruikshank calls such use of societal discourse as a 'technology of citizenship and self-government' (p. 234) where 'the question of governance becomes a question of self-governance' and the individual is held responsible increasingly for their 'development' (Cruikshank 1999, p. 232).

The terrain of the exercise of power, therefore, shifts from the political to the psychological/subjective. However, there is little recognition in developmental discourse, with its focus on the potential for the abuse of the coercive powers of the State, of the psychologically coercive powers of institutions, which gain power through processes, such as the socially sanctified tutelary authorities of the educator, the social worker, the therapist, the self-help guru, which are described as liberating. Ironically, these developments have multiplied the number of 'authorities' which incessantly chart and lay out in the minutest details laudatory subject positions that the 'responsible' individuals ought to occupy. Haugaard (2022), countering Foucault, offers that a continuous process of resisting one's subject position in a bid for freedom threatens the loss of social integration

for the individual with a very heavy cost in terms of ontological insecurity. Consequently, individuals tend to try to negotiate for a greater 'action-space' within whatever subject position the dominant discourse casts them in. With an expansion of the Market and societal discourse both, more and more 'subject positions' have been subjected to neoliberal influence.

Identifying the constraints of this situation, Mary Poovey (2011) points to the paradox that neo-liberalism, both represents individuals as free agents with respect to their life and welfare and also represents the market as fully autonomous, 'self-governing ... rational and efficient' (p. 199). With individuals theoretically made free by the rolling back of the coercive State, in the form of strict limitations on its regulatory and coercive powers, the assumption is that the Market rewards individuals – rational choice actors – according to their respective merits. Taking no strictly moral position but by prioritising the economic above the political, traditional, moral, religious and all other normative discourses, and equating economic achievement with fundamental human worth, neoliberalism ends up raising the market exchange as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action” (Harvey 2005: 3, as cited in Vallier 2022). Consequently, a main strand of neo-liberal ethos is to view “competition as the defining characteristic of human relations” (Monbiot 2016, as cited in Vallier 2022).

In such a normative environment, development is no longer about the pursuit of economic well-being to meet material needs so that 'other', more human and humane capacities may be developed, including the attitudes of respect, restraint, agency and compassion that characterise dignity, but becomes a matter of constantly proving one's worth against all others. Rewards and respect are conferred on a narrow group of economically focussed, competitive, 'prudential' (O'Malley 1999) individuals concentrated on attaining their self-interest and covering themselves against all risks in life.

Dignity, carefully used can, however, become a conceptual tool that checks the psychological impoverishment experienced when a narrow pursuit of money threatens to bring about the poverty in the midst of plenty that Marx had warned of, as the value of money constantly diminishes with the growth of constant production of more objects. A development discourse, therefore, that insistently and blindly continues to link dignified development as a matter of material standards *only*, without nuance, stands in danger of validating the reduction of human beings to mere economic measuring rods which constantly compete to outdo each other at all costs in a Hobbesian state of nature.

Two concepts of dignity in development

There is a strong need to offer visions that return the aspiration of development to be both a material and psychological state in the individual where, in a tiered prescription, beyond the meeting of one's basic material needs, achievement is judged by demonstrable contributions to raising the dignity of the 'experiential other ... especially the other with the greatest needs' (Allen 2019, p. 119). This recognises that dignity is an attitude of empowered 'self-assertion', of a 'sense of justice' and of 'being part of something important' (Akhtar 2015), which as an object of development can, and ought to be, identified, measured and monitored.

In this, Coen's (2015) distinction between an 'achievement-based' dignity and a 'basic' human dignity may be useful. Basic human dignity:

- belongs to all humans by virtue of their being human
- is recognised through fundamental human rights variously laid out/understood by societies and international agreements
- is breached by violations/inadequacies of both material and psychological wants that impact a human being's ability to survive 'whole' in body and mind both, creating ontological insecurity

should be the target of development efforts. Further, such efforts ought to be judged by

- the material 'things' made available to the recipients
- the way they are made available, and
- the increase in long-term capacities for increased agency vis-à-vis one's environment and the 'sense of being part of something important' (Akhtar 2015, p. 128).

By including recognition of 'psychological want', development efforts recognise that the terrain of power and governance has shifted to the subjective and psychological. This will require a widening of the concepts of poverty to capture the oppressions caused by this exercise of power as I show further in the paper.

Second, the concept of development, too, needs to be widened once again to lay an obligation of developing dignity as an indispensable part of developed societies and human behaviour. It lays the obligations of ‘self-assertion’, ‘compassion’, ‘justice’ and ‘restraint’ on those above material wants to counter the unitary normative frameworks of economic growth alone as development, even when it is reflected in ‘undignified’ attitudes. Figure 3 presents a comparison to illustrate one scenario where this comparison was made.

Studies like those by Gomez and Crowther (2006, p.) forcefully show the need for such reformulations of the concept and target of development to include psychological poverty and attitudinal change, by presenting on how neoliberal ‘language of business’ is creating ‘social reproduction’ (p. 16) of a continuum of psychological violence upon individuals both within and beyond the business world. They create new circles of oppression through extreme ontological insecurity of not just the poor but the economically ‘hindmost’ in a given situation. By equating dignity and worth with economic competitiveness alone, this language is instrumental in allowing the destruction of what Thera Mjaaland has called ‘dispersed interdependencies’ or ‘connections [of] “social capital” [or] ... of trust, reciprocity and exchanges’ (p. 16) (2024) that give meaning to life. In much of the Global South, where individuals with no access to natural resources have been forced back almost entirely upon the logics of the Market or on these dispersed interdependencies, for their means of survival, the severe effects of this psychological poverty upon the individual’s welfare and life chances amongst new demographic groups should be of concern to development practitioners.

The next section shows these concepts and their relationships through two case studies.

Section 3: The case studies and discussion: capturing some mechanisms of the social reproduction of ‘psychological’ poverty

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines poverty as ‘When a person’s resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation).’ (Goulden and D’Arcy 2014). Though ‘needs’ are defined in a variety of ways, certain basic psychological needs, including the need for dignity and worth, according to Markovitz (2015), in an individual-- ‘both his own sense of worth and its reflection in the attitudes of others toward him, is a necessity to give meaning to existence, to make life worth living’. Thus social conditions making for a lack of such worth and dignity in the individual may be said to create ‘psychological poverty’ leading to material impacts on an individual’s life chances. The two case studies below attempt to capture some mechanisms where the currently ascendant discourse of development is aiding the creation of such poverty.

The case studies are from the lives of two women known to me intimately, both of whom passed away recently. To protect them, I have anonymised their identities and some details of the reported interaction. The first of these women I shall call N. She was a family member. The second I shall call A, and she was a family friend. N was a generation older than A, however, both passed away within two years of each other. I have chosen them because they both belonged to similar middle-income families, so were not strictly poor, yet they felt the effect of globalisation through its associated discourse in a manner profoundly damaging to their basic dignity, ontological security and psychological well-being.

The case studies and their discussion use a mix of several discourse analysis techniques, including Conversation Analysis (CA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discursive Psychology (DP).

