Routledge Advances in Sociology

A SOCIOLOGY OF AWKWARDNESS

ON SOCIAL INTERACTIONS GOING WRONG

Pauwke Berkers and Yosha Wijngaarden

A Sociology of Awkwardness

A Sociology of Awkwardness shows how awkward feelings are the outcome of social interactions going wrong.

Combing insights from cultural sociology and the sociologies of interactions and emotions, this book develops the first comprehensive sociology of awkwardness. It provides an understanding of how people define, express, and experience awkwardness, while locating its causes not within individuals but within social interactions. The book also offers a unique perspective by examining how both time and space contribute to the experience of awkwardness. Additionally, it delves into the various ways people deal with awkward interactions.

A Sociology of Awkwardness introduces a novel theory and typology of awkwardness, drawing from rich empirical data of everyday encounters, work, dating, and self-help. This book will appeal to scholars across the social sciences, particularly those interested in culture, social interactions, and emotions. It will also attract readers seeking to understand awkwardness as a cultural phenomenon, though not as a self-help guide.

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402 Doubting Ghosts
Paranormal Investigation and the Paradoxes of Belief
Michele Hanks

403 A Sociology of Awkwardness
On Social Interactions Going Wrong
Pauwke Berkers and Yosha Wijngaarden

404 Migration, Mobility and Transformation
Examining the Role of Family and Schooling
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405 Avoiding Retirement in Chile
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A Sociology of Awkwardness

On Social Interactions Going Wrong

Pauwke Berkers and Yosha Wijngaarden

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Contents

List of figures and tables *viii*
Preface *ix*
Acknowledgment *xi*

Introduction: Sociology's awkward silence on awkwardness 1

1 Theorizing awkwardness 16

2 Culture, meaning, and awkwardness 24

3 Interactions, scripts, and awkwardness 33

4 Emotions, feelings, and awkwardness 47

5 Analyzing awkwardness 59

6 Awkward interactions 77

7 Awkward times 89

8 Awkward spaces 98

9 Dealing with awkwardness 109

Conclusion and discussion: That was awkward, folks! 123

Index *137*

List of figures and tables

Figures

6.1 A sociological model of awkward interactions 87
7.1 Temporal sequence of awkward interactions (based on Clegg, 2012) 90

Tables

5.1 COVID-19 and awkwardness topics 63
5.2 Self-help videos dealing with awkwardness 71
C.1 A typology of awkwardness 126

Preface

This book is a labor of love. We didn't receive, nor did we seek, any funding for it – after all, one does not (usually) get paid for such a love affair. However, we are privileged to have dedicated research time as part of our permanent positions at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

If not money, then what, one may ask.

First, it was our shared love for sociology and the sociological imagination, what corporate academia might call curiosity-driven research. Simply put, we have been curious about what awkwardness actually is. Given our primary research interests – music and the creative industries – awkwardness might seem like an unstrategic focus. Thus, this book is a tribute to researching something "just because".

Second, we wrote this book as a romantic tribute to some of the classical thinkers in (cultural) sociology. To contradict Refused: *They told me that the classics never go out of style, and they don't.* Yet, we still wonder: *Can one truly deep act a creature release?*

Third, we have both been labeled awkward individuals – occasionally. This book is our response: "It's not us; it's the social interactions". In a way, you can read this book as a punkish act of micro-resistance, where we don't blame the system but rather the interactions happening within it.

Finally, this book is a labor of *our* love – for each other. We have often joked: Which will come first? Our first child or this book? The kids (plural) have won – and rightly so.

All the love aside, a lot of labor has been put into this book, and not just ours. We would like to thank our students and colleagues for their invaluable contributions to both the conceptual work and data collection: Guilherme Giolo, who almost did his PhD on the topic of awkwardness and worked on awkwardness in everyday life as part of his Research Master traineeship; Alina Pavlova, whose quant skills helped collect the Twitter data; Maria Diaz, who wrote her Research Master thesis on awkwardness in online dating and who collected the data on dating; Mannes Kocken, who analyzed self-help videos on YouTube as part of his Research Master traineeship; and Nyota Kanyemesha and Lara de Poorter, who conducted interviews on post-COVID-19 awkwardness as student assistants.

We also greatly benefitted from feedback on our sociology of awkwardness from colleagues at various conferences, particularly Giselinde Kuipers.

[awkwardly abrupt ending of the preface]

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Introduction

Sociology's awkward silence on awkwardness

Are we all awkward?

"It's not just you. We're all socially awkward now", Lisa Bonos wrote in the *Washington Post* in 2021. Never, perhaps, have we felt more awkward than in the mid-2020s, which she describes as the "late-stage pandemic social awkwardness". Navigating social scripts and reading social cues has never been such a social minefield. And never have we been so bodily aware – from rejected handshakes to accidental sneezing in public. The abundance of newspaper articles on awkward experiences during the pandemic may lead us to believe that awkwardness is a recent phenomenon, driven by an extraordinary global catastrophe – a small wrinkle in a long history of smooth social interactions.

However, is our awkward era really such a historical anomaly? Earlier research on awkwardness begs to differ. More than a decade ago, cultural critic Adam Kotsko (2010) also claimed that "we are currently in a state of cultural awkwardness". Indeed, besides a presumed effect of a recent global pandemic, awkwardness has also been conceived and theorized as a key emotion in many contemporary (pop) cultural expressions, epitomized by the often-heard exclamation awkwaaaard! (pronounced at a rather slow tempo, usually by teenagers describing their parents' behavior).

Our persistent fascination with awkwardness is especially evident in entertainment media (e.g. Middleton, 2013). In fact, "awkwardness dominates entertainment to such an extent that it's becoming increasingly difficult to remember laughing at anything other than cringe-inducing scenes of discomfort" (Kotsko, 2010, p. 1). Such massively popular TV comedies portray a wide variety of awkward scenes, ranging from the main character accidentally taking off her shirt during an interview for a loan in *Fleabag* to Larry getting into a public confrontation because he says the n-word in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. These cringe TV shows demonstrate that awkwardness is not only incredibly captivating but also lucrative. For example, the Nielsen SVOD Content Ratings service (Spangler, 2021) ranked *The Office* (US) as the most streamed content of 2020 in the United States, with over 57 billion minutes streamed. Similarly, in 2021, the season three premiere of *Sex Education* reached the top

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charts of Netflix, being especially popular among young viewers (Tassi, 2021). In other words, awkwardness sells (Kirschbaum & Berkers, 2024). The popularity of these shows seems to suggest several key points about awkwardness – and why it is important to study it.

Awkwardness is everywhere and affects everyone

First, awkwardness is not a result of pandemic-induced social isolation only. Awkwardness is everywhere – at work, in public spaces, and yes, also in bed. Even our most private memories – think about rereading love letters to Nick Carter in our teenage diaries – evoke feelings of (retrospective) awkwardness. Hence, endless piles of popular (self-help) books discuss awkwardness in many domains of social life. For example, Adam Dachis and Erica Elson (2014), in their book *The Awkward Human Survival Guide,* aim to help the reader navigating uncomfortable situations across various social contexts, including dating and sex, work, and interactions with family, friends, and acquaintances. Ken Back and Kate Back's (1999) *Assertiveness at Work: A Practical Guide to Handling Awkward Situations* provides – in their words – fool-proof tables of interventions for each awkward situation imaginable, ranging from getting your ideas rejected *en plein public* to having to correct your seniors.

Moreover, awkwardness affects everyone, from world leaders like Joe Biden, who once mistakenly called Ukrainian president Zelensky "president Putin" (see also Khazan, 2023) to celebrities, such as Justin Bieber, who famously puked on stage during the first night of his world tour (Michaels, 2012). Even royals, like King George V, were known for awkward behavior, with reports suggesting that he did "nothing at all but kill animals and stick in stamps" (Dyer, 2023). And, of course, regular families provide endless examples of awkwardness, as seen in the popular website *Awkward Family Photos*, which offers hours of vicarious discomfort. As author Sam Scholfield (2011) confronted us on the back cover of her book, "No one is safe from awkward".

In our book, we will look beyond cringe comedy and post-pandemic social ineptitude, in order to gain a better understanding of what awkwardness is, how, where, and when it manifests, and how people deal with it. Therefore, this book approaches awkwardness in a much broader social and societal context: in everyday interactions, at work, in dating, and in online self-help videos.

Moving beyond awkwardness as a personal trait

Second, awkwardness is often reduced to a personal trait, with people being labeled as "awkward" based on their personal characteristics. For example, in his popular science book *Awkward: The Science of Why We're Socially Awkward and Why That's Awesome*, psychologist Ty Tashiro identifies awkward traits, such as narrow interests, nonsocial focus, obsessive interests, and need for sameness (2017, p. 137). These traits may manifest negatively, appearing as asocial behavior, low empathy, compulsiveness, and rigidity. Or, as Duncan (2017, p. 39) argued in her work on the aesthetic of the awkward: "The 'awkward' – whether the overzealous in their attachment to one role or simply unable to master the contours of an alternative one – displays repetitive patterns of behavior that seem more reminiscent of the monotonous, repeated motions of the machine than of the supple responsiveness of the human organism". Yet, if awkwardness is a personal trait – and some people just *are* awkward, while others are not, why do we all feel awkward at times? In our book, we primarily locate awkwardness outside of the individual, focusing on social interactions going wrong.

Awkwardness can be felt as a negative and positive emotion

Third, awkwardness is often seen as something negative. It is believed to evoke embarrassment, hinder career success (Back & Back, 1999), lead to conflict and social avoidance (Clegg, 2012), and create feelings of difference and misunderstanding (Kotsko, 2010). Indeed, although we are drawn to awkward television, most people would avoid *feeling,* and – even worse – *being* awkward like the plague (some comedians and exceptional individuals excluded). We, overall, rather say nothing at all than say something awkward. However, there are also positive sides to awkwardness, besides the commercial success of cringe comedies. For example, Tashiro (2017, p. 137) argues that awkward traits can also have positive manifestations – narrow interests may indicate focus, and a nonsocial focus can help one notice unusual details. Others, such as Plakias (2024), view awkwardness as an opportunity to rewrite social scripts such as those related to hiring committees or expressing one's preferred pronouns However, before attempting to harness awkwardness to drive social change, we believe it is essential to gain a better – and empirically grounded – understanding of what awkwardness actually *is* and *means* in the context of culture, social interactions, and emotions.

A need for a sociological approach to awkwardness

Thus, instead of seeing awkwardness as a historical exception, a personality trait, and/or a negative emotion, we argue that awkwardness is inherently social, looming in every social interaction and context. This opens the door to a sociological analysis of awkwardness. In our view, sociology is the study of forms of social interaction (Simmel, 1909), with a focus on social inequality, cohesion, and rationalization. A sociological study of awkwardness helps us to make sense of this elusive concept by prompting questions such as *what is awkwardness and what does it mean to people? What makes people feel awkward? How does awkwardness manifest itself across time and space? How do people deal with awkwardness?* Scarce work on awkwardness mostly draws on psychology or philosophy (Clegg, 2012; Kotsko, 2010; Plakias, 2024). Most previous studies, therefore, focus on the individual or popular culture, often without grounding their observations in empirical research. In contrast, this book aims to develop an empirically grounded sociology of awkwardness, including a typology that categorizes different types of awkwardness. So why should we study awkwardness as a sociological topic? The lack of research on the topic alone is not a sufficient reason to undertake a study of this nature. We therefore offer four key reasons why studying awkwardness is both relevant and urgent.

As argued above, awkwardness affects all aspects of social life. It arises in face-to-face interactions, online communication, and popular culture. It affects all parts of life, from intimate one-to-one connections – a *You've Got Mail* date gone wrong – to large-scale professional events – such as tripping while entering the stage to give a keynote presentation at a major conference – and from individual gaffes to inherently awkward social occasions like speed dating or pretty much anything involving an ex-partner. Since all social interactions require split-second decisions based on rough estimations of others' responses (Goffman, 1967/2017; Plakias, 2024), and more or less all individuals engage in social interactions, awkwardness may affect everyone. In other words, awkwardness is "an experience that is common to nearly all of humanity" (Clegg, 2012, p. 262). At the same time, awkwardness offers insight into universal or particular social norms or scripts, as awkwardness affords gaining "insight through breakdown" (Kotsko, 2010, p. 15). In other words, awkwardness helps us understand the social construction of everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) as it defamiliarizes the familiar (Bauman & May, 2014). Hence, understanding awkwardness will help to understand people, social interactions, and society better. While awkwardness overlaps partially with related sociological concepts, for example embarrassment, its ubiquity as a concept – apart from its practice – warrants a study in and by itself.

By extension, awkwardness can also be leveraged to understand how people respond to uncomfortable interactions. This became particularly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when old social scripts (e.g. a handshake) had to be replaced by new ones (e.g. elbow bump). Awkwardness frequently arises in the liminal space between the old and the new. It presents a representational disruption (Duncan, 2017), where habits are suddenly exposed as not so normal. As such, during the pandemic, interactions became less scripted and therefore more unpredictable (Plakias, 2024). Shaking up most social rules, the recent COVID-19 crisis made even the most mundane social interactions into potential awkward situations. In addition to the disruption of routine social interactions by social distancing, digitization more broadly has also led to the emergence of new ways of interacting – think about text messaging replacing phone calls, goal-oriented dating apps replacing serendipitous romantic encounters, doomscrolling replacing bus stop chit-chat, and, of course, video calls replacing office meetings and on-site job interviews. Obviously, such new developments require learning new ways of interacting, inevitably leading to new awkward interactions. For example, many white-collar workers have at least once witnessed a colleague picking his nose (yes – it mostly concerns men) during an online meeting without realizing his camera is on. Therefore, a deeper sociological understanding of awkwardness not only helps us to better grasp what makes people uncomfortable in certain social occasions, but also sheds light on the necessary conditions for more enjoyable and/or effortless interactions.

