# A FIRST NAME BASIS?

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Many societies are now characterized by much more informality than they were before. One manifestation of this is that whereas children would previously address adults more deferentially (as Mr or Mrs Bloggs, for example), they are now much more likely to call (some) adults by their first names. The same is true of younger adults addressing considerably older adults. Is this greater familiarity acceptable or should it be avoided?

*Manners or morals?*

To many this is a question of manners. On this view the question is whether the greater informality of address is a case of bad manners or whether it is instead no violation of etiquette at all. Other people think that the question is not merely one about manners but also about morals. Although there is a conceptual distinction between etiquette and ethics, no sharp line can be drawn between them and there is certainly an overlap. This is because manners are (often) a way of showing consideration to others. Having and displaying such consideration has moral import. Thus, while what does and does not constitute good manners is often merely a matter of convention, those conventions can impact on what is morally acceptable. That said, there must obviously be some limit on the capacity of conventional manners to acquire moral significance. The minutiae concerning which spoon or fork to use for a particular course of a meal hardly seems to be a matter of morality. Those who take ignorance about cutlery conventions, within reason, to constitute a moral breach, even a minor one, are surely mistaken.

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*Inconsistencies*

Irrespective of whether children's addressing adults by their first names is a matter of manners or morality, is it acceptable? We can certainly imagine circumstances in which it would be. If *everybody* called everybody else by their first name – that is to say, if there were no convention of more formal modes of addressing one's elders or those in positions of authority – then no undue familiarity would be indicated by younger people addressing older people by their first names. Alternatively, even in the presence of a convention of greater formality, if an adult requests that a child use the adult's first name, or if it is clear in the absence of an explicit request that this is the adult's preference, then there is no lack of consideration either.

There are adults who suggest (or otherwise convey a preference) that children address them in just this way. But many do not. In many cases, the child (or the child's parent) simply presumes that the child may be on a first name basis with adults. This presumption, I suggest, is problematic where more formal modes of address exist, because the less formal address may reasonably be viewed as unduly forward.

There are still many places where this is the case. For example, except in the most informal of societies, children usually still refer to their teachers by title. The same is true of (some) subordinates addressing those in (some) positions of authority, including heads of state and other senior members of government. And the overwhelming majority of people address their parents and grandparents in a way that refers to this relationship rather than simply using the parents' and grandparents' first names.

Indeed, because children often learn how to address people by the way their parents refer to those people *when speaking to children*, we find a curious asymmetry. Most (but not all) parents refer to themselves and their spouse as 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' (or some variant of that). Yet, when speaking to children about other adults, those same parents refer to these other adults by their first names, thus

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training their children to do so. This is the case even when the adult to whom they are referring is significantly older than the parent. In other words, the message many parents convey to their children is that they, the parents, are to be referred to honorifically as 'mother' and 'father', but other adults may be referred to by their first names only.

It is hard to reconcile this inconsistency. Perhaps it will be suggested that a child's parents are due more respect than other adults by that child. This might explain why a child's teachers are often also still addressed in a more deferential manner, because of the special authority relationship they have with the child. However, even if it is true that some adults are due *more* respect than other adults by particular children, it does not follow that those other adults are due no more respect than the child's friends with whom the child is on a first name basis. And if it is suggested that an honorific form of address is necessary only if the adult is owed a level of respect above some threshold, it is curious that some parents have presumed to lower the threshold to the precise point they have – below the level of respect owed to parents (and perhaps the child's teachers and doctors) but above almost all other adults.

Another attempt to explain away the apparent inconsistency is to claim that words like 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' are a mark of intimacy and that it is comforting for parents and children to hear and say such words when communicating with one another. One problem with this suggestion is that while parents sometimes address their children in an intimacy-marking manner as 'my child' (or 'my son' or 'my daughter') they more often do not. This suggests that if the use of 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' served only as a marker of intimacy, it would similarly be used on only some occasions, with children addressing their parents by their first names at other times. Yet this is typically not the case. Thus even if 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' mark intimacy they also serve as honorific forms of address. A second problem with the suggestion about marking intimacy is that we would



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then expect that other adults who are not strangers to a child should be addressed in a way that marks a degree of intimacy less than that of parents but greater than that of strangers. Yet, the once common practice of children addressing such adults as 'Aunt' or 'Uncle' (when the adults were not their parents' siblings or siblings-in-law) has been eroded to about the same extent as the use of titles in addressing other adults.