Case study 1: ‘I felt sorry because you can’t even afford a leather handbag

This case study presents a minor social interaction between N and a wealthier relative R, which I witnessed in 2011, and which features in a work of family memory that I am currently working on. As a piece of naturally-occurring data, which circumvents the observer’s paradox (Baker and Ellece 2011, pp. 80–81), this kind of interaction can give an advantage in revealing how ‘discourses’ may be helping to sustain ‘societal power asymmetries, hierarchies, and the oppression of particular groups’ in naturally occurring life situations (Benwell and Stokoe, p. 9). The conversation took place in Hindi, which was the native language of all those present; I have translated it in the transcript below. The transcript follows Jefferson’s Transcription system with the Line numbers shown in column 1, the speaker in column 2, the conversation with notations (in red), and explanatory notes for the notations in column 4.

The immediate context

The incident took place in one of the large metropolises in India, in a middle-income neighbourhood where N, a woman of 69 years of age at this point, was the hostess to a small group of her relatives including myself and R. The flat where the gathering took place belonged to N's son, B, and daughter-in-law. N had been living with them since the death of her husband 6 years earlier. Her son and daughter-in-law were absent on this occasion and N was in charge of the two-bedroom flat. It was a small gathering of 4 women belonging to N's extended family group who had come to visit her. N had been able to entertain us with the specific permission of her son and daughter-in-law, which was a rare and, therefore, exciting event for her. This fact was reflected in her uncharacteristically bright and animated manner from the very start.

Very soon after all the guests had arrived, N, speaking in an unnaturally loud voice, which silenced other conversations, addressed R specifically and the next few minutes were taken up by a somewhat unexpected conversation which I reproduce below.

Line number	Speaker	Conversation transcription	Explanatory notes
1 2 3 4 5 6 7	N:	((keeps looking at R only)) It is SO: GOOD to see you again I have been waiting for <u>just</u> such an occasion. I have a SPECIAL GIFT for you ↑ ((reaches behind her and produces a large, beautifully wrapped package and thrusts it towards R)) ((smiles broadly))	The capital letters in Lines 2 and 4 indicate a very large rise in volume. The colon in Line 2 indicates prolongation of the previous sound. The underline in Line 3 indicates emphasis on the word. The full stop in Line 3 shows a 'final' intonation contour rather than the end of a sentence. The upward arrow in Line 4 indicates rising intonation.
8 9 10 11 12 13	R:	Oh ↑ ((reaches out for the package almost automatically)) ((Looks uncertain)) <Oh ↑ that's nice> but what <u>is</u> it for	The upward arrows in Lines 8 and 11 indicate rising intonation. The angled brackets in Line 11 indicate a noticeable slowing down. The opening of the square bracket in Line 11 is aligned with the opening of the square bracket in Line 12 to show the start of overlapping talk.
14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28	N:	((speaks with impatience)) [Go on. open it see what it is. ((smiles widely))]	The opening of the square bracket in Line 12 is aligned with the opening of the square bracket in Line 11 to show the start of overlapping talk. The full stops in Lines 12 and 13 show a 'final' intonation contour rather than the end of a sentence.
14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28	R:	<Ah, ok, thank you ((opens the package)) ((smiles)) ((looks around at X and Y)) ((takes out a brown leather handbag and holds it up for the group to see)) ((smiles politely)) that's so nice (.) what's the occasion though?	The angled bracket at the start of Line 14 indicates a rushed/hurried start. The full stop in a bracket in Line 18 indicates a short pause (in taped recordings, the length of the pause may be given in minutes/seconds) The question mark in Line 19 indicates a rising, or questioning, intonation.
29 30 31 32	N:	((looks staringly at R)) O(h) h, do you REMEMBER when we were together last time? and you kept looking for leather handbags ↓ and then kept not buying them because they were too expensive for you. <u>Well</u> (.) I felt sorry ((looks sorrowful)) that you could not ev'n afford a leather <u>handbag</u> so I BOUGHT one for you [heh heh, =	The bracketed h in Line 20 indicates laughter bubbling through in the rush of excited talk. The question mark in Line 21 indicates a rising, or questioning, intonation. The downward arrow in Line 22 indicates falling intonation. The full stop in Line 24 shows a 'final' intonation contour rather than the end of a sentence. The full stop in a bracket in Line 24 indicates a short pause (in taped recordings, the length of the pause may be given in minutes/seconds) The capital letters and underline in Line 26 indicate a very large rise in volume along with a stressing of the word. The opening of the square bracket in Line 27 is aligned with the opening of the square bracket in Line 28 to show the start of an overlap and the equals sign shows the laughter, indicated by heh, heh continues until the next equals sign
29 30 31 32	R:	((looks taken aback)) [<Oh, oh, no (.) I mean, yes, that's true, I mean, but only because I already have several handbags ((looks strained)) I am really pleased though but really	The opening of the square bracket in Line 29 is aligned with the opening of the square bracket in Line 28 to show the start of an overlap The angled bracket in Line 29 indicates a rushed/hurried start. The commas in Lines 29,30,35 and 36 indicate continuing intonation and not a clause boundary. The full stop in a bracket in Lines 29,33,35 indicates a short pause.

33 34 35 36		(.) I could easily buy a handbag. It's just that I already had several so I don't like to go over my budget (.) that's why (.) um, I mean, that's why I didn't buy it then, but thank you -	The dash in Line 36 indicates a cut-off.
37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71	N:	= <Oh, yes, I told B about it after that time. I told him that I felt sorry for you ↑ that you had to be so careful that you couldn't even afford a leather bag (.) it was on my mind, you see, then I asked him ↑ well, can you help me out a little here, well, as you know, they only shop in the very <u>best plac(h)es</u> and he is just so picky (.) <u>heh heh</u> I say to him sometimes. that he ought to spend a bit less because, you know, things are so expensive these days ((looks at the others pointedly)) ((X, Y and R look down)) ((R looks up at N)) ((smiles)) but he has <u>ALWAYS</u> been extremely big on luxury ((uses English for 'luxury')), only the best will do for him ((uses English 'best will do')) <u>heh heh</u> then he took me (.) you know me, I don't really know good shops here but he told me <you know, I had felt so sorry for you ↓ that you could not even buy a leather bag and I thought I <u>WILL BUY</u> one for you what do I need <u>more(h)y</u> for and this upmarket shop ((uses English for 'upmarket')) had really so <u>many</u> things and I said to him, oh, B, I don't really know these things. I have never really bought real leather and all that (.) well, your <u>uncle</u> now, he was the same, like B he also knew all the luxury things but not brands and things. No, we didn't worry about brands (.) in those days, you didn't have so many brands but B of course knows all about it. it was a lovely shop, very sophisticated ((uses English for 'sophisticated')) but, of course, he wouldn't have gone <u>othery(h)ise</u> so, I hope you like it. I didn't get anything too <u>big</u> but it had really <u>GONE</u>	The equals sign in Line 37 shows the continuation of laughter from Line 28. The angled brackets in Lines 37,54 indicates a rushed/hurried start. The commas in Lines 37,40,41,42, 45,50,53,54,59,62,65,66,68,69,70,72 and 73 indicate continuing intonation and not a clause boundary. The upward arrows in Lines 38 and 41 indicate rising intonation. The full stop in a bracket in Lines 40,44,52,61,65 and 73 indicates a short pause. The underlined letter, followed by a colon, in Line 43, indicates a rise in pitch on the letter and an overall contour of 'up-to-down' in intonation. The bracketed h in Lines 43,57 and 70 indicates laughter bubbling through in the rush of excited talk. The heh, heh in Lines 44,52 indicates actual laughter. The capital letters in Lines 49, 56, 71 and 72 indicate a very large rise in volume. The downward arrow in Lines 54 and 72 indicates falling intonation. The underlined word in Lines 59 and 62 indicates emphasis on the word. The colon in Line 67 indicates prolongation of the previous sound. The exclamation mark in Line 74 indicates an animated tone.