Relatedly, feelings of awkwardness affect people's behavior more broadly. There is a widespread belief that people need strategies to deal with awkwardness, which is evidenced by a cottage industry of self-help books, videos, and blogs, aiming to "cure" awkward individuals. Some of them take a humorous position. For example, Sam Scholfield's book *Awkward: What to Do When Life Makes You Cringe* offers "a series of get-out-of-awkward-free cards, along with some amazing OMFG-WTF-awkward anecdotes" (p. v), including strategies such as: embrace the awkward, burn the bridge, evade the awkward, be honestly awkward, be cool, and be mature (p. viii-ix). Others are dead serious about their non-humorous intentions, such as Joshua Rodriguez's book *Embracing the Awkward: A Guide for Teens to Succeed at School, Life and Relationships*, which, after quoting the Dalai Lama, states that the aim of the book is "that YOU can be somebody great – that building confidence and finding purpose take some small steps, but together, we can get there" (2018, p. 30). In this context, awkwardness is framed as an individual flaw that needs fixing, becoming part of a for-profit industry that sells solutions to personal discomfort, a case in point for neoliberal societies.

Finally, awkwardness can be used as a research approach. There have been few attempts to develop a systematic methodology of awkwardness. Yet, as mentioned above, awkwardness may help to defamiliarize the familiar, one of sociology's key contributions (Bauman & May, 2014). Two fields have developed ideas in the direction of awkwardness as a method. First, within ethnography, the awkward posture is in some cases seen as a tool. "Indeed, the ethnographer's craft is precisely to hold a social world, a social fact, at an awkward angle, to look at it with a squint, in order to see it differently" (Gidley, 2009, p. 529). Similarly, Ooi and Koning (2010) argue for interrogation and reflection on awkward moments in ethnographic research as it would increase the quality of such studies (instead of casting doubt on its quality and trustworthiness). Hence, "being taken by surprise leads to awkward moments but may actually enrich the understanding of the field by being an active participant in it" (Ooi & Koning, 2010, p. 16, see also Sløk-Andersen & Persson, 2021). Second, and a bit further away from sociological methods and theory, awkwardness has been used – albeit sparsely – in artistic research. In this context, awkwardness is often perceived as “not smooth” or disruptive, either in posture (see e.g. Shinkle, 2017) or in performances, which could evoke critical reflections of audiences and participants (Oliver, 2016).

Awkwardness in an increasingly complex world

Awkwardness presents an exciting opportunity to engage with – and consequently rethink – classical sociological theory. In general, we theorize awkwardness in the context of an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Following Simmel (1909), we see society as the sum of all social interactions. As society develops from premodernity, the quantity of social interactions increases. Simmel calls this *Vergesellschaftung*, leading to “more society”, largely driven by role specialization and population growth. As a result, people become more functionally dependent on each other in different roles – as a doctor, as a babysitter, as a psychologist, but less dependent on people as individuals. Hence, we are involved in a multitude of social interactions, making it difficult to manage what we can expect from each interaction (even though many are functionally scripted). Here we draw on the work of Norbert Elias (1939/2000) who signaled a historical development toward an increasing refinement in conduct and manners in western Europe – a civilizing process, which was partially also the result of the increase in mutual dependencies between people.

In our contemporary society, the rules of behavior have become even more complex due to different mobilities and urbanization (Urry, 2012). As Wirth – already in 1938 – noted: “The distinctive feature of the mode of living of man in the modern age is his concentration into gigantic aggregations around which cluster lesser centers” (p. 2). This made discovering “the forms of social action and organization that typically emerge in relatively permanent, compact settlements of large numbers of heterogeneous individuals” (p. 9) the central problem of the sociologist. Indeed, almost one hundred years ago, Wirth foregrounded how such mobility and urbanization yielded increased differentiation between individuals, leading to a wide variety of character traits, cultural lifestyles, and prominent ideas clustered in a dense urban environment. This clustering of highly diverse individuals in urban settings had a noticeable impact. He observed that “frequent movement of great numbers of individuals in a congested habitat gives occasion to friction and irritation. Nervous tensions which derive from such personal frustrations are accentuated by the rapid tempo and the complicated technology under which life in dense areas must be lived” (p. 16). These frictions and nervous tensions might very well be the early 20th-century form of what we now call awkward interactions.

Roughly 60 years later, sociologists such as Manuel Castells (2000) observed that “new information technologies allow the formation of new forms of social organization and social interaction along electronically based information networks” (p. 693), while at the same time, broader processes of globalization and the dispersal of national boundaries produced a vastly different society that overloads people not only with global information but also with opportunities for interactions with other ideas and cultures. In many parts of the contemporary world, diversity has become increasingly complex (or superdiverse), impacted by not only ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but also variations in labor market positions, immigration rights and restrictions, gender and age profiles (Vertovec, 2007), but also by declining social cohesion and civic engagement among citizen groups (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021; Putnam, 2000). As a contemporary (sub)urban dweller, chances are that you will run into a mosaic of different people in your (international) classroom, supermarket, superdiverse neighborhoods, while also stumbling upon their online presence. As a result, we now encounter a wider variety of people in various roles more frequently. This makes it more difficult to think ahead, anticipate, and psychologize – that is, to know what to expect from and how to act in – a social interaction, especially because interaction scripts have become more fluid (and often more superficial, see again Wirth, 1938). In other words, if there ever was a time to revisit awkwardness, it is now.

Toward a sociological theory and typology of awkwardness

We are certainly not the first to theorize awkwardness. Kotsko (2010) – and more recently Plakias (2024) – acknowledges the cultural salience of awkwardness, and attempted to better understand what awkwardness *is*. Yet, in contrast to previous research, we aim to go beyond defining awkwardness based on first person experiences, popular media, and existing theories, but build on extensive empirical research (interviews, ethnographic research, content analyses, topic modelling of social media data) to develop a definition on what awkwardness *means* to people. Moreover, we seek to expand this definition into an elaborate sociological theory and typology of awkwardness by discussing five questions:

1. **What is awkwardness and what does it mean to people?** (Chapter 6)
   For example, are people awkward as individuals or are specific social interactions awkward? And what does it mean to feel awkward?
2. **What makes people feel awkward in social interactions?** (Chapter 6)
   For example, is awkwardness the result of not knowing, or not following the script of a specific social interaction? Or can interactions become awkward even when everyone adheres to the social script? How does the nature of the relationship – whether with a friend, boss, or unfamiliar acquaintance – affect feelings of awkwardness?
3. **How does time affect awkward interactions?** (Chapter 7)
   For example, does time heal all wounds caused by past awkward interactions and can we experience awkwardness in anticipation of certain social interactions? Are there inherently awkward times? And what temporal subtypes of awkwardness can we identify?

4 **How does space impact on awkward interactions?** (Chapter 8)
For example, how does awkwardness spread through a space? Can we distinguish inherently awkward spaces? And what spatial subtypes of awkwardness can we identify?
5 **How do people deal with awkward interactions?** (Chapter 9)
For example, when avoiding is not an option, how do people direct awkward interactions? And what are the consequences of different strategies to deal with awkwardness?

In the following chapters, we further develop a sociological theory of awkwardness, by responding to previous work on the topic (Chapter 1), thoroughly grounding it in sociological theory (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), and embedding it in empirical research (Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9). This leads to our core definition of awkwardness: *awkward feelings are the outcome of social interactions going wrong, as perceived by at least one of the social actors (in)directly involved*. Such interactional awkwardness can also be experienced by proxy, a phenomenon we call vicarious awkwardness. Our definition contains three building blocks, which are also partially reflected in the etymology of the concept: (1) direction, (2) wrong, and (3) perception (emotion and meaning).

First, the latter part of the word awkward, *-ward,* indicates direction. Our sociological definition theorizes awkwardness not as an individual psychological trait, but as a consequence of social interactions between people. Social interactions are perceived as *going* in the wrong direction; they are failing as rituals, unable to generate sufficient emotional energy for the interactions to have a positive outcome. We delve deeper into this in Chapter 3, where we discuss the sociology of interactions.

Second, as discussed quite extensively in earlier work on awkwardness (primarily Kotsko, 2010), *awke* is Middle English for something turned "the wrong round, upside down" (Duncan, 2017, p. 40). This often means a transgression (Kotsko, 2010) or a lack of a script (Plakias, 2024). Our research shows that awkwardness can result from the absence of a script, deviation from it, or a failed performance of a script. Furthermore, we identify three temporal subtypes of (interactional) awkwardness – time-off awkwardness, odd-time awkwardness, and no-flow awkwardness – as well as three spatial subtypes of (interactional) awkwardness – out-of-place awkwardness, odd-stage awkwardness, and no-show awkwardness. They make up our typology of awkwardness (which we will present in the conclusion of this book). Feelings of awkwardness experienced by one or more participants may also be influenced by the relationships between social actors – such as differences in familiarity, hierarchy, or cultural background (Chapter 6).

Third, social interactions going in the wrong direction may lead to awkward feelings – uncertain, uncomfortable, self-conscious – as someone is unsure what to expect or how to act in a social interaction. Hence, we rely heavily on the sociology of emotions in Chapter 4. However, feeling emotions and making sense of them are different sociological processes (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). The perception – or as Goffman (1959) would say, the definition of the situation – that something is going wrong triggers meaning-making. People label these feelings as awkward – often implicitly, sometimes explicitly. Here, we specifically build upon cultural sociology to understand how people give meaning to this perception (Chapter 2).

An empirical study of awkwardness

In this book, we draw on a wealth of primary and secondary data. First, we provide a literature overview of existing studies on awkwardness as well as related (sociological) concepts, drawing on academic work and more popular (media) sources as examples (Chapter 1). Second, we develop a firm theoretical embedding of awkwardness, focusing specifically on awkwardness in the context of cultural sociology, the sociology of interactions, and the sociology of emotions (Chapters 2, 3, and 4). After all, to build a theory we must build *upon* theory. Third, we incorporate several forms of what can broadly be labeled as content analyses of secondary data, including self-help and humor books as well as 39 long news articles about awkwardness during the COVID-19 pandemic which we analyzed using a thematic content analysis. Moreover, we conducted a multimodal analysis of nine YouTube self-help videos focusing on the discourse, design, production, and distribution of those videos, and a performed a topic modelling of 23,802 tweets discussing awkwardness in relation to changing interactions during the pandemic. Fourth, we collected ample empirical material in the form of 71 in-depth interviews, including 10 interviews with young adults regarding post-corona awkwardness, 15 interviews with young people who were engaged in online dating, and 46 with workers in open offices/co-working spaces. All interviews were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach with a strong focus on inductive, open coding, to fully grasp the intricacies of awkwardness for different groups of people in different contexts. Finally, ethnographic research was performed at co-working spaces for a period of two months to contextualize the interviews. In Chapter 5, all methodological details will be discussed more extensively. These empirical data will be used in Chapter 6, 7, 8, and 9, where we aim to deepen our understanding of awkwardness through our empirical research.

Outline of the book

Chapter 1 discusses previous work on awkwardness and related concepts, particularly embarrassment. Following previous studies, we locate awkwardness outside of individuals who are deemed awkward; instead, we distinguish five key elements of awkwardness. First, awkward feelings are the outcome of social interactions going wrong. Such emotions have three characteristics: feeling (1) uncomfortable in a social interaction as a result of feeling (2) uncertain of what to expect, which often leads to feeling (3) self-conscious about oneself. Second, these feelings are the result of a social interaction going wrong from the perception of at least one actor involved. Third, such feelings are given meaning by labeling them in a particular way (e.g. as awkward). Fourth, awkward interactions often follow a certain temporal sequence and manifest themselves in specific ways in time. Fifth, awkwardness spreads through space and is impacted by its spatial context. The final part of this chapter discusses related concepts – mainly embarrassment – to argue what sets awkwardness apart. We theorize embarrassment as the (relatively) short-lived, negative emotion that occurs after an individual social mishap, while we perceive awkwardness as the emotion that arises when (future or past) social interactions are (will be or were) going wrong.

Chapter 2 starts with commonsense ideas of culture as something that is given, fixed, and in some cases seen as unimportant. Some scholars have argued that culture is a (too) complicated concept. First, it is difficult to define what we mean by culture. Do we mean culture in the narrow sense, that is culture as creative or artistic forms of expression or communication, or culture in the broad sense, that is culture as a way of life, encompassing the activities, beliefs, and customs of a social group? This book focuses on awkwardness primarily as the latter. Second, culture consists of many different elements. We draw primarily on culture as interactions and rituals, as well as norms, beliefs, and vocabularies. Third, this book takes an interpretive approach to culture, drawing mainly on qualitative methods. Finally, we study awkwardness as culture primarily through the lens of social interactions and to a lesser extent focus on cultural objects and organizations. We here draw upon cultural sociology, the study of meaning-making processes. As meaning-making creatures, humans use categories to make sense of the world around them. Hence, awkwardness as a label represents an outcome of a social interaction and an emotion. This label can be used to categorize experiences, allowing interpretation of what is happening, and developing lines of action.

