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Humiliation, dehumanization and the quest for dignity

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Humiliation, dehumanization and the quest for dignity

Researching beyond racism

Philomena Essed

Thinking through and beyond racism

Racism research can build on a solid body of work relating the experiences of generations, synchronously and over time. Increasingly, scholars have broadened their scope beyond national confines to compare, integrate and relate racism across the globe (Reilly, Kaufman and Bodino, 2003; Bulmer and Solomos, 2004; Goldberg, 2009; Romm, 2010; Essed et al., 2018). The past two decades witnessed also the proliferation of critical analyses of the identity politics of whiteness (Levine-Rasky, 2016; Wekker, 2016), while extreme right ideologies are taking more comfortable seats at European and US political tables. National identity crises and discontent about politicians, democracy and government policies (Mounk, 2018) are normalizing into fear-mongering immigrant blaming (Postelnicescu, 2016), thereby stirring the quietness of the public secret that white supremacy and nationalism are deeply rooted in European and American histories (Serwer, 2019). Moral tension is hardening in Western countries around sentiments of white entitlement and supremacy on the one hand, and on the other, democratic and humanistic values majorities also subscribe to. The contradiction between international human rights commitments and the economization of whether and how to respond to global human tragedy has been referred to as one of the current century’s ‘greatest tests to humanity’ and ‘moral leadership’ (Abbasi, Patel and Godlee, 2015:351). Indeed, humanitarian crises in many areas of the world have moved high numbers of people across regions and borders, seeking safety from wars, political and religious prosecution, racism, tribalism, genocide, terrorism, rape, gang violence, environmental depletion, homophobia, unemployment, starvation, human unworthy living conditions, and futures void of hope (Gale, 2004; Carrera et al., 2015; Guild et al., 2015; Ostrand, 2015; Hage, 2017; Esses, Hamilton and Gaucher, 2017; Leach, 2003; Greussing and Boomgaard, 2017). These and other violations of equality, equity and human dignity in a global context are not just a list. They are related (Noble, 2015; Adams and Bell, 2016).

How different systems of dominance converge is, among others, at the heart of intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989) with its initial emphasis on race and gender. Probing into a related, often overlooked, direction Ghassan Hage (2017) explored the relation
between the ecological crisis and racism as inherently related social phenomena. His work reveals at a deeper level how systems develop through and inside each other, from similar roots, validating the subjugation and exploitation of nature to the will and power of human as more deserving of life than non-human animals. The fundamental principle of dehumanization, more or lesser degrees of being considered ‘human’ versus closer to ‘animals’ (or other parts of nature), accommodates the ranking of Others and their (imagined) ways of life. Fuller and Gerloff (2008) captured this in more popular terms as ‘rankism’. Whether dehumanizing metaphors directly refer to aggressive animals or despised animalistic behavior, they involve humiliations (Haslam, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006, 2009; Keith and Keith, 2013; Hage, 2017). This points to the assumption, central to this chapter, that dehumanization and humiliations help sustain most if not all of forms of structural inferiorization and marginalization, even when experienced also differently on local and individual levels. Implications are that the impact of one issue struggles – like racism – is bound to be curtailed because it operates through most if not all other structural social injustices and inequalities. While the insight of relatedness is not new, I hope to add to the conversation a different take. Rather than the paradigm of overlapping systems of domination, my approach seeks to identify shared experience across (imagined) borders and boundaries as a basis for social justice and for liberating practices that also honor the integrity of nature and life itself. Because this is too large a mission for this chapter, I simply take on the challenge of thinking through and beyond racism in order to counter racism more effectively. But more about this later. First I further elaborate on some of the moral implications of humiliating the racialized Other as if doing so is a natural right.

