Abstract and Keywords

Self-respect is central to many liberal accounts of social justice, as it is necessary for individuals to effectively pursue their plans of life. In particular, extant work on self-respect has focused on its social bases—that is, how social norms can shape the opportunities people have for developing and maintaining a sense of self-respect. However, much of this work overlooks the role information technology plays in such social processes. Given its pervasiveness—from search engines to automated facial and body scanners—and impact on people’s lives, scholars ought to pay closer attention to the ways human identity and dignity are not only socially, but also sociotechnically informed. To that end, this chapter recovers and expands on John Rawls’ “social bases of self-respect” to introduce the idea of the “sociotechnical bases of self-respect” to better account for the place of information technology in shaping possibilities for the development of individuals’ dignity.

Keywords: Rawls, self-respect, dignity, justice, information technology, identity, privacy, surveillance

1. Introduction

The work of political philosopher John Rawls has featured prominently in discussions of information, technology, and ethics (see Hoffmann 2017). However, the vast majority of these efforts overlook the substantive and justificatory role of what Rawls (1971) calls the social bases of self-respect, which he counts as “perhaps the most important” (386) of the primary goods his two principles of justice are designed to distribute. In some ways, this lack of work on self-respect is reflective of a broader absence of consideration paid to respect in information and computing ethics, as lamented by Dillon (2010). But the development and exercise of self-respect is, like other important human values, shaped by the affordances and moral valences of technology in ways that merit particular and sustained attention.
In the following sections, I attend to the role of self-respect as it relates to issues of social justice, information, and technology. Beginning with Rawls’ work, I detail the importance of self-respect for theories of justice generally while also moving past his individualist conception in favor of a social understanding of self-respect informed by race-based, feminist, and leftist work. This expanded notion of self-respect emphasizes its social contingency—that is, the ways self-respect is not only a matter of individual motivation, but also fundamentally shaped by social, political, and economic conditions. After establishing the importance of self-respect, I draw on work in both values-conscious design and disability studies to show how self-respect can also be promoted or undermined by the design, dissemination, and use of technology. More precisely, I argue that the sociotechnical relationships supported by, in particular, information technology play an important role in codifying, entrenching, and reproducing self-respect’s social bases. From there, I deploy Wolff’s (1998) notion of “respect-standing” as a heuristic for uncovering information technology’s impact on self-respect in two domains: (1) privacy and surveillance and (2) information and identity. In doing so, I demonstrate how a move from the social bases of self-respect to the sociotechnical bases of self-respect can help us better account for self-respect in ethical analyses of technology.

2. Rawls and the Social Bases of Self-Respect

According to Rawls, the social bases of self-respect are integral to the development of what he calls the two moral powers, defined as capacities to (1) recognize and act from justice’s demands and (2) adopt and take up effective means to some more or less complete set of valued ends. In view of this, Rawls lists the “social bases of self-respect” as among the primary goods his theory of justice is designed to distribute, even going so far as to call it “perhaps the most important primary good” (Rawls 1971, 386). As a primary good, the social bases of self-respect provide an individual with both “a sense of his own value” and a “secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life is worth carrying out” (Rawls 1971, 386). Rawls’ use of the masculine pronoun aside, we see that the first aspect of self-respect affirms the value of individuals’ plans of life, while the second affords individuals a confidence necessary to those plans (Zink 2011, 332). In this way, the social bases of self-respect are integral to the effective exercise of the capacity to set and pursue a conception of the good—that is, Rawls’ second moral power.

Elsewhere, Rawls connects self-respect to the first moral power during his argument from stability. Rawls believes that not only should a conception of justice be justifiable to parties in the original position, but it should also be stable—that is, it ought to cultivate in individuals a sense of justice and discourage countervailing inclinations or attitudes (Zink 2011, 338). In particular, a conception of justice should promote values like self-respect and discourage tendencies towards envy or resentment that, over time, might undermine the development of Rawls’ first moral power. For parties selecting principles of justice in the original position, if one conception of justice better promotes this moral power (by,
among other things, supporting the development of self-respect) then it is said to be more stable—and stability counts as a reason for parties to choose that conception.