Chapter 3 begins with the commonsense notion of awkwardness as an individual trait. However, we argue that awkwardness is, conversely, socially constructed, drawing on the sociology of interactions – particularly the dramaturgical approach (Goffman) and ritual theory (Collins). Social interactions require a gathering of people in specific situations who take part in social occasions where they put up a performance. Social interactions are defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate presence; they can be focused or unfocused. Awkward feelings mostly come from focused interactions going wrong (e.g. face-to-face conversations). Interactions take place within the context of a social occasion – a pre-established pattern of action such as the job interview – which provides behavioral norms and rules or scripts. We theorize that not knowing or deviating from a script likely leads to awkwardness. Additionally, a script is always performed by people who may fail, leading to awkwardness. While the dramaturgical approach lacks engagement with emotions, ritual theory offers ritual ingredients that can lead to collective effervescence or shared emotional energy. Hence, awkwardness can be theorized as an interaction that fails to generate mutual emotional energy.

Chapter 4 begins with the commonsense notion of awkwardness as an individual emotional expression. Drawing on the sociology of emotions (Hochschild), we argue instead that emotions are clues to how we are thinking or how others are thinking. Within the concept of emotions, we can distinguish between subjective feelings and emotional expressions. Building on this distinction, we outline three key understandings of the sociology of emotions. First, emotions are both biological and individual, as well as social and collective. Hence, people feel and express emotions as part of emotion cultures, consisting of (1) norms, (2) beliefs, and (3) vocabularies. Feeling rules and expression rules set out the emotional norms. Failing to meet these norms can make social interactions awkward. Moreover, emotional beliefs are learned through socialization, which helps prevent awkward interactions. Second, emotion vocabularies outline categories of meaning that are used to describe our emotional experiences – what am I feeling and what label do I attach to this feeling? Hence, emotions are not ineffable but articulated through emotion vocabularies. Awkwardness has been made an easily accessible label for emotions by popular culture. Third, emotions do not just happen; they are managed. Emotion work refers to the act of trying to change the extent, direction, and duration of an emotion. Therefore, emotional deviance is often a source of awkwardness.

Chapter 5 introduces the empirical sociological studies in this book, in which we explore what awkwardness is, how, where, and when it arises, and how it is resolved. We outline how the empirical research is grounded in the theories that were presented in the preceding chapters, and link four different contexts and occasions to the main theoretical concepts: awkwardness in everyday life, awkwardness at work, awkwardness in dating, and awkwardness in self-help videos. This chapter describes the background of each of these studies (referred to as EVERYDAY, WORK, DATING, and SELF-HELP in the subsequent empirical chapters), as well as the types of data used, and how this data is analyzed. EVERYDAY awkwardness draws upon Twitter data, a content analysis of news media articles, and interviews with students about social interactions after the COVID-19 pandemic. WORK draws upon ethnographic research and interviews within contemporary co-working spaces. DATING builds upon interviews with people active on online dating platforms. Finally, SELF-HELP contains a multimodal analysis of self-help videos on YouTube.

In Chapter 6, we develop a sociological theory of awkwardness, building on extensive empirical research. First, we argue that awkward feelings are the outcome of a social interaction going wrong and entail feeling uncertain, uncomfortable, and self-conscious. Second, such awkward feelings are often the result of the absence of a script in social interactions (e.g. how to greet in times of a pandemic), deviation from a script (e.g. accidentally forgetting to shake hands when meeting someone), or the failure to perform a script successfully (e.g. shaking someone's hand for too long). All of the cases above thus entail interactional awkwardness, which can also extend to people not directly involved in the social interaction feeling vicarious awkwardness. The degree of interactional awkwardness is affected by the relationship – or lack thereof – between the social actors, that is awkward feelings are more likely when participants are unfamiliar with one another, when there is a hierarchical relationship between the participants, and when participants differ in their cultural backgrounds.

In Chapter 7, we explore how time impacts awkward interactions. Social interactions can go wrong at various moments within their temporal sequence: (1) anticipation, (2) intensification and expansion, (3) resolution, and (4) retrospection. Intensification and expansion have been discussed in Chapter 6 as part of interactional awkwardness. Resolution will be explained in Chapter 9, addressing how people deal with awkwardness. This chapter explains anticipatory awkwardness – the awkward feelings in anticipation of a social interaction, often in social occasions imbued with latent awkwardness, such as first dates. Moreover, retrospective awkwardness can be experienced some time after the interaction has taken place, for example, looking at photos of oneself as a teenager. We identify three temporal subtypes of awkwardness. First, in the absence of a script, people may experience "time-off awkwardness", where they are uncertain about what is appropriate. For example, the pandemic made the boundaries between work and leisure time fuzzy, resulting in awkward interactions. Second, a deviation from the script can lead to "odd-time awkwardness", such as receiving a phone call from your dentist at 11 PM. Third, even when one follows the script, things can still become awkward if a performance is poorly timed, such as in the case of awkward silences. We refer to this as "no-flow awkwardness".

In chapter 8, we discuss how space impacts awkward interactions. A key spatial characteristic of awkwardness is its ability to spread through space, almost like a contagion. Some spaces are experienced as imbued with latent awkwardness, such as elevators. We identify three spatial subtypes of awkwardness. First, in the absence of a clear script, people may experience "out-of-place awkwardness". This often arises from conflicting scripts, for example teaching in a park during the pandemic may lead to awkwardness, as parks are typically associated with the occasion of a picnic (or other leisure activities), conflicting with the script of teaching. Second, "odd-stage awkwardness" refers to awkward feelings resulting from a backstage performance accidentally entering the frontstage. For example, accidentally unmuting during an online work call and having private conversations overheard creates such awkwardness. Third, even when one follows the script, things can still become awkward due to the absence of physical co-presence. Hence, as online interactions mostly lack intimacy (feelings of closeness) and synchronicity (interactions happening at the same time), they are often still perceived as awkward, particularly when transitioning from virtual to physical spaces. This spatial subtype is referred to as "no-show awkwardness", as the lack of co-presence, in Goffman's dramaturgical terms, leads to a performance, but not a show.

In Chapter 9, we outline ways in which people deal with awkwardness. What strategies do they use in awkward interactions to restore the order in an interaction going wrong? The data have shown two main strategies: avoiding and directing. First, avoiding means not being confronted with an awkward interaction in the past, present, or future. Awkwardness can be avoided directly by physically or virtually exiting, for example by ghosting. It can also be avoided indirectly, mainly through the use of small talk to keep an interaction flowing (avoiding awkward silences), and by finding common ground for more meaningful interactions. While avoiding awkwardness reduces the need for emotion work in the short run, this strategy may backfire in case of future encounters with those avoided. Second, directing refers to directly and immediately addressing an awkward interaction. This approach includes a variety of strategies: (1) creating distance to reduce self-consciousness, (2) communicating directly and honestly to decrease uncertainty over what others expect, and (3) embracing awkwardness through humor to reduce discomfort by re-establishing a shared definition of the situation. Finally, this chapter addresses why people choose one strategy over another and how they learn such strategies.

In the final chapter, we present our sociological theory and typology of awkwardness, drawing on extensive empirical research. First, we define awkwardness as the outcome of social interactions going wrong (drawing from the sociology of interactions), resulting in awkward feelings (drawing from the sociology of emotions), which are given cultural meaning through labeling – often using popular culture references (drawing from cultural sociology). Partially contradicting previous studies, awkwardness is three things all at once: (1) an emotion, (2) an outcome of a social interaction, and (3) culture. We develop a typology of awkwardness based on its main causes – a lack of a clear script, a deviation from a script, and a failed performance of a script – and the dimensions of time and space. This results in three temporal subtypes – time-off, odd-time, and no-flow – and three spatial subtypes of awkwardness – out-of-place, odd-stage, and no-show. Finally, we discuss the limitations of this study and provide avenues for future research regarding the nature of awkwardness, adhering to and performing social scripts, measuring awkwardness, and the role of social inequalities in awkwardness.

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1 Theorizing awkwardness

In the Introduction, we defined awkwardness as awkward feelings resulting from social interactions going wrong as perceived by at least one of the social actors (in)directly involved. In order to get to this definition, we will first examine the (limited) previous work on awkwardness. As stated in the Introduction, academic research on awkwardness is scarce, leaving the concept ill-defined compared to related notions such as embarrassment (Edelmann, 1981), shame (Crozier, 2014), shyness, and sociability (Cheek & Buss, 1981). However, some efforts have been made to define awkwardness. While these definitions are rarely based on empirical observations, they offer a starting point for developing an empirically grounded sociological definition of awkwardness. We will introduce the main elements of existing definitions and formulate how they will be addressed in this book, as well as contextualize awkwardness in relation to neighboring concepts.

Elements of awkwardness

Some scholars have defined awkwardness in relation to awkward people. For instance, Tashiro (2017) describes some people as "chronically awkward", where "the accumulation of their awkward moments can threaten their social inclusion" (p. 17). Here, awkwardness is closely linked to mental states and sets of awkward traits (p. 137). Kotsko (2010) also views this as a key component of awkwardness, which he terms everyday awkwardness. This type of awkwardness originates from particular individuals for whom "awkwardness is a perverse skill, who bring it with them wherever they go" (p. 6). Similarly, awkwardness is typically identified when someone intentionally or unintentionally breaks a social norm or script (Plakias, 2024). Awkwardness in this context is inherent to people – this one co-worker, weird uncle, or intrusive neighbor – that have difficulties adhering to the unspoken rules of society. This could be caused by a lack of childhood training and socialization, a divergence from the neurotypical norm, or just a passion for creating chaos. In either case, these individuals willingly or unwillingly lack the social tact to avoid making themselves or others feel embarrassed (Goffman, 1956). In other words, awkwardness in the everyday context occurs when individuals

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violate a strong social norm, according to these scholars. To set the stage for both the theoretical (2, 3, and 4) and the empirical chapters (6, 7, 8, and 9) of our book, we discuss previous work and build toward our sociological theory of awkwardness by drawing on four key elements: (1) social interactions, (2) emotions and feelings, (3) culture, and (4) time and space.

Awkwardness as the outcome of social interactions

Although the idea that some people are inherently more awkward than others (and some peoples' mothers are more awkward than other peoples' mothers, to paraphrase *the Smiths*) may be comforting to those not afflicted by the awkward curse, most scholars consider this perspective to be limited (Kotsko, 2010; Plakias, 2024). For example, besides everyday awkwardness, Kotsko (2010) also defines two additional types of awkwardness that are embedded in and caused by social contexts rather than individual misdemeanors. The first, cultural awkwardness, refers to the disorder that comes with weak norms. This means that there is a set of norms in place, but they are difficult to follow or adhere to, for example, because they continue to change or because they require some knowledge to follow them. "Even when personal deficits make certain individuals seem extremely awkward by nature" writes Kotsko (2010), "awkwardness remains a social phenomenon, and therefore the analysis of awkwardness should focus not on awkward individuals but on the entire social situation in which awkwardness makes itself felt" (p. 14). These situations may not occur because we, as individuals, break a rule, but rather because the norms are so weak that there can be discrepancies between perceptions of what is happening and what is actually happening (Bethany Teachman, in Miller, 2015). Many women, for example, may have experienced that "being friendly" to a man might give him the impression that they "are hitting on" him, due to a discrepancy between her reading of the situation ("I am just being nice") and his reading ("if women are being very nice to men, they must be romantically interested"). Thus, "it isn't quite enough to understand awkwardness only in terms of awkward people" (Dahl, 2018, p. 15). We follow this line of argument in this book, emphasizing awkwardness as stemming from a focused or unfocused (Goffman, 1959) social interaction between at least two people (building on the sociology of interactions in Chapter 3).

Awkward feelings

Similarly, Plakias (2024) suggests that "awkwardness is a property that characterizes social situations or interactions when one or more participant(s) finds themselves lacking the guidance of a script and feels awkward as a result" (p. 22). Important here is the emphasis on feeling awkward. Though Plakias (2024) is quite adamant in stating that awkwardness is not an emotion (a point on which we do not fully agree, as we outline in Chapter 4), there is an essential element of *feeling* in awkwardness. Often, this component involves feeling uncomfortable, uncertain, and self-conscious (Plakias, 2024), sometimes even with profound embodied characteristics. For example, Melissa Dahl explicitly highlights such awareness in an interview about her book *Cringeworthy*: "I think awkwardness is self-consciousness with this undercurrent of uncertainty. You're really aware of how you're coming off to the world and then there's an ambiguity about what to do next" (see Chen, 2018). Awkwardness, therefore, affects how we feel about ourselves, and our feelings in general. Thus, emotions are a key element of awkwardness (we contextualize this using the sociology of emotions in Chapter 4).

Awkwardness as culture

What most of the current definitions of awkwardness are missing is a concrete link to culture. Social interactions are not simply scripted but are culturally scripted, and emotions – felt and shared – are culturally embedded. Consider, for instance, appropriate public transport behavior (neat lines in some countries, and a complete chaos of people pushing each other to enter and exit in others). The absence of governing norms is what Kotsko (2010) calls radical awkwardness. Radical awkwardness emerges from clashing sets of rules and is especially salient when it concerns different cultures. This can be relatively innocent, such as the differences between the often highly assertive Dutch students and the more reticent students from other cultures in our international classrooms. However, Kotsko warns that in its most extreme cases, especially when it involves one hegemonic culture, it could yield forced assimilation, segregation, and expulsion. We believe that in our current, increasingly complex world, radical awkwardness is becoming more ubiquitous. Beyond increased globalization, the recent COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how radically different cultural beliefs about the coronavirus have led to different ways of interacting: from strict isolation to conspicuous hugging. And, considering how gender is "done" in everyday interactions of men and women with reference to normative conceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior for one's sex (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), changing gender roles affect the social norms we adhere to in our social interactions. They do not only grow weaker; sometimes they disappear or change completely.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, these cultural elements remain ill-discussed. Though such radical awkwardness is addressed in Kotsko's (2010) analysis of the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* television series, there is probably more to this than a Jewish-American television writer traversing White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture. In a similar vein, Plakias (2024) might argue that "we don't want to ally ourselves with someone who displays awkwardness, because that person has shown that they're not really 'from here'" (p. 69), she is, in fact, less outspoken about the cultural component of awkwardness. What is "from here" after all, in an increasingly superdiverse, globally mediatized society in which we are “bowling alone” (Putnam, 2000) anyway? Though she warns about the risks of misattunement and a lack of fluency in social scripts for individuals (leading, in the worst case, to ostracism), her context concerns differences of individuals within a homogeneous group (hence, ostracism being the rejection from their own group) rather than between groups or individuals. In other words, awkwardness is increasingly defined by the meaning we give to norms, interactions and emotions, instead of by the norms themselves. In conclusion, we argue that awkwardness is highly cultured – and largely originates from (popular) culture – and is defined by the meaning we give to norms, interactions and emotions (therefore, we start by invoking cultural sociology in the next chapter).

