

Rank and Rank Roles

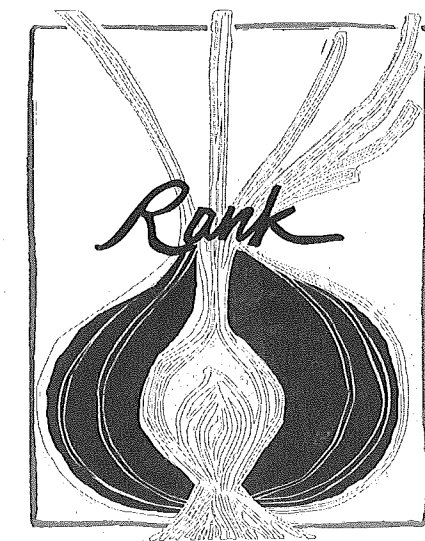
If Status dynamics are the easiest layer of the onion to observe, the next layer – which we call Rank – is more hidden. The elusive nature of the Rank layer is part of its mystique, the reason we find it hard to identify in action. We use the word Rank to invoke two associations. One is the idea of something that is no longer fresh, that has an unpleasant smell. The other is the association with military Rank. Social Rank is made up of memberships in social groups and the ways in which those memberships influence our social conditioning. We use the word “role” to describe the parts of us that are most shaped by socialization.

We speak of oppression as outmoded supremacy. Can supremacy ever be anything other than smelly? We will offer the idea that there are functional, circumstantial reasons for overvaluing certain people in certain situations. In a disaster-at-sea movie, it makes sense to have the strongest swimmer dive into the already flooded part of the upside down ship in order to save the cluster of protagonists. So we will coddle, support, privilege, and overvalue the star swimmer to make sure that they have all their nutrition and strength as they represent the best chance for our survival. Once we’re rescued by the helicopters and safe on land, it no longer makes sense for us to advantage that swimmer. In other words, in that particular context, it’s supremacist but not oppressive.

As human collectives, we have a tendency to institute supremacies much more easily and readily than we dismantle them. All societies are burdened with practices of unfair advantage of some, which may have been functional at some point in history but now exist as part of the social weave and tend to go unexamined. This is the Rank system. Rank – the system under which some of us are systematically valued more than others – is closely connected with roles. Rank systems exist in all human societies; the specific groups that are valued more or less highly across the globe and across time. Our focus here is mainly on Rank as it currently exists in the United States.

Roles

We associate the word “role” with the theater – that may be where the concept originates. In ancient Greek drama, players wore masks that let the audience know what kind of character they were playing – comic or tragic, king or warrior. Behaving appropriately according to social role is quite similar to playing a character in a play. Characters may do and say only certain things, according to the script, stage directions, and director – the actor has a limited ability to determine how their character will appear, at least in conventional theater.



According to Dr. Nieto, as a result of social conditioning, there is an insect-like consciousness, a crusty, robotic, mechanistic layer that interrupts our personhood. It is in place by three to five years of age. The chances of this not happening or of preventing it are nil. It is ascribed, applied, and installed – without critical thinking or reflection. Rank is heavy.

Julia Maxwell

The River of Oppression

Picture a river, flowing along with a strong current. A member of a Target group is in the river, managing life against the current. Part of Target socialization is to normalize the conditions of living against the current of the river. This is how the world feels and looks; this is how much effort it takes to move forward – or even to stay in place. The member of a socially devalued group does not necessarily pay attention to the force or quality of the oppressive current. In order to work, participate, shop, and live each day, the Target group member needs to navigate the river unconsciously – as if in a trance. But at any moment an incident can happen. An incident is an event that disrupts the trance and causes the Target group member to be swept down the current, forcing them to engage more consciously with the river. The incident reminds the member of the socially devalued group that Rank is always active. It “puts them in their place.” While status play is reversible and anybody can play high or low, Rank is not like that. Rank is like a river: it flows in one direction only. The hierarchically dualistic river of oppression is always there, advantaging members of Agent groups – who can move with the river, in the direction of the current – and disadvantaging members of Target groups in complex, cross-cutting, and internalized ways.

Jacob Moreno (1993) suggests that people in post-industrial societies like ours are socialized to a narrow scope of behavior and a rigid, limited role repertoire. Such societies tend to restrict members to prescribed roles with rigidly defined rules of behavior (businessman, soccer mom, rebellious teenager). Where roles are predetermined, many behaviors and ways of expressing are outside the role description. Much of socialization is to teach and learn congruence with social roles.

For example, it could be out of role for an adult to sit on the floor and pull off their socks and shoes with delight, or for a woman to sprawl in a chair and smoke a cigar. Some out-of-role behaviors and attitudes can be hard to discern. Some social roles demand primarily high Status stances, others low Status ones. We all get more practice in the kind of Status play, be it low or high, associated with our prescribed social roles than with the other kind. Our role and social assignments may be comfortable or uncomfortable for us, depending on the situation and on the fit with our personality or temperament.

Societies have mechanisms designed to train us in our roles as soon as possible after birth. All elements of our environment, family, school, media, peer culture, etc., conspire together to socialize us. This process, socialization, is not free of bias – quite the opposite. We internalize the particular biases of our social context while very young. By the time we are three years old, we demonstrate fluency with social values and norms. Children’s play is rich with social roles practice, explicit performance of social norms, and the mechanisms for enforcing them, such as ostracism.

