

## INVITED REVIEW

# The necessity of civility in academic life

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### Abstract

The increasingly fractured and contentious debates in academic life are in danger of undermining polite discourse in research and its publication – and therefore progress in research itself. This piece advocates a return to civility as a primary virtue in academic interchanges.

### KEYWORDS

best practice, career management, continuous professional development, training and development

Billante and Saunders (2002) suggest that there are three elements of civility.

1. Civility as respect for others.
2. Civility as public behaviour.
3. Civility as self-regulation.

In “The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)” (1759), Adam Smith faces the question as to what holds a society together. Smith accepts that individuals are greedy, self-interested, ignorant and often unaware of moral principles. Man’s imperfection is a given in Smith’s thinking. What holds society together is that individuals care what others think of them and are constrained in their behaviour by exercising their imagination to anticipate what a “fair and impartial spectator” would judge their behaviour to be. “To see ourselves as others see us” (to anglicise Robert Burns (1786)) is to use our imaginative power to guide us to moral behaviour (McLean, 2006). Smith utilizes “the Impartial Spectator” as a device to analyse social behaviour. The impartial spectator’s judgements correspond to what an individual imagines are the sentiments of the persons we observe in social situations. This analytical technique enables us to externalise and systematise our empathy for others. The impartial spectator provides a check on excessive behaviour and excessive individualism. This applies to extreme competition in business or academic life. Smith says of the individual competitor in “the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments” in TMS (Part II, Section ii, Paragraph 1 p 83) that “he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should jostle, or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is surely at an end” [See Rothschild (2001, p. 243)].

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Respect for others, and the views of others, is an unstated assumption of academic discourse that is conducted in the largely public places of books, journals, conferences, lecture and seminar rooms. Self-regulation is as necessary as adherence to scientific norms. If self-regulation fails, the alternative mechanisms to determine behaviour – external regulation and repression- are inimical to self-expression and therefore are self- defeating.

The importance of civility, as outlined by Billante and Saunders (2002), has three key elements.

1. Civility is a moral virtue
2. Civility aids social cooperation
3. Civility is the desirable alternative to repression.

Social cooperation is vital in academic life. Academics have to work directly with others and interact indirectly with others (journal editors, reviewers, and assessors) with whom they do not necessarily agree. Civilised discourse needs restraint, tolerance and respect for others. The alternative to voluntary cooperation is regulation (e.g. by editors of journals) and at the limit, repression. It is arguable that Universities enforce civility in policies on bullying and discrimination, but regulation of incivility in scientific discourse is more difficult because of the danger of inhibiting free speech and scientific discourse and progress.

Smith (1759) did not see the individual in isolation because the foundation of his system of moral philosophy is empathy. Referring chiefly to Adam Ferguson, Berry (1997, p. 39) avers that the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment found individualistic explanations to be simplistic because they removed individuals from their social context and since humans are naturally social, this removal is a distortion. The excessive individualism engendered by the market or academic competition is tempered by concern for others. It is as much this philosophical compass that restrains excess as technical devices. Devices of regulation and restraint are important but they must be derived from the principle of empathy. The abandonment of such principles in the loss of civility in academic discourse compressively fails Smith's moral test.

Smith (1759) himself suggests that “sympathy” (empathy) dissipates with physical distance. The virtues of civility, cooperation and empathy are therefore less likely to occur across countries, cultures and language divisions. As Coase (1994, p. 102) says “Adam Smith's view of benevolence seems to be that it is strongest within the family and that as we go beyond the family, to friends, neighbours, and colleagues, and then to others who are none of these, the force of benevolence becomes weaker the more remote and the more casual the connection. And when we come to foreigners or members of other sects or groups with interests which are thought to be opposed to ours, we find not the absence of benevolence but malevolence”. In multi –cultural environments, like modern Universities, cross-cultural civility means that care must be payed to differing interpretations of words and actions. The academic setting helps to overcome cultural barriers because of the creation of academic norms.

Boyd (2006) examines the role of civility in contemporary urban life. Contrary to many critics who see civility as a conservative or nostalgic virtue deployed to repress difference and frustrate social change, Boyd argues that civility should be understood as democratic, pluralistic and premised on a sense of moral equality. Civility's most obvious contribution is functional—in easing social conflicts and facilitating social interactions in a complex and diverse society. However, there may be more importantly an intrinsic moral value to civility. Observing the formal conditions of civility is one of the ways in which we communicate respect for others and generate habits of moral equality in the everyday life of a democracy (Boyd, 2006, p. 863). Again, respect for others and a presumption of moral equality are essential in negotiating a conflict of ideas and deeply held convictions. Formality may be, on occasion, tedious, but an adherence to formality helps to put boundaries on disputes that may become irrationally destructive.

Academic discourse has to be undertaken in a system of civic humanism (Evensky, 2005) where the social nature of the “impartial spectator” mandates civility. The spectator theory of moral judgement implies impartiality and the civility of practice that fosters successful research progress. If we lose civility, we threaten scientific progress and its social underpinnings (Hanley, 2009).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Geoff Wood and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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**How to cite this article:** Buckley, P. J. (2022). The necessity of civility in academic life. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 32(3), 515–517. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12458>