Awkwardness in time and space

Dahl’s above-mentioned quote regarding “what to do next” also highlights the temporal characteristics of awkwardness. Something happens, which evokes a certain feeling or emotion in the people perceiving the interaction as going wrong. This temporal element of awkwardness is also foregrounded by Clegg (2012), who – building upon semi-structured interviews – argued that people can experience anticipatory awkwardness about an interaction yet to occur. Some occasions seem inherently tense or uncomfortable, such as meeting one’s partner’s parents for the first time or going on a job interview, and discomfort thus precedes the events themselves. However, anticipatory awkwardness does not always result in awkwardness during the anticipated moment itself; this only occurs when a certain social transgression takes place and is recognized by at least two people. If awkwardness does arise from such a transgression, people become hyper-aware of themselves and/or the individual who committed the social transgression, turning social and/or bodily functions that normally happen automatically into conscious efforts. In other words, “social awkwardness [is] experienced as a magnified, tense focusing of attention on the normally implicit expressive acts involved in social interaction” (Clegg, 2012, p. 269). The final step of the temporal sequence is resolution, during which people come together to make an effort to move past the awkward moment and return to more comfortable social waters (Clegg, 2012). Besides time, awkwardness is impacted by the spatial setting in which the interaction takes place, including online and offline “spaces”. Space is important, as, in the words of Kotsko (2010, p. 8), awkwardness “moves through the social network, it *spreads*” [italics in original]. Yet, previous scholarship has remained relatively silent on the spatial dimensions of awkwardness. In conclusion, awkwardness has a temporal (sequence) component (which we will explore empirically in Chapter 7), spreads through space (Chapter 8), and is practiced and dealt with (Chapter 9).

Following these key elements and partially contradicting previous studies, we will theorize that awkwardness is three things all at once: awkwardness is (1) the outcome of social interactions going wrong (driven by the sociology of interactions), (2) resulting in awkward feelings (driven by the sociology of emotions), (3) which are given cultural meaning through labeling – often using popular culture references (driven by cultural sociology). In three theoretical chapters (2, 3, and 4), we will first describe the commonsense notions of each awkwardness, followed by a theoretical response to debunk this notion. The interactional and spatio-temporal aspects of awkwardness are discussed in the empirical chapters (6, 7, and 8). However, before we move to the next chapters, we will first outline some neighboring concepts to further clarify our approach to awkwardness.

Awkwardness and its neighboring concepts

Awkwardness is closely linked to several other concepts, and often is even seen as an equivalent of a number of neighboring concepts. Related emotions such as embarrassment and shame have a self-evaluative orientation and show others that we have transgressed feeling and/or expression rules (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Hence, displaying these emotions shows sensitivity to group norms. Yet, we believe that awkwardness has a life and context of its own, given its particular origin in popular culture (again, think of the teenager yelling "AWKWARRRRD"). Therefore, we argue that a separate study of awkwardness – in relation to related concepts – is a valuable endeavor.

Shame

Awkwardness shares some components with the emotion of shame. Shame has a long history in sociology. It appears, for example, quite prominently in the work of Norbert Elias (1939/2000), who argued that the civilizing process lowered shame thresholds. Shame obviously has been defined in many different ways, ranging from sociology to social psychology (see e.g. Scheff, 2003, for an overview). Often, such definitions are rather narrow, being closely related to the vernacular meaning of disgrace. However, Scheff (2003) posits that shame is a master emotion, a class name for a larger family of emotions and feelings that "arise through seeing self negatively, if even only slightly negatively through the eyes of others, or only anticipating such a reaction" (p. 254). Such a master emotion would contain a variety of lower order emotions, including embarrassment, shame (in the narrow sense), humiliation, and – we would claim – also awkwardness. The difference between these concepts is found in the duration of the emotion. Humiliation and shame refer to durable emotions that are often more attached to a person rather than an interaction (i.e. an individual failure instead of a specific gaffe, see Plakias, 2024, p. 57). Awkwardness, the way we perceive it, is instead tied to a social interaction and is more short-lived than shame (see also Chapter 7 on issues of time).

Embarrassment

The closest related cousin of awkwardness is probably embarrassment. Embarrassment is a reactive form of acute self-consciousness about a faux pas that has already occurred (Scott, 2004), or a "social emotion whereby one feels an aversive state of abashment and chagrin associated with unwanted mishaps or social predicaments" (Krishna et al., 2019, p. 492). Compared to awkwardness, it is even more short-lived. According to Plakias (2024), embarrassment arises when we do not know how to act (p. 54), though not all research agrees to this verdict. Through a meta-analysis of research about embarrassment, Edelmann (1981) identifies six different categorical causes of embarrassment: (1) the failure to present one's self-image to the outside world; (2) a lack of social grace, such as calling someone by a wrong name or farting in public; (3) differing expectations of a social encounter by various participants; (4) breaching common privacy expectations, such as standing too close to someone or touching them inappropriately; (5) unsolicitedly being made the center of attention; and (6) vicarious embarrassment. These six categories all share one common theme: "the transgression of a social rule, with resultant failure of self-presentation and the loss of self-esteem in the presence of others" (Edelmann, 1981, p. 127). Crucially, Edelmann argues that embarrassment only occurs when a social rule is broken unwillingly, since intentional rule-breaking will not result in any unexpected results on the part of the rule breaker (although likely more so by their unsuspecting victim).

Goffman (1959) – to whom we will return to extensively in Chapter 3 – has published widely on embarrassment, focusing primarily on the third and sixth cause of embarrassment. He adopts an interactionist approach, stating that embarrassment is the result of unfulfilled expectations in social scenarios. This occurs frequently in encounters where people have disjointed expectations of how the encounter will take place. Goffman (1956) further distinguishes between abrupt, intense embarrassment, and sustained, mild embarrassment. The former kind is "orgasmic" (p. 265) in nature and resolves back to the interaction's natural equilibrium relatively quickly, while the latter is more lingering and remains present throughout an encounter's duration. Abrupt incidents can sour entire interactions, though, leaving participants with an uneasy feeling despite the majority of an interaction going smoothly. People can even feel embarrassed by witnessing the actions of others, despite having nothing to do with the interaction themselves. This is known as vicarious embarrassment (Kilian et al., 2018, see also the sixth category of Edelmann, 1981) or empathic embarrassment (Miller, 1987). Another important point Goffman (1956) makes is that "embarrassment seems to be contagious, spreading, once started, in ever widening circles of discomfiture" (p. 268).

Both Edelmann's (1981) broad categorization – ranging from individual accidental gaffes to highly culturalized mismatches – and Goffman's interaction and expectation-oriented approach align with how we, along with authors such as Kotsko (2010), define awkwardness. Indeed, some of these definitions of embarrassment closely resemble what we perceive as awkwardness. And similar to Goffman's observation about embarrassment, awkwardness too has a tendency to spread (Kotsko, 2010). Melissa Dahl writes about the similarity – and difference – in the following way: "Embarrassment is a huge part of it, too. But embarrassment is like when you get pantsed in high school. I don't think we'd call that awkward". Though an accidental drop of a pants – caused by a combination of gravity and a failing button – might evoke feelings of awkwardness, a deliberate attempt by another to cause pants to drop is embarrassing for the victim, but not necessarily awkward. After all, the victim does not break any rules themselves, nor is there an interaction going wrong. This is also where we see the primary difference between both concepts.

We argue that embarrassment and awkwardness stem from the same master emotion (Scheff, 2003), and what we now refer to as awkwardness was once considered a form of embarrassment before the term 'awkwardness' became widely used in the early 2000s. As we will further unpack in Chapter 4, we need language, or a label, to categorize an interaction as awkward (Rosenberg, 1990). When both Edelmann and Goffman conducted their research, awkwardness was not a ubiquitous term to categorize a specific subset of embarrassing interactions. It seems likely that, had they conducted their groundbreaking work in the 21st century, they would have labeled at least some aspects of the broader emotion of embarrassment as awkwardness. In conclusion, we see embarrassment as a (relatively) short-lived, negative emotion that follows an individual social mishap, whereas we perceive awkwardness as the emotion that arises when (future or past) social interactions are (will be, or were) going wrong.

In the next three chapters, we will further theorize awkwardness – as culture, as an outcome of a social interaction, as an emotion – drawing upon cultural sociology, the sociology of interactions, and the sociology of emotions.

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2 Culture, meaning, and awkwardness

In this chapter, we discuss awkwardness as culture. We start by exploring commonsense notions of culture as given, fixed, and sometimes unimportant, as argued and used in everyday life, popular culture, and popular science. Then, we look at the complications in trying to conceptualize culture. Before we do so, however, we must first discuss what is commonly meant by culture. Do we mean culture in the narrow sense, that is culture as creative or artistic forms of expression or communication, or culture in the broad sense, that is culture as a way of life, encompassing the activities, beliefs, and customs of a social group? We discuss how this book focuses on awkwardness primarily as the latter, and to some extent as the former – as popular culture. Second, culture consists of many different elements. We explain why we focus on interactions and rituals, as well as norms, beliefs, and vocabularies. Third, we analyze awkwardness as culture through an interpretive approach to culture, drawing predominantly on qualitative methods (see Chapter 5 for more details). Finally, we outline how we study awkwardness as culture primarily through the lens of social interactions and to a lesser extent focus on cultural objects or organizations and institutions. After setting these boundaries and focal points, we explain what cultural sociology is, that is the study of meaning-making processes, and how it will help us to better understand awkwardness. As meaning-making creatures, humans use categories to make sense of the world around them. Hence, awkwardness as a label represents an outcome of social interaction and an emotion, which can be used to categorize experiences, allowing people to interpret what is happening and developing lines of action.

Common sense: Culture as given, fixed, and unimportant

Contemporary societal debates often revolve around the concept of culture, particularly in distinguishing between "our" culture and "their" culture. In everyday life, people frequently have a clear idea what "their" culture is and what it is not. Culture is often seen as the way things have always been done, passed down from our parents or caregivers. For example, many people in the Netherlands have been reluctant to change the appearance of Black Pete, the blackfaced companion of Saint Nicholas in the Dutch folklore tradition of

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Sinterklaas. Although the traditional depiction of Black Pete is widely recognized as racist, many view giving up this part of the tradition as tantamount to relinquishing a piece of "their" culture (Rodenberg & Wagenaar, 2016). Moreover, culture in general – and arts in particular – are often (politically) framed as a luxury (as one of the good things of life), which only takes priority when we have taken care of the essentials, such as health care, energy supply, housing and transport, and education. However, culture provides meaning, as we will show below, it contributes to human flourishing, democratic citizenship, and social cohesion (O'Connor, 2024). As such, culture is a necessity, not an unimportant cherry on the cake.

The complexities of studying culture

Yet, while scholars often underscore the importance of culture, there has been considerable debate among social scientists about its definition. Culture is incredibly difficult to define and therefore a fuzzy concept to work with. Hence, Raymond Williams famously claimed that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1976, p. 87). Several reasons contribute to culture being considered a complicated concept (Spillman, 2020, p. 13; see also Patterson, 2014). These reasons relate to four overarching questions: (1) how do we define culture, (2) what does culture look like, (3) what focus should the study of culture have, and (4) how should we analyze culture. Below we will briefly outline these questions and establish the book's perspectives within them.

How do we define culture

Firstly, the historical lineage of the concept of culture still produces two different connotations: (1) culture in the narrow sense, that is culture as creative or artistic forms of expression or communication (e.g. film, music, visual arts) and (2) culture in the broad sense, that is culture as a way of life, encompassing the activities, beliefs, and customs of a social group (such as the Black Pete example above). The former pertains to culture as a "separate institutional sphere within modern societies (highlighting differences with economics and politics)", whereas the latter defines culture as "a property of whole social groups (highlighting social differences)" (Spillman, 2020, p. 13). Whereas sociologists of culture focus on studying culture in the narrow sense – culture as a topic of study, cultural sociologists focus on culture in the broad sense, examining the social world through a cultural lens (Heinich, 2010). In this book, we view awkwardness as culture in the broad sense, which has found its way into (popular) culture in the narrow sense – particularly cringe comedy and meme culture (Evnine, 2018). Consequently, awkwardness becomes even more embedded in culture in the broad sense, as this embedding makes awkwardness more accessible as a classificatory tool. We will discuss this in more detail below.