72 73 74 75 76		<u>TO MY HEART</u> that time, when you looked ↓ and left it because it was too expensive (.) so, I hope it's nice for you! ((smiles)) ((looks around)) ((Pause))	
77 78	X:	The bag looks <u>lovely</u> . ((smiles)) um (.) I'll just check if <u>tea</u> is ready ((leaves the room))	The underlined letter, followed by a colon, in Line 77, indicates a rise in pitch on the letter and an overall contour of 'up-to-down' in intonation. The full stop in a bracket in Line 77 73 indicates a short pause. The underlined word in Line 78 indicates emphasis on the word.
79 80	Y:	<u>I</u> will also just see to the kids? ((smiles)) ((leaves the room))	The degree signs in Line 79 show an especially quiet part of talk.
81	R:	Let me go and help X! ((smiles)) ((leaves the room))	The Exclamation Mark in Line 81 shows an animated tone.

Notes and sources:

- 1) The conversation is related from memory of the actual event. The language spoken was Hindi, the native language of all the speakers. Switches to English, and their contextual meaning are included in the transcription and analysis because they are taken to convey meanings relevant to the analysis. Such data and translation, of necessity, is 'inherently interpretative and [a] political act, influenced by the transcriber's own assumptions and biases (Jaffe, 2007)' (McMullin 2023). The larger work has evidence to establish context in the form of letters and text messages.
- 2) I have kept the description in red to a minimum but in this Indian linguistic community, non-verbal communication of politeness (or its violation) is equally meaningful, and understood as such by the speakers, as verbal talk so in some places the description also indicates a measure as in 'broadly' in Line 7.

Source: Transcription and notes based on information in discussion of Jefferson's Transcription system in B. Benwell and E. Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. viii – xii; Charles Antaki, 'CA tutorial transcription'. [Conversation analysis page x](#) (accessed 27 June 2025); and, C. McMullin, 'Transcription and qualitative methods: implications for third sector research', *Voluntas*, 34, 1, 140-153. doi: 10.1007/s11266-021-00400-3. Epub 2021 Sep 10. PMID: 34522070; PMCID: PMC8432276. [Transcription and Qualitative Methods: Implications for Third Sector Research - PMC](#)

Discussion

CA looks at conversations as structured interactions where the observation or breakdown of rules may provide important insights into the type of 'interactional' work being done. The conversation reproduced is illuminating in terms of the 'interplay - and ... power play' (Graumann and Kallmeyer 2002, p. 5) that it reveals amongst the participants.

CA views talk as a series of sequential interactions made up of turn-taking by the various participants. Each turn is 'designed' by one of the participants to have content that is then analysed by the other participants, without conscious thought on most occasions, to respond in a variety of ways. The design, the content and the sequence of turn-taking may all be interpreted to provide an insight into the 'interactional' work being done by the participants (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 59).

N's response: Positioning for economic power and agency

This conversation snippet is marked by the absence of the usual CA samples where talk is reproduced through short 'turns' with the participants responding to each other in relatively quick succession. Here, however, X and Y only take 'turns' at the very end and N takes a very long turn, even interrupting R's turn in Line 36 to begin her long turn. Both in her opening turn and the long turn beginning at Line 37, N's use of a *recontextualization* strategy to insistently frame R's earlier search for a handbag as a matter of affordability gives an insight into the utility of the occasion for her.

In the context of gift-giving conventions, where focussing on the cost of the gift or the recipient's economic need is unusual, N's repetition of the verbal construction 'I felt sorry for you' at Lines 24,38 and 54 seem like attempts to emphasise that she is in a position to feel sorry for a better-off relative; the repetition has almost an aggressive nature to it in a relatively short interaction as well as almost the effect of a poetic motif that serves to foreground, reiterate and publicly proclaim the relative as an object of her pity.

Similarly, the sharp interruption of R's alternative explanation at Line 36, by N, that she did not have a need for a new bag, and, hence, was being prudent, rather than financially needy at the time of her earlier search reinforces the sense that she is determined to establish an economic lens for viewing of the incident.

N's amplification, ignoring R's response, from Lines 37 to 75, continues to position her gift as symbolising an act of compassion, fulfilling an economic need in the other. Using a strategy of *perspectivation*, to reinforce the earlier *recontextualization*, we can see that the perspective she is creating is of her as being able to afford a 'luxury' product. Through the employment of lexis drawn from a discourse of luxury consumption, such as 'very best places', 'luxury', 'upmarket shop', 'real leather', 'sophisticated', and 'brands and things', and the use of English words like 'upmarket', 'luxury', and 'sophisticated' (six times between Lines 43 and 68), which were often used in advertisements, and in the conversations of her economically successful children rather than of women of her age and background, she is clearly attempting to link herself to a modern culture of consumer luxury.

Yet, at the same time, this positioning is a careful balancing act. The use of the persuasive strategy of appealing to authorities to strengthen her point of view rather than take responsibility for it herself bespeaks a nervousness, or, perhaps lack of confidence, or, fear of seeming impolite, which would all indicate an awareness that such an aggressive economic framing stood to endanger her relationship with her audience, and lose her social capital. With the clauses, 'I don't really know these things' (Line 59) and 'I have never really bought real leather and all that' (Lines 60, 61), she seems to be distancing herself from the knowledge of the consumer market for the higher-end products, which she had shown herself eager to talk about in Lines 43,44,46,50 and 51, and to which she returns in Lines 63,66 and 68. Perhaps these are efforts to counterbalance the aggression in 'I felt sorry for you'.

If so, these are further bolstered by the use of a lexis of filial care, in phrases such as 'was on my mind' (Line 40), 'hope you like it' (Line 70), 'gone to my heart' (Line 72), and 'hope it's nice for you' (Line 74) and help N to take a position that is 'simultaneously ... both powerful and powerless' (Baxter 2003, p.9 as cited in Baker and Ellece 2011, p. 47). In this, N may be said to be displaying the kind of complex positioning strategy which Judith Baxter has identified as symptomatic of complex power relations where the 'powerless people may experience "moments" of power' (Baxter 2003, p.9 as cited in Baker and Ellece 2011, p. 47).

