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ABSTRACT: In recent decades governments around the world have been increasingly concerned about terrorism and have introduced new laws and policies in an attempt to combat it. I examine here the weakest link in chains of security management: what I call the realm of “the informal,” where neither law nor formal policy is at work, but where stereotypes, traditional sayings and jokes, social ideals often promoted by mass media, etiquette requirements certainly are. This realm is so dangerous precisely because of its deceptively innocuous appearance. First, I explain the kinds of things that function in the informal realm, revealing that it is more extensive than might first appear. Secondly, I describe three real-life examples where some informal factor plays a vital role in a catastrophic outcome, to show that such seemingly trivial matters can acquire tremendous practical significance in critical situations. My focus is on the influence of some informal factor on individuals who are in no way trying to threaten security, but rather intend to maintain or enhance it. Their roles call for that commitment. Finally I consider one of the three examples more carefully and illustratively, to demonstrate some of the key points raised. Currently, thinking about the dangers informal factors pose is routinely reactive (rather than proactive), often prompted by a catastrophe that has already occurred, but this means we miss some of what could be learned from the catastrophe. We need a far more proactive approach to those factors in the informal sphere and we need a much stronger focus on individuals who are responsible for and committed to maintaining security. Otherwise threats to security will remain are more serious than is typically acknowledged.

*Jean Harvey, a long-time supporter of this Journal, passed away on April 20, 2014, at the age of 67 of an illness that was detected in October of last year. Just weeks before her death, she had been hard at work on another book on the ethics of non-violent oppression titled, Civilized Oppression and Moral Relations, and she worked on it until she became too weak to sit at her computer. Dr. Harvey’s courage to persevere, in the face of her impending death, is testament to her unwavering dedication to applied philosophy. Her life and works reflect an authentic caring for the plights of others, especially the vulnerable; a profound passion for social justice; and a steadfast conviction that logic and philosophy can and should guide social change. She showed us how to be applied philosophers, without losing our hearts. —Elliot D. Cohen, Editor, IJAP
1. SETTING THE STAGE

The threats to human security today are many and varied and the ones we think of first involve large scale, dramatic kinds of phenomena, like massive environmental degradation, large populations involuntarily displaced or on the move, pandemics, the proliferation of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, threats to the safety of nuclear power plants, the ever escalating possibilities for the abuse of information technology, the growth of international crime organizations, and the increasing number of groups committed to terrorism. Those threats involving calculated violence are most likely to catch our attention and in recent decades (especially since the tragedy of 911), governments around the world have been increasingly concerned about terrorism.

They have reviewed and revised laws and policies to do with surveillance, information gathering and retention, grounds for arrest, options to detain without formal charge, and other matters to do with the danger posed by terrorism. The changes have aroused extensive debate, given that many of them seem to conflict with basic moral commitments to personal liberty, privacy, presumption of innocence, and more. Laws and policies embodying those longstanding basic commitments have sometimes been dislodged or at least radically weakened in the post-911 period. Given the serious nature of the ethical issues involved and the challenges of justifying and implementing such revisions, it is little wonder that points to do with law and policy have taken center stage in debating human security, especially in connection with intentional and organized violence.

It is a serious mistake, though, to assume that formal policy and law are the only matters that call for careful moral scrutiny or that only policy and law play critical roles in matters of security. It is also a serious but standard oversight to focus first and foremost on the eye-catching, more spectacular threats to security, especially those with elements of intentional violence, and furthermore to focus primarily on the would-be perpetrators. All of that of course is important, but such a restricted and emphasized focus means that some substantial threats to human security are routinely overlooked, at least until a disaster unfolds.

In this paper I look at the realm of the informal, where neither law nor formal policy is at work. I will claim that it is the weakest link in a chain of security precisely because of its deceptively innocuous appearance. In fact the apparent triviality of the issues has led to their being largely ignored. If their significance is acknowledged at all, it is often only retrospectively, when some associated disaster has occurred and is now being investigated. There is a lack of pro-active reflection. As a consequence informal prompters, such as cultural habits, rules of etiquette, individual personalities, and other seemingly trivial matters, can write the script that sometimes ends in catastrophe.

I should state immediately that nothing in this work challenges the expertise on security issues emanating from political science and law. Rather, I draw attention to a sphere of concern that is often overlooked and if seen, dismissed as trivial. The phenomena involved in the “realm of the informal” mentioned here are all easily observable in everyday life. Every astute and reflective observer has seen stereotypes at work in daily situations, has heard traditional sayings habitually
used and has reflected afresh on the actual messages they convey, has seen some innocuous personality feature slide into a more troubling personal attribute, and so on, and the real life examples given below illustrate the significance of these phenomena and their relevance to human security issues. Reasoning through the implications reveals how important it is to reflect on the role of the actual individuals involved in security situations and on the interactions between them in ways that are informed by the kinds of insights we can gain by reflecting on the realm of the informal.