What does culture look like

Secondly, culture in the broad sense consists of a wide variety of building blocks (Wray, 2014, pp. xxiii-xxxii), including norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs, frames and symbolic boundaries, repertoires and rituals, arts, ideas, and cultural capital, discourses and narratives, and institutions and identities, which also show significant real-world variation (Spillman, 2020, p. 13). Thus, culture is composed of elements that range from the very stable and the largely unquestioned such as institutions (petrified culture), to those actively imbued with meaning such as ideologies (see Swidler, 2001). Some forms of culture we can observe comparatively easily, for example rituals, while others are more abstract, such as habitus. This diversity in building blocks raises questions about what culture looks like. In this book, we specifically focus on awkwardness in the building blocks of interactions and rituals (Chapter 3) and in relation to norms, beliefs, and vocabularies (Chapter 4).

What focus should the study of culture have

Thirdly, there are persistent disputes within sociology, such as whether to emphasize conflict or social cohesion, whether to focus on interpretation or explanation, and the long-standing debate around agency versus structure (see also Smith, 1998). These disputes have complicated the sociological study of culture, as they involve different vocabularies to understand culture (Spillman, 2020, p. 13). Studies of culture, therefore, need to relate to these disputes and, to some extent, choose a side, as focusing on everything is rarely a fruitful approach (cf. Patterson, 2014). In this book, we focus more on cohesion than on conflict, as people generally try to maintain the interaction order when things become awkward (Chapter 3). Yet, we do touch upon inequalities in terms of access to a script, gender (particularly in dating), social position and hierarchy, and cultural differences. Moreover, we aim to hold a middle ground between agency and structure, as situations prescribe certain feeling rules for particular occasions. Yet, individuals have some leeway to deviate, albeit at the cost of creating awkwardness (Chapter 3). Finally, our analysis is more interpretive than explanatory, as we empirically examine how people experience awkwardness using mostly qualitative research methods (see Chapter 5).

How should we analyze culture

Fourthly, there is substantial debate on how to analyze culture – in other words, how to empirically or theoretically examine the three main components of culture: institutions, cultural objects, and interactions. The analysis of institutions refers to how large structures, such as a pandemic or national policies, impact what culture looks like. Cultural objects pertain to analysis of cultural products such as movies or series, and how different groups of people interpret them. Cultural sociologists also study culture by examining the interactions between people, for example, in a classroom or as part of subcultures. We will discuss these three lenses in more detail below. In this book, we incorporate all three lenses, though – given our definition of awkwardness – with a focus on social interactions.

As a result of these four questions, sociologists have sometimes argued that culture is too complicated and messy to analyze. We follow Spillman (2020, p. 13) in her assertion that this "complaint makes little sense: any topic can be complex and ambiguous when we start to dig deep, even topics that some would consider easier to study, like politics or economics". On the contrary, disagreements over what culture means have produced productive ambiguities (Jacobs & Spillman, 2005), generating further debate and leading to innovations in thinking about culture and sociology more broadly (Inglis & Almila, 2016, p. 6). Since the 1970s, cultural sociologists have been working with a concept that allows for the systematic study of culture, taking all the aforementioned complexities into account: meaning-making. Even though Wuthnow (1987, pp. 64–65) has argued that the concept of meaning may well be "more of a curse than a blessing in cultural analysis". We will outline the importance of meaning-making in our study of awkwardness below.

Cultural sociology: Making sense of awkwardness

Cultural sociology is the study of meaning-making processes (Spillman, 2002; Wray, 2014). The focus on meaning-making processes sets cultural sociology apart from other branches of sociology, such as economic sociology, urban sociology, or the sociology of art. Thus, "cultural sociologists investigate how meaning-making happens, why meanings vary, how meanings influence human action, and the ways meaning-making is important in social cohesion, domination and resistance" (Spillman, 2002, p. 1). As such, cultural sociological theory helps us to understand how people make sense of interactions that are going wrong, and how this meaning-making differs between social groups and various contexts. If cultural sociologists study meaning-making processes, it is crucial to understand what we mean by "meaning". According to Spillman (2020, p. 14), cultural sociology is based on three presuppositions: (1) humans are meaning-making creatures; (2) meaning is irreducible to biology; and (3) meaning is irreducible to private, subjective experiences.

Humans are meaning-making creatures

First, most cultural sociologists would argue that humans create meaning from the things they perceive around them, and that this meaning-making is essential to all human groups and actions (Spillman, 2020, p. 14). Indeed, as Simmel (1903/1950) states in his classic work *Metropolis and Mental Life*: *Der Mensch ist ein Unterschiedswesen*, man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences. An important way in which we make meaning is through our capacity to categorize or label. Patterson (2014, p. 8) defines categories as: “the words, concepts, and classes we use to make sense of reality and are one of the most basic features of automatic cognitive processing”. They are fundamental to process as much possible information with the least cognitive effort, and provide ready-made ways of drawing inferences, although these inferences may be in fact incorrect. For example, stereotypes illustrate that our categorizations may negatively affect qualified people. Black girls are not expected to be “into rock music” (Schaap & Berkers, 2020, p. 416), and women are “too nice and kind” to survive as scientists in contemporary academia (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012, p. 516). However, people are not constantly looking to stereotype others, but rather “seek to harmonize their relations, to make sense of and confirm their own and others’ intentions and sentiments” (Patterson, 2014, p. 7). Much of this meaning-making does not take the form of a compulsive or cognitively exhausting process; instead, humans are often meaning-maintainers, upholding the interaction order by maintaining shared meanings. In other words, people do not consciously *make* meaning of every situation they encounter, but rather interpret these situations in line with what they already know. Hence, the mental availability of the concept of awkwardness allows us to categorize a social interaction as awkward. This, in turn, helps us make sense of what is happening in a social interaction and allows us to draw inferences on what lines of action one can take to deal with the awkward interaction (see Chapter 9).

Meaning is irreducible to biology

Second, meaning cannot be reduced to biology. While meaning-making is undoubtedly an inherent natural ability of humans as biological beings, and while biology and culture can influence one another, meaning cannot be explained by biological processes only (Spillman, 2020). Meaning is primarily a social construction and is developed by the actions of humans. Thus, we are not naturally able to identify something as awkward, and our biology alone does not determine how awkward we feel. Indeed, although some people might be more prone to awkward behavior, *what* actually is considered awkward is dependent on the social and cultural context. To reiterate Kotsko’s (2010) argument, removing awkward individuals from society does not mean we will never again find ourselves in awkward situations. Furthermore, as we argued in the previous chapter, we might have been less able to identify awkwardness before popular culture made the concept readily available in our meaning-making processes. However, we do follow Patterson’s caution against extreme social constructivism (i.e. that *everything* is socially constructed), given that contemporary cognitive science has demonstrated that not all mental realities and categorizations are deeply embedded in social reality and that some mental mechanisms are universally shared (Patterson, 2014, p. 10). As we will describe in the next chapters, social interaction does require a variety of skills, and not everyone is born with an equal set of social skills, tact, and what Goffman calls savoir-faire (e.g. Goffman, 1955; see also Riggio et al., 2020).

Meaning-making is a collective process

Third, meaning-making is not merely a private process, confined to an individual's categorization of information. It is fundamentally a public endeavor. Although the individual, subjective experience should not be underestimated, meaning is not reducible to subjectivity (Simmel, 1903/1950). As Spillman (2020, p. 14) states: "Collective meaning-making processes create the conditions for individual, subjective experience". Thus, information only becomes cultural when it is publicly shared among a group of people. Information often is publicly known when it is common knowledge or – when it is not consciously known – it can be distributed by being embedded in different cultural elements (Patterson, 2014). Hence, cultural sociology does not focus on individuals and individual processes, but rather on shared meanings, communicated through / in organizations and institutions, cultural objects and social interactions. One could argue that cultural sociology studies "how human agency is linked to social structure through cultural elements, and how yesterday's cultural elements can become the structures of today" (Wray, 2014, p. xxxvi). The connection to awkwardness is clear: awkwardness now has an increasingly public element (through cringe comedy and as a well-known label for individual emotions and social interactions), which in turn affects human behavior *and* social structures. An interaction is only awkward when at least one actor perceives it as awkward and acts upon this definition of the situation.

Building on these three suppositions, we follow Wray (2014, p. xxxv) in defining meaning-making as reflecting on one's experiences and creating or maintaining symbols, categories, and interpretations to make sense of our experiences. Symbols are what people use to represent things to themselves and others, such as words or images. Categories are bounded sets of things that appear to be more similar than different. Interpretations are stories and narratives that people devise, both individually and in concert with others, to make sense of symbols and categories used to represent the world. In the context of this book, awkwardness results from meaning-making, where individuals reflect on feeling awkward – as the outcome of an interaction going wrong – by categorizing it as awkward. Through language and narratives, they interpret what is happening and develop lines of action.

Why meaning-making matters

Understanding meaning-making processes is important for several reasons. First and foremost, meaning-making involves all human beings. Culture provides meaning, helping us lead satisfying and fulfilling lives (O'Connor, 2024). Life without meaning can lead to distress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions. Hence, "it is not stretching things to say meaning-making can be a matter of life and death" (Wray, 2014, p. xxxvi). Therefore, culture should not be sidelined, but should be placed at the heart of sociology. As we wrote in the Introduction, everyone gives meaning to awkward interactions. Understanding what people see as awkward, when and where it manifests, and how people deal with awkwardness therefore will help us understand people and society better. Second, shared meanings are the glue that binds social groups together and the lubricant that smooths social interactions and rituals. Hence, understanding shared meanings helps us understand how interaction orders are upheld, for example, at work, in our love lives, and in everyday life; how rituals become successful; and how social groups cohere. Moreover, learning more about cultural conflict offers important insights into some of the most pressing social problems we face. Indeed, understanding where awkwardness comes from can help us grasp why some social interactions go wrong, while others do not.

Three lenses to study meaning

This brings us to the question of how to *do* cultural sociology. In other words, how can one study meaning? Following Spillman (2020), we make a distinction between three lenses of examining meaning-making processes: organizations and institutions, cultural objects, and interactions.

Organizations and institutions

First, cultural sociologists study how culture is produced in large organizations, institutions, or fields. Since its foundation, sociology has always been interested in social structures and larger organizations. Sociologists have historically tended to focus on how meaning-making is impacted by large-scale patterns of social relations and organizational restrictions. These questions remain relevant. For instance, how does streaming – and the fact that artists only get paid if a consumer has listened to at least 30 seconds of the song – affect how songs sound (Polak & Schaap, 2024)? Or, moving to awkwardness, how did the pandemic affect our daily interactions and make us feel awkward (Giolo et al., 2023)? Individuals may be largely unaware of how such larger patterns of social relations affect their meaning-making. Yet, cultural sociologists demonstrate the many ways in which organizations, institutions, and fields at large impact culture. For this book, popular culture in general – and the media and cultural industries in particular – play a key role in making certain categories more accessible than others. As we will discuss in the following chapters, awkwardness – made widely accessible through popular culture, including cringe comedy and meme culture (see e.g. Evnine, 2018; Kotsko, 2010) – has become a category through which we make sense of our experiences. In other words, awkwardness as a category has been made chronically accessible because it is frequently activated or cognitively linked to other widely used categories (Hale, 2004). Hence, we easily utter *Awwwwkward* when we encounter a situation that fits the category of awkwardness. Though this presumption is difficult to test, we will explore what people see as awkward (i.e. what exactly does this category entail?), how, when, and where it manifests (i.e. how does this category work?), and how people navigate these interactions (i.e. which actions are connected to this category?).

Cultural objects

Second, cultural sociologists analyze cultural objects and their properties as they mediate what Berger and Luckmann (1967) refer to as "the social construction of reality" (Spillman, 2020, p. x). Cultural objects express meaning as symbols, categories, and interpretations. Instead of taking meaning for granted or ignoring it as transparent and simple, cultural sociologists consider cultural objects integral to processes of meaning-making. For instance, they examine the ways the same television series generates different meanings for different groups (Jhally & Lewis, 1992), or how young adults interpret cringe comedy (Kirschbaum & Berkers, 2024). While our focus in this book is not on analyzing cultural objects – a core topic in much of the existing research on awkwardness, particularly cringe comedy – we do incorporate cultural objects and their interpretations to empirically study awkwardness. This includes self-help books and videos, as well as tweets and newspaper articles about awkwardness.

Social interactions

Third, cultural sociologists analyze interactions as a meaning-making process. Building on the symbolic interactionist tradition, they focus on how meaning is produced when people interact with each other. Symbols, categories, and interpretations are ultimately the result of processes of action and interaction. For example, subcultures such as punk produce symbols – such as the safety pin, categories – such as "weekend punks", and interpretations – such as "punk = resistance" (Hebdige, 1979). These meanings do not come from outside-in, but are produced when social actors within a subculture engage with in-group members and out-group members. In this book, our primary focus is on social interactions (to some extent on cultural objects, and the least on institutions). As we described in the previous chapter, we view awkward feelings as the outcome of a social interaction going wrong. This experience – of a social interaction going wrong – is made sense of using meaning-making processes, by (cognitively) interpreting a social interaction (what am I experiencing), by categorizing an interaction (is this similar to what I saw on *How I Met Your Mother?* Or to what my friend Katie told me about her awkward date?), and by taking action through social interaction, e.g. using a directing strategy. Hence, we will delve deeper into the sociology of interactions in the next chapter.

