

Feelings vs. Opinions

A current trend in American culture is to approach all conversations about topics on which people sharply differ by sticking to offering expressions of feeling, attitudes or emotion. Religion, Morality, Politics and Sexuality are examples of such topics.

In a way, it is perfectly natural to want to express feelings. People cannot keep their feelings entirely to themselves. Nearly everyone would agree that doing so would be unhealthy and probably lead to other harmful effects such as low self-esteem, stress, anger, and even violence.

What has happened in recent times, though, is that openly expressing feelings has become a widely accepted practice. We have learned to respect sincere feelings. We recognize the right to have and express them. That much is all to the good.

It seems, however, that people have begun to take advantage of this change by no longer expressing their *opinions* about things, especially about topics on which people may disagree. Instead, they stick to expressing their feelings about these matters.

No one should be forbidden from expressing feelings on any topic. But, in an academic context, it is inappropriate to speak *primarily* and *exclusively* about your feelings on a topic.

The reason is that, when one simply expresses a feeling, it is inappropriate for anyone else to *disagree* or *criticize*. With opinions, it is just the reverse. No opinion is immune to revision. All opinions are open to examination. Any opinion may need to be clarified, made more coherent, made more precise. Most importantly, offering an opinion puts one in the position of being obliged to *support it with reasons*, such that those reasons may, in turn, be examined, tested, challenged or criticized.

It is for these reasons that it is most appropriate in contexts of academic discussion to stick to offering and examining opinions rather than just expressing feelings on any given topic. Rather than saying things, in an academic context, like *I feel that religion is essential to good morals*, instead one should say something like, *In my opinion, religion is essential to good morals*.

What is the difference between saying the second rather than the first? The difference is that, unless they are being deliberately malicious, no one wants to disrespect or hurt others. So, people will be reluctant to disagree with your statement, or even to offer an opinion that they fear you may take to be disrespectful of your feelings.

Academic or intellectual discussions, in which opinions are stated, defended, criticized, challenged or argued for, are excellent kinds of mental discipline and training. We become stronger as a result of engaging in this discipline. There is no reason why anyone needs to have their feelings hurt in such a discussion because such discussions should not be *primarily* occasions for expressing feelings at all.

Examples of appropriate contexts in which to express personal feelings are family gatherings, conversations with significant others, physicians, counsellors or close friends.

Could it be that some people prefer to say things like *I feel that...* instead of?

I think thator

I maintain that or

I would defend the idea that or

I doubt that ... or

I would argue that

because they are *disguising* their opinions as feelings and they do not want to take the trouble to defend or support those opinions?

If you cause others to think that you are expressing personal feelings rather than offering opinions, *even though offering opinions is what you are really doing*, then you are misleading and even deceiving those others. You are inappropriately avoiding responsibility for your opinions by insulating them from any examination or criticism. It is inappropriate for someone to request that you defend or support your personal feelings. But it is even worse to present your opinions as if they were personal feelings.

In contexts of academic or intellectual discussions, practice using such phrases as

I think that ...

In my opinion ...

I would say that

I doubt that

Perhaps,

I maintain that ...

My position is that ...

It seems that

I question whether ...

In using phrases like these, you are participating in an intellectual discussion in which all participants accept the obligation to be clear, accurate, coherent, and logical. In such discussions, participants take responsibility for their opinions, agree to listen well to others, and are willing to support and defend their or others opinions with plausible reasons as well as request that others clarify, make more accurate and logically support their opinions.

In intellectual discussions, a climate of mutual respect is appropriate. In such discussions, no one should be openly contemptuous, derisive, dismissive or insulting to someone for expressing an opinion.

To participate in an intellectual discussion is like being dealt in to a game of cards. By participating in the game, you commit yourself to respecting the rules of play and you take responsibility for playing within the rules. But you thereby allow the possibility of legitimate criticism and correction by the other players if you violate those rules of play. Of course, if you think you have not broken any rule, you are entitled to defend yourself and to explain how your play has been within the rules.

Given these features of the context of academic or intellectual discussions, you should recognise those responsibilities and the meaning of those commitments. If you decide not to participate at all, you will have no chance to establish your intellectual merits and you will have fewer opportunities to earn a grade of which you will be proud. You may be afraid of making a mistake or of offering poor reasons in support of your opinions. But everyone else is taking the same risk. It is a game with very few masters. Nearly everyone is still learning to play it.

Deal yourself in!