The kinds of things that can threaten national security vary. At present terrorism and economic collapse loom large, but a nation can also face crisis because of war (in the conventional sense), natural disaster, pandemics, massive and widespread corruption in high places, and more. Both the US and Canada have already faced acts of terrorism, major wars, a pandemic (the 1918–1919 flu pandemic) and more recent threats of outbreaks, devastating economic crises, and a number of high impact natural disasters. (Probably the less said about corruption in high places, the better.) Any event or condition that threatens the public peace in some sizeable portion of the country and the freedom of many individuals to go about their daily lives in relative safety, or threatens to leave large numbers of people dead, injured, sick, or destitute, or radically undermines the people’s most basic trust in the government, or leaves the country prey to hostile and aggressive foreign forces is a security issue, whether it be the security of a number of individuals, a sizeable portion of a nation’s citizens, national security, or global security.

In some circumstances a threat to security at the national level can be a regrettable but necessary stage in a nation’s progress toward a non-totalitarian form of government (as we have seen in recent times), since the radical distrust of such a dictatorship if often followed by civil unrest or armed conflict in societies where free speech and representative government do not exist. In this paper, though, I will consider some of the less dramatic (but serious) kinds of threats to human security that arise more frequently in western democracies.

There are three underlying reasons why the relevance of the informal to issues of security is greatly underestimated and inadequately tackled (if tackled at all). First, many of the actions and attitudes involved are very subtle in kind and therefore often not explicitly noticed. Secondly, if they are actually noticed, they tend to be dismissed as completely trivial and insignificant. Thirdly, if people are ever induced to discuss the informal elements and to explore their relevance, then in quite a few cases the elements have a deceptive moral halo hovering above them. They look morally sound and this deters people from making changes that reduce, restrict, monitor, or eliminate them.

The first part of this work explains the kinds of things that function in the informal realm in the hopes that we can be more aware of them in situations around us. I will not in this part make the connections with matters or situations to do with security, since I wish first to reveal how extensive the informal realm is. This allows us to detect further connections that cannot be covered in work of this length. Seeing the extent of the informal realm in its own right, so to speak, is vital
if we are to continue to notice its relevance to security issues and specific security situations in the future. All I can do here is offer a sample of such connections.

The second part, therefore, describes three real-life examples where some informal factor plays a vital role in the catastrophic outcome, so that we can see how such seemingly trivial matters can acquire tremendous practical significance in some critical situations.

Finally I will select one kind of informal component, namely, etiquette driven politeness, for analysis. I hope to show that coming to grips with the serious nature of the informal requires not only much sharper perceptual skills (when looking at actions, situations, and interactions), but a more careful analysis of the situations and the relationships where the informal is functioning. Without this, the social pressure to keep walking down the same path will not be over-ruled by careful moral judgment in cases where such over-ruling is both justified and pressing.

2. INFORMAL ELEMENTS: STEREOTYPES AND THEIR ASSOCIATED EXPECTATIONS AND HABITS

Practices and beliefs that are shared within a culture need not be enshrined in law before resulting in specific actions in individuals or entrenched habits in most people. What I call the informal factors in a situation can take the form of stereotypes and other generalized images, rules of etiquette, social customs, familiar sayings, idioms, metaphors, and jokes, social ideals, as well as the individual character and personality of key players. Such components are not mutually exclusive. There are paradigmatic instances of each, but there is also overlap and in some cases an item can legitimately be described in more than one way. It helps, though, to keep in mind the range of things involved. Given the strong tendency to dismiss the role of the informal, anything that tends in the direction of being dismissive (such as overlooking how varied and extensive the relevant phenomena are) is dangerous. Such factors can be seen at work in daily life in both its mundane and more challenging aspects.

Stereotypes quite often lie behind habitual behavior. They involve images that are over-generalized, over-simplified, and misleading or outright false. Many stereotypes demean those portrayed, although some falsely boost their image beyond a reasonable level. In fact stereotypes do as much to sustain the often falsely elevated status of the privileged as they do to suppress the already disadvantaged. So embedded are they, they can easily influence the suppressed into co-operating with their own subordination. The images are both seen in and sustained by social interactions and they can readily influence a situation and the outcome.

For example, if traditionally men are seen as natural leaders and women as followers, then when minutes before the public lecture I see that there are not enough chairs, I will ask a male colleague if he can please deal with it somehow. When the bus leaves the road in a bad accident that kills the driver, we will look to the uninjured men for decisive initiative in this crisis. If on the other hand we see women rather than men as natural nurturers, we think it better if the mother rather than the father stays home to look after the sick child. (Note the “Dr. Mom”
advert for children’s cold medicine.) If we think that men are sharper and more insightful thinkers than women, then when the discussion begins the Chair may first scan the side of the room where the men happen to be clustered, to see if there are hands raised (a phenomenon that was not that rare in academia a few decades ago).

