



After the Fact | Are Americans Getting Ruder?

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TRANSCRIPT

Benny Martinez, cohost, "After the Fact" podcast: Touching other people's microphones: acceptable, sometimes acceptable, never acceptable?

John Gramlich, associate director, short reads, Pew Research Center: I don't do enough podcasts to know. I can't speak intelligently about this.

Gabriela Domenzain, cohost, "After the Fact" podcast: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Gabriella Domenzain.

Benny Martinez: And I'm Benny Martinez. Gabi, I've got an important question for you, and it's not related to work, but I'm curious if you've noticed people being ruder in public more lately.

Gabriela Domenzain: So I had, no pun intended, a rude awakening because I just got back from being overseas, and literally the minute I landed in the U.S., whether it was the coffee shop, security, or just random people in the airport, I felt they were rude.

Benny Martinez: Just less tolerant of being in your personal space or your suitcase hit mine. Like that kinda thing?

Gabriela Domenzain: Yeah. I mean, the niceties that were common in my travels disappeared as soon as I got here.

Benny Martinez: Well, there is a public perception that people in America have become more rude. We've been talking a lot on the podcast about some of the problems we're facing in the United States. We've covered the increase in political polarization, and upholding democracy is really a challenge that Pew as an institution has focused on since its founding.

And, you know, it's hard to ignore the sense that the country has changed; in fact, a recent Pew Research Center study found that 59% of Americans believe the country's best days are behind it.



Gabriela Domenzain: Oof.

Benny Martinez: And more ordinary things, like our daily interactions with each other, also play a role in how people feel things are going and apparently, that's not looking so hot either.

A different survey from the Pew Research Center found that half of Americans say that people have gotten ruder since the COVID-19 pandemic. So, I sat down with John Gramlich, the associate director of short reads, to learn a little bit more about that survey and this growing perception that we as a society are just a little more rude.

John Gramlich, welcome to the "After the Fact" digs. We're glad you made it down. Tell me a little bit more about your role and why y'all were interested in looking at civility in general, and this survey specifically.

John Gramlich: So, I'm an associate director at the Pew Research Center. I've been here for about 10 years now. And my day job mostly is overseeing our data journalism team. But I do a variety of things, and I've also gotten the chance to do a few surveys over the years, including this one about rude behaviors, which is a topic that a lot of people on the team that I work with felt strongly about. Felt like they had really seen a difference postpandemic, and that was really how this idea came about, is we were talking about things that we were seeing in our own daily lives during the pandemic and after the pandemic, and reading a lot of articles about whether the world had actually become a little bit ruder during those years.

Benny Martinez: Let's get into the data a little bit. One of the things that we've read is that nearly half of Americans say that people have gotten ruder since the pandemic. Can you talk me through what exactly those findings were and what stood out?

John Gramlich: Yeah. So five years after the pandemic we decided to ask people to look back on it and think about how society had or had not changed in their opinion when it comes to public behavior.

And so the survey found that a lot more people, about five times as many people, think that society has gotten ruder than think it has gotten more polite during that time.

A lot of people said that they go out and they see people behaving rudely almost every time they leave the house. A sizable share, about 44%, think that there hasn't been a meaningful change. But on balance, a lot more people see a ruder society today than before the pandemic. And of course, rudeness is very much in the eye of the beholder. It's a subjective concept so we acknowledge that, of course.



So we gave people eight specific behaviors that they might encounter while out and about in the world and asked them about those, as just some common examples of things that people might see as rude.

So we asked about each of those behaviors and whether you see it as acceptable or not acceptable. And so some of them were more widely seen as unacceptable, and others were more in the direction of, "That's OK."

Benny Martinez: So I'm curious what those specific parameters were?

John Gramlich: We asked about taking photos or videos of people without their permission. Another one was cursing, whether it's in dialogue or whether it's displayed on a sign or a T-shirt. Another one was smoking around other people, and then playing music out loud, and then the converse of playing music out loud is earbuds and people just walking around with earbuds.