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3 Interactions, scripts, and awkwardness

In this chapter, we discuss awkwardness as an outcome of a social interaction going wrong. We first outline the commonsense notion of awkwardness as an individual trait as used in everyday life, popular culture, and popular science. Though most academic scholarship argues that awkwardness is socially constructed, most studies are rather silent about how and where this social construction happens. To theorize awkwardness, we therefore draw upon the sociology of interactions, in particular the dramaturgical approach (Goffman) and ritual theory (Collins). First, social interactions require a gathering of people in specific situations who take part in social occasions where they put up a performance. Social interactions are defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals on one another's actions in each other's immediate presence. These interactions can be focused or unfocused, but awkward feelings typically arise from focused interactions going wrong (e.g., face-to-face conversations). Interactions take place in the context of social occasions – a pre-established pattern of action such as a job interview, which provides behavioral norms and rules (or scripts). Therefore, not knowing or deviating from a script likely leads to awkwardness. A script is always performed by people who may fail, resulting in awkwardness. Second, as the dramaturgical approach lacks serious engagement with emotions, we draw on ritual theory, specifically interaction ritual chains (Collins, 2004). Such interaction rituals provide ritual ingredients leading to collective effervescence or shared emotional energy. Hence, awkwardness can be theorized as an interaction that is failing to generate mutual emotional energy, and therefore is going wrong.

Common sense: Awkwardness as an individual trait

In everyday life, awkwardness is often depicted as an individual personality trait. Someone *is* really awkward. In popular culture, the awkward archetype is ubiquitous, even outside of cringe comedy. Series characters such as Spencer Reid (*Criminals Minds*) or Sheldon Cooper (*Big Bang Theory*) are depicted as awkward geniuses, whose hyperintelligence inhibits them from being properly responsive to social cues (cf. Kendall's, 2011, description of

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the “good nerd”). In popular science, authors often talk about awkward people whose “narrow aperture of attention is dispositional, powered by neurological hardware that is as heritable as one’s body weight or running speeds” (Tashiro, 2017, p. 23). Or as a Zen psychologist argues: “A notable shift has occurred from understanding awkwardness as a benign, temporary condition to a malignant, lingering disease. Or shall I say a fatal design error?” (Polard, 2020). According to these popular scientists, people who are consistently socially awkward have certain traits in common (Tashiro, 2017). Awkward individuals fail to notice minor social expectations, find routine social situations difficult to traverse, can have unusually intense focus, particularly on topics governed by rules, such as logic or mathematics, often show enthusiasm for taking things apart, studying the components, then methodically reassembling the parts differently, and are less intuitive when it comes to social graces. Hence, such individuals – with their unique perspectives – might need guidance on how to navigate the social. This commonsense understanding of awkwardness as an individual trait has resulted in a cottage industry of self-help books and videos aiming to “cure” awkward people – a data resource from which we will draw in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 (see Chapter 5 on a description of the empirical material).

At the same time, there is an ongoing academic debate on whether awkwardness is a trait of individuals or simply a characteristic of interactions. Some scholars suggest that certain people may naturally have more difficulty reading social cues – for example, due to a lack of childhood training or because they are neurodivergent – but they still shift their focus from individual to the social. Kotsko (2010, p. 7), for instance, writes: “Even when personal deficits make certain individuals seem extremely awkward by nature, awkwardness remains a social phenomenon, and therefore the analysis of awkwardness should focus not on awkward individuals but on the entire social situation in which awkwardness makes itself felt”. Others, conversely, strongly believe we should shy away from labeling people as awkward individuals *at all*. For example, Plakias (2024, p. 34) is “skeptical that there’s a unified attentional deficit underlying the category of people we describe as awkward”. Though she acknowledges that some people are more awkward in certain situations because of their marginalized position, awkwardness could be used as a stigma for people we prefer not to engage with (Plakias, 2024, p. 35). Yet, while both strands of scholars agree that awkwardness is socially constructed, they remain largely silent on how this social construction occurs. Hence, we turn to the sociology of interactions to better theorize awkwardness.

Sociology of interactions

Our book is strongly embedded in the sociology of interactions – symbolic interactionism, in particular. The foundations of this approach were outlined by American sociologist Herbert Blumer in his book *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (1969). Here he describes three premises of symbolic interactionism: (1) acting is based on meaning, (2) meanings are created in interaction, and (3) meanings are negotiated in interpretation.

First, humans act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to them. For example, if people perceive a neighborhood as unsafe – even though crime statistics show otherwise – they will avoid this area. This "definition of the situation" thus impacts human behavior. In this sense, if one individual in an interaction perceives it as awkward – while the other person does not – it may become awkward in its consequence. This is particularly the case as awkwardness tends to spread across space – it is contagious (see Chapter 8 for more details).

Second, the meanings of things arise from the social interactions one has with others, and from society more broadly. This means that meanings – and social life in general – are always evolving and in process. Humans have agency as actors in these interactions. "Agency is that quality of social life that recognizes humans have minds, imaginations, intentions, and resources to plan, act, and achieve ends, to resist others, and manage their worlds within limits" (Hall, 2016, p. 2). Therefore, awkwardness results from a social interaction between at least two people where at least one person defines the interaction as awkward. Hence, in extension of the first premise, this is an active process in which individuals have the agency to label interactions as awkward; things are not naturally or automatically awkward. The "rise of the awkward" – both as an adolescent's buzzword and a recurring term in popular culture – therefore also potentially leads to a greater number of interactions defined as awkward. We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter, discussing how emotions are labeled through vocabularies.

Third, meanings are used and changed through interpretations of environments and experiences. A key assumption of symbolic interactionism is that the shared experiences – that is, the heritage – of the past affect the way humans continue to build their society. This is called the idea of constructed conditionality. Thus, in order to understand society, there is a reality of conditions and circumstances that need to be taken into account. Though these conditions and circumstances do not determine the outcome of a society or social structure, they condition the social framework that yields opportunities and constraints for the agency that people have in taking action. Consequently, existing conditions shape interactions but do not determine them (Hall, 2016). Turning to awkwardness, it means that some social occasions are more likely to become awkward – but do not necessarily need to be – due to a specific reality, such as meeting your in-laws for the first time or dating. Below, we will further explain what we mean by interactions, gatherings, situations, occasions, scripts, and performances.

Social interactions as dramaturgy

A key branch within symbolic interactionism is Goffman's (1959, 1963) dramaturgical approach. With respect to the conceptualization of awkwardness, the dramaturgical approach helps to understand how the disruption of interaction can make people feel uncomfortable, uncertain, and self-conscious as its flow comes to a halt. In the absence of norms that would have otherwise helped to define the situation, participants of the interaction are now left ill at ease – that is: feeling awkward. Goffman's main thesis is that (1) social interactions require (2) a gathering of people in specific (3) situations who take part in (4) social occasions where they put up a (5) performance. Each of the five elements contains likely sources of awkwardness.

Social interactions: Focused and unfocused

Within Goffman's work, social interactions are defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate presence (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). Such communicative behavior between two or more people mutually affects their construction of reality and lines of action. The most ubiquitous form of social interaction is the everyday conversation. This is what Goffman (1963) calls focused interaction, in which people are – as the name implies – focused on each other and their shared activity. This encompasses, in the words of Goffman (1981, p. 7) "arrangements in which persons come together into a small physical circle as ratified participants in a consciously shared, clearly interdependent undertaking, the period of participation itself bracketed with rituals of some kind". In other words, the most profound forms of focused interaction are conversations between two or more people. Yet, focused interactions may also include activities that require less verbal communication but still focus on the other participant(s). Goffman (1983), for example, highlights "bouts of love making" (which, of course, inhabits a plethora of potentially awkward situations) and less potentially awkward situations such as card games. Though Goffman – a man of the 20th century – also includes "telephonic connection and letter exchange" (1983, p. 6) to focused interactions, he primarily focuses on physical, face-to-face interactions. However, social interactions now increasingly occur in a mediated form, through social media or online chatting. The extent to which mediated social interactions can be as successful as physical interactions is widely debated among scholars. We will return to this question below. In either case, most of the quintessential awkward moments – hugs gone wrong, dates gone awry – are the result of focused rather than unfocused interactions.

Besides such focused interactions, people also engage – willingly or unwillingly – in unfocused interactions. With unfocused interactions, Goffman refers to the exchanges of information occurring in situations of co-presence (often in larger groups) in which none of the participants take the official center of attention. People are physically co-present, but engaged in different activities and foci. Though we might wonder how much of an interaction collectively waiting on a train, or patiently sitting in a waiting room actually is, Goffman (1963) is quite explicit in arguing the interactional aspects of such encounters, claiming that participants do acknowledge and monitor other people's presence. Goffman (1963) calls such implicit acknowledgment civil inattention: "One gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present [...] while [...] withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design" (p. 84). Thus, though unfocused interactions might sound less likely to become awkward – no small talk required – the intricacies of being civil inattentive are manifold. Conversely, entering a fully packed room with coffee stains on your white shirt, what could possibly go wrong?

Gatherings and situations

As already touched upon above, Goffman (1963, p. 18) foregrounds that social interactions require, first of all, a gathering of people – "any set of two or more individuals whose members include all and only those who are at the moment in one another's immediate presence". Gatherings too can be focused and unfocused. In either case, key here is that people need to be close enough for others to perceive their actions and close enough to feel that they are being observed. Once someone moves out of the sight and hearing of others, social cues can no longer be observed, meaning awkwardness cannot be witnessed or perceived – perhaps to the relief of the person who tripped over their laces and spilled coffee on their white shirt mentioned above. This leads us to believe that awkwardness can only be felt or perceived in the heat of the moment, as we discussed in Chapter 1: witnessing a norm transgression, a faux pas (possibly literally, cf. white shirt). This brings up the question of whether a gathering (face-to-face, or mediatized in the form of, e.g., a sitcom) is required for awkwardness to emerge. We will touch upon issues of time and space in Chapters 7 and 8.

A related concept is that of situations. Gatherings – and thus many social interactions – take place within situations, which refer to "the full spatial environment anywhere within which an entering person becomes a member of the social gathering that is (or does then become) present" (Goffman 1963, p. 18). A gathering, thus, is the accumulated group of people present in a situation. Social situations can be highly diverse, think of a living room where a party is hosted or a classroom, for example, but they could also encompass larger groups of people, such as a music festival. People who become – or are made – part of social situations are forced to study the social attributes and definitions that are associated with certain situations, and act according to their definition (Goffman, 1964, 1974). As Goffman (1974, p. 8, quoted in Klemsdal & Clegg, 2022) stated: "I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question 'what is going on here?' Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to is presumed by the way individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand". Thus, individuals develop some kind of working agreement or definition of the situation.

Goffman's work allows us to discern several potential causes for interactions to become awkward within this context. First, given that individuals develop working definitions of social situations, individual errors are bound to happen. In other words, "[t]he individual [...] can be 'wrong' in his interpretations, that is, misguided, out of touch, inappropriate, and so forth" (Goffman 1974, p. 26). This neatly fits Kotsko's (2010) idea of individual awkwardness: an individual misreads the situation, and as such, the situation becomes awkward. Imagine, for example, arriving at a birthday party without having noticed the formal dress code on the invitation, or commenting on your friend's dating adventures without realizing that her mom is standing next to her. Second, one physical domain of a social situation might "be caught within the domain of two different occasions" (Goffman, 1963, p. 20). Not unlike Kotsko's cultural awkwardness, these social situations may then be the site of conflicts between different sets of regulation that should be governing the occasion (more on occasions in the next section). These situations might occur when different contexts overlap, like running into your senior supervisor on your girls' night out (or even worse, bachelor party). Third, the weight of an individual's influence on the definition of a situation might be higher or lower, depending on negotiation dynamics and power mechanisms (Clegg et al., 2006). Thus, there are potential conflicts about the appropriate definition of a situation, and who gets to decide whether some behavior is appropriate or not for a given situation. In either case, following the sociology of interactions, a key source of awkwardness lies in its perception by others or better: the interpretation of others as defining the social situation as awkward.

Social occasions and scripts

As discussed above, people gather in situations as part of social occasions: the wider social affair, undertaking or event, bounded in regard to place and time and typically facilitated by fixed equipment; a social occasion provides the structuring social context in which many situations and their gatherings are likely form, dissolve and re-form, while a pattern of conduct tends to be recognized as appropriate and (often) official or intended one – a "standing behavioral pattern" (Goffman 1963, p. 18).

Social patterns are defined as "(1) a form (2) which consists of social actions (behavior plus meaning); (3) a repetition of the form in time, space, context etc.; and (4) some probability that it will occur again" (Mondani & Swedberg, 2022, p. 556). Such pre-established patterns of action in social occasions strongly impact social interactions. For example, think of the difference between having a conversation with someone during a job interview and during an after-work drink. This focus on patterns within social occasions recurred in existing work on awkwardness, most notably regarding social scripts. Plakias (2024) specifically draws upon the idea of scripts – “the central guiding tool for coordinating behaviors in social interactions” (Eickers, 2023, p. 86) – to convey her understanding of awkwardness. Scripts, she argues, guide our behavior, even if we do not agree with the script’s normative underpinnings. And deviating from them, verbally, but also in our conversation timing, posture, physical distance or gaze tends to evoke feelings of awkwardness. A classic example is avoiding eye contact while having a conversation or, conversely, staring at someone. As touched upon earlier in this chapter, these scripts are highly cultured. Many people may recognize distinct cultural patterns in small talk, particularly concerning physical distance. Travelers to southern regions of Europe or the Americas might feel uncomfortable due to the closer physical proximity typically maintained in these cultures. Equally, those traveling to northern regions may perceive the social environment as awkwardly cold (see Beaulieu, 2004).

