

# ■ VARIETIES OF 'MUTUAL IDENTIFICATION': REFLECTIONS ON 'RESPECT' AND 'CONSIDERATION'

This meditation on a small difference between British English and American English was inspired by participant observation in the car park of the gym to which I belong in Dublin.

The difference in question is that between 'to show respect' (commonly American) and 'to show consideration' to others (commonly British usage). In American, the opposite is found in the expression 'dissing' (as in 'Don't diss me'), meaning to show 'disrespect'.

Now, to my ears, 'respect' is a hierarchical concept, much in evidence in Elias's account of changing manners in Europe. It involves a power relationship, even a threat in the case of the warning not to 'diss me'. It also essentially refers to face-to-face interactions: it is a matter of manners towards a person who is actually present.

To show 'consideration' to other people, in contrast, is more associated with lengthening chains of interdependence: one can show consideration to other people more abstractly conceived, people one does not meet face to face but towards whom one feels the 'social constraint towards self-constraint'. And 'consideration' is an egalitarian concept, not hierarchical.

How does this relate to the car park? Well, it is always very crowded mid-morning. It is often difficult to find a space. But there are always half a dozen cars parked smack across two spaces, whose drivers haven't been bothered to straighten up their car – and who thus prevent the use of a space by another person. Yet I have no doubt that, had there been another driver visibly waiting to park alongside them, the inconsiderate drivers would have stirred themselves to straighten up. They would have shown 'respect', but their level of mutual identification with fellow members of the club is insufficiently great for them to show 'consideration' in the abstract, for people who are not physically present.

By way of provocative extension, may I suggest that this Anglo-American difference is also reflected in the mainstream of American sociology, which broadly speaking remains at the micro-level of 'interaction'?

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