

Awkwardness, Uncertainty and Normality



Dr. Peter Fossey
Academic Development Centre
University of Warwick
p.j.fossey@warwick.ac.uk

Aims:

1. Begin to differentiate awkwardness from embarrassment and anxiety
2. Argue that awkward situations are more narrowly defined than existing literature suggests

Introduction:

“Awkwardness is everywhere, inescapable.

[I]t stalks us everywhere

We live, in short, in an age of awkwardness”

(Kotsko 2009, p.1-3)

Introduction:

GIRLS

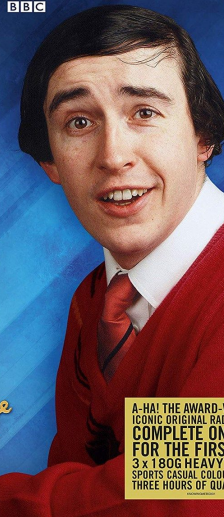


Starring Steve Coogan

KNOWING ME KNOWING YOU

Alan Partridge

THE COMPLETE ORIGINAL
BBC RADIO SERIES



A-HA! THE AWARD-WINNING ORIGINAL RADIO COMPLETE ON FOR THE FIRST TIME! 3 X 1.80G HEAVY! SPORTS CASUAL COLOR! THREE HOURS OF OUR



Amazon
BBC TWO

15



the
inbetweeners



FLEABAG

prime video



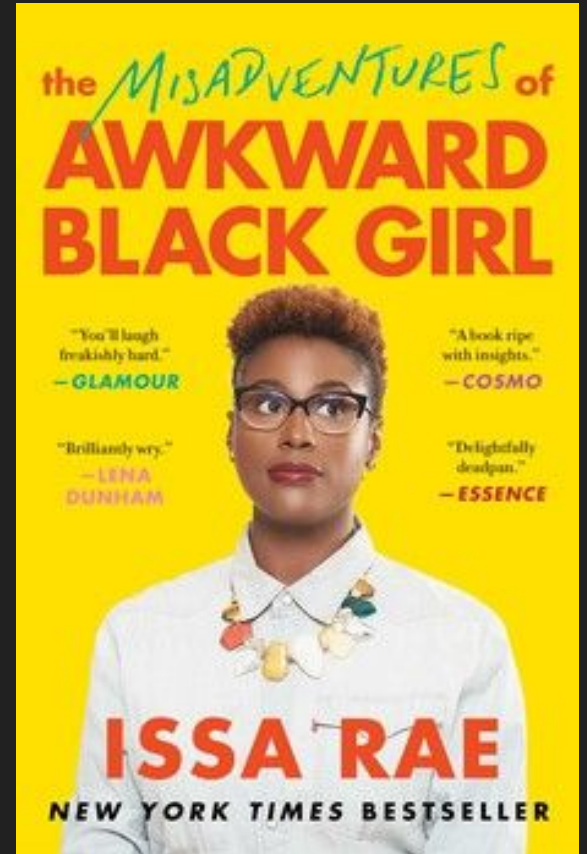
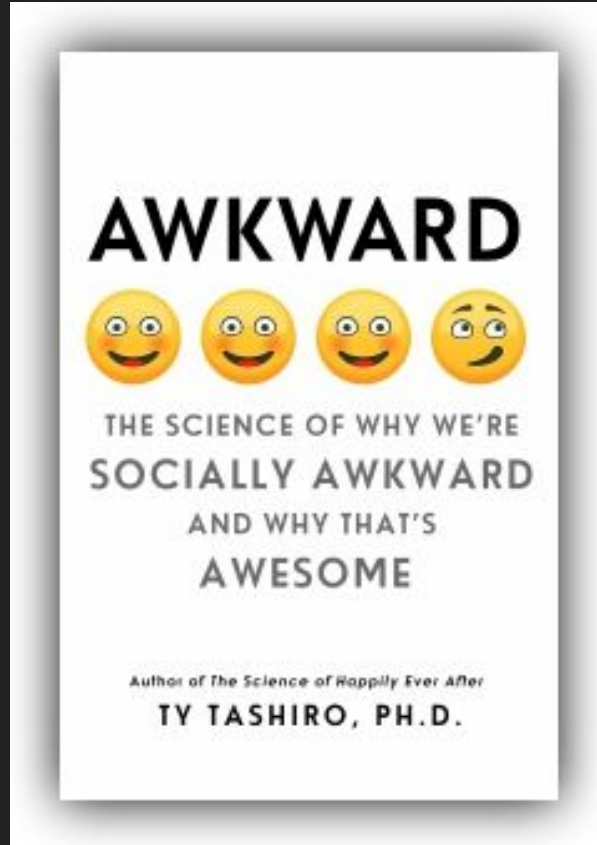
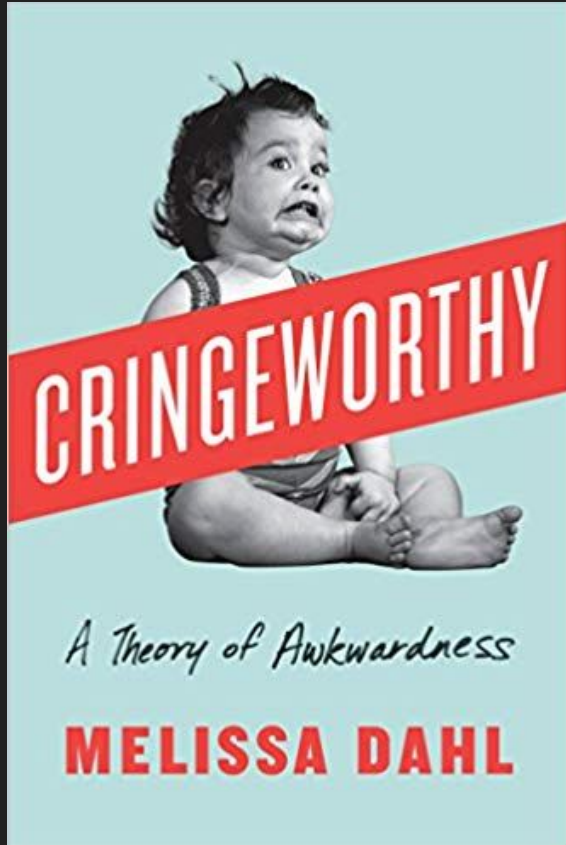
Comedy

