

## Construals of Respect and Disrespect among Adolescents

Priyanka Panwar\*

Department of Human Development and Childhood Studies, Lady Irwin College,  
University of Delhi, New Delhi

\*Corresponding Author E-mail: [panwarp55@gmail.com](mailto:panwarp55@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*Respect may be viewed as the regard expressed towards a person or thing by admiring and giving special attention. The present study focused on construals of respect among adolescents. A qualitative approach was used to design the study. The participants of this study were 50 school-going adolescents aged 14-15 years from New Delhi. The tools included focused group discussion and theatre activities with groups and semi-structured interviews and vignettes with individuals. Incidental observations were used to support the data thus gathered. Audio and video recordings were the data management devices used. The data were subjected to qualitative analyses. The main findings were that participants were deeply aware of respect as comprising of behavioral and affective component. Disrespect was shown in context when someone talks insolently by abusing, teasing, arguing and not acceding to others. Overall, according to the adolescents respectful behavior includes components of verbal, tone and gestures and disrespectful behavior includes verbal abuse, defiance and disruption.*

**Key words:** *Respect, Disrespect, Obedience, Defiance, Adolescent.*

### INTRODUCTION

The word 'respect' means deferential regard or esteem felt or shown towards a person or thing (Onions, 1964). "Respect is essential in a civil society and crucial to positive human relations"<sup>9</sup>. We show respect to others by considering their thoughts, feelings, behavior and needs. Respect may take different forms, firstly as a behavior or act, and secondly as a feeling, that may or may not be revealed in the behavior<sup>2</sup>. The first, respect simply as behavior is expressed when someone conforms to for, existent rules or limits. For instance, smiling at the other, or a driver following the traffic lights. In the second case, respect as an

expression of feelings for, or an attitude towards, the other person is exemplified by the feelings of a child towards a parent<sup>2</sup>. "Respect is usually viewed as desirable and positive, whereas disrespect is often viewed as negative and undesirable"<sup>9</sup>.

#### Some perspective on respect

Immanuel Kant, German philosopher (1724-1804), noted, "Respect involves conduct and treatment that is due to all persons as such"<sup>1</sup>. This means that there should be equal respect for everyone. In Kant's view, treating a "person as an end" and never "as a means" has two important facts about people.

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First, individuals have desires and goals, other things have value (as human ends give them value); and second, humans have dignity because they are rational agents i.e., they are free to make any decisions, guide their conduct and set their own goals<sup>7</sup>.

An individual is worthy of the kind of respect that restrains how he may be treated (ends-in-themselves) in virtue of their ability to set and follow ends in accord to reason (humanity)<sup>3</sup>. Respecting people is an end in itself requires, respecting their rationality by not manipulating people or using them to attain a purpose<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Notion of respect in India**

In the Hindi speaking Indian speaking context, the lived experiences of people depict that use of words like 'ji', 'aap', 'tum', and 'tu' reflect different ways of showing respect. 'Aap' is used to address people who are elder, superior or unfamiliar people, 'tum' for the familiar people like friends and peers and 'tu' for those who are intimate like younger children or same age group (most often within the family). 'Ji' is used as a suffix to express respect especially used when speaking to or about a socially superior person.

In a collectivist culture like India, understanding of 'respect' becomes core to an individual. Children learn to display respect towards people based on their age, socio-economic status and cultural context from an early stage. Respect appears to be important for positive relationships with other people. Individuals learn respectful behavior from their micro and macro setting. There are different ways of expressing and displaying respect by an individual within a family and in society<sup>8</sup>.

Adolescence is a period marked by development of moral reasoning focused on upholding the values of family and understanding of societal rules. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand adolescents developing worldview and construals of respect. Therefore, the objective of present study was to explore adolescents' construals of respect and disrespect.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **LOCALE**

The locale to identify the sample for the present study was Sikandra Road, New Delhi.

### **SAMPLE SIZE**

The participants for this study consisted of 50 school going adolescents in the age range 14-15 years. Attempt was made to have an equal distribution of girls and boys i.e., 25 girls and 25 boys.

### **SAMPLE SELECTION**

The sampling technique for participant selection was purposive and was dependent upon the participant's availability and willingness. Through purposive sampling, the researcher included only those adolescents who fulfilled to purpose of the study. Socio-economic status was not considered as a selection criterion. Individuals were primarily located by the snowball method of sampling which is the process of selecting a sample using networks<sup>5</sup>, depending upon the researcher's access to the site.