Consider children playing at being parents, young adults experiencing relief at the mastery of at least some social expectations, and middle-aged adults comfortably living into unexamined lifestyles. Initially, we may feel we are adopting a character or putting on a costume, but eventually the roles come to feel quite natural. We enjoy our newfound competency, knowing “how to be,” whether as a college student, an up-and-coming employee, a hot date, or even a total failure. Knowing what is expected of us and how to do that very thing can open doors to the social world. Like a well-worn pair of shoes, our roles may feel natural. Yet, until we step out of them, we may not have a feel for our own true footprint. We may not know the extent to which the shoes have shaped our gait. We often don’t even “feel” our roles. Instead, we may readily identify with them as a central definition of who we are.

“I’m an addict.”

“I’m the vice-president of finance.”

“I’m a college drop-out.”

“I’m a happy mother of three.”

From a human development point of view, we first focus on fulfillment of expectations of our assigned Rank roles; we work to become our roles. As we mature, if we develop skills that take us out of conventional attitudes, we may begin to feel the limits and edges of our socially ascribed roles. We may wish to express a more authentic self, to discern chosen values from inherited

ones, and to act on our deepest passions. Many people spend the latter part of their lives getting out of the mold that they worked so hard to fit into. This shift beyond our socially conditioned role selves is what we identify with anti-oppression and true Power. Moving to more authentic expression can be a huge risk – one that anyone might hesitate to take – yet worth everything.

We cannot shed our roles until we master them. Before we can move beyond our roles, we must learn to inhabit and fulfill them well. We can’t skip any stage of development, and adequately fulfilling social roles is a necessary skill that marks adulthood. Fulfilling these roles enables us to participate in work, partnerships, and public life.

As we move into increasingly conscious living, we may find it harder to fit into social expectations and Rank roles. Concerns and self-identity shift. Even as we gain authenticity, integrity, and Power, we may be perceived as losing something rather than gaining something. We may seem somehow less sturdy, less predictable, less delineated. Performing roles we have mastered can bring social rewards – money, influence, belonging, and safety – which discourage us from changing even when the mold becomes uncomfortable. Role compliance can provide psychological safety and physical safety from violence, hunger, or need. Our cultural rules can prevent people from claiming the wisdom of their later years, a wisdom that society desperately needs.

When we identify with roles that no longer fulfill our needs for growth, roles that once fit us well can become a kind of prison, an obstacle to authenticity and Power. Identifying with narrow, socially defined roles limits our perceptions and prevents us from accessing the fullness of our creativity and our truth.

Agent & Target Group Memberships

In our discussion of Status play, we reviewed high Status style and low Status style. Status dynamics are changeable; that is, within the same context, a person can use high Status one moment and low Status the next. They are also situational; a person may play low Status in one context and high Status in another. In contrast, Rank roles are neither changeable nor situational. They are fixed. They show up consistently from one context to another and hold continuity across time. Within the Rank system, two roles are central: we refer to them as Agent and Target.

As individuals, we likely hold both Agent and Target group memberships. Social groups that are overvalued and normative we term Agent groups. As members of social groups that hold Agent Rank, we are overvalued and receive unearned advantage and benefits. Examples of Agent groups include adults, heterosexuals, Whites, biological males, or the U.S.-born. As members

Role-bound Agent-Target Dialogue

When both Agent and Target are fully in-role, plugged in to the system, the conversation itself becomes part of the system. They enact a scripted play, with no consciousness and no freedom to change their roles.

A: I don’t even think of you as a kid. You are so much more mature than any other 14-year-old I know.

T: I bet you don’t know a lot of 14-year-olds.

A: You don’t have to be rude. I was paying you a compliment.

T: I’m not interested in your compliments. You don’t get it at all.

A: That’s what I get for trying to talk to you.

T: Talk *at*, you mean.