Rawls argues that the lexical ordering of his two principles of justice—that is, his requirement that the first principle (the liberty principle) be satisfied prior to the second (the opportunity principle)—offers more stability than principles from other philosophical traditions. First, Rawls believes that his prioritization of liberty helps individuals cultivate an effective sense of justice (i.e., Rawls’ first moral power) and better supports their self-respect. As Cohen (2003) summarizes, self-respect is, on Rawls’ account, most stable when rooted on one’s sense of oneself as an equal member of society, sharing responsibility for making fundamental judgements about social and political issues (109). Second, he argues that second principle considerations (fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle) support individuals’ relative socioeconomic independence, ensuring no one must be wholly subservient to another—a condition that would be detrimental to one’s self-respect.

Combined, these two features of Rawls’ work—the social bases of self-respect and the argument from stability—show how self-respect is integral to his theory of justice. It also demonstrates the foundational role self-respect plays in establishing and stabilizing egalitarian social arrangements, since it supports individuals’ sense of equal membership in society (Mathiesen 2015, 440). In this way, his work establishes the importance of self-respect for the stability of liberal egalitarian theories of justice generally. At the same time, it also exposes some limits of Rawls’ conception of self-respect. Rawls clearly views self-respect as “a matter of individual motivation” and that those who lack it “do not possess the psychological disposition necessary for acting from a sense of justice” (Zink 2011, 338–339; see, also: Rawls 1971, 440–446; Dillon 1997, footnote 18, 232). But Rawls’ two principles of justice do not exhaust the social and cultural sources that may be relevant to the development of self-respect in individuals, especially forms of stigmatization, disdain, or humiliation (Young 1990; Young 2006; Pilapil 2014).

This is not to say that social considerations are wholly absent from Rawls’ account. He notes, for example, that maintaining a sense of one’s value “depends in part upon the respect shown to us by others; no one can long possess an assurance of his own value in the face of enduring contempt or even the indifference of others” (Rawls 1999, 171). Here, self-respect, while still fundamentally rooted in the individual, is contingent on the recognition that one is seen as a fully cooperating member of society (Rawls 1993, 318). Further, Rawls argues in his characterization of the family—in line with liberal theory generally—that the home is a uniquely intimate sphere of personal development and that a theory of justice must not unduly intrude on its inner-workings. Given the relationship between self-respect and his second moral power, it’s clear that the family plays an important role in the development of individuals’ self-respect.

Despite these gestures, his individualist conception of self-respect generates some lingering problems. Eyal (2005), for example, argues that Rawls’ characterization of self-respect ultimately commits him to objectionable or even illiberal politics, as his commit-
ment to individualistic self-respect as “perhaps the most important primary good” should logically force him to abandon the priority of liberty in favor of strict equality in self-respect’s social bases. For others, Rawls’ conception is less logically fatal; instead, it simply necessitates further explication of what might make up self-respect’s “social bases” and whether or not those things are distributable in ways similar to, for example, income (Doppelt 2009, 128). His image of the (patriarchical) nuclear family, for example, abstracts away from the often oppressive realities of many family situations—realities that require attention to both unfair distributions of resources and misogynistic cultural norms.

For present purposes, however, I accept and affirm Rawls’ insight that self-respect is not only important, but integral to the realization of social justice. Without a secure conviction in one’s self and one’s plan of life, moving through the world and pursuing one’s valued ends is comparatively more difficult. However, accepting self-respect’s value does not simultaneously mean adopting Rawls’ views uncritically or without exception. Rather, we must take care to further articulate and extend our understanding of self-respect’s social bases in order to better understand how it may be supported or undermined. If our aim is to ultimately move from the largely ideal realm of Rawls’ work to achieving social justice under non-ideal conditions, then we need to be explicit about the social conventions and contexts that shape the development of self-respect today.

3. Taking Self-Respect’s Social Bases Seriously

Self-respect’s social dimensions have generated explicit philosophical discussion since at least the mid-twentieth century, both prior to and in conversation with Rawls’ work. Telfer (1968), for example, argues that self-respect hinges on an independence from others (117)—though she does not specify the degree of independence required. Darwall (1977) makes self-respect’s social contingency more explicit, noting that its realization depends, in part, “on the appropriate conception of persons and on what behaviors are taken to express this conception or the lack of it” and may “vary with society, convention, and context” (48). Attention to social convention matters as individuals’ lives are informed by a range of contexts, from networks of friends and family to workplaces, neighborhoods, and nation-states (Doppelt 2009, 132). Each of these contexts can have profound and pervasive impacts on the possibilities for self-respect available to individuals and groups.