### **PROCEDURE FOR DATA COLLECTION**

Written consent was taken from the participants and their parents for the study. They were informed and explained about the research and its objective. The adolescents who volunteered were included and they were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the research process. Privacy with regard to how much information the child wanted to reveal or share was also considered. The anonymity of the participants has been maintained by giving them fictitious names.

The data obtained from all the tools were of a descriptive genre. These were subjected to content analyses through a search for themes and patterns. Data obtained were grouped to form themes in order to arrive at distinct findings that would fulfill the research objectives.

### **RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS**

Keeping in mind the qualitative frame of the study, it was important to use multiple methods for engaging the participants. An array of investigative techniques was used to understand the adolescents' construals of respect. All the tools were constructed keeping

in mind the objectives of the study as well as the developmental attributes of the adolescent years. The tools were devised in English and in Hindi for easy interaction with the participants. The following were the tools selected keeping in mind the attributes of the sample:

- Interview
- Incidental Observation
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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study focused on adolescents' construals of respect. The study looked at the various sources of respect, and ways in which adolescents expressed respect. Qualitative analysis of the data generated and gathered from the various modes of data gathering enabled the identification of certain major themes that describe the various facets of respect. The children were aged 14 to 15 years. Of the 50 participants, 60% (30) were 15 years old and 40% (20) were 14 years old. Equal number of girls and boys were selected i.e., there were 25 girls and 25 boys in the sample.

All the participants were studying in government schools.

## Construals of Respect and Disrespect

### 1. Definitions of Respect

According to respondents respect primarily meant venerating someone (40%), to give dignity (24%), accede to what other say (20%) and honor someone (16%). Respect for these adolescents referred to the manner displayed while talking to parents, teachers and other people. The participants exhibited "manners" such as while conversing, with everyone. Respecting others also involved component of feelings (thinking good about someone, understanding someone) and actions (not fighting, not arguing, and teasing). A study by Tonheim<sup>10</sup> in the cultural context of Madagascar, also suggested that respect to parents was linked to not arguing with the parents. To sum up; while defining respect, adolescents emphasized on obedience; by acceding, paying attention, listening carefully and helping other people.

**Table 1: Meaning of respect among adolescents**

Meaning of Respect	Frequency	Percentage
Venerate	20	40%
Dignity	12	24%
Accede	10	20%
Honor	8	16%

## 2. Respectful Behavior

**a) Verbal:** Respect is mostly expressed through verbal language for 66 per cent of the respondents, it was using 'आप'(aap), 'जी' (ji) and also adding 'जी' after the person's form of address (e.g. mamaji), not saying 'तू' (tu) while addressing older people, using 'दीदी' (elder sister) and 'भैया' (elder brother) while referring to older siblings, saying 'hi', 'hello' and using 'तू' and 'तुम' while addressing younger children. 34 per cent of participants believed that greeting others by saying 'namaste' and saying 'namaste' while touching the older person's feet are a form of respectful

behaviors. Likewise, in the school setting, wishing the teachers "good morning", "good afternoon" were mentioned as respectful conduct.

**b) Tone:** In according respect, the pitch of the voice is also to be controlled. Mostly for 70 per cent of the respondents, the tone and pitch of the voice was soft and low while addressing elders, but while talking to their friends and younger children they mostly used a relatively louder tone and a higher pitch. In some 30 per cent of the respondents, it was noticed they used a higher pitch with their parents when they had arguments with them. The respondents stated that that they should use low pitch with older persons and should not raise their voices. In other words, modulation

of one's voice according to other's character was a salient to the presentation of oneself as a respectful person.

c) **Gesture:** The study indicates that there were different ways of communicating one message that could have different meanings. The gesture of '*namaste*' was observed as folding the hands by bending the elbows straight with palms of the hands facing each other and folded arms resting on the chest and then, participants utter the word '*namaste*'. For 54 per cent of the respondents, this was the most common way of doing '*namaste*'.

Touching of an older person's feet was yet another gesture of respect. The study revealed the use of varying postures of touching feet by 30 per cent of the respondents. Apart from the above-mentioned gestures; shaking hands, waving of hands to say 'hi' and giving a hug to others were largely depicted for people of the same or younger age group (16%). Therefore, it can be said that for adolescents various physical/bodily gestures were also a sign of respectful conduct.

