

Burdening others disrespectfully

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We manifest disrespect for others when we manipulate them, humiliate them, or unfairly burden them. It's pretty clear what manipulation and humiliation consist in. And it's pretty clear what it is to burden someone. But what is it to burden someone unfairly?

We continually burden people. We burden others over and over again in the course of every ordinary day. Roger wants to watch the news, but you're watching *Law and Order*. Sally needs to get to class on time, but you're standing around talking with your friends, clogging up the halls. Martin is offended by the sight of a breast, but your baby's hungry. You've burdened Roger, Sally, and Martin, and yet you've not manifested disrespect toward any of them. You've not manifested disrespect because you did not impose the burden unfairly.

What makes a burden imposed on another a burden imposed unfairly is that it is imposed in violation of a rule or norm or custom in place at the time of the burdening. This is a necessary condition, perhaps not always sufficient. That is to say, any instance of a burden imposed unfairly is simultaneously an instance of a norm being violated, but maybe not every instance of a norm being violated is also an instance of a burden being imposed unfairly.

The rules, norms, and customs by which burdening can be disrespectful are often explicitly formulated and set down in words, but not always. Few, though, are codified in law, and that's how it should be, for law ought to deal with serious harms only, and not all burdens are harms, let alone serious harms. Often enough, a rule, norm, or custom will consist in tacit understandings of how things are done around here, who has the right of way. Waiting in line, turn taking, first-come, first-served—one or another is the custom in this area of interpersonal life, another in a different area. By violating a rule, norm, or custom that's in place, the burden one imposes on another becomes a burden imposed unfairly, and to impose a burden on another unfairly is to treat that other disrespectfully.

Since rules, norms, and customs change over time, so over time do the forms disrespectful treatment can take change. And since rules, norms, and customs differ society to society, so, too, differ the forms disrespectful treatment can take society to society.

Rules, norms, and customs are themselves, of course, sometimes burdensome, and sometimes we have reason to try to change them. One way that sometimes works to change them is to violate them. Violating a rule, norm, or custom can show people what it is like to live with different rules, norms, or customs; people, seeing the attractions of living with the different ones, will begin to violate the old ones, perhaps thereby bringing new ways to the common life.

Though we find we have reason to violate a norm, we should not think that whatever burdens we impose on others when we violate it we do not impose unfairly. The burden we

impose is one we impose unfairly. Our actions manifest some degree of disrespect for the other. That we judge it all things considered better to pursue our end at the cost of treating some person disrespectfully than to surrender our end does not mean we should deny that our pursuit involves treating that person disrespectfully.

One thing to prize in open, democratic, individualistic societies is our custom of distinguishing offence and hurt feelings from harm. This is something to prize as it gains for us much freedom in how we live our lives. Martin, remember, was deeply offended by your breastfeeding your baby in the restaurant. But because the custom in place around here is to distinguish offence from harm, his being offended is his problem, not yours. He cannot legitimately expect you not to bare your breast in his presence to feed your baby. And so you did not burden him unfairly, though burden him you did.

Martin may, without thereby treating you disrespectfully, ask you to go elsewhere to feed your baby. (If you take offense at his mere request, that's your problem, not his.) And you may decline his request, again without thereby treating him disrespectfully. Now, if Martin continues to ask you to cease—or, worse, makes a fuss about your breastfeeding—, Martin has begun to treat you badly, for Martin is burdening you in violation of a custom in place. It's Martin's sensitivities that are at fault here, not your insensitivity to his sensitivities.

Doing something that offends another can be to treat that other disrespectfully. And making a big deal about one's being offended can also be to treat another disrespectfully.