

Symbolic anthropology: sex, shame and relationships



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To what extent is social life dependent on symbolism? Illustrate your answer with examples drawn from your own cultural experience and inform your discussion of these examples with insights gained from your research into the symbolic anthropology.

Symbols exist in many different forms in our social life whether it'd be a symbolic behaviour or gesture or even ritual and. In this essay, we are going to explore some of the symbols in our current society through evolution and how it affects the social life.

So why do us human wear clothing? We use it for protection from the weather, the heat from the sun and unsanitary environment and some uses as fashion to show off our uniqueness. However, clothing does not exist in the animal kingdom. More importantly, why do we feel embarrassed to be naked around other people? The word embarrass comes from the Portuguese word, 'embaraçar' which means entangled or entwined. [G. & C. Merriam, 1913]. And feeling embarrassed often feels like being tied up or exposed. But how can a healthy amount of embarrassment be a symbolic behaviour that you're likeable, forgivable and trustworthy in our society? The T-shirt, hoodie and other forms of clothing we are wearing right now came from a local shop that was made in a factory probably a few years ago. However, clothing has been longer a lot longer than that for at least the last 100, 000 years. Clothing protects us from the cold, from rain and from the sun and it can also be a symbol, a way of showing wealth or status but we'll be talking about another use of clothing, 'Modesty' (Alamrousi 2013).

Why are we afraid of being naked? Especially because animals pretty much walk around naked all the time. Why aren't animals embarrassed to be naked? Well, let's take a closer look at "embarrassment". Embarrassment is a fascinating emotion and a very social one. You don't really feel embarrassed alone when no one is watching you or listening to you. So embarrassment probably evolved because it is such a good influence on social cooperation. We feel embarrassed when we violate little social rules of conduct and each of us individually hoping to avoid that, to avoid embarrassment has helped all of us live together better. A healthy brain experiences embarrassment. Neurodegeneration of the frontal and temporal lobes causes to less awareness of yourself. So a healthy amount of occasional embarrassment is a good thing. The act or behaviour of occasional embarrassment is a symbol of a socially adept and normally functioning brain.

A famous experiment called, "Flustered and Faithful: Embarrassment as Signal of Prosociality", conducted by University of California, involved participants watching an actor receive praise for achieving a very high score on an exam. In some cases, the actor was told to feign pride in the achievement and in the others; they acted embarrassed to have attention put on them. Later the actor and the participants played games together; the participants were more prosocial, friendly and cooperative with actors who earlier expressed embarrassment. It suggested that the actor was to be trusted and they desired to fit in and work together. Now the fact that embarrassment symbolises our knowledge of others and our desire to be liked may explain why evoking embarrassment in others whether it be flirtation or playful teasing is so common when we like the other person.

Shame is a stronger emotion and when it comes our private parts the kind nearly every society in western or not, shares some degree is related to our question, "Modesty".

Havelock Ellis's writing on the evolution of modesty in 'Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume 1', he discusses quite well on two possible reasons for our fear of nakedness. Both of which pre-date clothing and are not unique to humans. "The first is the vital phenomenon of refusal. Before mating, many animals play a game of 'chase', hard to get" (Alamrousi 2013). It's a game of acceptance and then flight which forces the pursuers to contend in order to prove their worth before being chosen as a mate. So when it comes to humans, the purpose of clothing serves as both the means of drawing attention to one's body and as a way to cover the body. Clothing also is providing us with less availability to any potential mate, making breeding more selective. Ellis also mentioned the fear of evoking 'disgust' and it's easy to see individuals of a species who avoid things we consider disgusting would survive better. Faecal material, waste, rubbish and other bodily secretion can spread disease. For instance, animals whose poop likely contains dangerous parasites avoid grazing around their waste. Habits like that lead to more sanitary condition and a specie more likely to survive. It's a satisfying piece of evidence as to why clothing once invented so quickly used to cover private areas.

In 2009, BBC investigated raising children in species where the newborns are pretty much ready for life. This is why it makes more sense to spend your time breeding babies as many as possible to survive rather than sitting around and raising them. Super precocial animas like Blue Wildebeest has <https://assignbuster.com/symbolic-anthropology-sex-shame-and-relationships/>