In the midst of an overtly condescending speech, what strikes one is U's assertion of an agentic position for herself and when read with her insistence on framing the matter in an economic frame, the purpose of the whole exercise certainly seems to be for her to feel and express the power of an economic agent rather than merely engage in a crass one-upmanship or discomfit R. She is presenting herself as the problem-solver, in a problem-

resolution construction of an economic situation by saying ‘because you can’t ... so I...’. The use of the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’ seems both unusual and deliberate. A more common Hindi construction, using the polite register, would have used a passive construction to refer to the bag and an inclusive ‘our’ in referring to their previous bag search, as in the following sentence, ‘The bag came to my notice, bringing up the thoughts of you and our trip’.

Finally, her competition for the floor in interrupting R at Line 36, in an assertion of the ‘the right to speak and listened to’ (Sacks et al. 1974, as cited in Baker and Ellece 2011, p. 155), the sudden bursts of booming intonation, the emphasis on ‘bought’ (Line 27) with laughter in Line 28, her persistence with her narrative of the purchase despite the silence from others in Line 47 and 76 may be seen as a need to inscribe her perspective and her economic agency upon those listening. Even though the lack of response from the others signals to her that she is being refused approval for the emphatic positioning of herself as momentarily superior to R on economic grounds, she insists for, what seem to be other needs. That she is uncomfortable, perhaps nervous or uncertain would contradict any impression of a naturally bellicose disposition. Yet she persists.

CA does not go behind the language of a conversation to examine the possible ways in which language ‘mediates, influences and even constructs our experiences, identities and ways of viewing the world’ (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 44). CDA, on the other hand, postulates a ‘more agentive and on-going process’ of identity formation during discourse (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 45) that warrants the linking of the insights from conversations to wider cultural, political or historical frames of reference. Both CDA and DP seek to understand conversational interactions by linking the micro to the macro levels of discourses to better understand the processes shaping a seemingly small and ordinary situated conversation.

Dignity in a place of psychological pain and poverty

To appreciate the true nature of the interaction related here, we need to zoom out from the micro to connect it to its wider cultural context. Our first observation in this must be the thinly-veiled constructed nature of the gift-giving exercise. U initiated the topic of the handbag, even as she completed her ‘turn’ in which she had barely finished greeting her guests. This was in contravention of the normal social rules in India requiring that enquiring after the family members of her guests should have followed the greetings during this extended family gathering. The *Times of India* (5 May 2020), one of India’s foremost broadsheets suggests that appropriate conversation starters in such situations should be in the manner of open-ended invitations that draw the guests into talking about their lives, families or hobbies or even introduce games that everyone can play together.

Projecting an identity: a caring disposition and an economic position

N’s show of excitement, reflected in her louder than normal voice, her markedly broad smiles, and her producing the package from behind her as if in a magic show, when read with her impatient exhortations for R to open the package, can certainly create the appearance of this being a game-like performance of social conviviality, designed to express her enthusiasm at seeing her guests after a long interval. However, the fact that there were no gifts for the others in the gathering, and N did not even offer them an explanation directly, aiming her explanation of the gift-giving, when it did come, in the form of ‘do you remember when we were together last time’, very clearly at R alone, belie this appearance.

Until the gift had been unwrapped and displayed to the whole group, N’s attitude towards the others was marked by a remarkable absence of attention in that she neither addressed them nor included them in any non-verbal communication, treating them instead, it would seem, as audience and spectators for a theatrical interaction between R and herself. Even after the gift had been unwrapped and displayed, she continued to address R, though she widened the non-verbal interactions to include the others by making and inviting eye contact for, to use the language of Haugaard (2022), confirm-structuration of her position in narrating an event whose interpretation was clearly being challenged by R’s re-stating of the rationale behind her not having bought a handbag.

N’s attempts to force an economic interpretation of the event that positions her, instead of the better-off R, as a consumer of luxury products, presents itself as an attempt to gain status for herself, but, importantly, also to do so at R’s expense. Dubois et al. (2021) argue that the main driver of luxury consumption is a ‘need for status, that is, “respect, admiration, and voluntary deference <...> afforded by others”’ which is a desire further evident in N’s attempts to link herself to the discourse of luxury consumption as shown by her use of language borrowed from advertisements and from the vocabulary of younger people. Markovitz (2015) comments that ‘the feeling

of having some form of superiority over some others is usually necessary in order to have a sense of one's own dignity' (p. 63).

Interestingly, however, she also follows what may be termed a high-risk strategy here by choosing the better-off R to be positioned as a recipient not of her goodwill but of her patronising care. It is inconceivable that N would not have anticipated R's resistance or of the others in denying to her a position of economic superiority above R. Perhaps the length of the silence from the others, signifying the strength of their disapproval or denial of such an authority for her, may have been a surprise for her, but the fact of it would certainly not have been a surprise.

Under the circumstances, the idea that the entire interaction has a different significance for N than its surface social appearance would suggest, is an obvious one. Countering Foucault's assertion of a passive subject completely shaped by the dominant discourse, Haugaard (2022), referencing the psychological breakdown of some concentration camp inmates, even when their bodies had stayed whole, suggests that individuals tend to avoid constantly resisting the subject position they may be cast in, but attempt to exercise agency by negotiating and managing how they represent themselves to others within their action-space as an exercise of their freedom. I posit further that the example under discussion shows that the action space made available to individuals for such a management of their identity representation by the dominant discourse(s) may be ontologically destructive of them through the destruction of their dignity. Markovits (2015) too references Hitler's increasing humiliation of Jews, robbing them of power and dignity both, prior to their being 'led like lambs to the slaughter' (p. 67).

Analysing the assertion of subject-positions in talk, Harré and colleagues highlight that it is in the "subtle interplay" of the way the individual employs chosen "cultural elements or discourses" in a story and their positioning of "self" that we may read the "unique and justifiable identity" they attempt to create "in that setting" (cited in Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 150). The setting and the context of this conversation are well-described by Nair's (2014) assertion that under the massive socio-cultural changes effected by globalisation in India, aging switched from being a social to an economic phenomenon. The elderly, she says, were marginalised as they did not fit the new shift from 'humanistic (social) to materialistic (economic)' values and perspectives. Older women of the 'upper-lower and middle classes' were most adversely affected amongst this group (Nair 2014) (Fig. 2).