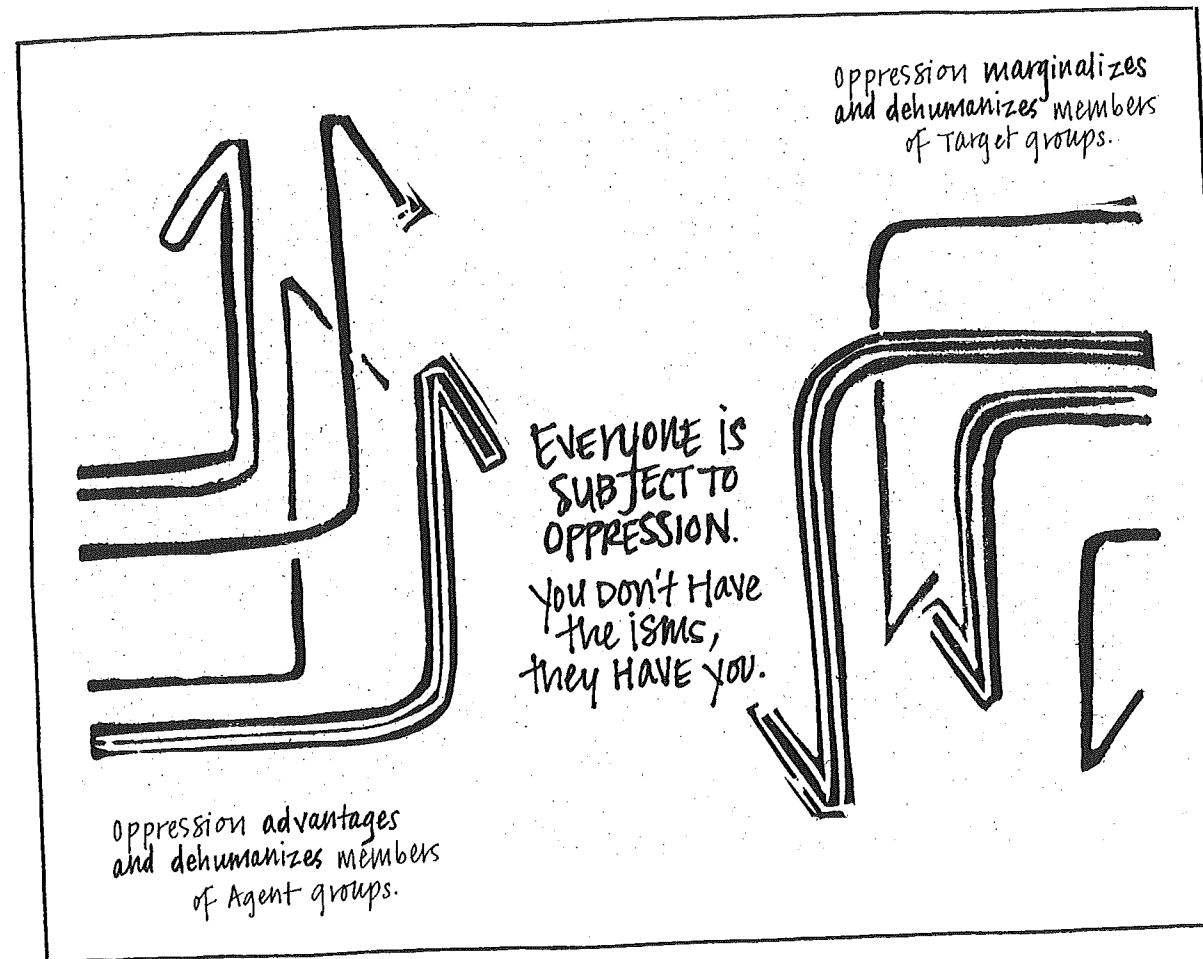
of Agent groups, we receive affirmation and support and have ready access to rewards. As Agent group members we have an easier time getting jobs, are more likely to see people "like us" on television, and can expect that our concerns will be taken seriously by public institutions.

Social groups that are devalued and "otherized" we term Target groups. As members of social groups that hold Target Rank, we are undervalued and subject to marginalization. Examples of Target groups include children/elders, gay/lesbian/bisexual people, People of Color, women, and people born outside the U.S. As members of Target groups, our access is limited and our movement restricted. For example, we experience difficulties finding work appropriate to our education and abilities, we often see people "like us" depicted negatively in the media, and public institutions rarely address our concerns.

We use the acronym "ADRESSING," developed by Pamela A. Hays, (2001) to remember the categories, as follows:

SOCIAL RANK CATEGORY	AGENT RANK	TARGET RANK
AGE	Adults (18-64)	Children, Adolescents, Elders
DISABILITY *	Able-persons	Persons with Disabilities
RELIGION (relates to religious culture) **	Cultural Christians, Agnostics, and Atheists	Jews, Muslims, and all other non-Christian religions
ETHNICITY	White Euro-Americans	People of Color
SOCIAL CLASS CULTURE	Middle and Owning Class (access to higher education)	Poor and Working Class (no access to higher education)
SEXUAL ORIENTATION	Heterosexuals	Lesbians, Gay men, Bisexuals, Queer, and Questioning
INDIGENOUS HERITAGE	Non-Native	Native
NATIONAL ORIGIN	U.S.-born	Immigrants and Refugees
GENDER	Biologically Male	Female, Transgender, and Intersex

* Now identified by Hays as "developmental and acquired Disabilities"
 ** Now identified by Hays as "Religion and Spiritual Orientation"



The flip side of disadvantage is advantage. You can't have a down without an up.

Tim Wise (Cook, 2009)

Economy of Energy

Imagine a room in a military setting such as a barracks where enlisted personnel are busy working under pressure of a deadline. An officer walks in. What do the enlisted personnel do? They stop what they are doing. They stand and salute. They await orders. The enlisted must suspend their focus and attend to the officer. The officer will either say "at ease" – releasing the enlisted back to their task – or give them an order. Now imagine an officer and an enlisted soldier, both in civilian clothing, shopping at a grocery store located off the base. The chances that the enlisted person will notice the officer are very high. The officer, on the other hand, may or may not notice the enlisted person. The presence of one of these people will affect the other more. These images are illustrations of a differential economy of energy. We suggest that the enlisted person must use some or much of their energy to tune in the officer and their requirements. The reverse is not necessarily so.

Rank dynamics are not reversible. Because societal systems are set up in ways that advantage members of Agent groups, those individuals can allocate energy focusing on personal interests. Usually, as Agent group members we do not notice the advantage of being free to spend our energy on things like reaching our goals, meeting our needs, pursuing our dreams.

Because societal systems are set up in ways that advantage members of Agent groups, Target group members must use considerable energy dealing with social barriers and restriction of movement, unnecessary suffering that comes from being frequently given devaluing messages: some overt, some not; some intentional, some not. Target group members must also use energy to manage internalized oppression including internalized versions of barriers, restrictions, and devaluation. As we will discuss later, members of Target groups are conditioned to be always aware of and attentive to Agent group members. The extra energy it takes to get through the day, to get a job and to perform at extraordinary levels, drains our life energies. As in the example we gave of the officers and enlisted personnel, Target group members unconsciously or consciously live subordinately, while Agent group members receive un-earned benefits from inequality.

