

The Psychology of Manners: Why Small Acts of Courtesy Matter More Than We Think

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Something seems to be disappearing from our everyday interactions. It happens quietly and in moments so small that they are easy to dismiss. Someone walks into another person's home without saying hello. A kindness is received without a thank you. Someone walks through a doorway and allows the door to close directly in the face of the person behind them. A service worker is spoken to dismissively. A stranger is treated as an inconvenience. A disagreement becomes an excuse for contempt.

None of these incidents, individually, is particularly earth-shattering. Collectively, however, they raise an uncomfortable question: **Have we forgotten how to be civil to one another?** Perhaps an even more important question is what happens to a society when we begin to decide that manners no longer matter.

When we hear the word *manners*, we may think about the instructions many of us heard as children: say please, say thank you, don't interrupt, hold the door, say hello when you enter someone's home. But psychologically and socially, manners serve a much greater purpose than simply demonstrating that someone was "raised properly". They are tiny signals of recognition. When I say hello to you, I acknowledge your presence. When I thank you, I acknowledge your effort. When I hold a door for you, I briefly consider your needs alongside my own. When I apologize after causing harm, I acknowledge that my behaviour affected another person.

In this sense, manners are not meaningless rituals or outdated rules of etiquette. They are among the smallest ways human beings communicate something profoundly important to one another:

I see you. You matter too.

Human beings are profoundly social creatures. Our behaviour is shaped not only by our personal values, but also by social norms; our perceptions of what the people around us consider acceptable. We watch one another. We learn from one another. And, often without realizing it, we adjust our own behaviour according to what appears to be normal.

This becomes particularly interesting when we consider research into incivility. Foulk, Woolum and Erez (2016) examined what happens after people encounter relatively low-level negative behaviour such as rudeness. Across three studies, they found evidence that rudeness can effectively become contagious. Exposure to rude behaviour activated related concepts in people's thinking, which could subsequently influence their interpretations and behaviour toward others. The consequences were not necessarily confined to the people involved in the original interaction. They could affect future interactions with entirely different people.

That should give us pause.

When everyday incivility becomes socially tolerated, it risks becoming socially contagious. And if behaviour is learned socially, civility can be contagious too.

Consider what that means in everyday life. The person who receives someone's unnecessary hostility may carry some of that hostility into the next interaction. The person receiving *that* behaviour may then carry it somewhere else. A dismissive encounter at work may affect an interaction at a store on the way home, which may influence another person's mood when they arrive at their own home. What appears to be an isolated moment of rudeness may travel considerably farther than the two people originally involved.

Fortunately, the psychology of human behaviour also gives us reason for optimism. Prosocial behaviours (the actions that help, support or benefit other people) can reinforce connection and reciprocity. Research examining gratitude is particularly interesting in this regard. Ma, Tunney and Ferguson's (2017) meta-analysis of 91 studies involving more than 18,000 participants found a significant positive association between gratitude and prosocial behaviour. The relationship was particularly strong when gratitude arose in response to another person's kindness.

In other words, acknowledging goodness may help generate more goodness.

This raises another uncomfortable cultural question. We have rightly spent years encouraging people to establish boundaries, advocate for themselves, protect their well-being and recognize that they cannot endlessly sacrifice themselves for others. These are important lessons. Yet we should be cautious about confusing self-respect with self-centredness.

The sentiment "I don't owe anyone anything" has become increasingly familiar in contemporary conversation. Technically, perhaps we don't. You do not owe the stranger behind you a held door. You do not owe your host a warm greeting. You do not owe someone a thank you when they do something thoughtful. But societies cannot function solely according to what human beings legally, contractually or personally owe one another.

Healthy communities require something more. They require reciprocity, consideration, restraint, accountability and grace. Sometimes they require us to inconvenience ourselves for approximately five seconds because another human being is standing beside us. That is not weakness. That is community.

Psychologists Jay Van Bavel and Dominic Packer explore another important piece of this conversation in *The Power of Us: Harnessing Our Shared Identities to Improve Performance, Increase Cooperation, and Promote Social Harmony* (2021). Their work examines the enormous influence social identity can have on how we understand ourselves, relate to others and behave within groups. Group identity can become a powerful source of cooperation and collective action, but divisions between "us" and "them" can also contribute to hostility and contempt.

That presents an intriguing question when thinking about civility: **What happens when our definition of "us" becomes increasingly narrow?**

My family. My friends. My political group. My community.
People who think like me.
People who agree with me.
And everyone else gradually becomes *them*.

Civility asks us to widen that circle. The cashier having a difficult day is part of *us*. The neighbour whose opinions differ from ours is part of *us*. The stranger holding the elevator is part of *us*. The person driving too slowly in front of us is part of *us*. We do not need to agree with one another to recognize one another's humanity. In fact, perhaps one of the most important purposes of civility is that it allows human beings to coexist respectfully despite disagreement.

We must also acknowledge the transformation in how people communicate. Much of modern interaction now occurs through screens, where many of the social cues that traditionally moderate human behaviour (tone, facial expression, immediate emotional feedback and the discomfort of witnessing another person's reaction) may be diminished or absent. Online environments can also make highly emotional, hostile or provocative exchanges exceptionally visible. Regardless of whether social media *caused* declining civility, it is worth considering what behaviours our communication environments normalize and reward. If contempt becomes ordinary in one part of our lives, we should not be surprised when some of it appears elsewhere.

So what do we do?

Simply telling people to "be nicer" will not change a social norm. If human behaviour is influenced by what we repeatedly observe around us, communities must intentionally model and reinforce something different.

That begins in remarkably ordinary places. Parents can model thanking servers, greeting neighbours and apologizing when they are wrong. Schools can teach civility not simply as behavioural compliance but as social responsibility. Organizations can create cultures in which respectful disagreement is expected, and accountability is not confused with hostility. Community leaders can demonstrate that strength and decency are not opposites. We can celebrate cooperation and kindness instead of reserving our attention almost exclusively for conflict.

And each of us can begin somewhere even closer to home: with our own behaviour.

Say hello. Say please. Say thank you. Hold the door. Put the shopping cart back. Let someone merge.

Acknowledge the person serving you. Look up from your phone. Apologize when you are wrong. Disagree without humiliating someone. Offer kindness without expecting recognition for it.

And perhaps, allow other people to see you doing these things.

Social norms are created through repetition. Children observe them. Colleagues absorb them. Strangers respond to them. Communities gradually come to expect them.

This does not mean that civility requires silence or compliance. Politeness should never be used to suppress legitimate anger, advocacy, accountability or difficult conversations. Some of the most important conversations we will ever have will be uncomfortable. **Civility does not mean avoiding disagreement. It means remembering the humanity of the person standing across from us while we disagree.**

Perhaps rebuilding social trust does not always begin with governments, institutions, policies or massive social campaigns. Perhaps some of it begins much smaller: at the grocery store, at work, around the dinner table, on the sidewalk or at someone's front door.

One person looks at another person and says, 'Hello'.
Another says, 'Thank you'.
Someone holds the door.
Someone else holds it for the person behind them.
Tiny behaviours. Almost insignificant.
Except perhaps they aren't.

If incivility can travel from one human being to another, then we should take seriously the possibility that the norms travelling in the opposite direction can be strengthened as well. Every small act of consideration contributes to our collective understanding of how people are expected to treat one another.

Maybe manners were never small.
Maybe they have always been part of the invisible social fabric that helps hold communities together.

So perhaps the question is no longer, where did humanity lose its manners?
The more useful question may be: What would happen if each of us decided to bring them back?

References

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