Even those parents who prefer that their children refer to them by their first names should not presume that other adults are comfortable with such familiarity, given the still existent (even if attenuated) convention that use of a first name indicates greater familiarity. In other words, as long as the convention of honorific address persists, the failure to use it indicates greater familiarity. Such familiarity, according to the convention, is inappropriate in some cases.

*Should the convention be changed?*

Now perhaps it will be suggested that the convention is itself inappropriate and ought to be abandoned. Typically this is justified in the name of equality. It is said that because children and adults, subordinates and leaders are equal, the convention of honorific titles in one direction but not the other should be abandoned. There are a few things to be said about this proposal.

First, one can concede that children and adults, subordinates and those in authority have *moral* equality – that their equal interests have equal moral weight. The convention of honorific address does not deny this. Insofar as those who subscribe to the convention of honorific address do dispute this, it is because they think that in at least some circumstances the interests of children should count *more*. This suggests that the kind of equality relevant to the convention is not moral equality.

Second, once we turn to other senses of equality we find that children are not equal to adults and subordinates are often not equal to those in authority. Children are younger, have less understanding, less experience, and less power,

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for example. Adult subordinates are sometimes also unequal in all or many of these ways to those adults in positions of authority.

Third, if it is suggested that dropping honorific address is a way to counter these inequalities, then we can note that more in formal means of address do not remove the differentials. At most they mask them – they create a veneer of equality when none exists. People are quick to recognize these differentials in other contexts. Adults who sexually proposition children, or those in authority who have sexual encounters with those subordinate to them are quickly said to have exploited a power differential. But if such power differentials exist, why not mark them? If, for example, we do not want adults to treat children as they would equals, we should not encourage children to talk to them as though they were equals. Preserving the honorific address is, of course, no guarantee that appropriate boundaries will be respected but that does not mean to say that those boundaries are not worth marking.

Finally, if the convention of honorific address were something that ought to be changed – and changed in the name of equality – then the change should begin somewhere other than where it has begun. The children of those parents who are leading the trend towards greater informality should be on a first name basis with *them* before (and not after) they are on a first name basis with other adults.

*Complexities*

The etiquette or ethics of address is undoubtedly complicated. Among the clearest cases are those of children addressing adults. In such cases, I have suggested, the presumption should be in favour of a more formal address unless they are invited by the adult to address him or her more informally, or unless there is other good reason to think that this particular adult prefers to be addressed in the more casual manner. The exception is especially strong when there is good reason to think that an adult would be offended by being addressed in a more formal manner.



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The case of younger adults addressing significantly older adults is more complicated. The age differential persists. Often the older person is also in a position of greater authority, or once was. Thus, barring special circumstances, it may be preferable to err on the side of formality, at least until the older person has said or implicitly indicated that the first name basis is acceptable. There are also questions about how much of an age differential requires the more formal approach. Other complexities arise when the age and authority differentials cut in opposite directions. Finally, there are questions about which relationships (both hierarchical and equal) between adults necessitate a more formal mode of address, because it is surely the case that not all of them do.

Those of a more informal bent will be impatient with deliberation about these complexities and will recommend informality. But such people forget that informality is a matter of degree and even they, presumably, have their limits. If one meets an adult by the name of Robert, one does not immediately start addressing him as 'Bob' or 'Bobby' without some indication that this is his preference, and especially if he is considerably older than oneself. And one certainly would not begin calling him by some endearing nickname with which his wife addresses him.

Indeed, we should generally address people the way they prefer to be addressed, irrespective of age or authority. There are exceptions of course. None of us was ever under a moral duty to address Idi Amin as 'His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, Lord of all the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular', his preference for that title notwithstanding. Similarly, if a child insisted that we call him 'Sir' or 'Mr Bloggs' we would be under no obligation to do so.

The same does not seem to be true where an adult prefers that a child not be on a first name basis with him or her. Defenders of informality of address might ask of such

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an adult: 'Who does she think she is?' or 'How pompous must he be to have that preference?' While an inflated ego is one possible reason why somebody might prefer to be addressed more formally, it is not the only possible reason. Another is that the adult is putting himself in the shoes of the child. Because that adult would not dream, as a child, of addressing an adult by his or her first name, he wonders why this child takes these liberties. In other words, the adult might be wondering about the child: 'Who does he think he is to presume to address an adult – not me in particular, but any adult – in that way?'

The perception that adults who prefer that children not be on a first name basis with them have an inflated ego creates a disincentive to expressing dissatisfaction when they are addressed in this way. It is much easier to ask somebody to address one less formally than it is to ask somebody to address one more formally. This provides an added reason why children should be taught not to presume that they are on a first name basis with every adult they encounter.

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