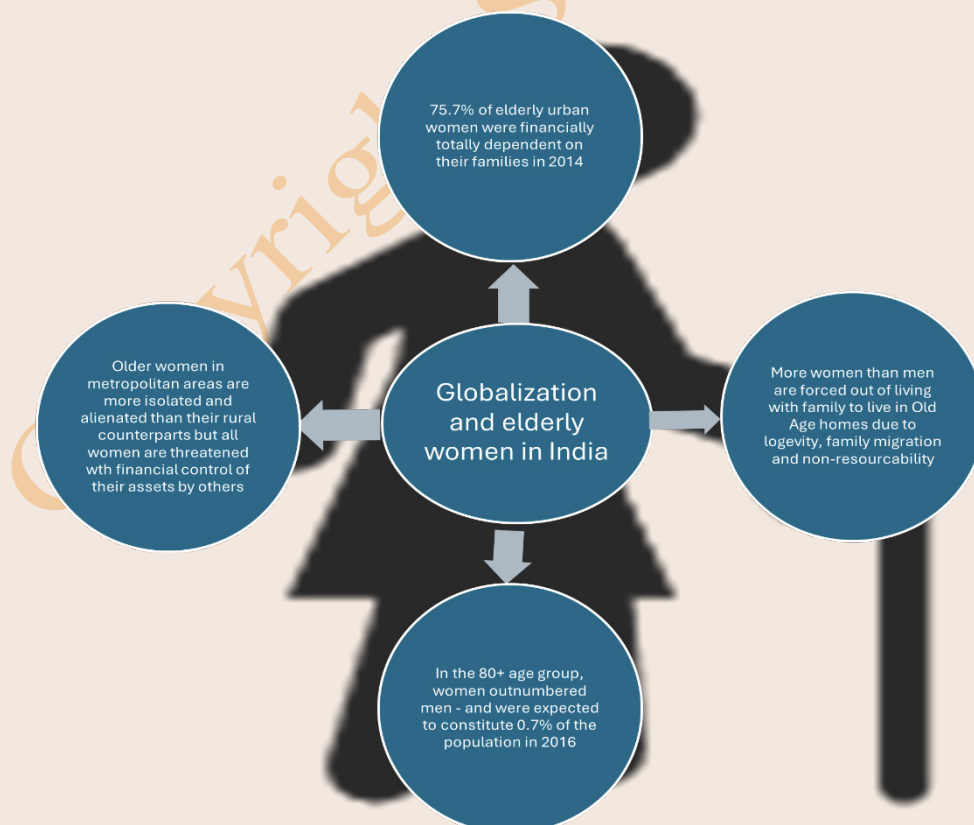


Figure 2: Effects of globalization on elderly women in India (based on data in Nair 2014)

In keeping with the changing mores, N had experienced a swift and sudden change in power relations amongst family members after moving to her son's home. Mothers in Indian cultural imaginary have long been associated with 'strength of character' (Kottary in Chaurasia and Dubey (2021) and exercise of agency, particularly in the domestic sphere and even outside if so required for the sake of their children. The respect reserved for them in return has also been a cultural given. This respect had been further built up for N as her husband and father-in-law had been 'liberal' interpreters of the many cultural strands that newly independent India was heir to in the 1960s, when N had been married at the age of 18. Ultimately, the family had adopted a Gandhi-infused cultural modernity which had combined the duty-driven ethos of the Gandhian philosophy with a 'human-centred' approach grounded in Western modernity.

Following these ideals, N had not only accepted her son's choice of a partner from another caste and region but had graciously swatted away all suggestions of dowry payments that were still a powerful feature of matrimonial arrangements in her community (Fig. 3). In demonstrated agreement with her family ideals, she had adopted a posture of welcoming equality towards her daughter-in-law, disregarding the traditional family hierarchies that allotted a position of superior power to the mother-in-law in relation to her daughter-in-law. In a show of that 'lack of internal struggle' that Schiller equates with dignity (Akhtar 2015, p. 25), she and her husband had made no opposition to requests from her daughter-in-law's family to undertake all arrangements for them too in the elaborate organisation of the wedding rituals for their part too. At the same time, the elderly couple had agreed to the daughter-in-law's family's request, in a surprising contravention of established tradition, to send their substantial gifts directly to the young couple's home bypassing the groom's elderly parents entirely.

	Situation	Party holding power	Action	Impact
Development as an expansive and inclusive consciousness, in practice	B (N's son) wishes to marry against cast, language and regional bounds	N (through high cultural respect for mother)	Agrees without protest to practice ideals of human equality	B and his partner gain social support and recognition
	B's future in-laws request that N and her husband organise their part of the elaborate wedding rituals too	N and her husband through the traditionally very much greater power in marriage arrangements for the groom's parents	Agree despite ill health and some reservations to demonstrate belief in equality of both sets of parents	B's future in-laws express some gratitude N and her husband achieve a sense of 'constancy' with their ideals
	B's future in-laws request that tradition be broken to allow their substantial gifts to be presented to their daughter and not her in-laws	N and her husband as they have high social capital as idealists, and the backing of social norms	Agree as against dowry and ostentatious gift-giving	B and his wife are set up with a new furnished household
Development as pursuit of material growth at all costs, in practice	N's husband passes away, leaving her with a furnished household and a modest income but no property	B and his wife, as B is the only son and tradition demands that N needs to move to live with him B and his wife hold well-paying jobs in the corporate sector	B winds up N's household as thinks fit N is to observe severe restrictions in B's home, handing over her pension to be managed by B and his wife She is branded a failed individual, lacking agency and prudentialism	N develops bouts of depression, and signs of introjection of the values of her new home, is asked to leave after 14 years, is taken in by one of her daughters to be treated in the same manner, dies after 2 years of moving

Figure 3: Measuring material impact of practising two approaches to development at the level of 'mind-body-heart' individual experience

By the time of N's husband's death, however, a shift had occurred in the dialectical relations between systems of production and cultural production in India. This shift was in line with Gomez and Crowther's (2007) argument that, under globalisation, the 'macro-economic' world, through its 'daily experience' was affecting the lives of individuals both 'inside and outside' the field of economic activity. Such value shifts were reflected in the restrictions that N was asked to observe in her son's home where she did not have the freedom to access the

kitchen, the entertainment apparatus, the other rooms in the flat or entertain guests without prior permission. Her Gandhian eschewing of the material to prioritise domestic and social responsibilities had resulted in her partial financial dependence upon her children after her husband's death even though she was able to meet her basic needs for food, clothing and healthcare from her widow's pension.

Still, her partial dependence was daily interpreted in the family's practice and conversations as a lack of respectable prudentialism and an example of her inability to show agency or take personal responsibility. The agency shown in her having pursued her studies up to the degree level while also running a household that included providing full-time care for an invalid great-grandmother-in-law for 15 years and later for her father-in-law for about 4 years, as well as her initiative and courage in enlarging the sphere of her domestic activities to include traditionally male tasks of shopping, directing the children's education and conducting social relations were unfavourably compared with women in her daughter-in-law's family who had prioritised paid jobs and a way of living that we may term as a materially-informed being-in-the-world that emphasised a driven pursuit of 'wealth, status, power, happiness, and a higher standard of living' (Allen 2019, p. 117). N's conduct had been in keeping with her beliefs in line with what Douglas Allen (2019) characterises as 'a sustainable harmonious integration of the mind-body-heart self' (p. 118).

An alternative Gandhi-inspired practice of 'development'

Allen goes on to show how such an attitude is critical of an unproblematic equating of constant material progress with development. It prioritises instead, a holistic satisfaction of a human being's 'mind-body-heart' needs (Allen 2019, p. 118). He says that in a 'developmental model', Gandhians would argue for the sacrifice of an 'undisciplined, untruthful, violent, ego-driven, modern construction of the self' (p. 118) that produces 'undisciplined, insatiable [bodily] needs' and 'mental disease, dissatisfaction, and alienation' (p. 117) on a psychological plane. Instead, we may re-formulate development as the inculcation in the individual of a more expansive and inclusive consciousness, the sacrifice of the ego-driven Self, and the privileging of the 'experiential Other'.