Every semester, while teaching a graduate course called Gender and Ethnicity Issues in Psychotherapy, Dr. Nieto hears from female students in their thirties, forties, and fifties about their increasing consciousness of this phenomenon of subordination. The same student who at the start of the semester spoke about never having felt restricted as a woman, particularly in comparison to her mother, later reports that she was and is restricted. She recognizes that she is devalued and marginalized in ways that are different, but no less harmful, than the ways her mother was treated in the past. While some of the experience of marginalization becomes normalized and absorbed, some experiences of restriction and struggle do tend to register in

One April day I was on a walk to a therapist's office. I had all manner of things to work out in my once-per-month appointment with this wise person. That morning I remember feeling particularly inspired.

My walk to the office was interrupted by some men whistling at me from a car window, but I shook it off and returned to my thoughts. Ten minutes later, more shouting from a different car: "Nice Ass!" they shouted. I scowled and kept moving – only sort of able to return to my thoughts. Two blocks from my therapist's office a third incident: a man pulled up behind me slowly driving there for a few long minutes before pulling up beside me and asking if he could please drive me somewhere. – scary!

Incidents like these are not infrequent for most Targets of sexism, but three in an hour's time was enough to take all the inspiration I'd had right out of me. When we say that oppression interrupts the flow of life, this is what we mean. I spent that day's long-awaited and expensive therapy session sorting out the fear I felt about my safety, and the disgust I felt about being so objectified. What deeper puzzles might I have been able to go after that day had the incidents not piled up one after another? I feel most angry about oppression when I think about how short and valuable life is. So much irreplaceable time is spent by Targets when we have to cope with incidents like these.

Laurel Collier Smith
Gender Target Group Member

the minds of Target group members. Given social profiles, which for most of us include both Agent and Target group memberships, we are more likely to notice experiences of restriction than experiences of advantage. In this way, we may find that we over-identify with our Target group memberships, to the exclusion of noticing our Agent group memberships. Later in this book we suggest disciplines for attending to both.

Mechanical Metaphors

In talking about Rank, we find it helpful to associate all things Rank-related with machine-like or mechanical images. We are trying to evoke the sense of automated, impersonal, "in place," and industrial. These are features of socialization and conditioning. The idea is that we each house a layer of material that operates as if installed, robotic, and remotely controlled. Try on the image of the Rank robot. For *Star Trek* fans, remember the Borg declaring, "Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated" (Frakes, 1996). We can think of the Rank system as a network of machines – either as a simple device for sorting, a primitive clockwork or conveyor belt system, or a bar code scanner in a supermarket. The Rank layer of interactions can be thought of as "operating on automatic," as when we work, drive, or even speak to each other in a highly routinized and unconscious way. Many behavior patterns and actions in contemporary life in the U.S. have this mechanical feeling, lacking in life and authenticity.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, how are you?"

Consider how much of your day is taken up with mechanical interactions. The view of human beings as machines has history. Images of the world as a machine, God as the great watchmaker, and mechanical models as the most accurate way to conceptualize the universe lie at the root of much medicine, economics, and politics. Societies that place a high value on material production and profit, and a low value on subjective experience, happiness, or even long-term survival, are based on generally mechanical concepts of existence. These "doing versus being" models pervade the consciousness of many people – even people who are critical of the results those models create. For example, environmentalists may criticize the mechanical model directly, while still using economic efficiency as a primary measure of value.

Many of us have been trained to understand the world in concrete terms that lend themselves to analysis and dissection. Taking things apart, seeing the pieces rather than the whole, is central to this worldview. Within this mental framework, we try to solve problems by looking for what's wrong so that piece can be corrected or eliminated. Problems and challenges are conceived as broken parts in a machine.

The very term "metaphysical" suggests that our primary orientation is to

the physical world. We have been trained to conceptualize the subtler aspects of existence – like consciousness, spirit, and feeling – as "beyond physical." From the dominant point of view, the physical is central, the basic fact, our home ground. Ironically, we tend to hold this concrete consciousness while living disembodied lives.

The centrality of the mechanistic view can be seen in the ubiquitous use of computer metaphors for all kinds of human experiences. Terms like hard drive, software, feedback, and download are applied to a variety of situations, as if the computer was the ultimate symbol of our lives. People's minds, in particular, are often compared to computers, both explicitly and by metaphorical implication. The film *Office Space* (Judge, 1999) provides an image many of us can relate to, of a man who is driven mad by the cold, inhumane, mechanical routines of office life. These mechanical metaphors have come to seem inevitable and natural, even to those of us who question their underlying assumptions. They increasingly are a part of our everyday discourse and way of framing problems and solutions.

The Rank Machine

If the Rank system is a network of machines operating independent of human reflection and input, the Rank robot lives exclusively out of the Rank role. The Rank roles are prescribed scripts, assigned to each of us, which determine how each person is to behave in the world. Rank is an essentially artificial or cultural marker, something determined by society, based on socially ascribed (assigned) memberships, such as gender, ethnicity, and religious culture. While the Status layer of human interaction is obvious and easy to identify, the Rank layer is mystified, covered over, and entangled. Individuals have little or no influence on how they are assigned Rank membership. As influential as it is in determining the course of our lives, Rank is arbitrary and, ultimately, absurd. Our Rank is assigned, in a mechanized way, without input from us. Yet, Rank acts through us. The Rank machine – as if installed in every environment including our minds – sorts us into Target and Agent Rank roles.

