

The Mother of All Isms

By Robert Fuller

An executive pulls up to valet parking at a restaurant, late to a business lunch, and finds no one to take his car keys. Anxious and fuming, he spots a teenager running toward him in the rear-view mirror and yells, "Where the hell were you? I haven't got all day."

He tosses the keys in the kid's general direction and they fall to the pavement. Bending to pick them up, the boy says, "Sorry, sir. About how long do you expect to be?"

The executive hollers over his shoulder, "You'll know when you see me, won't you?" The valet winces, but holds his tongue. Postscript: the teenager goes home and bullies his kid brother.

It's easy to multiply examples like these: a customer demeans a waitress, a coach bullies a player, a doctor disparages a nurse, a school principal insults a teacher, a teacher humiliates a student, students ostracize other students, a parent belittles a child, an officer abuses a suspect, a professor exploits a teaching assistant, a boss harasses an employee, a caretaker mistreats a person with a disability.

Most such behaviors have nothing to do with racism or sexism. Yet the effect on the victims is no different from how it felt to be Jewish, black, or gay until things began to change for those groups. The perpetrators of these insults, like racists and sexists, select their targets with circumspection. In each of these examples, what triggers unequal treatment is rank--rank as measured on the somebody-nobody scale.

"Somebodies" are sought after, given preference, lionized. "Nobodies" get insulted, dissed, exploited, ignored. Low rank, even when the ranking is clearly meretricious, functions exactly like race and gender--as an unjustifiable impediment to advancement.

All forms of abuse, prejudice and discrimination are actually predicated upon differences in rank. Rank-based discrimination deserves a name of its own to distinguish it from racism, sexism, and bad manners. By analogy, we shall call it rankism. Once you have a name for it you see it everywhere.

Our society no longer condones abuse based on race or gender, but inequity based on rank is, for the most part, still overlooked. It might be supposed that if one overcomes tendencies to racism, sexism, ageism and other narrowly defined forms of prejudice, one would be purged of rankism as well. But rankism is not just another ism, it's the mother of them all. The familiar kinds of discrimination are simply special cases of rankism. Color, gender, etc. are excuses for exploiting power differences, not the cause of the resulting injustices.

Unlike race or gender, rank is mutable. You can be taken for a nobody one day and for a somebody the next. You can be a nobody at home and a somebody at work, or vice versa.

"Nobody" is an epithet used to justify further denigration and inequity. "Nobody" is the N-word of our time.

Much of what's labeled social pathology arises from rankism. The indignity suffered by nobodies festers. It turns to indignation and sometimes erupts in violence. To "nobody" individuals, or a people, is not only to do them an injustice, it is to plant a time bomb in our own midst.

The consequences range from school shootings to revanchism, even genocide. The 20th century has seen many demagogues who have promised to restore the pride and dignity of a people that felt "nobodyed." Hitler enjoyed the support of Germans humiliated by punitive measures in the aftermath of World War I. President Milosevic of Yugoslavia has traded on the wounded pride of the Serbs. People will become apologists for crimes they would otherwise condemn to get even with those they believe have nobodyed them.

Attacking the familiar isms, one at a time, is like lopping heads off the Hydra of discrimination and prejudice. Going after rankism, which underlies all forms of discrimination, would drive a stake through the Hydra's heart.

In targeting rankism, it is vital to recognize that there is nothing wrong with rank per se, any more than there is anything wrong with race or with gender. When it has been earned and signifies excellence, rank is generally accepted.

But when rank is exercised beyond its appropriate domain, or when others are "nobodyed," that's rankism. The democratic process provides a recourse to rankism in civic affairs, but in the workplace and in education we must often knuckle under or risk our position.

Before the civil rights and women's movements, even blatant forms of race and gender-based discrimination were condoned. Now, being labeled a "racist" or a "sexist," a "bigot" or a "homophobe" does not look good on your résumé.

In contrast, rankism, in both its interpersonal and institutional guises, still enjoys wide tacit support. Overcoming rankism-in the family, the schools, health care and the workplace-is democracy's next step.