

How to Avoid Being a Jerk

Tips for interacting with different social groups



INTRODUCTION, OR WHY THIS BOOK EXISTS

Growing up in America, there are plenty of children's programs that try to teach you how to treat others, particularly *Sesame Street*. These are some pretty important life lessons, but, unfortunately, after childhood there are no cultural institutions directed at continuing this work.

While it would be wonderful if the early lessons sufficed, this is, unfortunately, not the case. After all, American culture is very much steeped in oppression, which, as defined by Iris Young, requires institutional support to be fully dismantled.

Not everyone can devote their lives to ending systematic oppression. However, one *can* make an effort not to perpetuate it in daily life, and to be aware of what behaviors might contribute to it. That is the reason for this book.

It should be noted that this piece is not intended as an end-all be-all for correct behavior, but a set of basic guidelines allowing one to treat people respectfully without discovering all forms of inappropriate behavior through trial and error.

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ALL
= ABOUT =
RESPECT



P1: WHAT IS RESPECT?

Respect is a basic level of fair treatment one is required to give to all human beings. Respect means understanding that other people are just as deserving as you of being treated like a person. That is, that they have a right to, as the Constitution puts it, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Respecting people does not mean talking over them. Respecting people also means respecting yourself.

According to Terry Pratchett, the greatest trouble arises when you begin to think of and treat people as things. Therefore, the counter to it is making the effort to treat people as humans who ought to be respected.



This is the face of a man who has made mistakes.

P.2: ON MAKING MISTAKES

It is extremely unlikely that one will *never* say something rude/problematic/etc. to another group. None of us are born omniscient. It happens. However, what is truly important is one's behavior afterwards.

First, one must acknowledge that a mistake has happened. Loudly denying that you have made a mistake does not correct the mistake, nor does it reflect well on your character. Few people like to be wrong, but in the particular circumstance the priority is not you, but the people you have offended.

Having made this mistake, you are required to find out (if it has not been explained) *why* it was a mistake, and attempt to avoid repeating it.



It's very gold.

P3: THE GOLDEN RULE

If you are about to ask a member of another social group a question, please consider how you would respond to a similar question. If you would be insulted, don't ask it.

Alternatively, ask yourself if this question is appropriate. Is it too personal? Or does it draw on assumptions that the other person is obligated to share very personal information simply because you are curious? If either is the case, don't ask.



Without context, this severed hand is extremely awkward.

P4: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Sometimes, even if you wouldn't be insulted by a question, it is still not appropriate to ask. This can be because you do not have the cultural context that would make the question insulting.

There are a few ways you can change your understanding of context. One is to look at history. Seeing the historical record of a particular group may help you understand why certain questions or behaviors are particularly offensive.

Another way is to spend time with that group, and listen carefully to what people say, so you have an understanding of appropriate behavior.

You can also ask if something is inappropriate—but make it clear that you do not want to offend the other person. It is okay to ask as long as you do so respectfully. Understand that even if you ask respectfully, this does not guarantee the other person will not be offended.



The amount that media/the environment affects us can be overwhelming, just like this picture.

P5: THE ENVIRONMENT/MEDIA

The society we live in has no small amount of oppressive institutions. It can be difficult to realize how fully entangled they are in our lives, or what problematic behaviors/ideas have been absorbed. Support for racist, sexist, and other disrespectful or oppressive behavior is available in everyday items like advertising and news articles.

For instance, American media in particular can have a very specific narrative of who an American is supposed to be—one that does not reflect the reality of the country. Media perpetuates a false conceptualization of proper behavior, and context. Take Thanksgiving—it's not a thankful holiday for everyone, but it's often the only time we, as a culture, consciously think about Native Americans. Interesting, isn't it?



This mantis does not fit into the single story narrative for its species. But does any mantis, really?

P6: THE SINGLE STORY

Please remember that there is no such thing as a social group made of only one kind of person. This means two things: first, that if there is a particular group you hear only one sort of story about, it is probably not accurate. Second, this means that a particular member of a social group neither speaks for all of them nor is a unique example.

Put differently, this means that, for instance, if you have a friend who is a member of a particular social group that finds it amusing if you use a word some might find offensive, you do not have blanket permission to use this word in front of every member of this group. It also means that if you like a person in a particular group, it is *extremely* rude to ask them why all the members of their group cannot be exactly like them. i.e. “Why can’t all black people be like you?”



Like people, birds are stronger when they are in groups.

P7: ON SUPPORT

While it is extremely important to work on removing problematic elements in one's own behavior, it is also important not to support this behavior when it appears in others.

This means both not encouraging and actively discouraging racist/sexist/etc. behavior that you see in others. It also means doing your part to ensure people are treated fairly.



This woman is part of a marginalized group...but she's also white! Fun fact: white people made up about 90% of the people in the stock photos I found.

P8: ON PRIVILEGE

Being in a minority group does not automatically prevent you from being in other majority groups, and this affects your life experiences. However, it is not always easy to notice when you are in a majority group, as this does *not* make your life more difficult. So what does this mean in the context of behaving respectfully?

It means you need to make sure you are listening to others when they talk. Just because you have not had a particular experience does not mean it is impossible.



It should be noted that this book is intended as a guide rather than a final word. If you'd like to explore this topic in more depth, provided you keep the concepts mentioned here in mind, you ought to do well. Thanks for reading!