

Uncommon Courtesy

Italian essayist Natalia Ginsburg has called civility a “little virtue,” not a great one. And one might expect that rudeness, common courtesy and manners wouldn’t be of paramount importance given the terrorism, war and economic instability of the day. But the issue of *respect*—how people treat each other in their daily interactions and whether they are willing to moderate their own desires and comfort to accommodate the needs of others—seems to be a profoundly important one that provokes a strong and often heartfelt response.

This past January, Public Agenda, supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, conducted research for *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America*. Respondents to the study were quick to connect the annoyance of an inconsiderate cell phone user or a reckless act by a fellow driver to a much bigger concern—a lack of respect perceived as an assault on people’s sensibilities and the quality of their lives.

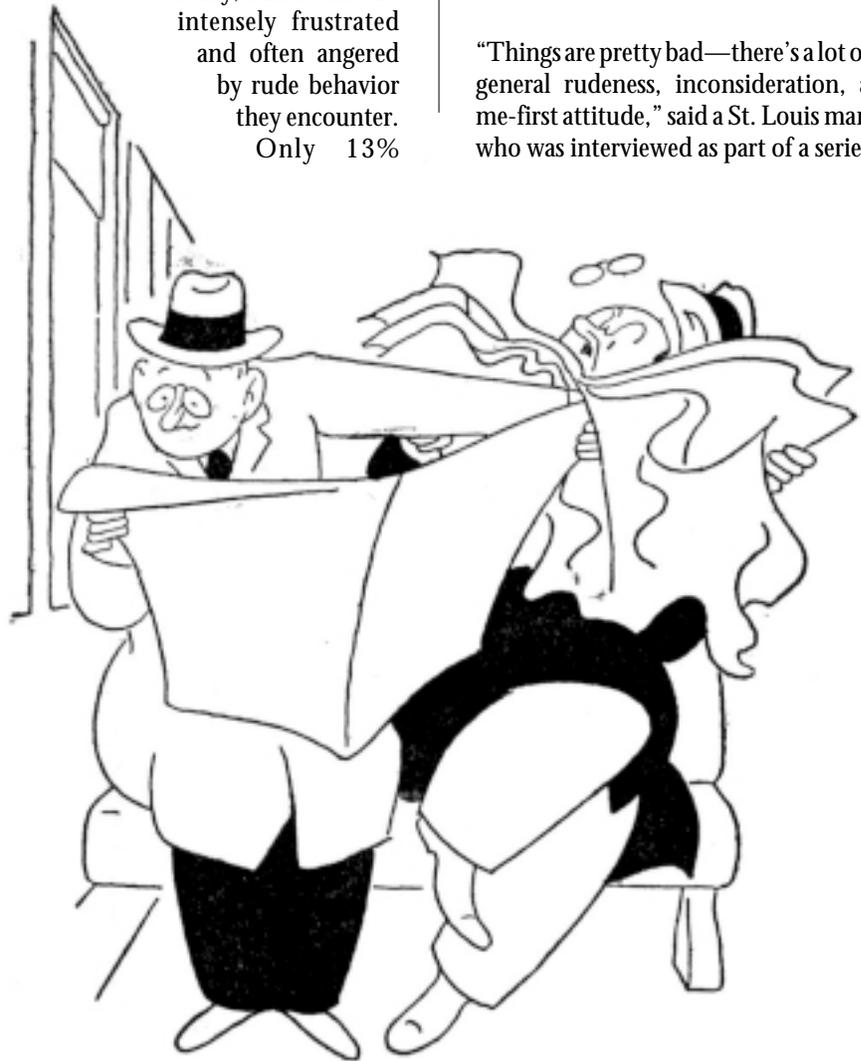
According to about eight in ten survey respondents (79%), lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem, one we should try to

address; only 19% did not find it important, given all the other issues facing society.

Clearly, Americans are intensely frustrated and often angered by rude behavior they encounter. Only 13%

said people were basically treating each other with enough respect these days; 40% said things should be somewhat better, and 44% said they should be a lot better.

“Things are pretty bad—there’s a lot of general rudeness, inconsideration, a me-first attitude,” said a St. Louis man who was interviewed as part of a series



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of focus groups conducted for the study. “I get real aggravated with people who are into their cell phones at a public place. I don’t really care to hear their conversation. Driving—they’re more concerned about themselves, not whether they’re running a risk of pushing you off the road.”

Fully 61% of the survey respondents believed that rude and selfish behavior in places such as highways, stores and airports had increased in recent years. In one measure of how pervasive the problem is, only 12% said they practically never came across people who were rude and disrespectful; the remainder said they saw them either often (34%) or sometimes (54%).

Arguably, the most dramatic statistic emerging from the study was the number of people who confessed to having been rude and disrespectful themselves—41%. At least some Americans were clearly ready, willing and able to talk candidly about their own shortcomings on the courtesy front. “I’ve done some very inappropriate things,” said a Connecticut man. “...my kid started [soccer] at four. He had fun but I started [thinking], ‘My kid can pay his way through college with this, my kid can be a professional player.’ And I’ve been red-carded and thrown out of games as a coach. I’m working my way through that.”

Are these concerns over behavior driven merely by a sense of nostalgia for an imaginary past? People in the survey did not think so. When asked directly, an overwhelming 73% said

that Americans actually used to treat each other with more respect; only 21% said this belief was no more than nostalgia for a past that never existed.