If self-respect is, in many ways, social, our analyses must pay close attention to the contours of those social frameworks and contexts that underwrite its development. For Dillon (1997), self-respect is profoundly shaped by our “basal self-understandings” that inform our moral development long before we begin to exercise agency. These basal frameworks “are constructed in the complex, emotionally charged interplay of self, others, and institutions which begins before we are capable of conceptualizing self, worth, persons, institutions, and the relations among them, and it shapes and delimits ... our agentic capacities” (Dillon 1997, 244). In this way, self-respect is—at its base—constructed through the complex interplay of social, cultural, and political forces.
Importantly, the basal self-understandings that support our self-respect are, for some, forged within social contexts of oppression (Dillon 1997, 245–246). This presents particular problems for conceptions of self-respect as solely a kind of independence or matter of individual motivation, especially in cases of internalized oppression (see: Charles 2010). In the United States and elsewhere, individuals’ basal frameworks are shaped by histories of colonialism, genocide of native peoples, slavery, discrimination and disenfranchise-ment, and other institutionalized injustices. As Moody-Adams (1993) argues, for example, the development and maintenance of self-respect for Black individuals is often constrained by normative standards of race embedded in social, political, and economic structures. Specifically, white hegemonic norms and expectations of appearance, behavior, and beyond create both explicit and implicit barriers for the development of self-respect. As poet and writer Morgan Parker (2017) captures it in her essay “How to Stay Sane While Black,” “every time I tell myself that I am worthless, how do I know whether it’s me thinking it, or the white voices I’ve internalized?” (para. 12).

To be certain, the presence of barriers does not make the development and exercise of self-respect impossible. It does, however, shape the conditions and means by which self-respect is realized and maintained. As Thomas (1995) and Boxill (1976; 1992) argue, for example, political protest during the American civil rights movement of the 1960s was not exclusively about the winning of specific rights for African-Americans—it was also an effort to liberate self-respect for marginalized Black communities generally. Their accounts follow Rawls in admitting the profound influence of social institutions on the development of self-respect, but they are more explicit in attending to the role of protest for transforming unjust institutional structures and asserting self-respect.

In addition to race and ethnicity, Rawls’ heavily criticized characterization of the family reveals how the development of self-respect is also contingent on sex and gender. As Nussbaum (2004) notes, “the family is one of the most non-voluntary and pervasively influential of social institutions, and one of the most notorious homes of sex hierarchy, denial of equal opportunity, and sex-based violence and humiliation” (115). Though Rawls recognizes the equal standing of all family members as citizens, he fails to offer an appropriate response to injustices within the family’s structure itself. This is insufficient, as the equal provision of the social bases of self-respect must take seriously issues of sex-based subordination and oppression both in the home and more broadly, as the development of self-respect is intimately tied to one’s place within a larger culture and whether or not that culture forces particular social roles upon certain categories of people (Okin 2004, 202). It must also pay attention to the ways embedded heterosexist standards of sexuality and cisgender norms of binary gender shape the development of self-respect for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Mohr 1988) and transgender, intersex, or gender non-conforming individuals, respectively.

Finally, self-respect is also often informed by conditions of work and employment—especially by uneven distributions of decision-making power that structure socioeconomic relations. As Doppelt (1981) argues, “Rawls’ conception does not adequately comprehend...the deep ways in which equality and inequality in its social bases are deci-
sively shaped by the distribution of economic power and position in advanced industrial society” (260). As Rawls (2007) himself points out in his lectures on Marx, leftist conceptions are suspicious of the assumption that the conditions under which individuals are able to exercise certain moral ideals can be improved independent of economic circumstances. On this account, the realization of self-respect for certain individuals (workers) is unduly subject to the decisions of others (capitalists) that drive economic relations. These individuals are constantly subject, as Marx (1975) put it, to the “whims of the wealthy” (283).

4. Sociotechnical Relations and Self-Respect

The preceding discussions lay bare the ways self-respect is more than solely a matter of individual motivation. But even the more expansive, social accounts of self-respect fail to describe how material artifacts and practices work to entrench social and political norms, persisting and shaping individuals’ experiences over time. Put another way, an emphasis on the social overlooks the role of technology and sociotechnical relations—that is, relations defined by the “combinations of hardware and people (and usually other elements) to accomplish tasks that humans cannot perform unaided by such systems” (Kline 2003, 211)—in constituting and entrenching the social bases of self-respect in both material and practical ways. Importantly, our self-respect is not won or lost only in our interactions with others; it is also shaped by our interactions with non-human dimensions of the world—like technological artifacts, information systems, and the built environment—that codify and reproduce self-respect’s social bases.