Friday Night Dinner

TERRACE HOUSE

テラスハウス

Introduction:



Introduction:

“It is likely that ... socially awkward moments are a near-universal human experience but they have seen little formal research - to the author’s knowledge there is only one book chapter dealing with awkward interactions between stigmatized and non-stigmatized individuals ... and a pair of communication studies on long awkward silences.”

(Clegg 2012a, p.693-4)

Introduction:

“There is little existing research investigating social awkwardness, presumably because it comes from an essentially colloquial - as opposed to technical or “scientific” taxonomy.”

(Clegg 2012b, p.262, my emphasis)

Introduction:

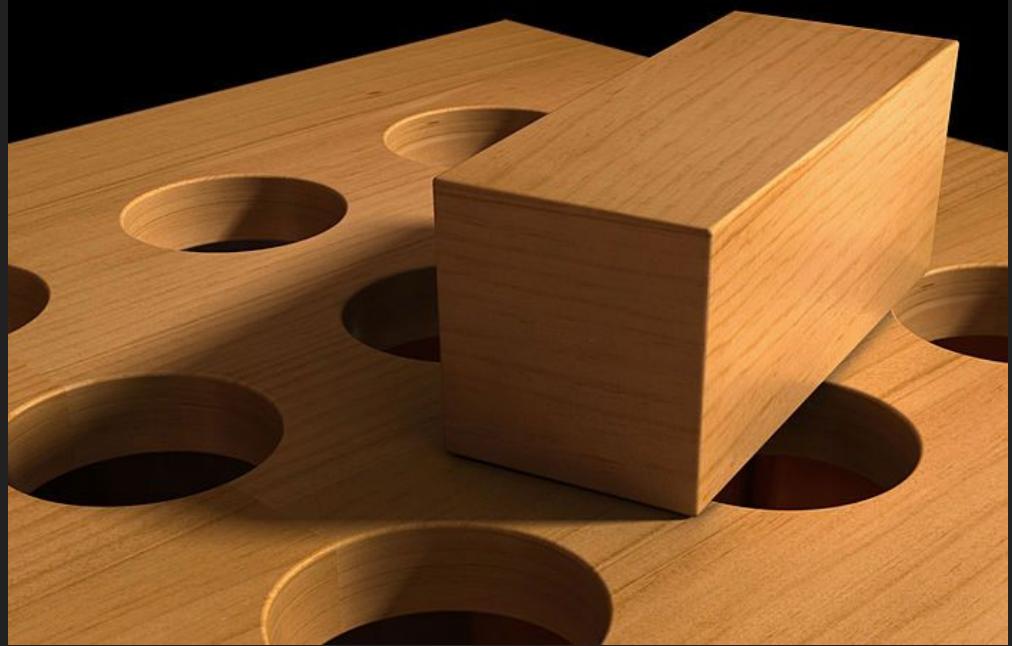
“We’re all concerned to develop our own strategies for avoiding or at least controlling social discomfort, and so it’s perhaps understandable that so few have asked themselves what awkwardness is, what it means, what it is telling us about our age and about ourselves.”