**Entitlement racism as humiliation**

The new millennium has brought surging populist support for the acclaimed right to defend white, national, European, and related exclusive entitlements. The slogan of ‘never again’ has faded with the rapidly decreasing numbers of World War II survivors who carried a critical moral consciousness. There are concerns about the negative impact of strong polarization on the trust among people (Rapp, 2016), much of which gets to be expressed in the public sphere of political, social and traditional media reporting. Overemphasis on conflict, rather than what people share, fuels anxieties and fears among hosting populations imagining or living cultural and societal changes. Exposure to refugee stories through global media also brings closer to home, in rich countries, the kind of existential insecurities and survival challenges the majority of the world faces. At the same time, in the US, Europe and other white dominated countries (racialized, ethnicized, and zipcode) economic inequality has increased (Sayer, 2015) along with stress, a sense of loss and insecurity. The current mode of rudeness, offensive language, openly racist discourse, among politicians, in social media, or in street demonstrations, signals a more general trend of moral erosion (de Gaay Fortman, 2016). In the new millennium, the limitless symbolic violence against Muslims, a form of cultural character assassination (Essed, 2009), became a fertile ground as well for the return of unashamed explicitly anti-black, sometimes called Afrophobic, discourse and images. What I have coined entitlement racism (Essed, 2013; Essed and Muhr, 2018) points to the insistence on the right to use any discourse and images as freedom of expression, also when racially offensive. Entitlement racism presumes that whites are entitled to priority, deserve more space, are more human than people of color, and the license to openly claim this. Entitlement racism has different connotations than the racial bigotry before and during the Civil Rights era of the previous century, when the universal rejection of racism was relatively new and modern.
democracies were still in the making. Today, the claim of ‘white innocence’ has lost credibility (Wekker, 2016). The grace of the benefit of the doubt depletes when racist discourse, presented as freedom of expression, gets to be licensed in spite of the universal right to live free from discrimination. In the information society few, if any, with access to television, mobile phones, computers, tablets, libraries, free E-news papers, search engines, or the financial means to shop at physical or E-bookstores, can claim that they do not have any access to publications or programs, blogs, and other social media, to know when discourses, symbols and images are racially humiliating. Entitlement racism must also be seen against the background of the celebration of neo-liberal individualism to speak your mind; that anything ‘me-me-me’ wants to say ‘should be possible’.

Case in point, the Dutch Black (faced) Pete (Zwarte Piet). This Sambo-esque figure with exaggerated African features, servant of the Saint Nicholas who traditionally visits the Netherlands in early December, has become a prime example of entitlement racism. Not so in its initial stage of racialization, the mid 19th century, when Black Pete first came to resemble a ‘negro’, with exaggerated Black African features, in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery. In spite of three decades of protests, which intensified over the past ten years, pro-Black Pete groups, representing significant parts of the population, still feel entitled to claim the right to ‘their’ Black Pete (Essed and Hoving, 2014; van der Pijl and Goulordava, 2014; Hilhorst and Hermes, 2016; Rodenberg and Wagenaar, 2016). As recently as November 2018 pro-Black Pete figures, apparently including children cheered by their parents, threw eggs, beer cans and dirt while scandalizing with racist and sexist slurs against black (and other) ‘kick out Black Pete’ advocates. The inclusion of sexist slurs suggests the relatedness to other forms of domination, which will be addressed later in this chapter. In light of these and other developments, the question of ‘end of racism?’ sounds rhetorical. Although the ‘Black Pete = Racism’ slogan is inevitably gaining more support, the viciousness of ‘keep your hands off Black Pete’ proponents and the deep emotions involved, including death threats, suggests that advocacy for the Black face cannot simply be reduced to racism (only). Families, friends, the whole country are highly polarized. But they also share something significant. Both pro- and anti-Black-Pete camps feel humiliated, be it for different reasons and seen from different power positions. The former, who draw from the power of entitlement as white Dutch, feel infuriated and humiliated by what they see as immigrants and national ‘traitors’ disrespectfully ripping apart their Saint Nicholas celebration, ‘accusing’ them of racism and demanding that they should do without the Black Pete. Those who reject the racism the celebration invokes, have been exposed to verbally and physically violent forms of humiliating and dehumanizing attacks in their struggle for national celebrations that can honor the dignity of all, including Black Dutch. The pain of feeling disrespected and humiliated is universal, regardless of the cause. Mutual recognition of violation of dignity as a member of a social group, what I would call dignity hurt, can become the rope for a possible bridge across divides, even when initially narrow and shaky (Hicks, 2011).