Despite the public’s evident frustration, though, not all the findings painted a dismal picture. Nearly half (48%) of our sample said they often saw people being kind and considerate, and only 6% practically never did (46% said they saw it sometimes). And people apparently still count on neighbors to be friendly and helpful—almost two in three (64%) gave them good or excellent ratings, and only a relative few (32%) said things had gotten worse in this regard.

Interestingly, Americans ages 65 years and over reported somewhat better experiences on the civility front. Almost six in ten (59%) gave people excellent or good grades for treating the elderly with respect and courtesy, a better evaluation than the overall sample (43%). Older Americans were more likely than younger ones—those under 30—to say they often saw people who were kind and considerate (59% vs. 39%). They were also less likely to say they often saw rude and disrespectful people (27% vs. 45%; see Figure 1).

Survey respondents also pointed to areas where they believed things had im-

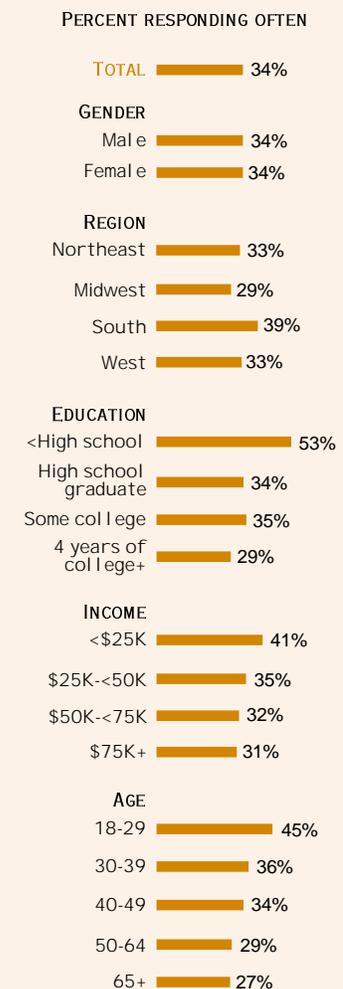
proved. Progress was cited in the area of respect for diversity, although many would add that there is still a long way to go.

The public believes that people have become increasingly respectful and considerate in their dealings with African Americans. A 59% majority, for

Figure 1
Rudeness Abounds

Question:

How about people who are rude and disrespectful? Do you see this often, sometimes, or practically never?



Source: Survey by Public Agenda, January 2-23, 2002.

example, said there had been improvement in “treating African Americans with respect and courtesy.” African Americans themselves, however, were

behavior. More than half (52%) also said incidents of disrespect tended to stay with them for some time, that they were difficult to shrug off. And

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not quite ready to applaud their fellow citizens; only 41% saw an improvement.

Hispanics responded more favorably than the general public regarding their treatment in American society. While only 41% of the public said things had gotten better when it came to “treating Hispanics with respect and courtesy,” among Hispanics themselves the number rose to 54%.

Half of respondents overall (50%) thought there had been improvement in treating “gay people with respect and courtesy” (although only 31% would now give Americans overall good or excellent ratings). And about half (51%) said Americans had gotten better at “being kind and considerate toward people with physical handicaps”—fully 61% would now give people good or excellent ratings in this regard.

The focus groups and the survey findings of the *Aggravating Circumstances* study both made clear that people personally experience and witness lack of respect in their daily lives. Their views are not simply fueled by the media, nor are they merely a reaction to partisan infighting in Washington.

Sixty-two percent of survey respondents said it bothered them “a lot” when they saw rude or disrespectful

nearly four in ten (37%) had been so affected by rudeness that they had even thought about moving, just so they could live in a community where people were nicer to each other.

Considering this high level of dissatisfaction, can anything be done to improve our behavior toward one another? We no longer permit racism to go unanswered. We teach and practice respect for diversity and have added muscle to these beliefs through legislative action. This has led to a sense that we, as a society, are making progress in these areas. However, this progress was not achieved without considerable effort. It may take substantial will and resolve on a personal and a national level to change our attitudes and modify our behaviors.

One challenge involved in taking on the civility issue at the national level is the unconscious confluence of ideological voices raised against it. Some conservatives, for example, are quick to point to the decline of civility as a corrosive example of the unraveling of the ties that bind us. Yet they are also quick to belittle as mere political correctness people’s wariness to judge or label others. They extol the civility of the past, ignoring the shortcomings of earlier decades—for example, the mistreatment of minorities or the handicapped.

Some liberals, for their part, disparage the call to civility as a meaningless exercise in window dressing, a trifling concern. Even worse, they suspect that the call for nicer behavior is simply a way to forgo discussion about important issues facing our society.

What ordinary Americans have to say may offer a useful corrective that can move the argument beyond the terrain of pundits, if only because they are struggling and living with the consequences of the issue day in and day out. What truly bothers them are not questions such as which fork to use with the salad.

Their state of mind is closer to what Stephen Carter, author of the book *Civility*, once said: “We tend to think about civility as being about manners. I’d like to think of it as something larger, that civility is the sum of the sacrifices that we make for the sake of living together. And one of the things I think we’re losing in America today is the sense of—to put it simply—going the extra mile, doing something we don’t have to do that the law doesn’t require of us in order to help someone else’s life be a little better.”

The research for Aggravating Circumstances was originally intended to be fielded in the latter part of September 2001, but was postponed until January 2002. Public Agenda added a series of questions that specifically asked Americans whether they believed people were treating each other with more respect and consideration in the aftermath of September 11. Most thought September 11 changed the behavior of Americans for the better, but they also suspected the change would be short-lived, and we would soon return to business as usual—if we hadn’t already done so. For more information on the Aggravating Circumstances study, go to www.publicagenda.org.