(Kotsko 2009, p.3)

Kotsko: Awkwardness as social phenomenon

awk (misaligned)
ward (direction)

Feeling,
Situation,
or person



Kotsko: Awkwardness as social phenomenon

Three kinds of awkwardness:

- Everyday, resulting from breaking of social norms
- Radical, resulting from inadequacy or conflict of norms
- Cultural, background conditions giving rise to EA and RA

Kotsko: Awkwardness as social phenomenon

“Even when personal deficits make certain individuals seem extremely awkward by nature, however, awkwardness remains a social phenomenon, and therefore analysis of awkwardness should focus not on awkward individuals but on the entire situation in which awkwardness makes itself felt.”

(Kotsko 2009, p.7)

Kotsko: Awkwardness as social phenomenon

“Contemporary mainstream middle-class social norms are not remotely up to the task of minimizing awkwardness, but at the same time, there seems to be no real possibility of developing a convincing positive alternative.”

(Kotsko 2009, p.17)

Clegg (etc.): Awkwardness as self-regulation

“[First, social] acceptance is a primary goal state of most individual social functioning. Second, in socially awkward situations, perceived or expected threats to that goal state activate a self-regulatory system - a system directly experienced as “social awkwardness” - where ... social anxiety drives a social stabilization process.”

(Clegg 2012a, p.695; my emphasis)

Clegg (etc.): Awkwardness as self-regulation

What makes for an awkward situation?

- Non-normative or counter-normative behaviour
- Implicit or explicit negative social judgements
- Making social processes explicit (e.g., ice-breaker activities)
- Anxiety, tension or uncertainty expressed but not explicitly acknowledged

...but there is otherwise little commonality between them

What we have so far:

- Importance of focusing on awk. situations over individuals
- Question mark over status of awk. as an emotion
- Awk. situations involve transgressing social norms, and practical uncertainty on the part of the subjects
- Relationship between awk. and emotions like anxiety and embarrassment

Questions:

- What, if anything, is the difference between awk., anxiety and embarrassment?
- What, if anything, is the relationship between them?
- What is awkwardness like, as a (putative) emotion?
- What is an awkward situation?

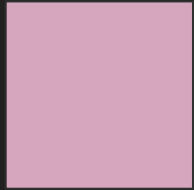
Questions:

- What is an awkward person? (Feel awk., cause awk., or both, or neither?)
- Is awk. contagious? Why?
- Is awk. good or bad for individuals, for society?
- Is awk. a characteristically negative emotion?

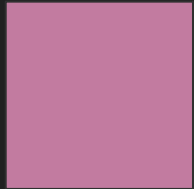
Aims:

1. Begin to differentiate awkwardness from embarrassment and anxiety
2. Argue that awkward situations are more narrowly defined than Clegg and Kotsko suggest

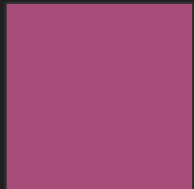
Awkwardness, embarrassment and anxiety



“During such awkward moments, the participants experienced... tension or discomfort, and sometimes anxiety or embarrassment.”



(Clegg 2012b, p, 272, my emphasis)



Awk. and anxiety

- Contrast between mere tension and pathological anxiety
- Anxiety not part of Kotsko's characterisation of the "age of awkwardness"; not adopted as an object of comedy
- Differentiated by antecedents, by the actions it motivates, and by resolution strategies
- In particular - awk. does not motivate the subject to withdraw or retreat from the situation; anxiety does

Differentiating awk. and embarrassment



“[E]mbarrassment occurs when people experience a self-presentational predicament in which they think that others have formed undesired impressions of them.”