In the course of this chapter I make an effort to focus more specifically on these two universal mechanisms sustaining racism and other forms of oppression and domination: humiliation and dehumanization. I also suggest that a human made and destructive universal phenomenon, dignity hurt, urges a universal healing response, one that draws from constructive human capabilities to enable, restore and honor that dignity is a universal need (Fuller and Gerloff, 2008). I hope to inspire consideration that new directions in researching racism might be more effective when thinking and acting broader than racism as a standalone.

To date, one of the most accessible and potentially transformative approaches in this context has been intersectionality.
Are we all intersectional now?

The 1974 Combahee River Collective’s much cited 1977 statement was a wake up call:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.

[http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html]

But ideas do not develop in isolation. Across countries and continents feminist pioneers urged recognition of the simultaneity of oppression, including Hull, Scott and Smith (1982), Audre Lorde (1984) and Adrienne Rich (1979, 1984) from the US; Pratibha Parmar (2004) and Hazel Carby (1985) in the UK. Their work made explicit the epistemological power of positioning as a basis for identifying knowledge gaps, while transforming the relation between experience and theory.

In my own case, a critical article about racism in the (Dutch) feminist movement, contesting the homogeneity of the generic ‘we and us women’ (Essed, 1982) preluded the concept of everyday racism, based on the gendered and racialized experiences of Black women in the Netherlands and the US (Essed, 1984). Kim Crenshaw’s introduction of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) became the most influential breakthrough for theories of simultaneous oppression. With this metaphor she reached from within theory and social movements into the professions, notably the legal system. Together with notable legal scholar Dereck Bell and others Crenshaw became founder of Critical Race Theory, a frame that has proliferated into a rich body of work (Crenshaw, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2015). As an intervention in legal studies, CRT problematized the US failure, in spite of the Civil Rights Movement, to improve the political, social and economic conditions of African Americans. CRT called out the neglect, denial and indifference in legal studies when it came to addressing, studying and countering racism. Moreover, Crenshaw (1989) revealed the erasure of black women’s experience in Courts where it was and often still is not possible to consider both racial and gender discrimination in the same complaint. You had to make a choice, usually at the expense of black women’s voice and experience. As a notion, concept, activist tool, analytical frame, policy instrument and more, intersectionality has gained popularity and, arguably, societal acceptance, beyond expectations.

Theory is one thing, but how intersectional analysis can work in everyday life is a domain still under-researched in the area of race critical studies (Essed and Goldberg, 2002; Solomos and Collins, 2010). The following example, a personal anecdote, can probably illustrate the complexity of interpretation when different modes of domination are latent or actively operative at the same time. An everyday example can also call attention to some of the unresolved conceptual tensions underlying the very idea of multiple, but still separate, factors as intersectional in occurrence.

The other day I went to a nearby supermarket in the small mall adjacent to a university campus in Southern California. Bright sunny day, at noon. In order to enter you have to cross the driveway in front of the supermarket, where cars are supposed to go very slow, and where they have to give way to pedestrians. Walking towards the entrance, a car, silver compact, approaches from my right looking as if it had no intention of stopping and is about to hit me when I call out last second: “Heh!” The driver, who had been looking at something in his lap, lifts his head, steps on the brake, and makes eye contact, apparently
taken by surprise. My brains make a quick assessment based on his appearance: a guy, maybe olive skin, maybe white with tan – hard to see skin color in the summer underneath elaborately tattooed arms, baseball cap, sunglasses. Traditional student age, probably a student indeed – remember this is almost on the premises of a university campus. The professor-educator in me is right there. I urge him to scroll down his window, point at the smartphone he had quickly squeezed in between the two front seats, commenting, “You’re not supposed to do that, emailing while driving.” Agitated, he barks back: “What the fuck do you know?” Flabbergasted, I respond, “You almost hit me!” But he is already driving off.