Whether they're having conversations with people in the real world or not, their earbuds might stay in. And then we also asked about things like bringing a pet into a grocery store and also bringing a child into areas where children are generally not that common, such as a bar or an upscale restaurant.

So we really tried to run the gamut with a variety of different behaviors, just to get a feel for if there are any big differences on those.

Benny Martinez: Can you peel back the curtain for me a little bit? How did y'all determine which behaviors to choose?

John Gramlich: We started this out really by talking amongst ourselves as researchers and residents of the Washington, D.C., region, about stuff we were seeing in our own daily lives. But as we started having those conversations, we really started giving more thought to what people in the whole country are experiencing.

And so we wanted to settle on a list of behaviors that people could experience regardless of if they lived in a big city or a suburban area or a rural area, regardless of their income level. So you know, we had talked about maybe asking people about the behavior they were seeing on airplanes while flying.

A lot of people don't fly, or we talked about maybe something you would see on public transit. There aren't many public transit systems in the U.S., and so that leaves out a lot of people. And so we tried to narrow down onto behaviors that you would see regardless of whether you lived in a huge city or extremely rural area. And so that's where we got things like cursing out loud. Pretty sure people do that everywhere.



Benny Martinez: Guilty ...

John Gramlich: Or going to the grocery store. So that was really a big motivation is thinking about our own experiences, thinking about people's experiences elsewhere in the country. And also we were reading a lot of news stories and watching a lot of video clips about the types of things that had become points of discussion at that stage in the postpandemic.

Benny Martinez: So I'm curious, as you reviewed the results of this survey, were there specific behaviors that people agreed on? Maybe saw a trend that was very obvious, like everyone universally is "No, this is never acceptable."

John Gramlich: For most of the behaviors that we asked about, majorities of Americans think that they're rarely or never acceptable. There was one exception, which is bringing your pet into a grocery store.

That one was much more evenly split, where 45% of people think it's rarely or never acceptable, 40% of people think it's sometimes acceptable, and 14% of people think it's always or usually acceptable. People really love their pets and they want to bring their pets to the places that they go. We did a survey a couple of years ago where we asked pet owners to reflect on their relationships with their pets, and something like 95% of pet owners viewed their pets as a member of their family.

But on the other end of the spectrum, things like smoking around other people, taking pictures of them without their permission. That kind of stuff involves personal space and that was widely seen by large majorities of people as not acceptable. Those were the two that really stood out.

Benny Martinez: You developed this quiz people could take to figure out where they fall within their demographic. I took it upon myself to take the quiz. I gotta say I was a little surprised on some of the results. I found myself falling a little bit more on the tolerant side, particularly for my age group. So I'm wondering if you happened to take the quiz and how does that stack up against the larger survey you guys did?

John Gramlich: Yeah, I can't remember all of my answers now, but I'm pretty sure that I would've fallen on the old side of my age group because I'm kind of that grumpy person shaking my fist at the world all the time anyway. No surprise there that I'm probably old for my age.

Benny Martinez: Why did this center actually decide to frame these research questions around before and after the pandemic?

John Gramlich: Of course, rudeness existed before the coronavirus pandemic.

Benny Martinez: I think so.



John Gramlich: It's shocking. Or maybe people can't even remember before the pandemic. Rudeness has been around for as long as people have, but we really wanted to focus on the pandemic because that was just a time when so many people were isolated and spent time at home, and there was a lot of discussion in pop culture and in the regular media about this idea of losing your social skills and losing the ability to interact with people on an in-person basis. And is there any evidence to show that maybe people's social skills have deteriorated a little bit?

And like I said, we can't measure that through objective external data. But we can do a survey and ask people what their perceptions are, and so that was really what drove this. Especially coming out of something like a pandemic, it's very important for people in a time of crisis like that to try to help each other out. We wanted to find out whether people felt like their fellow citizens were in that frame of mind or were actually going the other direction in terms of the way that we are behaving in public.

