Third Person Polite:
In defence of more courteous reference

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Why do academics, in their professional writings, refer to their scholarly predecessors and one another by their surnames only? It may be tempting to answer that that is the convention – “everybody does it”. However, while that is a compelling *explanation*, it does not constitute a good *justification*.

Yet it seems that the practice does require a justification because, on the face of it, it appears impolite to refer to people in this way. It lacks the personal touch and individualising feature of the first name but also the respectful tone of a prefixed title. It is thus unsurprising that most of us do not refer to our friends and colleagues that way. Nor do most of us use only surnames when directly addressing people, whatever their relational proximity or distance to us may be.

Of course there *are* contexts in which people do address one another in precisely this fashion. The military, as well as traditional British public schools come to mind. However, while these are environments of formality (which explains the more respectful ways in which “superiors” are addressed in those contexts), they are also de-individualising and harsh cultures. They are thus not the touchstone of politeness.

There are cracks in the academic practice of using surnames only. That is to say, there are occasions on which the prospect of following it seems sufficiently uncouth that some or even many people depart from the practice. This is quite common in extended acknowledgements of another scholar’s contribution. For example, Larry Temkin, in his *Rethinking the Good*, pays tribute to his teacher and mentor, Derek Parfit, to whom he repeatedly refers in the acknowledgements as “Derek” rather than “Parfit”. (He does refer to him as “Parfit” elsewhere in the book.)

Another crack is visible when, at a seminar or symposium, the scholar spoken about is present. In such situations, some (but not all) will refer to that person either more familiarly by first name, or more respectfully by title and surname. Occasionally, this collegiality carries over into academic writing. For example, Daniel Kahneman refers endearingly, throughout his *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, to his late collaborator Amos Tversky, as “Amos”.

Jonathan Glover, responding to colleagues writing in a festschrift for him (*Ethics and Humanity*), notes that in “real life, I do not talk about Davis, Keshen, and McMahan, but about Ann, Richard and Jeff, and the same with other contributors, who are colleagues and friends”. He says that the “formality is a bit uncomfortable” but explains that he nonetheless refers to them by their surnames “so that others do not think the book is a private conversation from which they are excluded”.

The concern to avoid exclusion is admirable. I am not sure that using first names would indeed have been exclusionary, but if it would have been, it is regrettable both that an impolite convention makes the more familiar form of reference sound exclusionary, and that the impolite convention provides the perceived solution.

Is there a good justification for referring to people by surnames only, despite the coarseness of that practice? One possible suggestion is that it is better than the alternatives. Even if first names would be appropriate in some contexts, they would usually be too familiar. It would hardly be appropriate, for example, to start referring to Immanuel Kant as "Immanuel" (and certainly not as "Manny"). First names are also often insufficiently individuating. Davids are ubiquitous, which makes "Hume" a more successful reference.

Of course, how individuating a first or last name is depends on the respective names. A reference to "Smith" is unlikely to be clearer than a reference to "Adam". Context could make either clear. As for undue informality, this can be avoided by using both first name and surname or title and surname at every mention. Some will take this to be too cumbersome and, in the latter case, perhaps too formal. However, I am not convinced that these objections outweigh the benefits of the more polite forms of reference.

The more polite practices are not *that* cumbersome. The *New York Times*, for example, successfully uses title and surname, while preserving a readable style. Nor does it seem excessively formal. Those who think it would not work in academic journals, should be reminded that there was a time when scholarly journals contained articles with titles such as "Professor Sidgwick's Utilitarianism" (by Hastings Rashdall in *Mind*, 1885) and in which the author unswervingly refers to "Prof. Sidgwick" throughout. It was perhaps a more respectful time, but it may be an example worth emulating. (Readers, of course, are at liberty to gloss over "Prof." or to read the title and name as they would a double-barrel surname ("Prof.-Sidgwick"), and thus it need not be distracting.)

Some will think that this is prissy. That view, however, cannot be used to defend the status quo, because it is standard practice in some domains to use more respectful forms of reference. Judges, for example, are routinely referred to not merely with their surnames but also with their titles. It is thus common, including in law journals, to refer to "Judge (or Justice) Bloggs", or by abbreviation to "Bloggs J".

This gives rise to curious inconsistences. For example, in a review "Should Hate Speech Be Outlawed?" in *The New York Review of Books*, John Paul Stevens repeatedly refers to legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron as "Waldron", while referring to judges by their titles – for example, "Judge Richard Posner" and "Judge Robert Sprecher". Sometimes the jarring differential is in the same sentence: "Waldron also contends that Justice Black's position is unwise."

Such inconsistencies also undermine the suggestion that, for example, "Jeremy Waldron" and "Waldron" refer to different things. The former refers to the human being so named, whereas the latter, it is suggested, refers to the collection of views expressed by the human being. If that distinction were anything other than a rationalization we would expect it to apply to judges too.

Is there a limit to the more polite form of reference? Even the *New York Times*, after all, refers to "Shakespeare", for example (except when differentiating him from Shakespeare père, in which case the famous Shakespeare is "William"). Their general practice is to "drop courtesy titles for 'historic or pre-eminent figures no longer

living'" – unless that person is "being discussed in the context of current news events". The stated justification for this is to "avoid sounding odd or tone-deaf". There may or may not be good reasons to refer to "Shakespeare" rather than "Mr. Shakespeare". However, even if there are good grounds for dropping the title for prominent historical figures, it does not follow that we should do the same for everybody.

There is something impolite in referring to people by their surnames only. The coarseness of the practice in academic (and much other) writing is obscured by its pervasiveness. However, we can do better. In my own writing I use either first and last name, or title and surname (even for people with whom I am on a first name basis). This facilitates a less aggressive and more respectful tone, which is especially important when one is criticising the views of others. I encourage others to join me and thereby to make this approach less unusual.

A shorter version of this piece was published under a different title in the Times Higher Education *on 31 January 2019: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/why-dont-academics-address-each-other-politely*