My immediate thoughts: how rude! Why? What’s wrong with these young people? Donald Trump effect? Social media entitlement to say whatever you want? Racism? Only to notice that he stops again, ten meters further at the far left of the supermarket facade, where a young woman, black, decidedly walks towards his car, opening the door to take a back seat. She might have come from one of those small snack or nail polish places behind her. Girl friend? I guess so. ‘The’ girlfriend? Interracial dating is not very common in the US, but possible. Hmm… maybe this was not really about race, but iGen or Generation Z who do not want to be lectured, certainly not a testosterone charged male having a lady, one or two generations his senior accuse him of doing an ‘oh so 20th century’ thing as emailing when, in retrospect, his ear phones, I had also noticed, suggest he might have been browsing music collection, Facebook or whatever apps. He probably knows it is against the law to be on a smartphone while driving. So, was it necessary to ‘educate’ on top of that? I could have just left him with a little touch of shock about what could have happened. The imagined litigation due to injury of pedestrian might have touched him sufficiently to cause a little scare. But then this rude language and not even apologizing… no politeness, no sense of dignity.

So far the 30 seconds of the event include hasty interpretation, scratching the surface of layers in an ordinary everyday encounter. Mind you, even olive skin with black girlfriend could still make it a case of rudeness inclusive of racism. And this could also have been an Uber or Lyft driver collecting a passenger, which could explain her taking the back seat and might suggest that he was doing a last minute smartphone check for info about the passenger or pick-up space when his car almost hit a pedestrian…

The initial quick interpretation draws from generalized, arguably, quite stereotypical, profiling: the woman as possibly coming from the corner nail studio; the relation to the ‘young, student, white’ driver constructed in terms of a hetero-normative scenario: if a young man picks up a young woman they must be friends or maybe dating. The other scenario projects what an Uber or Lyft driver might be doing with their smartphone.

While the above intersectional interpretation attempts to be inclusive in terms of possibly relevant identity factors, it remains a question of reductionism, be it not to one factor (racism) but to various simultaneously (e.g. racism, ageism, sexism). Reductionism usually works at the expense of nuance in terms of ‘truth’ value, even when multiple reductions are acknowledged at the same time. Life experiences and frames of interpretation cannot simply be reduced to generalizable categories as if we would only live according to what racial, gender, economic or other parts of positionality would dictate. This immediately highlights the tension between the fact that any experience is uniquely received in the context of a unique constellation of life experiences (this particular event, that particular location, these specific actors involved) but also shared, because at a higher level of abstraction an event like this (white male verbal aggression against female of color) fits a standard scenario of gendered everyday racism (Essed, 1991). Different than gender and racism, the notion of gendered racism assumes that race is modified, co-constructed, or fused with gender, class and the other way around. It contests the existence of ‘pure’ racism, pure sexism, pure ageism, or pure...
xenophobia, for that matter. The theoretical principle of experiencing race through another modality is not new. The 1970s/80s had also been the era of critiquing sociological and economic reductionism, notably through the notion of articulation (Hall, 1980).

The story, so far, is fairly apolitical, not much at stake, indicating how intersectionality, a concept grounded in generations of political protest and struggle, has evolved to come to cover the more general idea of multiple dimensions of identity, including style preference (baseball cap and tattoos), lifestyle (silver car) and professional status (professor and student) (Fuller and Gerloff, 2008).

But, one can also make the story more political. Suppose the car had hit the pedestrian indeed, who, given the fairly slow speed, would have survived, probably with some injuries. The subsequent 911 call would have activated already latent and also additional issues of power and (health-legal) politics. The police, ambulance, hospital, insurance policies, are imbued with different and oppositional issues of interest, and hence, social power inequalities would be activated to become highly relevant. The pedestrian would still be a university professor, but also a woman of color, which might chip away at the status of being a professor (Henry and Tator, 2009); and the driver might have been ‘just’ a student, but white male and maybe also the son of a wealthy white lawyer, which might ‘upgrade’ his version of the story the police and maybe, later, a judge would hear and take into consideration. Each of the considerations, race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, national status, age have their own set of empowering or disadvantaging characteristics, none of which works in isolation. Fusing the factors could look like this: the driver is not just young, but let’s say a particular young man, namely a white young man, not a black young man, and then white, middle class able-bodied young, which is a quite different white young person than say, a white lower class young man or a white highly educated middle class blind young man (Adams, 2019).

The story could have been just a dinner table entertainment story about ‘almost got hit by a car the other day’. But analyzing the story can reveal the complexity of interpreting that and most other interactive situations in life. The interpreter not only inserts into the story socially constructed categories, but also acts upon those projections. I was interpreting on the basis of prototypes and my particular personal experiences with those categories. For instance, coming from the Netherlands, where, unlike the US, gun ownership is unusual, it was probably risky to ask the driver to scroll down his window. He clearly got agitated and fired. The face saving excuse that he felt threatened could have been acceptable as it fits a standard US racism scenario of criminalizing ordinary black and brown people.