Choices made during the conception, development, and dissemination of technological artifacts and systems imbue them with particular values; at the same time, those built in values press on users and the world and, subsequently, further inform the shape of human values. Consequently, technology does not passively mediate, but actively shapes our moral, political, and cultural development (Verbeek 2009). Our moral analyses, then, should attend to the ways in which the design and development of technological artifacts and information systems might promote or obscure different moral values or ethical norms (Brey 2010, 41–42). Work in the area of values-conscious design (see, for example: Friedman and Nissenbaum 1996; Friedman, Kahn, and Borning 2006; Flanagan et al., 2008), in particular, is driven by a “concern over the moral and ethical consequences of our modern technological era” and focuses on ways to “ensure that particular attention to moral and technical values becomes an integral part of the conception, design, and development” of technology (Manders-Huits and Zimmer 2009, 38).

The moral valences built into technology (Verbeek 2009) can, along with the broader social structures within which they are deployed, have a profound impact on individual possibilities for the development and exercise of self-respect. As Brey (2007) describes, “the same technological artifact may empower one user more than it does another [since] artifacts will necessarily serve certain goals or interests better than others [and] may be more or less compatible with the attributes of users” (17). And although any single arti-
fact or system cannot account for every possible user, there is—as Wittkower (2016) points out—a point where exclusion crosses over from pragmatically necessary to discriminatory, especially when interpreted in the appropriate social and historical context. Patterns of disempowerment, exclusion, and discrimination built (knowingly or incidentally) into technological artifacts and systems work to systematically hinder the development of self-respect for some, while promoting (or at least not standing in the way of) its realization for others.

The relationship between technology design and self-respect is made explicit in discussions surrounding disability. As disabilities activism and scholarship has shown, what counts as a disability is often determined not by any particular abilities exhibited by persons but, rather, by features of the social and physical environment (Oliver 1981; Shakespeare 2010; Barnes 2012). In this way, disability is something that is “imposed on top of” physical or other impairments (UPIAS 1976). For example, blindness is only a disability with regard to reading in the absence of Braille; similarly, being wheelchair-bound is only a disability with regard to mobility in the absence of accessible buildings. Further, as Shew (2017) points out, disabilities hinge not only on the presence or absence of assistive or accommodating technologies, but also on their maintenance and the social meanings attached to them (n.p.; see also Bell 2010; Docherty, et al. 2010). With regard to the latter, Terzi (2010) notes that persons with disabilities face difficulties “in dealing with the reactions by other people to the way they look, act, or simply to the way they are” (163), the complexities of which have been explored by Garland-Thomson (2006). Social attitudes and circumstances, then, “question disabled people’s equal social bases of self-respect” (Terzi 2010, 163).

Building on these insights, the remainder of this section explores the sociotechnical bases of self-respect in two overlapping, but distinct areas of concern: (1) privacy and surveillance and (2) information and identity. I show how the affordances, norms, and assumptions “baked in” to the design, dissemination, and use of, in particular, information technology work to create differential conditions for the development of self-respect for different groups of people. To be clear, the point is not to show that such conditions will always, without regard to other factors, contribute to the diminishment of self-respect. Rather, I only mean to show how it might be that sociotechnical factors are complicit in the promotion of the self-respect of some while undermining it for others.

5. Analyzing the Sociotechnical Bases of Self-Respect

In order to see how self-respect’s social bases are produced, reproduced, and codified through information technology, it will be helpful to first have some sort of heuristic or guide to identifying some of the ways technology might invoke self-respect. To this end, Jonathan Wolff’s (1998) notion of “respect-standing” presents one concrete way to think about the ways social, political, or other forces may work to undermine self-respect. On Wolff’s (1998) account, a person’s respect-standing is defined as the degree of respect
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others have for that person (107). If individuals are treated with contempt, they will likely be led to believe that they have low respect-standing; conversely, if individuals are treated decently, they will likely believe their respect-standing is high (Wolff 1998, 107). When paired with Dillon’s (1997) argument that pervasive subordination or devaluation of a category of persons can impact the respect persons can have for themselves, the notion of “respect-standing” helps us identify patterns of contempt (or, conversely, decent treatment) that inform the development of self-respect.