Thus, when N had sacrificed her traditional privileges during and after her son's wedding, or when she had sacrificed her own bodily comfort to undertake more demanding chores to look after her ailing in-laws or aid her husband's attempts to increase the family's material resources, she was practising this kind of development as translated into individual practice. That there was a community, or society, level recognition of these goals as desirable development was reflected in the remarkable respect she had enjoyed in the community of her town prior to her move to her son's home in the large metropolis. As Bourdieu (1977) wrote of the Kabilayh community of Algeria, 'the sense of honour' is something that is 'inculcated in the earliest years of life and constantly reinforced by calls to order from the group' (p. 15). Further, the rules of honour are known and understood by all members of a community such that the response to a challenge or a gift-giving or other such ritual is a known, anticipated and repeated act. Hence, it is reasonable to suppose that the cultural respect for a mother, amplified and reinforced by her lived practice of a communal ideal and the community's response to it over time, would have led U to have anticipated a role of trust or respect that the restrictions and loss of freedom in her son's home were out-of-step with.

In her new environment, respect was accorded to a new model of a self-centred, competitive, prudential individual focussed solely on the achievement of social power and material success. Haugaard (2022) references Weber's observation that the early capitalists constantly measured themselves against others and interpreted worldly success as a sign of divine grace. Over time, constant comparison and competitiveness as well as envy have been raised to ethical positions deeply entrenched in the centre of the capitalist worldview. They are also associated with ideas of superiority, status and worth. Through the employment of her son and daughter-in-law in the corporate world, such values reached and affected N's life strongly, reducing her dignity through daily humiliations, against which her conceptual repertoire furnished no defence (Fig. 4). The pernicious effects of this continuum of psychological violence from the business world, through its employees' talk and attitudes, to their families and social circle has been discussed in depth by Gomez and Crowther (2007).

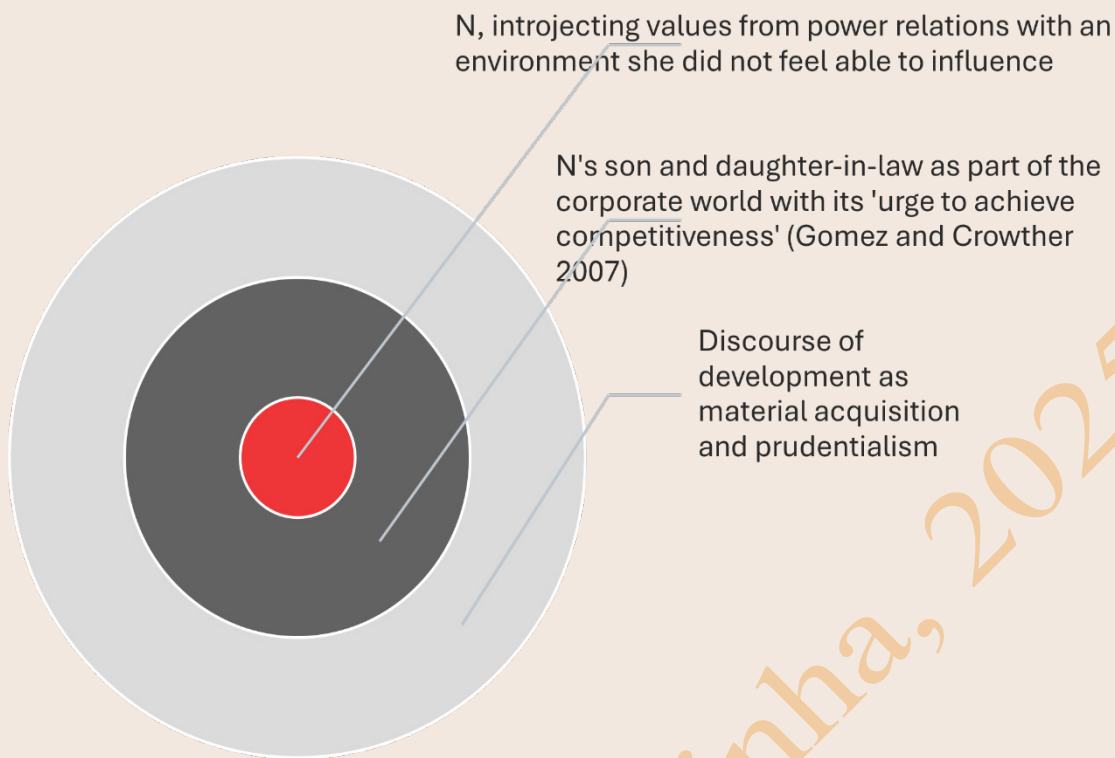


Figure 4: The process of concretising the discourse of development into psychological oppression of the 'hindmost' individual

N's aim in the interaction narrated was akin to an effort that Bourdieu (1977) describes as required of us when we are forced to navigate the 'foreign landscape' of an alien culture; the new culture presents us with a 'potential, abstract space, devoid of landmarks' and needs to be brought in alignment with the known and familiar "“system of axes linked unalterably to our bodies, and carried about with us wherever we go”" (p. 2) if we are to read successfully the map of this culture and navigate our way through it. N's own sense of herself, grounded in her history that was being denigrated daily, was of a caring individual who deserved to be respected. However, that sense was being constantly undermined in the new ethos prizing materialism. Thus, when a faint opportunity to graft that role onto a subject position made available by the current discourse appeared, she was unable to ignore it despite the transgressions of politeness and social order that it involved. Markovitz (2015) has cited this inability to forego need satisfaction as a sign of a "“culture of poverty”" (Oscar Lewis, cited in Markovitz, p. 70). That she was aware of these transgressions is shown by her careful disavowals of any lasting economic dominance over R in stressing that she did not know about the 'upmarket' product or, in general, about things of luxury, attributing that knowledge to her late husband and son. Her frequent laughter, an indicator of embarrassment, further supports her conscious awareness that she is putting herself in a power role that she does not really have.

Yet, the assertion of her having felt 'sorry' for R and the insistence upon making R's earlier search into a matter of affordability project expresses a need to re-experience herself as an individual worthy of respect, to a basic dignity, though momentarily, that she is unable to deny. Linking herself to other status signifiers through the use of English words and the language of luxury indicate that not only is she referencing the framework of meaning which pivots on the supremacy of the economic but that within it, she is seeking identification with a position of power and respect.

To make this claim, she has made a considerable material sacrifice in purchasing an expensive handbag that she did not need to, hence, the felt-need driving her unusual discourse practice is not really for economic superiority, which she seems to be asserting, but of a respect that is not available within the neo-liberal normative world that views all human behaviour through an economic lens alone. Her attempt to re-experience power as respect to offset the psychological pain of the daily experience of an ill-understood subordination may be likened to a Hauka ritual in colonial Ghana cited by De Vos and Suarez-Orozco (1990, pp. 144-146) in which a group of locals 'relieved previous stress' through the practice of blood sacrifices that also involved their imitating their

colonial superiors in both awe and parody. The authors opined that the role-acting allowed the daily-humiliated Ghanaians ‘to experience, be it briefly, what power feels like inside’ (p. 145).

Reproducing psychological violence: humiliation and resistance

The material sacrifice involved in the purchase of the bag is not the only sacrifice made by N in this interaction. The response of the others offered a strong disagreement even to her request for momentary power by not meeting her gaze or invitations for turn-taking.