This dramatic fictional turn introduces yet another approach to the event: Apparently, the driver felt entitled to use offensive language against someone who is, on face value to him, an able-bodied, generationally older woman of color immigrant – given my ‘foreign’ accent most Americans seem to detect after two words – or whatever ‘Othering’ projections might have been on his mind. The sense of entitlement is embedded in his being a whole person. Agitated, annoyed, irritated or otherwise negatively emotionally impacted, he somehow feels authorized to express these feelings. This kind of empowerment is grounded in the lived experience of entitlement in a societal system that attaches premium worthiness to masculine whiteness and white (American, middle-classed, able-bodied, heterosexual) masculinity.

The above fusions of premium values and characteristics around human worth prompted me to redefine racism to acknowledge the key role of questioning the ‘worthiness’ of the Other as a human being:
Racism is about the creation of hierarchies of worthiness attached to groups of people identified as different in terms of (attributed) racial, or cultural (ethnic) factors. It is a historically anchored ideology, structure and process, where one racial or ethnic group privileges its members on the basis of attributed preferred values and characteristics, in order to legitimate the disadvantaging of other groups. These values and characteristics are used to assess the worthiness of human beings and ways of being in terms of related degrees of entitlement to ‘be’, to be validated, and to develop.

My definition purposefully intends universal or multi-applicability. Because you can change race for gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, religion or other, it creates the opportunity to address fused forms of domination.

The shared experience of dignity hurt

Dominated groups will seek, sooner or later, acknowledgment of the injustices done to them, while dominating groups might defend themselves or deny. Fellow teachers in the area of race and racism studies may be familiar with the situation where teaching about the topic could trigger emotions of recognition and empowerment, but also anger, resentment, race-fatigue, humiliation, shame, defensiveness, self-silencing, guilt, or powerlessness, depending on the identities involved. There could be those who felt unseen in their hurt, based on violations of what they felt was primarily not race but class, gender, disability, religious or another part of their experience. There would be those who felt seen in their dominated racial identity, but denied or only marginally seen in their LGBTQ identity. Whether (fused) gender, class, sexual orientation or other systems or domination involved, all operate, among other things, through humiliation and dehumanization; the creation of hierarchies of (human) worthiness attributing a lesser degree or complete absence of human-ness to one or more particular groups. The purpose of humiliation in systems of oppression is to discourage potential protest and to punish or retaliate against actual rebellion. Without resistance there will be no change.