Wolff describes three ways in which one’s respect-standing might be (reasonably or unreasonably) diminished: failures of common courtesy, mistrust, and shameful revelation. Failures of courtesy address situations where one is frequently ignored, patronized, or lectured, leading one to believe that she has low-respect standing (Wolff 1998, 108). In the workplace, for example, women have described situations wherein their ideas or contributions are not “heard” by others until they are repeated or reiterated by a colleague who is a man, often without attribution (Dodgson 2018). This phenomenon—colloquially known as “hepeating,” a play on “repeating” (Gugliucci 2017)—is indicative of an uneven social distribution of respect. Where one category of persons (in this case, women) must struggle to be heard in ways other categories of persons (in this case, men) do not, we can expect the development and maintenance of self-respect and a sense of one’s worth to be more emotionally or psychologically laborious for the former than for the latter.

Similarly, systematic patterns of mistrust can also undermine the respect-standing of entire categories of persons. Being asked to justify oneself or being called to account too often, or when similarly situated others are not, or when the depth of investigation seems out of proportion, is insulting—it gives the impression that one is not trusted, that one is an object of suspicion and is not being respected (Wolff 1998, 108). Here, persons’ respect-standing can be undermined by uneven patterns of trust in society—as when some are subject to disproportionate and invasive investigations or are made to account for their day-to-day actions or beliefs more often than others. “Broken windows” policing policies, for example, intentionally skew law enforcement resources toward so-called “quality of life” offenses like vandalism or public drinking. Of course, the ideal “quality of life” often encodes particular racial or class biases, often privileging affluent and largely white standards of decorum or appearance. So, while the practice superficially appears not to target specific groups of people, like those of low socioeconomic standing or of minority racial or ethnic groups, its effect in practice is to subject these groups to increased surveillance and outsized levels of policing.

Finally, Wolff’s (1998) third source of diminished respect-standing involves what he calls “shameful revelation” (109–110). In instances of shameful revelation, one is forced to behave in a certain way or reveal things about themselves that reduce their respect-standing (Wolff 1998, 109). Specifically, people are forced to reveal details about themselves or their lives that may be perceived as embarrassing or shameful. Even if there is no good reason why a particular trait should lower your respect-standing, it can still be experienced as a source of shame (Wolff 1998, 114–115). Consider, for example, the practice of “outing” lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer individuals. Though activism and
other efforts have, in the US context, made some progress towards lessening the shame and stigma attached to LGBTQ, acceptance and safety are far from evenly or consistently distributed. The practice of “ outing” retains its force, in part, because normative background assumptions about sexuality or binary gender identity still work to structure LGBTQ identities as, at best, “other” or different and, at worst, deviant or shameful. This is particularly true for transgender, intersex, and gender-nonconforming individuals, who continue to face violence and harassment at greater rates than, for example, white and affluent cisgender gays and lesbians.

In the following two domains, I trace these three mechanisms—failures of courtesy, systematic mistrust, and shameful revelation—and their manifestation by and through the sociotechnical bases of self-respect. In each domain, the design and affordances of information technology conspire with existing patterns of social contempt and injustice to produce differential treatment for different groups of people. In doing so, they demonstrate how a move from the social bases of self-respect to the sociotechnical bases of self-respect can help us better account for the relationship between self-respect and technology.

### 5.1 Domain 1: Privacy and Surveillance

The values of respect and privacy have long been bound up with advances in information technology. Warren and Brandeis’s (Warren and Brandeis 1890) paradigmatic framing of privacy as “the right to be let alone,” for example, was a direct response to the increased popularity of Eastman Kodak Company’s small and inexpensive snap cameras, which allowed almost anyone to become a photographer and further propagated salacious gossip papers (Solove 2010, 15). While Warren and Brandeis did not use the language of self-respect specifically, they nonetheless sought to affirm the fundamental role of privacy in preventing indignities and securing “the protection of the person.” Subsequent claims to privacy made against technological invasions have followed this logic, also appealing to ideals of individual autonomy, self-determination, and dignity (Westin 1967; Benn 1971; Schoeman 1984). Reminiscent of Rawls’ defense of self-respect, Regan (1995) argues that “privacy inheres in the individual as an individual and is important to the individual primarily for self-development or for the establishment of intimate or human relationships” (24). Similarly, Bloustein (1984) describes privacy as preserving an “individual’s independence, dignity, and integrity; it defines man’s essence as a unique and self-determining being” (163).