Such scripts are explicitly present in social occasions. For instance, expats commenting on the reserved and formal nature of Dutch birthday parties has almost become a genre of its own.[1] Therefore, it is crucial to understand the type of social occasion we are in when engaging in interactions, as it influences how we are expected to behave, how others are expected to behave, and what roles we are supposed to play. Take, for example, a job interview. Job interviews, as quintessential social occasions, usually contain a (potentially quite nervous) job applicant and a hiring committee. There are a number of formalities (see, e.g., Stewart et al., 2008) – an introduction round, an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions – but also many unwritten rules. Flip-flops are in most job interviews not recommended, unless you are applying for a new media job in an open office with a ping pong table and beer crates stacked to the ceiling. Also, candidates are usually asked to pay attention to posture – keep your feet off the desk, basically. These roles and related behavioral expectations (norms) are often not written out in formal etiquette but are tacit knowledge.

As illustrated by the examples above, social occasions can be sources of awkwardness in various ways. First, in some social occasions, social awkwardness is almost part of the script itself. Things are bound to become awkward, regardless of one’s social wit and cultural similarities. A well-known example is meeting one’s in-laws for the first time, particularly when it happens to be the first romantic interest of their child. In such situations, intense scrutiny is common, and one might be subject to light-hearted teasing about the new relationship. Or, vice versa, bringing a boyfriend or girlfriend home as an adolescent may very well provoke dad jokes about puppy love – the last thing any teenager wants to hear.

Second, awkwardness can arise in relation to the social script. A social interaction is least likely to become awkward when a social occasion has a clear script, all participants know and understand the script, and everyone adheres to the conventional patterns of interaction. For example, consider –

again – the Dutch circle birthday parties. The customary script is well-defined: attendees form a large circle with their chairs around a central table laden with snacks, preferably cheese and liverwurst. New entrants enter the room, shake hands with everyone present, and offer congratulations to each guest in honor of the birthday celebrant ("congratulations on [insert name]"). Things are more likely to become awkward either because someone does not know the script or deviates from it for a variety of reasons. For example, when a new entrant forgets to congratulate the person whose birthday is celebrated. Awkwardness can also be the result of the absence of a clear script. This is the case when a social occasion accidently leads to the conflict between two types of scripts (running into your manager at the bar). The COVID-19 pandemic introduced uncertainties to many scripts, including the birthday party script, and sometimes even left us without a script. Is shaking everyone's hands still necessary or acceptable? Do we really want to sit so close to each other? And is there, perhaps, also vegan liverwurst available? This leaves social actors without any social clue provided by the script to engage with one another. One may stick to the old habit trying to shake hands, while the other person in the interaction has learned the pandemic-proof way of greeting: the elbow bump. This interactional mismatch will most likely lead to feelings of awkwardness. In the caveats of unlearning old routines and learning new ones, awkward interactions are flourishing.

Performances, stages, face-work

The previous sections discussed awkwardness as a situated phenomenon, focusing primarily on scripts rather than individual actions. However, within the sociology of interactions, much emphasis is also placed on how individuals respond to and behave in social situations. Scripts need to be played out, after all. Goffman approached social interactions within occasions through the lens of dramaturgy, where social actors perform as if on stage. These performances are highly dependent on – and embedded in – the occasions described above, which shows in his well-cited definition of performances as "all activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15).

Within social situations, Goffman (1959) discerns a frontstage, where individuals show their performances to others, and a backstage, which is normally not seen by others and where they can step out of character and prepare their public performances. Before we enter the stage, for example as a lecturer, we might double check our dress and face to ensure that no food particles remain between our teeth, and no fly has been left open. The same goes for attending a party (checking the mirror whether our hair looks right), going on a date (exchanging nude shapewear for something more seductive), and joining a Zoom meeting (blurring the background to ensure no one notices last week's dishes). Awkwardness especially arises when backstage actions suddenly appear in the frontstage (publicly noticing and zipping the open fly, a partially undressed partner suddenly walking past in a Zoom meeting), as we will also discuss in Chapter 8 on the spatial characteristics of awkwardness.

Nevertheless, what this shows is that people use strategies to present themselves and control the impression they make on others. Goffman argues that in these interactions, individuals aim to maintain their face – the positive social value or character persons effectively claim for themselves that is assessed by others – in relation to the line. Face, in this context, is strongly connected to awkward interactions. For example, "losing face" can result from an unresolved awkward situation, such as a public speaking slip-up or forgetting key parts of a presentation. On the other hand, "saving face" occurs when someone helps you avoid embarrassment – like a friend warning you about a coffee stain on your shirt before your presentation. With line, Goffman (1967/2017) refers to the pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts in which individuals express the view of the situation others assumed they have taken. Altering one's line would lead to confusion, as participants in the interaction would be prepared for certain actions or responses that have become unsuitable (Goffman, 1955). This confusion would now, some 70 years later, probably be called "awkwardness". Think about the awkwardness that arises when an introvert, shy friend starts dancing on the bar's tables after a few drinks, or conversely, when a tough guy unexpectedly bursts into tears upon seeing a dead pigeon.

When a face is threatened, actions must be taken to counteract "incidents". Goffman calls such actions face-work. The steps of face-work that can be taken are – according to Goffman (1967/2017, p. 13) – highly dependent on cultural and social habits and standards: "They are like traditional plays in a game or traditional steps in a dance. Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices". The capacity to do face-work – and thus to save face in the case when things go awry – is usually called social skills, tact, or savoir-faire, and differs from person to person. Once losing face becomes a serious risk, a person has various defensive options. The first one is avoidance, for example, by ensuring the conversation will not bring about any information that threatens his line. For example, the punk adolescent kid, high in subcultural capital, might want to remove their old *One Direction* posters from their bedroom walls before their punk friends drop by. A second, corrective tactic can be found in acknowledging the situation, but not as something that is threatening to one's face ("I used to be a huge fan of *One Direction* when I was 12 years old, these are some relics of my bad taste as a child"). Of course, for this strategy to be successful, one is dependent on the willingness of the participants in the situation to accept this strategy.

Thus, Goffman emphasizes that such face-work is not only done by the offender; it could also be done by participants (sometimes to compensate for the offender's lack of face-work) to find a resolution of the situation. Plakias

(2024), for example, explores awkwardness that arises when a junior staff member inadvertently takes the table position of the head of department in a staff meeting – a setting that is, for most academics who have to endure monthly semi-formal department meetings, not too hard to imagine. As a result of this transgression, either someone must instruct the new hire to move, or the new hire must realize this mistake independently. Both scenarios can be awkward for the new hire, who might think: "Oh no, I did something wrong, and everyone is watching!" In the former situation, where someone notices the junior staff member sitting in the wrong chair, a colleague (a participant in this interaction) may try to preserve the situation through corrective practices, such as quietly explaining the situation to the transgressor without exposing them. Goffman calls this a protective practice. In the latter situation, when the new hire realizes the mistake on their own, defensive practices such as quietly getting up to get coffee and subsequently taking another chair might be employed. Often, both practices go hand in hand – by saving one's face one aims not to cause face loss in other participants in the situation, and vice versa (Goffman, 1955). The introduction of these protective practices is highly important for understanding awkwardness, as it shows that awkwardness is constructed not only as part of an individual transgression (and by extension an individual trait), but should be understood as a result of a broader discrepancy between intended or expected behavior, and what *actually* happens. We will discuss strategies to deal with awkwardness in Chapter 9.

Interactions, rituals, and emotional energy

The bulk of this chapter builds upon the work of Erving Goffman. However, other authors have extensively built on his legacy. One example is Arlie Hochschild, to whom we will return to in the next chapter. But perhaps one of the most well-known contemporary theorists on social interactions is Randall Collins. His primary argument concerns the ritualistic character of social interactions and the effects of both successful and unsuccessful interactions. In the final part of this chapter, we therefore outline his work, specifically the idea of interaction rituals and the role emotions fulfill this theory.

Ritual theory and emotions

Collins (2004, p. 7) defines a ritual as "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention, producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and group membership". It bears therefore some resemblance to Goffman's idea of the performance, in which attention is focused on the person on stage, and people are willingly or unwillingly part of a gathering or social situation. According to ritual theory, such rituals are at the heart of all social dynamics, as they "generate group emotions that are linked to symbols, forming the basis for beliefs, thinking, morality, and culture" (Summers-Effler, 2006, p. 135). Think about national anthems, regional traditions, religious dress such as a kippah or niqab, or subcultural symbols such as the mohawk, peace signs, or the Australian tracksuit. Correct usage marks in-group status, while incorrect usage can lead to cancellation and exclusion. Indeed, we assume that symbols out of place (Douglas, 1966) may be conceived as potentially awkward (think about singing the wrong national anthem, or a soldier sporting long hair and peace signs all over).

Rituals have been a subject of sociologists studying culture for decades. In one of the foundational studies, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1912) describes how collective gatherings produced and maintained social cohesion among group members through the rituals of Aboriginal Australians. This now classic work laid out the different elements "chaining" interactions to emotions. First, rituals are social gatherings in which individuals share a mutual focus of attention, typically directed at a sacred totem. Second, these gatherings generate what Durkheim refers to as collective effervescence, an emotional arousal that leads to a heightened sense of group consciousness. In contrast to Goffman's conception of social interaction, ritual theories explicitly argue that emotions are foundational to solidarity and culture (Summers-Effler, 2006, p. 136). Third, in Durkheim's study, these emotions are stored in group symbols, often closely linked to totemic images, which serve as emotional batteries and objects of group identification outside of specific social gatherings. To renew the symbol's emotional charge, groups need to gather periodically, completing the interaction cycle. Thus, in its most basic form, rituals follow a cycle: interaction > emotions > symbols > interaction.

Collins (2004) extends Durkheimian ritual theory to encompass not only sacred rituals but also everyday social interactions such as ordinary conversations. Today's rituals may include not just religious offerings, cockfights or traditional weddings, but also Friday after-office drinks, Sunday roasts, Taco Tuesdays, attending sports matches, the Swedish fika, bedtime routines with children, and more. Such rituals facilitate smooth(er) social interactions and (a better) socialization. For example, children spend time with their parents and learn about fairy tales – a gateway to understanding feeling and expression rules, as we will describe in the next chapter (see also Zipes, 2012). New colleagues learn the firm's implicit work culture and the types of performance expected from employees (see, e.g., Rimstad et al., 2023), and friends continue to synchronize their lives through shared activities (see, e.g., Oring, 1984, on dyadic traditions).

Ritual ingredients and collective effervescence

Collins (2004) formalizes ritual theory by distinguishing between ritual ingredients and outcomes. First, for an interaction ritual to be successful, it requires a group assembly and bodily co-presence. Bodily co-presence is essential, even – or perhaps especially – in contemporary mediatized society (see, e.g., Vandenberg, 2022). Imagine watching a music festival online and claiming to have attended it, without experiencing the actual dirt, exhaustion, and presence of other people. The connection to Goffman's perspective on co-presence in social interactions is evident in this context. A second element of a successful ritual is the barrier to outsiders, which stimulates a sense of group unity. This barrier makes it possible to distinguish the in-group from the out-group, both physically and symbolically. For example, not everyone is typically allowed to join after-hours office drinks. Support personnel, people deemed "uncool", or minoritized groups (Halkjelsvik & Moan, 2023) may not always be invited. Similarly, consistently skipping such activities may also lead to exclusion from future events and activities (Buvik, 2020). Another key ingredient is the mutual focus of attention; a collection of individuals must feel they are part of the same activity.

If these ingredients are all present and all conditions are met, participants may feel collective effervescence: group-based solidarity and individual-focused emotional energy. Collins (1981, 2004) distinguishes between positive emotions and moral feelings directed toward the group, which shape social solidarity, and the positive emotions and trust that individual participants feel in the form of emotional energy. Individuals always seek to maximize their emotional energy in every social encounter. According to Collins (2004, p. 74): "The success or failure of a natural ritual is felt rather than thought, at least initially". Successful rituals evoke shared action and (symbolic) awareness: a positive feedback loop that strengthens group solidarity and leads to increased emotional energy. Failed rituals lack momentary buzz and result in low levels of collective effervescence, no group solidarity, no heightened energy levels, and no respect for group symbols (Collins, 2004, p. 51). They also lead to negative emotions, such as shame or fatigue, particularly in the case of forced rituals (i.e. interaction fatigue). Hence, failed rituals require a lot of emotion work to maintain face (Collins, 2004, p. 111).

Awkwardness, in this context, may arise from a failing (ritualistic) interaction that is not able to generate emotional energy. A lack of such energy means things are literally not progressing in the right direction. For example, a new colleague joins the after-work drinks, a ritual that may strengthen group membership if executed successfully. Everyone has a couple of drinks, and as alcohol levels rise, the conversation becomes less work-related and more humorous. However, the new colleague begins telling jokes with racist elements that the group considers inappropriate. The jokes fall completely flat. No one laughs, and people just awkwardly stare at the new colleague with disdain. The positive emotional energy that motivates participants in the ritual to continue their conversation and jokes disappear. The participants are now left with some options. Considering that the positive cycle is broken, they may go home (the ritual, therefore, fails this time), or they may attempt to save the situation with protective face-work (come up with a new joke, or tell the new colleague that "we do not make such jokes in our office"). Yet, these face-saving efforts also depend on the emotions of the participants, and their ability to suppress or evoke them. Are they able to control their anger? Can they conceal their laughter if they secretly find the joke funny? As such, emotions and emotion work are crucial to understanding awkwardness and how it is experienced. Therefore, in the next chapter, we introduce our final theoretical building-block to theorize awkwardness: the sociology of emotions.

