Are People Ruder now, or is it just me? (It's Both)

I recently learned that almost half of Americans say people have become ruder since the 2020 Covid pandemic. Truth be told I'm surprised it's not a higher statistic. The idea that people we encounter in our daily lives are ruder than they used to be provides nothing new under the sun. You need only invoke the age-old expression "Kids these days" to conjure up a myriad of stereotypes about how the 'next generation' contributes to making society less considerate and poor-in-taste.

Beyond generational differences there's discrepancies between what sort of behavior may be overtly disrespectful to one person and completely innocuous to another. Depending on any number of factors it's not always easy to distinguish a stranger's intention (or lack thereof) until you get to know them on a more personal level. And this leads me to my point.

A debate over what defines 'rude' behavior could go on forever, but the assertion that people have become ruder *specifically* since the COVID-19 pandemic makes for an interesting discussion. One thing that everyone can agree on is that the use of social media and technology for social interaction has increased *dramatically* since 2020.

The internet was a saving grace amid the pandemic. It allowed us to compensate traditional forms of communication at a time when engaging with others in a public or work setting was far and few between. Catching up with friends was relegated to the phone and video calls. Jobs across the country had employees working from their home computers. And as far as running errands goes, delivery services became the new standard. Even as pandemic restrictions have loosened and we're able to socialize in person once again, the collective dependence on technology we developed throughout the pandemic persists to this day.

We can view the impact that in-home isolation has had on our seeming rudeness uptick from two perspectives. The first perspective approaches the topic from the lens that lockdown influenced the way Americans *behave* towards each other. The second is from the lens that lockdown has influenced the way Americans *perceive* each other. I'll be referring to these as 'Behavioral' and 'Perceptive' lenses respectively.

The Behavioral lens is fairly cut and dry. Socializing is a skill, and skills need to be practiced if we intend to develop and maintain them. And while technology has allowed us to remain connected amid the pandemic, there's many aspects of social behavior that that are lost over screen. So, when the only in-person practice you're getting is from your immediate family and the occasional door dash delivery driver It stands to reason people may not be as considerate or attuned to how they treat others as they once were.

The Perceptive lens is more nuanced. It's far from revolutionary to point out how social media has caused us to become more divided, particularly in the realm of politics. But it doesn't stop with politics, and it doesn't start with social media for that matter. It starts with something

that has been around as long as humanity, our suspicion of the unknown, which social media has only exacerbated since lockdown. Consider how many humans you see on any given day. Now consider many of them do you encounter in person verses on your phone. Social media often highlights the worst in others, we might comprehend on a logical level that parents on YouTube exploiting their crying children for views don't make the up the majority of parents in the country, but we're pattern seeking creatures. If we're constantly absorbing compilations of parents being inconsiderate to their children, we're naturally going to be more alert to signs of that sort of behavior in our day to day lives. Which can lead to projecting those traits onto people and situations where we lack context. There's actually a fascinating study titled "Rude Color Glasses: The Contaminating Effects of Witnessed Morning Rudeness on Perceptions and Behaviors Throughout the Workday" that I've literally just stumbled upon while wrapping up this post and I couldn't not mention it. I'll leave out the nerd biz for brevity's sake, but I highly recommend at least giving it a solid skim. it encapsulates much of what I'm speaking to in regard to the inextricable link between perception and behavior. I'll have a link to the full study at the bottom of this post.

The latter lens doesn't negate the former, but it could very well be vital in rehabilitating aspects of the social atrophy we've developed from our extended time indoors. The ways in which we learn about our world and the people we share it with have been coming increasingly (for some, exclusively) through social media algorithms designed to prey on our reactivity. It's important that we consider how our perception of the people in our community can alter our behavior towards it and vice versa. There's a psychological phenomenon known as 'The Pygmalion Effect' which explains:

"Others' beliefs about us shape their conduct toward us.

Their conduct toward us influences our beliefs about ourselves.

These beliefs in turn, impact our actions toward others."

I'll leave a link to a more in-depth breakdown of The Pygmalion Effect at the bottom of this post as well but suffice to say We can perpetuate cycles of assumption and distrust of our fellow human beings, or we can take the first step to breaking out of those cycles by challenging our perceptions and changing our behavior.

https://www.simplypsychology.org/pygmalion-effect.html

https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/12/almost-half-of-americans-say-people-have-gotten-ruder-since-the-covid-19-pandemic/