With the emergence of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, the discourse of hierarchies of worthiness in terms of ‘ways of being’ and ‘of being human’ has become tragically explicit again, since the (pre) Civil Rights Movement. The very name of the movement, a 21st century reminder that black people are human and equally worthy of life, reminds, like a déjà vu, of abolition movements of the 19th century. Going back to basics as if (formal) democracy never happened: some are less deserving than others for being seen as (fully) human. The BLM movement rises up against the widely spread phenomenon in the US (and increasingly in Europe) that black and brown people can be beaten, kicked, strangled, dragged, smashed, shot, stamped upon, and killed without repercussions, in particular by the hands of Law Enforcement. The moral crisis around discourse in the social media and the renewed respectability of hate infused populism, has also emboldened openly racist verbal aggression whites feel entitled to take ownership of again. At this point in time there is an endless list of everyday entitlement racism one can read about in the (social) media, where racially offensive discourse freely violates the right of black people to ‘be’. Tags are floating around social media, such as: driving while black; having a barbeque in a park while black; going to Starbucks while black; trying to enter your own apartment building while black male; taking a seat on a Ryan airplane while black female, and so on. Add the examples you have read, heard about, witnessed or been exposed to yourself.
History is rife with the use of humiliation in personal and group conflict – without exception including all of the structural forms of domination. In a groundbreaking study Donna Hicks (2011) analyzed the role of dignity in conflict resolution. Drawing from decades of expertise as a mediator, she discovered that even long standing historical enemies were able to share the same table and start a dialogue, on the basis of the mutual recognition of shared experiences when they had felt violated in their sense of dignity by the other party. I would like to rephrase this as the recognition of dignity hurt, as a way of acknowledging the subjectivity of social, cultural or ethnic-racial pain involved (Essed, 2009). The focus should not be on the (often contested) ‘facts’ of violated dignity or humiliating – she said versus he said – but on the shared experience that people feel pained or violated when they are humiliated as a member of a group perceived in terms of ‘They and Them’. The point of departure then becomes the way words, discourses, (physical) acts, practices, are received and interpreted, and why/how this causes a sense of feeling hurt in their (social identity) dignity. It is exactly the interpretative, that is, subjective, painful, often also shameful, space, that makes dignity hurt often being overlooked as an essential part of power, dominance and resistance. Earlier, Cynthia Cockburn (1998) had been successful in Participative Action Research projects that brought together women from different national, religious, ethnic enemy groups who shared deeply felt, often traumatic, experiences of (violent, often sexual) humiliation as women, across warring parties. Because they could face dignity hurt as shared experience across historical divides, there was a space to build mutual understanding and more. Both authors draw from a negative and a positive account of human dignity. A negative account explains what dignity is not – how it is being violated in terms of physical, social, economic, and cultural humiliations and forms of dehumanization. Focusing on the shared experience of dignity hurt is invaluable as a way of acknowledging as well as transcending multiple and interrelated systems of oppression/domination. Without an in-depth understanding of the inherent role of dignity hurt in sustaining oppression, it is too easy to embrace a positive account of ‘dignity’. Who could not be for dignity? An easy ‘yes’ to dignity would be vulnerable to missing the point that systems of domination reserve dignity for some only, over the backs of many. Therefore, one cannot really appreciate and understand the depth of what dignity stands for without understanding even better what it means to be denied equal human worth and the right to live in dignified circumstances.

Although humiliation often serves to coerce or reconfirm respect for the superior status of the humiliating party, there might be a negative impact on the latter’s dignity in the eyes of others (Dillon, 2013). Denying respect to people of color, questioning their humanity, or trying to strip away the dignity of disabled people, invariably implies unacknowledged behavior from the side of the actor (Margalit, 1996). Yet, few people would think of themselves as having compromised or lost their dignity in the process of humiliating others, practices including: all acts of sexual harassment; acting out racial and sexual disgust towards anyone; laughing about the abuse of transgender sex workers; all parties involved when one bullies a colleague by mimicking his ‘Asian English’ or her physical disability in order to humor the audience of peers who crack up about it; punishing your child with a belt, and so on. More about the meaning of dignity will follow, but simply click on a YouTube video: focused observation of the humiliator/s might be revealing.

Loss of dignity is not bounded by class or by social status. The most privileged are known to degrade themselves: impulsively twittering state or company presidents, cursing CEOs, yelling directors losing self-control, or authoritarian supervisors bossing workers around, are not uncommon.
There are two sides of the interactional coin between actors and targets with regards to humiliating the Other. First, the earlier mentioned disregard of actor decorum. Second, the force by which the target may try to maintain dignity in spite of humiliations (Moody-Adams, 2013). Having said this, it should be seen as well that continuous attacks on your sense of human worth and dignity throughout years, lives and generations can damage or destroy the sense of self as a worthy human being, worthy family, community or people (Moody-Adams, 2013).

How humiliation dehumanizes

Dehumanization involves degrees of humanness measured along dominant group based normative or idealized values and traits, which are culturally sensitive and more generously attributed to the ‘we-us’ group. Values determining the degree of human superiority scoring high in Western (capitalist) societies, such as control over nature, progress, profit, rationality, autonomy, and productivity translate into desired traits, including intelligent, civil, developed, self-made, invulnerable, competitive, stable, independent, able-bodied, or born to lead, which are often associated, implicitly, with and thereby naturalizing superiority attached to white middle class males. Not surprisingly, because these dominant values and traits are and have been produced through, and with the purpose of sustaining a nature destroying, growth obsessed, patriarchal, racist, and exploitative system of power relations. Lower on the scale of importance are, for instance, love for the earth, sharing, compassion, care, kindness, sacrifice, vulnerability. Dehumanization takes two main forms: full or partial exclusion of being considered part of the human race. Full exclusion is often expressed in terms of the animalization of the ‘they-them’ group. Examples are African descent people compared to monkeys, or Jews being called rats. Not being considered fully human finds expression in terms of the target group being seen, for instance, as less rational – women as a group; as less civilized – African and indigenous communities in particular; as less intelligent – women as a group; certain races and ethnicities; as ‘stupid’ – people with cognitive disabilities; as culturally ‘backward’ – Muslims portrayed in Dutch and other European discourse.