calves that enable them to stand within a few minutes from birth and walk within 30 minutes. They can outrun a hyena in as little time as a day. Human babies on the other hand are pretty artificial (requires nourishment). Infants are born to barely be able to do nothing more than swallowing food that is put straight into their mouths. One explanation for why human babies need so much development time is that because we have a big intelligent brain. Brain size is correlated to body size and bigger body means it requires bigger brains. The shrew has smaller brains than humans and humans have smaller brains than whales. But of course, bigger brain is not indicative of intelligence. For one thing larger, animals just have more cells they need to worry about and control. When it comes to intelligence, the proportions of brain size to body size known as Encephalization quotient is important (Martin, RD, 1984). Comparison to the size of a human body, the size of our brains is gigantic in terms of proportions. As consequences of this are that the brain as big as ours to come out of a mother as small as a human which results in brains that aren't fully developed as newborns. This is why human babies require so much care and time to develop in order to go out on their own. Under this theory, being naked and mating all of the time becomes less of a priority. Human and societies that privilege modesty would have more time in resources to put work raising children and avoiding extra mates instead of conceiving more kids allowing kids develop properly. Clothing serves this purpose quite well; it conceals the privates and allows more time to be spent on other things. Clothes and clothing may in a way be a consequence of our unique intelligence. It's a symbol of reminder that we are smart.

Attachment of two people lips is kissing but why do we kiss? Today kissing symbolizes peace, respect, passion and love. But when the first two people in human history kissed, were they just being kind of being gross? Well, let's begin with what we do know, kissing feels good and it is good for you. A passionate kiss " burns about 2-3 calories per minute and releases hormones" (Schafer, J 2013) such as epinephryn and norepinephryn into the blood, making your heart beat faster. Kissing more often is correlated with a reduction of bad cholesteral and perceives stress. But these positive effects did not become wild-spread by accident. Evolutionary psychologists have argued that what we know today as " kissing" may have come from " kiss-feeding", the exchange of pre-chewed food from one mouth into another mouth. Mother birds are famous for doing this and many primates are frequently seen doing it as well. Not that long ago, it was common between human mothers and their children. Before commercially produced baby food instructions were readily available, it made a lot of sense. In fact, I myself was mouth-fed by my mother when I was young. It may sound strange to some people. Even though, it exchanges saliva which like any contact with an infant can transfer pathogens, healthy mothers and healthy children can benefit from the fact that kiss-feeding provide nutrients; carbohydrates, protein, iron and zinc which are not always available in breast milk. Plus, adult saliva can help pre-digest the food, making vitamins like B12 easier for the baby to absorb. Mouth-to-mouth attachment symbolizes also intimacy, trust and closeness. Your saliva also carries information about who you are, your level of health, and mucus membranes in our mouth are permeable to hormones like testosterone, making a kiss a symbolic behavior to taste test a potential mate. A good kiss can be biological evidence that the kisser

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might be a good mate. So, as a strategy for mate selection, pre-historic people who enjoyed kissing and did it more often, may have made better decisions, picked better mates and reproduces more successfully and eventually become the norm, giving “ us”, people who love kissing.

The idea is that we love our mothers because as soon as we are born, they are a source of life-sustaining nourishment. But, what if nourishment didn't come from a loving mother but from a “ wire mother”? In 1950s, Harry Harlow conducted series of experiments. He separated young monkeys from their mother as soon as they were born and stuck them in the cages with two fake mothers: a soft one wrapped in cloth that did nothing and a cold mechanical mother that only provided food. When baby monkeys were scared by a strange contraption, the monkeys ran not to their wire source of life-sustaining nourishment but to the soft and cuddly and otherwise “ useless” cloth-mother. This suggests that warmth and comfort was more important than food when it comes to nurturing attachment. (Cardwell, M & Flanagan, Cara 2005) Harlow also built a rejecting mother which used a blast of pressurized air to push baby monkeys away. Instead of finding another source of comfort, these monkeys clung even tighter at all the time than monkey raised without rejecting mother. The instinct for warmth and comfort in newborn is so strong, it not only resists attempt to frustrate it but is paradoxically strengthened by it. This seems like a paradox but paradoxes can teach us. As Oscar Wilde put it, “ a paradox is the truth standing on its head to attract attention” and what get our attention here is the effect uncertainty can have. Uncertainty, psychologically, can lead to some of the greatest feelings of attachment and dependence. Good things and bad

things in our lives often seem random out of our control. So it's surprise that we often react with blind love and acceptance in the face of an unfair existence because what else are we supposed to do? But investigating uncertainty, conquering it to make the best decisions possible is advantageous. So overtime, life has favoured activities that turn uncertainty into knowledge. Not every person out there is the best mate for you but if it didn't matter which one you picked, a kiss, a taste-test, wouldn't be necessary and it wouldn't need to feel so good or bring us so much pleasure. Therefore kissing presents a symbolic activity as human to avoid uncertainty and find the right person as a mate/ partner.

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