We like to say that the Rank machine is not intelligent. It doesn't have the complexity to organize and sort human beings based on valid elements. It does not have capacity to learn. It is more like a really large clockwork, filling a whole room. Picture huge gears, chains, and pulleys or factory conveyor belts, chutes, and funnels. Picture a bar-code scanner, which reads information on the label of the products in the store. Unlike a computer, which can do many things, the Rank machine can do only one. It sorts people into two categories, consistently, in every situation and interaction, over and over again.

The Rank machine operates invisibly and constantly. It operates within us, but it's really a social mind or collective mind at work, rather than our own

Rank and First Impressions

Malcolm Gladwell exposes how our Rank memberships can influence interactions with significant implications when he writes, "If you have a strongly pro-White pattern of associations, there is evidence that that will affect the way you behave in the presence of a Black person. It's not going to affect what you'll choose to say or feel or do. In all likelihood, you won't be aware that you're behaving any differently than you would around a White person. But chances are, you'll lean forward a little less, turn away slightly from him or her, close your body a bit, be a bit less expressive, maintain less eye contact, stand a little farther away, smile a lot less, hesitate and stumble over your words a bit more, laugh at jokes a bit less. Does that matter? Of course it does. Suppose the conversation is a job interview. And suppose the applicant is a Black man. He's going to pick up on that uncertainty and distance, and that may well make him a little less certain of himself, a little less confident, and a little less friendly. And what will you think then? You may well get a gut feeling that the applicant doesn't really have what it takes, or maybe that he is a bit standoffish, or maybe that he doesn't really want the job. What this unconscious first impression will do, in other words, is throw the interview hopelessly off course" (2005, p. 85-86).

Status play cannot affect or change Rank

Status and Rank are two separate realms, but I previously thought that Status maneuvers made me more or less oppressive in matters involving Rank. Status play cannot affect or change Rank. This knowledge means I have to deal with my agency in those areas that I hold Agent Rank, and build Allyship skills, instead of relying on Status play to change dynamics.

Amanda Morstad

The Rank Machine

The Rank Machine can be visualized as a large mechanical apparatus like a motorized clock or a culling device in an assembly line. The Rank machine was designed and crafted long ago to do only one thing: to exclude the largest number of people for the smallest possible reason.

Another image for the Rank Machine is a bar code scanner in a supermarket. The scanner reads the nine-digit code for each person to determine his or her Agent and Target Rank roles. This happens very fast, automatically. The speed of this scanning is clear from the Implicit Association Tests (IAT Corp., 2010) discussed at Harvard University (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>). The scanner doesn't stop to investigate whether the coding really fits the person – it just picks one and goes on. The point here is that Rank is not an evolving identity. It is simply an assigned or ascribed category.

individual thought. It reflects programmed behavior, convention, and role-bound unconsciousness. This Ranking mechanism acts instantly, before our conscious thought can catch up. As individuals, we cannot influence the way the Rank machine sorts people. We can become more aware of it, and more resistant to acting on its messages.

The Rank machine is a social mechanism that has been with us since the beginning of human collectives. Lacking intelligence, the Rank machine cannot tell the difference between *truth* and *reality*. Human beings cannot actually be sorted into dyadic, dualistic, binary categories. This is not a meaningful or accurate way to organize human features. We are complex, unpredictable, infinitely varied: anything but binary.

Yet the *reality* of daily life is that our existence, our experiences, our chances of getting our needs met, are strongly influenced by the Rank memberships ascribed to us. To be defined as White or Black, as straight or gay, as biologically male or female, as persons with or without a disability, has a tremendous effect on people's lives. That's *reality*. These categories are not true, but they are real. They make a difference. We may criticize these terms, analyze them, and challenge them, but they remain influential forces.

Sorting

What if, in the back of your neck, under your skin, imperceptible to you, there was a bar code, nine bars – each one identifying you as member of either a Target or Agent group? As you read on, you will find a model describing nine social membership categories that the Rank machine sorts by. In reviewing this model, most of us find at least some of the categories confusing or objectionable. We find it difficult to place ourselves cleanly into the Target or Agent side. Nonetheless, the Rank system operates as if it were possible to tidily classify you as either one or the other. Each of these categories is false. Each is a social construct. It was made up, invented for mercenary purposes, at a time in human history when the understanding of human beings was even more limited than today. We are working here with inherited supremacies, strong tendencies to overvalue particular groups and devalue all others.

We think of oppression as outmoded supremacy. We consider that there may have been a function to the establishment of supremacist practices. It can be possible to trace the origins of these constructs and discover the reasons (moral, amoral, or immoral), for the establishment of supremacies. In the present, though, we live against a backdrop embedded with these outmoded, foul-smelling, supremacies. They are woven into the fabric of our collective life, pervading every aspect of our life and consciousness. So, even though they are false, we must engage meaningfully about the way they shape ourselves and our days.

If you are having trouble determining how your social profile breaks down,

that is probably because you are a reasonable person and you are reacting to the false and arbitrary nature of these categories. There are two anti-oppressive techniques to apply here.

First, consider there is no such thing as being a little bit Target. We sometimes try to humanize the Agent/Target binary by moving it into a continuum – being more Agent or more Target. Given that the Rank system is false, inhuman, and artificial to begin with, a continuum model does little to improve its validity and instead distracts us away from the useful focus on the supremacy of Agent groups. We have found that many people tend to discount their Target group membership if they have experienced benefit in that area or if their Target group membership is less visible. We suggest a different angle. If you have Indigenous heritage, consider that you may be a Target in that area. If you live with a learning disability, consider that it makes you a Disability Target. Even though you're not completely sure, give it a try.