The phenomenon of dehumanization has been theorized and studied in relation to various social domains, including gender, disability, criminal offenders, and others, but most often in relation to race, war, and genocide, that is, as the denial of the humanness of the racial, ethnic, national or religious other (Haslam, 2006; Bain, Vaes and Leyens, 2014). The pervasiveness of dehumanization (Nussbaum, 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2010) makes the cry for respect and the struggle to maintain dignity essential to dominated groups (Lamont, 2000; Moody-Adams, 2013; Lamont et al., 2016).

Towards cultures of dignity

Dignity is difficult to define but most people know, intuitively, what it means. It is

a need so strong that people will give up their freedom to have it met; an inner drive so insistent that it can move people to shocking acts of revenge when the attempt to achieve it is thwarted; a human value so critical to happiness and well-being that people sometimes value it more than life itself.

Fuller and Gerloff (2008, Kindle locations 50–52)
Though included in the UN declaration of human rights, the meaning of dignity is contested. It has been associated, among other things, with rank and position, used alternatively as equal to self-respect, as paying respect and giving honor, as unique and inherent to being human or something that can be cultured and achieved (Dillon, 2013). For the purpose of this essay dignity is seen as a universal desire and/or need. Because of its universal significance, even when the exact interpretation can vary, the search for dignity in itself has unifying potential that transcends personality and group differences: race, ethnicity, class, gender, physical-cognitive ability, sexual orientation and others.

On a personal or dispositional level, having dignity is not inherent to being human. Who is not familiar with images of undignified living conditions, with comments or observations that so-and-so have ‘lost’ their dignity or behaves in an undignified way? Dignity can be seen as ‘a potential that has to be fulfilled and self-actualized by the persons in question themselves’, but the circumstances under which this happens can be ‘precarious’ (Pollmann, 2011:233). Undignified conditions can, but do not necessarily, take away your dignity. However, supportive social, legal, economic, political, cultural, and other societal conditions, can make it easier to maintain the full potential of dignity.

Dignity can be manifest in at least three, related, areas:

- **Personal/dispositional (traits)**
- **Relational (behavior towards others)**
- **Environment (human or ‘life’ worthy living, working, learning conditions)**

Manifestations of dignity as a quality or disposition are culturally sensitive and there is no agreement on what these qualities are. For instance, Inmanuel Kant would see dignity as inherent in being a rational person. Aurel Kolnai (1976), another much cited Western philosopher, explains that dignity as a quality is manifest in ‘such characteristics as composure, calm self-control, serenity, and quiet invulnerability’ (Dillon, 2013: 22). Drawing from Bontekoe (2010), Bolton (2007), Sayer (2007) and others, I suggest that dignity, as a potential personal quality, represents related principles of leading the self towards aims beyond self-interest:

- **Moral integrity** assumes consistency in living up to moral principles, including social justice, honesty and truthfulness.
- **Whole person approach.** Acknowledging that we are all fully human, that is, with capabilities and vulnerabilities, can prevent patronizing, pathologizing and dehumanization.
- **Humility.** This opens up to see, hear, and value others, while countering self-aggrandizement. It can also contribute to a degree of emotional stability, relevant to appreciate critique.
- **Emotional self-control combined with responsible risk taking in the pursuit of justice.** The discussion of entitlement racism illustrated the importance of ‘think before you say it’ because of the damaging impact on others. This does not mean that one cannot show anger or firmness in rejecting injustice.
- **Self-direction** while acknowledging interdependence. The usual term used in the context of dignity is ‘autonomy’. Because of the (masculine) connotations of (heroic) acting alone, I prefer the notion of self-direction in thinking and deciding about acting. Recognizing interconnectedness between all human beings and our natural environment enables recognition of (the needs of) others and acknowledging their contributions. Human achievements always imply the direct or indirect, synchronous or past, seen or unseen, work of others, including self-direction with the trusted help of someone else in case of challenged physical or cognitive facilities.
The above qualities are not meant to be comprehensive or conclusive, but as a step into the direction of reflecting on dignity as a disposition in everyday life.