Cultural stereotypes of long standing do not disappear overnight. Since they promote ways of behaving that become habitual, agents are often unaware of these habits if they are unobtrusive. They literally do not know what they routinely do; they do not perceive their own habitual actions. And in the agents’ minds there is no intention, say, to favour the men. Being oblivious in this way is not special to such situations. Anyone who is ruthlessly honest will acknowledge that s/he is not fully aware of every little gesture, glance, facial expression, intonation of voice, body position, variation in clothes worn, and dozens of other ‘small’ matters, nor is s/he fully aware of every culturally inherited stereotype and image that lies behind such ‘trivial’ actions, but it is this unawareness that permits the images and the associated habitual actions to continue even after the agent sincerely claims to have changed the relevant beliefs. At least, they can persist if they are not particularly eye-catching actions. After all, the habitual deference to the ‘natural leadership’ of men can be reflected in as simple an action as the majority of bus passengers’ scanning the faces of men—or fellow men—looking for that first decisive move. This can then become a link in the causal chain that hands over the responsibility for handling the crisis to the men present. So too can the general expectation, felt by the women and also the men themselves, that it is for the men to take action, an expectation highlighted by the many glances in their direction. Causal chains often contain seemingly trifling components that are nonetheless powerfully efficacious links.

3. INFORMAL ELEMENTS: JOKES, SAYINGS, AND SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Stereotypes are not the only active ingredient in the mix of informal influences. Rules of etiquette and other customs, as well as familiar sayings, idioms, metaphors, and jokes all send their messages and leave their mark. Both the “mother-in-law” jokes and the “ball and chain” jokes at weddings denigrate women and yet women present at the celebration are expected to find them amusing and join in the laughter. Not to do so brands them as “poor sports” who are far too sensitive and have no sense of proportion, i.e., reveals that they have a significant character flaw. Traditional jokes, in fact, are quite often not so innocent weapons used to exclude, marginalize, or demean members of certain groups, although the explicit intention to do so is often lacking. Nonetheless, humor remains one of the few socially acceptable forms of attack on the already disadvantaged, and in ways that are often not seen. Also quite a number of our western, traditional sayings or adages carry disturbing messages. There is often more to the message than first appears: “A woman’s place is in the home (or the kitchen),” “A woman’s work is never done,” “children should be seen and not heard,” “boys will be boys,” “like father, like son,” and many others are still heard, either used seriously, or called upon via the back door—in jokes (a common way of trying
to squeeze content out of a saying now discredited by most reasonable people). There are also sayings that do contain valuable insights. The point, though, is that jokes and sayings are far less scrutinized for soundness than some other forms of speech and they therefore can and do successfully play a conversational role they do not deserve to.

The same can be said of quite a number of our apparently innocuous social customs or elements of standard etiquette. When men and women are in the car together, it is not random who tends to drive, and it seems to be actually true that men rather than women are reluctant to ask locals for directions when they are lost. It’s still expected that men rather than women will propose marriage, that a woman will follow her partner to wherever his new job is, and so on. If true, they are just trends (and so not true of everyone), but trends in response to long-standing expectations about gender roles.

4. INFORMAL ELEMENTS: SOCIAL IDEALS

In any society there are also influential social ideals portrayed more or less explicitly in daily life. I have in mind ideals that seem not really significant, whether or not we share them. They often contrast in this way with the kinds of clearly moral ideals that are portrayed and urged in times of major crisis, like a time of war. The ideals voiced in these critical times catch our attention and provoke reflection, e.g., being willing to enlist and risk one’s life in a time of war, or readily handing over precious possessions that can be used in the “war effort” (e.g., handing over all kinds of metal items in the Second World War), or making the commitment to manage on the food rations provided, meager though they are, rather than be involved in the thefts, indulgence, and corruption lying behind the black market provisions. In western cultures today, however, adverts, movies, comedy series, news coverage, computer games, all have the power to influence those constantly exposed to them, especially younger people. The key role of mass media is just beginning to be understood. Adverts on television and in magazines are in fact major purveyors of social ideals. The women portrayed in magazine adverts are still nearly always super-slim, regardless of the product advertised. Those on television display much the same trend. Only very recently have possible connections been explored between such adverts and an upsurge in eating disorders in children, teens, and young adults, and perhaps also the increased bullying of youngsters who happen not to match these portrayals. The adverts send messages about the need for women to be super-thin in order to be attractive and popular, but being thin is not enough. They must also be young. This youth culture has given rise to dozens of expensive products that supposedly reverse the effects of ageing and has caused immeasurable self-loathing in women who cannot reconcile themselves to becoming visibly older. (A few years ago there was a temporary “pro-age” advert run by Dove, portraying older women as beautiful—a strike against the overwhelming trend—but predictably the women portrayed drew scorn from some professional male comedians and the advert disappeared fairly quickly.) Other popular social ideals are seen in the media, including seeing one’s life as ‘all about me.’ Whether explicitly or tacitly promoted, such ideals are not
in fact morally neutral, but given the casual, light-handed way in which they are portrayed, that is far from obvious to many observers. Unlike the blunt and explicit war-time exhortations, the moral dimension of the social ideals portrayed via mass media pass under the moral radar screen of many who ‘see’ them.

