

A LINE ON LIFE

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"What's in a Name?" *

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Most norms — approved ways of acting in specific situations — differ from culture to culture. Cultural norms deal with situations like eating, punctuality, personal space and most other behaviors. However, few norms are the same in all known societies. They are called "*universal norms*."

The best-known universal norm is the **incest taboo**. Except for ancient Egyptian and Hawaiian royalty, all known cultures have taboos against sexual relations between parents and children or between siblings. However, once you get outside the nuclear family, taboos against sexual relations vary in different societies.

In 1965, Roger Brown, a social psychologist at Harvard, described a less-known universal norm. This norm governs how people of **unequal status** relate to one another. Every society has a status hierarchy based on kinship, wealth, occupation and other factors. Essentially, it is a social ladder. Some people are on higher rungs, while others occupy lower positions.

When people of different status meet, they differ in how they address each other. People speak to those of superior status in a distant, respectful way. It is similar to the way they speak to strangers — using their *title* and *last name*. In contrast, when speaking to subordinates and intimate friends, a more familiar address is used — only the *first name*. For example, I typically call my students by their first name, while most of them call me, "*Dr. Gershaw*." This same imbalance of address exists between other teachers and their students, bosses and employees, doctors and patients — any interaction of unequal status.

This difference occurs in all known cultures. In most foreign languages, there are two different forms of "*you*" — a respectful form and a familiar form. Most of you may be familiar with the "*Usted*" and "*tu*" in Spanish. The same distinction exists with the "*Sei*" and "*du*" in German and the "*vous*" and "*tu*" in French. Norms for the use of these pronouns reflect unequal status. Remember, the familiar form is used for those close to you and those perceived as inferior. For example, the familiar form is used for close friends and family — and for speaking to children and pets.

Even nouns can label people as socially unequal. This is why blacks resent being labeled "*boy*," while whites are being called "*men*." The same inequality can reflect sexism. Suppose you are talking about a couple. Some people might say she is his "*girl*," but he is her "*man*."

Brown's universal norm of address not only indicates social status, it can also indicate **social distance**. When you first begin a relationship — whether you are in the United

States or abroad — you tend to use the more polite, formal way of addressing others. As your relationship gets closer, there is a gradual shift to more familiar terms.

Who determines when your relationship is intimate enough to use the more familiar form of address? Advances in intimacy are usually suggested by the higher-status person. With two people in Europe, for example, the older, richer or more distinguished one typically suggests the more familiar "*tu*" or "*du*." However, in the United States, we don't have two levels of "*you*." In this case, higher status persons could invite the other to use their first name.

"Just call me,' Dave.'"

There are even nonverbal differences in unequal status. It is more acceptable to touch intimates and subordinates than strangers and superiors. Your boss or teacher may put his hand on your shoulder, but how often have you put your hand on theirs? (I am assuming that the boss or teacher is not also a close friend.) In a similar way, the president of a college would need to invite faculty members to his home, before they would invite the president to theirs.

Remember, the higher status person typically determines how intimate the relationship becomes. In my classes, I offer my students the choice of calling me whatever they want (as long as it can be mentioned in public). Even with that, few students call me by my first name. Those that do are closer to my age in contrast to the typical 18-20-year-old students. Some students make a compromise and call me "*Dr. Dave*." (This was long before Dr. Ruth became popular on television.)

When there is a change in status, some of the lower status habits may be hard to break. Even after I became Dr. Gershaw, I still addressed my old high school teachers as "*Mr.*" or "*Mrs.*", and they called me "*David*." Several students of mine have continued their education and returned to Arizona Western College as colleagues. When they return, I ask them to call me by my first name as an indication that I accept them as an equal. One ex-student in particular had a hard time making the transition. To get him to change, every time he called me by the formal "*Dr. Gershaw*," I adopted the same level of formality and called him "*Mr. Camarena*." Now he calls me "*Dave*."

* Adapted from David G. Myer's Social Psychology, McGraw-Hill Publishers, 1990, pages 171-172.