On these accounts, privacy is one means by which we respect individual dignity and, by extension, provide an individual with a sense of their own value constitutive of self-respect. In particular, privacy helps to cordon off and preserve spaces where, as Julie Cohen (2012) notes, individuals are free to “play”—socially, morally, culturally—and explore our identities, values, goals, and, ideals. Here, privacy is one means by which we can connect Rawls’ second moral power and self-respect, since private reflection and exploration of different identities and plans of life is integral to developing a conception of the good upon which which self-respect rests. Further, as Shannon Vallor (2016) argues, surveillance
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technologies that eliminate or degrade these private spaces “may shortchange our moral and cultural growth in the long term” (191).

But privacy, as with self-respect, cannot be fully accounted for by discussions of the individual. As Reiman (1976) points out, privacy is integral to establishing and maintaining intimate human relationships. In a different way, Nissenbaum (2010) connects privacy and the social through the notion of contextual integrity. She argues that social context is characterized, in part, by “context-relative informational norms,” as she describes them, that “prescribe, for a given context, the types of information, the parties who are the subjects of the information as well as those who are sending and receiving it, and the principles under which this information is transmitted” (Nissenbaum 2010, 141). Privacy violations occur when the norms that govern the flow of personal information in a given context are upset in certain ways.

These “context-relative informational norms” have long been shaped by the affordances of available technologies of information production, storage, and dissemination. As Bra­man (2006) describes, many contexts—especially liberal bureaucratic ones—require the collection and processing of vast amounts of information in order to function (33–34). This collection and processing of information in the abstract hinges not only on the social expectations articulated by Nissenbaum, but also on the availability and use of material artifacts (paper, file cabinets, hard drives, networked computers) and the deployment of particular schematic practices (classification systems, organizational schemes). These artifacts and practices are not merely instrumental, but constitutive of one’s understanding of given informational norms. For example, my expectation that sensitive information about me recorded on paper and shared with a third party will be kept confidential is determined not only by my trust in the third party, but also by the presence (or absence) of the material means for security, like a locked file cabinet. In this way, information technology is an integral part of the social bases of self-respect.

Today, online platforms like social networking sites take up much of the work of developing and regulating norms of information exchange. Despite the “open, neutral, egalitarian and progressive” connotation of the term “platform,” however, these services are not neutral conduits for information exchange (Gillespie 2010). They are, instead, engaged in various forms of social, political, and economic mediation of online content (Klonick 2017; Gillespie 2018; Roberts 2018). Using a combination of human labor and computer software, online platforms actively set and inform the conditions and rules under which information can be shared, even if such interventions are, at times, hard to see (Gillespie 2010, p. 358). This kind of pervasive informational (and often algorithmic) gatekeeping raises important questions around fairness and transparency (Suzor 2018), democratic participation (Vaidyanathan 2018), and the role of computational agency in social and economic life (Tufekci 2015).

Platforms’ design choices can have a profound impact on the informational norms and privacy expectations of users. For example, the introduction of Facebook’s NewsFeed in 2006—an algorithmically curated stream of updates and advertisements based on a users’
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network of friends, interests, and engagement—shifted the flow of information within the service from the manual navigation of static profile pages to an automated stream of user updates visible upon logging into the site. This shift “threatened the privacy of users who previously assumed that only those friends who happened to visit their page would notice the changes; instead, any change made was automatically fed to all followers” (Zimmer and Hoffmann 2011, 177). The visceral and negative reaction of users—part of what Stark (2016) calls “the emotional context of information privacy”—betrayed the uneven power dynamics that mark our online lives, where dramatic design changes can be foisted on upon millions (or even a billion) users. Recalling Doppelt’s discussion of the connection between power and labor, this and other violations by the company points toward one way in which the design of online platforms may be implicated in the development and maintenance of our self-respect.

It is important to point out, however, that privacy violations are not always (or even usually) inflicted equally across all individuals or groups, be they citizens of a nation-state or users of a website. In the United States context, disparities in surveillance across racial and ethnic groups are well established (Parenti 2004; Browne 2015; Bedoya 2016). Today, new surveillance practices stand to further entrench these disparities, as in the case of electronic monitoring for already racially-skewed prison populations (Albert and Delano, 2018). And privacy protections can also undermine human dignity when they are applied unevenly or conceived of inappropriately, as with the uneven privacy protections afforded to seniors in nursing care (Young 2004). As Levy, Kilgour, and Berridge (2019) found in their work on consumer surveillance in elder care facilities, emerging law and policy has tended to defer to residents’ family members and legal representatives, leaving little space for the voices of residents and facility employees in deciding how new, lightweight surveillance technologies should be regulated and deployed. Similarly, privacy protections developed to promote liberal ideals of autonomy or dignity in the home can sometimes work to further institutionalize sex- and gender-based power imbalances, reinforcing conditions of domestic confinement, traditional social roles, and violence (Allen 2004, 35).