5. INFORMAL ELEMENTS: INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER

Sometimes the personality or character of some key player has an enormous influence on how a situation unfolds. Here again I am particularly interested in the less obvious aspects of the individual. It is fairly easy these days to check on someone’s criminal record, credit rating, or driving record. Professional services will also check educational and employment related credentials. It is rather more challenging to know whether someone is able to keep items confidential, neither sharing them nor even indicating that such items exist, not even to the closest family members, and not even when this causes misunderstandings and pain in those close relationships. Alternatively, does an individual have the self-confidence needed for a certain role? In some situations does the confidence level move into the realm of something different, perhaps a form of arrogance or recklessness? If so, when, and what are the triggers, and exactly how does the change manifest itself?

The US and Canadian governments have access to more thorough checks than usual on people who will be placed in security sensitive positions. For example, investigations conducted by CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) standardly include a “field investigation” where the person in question is interviewed, along with friends, neighbours, employers, and local police. Yet even if psychologists are involved in the interview and testing process, there is a limit to how much can be learned this way about the subtler aspects of someone’s psychological make-up and dispositions, especially those that vary according to the situation.

One of the reasons it is so difficult is that features of character and personality are usually articulated via what are called “spectrum concepts” and this brings with it problems for those who wish to know “everything” about an individual’s nature. To clarify briefly: the light spectrum contains all the colors of the rainbow. One stripe is definitely a red stripe and one is clearly orange, but there is no sharp line dividing them. There is a small zone where it is neither clearly red nor clearly orange. Spectrum concepts share this feature. There are clear cases where the concept applies and clear cases where it does not, but there is also a grey area where no definitive answer can be given, not because of any inadequacy on the part of the concept user, but because of the very nature of the concept.

We have all seen people who are appropriately confident about their skills or talents, and we have all seen individuals who are blatantly arrogant, but when do we see signals that someone is sliding from the first attribute to the second? It matters for my concerns here that so many personal attributes that are generally desirable have a shady ‘relative’ lurking in the background. Reasonable confidence can move into arrogance, sensible caution into immobilizing fear, independent thinking into a wilful refusal to listen. Do we have someone who works well
in a team or someone who is all but dependent on others and cannot function well alone? Is the individual an impressive multi-tasker or someone who cannot prioritize and let some things go? When do we have a person who can give clear and unambiguous directions to others and secure their responses, and when do we have someone who shows signals of being a power-driven bully when in a position to be so? In all of these there are crystal clear exemplars of each of the pair, cases where there is no doubt as to the answer to the question. However, there are also situations where there is no straightforward way to give an answer.

At first glance this may seem to be a problem that has an easy solution: place in a security sensitive role only the person where there is a clear answer to such relevant questions. Things are not so simple, however. One reason is that people may only rarely reveal the signals that cause an astute observer’s antenna to twitch (and only then for an astute observer). The fact that friends, neighbors, and employers have seen no signals of some desirable attribute’s sliding into something a lot more dubious and that no signals of such a slide are given even in an extensive, formal interview is relevant and fairly reassuring, but it is incomplete evidence. Furthermore, as partial evidence, it is only as good as the perceptual skills and memory and—in the case of the interviewer or psychological tester—the expertise of those involved. The role of extremely developed perceptual skills in seeing and noting exactly and fully what is heard and seen cannot be over-stated and professionals with established expertise in their discipline may not have developed the kind of perceptual skill called for here—and it is indeed something that has to be developed over time, as does any other skill. The level of the perceptual skill called for is extremely high in the case of noticing subtle, but very important, informal features of the situation, and this unusual level of perceptual ability is not typically required to qualify as an expert in the relevant discipline (e.g., psychology).

6. INFORMAL ELEMENTS: LESS VISIBLE KINDS OF “RELATIONSHIP POWER”

The last kind of informal factor I will include in my sample here concerns social power (as distinct from straightforward physical power). There are many ways in which individuals differ with respect to power. Kai Nielsen, for example, reminds us that “Given the way political and economic phenomena interact, liberty and moral autonomy cannot but suffer when there are substantial differences in wealth.” There are also more subtle but none the less real differences in social power that are very much to do with the nature of the relationships in which people’s lives are embedded. Society is not composed of individual, isolated lives and life situations, but of a vast network of relationships, some consolidated into institutions big and small, some of a more intimate kind, and the advantages of the socially privileged include power over other people in various relationships.

The employer is in a position to fire the employee for shoddy work, but it is a mistake to think that all relationship power is this transparent. For example, what I call “interactive power” is roughly the power to take the initiative in a relationship: in beginning or ending it, in insisting on its being modified, and—most relevant here—in taking communication initiatives like the power to begin or end
a specific contact (like a conversation or exchange), to insist on being listened to and on being given answers to reasonable and pertinent questions. Social custom awards the ‘more socially important’ people a lot more interactive power than those lower in the social hierarchy. The rich, the famous, those in prestigious roles, those in the professions, those higher up in some employment hierarchy, are expected to take the initiative in encounters with ‘less important’ individuals (e.g., those lower in the employment hierarchy). Interactive power is power that one person wields directly over another, but it is anything but conspicuous.