The second anti-oppressive technique is what we call "owning your Agent Rank." The best example where this applies is in the area of social class culture. If you've had access to higher education, we suggest that you declare yourself a social class Agent regardless of your level of income or class of origin. (We will go into more depth about all these categories as we go on.)

The imaginary bar code on the back of your neck symbolizes not your "identity" (which is a function of Power – at the core of our model) but your ascribed social memberships and their implications in regard to access, advantage, and marginalization. It is as if, in every environment, hidden scanners are constantly reading your code and automatically opening or closing doors for you, causing the ground to be uphill or downhill, making the path smooth or treacherous. This goes on regardless of whether you or anyone else is aware of your memberships. The Rank system categorizes people by reading their ascribed membership in one category or the other, Target or Agent in nine Rank categories. We'll discuss each of the categories and our rationale for limiting the list to these nine in the next chapter "The ADDRESSING Model."

Not only does social Rank operate in the minds of all individuals, it also operates institutionally in all systems and organizations. None of us chooses to have a version of the Rank system implanted in our minds. We never had a chance to sign up or opt out. In the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* (1999), the protagonist Neo spends the first part of the movie wondering about something called "the Matrix." What is it? How can it be revealed? Who knows about it? After waking from a series of "dreams," he finally finds himself in a room with the character called Morpheus who tells him that no one can be told about the Matrix – that it is everywhere: in the television, at church, when you pay your taxes, etc. Neo, and the audience, learn that the Matrix signifies at least two things.

First, the Matrix is a physical structure that houses the bodies of every

Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression is a feature of oppression, when Target group members believe, act on, or enforce the dominant system of beliefs about their own group. For example, self-talk that reinforces negative stereotypes of one's own group, or women enforcing standards of appearance with other women.

human being on the planet, which are being used as batteries. Human life force is the only resource left to fuel the world, which has been taken over by machines. Second, the Matrix is a computer program that all human minds are plugged into, providing each person with a virtual experience that they perceive as real life. Neo's mission becomes to awaken as many people as possible to the current state of things. That is, all minds and bodies are co-opted, subject to unconscious participation in a system that dehumanizes and exploits. Like the people in the Matrix, we are all born into a backdrop, which includes supremacy. We don't know we are in it any more than fish know they are in water.

The Rank system goes about sorting people into two piles: those that will be advantaged and everyone else. When confronted by someone who doesn't fit easily into either pile – as with mixed race people and intersexuality – it resolves in favor of Target group membership. Few people fit tidily into one or the other category, so we talk about these categories being false, but also real. The Rank system will exclude the largest number of people for the smallest possible reason. This is the nature of supremacy. One group is consistently overvalued, and to foster the benefit of that smaller group, everyone else is devalued. The sorting goes on both deliberately and automatically, consciously and unconsciously. It is systematic and institutionalized.

The mechanisms scanning us for Target group membership are surprisingly "accurate," due in large part to the nature of internalized oppression. For example, a person may identify as heterosexual. Yet, at a later date in their life experience they may come out as bisexual or gay or lesbian. Even during the time when they are identifying as straight, compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1994) will actively be curtailing them as members of the Target group in the area of sexual orientation. We'll return to this idea later.

The social Rank machine checks closely to see if people fit in the narrowly defined "okay" pile before it puts them there. It looks for reasons to exclude them from the "okay" pile; often a tiny reason will suffice. In the area of ethnicity, this is often referred to as the one-drop rule; it can take only "one drop" of African or Native American blood to be recognized as a Target by the Rank machine.

Because the focus of social Rank selection is on exclusion, Target groups tend to be larger than Agent groups. Only a minority of people holds all Agent memberships; most of us have one or more Target areas. So it's ironic that the more numerous members of Target groups are often referred to as "minorities," "special interests," and "marginal groups." This kind of language obscures the true nature of social Rank. By defining majority groups as "special" or "marginal," the needs of most people are minimized and ignored.

It is useful to think of the Rank system as an impersonal automatic process, rather than a thoughtful or personal one. Since the categories are arbitrary, constructed and applied inconsistently, it is possible to perceive that looking carefully at any of the categories – subjecting them to even a small amount

of analysis – reveals their lack of validity. In fact, much of the work in anti-oppression and social justice has been about debunking, taking apart, and deconstructing these as valid categories. These are not valid categories. They don't apply very well to anyone. Yet, the advantaging process goes on.

Social Rank has little to do with personal identities, beliefs, values, preferences, or feelings. The Rank machine doesn't ask a person of mixed ethnicity which part of their family heritage she or he identifies with; it just registers all the ways a person isn't a member of a dominant group, and uses anything "other" against that person. It's not interested in what a person actually believes about spirituality; it simply checks if they "belong" in Christian culture. It is not capable of examining who a person truly is.

Rank systems are self-running and self-sustaining. The system has successfully installed itself inside the mind of each person, and now operates out of control. Its scope is large, with outposts everywhere, operating at all times, making oppression pervasive and constant.

Unlike Status play, which is momentary and has a discrete beginning and ending in time, ascribed Rank memberships are not situational. For the most part, Rank membership remains stable, no matter what the immediate situation or interaction is. Some rank membership can change under some circumstances, for example, when a child becomes an adult (moving from Target to Agent membership) or an adult becomes an elder (moving from Agent to Target membership). But in most categories, the Rank membership one starts with is the same that one ends with.

What's Rank For?