The issues of privacy, information, and technology implicate Wolff’s sources of reduced respect-standing in various ways. Failures of courtesy occur when contextually bound information norms are misunderstood or violated, as when changes to online social networking platforms upend previously established information flows. The widespread deployment of pervasive surveillance technologies against particular racial and ethnic groups can promote an environment of mistrust that systematically targets the dignity and security of particular groups, as exemplified by revelations of domestic spying carried out on Black Lives Matter activists (Vohra 2017; Levin 2018). Finally, the ubiquitous and invasive data-gathering techniques employed online can produce (to use Wolff’s term) “revelations” of information, that is, they can unwittingly reveal information, invite undue scrutiny, or have negative social and financial consequences. This risk is especially acute when the vulnerable parties have little say in how information about them is collected or circulated, as with elder care residents and employees. Depending on how these technological practices are employed, they can have the effect of reducing a person’s re-
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spect-standing—from the upsetting of informational norms to undue subjection to surveillance to forced disclosure.

5.2 Domain 2: Information and Identity

Beyond privacy, the standards and categories imposed by informational technologies can also influence one’s sense of self-respect. Information technologies are not neutral or empty vessels for encoding and transmitting information (Briggle and Mitcham 2009, 171)—rather, they necessarily require some more or less complete set of standards, classifications, or protocols in order to function. Without such recognizable and shared standards, advanced communication networks like the Internet would be impossible. In some cases, the standards imposed by these systems are of immediate relevance to a person’s sense of self, imposing what Manders-Huits (2010) describes as an information system’s “administrative conception” of identity and identification. Importantly, this “administrative” or built-in conception of subjects’ identities is, as with the design of online platforms discussed in the previous section, not neutral. These affordances can be discriminatory when they fail to represent certain populations or people, or when they encode assumptions about the world that systematically exclude other ways of understanding phenomena (Wittkower 2018, 22). Today, these problems are amplified by often opaque automated or algorithmic processes (see Cheney-Lippold 2011; Bucher 2018).

For minority or otherwise vulnerable groups, administrative conceptions of personal identity pose a particular threat to self-respect, since these conceptions often come into conflict with our “self-informative” identities (Manders-Huits 2010)—that is, self-conceptions that tend to be more comprehensive, reflexive, and moral in nature. She discusses three ways in which these identities can come into tension. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the problem of computational reductionism, that is, an “endorsement of the ideal that anything can be expressed in terms of data (and the probabilities and profiles based on them)” (Manders-Huits 2010, 51). Though necessary for the operation of computational systems, practices of computational reductionism cannot take into account “soft information or data, such as contextual and motivational features, background knowledge, and (personal) explanation regarding actions or decisions” (Manders-Huits 2010, 51).

In the US context, the problem of computational reductionism is evident in the practice of body scanning employed by the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) and the problems it generates for transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming (GNC) individuals. As Beauchamp (2009), Costanza-Chock (2018) and others have pointed out, the millimeter wave scanning machines employed by the TSA are designed around more or less strict binary (i.e., “male” and “female”) assumptions about human bodies that fail to account for the full range of body types and configurations. As Costanza-Chock (2018) summarizes, “anyone whose body doesn’t fall within an acceptable range of ‘deviance’ from a normative binary body type is flagged as ‘risky’ and subject to a heightened and disproportionate burden of the harms (both small and, potentially, large) of airport security systems and the violence of empire they instantiate” (para. 6). In this case, violations of courtesy, mistrust, and revelation are committed all at once, as trans, intersex, and GNC
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individuals are often (1) unable to negotiate the categories imposed on them, (2) disproportionately exposed to scrutiny, and (3) routinely forced to reveal information about their bodies, identities, or personal histories that are deemed deviant by the normative standards of the system. Here, social attitudes, institutional structures, and technology design conspire to produce violent conditions (Spade 2015; Hoffmann 2018) hostile to the development and maintenance of these individuals’ social bases of self-respect.