But there is more to understanding forms of power than noticing less conspicuous types that one individual may have over another (like interactive power). It is a mistake, in fact, to assume that all relationship power is ‘direct’ in this way. As Thomas Wartenberg writes in *The Forms of Power*, “According to this assumption [that power is direct], power is ‘located’ within a dyad consisting of a dominant agent and a subordinate agent over whom he wields power,” and so an adequate account of the power need refer only to those two people. This is a false assumption. Someone can have a great deal of power in a relationship because of the role of some third party. For example, in an interaction between two people one person may have a lot more “support power,” as I call it, than the other. A rich and famous person dining in the restaurant may be unreasonably demanding with impunity if he can count on the support of the manager if his behavior is challenged by a staff member. The staff member will handle the situation without complaint and without signs of frustration if she knows the manager will not support her in the event of a confrontation. She knows she has far less of this type of ‘indirect’ power (namely, support power) than the difficult diner and this affects the relationship between herself and him. She is in a sense socially powerless to do anything about his boorish behavior.

These differences in relationship power are not random. There are well understood social rules as to how the power game is to be played. In some cases the rules may change according to the sex, race, or age of those involved. (For example, a woman teacher, unlike her male colleagues, may find that she has no support power via the school principal when a male pupil becomes verbally abusive.) For all of these types of less visible relationship power, it is possible to have a morally excessive amount or a morally inadequate amount. That is to say, the amount of such power someone has in this or that relationship is open to moral critique in either direction.

7. EXAMPLES OF THE INFORMAL AT WORK

Insignificant looking elements in a situation can acquire practical importance in at least two ways. In the first place they can have a cumulative impact that is anything but trivial. Forms of non-violent oppression typically function in this way, marginalizing members of the oppressed group by an unending series of small omissions, slights, and impositions that demoralize and disadvantage the recipients. Lives can be derailed without any formed intention to do so and without violence. You do not even need to know how the mechanisms work, nor even what the crucial moves in the mechanisms are. All you need is for a large number
of people to have the habitual behavior that does in fact disadvantage and isolate members of certain groups. Cumulatively the many small moves devastate the lives of those on the receiving end.\(^6\)

The second way in which something that looks trivial can become important in practice is by its impact on some critical situation. This second possibility is the more relevant to our topic here. I am particularly interested in the role of the informal factor, but whatever the factor is, it often has the influence it does on the critical situation because there lies in the background a social convention, a stereotype, a practice or expectation, that is giving the factor a power it would not otherwise have. In these instances there is, so to speak, some form of social pressure or leverage at work.

I describe below three real-life cases where such an informal component played a vital role in bringing about some calamity. In none of the examples was it the only causal factor; a number of elements came together in unexpected ways. In some cases there might even have been breaches of policy or law. Nonetheless I select these examples since the informal factor was crucial in the sense that changing this one component could have radically altered the end-result. In each case the change could have eliminated or drastically reduced the scope of the calamity, despite the other elements and despite any violations of policy.

In addition, I consider primarily the role of the informal element on someone who had no intention to cause a disaster. In fact the key people in the examples were in positions with one thing in common: one way or another they were all responsible for protecting human security and none of them was intending to betray that responsibility.

The examples I think show how easy it is to underestimate the influence and effects of these informal elements, except in reflective hindsight after some disaster has already occurred. For each case I suggest a label for the informal element at work. Other examples and suitable labels for other such factors can be readily imagined. All I can do is offer a sample. It is difficult to secure accurate information about security-related events at the national level, so the examples have a smaller scope, but the role of the relevant components can easily transfer to events where the outcome is on a far bigger scale. The examples allow us to see the informal at work in critical circumstances, which is important if we are to further our understanding and perceptual skills needed to better prevent such outcomes and if we are to reflect on some tough moral decisions such prevention involves.

(1) (This is the example I will return to at the end, so I have given the minimum description that it still a fair account.) The Tenerife air crash of 1977 remains the worst air disaster on record with respect to the number of deaths. Two Boeing 747s collided on the runway with a final death toll of 583. There were a number of contributing factors: it was foggy, the Pan Am plane had trouble identifying the transverse taxiway it was sent to in order to clear the main runway for the KLM take-off, and there were some key misunderstandings in communications. When the KLM plane declared that it was waiting “for our ATC [air traffic control] clearance,” the response was that it was “cleared to the Papa beacon. Climb to and maintain flight level 90 . . .,” a message thought by investigators to give the
information as to what to do when actual “clearance” was given. The directions were repeated back to ATC, the message ending with “we’re now at takeoff” (at least, that seems to be what the voice recording shows). ATC responded with “Okay.” Investigators believe that ATC construed the message as “we’re now at takeoff position.” This was followed by a disastrous four seconds when simultaneous attempts to speak caused a shrill noise in the KLM cockpit so that a crucial instruction to “stand by for takeoff” given by Air Traffic Control was not heard. The KLM pilot did not ask ATC if any messages had been missed in the four seconds of radio interference.