**Table 2: Kinds of respectful behaviour among adolescents**

Respectful Behaviour		Frequency	Percentage
Verbal	Use of respectful language like 'app' and 'ji'	33	66%
	Greeting others	17	34%
Tone	Soft and low pitch of the voice	35	70%
	High during arguments	15	30%
Gesture	Wishing ' <i>namaste</i> ' by folding hands	27	54%
	Touching feet	15	30%
	Shaking hands, waving hands to say 'hi' and hugging others	8	16%

### 3. Definitions of Disrespect

Adolescents' description of disrespect included a range of answers which comprised of talking insolently (34%), dishonoring (22%) and not acceding (17%). The study indicated that ignoring someone by not replying (11%), speaking ill (9%), and using abusive language

(7%) were some of the ways of disrespecting others. Therefore, 'disrespect' is defined in context when someone talks insolently by abusing, teasing, arguing and not being obedient to other person by not replying and not acceding to others.

**Table 3: Meaning of disrespect among adolescents**

Meaning of Disrespect	Frequency	Percentage
Talking insolently	17	34%
Dishonoring	11	22%
Not acceding	9	18%
Ignoring someone by not replying	6	12%
Speaking ill	4	8%
Using abusive language	3	6%

### 4. Disrespectful Behavior

a) **Verbal abuse:** Disrespectful words according to 56 per cent of adolescents were use of '*tu*' while addressing elder people and using abusive words. Speaking bad things,

talking rudely, ordering, making fun, yelling, and name calling were found to be associated with disrespecting someone verbally among 44 per cent of the respondents.

**b) Defiance:** Defiant behavior included ignoring someone (42%), not acceding to what the other had asked for (22%), not listening (21%), and retorting to authority (15%). Adolescents stated that when they do not abide by the instructions given, it is disrespectful.

**c) Disruption:** In most of the cases, disrupting behavior consist of fighting (35%), arguing (29%), teasing (19%) and staring (17%). Overall, according to the adolescents disrespectful behavior includes components of verbal abuse, defiance and disruption.

**Table 4: Kinds of disrespectful behaviour among adolescents**

Respectful Behaviour		Frequency	Percentage
Verbal abuse	Using 'tu' while addressing elder people	28	56%
	Speaking bad things, talking rudely, ordering, making fun, yelling, and name calling	22	44%
Defiance	Ignoring someone	21	42%
	Not acceding	11	22%
	Not listening	10	20%
	Retorting to authority	8	16%
Disruption	Fighting	18	36%
	Arguing	14	28%
	Teasing	10	20%
	Staring	8	16%

### 5. Importance of Respect

Adolescents believed that if there was no need for according respect through appropriate means then, people would not respect each other (33%), would not give value (21%), would talk ill of the other (14%) and would not talk with courtesy (11%). This understanding of appropriate behavior in a community indicates to development of ethics of community among adolescents. One of the participants went as far as describing that there should be respect in relationships because in its absence they could not even hold their head high. This was similar to what was discussed by Shwalb and Shwalb<sup>9</sup> that respect might

possibly be the adhesive that binds or connects' people together. Respect was important for adolescents as it helped them to form good image. This depicted their need for "good boy or nice girl orientation" as described by Kohlberg<sup>4</sup> in the stages of moral development.

The study also indicated that if there would be social demand for respect, then, it will result in various difficulties and situations, since people would resort to hostile conflicts (9%), not accede to what the other say (7%) and abuse other (5%). Thus in life, respect is important for healthy relation with people by giving them value.

**Table 5: Importance of respect among adolescents**

Importance of Respect	Frequency	Percentage
Absence of respect among people	17	34%
Lack of value	11	22%
Speak bad about others	7	14%
Lack of courtesy	6	12%
Hostile conflicts	4	8%
not accede	3	6%
Abuse other	2	4%

### CONCLUSION

"When we give respect to another human being then that person goes on to give it to another person and then a chain is formed"

The preceding statement reveals adolescents understanding of the outcome of giving respect to people, i.e. it has the capacity of a ripple effect. This is how they believed that people will eventually respect everyone and there will be mutual and reciprocal respect.

The study highlighted various ways through which adolescents displayed and expressed respect towards other people. It included greeting, honoring, venerating, being obedient and courteous to others. The study also emphasized the difference in expressing respect towards people based on hierarchies that exist in the society, i.e., age, gender and position in familial relationship.

For adolescents, disrespect was related to someone being disobedient and insolent with others. Respect and disrespect were seen as the two-sides of a coin; disrespect was considered as absence of respect, as visible in behaviors that were opposite to what are considered as respectful. It was found that respect was considered as an important aspect of an individual's life for healthy relationships with others.

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