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## What Divides America

The recent Supreme Court decision on the University of Michigan Law School's use of race in the admissions process has stirred up an all-too-familiar controversy. By what means can we deliver on Thomas Jefferson's proposition that "all men are created equal"? While the decision upheld a limited place for affirmative action, it was the hope of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor that 25 years from now affirmative action "will no longer be necessary."

Without question, affirmative action has given teeth to the goal of equal opportunity. But it alone cannot bring about the society O'Connor hopes for because it fails to address a problem more fundamental than racism, sexism and the variety of other "isms" that still plague us. What underlies all these forms of discrimination is something less conspicuous but no less profound in its consequences. It is rank – in particular, low rank signifying a lack of power.

The most significant unexplored rift dividing America today – one that cries out for our attention – is not that of race, gender, age or religion. Rather, it is the gap between the "somebodies" – the relatively powerful and successful – and the "nobodies" – the relatively weak and vulnerable. The nobodies are not just another in the litany of identity groups. There is something different about this grouping, because each and every one of us can be a member of it just as all of us have at some point nominated someone else for inclusion.

It happens every day. A boss harasses an employee. A customer demeans a waiter. A coach bullies a player. A doctor disparages a nurse. A teacher humiliates a student. A parent belittles a child. Somebodies with higher rank and more power in a particular setting can maintain an environment that is hostile and demeaning to nobodies with lower rank and less power in that setting, much as most everywhere whites used to be at liberty to mistreat blacks.

Some 35 years of affirmative action have put racists and sexists on notice. But there has been no corresponding outcry against abuses that occur within a race or gender. Blacks insult and exploit other blacks of lower rank, whites do the same to whites and women to women, all with confidence that it will pass as business as usual.

We don't have a ready name for abuse and discrimination based on rank, but it deserves one. When discrimination and injustice are race-based, we call it racism; when they're gender-based, we call it sexism. By analogy, rank-based abuse and exploitation can be called "rankism." Naming rankism, putting it in the spotlight, is half the battle.

Rankism occurs when rank-holders use the power of their position to secure unwarranted advantages or benefits for themselves. It typically takes the form of self-aggrandizement and exploitation of subordinates. It is the opposite of service. Good leaders eschew rankism; bad ones indulge in it. It can be found in governments, businesses, families, workplaces, schools and universities, as well as religious, nonprofit and health-care organizations. It distorts personal relationships, erodes the will to learn, fosters disease, taxes productivity, undermines public trust, stokes ethnic hatred and incites revenge. Recent front-page examples of rankism include corporate and philanthropic corruption, sexual abuse by clergy, school hazing, and abuse of elders.

At the societal level, rank-based discrimination afflicts none more inescapably than those lacking the protections of social rank – the working poor. Two recent books chronicle this widening fissure. In "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America," Barbara Ehrenreich makes a compelling case that the working poor are in effect unacknowledged benefactors whose labor subsidizes the more advantaged. In "Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich," Kevin Phillips explores how the rich and politically powerful create and perpetuate privilege at the expense of the middle- and lower classes.

I am not in any way proposing that we do away with rank. This would make about as much sense as doing away with race or gender. When earned and exercised appropriately, rank is a legitimate, virtually indispensable tool of an organization. But when the high-ranking abuse their authority, those of lower rank

experience discrimination and injustice not different in their material and psychological effects from the discrimination and injustice we now disallow when their victims belong to the familiar identity groups.

To achieve a just society, we have to decide what it means to be a nation of equals. Indeed, at first glance, such a goal might seem absurd. How can we be equals when we are obviously unequal in skill, talent, beauty, strength, health and wealth – in any commonly recognized trait for that matter? The answer is that people are equal in a sense they have always considered fundamental to being human: They are equal in dignity.

This is not some utopian ideal. As Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, once put it: "Dignity is not negotiable." Rankism is invariably an insult to the dignity of an individual or group. If the aggrieved party dare not protest, it will nurse its wounds until a time when it can exact revenge. The 20th century has seen numerous demagogues who have promised to restore the pride and dignity of a people who felt they'd been "nobodied." The long-term and most horrific consequences of rankism between peoples range from sabotage and terrorism to genocide and war.

It's natural at first to wonder whether rankism is part of human nature. Not so long ago, it was widely believed that racism and sexism were, but now they are generally regarded as learned. While the impulse to exploit a power advantage for personal gain is hardly uncommon in our species, history shows it is equally in our nature to detest such abuses and to act together to circumscribe the authority of rank-holders.

To this end, we have overthrown kings and tyrants and placed political power in the hands of the people. We have reined in monopolies with antitrust legislation. We have limited the power of employers through unionization. Blacks, women, homosexuals and people with disabilities have all built effective movements that succeeded in replacing a once-sacrosanct social consensus with another that repudiated it.

People acquiesce in rankism because they fear the consequences of resisting: demerit, demotion, ridicule and ostracism. The muffled

complaints, occasional whistle-blowing and sporadic outbursts we do hear echo those of blacks and women who resisted in solitary protest before popular movements made it impossible to ignore their demands.

By breaking the taboo on discussing rank, giving this kind of abuse and discrimination a name and revealing its costs, we can anticipate that the tacit social consensus that supports rankism will unravel. Like the members of other identity groups, victims of rankism can then be expected to join forces and make themselves heard. An auspicious example is the recently founded Roman Catholic lay organization Voice of the Faithful, whose goal is to limit the absolute authority of clerics. In time, we may see the emergence of a broad-based "dignitarian" movement dedicated to overcoming rankism in all its guises.

Today's N-word is "nobody." The successes of affirmative action herald the day when the victims of indignity, injustice and inequity are as apt to be white as black, male as female, or straight as gay. Even now, what primarily marks people for mistreatment and exploitation is low rank and the powerlessness it signifies. Overcoming rankism is democracy's next step. In taking it, we will have the opportunity to honor the dual commitment to both freedom and justice that our nation's founders imprinted on the American psyche.

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