What was heard in the KLM cockpit after this was the ATC asking the Pan Am plane to report when they were clear of the runway and the response, “Okay, we’ll report when we’re clear.” This is the point when the KLM flight engineer asked the captain, “Is he not clear, then?” Response: “What do you say?” Again: “Is he not clear, that Pan American?” The captain responds: “Oh, yes. [emphatically].” The flight engineer heard a clear indication that the Pan Am plane was still on the foggy runway the KLM was taxiing down in order to take off. He had posed a question to the captain in a highly suggestive way (that should have prompted the answer, “no, the other plane is not clear”), and then had repeated the question in the same mode. The emphatic answer from the senior officer ended the exchange. It seems that neither the flight officer nor the first officer was able to set aside the conventional mode of polite deference to the senior officer and yell something like, “Abort the take-off! Abort. It’s still on the runway! What the hell are you doing? Turn off!” Whether the captain would have responded and whether it would have been in time are uncertain, but the voice recording vividly illustrates the informal at work: the social custom of submissive deference to authority-figures here functioned disastrously.

(2) The D-Day landings on Normandy were critical in the Allies’ reversing the direction of WWII. Although at the critical time Hitler did not expect Normandy to be the location of the invasion, the beaches were heavily mined and fortified. Many casualties were expected when the first wave of troops made their way over the beaches, both from the guns overlooking the beaches and from the anti-personnel mines. On the British-Canadian beaches many of the mines were harmlessly detonated by flail tanks, one of a number of armored vehicles invented by a British engineering officer, Percy Hobart. To the front of a tank was attached a large cylinder, held away from the tank by metal bars. The cylinder rotated as the tank moved forward and heavy chains attached to the cylinder flailed the ground in front of the tank, exploding any mines in its path. Troops walking in the tracks of the tank were thus ensured a mine-free pathway.

The British commander, Montgomery, offered the US forces a half-share of all the special armored vehicles available, but except for the amphibious tank Hobart invented, the offer was rejected. On the American beaches the mines were walked over, walked past, or defused the old fashioned way, with a predictably much higher casualty rate. The main reason given for rejecting the offer seemed to be a concern that “gadgets break down.” However, had the “gadget” been American, one cannot help but suppose that there would have been some follow up on that concern and it would have been quickly resolved. Flail tanks had already
been successfully used in the North African campaign, so Hobart had already established his innovative genius. Was there an element of sensitivity about the image of “American know-how,” since such an image would sit in some tension with accepting the offer. At least, the case serves to remind us that national pride (in the case of all nations) has more than once nudge powerful individuals into ill judged decisions.

(3) R.M.S. Titanic struck an iceberg on the night of April 14, 1912 and sank just under three hours later in the early hours of the next morning. The inquiry established that the two lookouts incredibly had no binoculars, although testimony revealed there were at least five pairs in the bridge area. The vessel had a lifeboat capacity of 1,178 while carrying 2,201 persons, but this capacity was over the legal requirement. Most striking, though, is the number of ice warnings received by Titanic: six on the 11th from vessels stopped in or passing through heavy ice, five on the 12th, three on the 13th, and seven more on the 14th—the day the Titanic struck. Plotting the locations given in the messages would have shown that a huge belt of ice, nearly 80 miles across, lay right in the vessel’s path.

The captain did not slow down the ship, let alone stop, not even in the dark of night. Although there is no evidence that he was trying to establish a speed record (a familiar myth about Titanic), the captain did dismiss the series of warnings (twenty-one in all) with no appropriate response taken. Was there arrogance at work (sailing on the biggest vessel in the world at that time, a ship renowned for its first class luxury) or perhaps complacency (as the highest paid commander in the merchant marine, someone with a rich career behind him, now on his last and most prestigious voyage before retiring)? Whatever description is the more appropriate, something was seriously amiss with the attitude of the captain. With all the other problems (like the number of lifeboats), had the Titanic stopped when it became too dark to see safely (as did a number of the vessels in the same area), the catastrophe would not have occurred.

Lest it be thought that this was simply a violation of a policy requirement rather than something to do with a key individual, the report of the British inquiry had as one of its recommendations that it become a regulation of all steamship companies that ships reduce to a “moderate speed” or change course when ice is reported nearby. Both the American and British inquiries concluded that speed was a factor in the collision, but the British inquiry made a point of recording that maintaining speed in icy conditions was common practice (and far more blame was laid on the captain of the Californian, the vessel stopped for the night nearby, the vessel that apparently failed to notice or respond to the Titanic’s distress signals, than on the Titanic’s captain). Common practice or not, a character flaw was involved in the persistent dismissal of over twenty ice warnings over a period of four days. No significance was attached to them either as many individual warnings or as charted locations clearly indicating a massive ice-field right ahead of the vessel.

What is especially suggestive about this example is the improbability of the captain’s having thrived in his past career with this degree of negligence. So it may well be an example of a phenomenon mentioned earlier where a person’s usually displayed attributes slide from their desirable form into a murkier family relative. What might this look like? Perhaps a usually relaxed mode (generally
speaking, an asset) moved into complacency, or perhaps a sense of professional pride (presumably fully justified) shifted into a smug and careless arrogance. The situation contains possible triggers for such shifts.  