Dominant notions of productivity are used to justify a wide range of objectively harmful and life-destroying actions, from polluting drinking water with industrial waste to making health care unavailable to millions of people. The Rank machine serves this economic system by defining which people's needs matter.

As we go through our daily life, in areas where we are members of Agent groups, we experience advantages that few receive, but we perceive them as being available to everyone and do not see ourselves as advantaged. People with predominantly or entirely Agent memberships expect to get many of their needs met. When we as members of Agent groups don't have those expectations met, we are conditioned to react with distress to that break from the norm.

Members of Target groups will not experience those advantages on a regular basis and will be conditioned not to expect them. People with Target group memberships will not be conditioned to expect to have their needs met; therefore as Target group members our unmet needs provoke less response – at least initially.

Both as Agent and as Target group members, we have all been conditioned to accept this disparity as normal and not to notice when it happens. Under oppression, those with Target group memberships get defined as having "special interests," suggesting that they are receiving special advantages. This further mystifies the reality of oppression. This social conditioning obscures the actual situation: that some groups' needs are made trivial and safely ignored, even when those groups' members constitute a majority of the population.

The term "mainstream" is another example of how the language of Rank serves to make the needs of a majority of people seem insignificant or irrelevant. "Mainstream" is a term applied consistently to the Agent group members in any Rank category. The only truly "mainstream" person could be defined as an adult, able, culturally Christian, White, heterosexual, owning-class, non-Indigenous, U.S.-born person who is biologically male. Even the minority of people who do fit this definition can expect to eventually be cast out of it by age and/or disability. The Rank system defines almost everyone's actual needs as irrelevant. Although this system may be profitable for a few privileged members of Agent groups, even those can look forward to losing the portion of their privilege based on loss of ability or simply age if they live long enough. Ultimately, the actions of this system come at the expense of all of us, and of future generations.

If social systems were set up to accommodate the needs of everyone, instead of to exclude many people, it would be a much better world for all of us – yet would require a massive shift. For instance, a health care system that truly met the needs of everyone in the U.S., including the poor, people with disabilities, children, and elders, would require a significant change in how resources are distributed.

The Rank system makes it possible to reduce the number of people whose needs have to be considered to only those in the Agent group. This focus on the Agent group only is normal. In the context of Rank, the U.S. health care system provides mostly for the needs of employed adults of the middle and owning classes and their immediate families. Different social systems, such as insurance companies, HMOs, hospitals, and government health agencies, collaborate to make sure that the people with the most Agent group memberships get most of their needs met, and people with mostly Target group memberships get few or none of their needs met.

We have been speaking here about the reality side of the *truth* and *reality* conundrum. If the *truth* is that we are all of value, why concern ourselves with social Rank categorization? The answer: the only way to bring about socially just change is to name and address inequality.

In the Wachowski brothers' film (1999), Neo must re-enter the Matrix to be able to effect change. Similarly, we have to acknowledge the real impact of Rank in spite of how faulty the categories are.

Truth versus Reality

Bring out your hands in front of you, each holding the weight, one of *truth*, one of *reality*. The *truth* is that human beings do not fit into dualistic categories: we are much too complex, and the possible categories are infinite. The *reality* is that people's lives are profoundly affected by the attribution of Rank. Hold both *truth* and *reality* in front of you as you do the work of anti-oppression. Rank categories are false. Take race. There is only one human race. Racial categorization is problematic to begin with and increasingly so as most of us are multiracial. Yet simply knowing that this category is absurd doesn't neutralize the effects of racism. It is important to educate ourselves to understand the historical roots of these categories and how they have been used, but this intellectual knowledge doesn't change the *reality* of oppression and advantage.

Holding *truth* and *reality* at the same time is tiring. We tend to try to resolve our exhaustion by letting go of one or the other. On the one hand, we idealistically hold on to *truth* and deny *reality*, saying "There's no such thing as race. It's not real, it doesn't matter, and I will not acknowledge it." We may advocate this version of *truth* when we hold privileged social positions and don't want to undertake the painful process of challenging our own privilege, or conversely when we can't bear the implications of our own marginalization. When we take this position, we can be hard to argue with – we have the *truth* on our side – and may be avoiding the issue of oppression because we know or sense how uncomfortable it will be to confront. When we align with *truth* we're responding to a high impulse. It can be heart breaking when we come up against the limitations of this idealistic approach.

On the other hand, holding tight to *reality* and forgetting *truth* is another error – that of essentialism. It leads us to begin to believe stereotypes and make generalizations about groups. When we grip only *reality* and disregard *truth*, we tend to generalize about the Black experience, the Deaf community, or women's reality. We might expect individual members of Target groups to speak for everyone who shares that social membership, or mistake a few examples of Target experience for universal ones. When we believe that the Rank categories are transcendent factors that bind together all members of a group, we tend to disregard intra-group difference. When we are advocates of the "sisterhood" of all women, we may have difficulty recognizing or addressing the profound differences among women. Social justice efforts that focus primarily on one group membership as a bonding device can sabotage our efforts. For example, we might fail to address racism within women's movements or ableism in LGBTIQ gatherings. The importance of the group bonds, the shared experience of all members of the group, must be in balance with other kinds of analysis and the building of coalitions with Allies outside the group.

Anti-Racist educator Tim Wise, in response to interviewer David Cook (2009), explored the paradox we try to expose in the *truth* and *reality* exercise:

Q: What is your response to people who say race is a social construct, an illusion, and that they don't "see" it?