Benny Martinez: And the fact that people were working remote or going to school remote. They were isolated in a way that led them to interact with each other using phones and social media. But there was this sense of, people just are generally more secure behind their keyboard and more confident to say certain things, and two or three years of isolation and social distancing is manifesting itself in real time. I don't think you have any data on that, but it is something that I observed and I was thinking about.

John Gramlich: This particular survey can't answer that question as to like the, the effect of technology, but we do know people are spending more time on their devices. We do know that they're spending more time alone. So we know that there has been this pandemic carry-on effect of people being behind their screens a lot more than they were.

And so there is a connection there for sure. How much of it is the role of technology versus some of the pressures of the pandemic itself we can't say. But I completely agree that there is a huge role for technology in this whole discussion.

Benny Martinez: All right, so people ultimately believe that we're more rude as a society. There's a heightened sense of incivility. But do we know that for certain, or is this just public perception?

John Gramlich: It's definitely public perception. This is all people's perceptions and, the, there are some caveats that apply. It's a survey, and people might have recency bias. They might be thinking about something that they saw that really upset them just the week before the survey and can't really remember what it was like six years ago before the pandemic.



So it is very much a perception, but perceptions matter in and of themselves. It really defines the way people interact with each other. If there's a widespread perception that so many people are rude and behaving negatively, that might actually change the way that you engage with the world.

Benny Martinez: One of the interesting findings from the report is that there's not major differences here in terms of political party. Republicans and Democrats alike might think smoking in and around your personal area is never acceptable. But age was actually the biggest factor. Talk to me a little bit more about what that looks like in terms of reviewing the survey results.

John Gramlich: Yeah, age is by far the story when it comes to perceptions of rude behavior. Older adults were substantially more likely than younger adults to see all eight behaviors that we asked about as rarely or never acceptable. And again, that kind of goes back to our discussion of the old guy shaking his fist at the world.

There were a few other differences. Women were more likely than men to see most of the behaviors as unacceptable, but not much more likely, just a little bit. There were a few differences by income. People with household incomes that were higher were generally less tolerant of some of these behaviors.

But as you said, there was really no partisan dimension to this at all, and that's actually something that as a Pew Research Center staffer I always try to remind people is that not everything is partisan. There are plenty of surveys out there where we ask people about their personal experiences, their daily experiences, and there really aren't any partisan breaks. I can cite many surveys where partisanship is the story, but this is not one of them.

Benny Martinez: I mean, despite people believing that society's gotten a little bit ruder, your data shows that 84% of Americans still say it's easy to know what's appropriate in public. This seems a little contradictory, so can you elaborate?

John Gramlich: This was funny to me. So we asked people to reflect on other people's behaviors, and a lot of people had said, they go out and they see people behaving rudely almost every time they leave the house. But at the same time, 84% of Americans, when we asked them about their own personal behavior, said it's no problem for them to know how to behave in public. It's easy to know what's appropriate to do and what's not to do.

Benny Martinez: It's never my fault.

John Gramlich: Exactly. This is another not uncommon pattern in survey research where you, where if you ask people about themselves, it's a different answer than if you ask them about other people. But also this could be obliviousness. It could be that people feel very confident in their ability to know what's appropriate to do in



public and then go out and still do something that someone else might find offensive. It goes back to the idea of what is rudeness and what is acceptable or not. All of that is subjective, so maybe people are confidently strolling out into the world and doing things that other people find rude.

Benny Martinez: Is this an issue of America being ruder, or is this just a cultural change and some people are struggling to catch up?

John Gramlich: It's hard to say from this survey, but I think that it is true that there would be age divides, I think, on these kinds of questions, regardless of if you asked it in the context of the pandemic or if you did this survey 10 years ago or 15 years ago or 20 years ago. The things that I find rude today may not be rude to the people who are 20 years younger than me.