8. POLITENESS AS MORALLY VALUABLE

Having explained what I mean by “informal factors” and given a few examples of how such items can play a vital role in bringing about a catastrophe, I wish now to offer a few ethical remarks. I will have to be highly selective in this section. Since many in a number of disciplines have had a lot to say about stereotypes, and others have written a great deal about attributes of character, self-esteem, and self-respect, I have chosen instead to focus on etiquette, or rather, one specific component of it, namely, politeness. As a bonus, it has at first glance a completely innocent appearance.

Most of us first think of conventional manners as relatively trifling with little or no moral significance. There are exceptions, however. Michael Meyer, for example, refers to the “civility of etiquette” which, he claims, is grounded in the idea of civilization. He sees such civility as desirable even within a close-knit community (including families) where other bonds exist and argues that civility is a virtue. Nancy Sherman is clearly sympathetic, arguing that behavior that is conventionally required by rules of etiquette is sometimes involved in expressing a virtue, such as kindness. It is the outward face of kindness.

There are clear benefits to having rules of etiquette. In the first place it reduces confusion and embarrassment as to who is expected to do what and how in this or that social situation, from introductions to which cutlery to use. These conventions allow everyone in the situation to know what to do, what happens next, and when the specific social requirements are met. Removing the uncertainty makes the occasions and encounters less stressful. Etiquette not only helps to minimize confusion but also social friction. Many of the rules are geared to generating polite behavior and this smoothes the interactions. This in turn promotes social harmony which provides the background conditions for co-operation, mutual aid, the exchange of ideas, and so on. In short, upon reflection the rules of etiquette (those we happen to have) appear to be morally sound rather than morally irrelevant in that they seem to produce a morally desirable kind of community. As Sarah Buss notes in her article, “Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners,” “social disharmony could not fail to adversely affect people's willingness to regulate their behavior according to certain principles of justice.” That is, politeness has more far reaching consequences than first meets the eye, according to Buss. It helps promote not just practical co-operation, but a general willingness to abide by the restrictions imposed by the moral demands of a just society because good manners construct “a conception of human beings as objects of moral concern.” So with an eye on good consequences produced, politeness looks to be morally desirable.

Buss, in fact, moves to an even more robust defense of etiquette-driven politeness, one that is no longer to do with its effects, claiming that “polite behavior not only has important moral consequences; it has an essentially moral point.”
She refers to “the expressive function of manners” and writes that “When we treat one another politely, we are directly expressing respect for one another in the only way possible. We are, in effect, saying: ‘I respect you.’” This is no longer focused on the results of politeness. The value now lies in the nature of the polite actions themselves rather than in their desirable effects, or at least she is offering additional (and primary) value that is no longer effect-dependent.

So far, then, we can see that politeness is generally seen by most ethicists as either morally irrelevant or morally desirable. Either way, it is, generally speaking, seen as morally harmless. Buss herself makes the point that one may be morally obliged to violate certain rules of politeness in order to save someone’s life (since obviously more by way of recognizing and respecting a person’s ‘dignity’ is shown by saving a person’s life than in being politely respectful). Such rare situations, though, leave the generally safe moral status of politeness untouched.

9. DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL POWER AND THE MORAL STATUS OF POLITENESS

All the points above in favor of the moral value of politeness would be unproblematic if society consisted of individuals who are peers with respect to social power, status, opportunities, material assets, access to vital services (like health care), and so on. It’s the image of independent, thriving individuals, all fully able to chart and then pursue a fulfilling life-path, subject to no-one’s coercion, manipulation, or domination. Societies, however, are not like this and the systematic differences in social power and the challenges involved in detecting when they are at work give rise to a far more wary approach to politeness. It suggests a less positive moral status for politeness. As my final point here, I hope to show how this points to the need to think afresh about its relevance to security situations and those involved.

Structured power differences of subtle but highly effective kinds (such as interactive power and support power) hold, for example, between the rich and the poor, the highly educated and those with little education, the healthy and the physically challenged, between members of different ethnic groups, and between individuals differently placed in an institutional or employment hierarchy, and these power differentials change the complexion of politeness. Politeness may indeed be an expression of respect and is likely to be so in interactions between social peers. However, it can also function as a mechanism by which to suppress protest and it can be a social requirement that blocks the justifiably strong expression of emotion that victims of injustice feel. Furthermore, it can function in these ways systematically, not simply on some rare occasion.

How can this be? Surely one can protest while maintaining the standards of politeness? Yes one can, especially if one has highly developed articulation skills. Many members of varying professions have those skills. Many not so favored in their educational background and circumstances may not. The requirement of politeness may seem to be a fair requirement on all concerned, but in fact in certain ways it favors the already favored. Not only articulation skills are relevant here. So too is the frequency with which the demand is made, i.e., the demand to be
polite regardless of the justifiable degree of frustration. Unfair incidents occur to everyone. Systematic unfairness does not. The more the incidents accumulate, the heavier the burden imposed by the demand that everyone handle the situation “politely.” If emotions gradually escalate over the years, it is understandable. Still, negative emotions are not to be expressed, nor is there to be any raised voice, no curt phrase, no interruptions, and of course no expletives or other embarrassing breaches of politeness. More and more the class-biased underpinnings of etiquette become visible. The ‘working class’ language habits in many western societies do not fit this description, not even when everything is going well.