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In behavioural research, gaze direction ‘indicates spatial focus of outward attention’ and a lowered gaze may be interpreted as a refusal that the subject warrants attention. Social actors seek to construct themselves as social subjects, performing their own subject positions and interpreting that of others, in order to empower themselves and achieve agency (Giddens, cited in Haugaard 2022). N’s appropriation of the neo-liberal discourse through references to its norms of cultural consumption and positioning herself as the economic superior to a better-off relative failed to achieve the social integration that the group’s co-construction of her authority position would have given her. Instead, resistance is offered by others to N’s recontextualization, perspectivation and assertion of agency.

Her interpretation is resisted by R when her acceptance of the bag comes with an explanation or an ‘account’ offering an alternative perspective on her earlier search for a handbag. In CA, an acceptance with an account is a sign that the normal exchange of conversation sequencing has broken down as normally an acceptance is short and direct whereas it is a rejection of an offer that warrants an accounting. Where an acceptance is accompanied by an account, something about the offer is being rejected by the recipient. R stresses that that she owned a number of handbags already and wished to remain within a budget due to that. As R was wealthier than N, she may be seen to be resisting the role of a needy relative to be pitied, which is both surprising and insulting for her. Her response is also punctuated with pauses and hesitation markers, such as ‘oh!’ and ‘ah!’ that express a certain reservation in her acceptance of the gift. N’s need for economic status can only be achieved through a ‘power-over’ position of humiliating R, thus forcing R and the others to join in the subtly aggressive power play by contradicting her, or refusing to join in the conversation even at ‘transition relevance places’ to protect their own psychological needs. By refusing to take turns, by maintaining silence and mostly looking down, her companions, according to CA rules, are declining the recognition of her authority to make the claims of economic capacity that should place her in a position to pity R.

The conversation is brought to an end by one of them making a short statement of agreement that is careful to praise the bag, thus complementing N on her choice, but being silent on the other details of the story. By leaving the room, they express a strong wish to move away from the subject even at the cost of leaving N sitting alone for a while. This Repair work by X to fix the breakdown against R’s dignity, in polite respect for her, can only be done in this instance by the participants physically leaving the room and returning later with the tea to make a fresh start, signalling a strong transgression of R’s dignity by N that needs time to be repaired. The strain is strong enough that ‘Repair’ can only be effected by X, Y and R all leaving the room at the end of N’s long speech to bring the conversation to an end, though being in economically stronger position, their self-assertion did not require transgressing politeness to the same extent as N.

Reproducing psychological violence: market lexis as care

The use of the lexis of care by N is striking in the inversion of its intended use. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) has pointed out how the use of care-giving agents in the form of therapists, social workers, educators and others has been appropriated by neoliberal societal discourse to complicate care positions with economic objectives, validating the mix of care and economic semantic fields to achieve socially competitive ends.

The attribution of good taste and ‘help’ to her son and the focus on him would also have made it clear to the others that N’s real objective had been to achieve a short period of social integration with him in the process of purchasing the bag. Gomez and Crowther (2007) argue that ‘our present behaviour ... and our attitudes reflect our life ... [and are affected by] those with power’ (p. 24) in our environment. As Haugaard (2022) suggests, subject positions give meaning to our lives and her need to counter the daily denigrations, as Marx had predicted, was so great that when the opportunity to achieve a brief collaboration with her son presented itself, even at the cost of sacrificing of the social capital entailed in this interaction, its pursuit was not a matter of choice for her in any real sense, even though it came at R’s cost, which R, X and Y then felt the need to resist.

In heavy irony against the discourse of material uplift as a guarantor of dignity, N had actually acquired an income for the first time on her husband's death. As the widow of a former civil servant, N was granted a modest pension by the government of India upon her husband's death. Throughout her stay with her son, she contributed to most of her own expenses and also contributed by making savings in the name of other family members, but was exhorted daily to be grateful for their consideration in sheltering her. Her material uplift had come at the cost of a psychological 'emptiness' (Gomez and Crowther 2007), or alienation. Her behaviour reflected possible introjection of these values from her son and daughter-in-law as she often 'imitated' gestures, language and intonation used by her daughter-in-law though she seemed not to be aware of it. Under the circumstances, her need for affirmation from those holding power over her was so great that her acting to enlarge the continuum of psychological violence that Gomez and Crowther have pointed to, by subjecting R to a needless 'powerplay' was not an act of choice but of imposition by an environment she felt unable to negotiate with in any constructive way.

The continuum of violence was not limited to this family, as testified by Nair (2014). After 14 years of staying with them, N was asked by her son, to move to a poor women's ashram. In a final inversion of care positions for economic use, her elder daughter invited her to move in with her instead. Soon afterwards, N began to develop frequent need for hospitalisation and suffered physical injuries. Two years later, she died in hospital of unexplained medical causes. She left behind substantial savings which were divided amongst her children.

Case Study 2: Fear as a mechanism of psychological violence

At this point, as further illustration of the mechanisms aiding the 'social reproduction' of a continuum of psychological violence (Fig. 5), with its starting point in the business world, fuelled by the current discourse of development, which breaches human dignity, I would like to introduce the second brief case study. It shows that the oppression and continuum of psychological violence are not limited to older women. Further, it shows that the opportunities for paid work opened up to women in globalised India did not necessarily accord them greater dignity than N had been accorded in her economically subordinate position under the Gandhi-influenced cultural ethos of some Northern Indian communities prior to globalisation.