(Leary et al p.1996, p.620)

Differentiating awk. and embarrassment

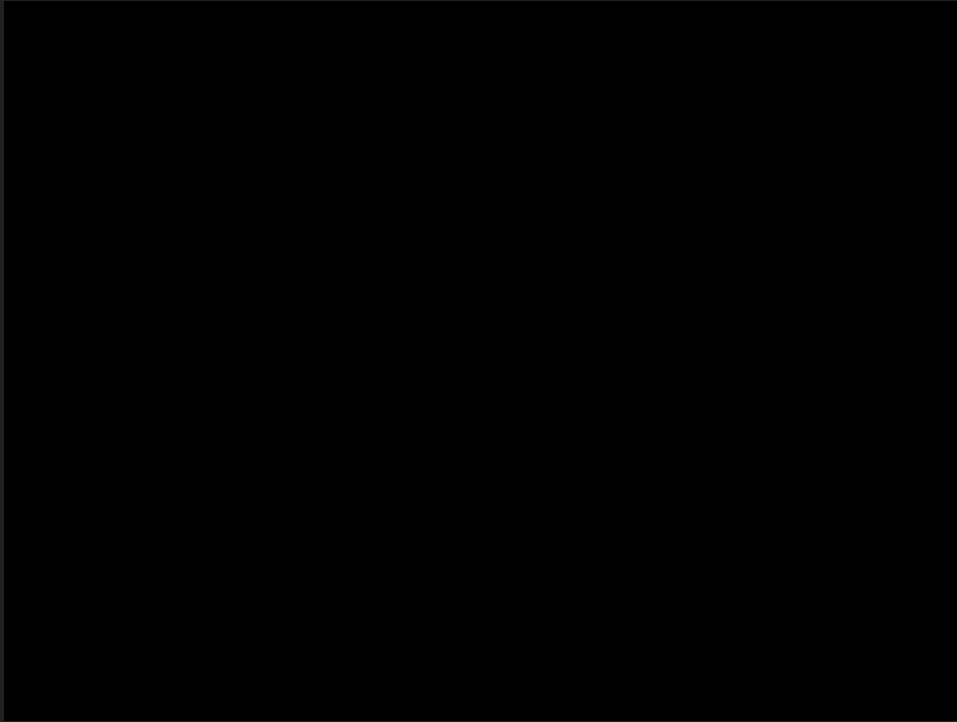


Awkwardness is not necessarily
a matter of self-presentation

Departing from and returning to normality

“[P]articipants expressed a strong desire to somehow redress or resolve the awkwardness... The imperative was rooted in the sense that doing nothing would only make things worse.”
(Clegg 2012b, p.270)

Example: Trump-Macron Handshake



Escape Attempts:

4s- walk away (new script)

7s- distraction (new script)

10s- shoulder pat (restart script)

12s- pull away (abort! abort!)

14s- Brigitte's gambit (new script)

Awkwardness and Embarrassment

Clegg notes that there is an “affinity” between strategies used to resolve awkward situations, and appeasement behaviours used in response to embarrassment.

And, avoidance behaviours (tend to) fail in both cases.

Differentiating awk. and embarrassment

“What started out as a very uncomfortable situation immediately changed when her husband Nate said “there you go Penelope, you just ruined the evening for everyone”, to which everyone ... just started roaring [with laughter] because it just cut the tension entirely”

(from Clegg 2012b, p.272)



Differentiating awk. and embarrassment

Nate transforms the awkward situation into a presentational issue for Penelope

...and resolves it with humour



Differentiating awk. and embarrassment



Avoidance strategies

“When Molly was asked when her experience stopped being awkward, she said:

Never! I think I’ve sort of come to terms with it ... but still I was working on a show a couple of weeks ago, maybe a month ... and uh, Joe who was at the party ... the first time he saw me he was like ‘hey Molly, have any shocking experiences recently?’ and so it’s like it’s brought up randomly with people from the party that night.

Avoiding or distancing oneself from awkwardness, it seems, can entrench the very awkward feelings and interactions being avoided”

(Clegg 2012a, p.271-2)

Tentative conclusions:

- Awk. is an emotional response to awkward moments
- Awkward moments are those which have deviated from a plan or script, but are still retrievable
- Awk. motivates subjects to return to a script

Tentative conclusions:

- Hence, awkward situations are precarious
- Resolution strategies for awk. differ from those for anxiety and embarrassment
- ...and awk. involves tension, and awkward situations, being unscripted and uncertain, can provoke anxiety
- ...and awkward situations can often be re-framed as self-presentational dilemmas (i.e. embarrassing scenarios)

Works cited:

Clegg J. (2012a) “Stranger Situations: examining a self-regulator model of socially awkward encounters” in *Group Processes and Interactions* 15:6, p.693-712

Clegg J (2012b) “The importance of feeling awkward” in *Qualitative Work in Psychology*, 9:3, p.262-298

Kotsko A. (2009) *Awkwardness*. (London: Zero Books)

Leary et al (1996) “Motivated expression of embarrassment following a self-presentational predicament” in *Journal of Personality* 64:3, p.619-636