The demand for politeness also requires that those subject to systematic injustice or contempt control themselves and refrain from one of the greatest of social sins, that of “making a scene.” The long-term subordinated must contain their frustration and anger. Such emotions are not to show in the many daily interactions they engage in. They must try to watch how they speak, what phrases they use, the tone of voice, facial expression, and the kind of looks they give. They must be polite in their exchanges with their oblivious, power enhanced contacts. It will be objected that those they interact with should also meet these requirements, but it is relatively easy to be relaxed, patient, courteous, and cheerful when living a privileged life-style, receiving due recognition for one’s abilities and achievements, rarely disparaged or ignored, and rarely the recipient of public humiliation. For the systematically subordinated, the suppression of protest and emotional expression become additional dimensions of their subordination that go far beyond material deprivation. Politeness, it seems, can serve to express respect and it can also serve to suppress and control. Given the nature of society, the moral status of politeness is rather less rosy than it first appears.

10. CONCLUSION

There are dimensions to the functioning of politeness that need to be made visible and examined if we are not to be caught off-guard by the role they can acquire. Etiquette driven politeness is not simply an expression of respect which we should, for good moral reasons, sometimes over-ride. It is a social mechanism that is prone to mold individuals in certain ways, depending on their relative social status and power, and such trends are neither insignificant nor morally neutral. I have tried to show that politeness has a murky side to it in that it can readily cultivate in the less powerful a resigned acceptance of strict constraints on the justifiable free expression of their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. The more advantaged individuals with whom they come in contact are often in a rather different situation, being more consistently genuinely relaxed and confident. They feel secure and they expect and find due recognition on all sides, and so on. If and when something radically untoward occurs, they are far more likely to react immediately and explosively than are the long constrained individuals who have been pressured and manipulated via various social mechanisms into self-suppression. Going back to the Tenerife air crash, there was no evidence of hesitancy or uncertainty on the part of the KLM pilot when responding to the flight engineer’s painfully polite, suggestive question as to whether the Pan Am
plane had cleared the runway they themselves were heading down. The official records all state that the pilot’s answer was “emphatic”—and wrong. On the other hand, the flight engineer at that time had lived in a culture of constrained expression, being lower in the institutional hierarchy than the pilot. The culture of the work environment can in such a way easily make it psychologically all but impossible for the less powerful person to seize the interactive power called for by the critical situation. The social expectation to be submissive and polite has, over the long term, done its work.\hspace{16}\textsuperscript{16}

I am not recommending that we drop all expectations of politeness. I am, however, suggesting that in security sensitive situations, the informal factors and their functioning (and the social requirement of politeness is but one of very many) be explicitly and thoroughly addressed.

In more general terms I am suggesting that we, first, look far more closely at how items in the informal sphere function; secondly, reflect on the potential (and indeed actual) situations where such factors played a vital role in some disaster; thirdly, take far more seriously the need to thoroughly train key individuals so that they acquire far sharper perceptual skills of the relevant kind (which typically means a level of perception far above the usual level required by this or that professional expertise); and finally, examine closely the ethical issues involved to see what insights we reach, what changes or developments they point to, and how they are morally justified. I am especially concerned that we consider the implications for those in key roles of responsibility for protecting human security (rather than the misguided but understandable trend of maintaining tunnel vision on those deliberately perpetrating violent attacks on security). If the role of the informal portrayed here is correct, then safeguarding security involves, among other things mentioned, that those in security sensitive positions be closely scrutinized in ways that go far beyond what is now usual. It inevitably raises questions about the morality of such scrutiny and although I have explained why we need to think seriously about it, I cannot here move to an unqualified recommendation since that would involve taking on that moral inquiry and that is beyond the present scope.

In these dangerous times moving forward should not consist of a series of steps on shifting and unstable sands. We can and should aim for more solid justificatory ground than that. But the point remains that no matter how good the policies and formal processes are, basic human security is not achievable until we take far more seriously the various kinds of informal matters that surround them.

ENDNOTES


6. This phenomenon and the associated moral issues have been examined in feminist writings. A classic work on this is Paula J. Caplan, *Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman’s Guide to Surviving in the Academic World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

7. The disaster of the *Costa Concordia* cruise ship and the earlier 1991 disaster of the cruise ship *Oceanos* both raise questions about what was missed in assessing the captains for their suitability for that role, given that both left their sinking vessels while hundreds of passengers were still on board. Technical expertise is not enough, but if moral character is an indispensable component of that suitability (and I believe it is), is such a component actually scrutinized or is it considered too intrusive and embarrassing to do so?


11. Ibid., 800.

12. Ibid., 801.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 802.

15. Ibid., 805.

16. Since this disastrous accident the training of pilots and other flight officers has changed, precisely to enable the demand of politeness to be set aside instantly, or, as I prefer to describe it, to enable them all to have the levels of interactive power needed for them to perform their duties without threats to safety and security.