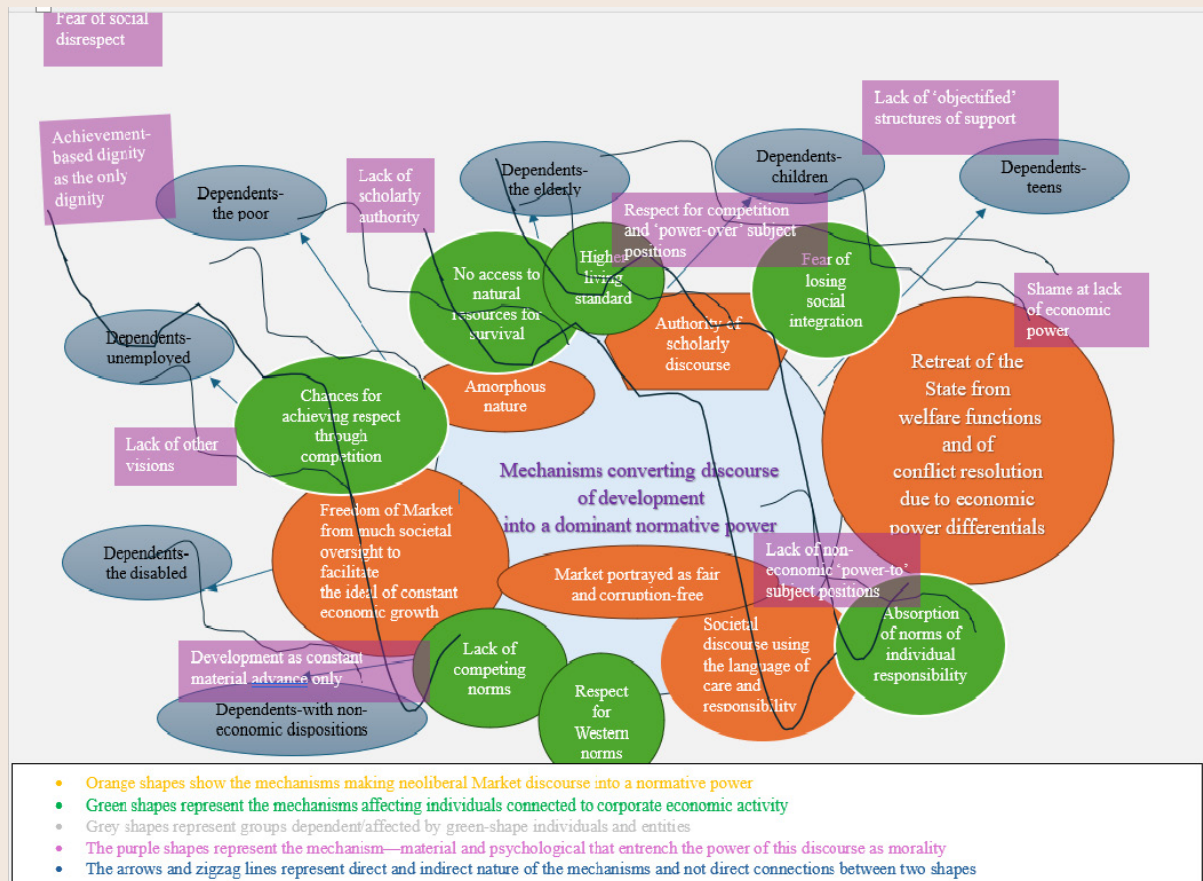


Figure 5: Webs of discourse: mechanisms converting neoliberal economic vision into a whole-society normative code

A had been close to N's family for nearly 35 of her 52 years at the time of her death and had witnessed the counter-intuitive deterioration in N's position from when she had no personal income to when she acquired a modest income, giving her the capability to contribute to her son's family in the form of paying for her own essential needs and also contributing to savings for the other family members. Alarmed by this deterioration, A stepped up her own efforts towards a heightened prudentialism. Importantly, she attempted to ward off not only material insecurity, but, in a recognition of the promotion of envy as a technology of control in this discourse, she began to attempt to ward off the loss of dignity that N was experiencing daily as having been the 'least able' economically in her social circle. Despite suffering serious health problems, and holding a full-time teaching position at a prestigious secondary school while caring for a seriously ill spouse, A set up an online baking business to ensure greater financial security for her later years. In many of her conversations, she expressed fears about loss of respect, or recognition, caused by financial inadequacy. Dignity, unlike in pre-globalisation India, was no longer a piece of cultural capital open for everyone's acquisition, providing an alternative system of trust and those 'dispersed interdependencies' that should help to weather economic difficulties but had become an adjunct of the economic, which alone was supposed to encompass the whole human being. Soon after these increased efforts, A died of a heart attack at the age of 52, pre-deceasing N by 22 months.

Section 4: Concluding thoughts

The need for diversity in discourse of development

The deteriorating condition of elderly women has led to legal interventions by the government of India. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007 laid legal obligations for children, defining children more widely than one's biological offspring only, has attempted to put in place enforceable objectified norms that draw on a vision of humanity other than a neoliberal-inspired vision of human as *homo economicus* only.

Recognising the insights from many sources, such as 'data, [from]... Thomas Piketty's book, *Capital* (2014)' and 'Martin Gilens's (2014) work on inequality', which show that economic inequality increases severely under neoliberal regimes (Vallier 2022), the role of State, society and the Market should be redesigned to balance each other's power rather than act in concert, leaving the individual little power for Voice and Exit options. There needs to be an understanding that due to the lack of a 'centre' or any 'objectified' norms, the Market can act with greater facility to interfere with the individual's freedom creating conditions of oppression with no entity held accountable reducing their psychological capital and thus their ability to act.

In N's case, her modest pension, provided by the State, could have met her basic needs but it only inflicted a life of psychological pain that destroyed her welfare and well-being both, through her exposure to the neoliberal ethos of economic competition as the only value in life. Thus, maintaining focus on the creation of an expansive, inclusive consciousness that provides agency to hitherto marginalised groups, whether through deregulation of trading or through State action to counter both material and psychological poverty, must all remain valid options in a richer discourse of development that is currently being straitjacketed into a destructive economic cast to serve powerful financial interests.



Figure 6: Relationship between the current discourse of development and dignity

Development and dignity: Enabling a broadening of the vision of development

To end, I would like to return to Marx's vision of an enriched life of equality and camaraderie by quoting a street vendor that the authors of the book *Dignity with Development* (2022) have cited at length as someone who has achieved a life of dignity through the recognition of previously illegal street vending; summing up the reason for his new dignified life, Dinesh says 'Back then I used to be alone; now I am a million, billion voices, a people's representative' (p. 163). I would argue that it is the recognition, solidarity and voice, as well as the legalising of his vending business, that are responsible for giving Dinesh a sense of dignity, which in our catalogue in Section 1 on defining dignity featured as a 'sense of being part of something important' (Akhtar 2015, p. 128).

Confirming the importance of voice and agency with respect to one's environment, Gillebaart and De Ridder (2019) reported in a study carried out on 3750 participants in Utrecht in 2019, that participants from a disadvantaged neighbourhood experienced greater lack of perceived control over their environment than those from non-disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Perceived control is a measure of the individual's perception of the extent to which they believe their chances in life to be under their own control rather than under environmental factors beyond their control. This perception had material ramifications as it was linked to 'lower quality health outcomes and lifestyle' in the participants.

Through the case studies in this paper, we have examined the effects of such a lack of control at the level of the individual, socially and psychologically, showing how a narrow, economic and competitive view of development needs to be broadened. The concept of dignity can enable that objective through its 'intra-psychic and ...social' aspects that allow development to be interpreted differently below and above the point of meeting an individual's basic needs. Above it, development must be reflected not only in demands to be shown dignity but also in a measurable attitude of respect, restraint and compassion towards the suffering Other.

In this paper I have shown:

- an illustration of some mechanisms by which a continuum of psychological violence and poverty become evident, material facts in the lives of some of the most vulnerable groups whose poverty is not captured by purely economic metrics

- that this poverty, with its attendant but, often hidden, abuse of power, is not caused by material want but by psychological want, which is equally detrimental to human dignity
- that this loss of dignity is caused by a lack of distinguishing between basic and achievement-based dignity and their different needs
- a practical comparison between the visions of development under a Gandhi-inspired expansive and inclusive cultural ethos, open to a plurality of influences, and the current dominance of the unitary discourse of development as wealth maximisation with its detrimental impact on basic human dignity
- the need for a more nuanced view of the welfare role of the State, which in many cases, through a dynamic assessment of cultural needs and objectification of norms into laws retains the power to both change, and respond to, societal discourse for human welfare more effectively than theoretical worldviews developed in response to particular historical moments.



I have also argued that the current destruction of dignity echoes Marx's prediction about increasing psychological poverty and alienation if the need for money-making is allowed to become the sole driver of development.

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