Likewise, when those people are my age, there's gonna be people 20 years younger than them, and they might have different standards. And so I think this is just the life cycle and the aging process. But I think it can also be true at the same time that the pandemic was a once-in-a-lifetime type of event that had repercussions and consequences that we're all still in some ways trying to come to terms with. And it could be true that there has been a lasting change in public behavior for the worse. I think both things can be true.

Benny Martinez: To take a positive spin on this, people's perceptions of society might be that we're a ruder America. But when you take face-to-face interactions into consideration, I think there's room for optimism. And I'll give you a quick anecdote because the last weekend, I drove with my family up to Lake Erie in Erie, Pennsylvania. And I gotta say, people along the route were incredibly nice and polite.

From the drive-through in Breezewood, Pennsylvania, to the candy shop just west of Erie. Everyone I interacted with was very cordial, very polite, "Have a great day. Thanks for coming." And as a people, we have more in common in terms of how we treat one another. So I'm curious if there's cause for optimism. Is there room for positivity? What does tomorrow look like?

John Gramlich: Well, I'll tell you why you had that experience. It's 'cause you were in my home state of Pennsylvania, and everybody there is great.

Benny Martinez: How do we get this whole conversation without me understanding that you are from PA? My wife's from Pennsylvania, so we have that connection.

John Gramlich: Yeah, so these survey findings are true of 49 states, but not Pennsylvania, so everybody in Pennsylvania is great all the time. Just kidding.



No, of course, it's true that you're always going to find kindness out in the world. And I think it's important to also put these survey findings in context in terms of the really big-picture stuff that Pew Research often asks about, really weighty issues like politics and religion. This is pretty small-stakes stuff.

Sure, people going out in society and seeing rude behavior, for most people, that might be a minor annoyance, something that they're irritated by for a little portion of their day. And like you said, I think that there's lots of reasons also for optimism. It doesn't mean that society is falling apart at the seams necessarily, even though maybe it felt that way during the pandemic for some people.

We see still that Americans are engaging in society, engaging with each other. We actually just released a fairly large study looking at civic engagement. We find that most Americans are still participating in society, whether it's volunteering or donating or going to church, reading the news, talking about current events.

The famous book *Bowling Alone* talked about this big decline in that kind of civic engagement, but our new study shows that's still very alive today, even if it might look different than it did a couple decades ago. So not all is doom and gloom. People are still out there talking to their neighbors. People are still having good experiences, including in the other 49 states, not just in Pennsylvania.

Benny Martinez: Well, John, thanks for swinging down to the basement to Pew Studio and talking with us today.

John Gramlich: Absolutely. Thanks for having me, Benny.

Benny Martinez: So daily experiences and personal experiences obviously affect how we perceive the world. And John and I got to talking a little bit about this, and it's like the media and the information we consume is just so heated all the time, right?

Gabriela Domenzain: I feel like I sometimes am scared to go on the internet because of the responses.

Benny Martinez: Well, there's one thing about seeing a debate unfolding online where maybe you have an opinion about it but what you're reading are the two polar opposites of an argument.

Gabriela Domenzain: I feel like it's because of the anonymity too, no? Like, some people would never say what they say online in person. It would be too rude, right? But because nobody knows who they are and they're behind a computer screen, they have more audacity. But that's sad because so much of our civil discourse is online.



Benny Martinez: And unfortunately, that's maybe just the consequence of the algorithms at work. Every once in a while, I like to see a positive story where like somebody did good.

Gabriela Domenzain: Or a cat that was rescued or there's a woman who I know she was a reporter, and she started Good News Movement and all they publish is, like, really cute good news stuff.

Benny Martinez: More people should do that.

Gabriela Domenzain: That would change the world. Thanks for listening.

Benny Martinez: Make sure you're subscribed to "After the Fact" wherever you get your podcasts to hear all of our latest episodes.

Gabriela Domenzain: For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Gabriella Domenzain.

Benny Martinez: And I'm Benny Martinez. And this is "After the Fact." Until next time.