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Living the Life of the Mind: What's in a Title?

*Charlotte Knowles on why titles can be important
in addressing structural inequality*

If you have earned a PhD should you use your title? This is a question that seems to do the rounds on Twitter every now and again. Nigel Warburton recently posted:

“Serious question. I have a PhD in Philosophy. Is there any conceivable situation in which I should put ‘Dr’ in front of my name or expect to be addressed in that way? I can’t think of one.”

One eminently sensible reply, came from Lisa Shapiro, professor of philosophy at Simon Fraser University:

“you might not find it appropriate or necessary, but I find there are occasions when, as a woman, having that ‘Dr’ before my name signals that I actually am entitled to the authority I assume. I tend to go for subtlety: i.e., in my email signature.”

And as Helen de Cruz, professor of philosophy at St Louis University, added:

“I am a first-gen student, daughter of an immigrant bricklayer and a homemaker. The only books we had in the house were cooking books and stuff like that. I’m really proud of my Dr title. It was

a difficult achievement, each step of the way. I think that’s sufficient to put ‘Dr’.”

We can see a pattern emerging here, and as Warburton himself pointed out, commenting on the twitter thread that developed: “Some very interesting answers to this one, many from women in philosophy who make the case for their using it.”

The point being, people who are often denied respect or esteem can deploy the legitimate use of their title as a way to assume the authority to which they are entitled. Or can they? Somewhat predictably, the first comment under Shapiro’s post was “entitled to authority”, posted with the full range of scare quotes to indicate that it was typed with the accompaniment of the customary throbbing forehead vein and a violent mashing of keys.

A pattern I have noticed among my academic colleagues is that while students may often promote male colleagues from “Dr X” to “Professor X” when writing emails to them (clearly they’re all big X-Men fans), my female colleagues are often demoted: we become “Miss X”, “Mrs X” or – in some particularly bizarre cases – “Madam X”. So why does this happen?

A first answer is ignorance. Discussing

this phenomenon with my colleagues, we wondered if students just didn't know the norms of email etiquette in academia. As I was taught, and as I have seen in practice many times, whenever you write to someone you don't know in a professional setting, you use their correct title as a form of respect and politeness and to avoid being overly familiar in a potentially inappropriate way. If I am writing to another academic I have not met before, I will address them as 'Dr' or 'Professor' and then when they respond signing off with their first name, I will also start addressing them in this more familiar way.

If this strange phenomenon of mis-titling female academics was a matter of ignorance, the best way to address it would be to provide the students with the relevant information to combat this ignorance. So, in my course outline, along with information about the readings, the assessment, and details of the seminar questions, I diligently included a short paragraph explaining the norms of email etiquette as described above. I was hoping not only that this would stop me receiving emails addressed to 'Miss Knowles', but also that this information might be beneficial to students, especially if they planned to pursue an academic career, as it would help them avoid unnecessary rancour in any potential future interactions.

However, I was dismayed to find that my attempt to enlighten my students about how to address their correspondence, was met with one student providing me with "critical input" – as they put it in the subject heading of their anonymous email, sent through an encrypted server, with a picture of a cat giving me the finger. The email, of course, also included some vague, underdeveloped

references to Zizek and a concession to the point I had made about why titles can be important if we want to address the unjust structures of racial and gender hierarchy, and how we may be complicit in reinforcing these injustices if we continue to incorrectly address those who have traditionally been excluded from positions of (academic) authority. However, the main message of the email was overwhelmingly telling me to go fuck myself.

*Titles can be important
if we want to address the
unjust structures of racial
and gender hierarchy*

The fact that the email was sent anonymously through an encrypted server clearly indicated that this was not an attempt to open up channels of reasonable and respectful discourse on norms of etiquette. Rather, it was designed as a tactic to try and undermine the legitimate authority of a woman in a position of relative power and "put her in her place".

Sadly, these kinds of responses are not uncommon – although this is perhaps an extreme version of a more everyday pushback against addressing women with their correct titles in professional settings. So, what can be done about it? Addressing something like being mis-titled puts us in what the philosopher Marilyn Frye calls a "double bind". Double binds are "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure

or deprivation". Frye's example is young women's sexual engagement – if women engage in sexual activity they are seen as sluts, if they don't they are seen as frigid. We can identify a similar bind in the case of being mistitled: we point out the error we get abuse; we don't point it out we continue to be addressed as "miss" in an annoyingly patronising way. We have to self-police our responses so as not to seem overly sensitive – a hysterical woman or an angry bitch – but in the knowledge that any response, or indeed lack of response, is likely to expose us to penalty, censure or deprivation.

At this stage, we might still respond by saying "well why does it matter? Why should anyone ever insist on being called by a title?" But to make this point is to miss what is at issue. Would the student have sent a similarly irate email to my male colleague who I know also has a similar statement on etiquette in his course outline? As far as I know, no student has ever bothered to create an anonymous email account to call him out on the flexing of his academic credentials.

The issue is not so much the title, but the gender imbalance in these forms of address. Does this student also refuse to call medical practitioners Dr? If they were in a court of law would they insist on calling the judge by their first name? Perhaps, but probably only if their interlocuters were people they were not used to thinking of as legitimately occupying positions of power. My female friend who is a surgeon routinely gets demoted to "nurse" during her hospital rounds. Being misrecognised as having a lower status or less authority than you do may not be an injustice on a par with being barred from certain jobs, or denied the vote, but it nevertheless signals the persistence

of retrograde attitudes around gender, and points us towards the fact that women are still not regarded as people who can be in positions of power or esteem even when they are *literally in those positions*.

I'm not sure what the answer is to these kinds of issues, but noticing there is a problem and flagging it up has surely got to be part of the solution. And if you have any other ideas, please feel free to send them to me. The address is: Dr CE Knowles, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen.

Charlotte Knowles is an assistant professor in ethics, social and political philosophy at the university of Groningen. Her primary research areas are in feminist philosophy and phenomenology, with a particular focus on issues of complicity, freedom, injustice and responsibility. You can follow her on twitter at @cbarknowlez