Outside of reduction, the persistence of information (particularly digital information online) can shape one’s nominal identity in ways that obstruct the development of—or actively harm—one’s self-informative identity. Because information captured in files and databases endures, is easily spread, and is often difficult to change or remove, the ability of individuals “to wrest themselves from (former) characterizations and change in light of (new) moral considerations” is stunted (Manders-Huits 2010, 52). Consider, for example, increasingly pervasive forms of online harassment made possible, in part, by the design of online platforms and information systems (Massanari 2017). Online harassment and abuse—which may include threats of violence or physical harm, privacy invasions, defamation, and technical attacks—is more than just a mere extension of offline abuse, as the affordances of networked information systems can accelerate and exacerbate harm or injury (Citron 2014).

In particular, the Internet helps extend the life of destructive or abusive information, making it nearly impossible to forget about or evade harm (Citron 2014, 4). This problem is particularly acute for victims of the ill-named (see Jeong 2015) “revenge porn”—that is, the nonconsensual distribution of sexually graphic images of an individual often (though not always) posted and circulated online with malicious or ill intent (Citron and Franks 2014). These efforts are “inextricably tied to the nature of the Internet” (Levendowski 2014, 426), leveraging its affordances to shame or injure victims (and, subsequently, reduce their respect-standing) in ways that are difficult to remedy and nearly impossible to remove. In this way, the persistence of information online poses an ongoing challenge to victims whose social bases of self-respect have been directly and maliciously targeted.

Lastly, Manders-Huits (2010) draws on Ian Hacking’s notion of “dynamic nominalism” to show how moral or self-informative identities often take up or are shaped by available categories, labels, or attributed identifications (52–53). Dynamic nominalism refers to the processes by which a given system watches what you do, fits you into a pattern, then feeds the pattern back to you in the form of options set by the pattern, the options reinforce the pattern, and so on. Importantly, however, these patterns are not solely determined by our individual preferences or behaviors; they are also informed by assumptions in the aggregate and the behavior of others within a system. Safiya Noble (2018) has extensively documented how this dynamic cycle is complicit in reproducing (or even amplifying) racist and sexist cultural ideas—ideas that stand to have the biggest negative impact on those already vulnerable to racism and sexism. For example, she shows how Google searches for the term “black girls” that return results for pornographic web pages reproduce historical conditions of racist, sexualized subjugation for Black women and girls (64–109). As Noble (2018) summarizes, “these search engine results for women
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whose identities are already maligned in the media, such as Black women and girls, only further debase and erode efforts for social, political, and economic recognition and justice” (88).

Problems of computational reductionism, the persistence of information, and dynamic nominalism can undermine certain individuals’ respect-standing according to all three of Wolff’s criteria. Information or standards that are imposed on an individual from without—and that endure in ways that are difficult to change—can, as in the case of TSA body scanning practices, produce violations of courtesy and systematic mistrust that systematically undermines the dignity of trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming people. In different ways, online harassment and abuse enabled by online platforms and problematic search results work to shame or degrade particular individuals, especially women. The persistence of online information and processes of dynamic nominalism make these forms of shaming particularly pernicious and often difficult to remedy.

6. Conclusion

As demonstrated by various scholars, our self-respect is informed, in part, by considerations external to the individual. Recalling one of Rawls’ (1999) earliest statements on the subject, it is unreasonable to expect that individuals will remain assured of their own value “in the face of enduring contempt or even the indifference of others” (171). While others have shown how institutionalized discrimination within social, economic, or political structures can serve to disempower individuals along racial, gender, sexual, or other lines, I have tried—building on insights from values-conscious design and disability studies—to demonstrate that self-respect is also importantly shaped by the design, dissemination, and use of technology.

Information technology, in particular, plays an important role in codifying, entrenching, and reproducing self-respect’s social bases. Issues of privacy and surveillance show how technological advancements threaten individual autonomy and dignity, while uneven patterns of power and surveillance undermine the respect-standing of particular individuals or groups. Additionally, the collection, classification, and implementation of information pose a distinct set of threats stemming from practices of computational reductionism, the persistence of information, and processes of dynamic nominalism (Manders-Huits 2010). Biased, discriminatory, or incomplete standards, especially when deployed on a massive scale, can serve to systematically undermine the dignity of certain individuals or groups, while the persistence of online information can work to shame or degrade in pernicious ways. When coupled with self-respect’s social dimensions, the values and affordances embedded in the design and use of information technology plays a key role in promoting the development of self-respect for some people and hindering it for others. In view of this, work interested in the practical relationship between information, technology, and social justice ought to be mindful of the importance of self-respect and its sociotechnical bases.
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