A: It is a biological illusion, but it's a social fact. There were no witches in Salem in 1692, but women died because people thought there were. There may not be separate races of humanity, but skin color has been given social meaning that affects people's lives. It's a sign of privilege for whites to say they are going to view people of color only as people. If I don't see their race, I'm not going to see their lives as they really are. I'm seeing them as abstract "human beings," not as people who've had certain experiences. I'm going to miss or misunderstand how their experiences have shaped them.

The challenge for each of us, whatever Rank memberships are ascribed to us, is to hold both *truth* and *reality*. We must hold our knowledge of *truth*: that Rank categories are arbitrary and absurd, mechanisms for dividing humanity into binary groups. We must also recognize the *reality* that these absurd categories operate in society as if valid, causing profound harm.

If you have a preference for *truth*, you're more likely to say things like "These categories are false! Why even think about them? Let's get beyond this, let's move to the point where these categories don't matter – since they shouldn't matter." While that's inviting, if we lean in that direction and let go of the weight of *reality*, we'll fall into minimizing the experience of Targets' suffering under oppression. We may tend to diminish the impact of oppression – which means we will get co-opted by the oppressive systems more readily.

On the other hand, if you feel more tempted by the weight of *reality*, if you are occupied with how incredibly important and forceful the role assignments are, then you might find yourself saying something like, "For thousands of years, women have been oppressed by patriarchy. Even though our lives look different on the surface, as women we all share common suffering. Until women are free, nobody will be free." Leaning in this direction, we can fall into hopelessness and rage. We might lose sight of the complexity of oppression and the way it affects people in many different ways. We can end up feeling certain that the way things are today is the way they will always be. It's important to remember that although historical gains haven't resulted in the ideals we have wished for, there have been important historical evolutionary movements showing that apparently intransigent dynamics can change across the course of history. They can change even in our lifetimes.

The TRUTH is that human beings do not fit into dualistic categories: we are much too complex – and the possible categories are infinite.

The reality is that our lives are profoundly affected by the attribution of Rank.

Defining Key Terms

Power: Connection to source, wholeness, the sacred. Anyone can be a person of Power regardless of social memberships, roles, job, or other external markers. Our authentic center. The person we are when we are aware of and free from the restrictions of Rank roles. Access to true self in moments when we are aware of Status and Rank dynamics and we are able to operate on the anti-oppressive side of the Agent and Target models.

Status: Style of interaction. Has two settings: high and low. Shifts continually. Is two-directional. Anyone can play high or low Status. Easy to observe.

Rank: System in which socially ascribed memberships result in benefits/privileges for some and oppression/limitations for others. Pervasive yet can be difficult to observe.

Agents: Members of groups who experience benefits/privileges. Socially overvalued. May hold Target group memberships as well. Examples: males, White people, heterosexuals.

Targets: Members of groups who experience oppression/limitations. Socially undervalued. May hold Agent group memberships as well. Examples: females, People of Color, gay/lesbian/bisexual people.

Oppression: (1) The overvaluing of some groups (and overvaluing everything associated with those groups), and the undervaluing of some groups (and undervaluing everything associated with those groups). (2) Unnecessary suffering caused by social inequality.

Privilege: The unconscious benefits and unearned advantages that come with being a member of an Agent group.

FAQ

Isn't Rank about perception?

Not really. This is one of the hardest elements of our model for people to grasp. One way to connect to the idea at the heart of Rank is that it has to do with cost. Let's look at a couple of examples that may seem exaggerated.

A person who as far as they have known is European American discovers on their 37th birthday that they have an African American grandparent. If we base our analysis of Rank on perception, we would surmise that the person did not experience racism until after their 37th birthday, if at all. Under our definition, that person would have experienced the impact of such oppression their whole life. Why didn't they know about their African American roots? The secrecy and invisibility result from White supremacy; oppression has prevented the person from knowing the truth about their family and their own identity.

Another example would be a person who as far as they know does not have a disability. Sometime later in their life, they come to consciousness about their disability. One likely reason for their late discovery is ableism. Thus ableism has cut the person off from self-knowledge and from access to accommodations.

FAQ

What if people don't know or can't tell you're Gay or a Person of Color?

These questions come from people's attempts to sort out whether social membership is a function of perception. We propose that it is not exclusively or primarily perceptual.

In discussing what Rank is or is not in trainings it is sometimes helpful to illuminate using these kinds of so-called "extreme" examples. What if you're Native and don't know you're Native? What if you have a disability and don't know you have disability? We bring these examples up in order to highlight that Rank is not about perception, neither others' perception of the person or the person's own perception. This contrasts with the widely held understanding of social memberships as purely perceptual. Instead, we suggest that Rank dynamics are trans-perceptual, peri-perceptual. They are related to the economy of energy, access, and costs – the ways that Rank can limit a person's experience.

Why do so many people not know that they have Indigenous heritage? Because anti-Indigenous oppression forced families to keep that ancestry secret, the shame-related associations with Indigenous heritage lead to families "forgetting" their authentic heritage. The descendants who don't know their background have been Targets of such oppression. Recognizing the costs to a person who lost part of their ancestry is anti-oppressive. Recognizing the benefit of "passing" as non-Native is also anti-oppressive.

If the reason a person has not come out to themselves is compulsory heterosexuality, then they have been a Target of heterosexism and homophobia – both external and internal – regardless of whether or not they appear gay to anyone else or themselves. Recognizing the cost of homophobia to a person who doesn't recognize their own sexuality until later in life – or ever – is an anti-oppressive awareness.