Dispositional qualities are not relevant in themselves but in the way they can enable and foster dignity in interpersonal relations, which, drawing from Donna Hick’s ‘essential elements’ of dignity in interpersonal relations (Hicks, 2011:25–26) can include: freedom from social prejudice; providing a mutual sense of belonging; absence of physical harm and humiliation; mutual (critical) appreciation of each other’s talents and capabilities; fairness and belief in each other’s moral integrity, for instance by giving the other the benefit of the doubt (Hicks, 2011).

Personal qualities and interpersonal relationships with dignity contribute to creating dignified working and living environments or cultures of dignity. What could a culture of dignity mean, for instance, as applied to dignity in the workplace? Key theories and empirical explorations of dignity at work (Hodson, 2001), the dignity of workers as moral experience (Michele Lamont, 2000), organizational and relational dimensions of dignity at work (Sharon Bolton, 2007) and dignity as humanistic leadership and management (Kostera and Pirson, 2017) agree that dignity at work goes beyond mere formal rights.

In a global world where the exploitation of nature services to compete for the fastest productivity growth, one of the most basic, but difficult, ways of honoring the dignity of people at work is to challenge workplace (and other) instrumentalism.

The reign of capitalism and corporate culture, the global primacy of economic goals, the legitimacy of greed, the widely shared pursuit of profit and cultures of constant assessments, reduce employees to mere instruments – a pair of hands or a set of brains. Humanistic leadership and management (Kostera and Pirson, 2017) could contribute to environments where employees, supervisors and leaders feel seen, heard, and understood as embodying many capabilities, vulnerabilities and life experiences, rather than foremost as being instrumental to profit and brand value for the organization. Employees would likely feel trusted with a degree of self-direction, which increases work satisfaction, motivation and pride. In addition, one could imagine the following workplace suggestions with dignity in mind, as including but certainly not restricted to:

- Respect for employee rights and interests
- Freedom from chronic or serious conflict with managers or peers
- Work that can make you feel meaningful, proud, and which can be a source of growth
- Worker citizenship, including flexible working hours, but without the burden or 24/7 availability that often undermines family and other private commitments
- Self-direction in moving around in the workplace, making friends, building networks (Hodson, 2001)
- Competent leaders who feel comfortable with a dignity disposition (see above) and ability to relate in a dignified way with others (see also above)
- Teamwork and collaboration rather than competitive individualism
- Working spaces designed with the employee as a whole person in mind, not just the performer of a particular function in a particular physical space. Dignity design speaks to the body, spirit, and senses, such as the human need for pleasing aesthetics, including direct or indirect contact with nature (Mannen and McAllister, 2017).

Summarizing from the above, it means that in cultures of dignity interpersonal relations are interdependent and participants are recognized as a whole person with (potential) capacities who is equally worthy to be. They would neither be boxed, overvalued or undervalued in
terms of specific elements of identity – race, gender, disability or other – nor reduced to human capital or followers as if lacking responsibility and relevant agency. All forms of social injustice, including and beyond racism, can be addressed at the same time when people are seen, heard, understood, valued, and critically supported in their (potential) capabilities and vulnerabilities (Nussbaum, 2011).

This brings us back, full circle, to countering (fused forms of) racism as embedded in the pursuit of social, cultural, economic and environmental justice. If dignity is truly a universal desire, its pursuit can be considered a potentially strong motivation to unite in common pursuit of cultures of dignity as a mode of thinking through while thinking beyond single issues.

Notes

2 A news item from the RTL Nieuws indeed reports infiltration among Black Pete of extreme right representatives dressed up like Black Pete. www.rtlnieuws.nl/editienl/artikel/4490091/extreemrechtse-pieten-liepen-mee-net-intocht-dit-provocatie
3 www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-every-day-metaphor-anyone-could

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