Note

1 For example, the website *Accidentally Dutch* has published a thorough survival guide: https://accidentallydutch.com/guides-to-holland/the-dutch-circle-party-guide

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4 Emotions, feelings, and awkwardness

In this chapter, we discuss awkwardness as an emotion. We first outline the commonsense notion of awkwardness as an individual emotion as used in everyday life, popular culture, and popular science. However, whether awkwardness is actually an emotion is subject to academic debate, largely depending on the disciplinary lens. Drawing on the sociology of emotions, we argue that emotions are clues to how we are thinking or how others are thinking. Hence, awkward feelings provide a clue that an interaction is going in the wrong direction. Within the concept of emotions, one can distinguish subjective feelings (e.g. anxiety) and emotional expressions (e.g. blushing). In this chapter, we outline three key understandings of the sociology of emotions, which help us theorize awkwardness. First, emotions are both biological and individual as well as social and collective. Hence, people feel and express emotions as part of emotion cultures, consisting of (1) norms, (2) beliefs, and (3) vocabularies. Feeling rules and expression rules set out the emotional norms. Failing to meet these norms can make social interactions awkward. Emotional beliefs are learned through socialization, helping to prevent such awkward interactions. Emotion vocabularies outline categories of meaning used to describe our emotional experiences – identifying what we feel and the labels we attach to those feelings. Hence, a second key understanding of the sociology of emotions is that emotions are not ineffable; they are articulated through emotion vocabularies. Awkwardness has been made an easily accessible label for an emotion through popular culture, such as cringe comedy and memes. Third, emotions do not just happen but are managed. Emotion work refers to the act of trying to change the extent, direction and duration of an emotion. Therefore, emotional deviance is often a source of awkwardness.

Common sense: Awkward emotions as individual expressions

Awkwardness is often considered an individual emotion, and emotions in everyday life are typically portrayed as highly personal. People often say things like, “you have no idea what it feels like to …” or “you cannot imagine how I feel right now” (Harris, 2024). Indeed, many of us feel quite

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isolated – at least for a short while – after making a faux pas such as declaring ourselves to be fans of the *wrong* band or calling our partner by our ex's name. Some even talk about "recovering" after such events (Thomson, 2022). On the other end of a social interaction, people may argue that they cannot comprehend others' emotions, stating they have "no idea what it feels like" to be a dad, to be part of a marginalized community, or to live in poverty, as they have not personally experienced this. In his handbook on the sociology of emotions, Scott Harris (2024) describes this approach to emotions as "a form of solipsism, where each emotional experience is unique and can never be understood or imagined by others" (pp. 6–7). In popular science, we often see a similar tendency to treat emotions as individually anchored. In fact, many popular scientists see emotions as even overriding individual agency. For example, Tashiro (2017, p. 75) writes: "… there are few emotions more acute in intensity than the feeling of awkwardness, and this intensity can easily overwhelm the awkward person's mind". He then argues "that we *feel* awkward before we *think* about the fact that we are in an awkward situation". This suggests emotions are almost biological, and that we can only respond to them after the fact. This individualized approach to emotions is prominently featured in popular culture and may even be the driving force behind many forms of culture. In (popular) music, for instance, lyrics often deal with emotions as individual expressions. Issues of personal identity have long been a key theme in pop music (Christenson et al., 2019), for example, way before awkwardness was 'coined' by memes and teenagers, in the 1990s sad kids' anthem: "But I'm a creep/I'm a weirdo/What the hell am I doing here?/I don't belong here". In recent years, awkwardness has explicitly become a theme in popular music, for example, BTS sings explicitly about awkwardness as an individualized emotion: "Inside of me/there's still (Oh-oh)/That awkward part of me".

However, whether awkwardness is actually an emotion is subject to academic debate, largely depending on the disciplinary lens. Some scholars suggest that awkwardness is – or at least can be – an emotion. The aforementioned psychologist Tashiro (2017, p. 75) describes awkwardness as a "powerful emotion". Social psychologist Clegg (2012, p. 274) refers to social awkwardness as "aversive social emotions". Taking a philosophical approach, both Kotsko (2010) and Plakias (2024) reject the idea of awkwardness being an emotion. Kotsko (2010) follows a rather individualized approach to emotions as "being located somehow inside the individual" (p. 9). He then continues: "We lack a clear word for something that is somehow between the objective and the subjective, between the status of an external situation and an emotion" (p. 9). Plakias (2024) is more outspoken in her rejection of awkwardness as an emotion. It is not an emotion, according to her, but a property that arises during social interactions. She is less clear about how this property then manifests, nor how we can empirically study it. Moreover, she argues that we lack reasons to classify awkwardness as an emotion, because "awkward feeling lacks intentional content, characteristic physical displays, physiological changes, and action tendencies" (pp. 43–44). For example, according to Plakias, fear has a characteristic physical display: a rapid heart rate. We argue that this conceptualization of emotions is primarily biological, focusing on automatic and inevitable bodily responses within individuals. Like Kotsko, her solution is to distinguish between awkwardness and awkward feelings – where the latter refers to subjective experiences characterized by uncertainty, self-consciousness, and discomfort (p. 39). Yet, do all emotions have a characteristic physical display? Some people experiencing fear would actually argue "my heart stopped for a moment", and bereaved people often feel that their grief is so intense that they cannot seem to cry. And though happiness is usually accompanied by a smile, not everyone who feels happy smiles all the time. Moreover, are awkward feelings not a part of emotions?

Sociology of emotions: Defining emotions and feelings

In order to better understand how awkwardness relates to emotions, we will bring in the sociology of emotions. Below, we will theorize that – like emotions – awkwardness is not located somewhere within the individual, but is elicited from – and constructed out of – social interactions, arguing against the primarily individualized and biological conceptualizations of emotions. We will start with what a sociology of emotions looks like and how it impacts our conceptualization of awkwardness.

Our book is firmly embedded in the broader field of the sociology of emotions. Scholars working in this field examine the social dimensions of emotions. In sociology, one of the most influential definitions of emotions is drawn from the work of Hochschild (1983), defining emotions "as linked (like a sense) to what is going on in the world and (like a clue) to what is going on in our heads" (Harris, 2024, p. 11). As such, awkward feelings provide a clue that an interaction is going in the wrong direction. Hochschild defines emotion as our most important, biologically given sense which – like other senses (hearing, touch, and smell) – helps us understand our relationship to the world and which prepares us for action (Hochschild, 1983, p. 219). "Fear, for example, indicates danger while an increased heart rate prepares us to flee or fight". However, emotion is a unique sense because it not only connects to action but also to cognition: our perspectives (Hochschild, 1983, p. 219). Emotions can be treated as clues to how we are thinking or how others are thinking. For example, pride in job success, such as a high-impact academic publication, may reflect our factual academic careers: showing that we aim to advance our field of research. But it may also reveal something about the academic world, which values high-impact journals over other aspects of academic work (e.g. helping a junior colleague prepare their tutorials). In line with this external attuning of emotions, the sociological approach to the study of emotions is therefore, in many cases, a two-stage theory of emotion (Schachter & Singer, 1962). In the first stage, emotions manifest as biological arousal (smiling, crying, increased heartbeats, etc.). The second stage, conversely, is a reflexive process (read: meaning-making) in which the individual uses situational cues to assess whether their emotion is actually appropriate for the given situation. We will further develop the *fit* of emotions later in this chapter.

Within the concept of emotions, we can distinguish between internal and external emotional experience: subjective *feelings* and emotional *expressions*. These expressions are the external manifestation of emotions and articulations of feelings such as our facial expressions (smiling, pouting), vocal tones (the lower tones of angry parents, the high shrieking of children finding presents under the Christmas tree), and of course the words we use and the way we act (Bericat, 2016). As such, emotional expressions are key to engaging in social interactions (Von Scheve, 2012). However, the relationship between feelings and expressions is complex. First, there is a lack of evidence that internal feelings inevitably produce external bodily changes (Bericat, 2016). Again, not everyone who smiles is happy, and not everyone who is sad cries. The primary reason for this is that external manifestations serve not only an emotion-expressive function; but also a social communicative function (Marinetti et al., 2011, p. 32). Emotions, in this sense, are not just individual biological responses; they are highly social and collective; they are manifested in the context of emotion cultures. In other words, the way we express emotions is highly cultural, with some cultures for example being highly expressive, whereas in others emotions are much more muted (Safdar et al., 2009). Second, "emotional expression cannot be reduced to a simple direct manifestation of an internal emotional state, but has to be considered as emerging from an interactive context" (Marinetti et al., 2011, p. 32). In other words, emotions do not just happen; they are the result of emotion work. For example, a football player might scream and cry, rolling around frantically, after an opposing team's player grazed his leg. Yet, he will be less likely to display such behavior when hurting his leg while playing with his kids or on a date night with his wife. In the next section, we will further unpack the definition of emotions by following Harris (2024), who debunks three commonsense assumptions we may have about emotions. We will connect these assumptions to our conceptualization of awkwardness.

Emotions are biological and individual but also social and collective

Primary and secondary emotions

Emotions are both biological *and* social. As mentioned above, emotions are often first and foremost considered to be biological phenomena. They are strongly connected to our bodies. When we feel angry, our face may turn red; when we feel sad, our eyes become watery. Strong emotions in many cases also overpower our rational thinking and acting, almost like a biological force. Such emotions are referred to as *primary emotions* and are "considered to be universal, physiological, of evolutionary relevance and biologically and neurologically innate" (Bericat, 2016, p. 492). These include satisfaction–happiness, aversion–fear, assertion–anger, disappointment–sadness, and startlement–surprise (Turner, 1999, p. 145). The regulation of primary emotions arguably has a genetic basis (Al-Shawaf & Lewis, 2020). Most neurotypical babies more or less automatically know how to cry, learn how to smile, and – some two years after their birth – are highly skilled at throwing tantrums. Yet, which emotions we are expected to show – at least as adults – in certain occasions is very much a cultural matter. *Secondary emotions* are also well-known to most people, yet less biologically grounded. Think about guilt, shame, pride, nostalgia, and disappointment (Bericat, 2016). Even more than primary emotions, secondary emotions are socially embedded and situational. For instance, eating the last cookie is often not something to feel guilty about, especially if you live alone. However, if you eat the last of your partner's favorite cookies, you might feel a little more guilty. Similarly, loudly singing Adele in the shower is not something to feel ashamed about. However, once your neighbor starts commenting on your (lack of) talent, you might tone down your volume next time. Thus, emotions are (also) highly social. Similarly, what is awkward in one occasion may not be perceived as awkward in another occasion. As such, even private emotional issues are often the result of larger societal issues. Seeing such societal causes of individual issues has been referred to as "the sociological imagination" by C. Wright Mills (1959). For example, in his classic study on suicide, Durkheim (1897/2005) shows how an act often seen as highly individualized – taking one's own life – has social causes. Hence, we draw on the concept of emotion cultures. Emotion cultures consist of three core elements: (1) norms, (2) beliefs, and (3) vocabularies.

Emotion cultures: Feeling and expression rules

The sociology of emotions posits that humans – as social actors – are "capable of feeling, capable of assessing when a feeling is 'inappropriate', and capable of managing that feeling" (Hochschild, 1979, p. 557). People assess such appropriateness by comparing their feelings to what they believe the *feeling rules* are, that is the shared (often latent) guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel (Hochschild, 1979, p. 564). In other words, feeling rules are the norms governing what one can appropriately feel in a given occasion.[1] For example, we are supposed to feel sad when a relative passes away or when we are going through a divorce. Excessive partying is not uncommon in these occasions, yet it is often frowned upon or portrayed as a form of coping. Similarly, when their child scores a goal in a football match, parents are supposed to feel proud; not displaying such pride will evidently come across as bad parenting. And, as described extensively in the previous chapter, when we accidentally reveal our backstage, we are expected to engage in some face-work to rectify our performance (cf. Goffman, 1959, 1963). In other words, the feeling rules may indicate that we should feel awkward after making certain kinds of social faux pas. Reactions to such awkwardness might range "from self-consciousness to embarrassment and shame and the intensity of these reactions can vary by the situational contexts" (Wherry et al., 2019, p. 754).

In addition, *expression rules* prescribe how an emotion should be expressed. Here, the work of Hochschild – and sociology of emotions more broadly – intersects with that of Goffman and the sociology of interactions more broadly. To reiterate, Goffman outlined various social rules that govern social occasions, rules that need to be adhered to for interactions to run (relatively) smoothly. This means that adults are usually not expected to burst into tears in everyday interactions (funerals and sad movies being notable exceptions), and screaming is similarly discouraged (women encountering a spider or mouse might be a notable exception here). Following this spider argument, it immediately becomes clear that such expression rules are highly gendered (Peterson, 2006). Computer nerds (i.e. white men, cf. Kendall, 2011) may be more allowed to express themselves in ways that are considered awkward, while women are more often expected to be graceful and empathetic (see e.g. Christov-Moore et al., 2014 on gender and empathy). In a similar vein, no one would perceive teenage boyband fans as outsiders. Yet, screaming, fainting, and holding "will you marry me" signs during concerts would likely be seen as quite weird or awkward for successful businessmen, even though they might be equally moved by the performance. Thus, generally, social actors strive to follow these feeling rules, creating a fit between what they want to feel, what they should feel, what they try to feel, and how these feelings should be expressed.

Emotion cultures: Rules and emotional beliefs

Such feeling and expression rules have five key characteristics. First, feeling and expression rules often remain invisible; yet their impact is pervasive. According to Hochschild (1979, p. 566), "feeling rules differ curiously from other types of rules in that they do not apply to action but to what is often taken as a precursor to action. Therefore, they tend to be latent and resistant to formal codification". When they become visible, it is usually because they are broken (see also Zerubavel, 1997), which comes with a certain cost, both for the perpetrator and for the rule itself. For the person breaking a rule (being grumpy at your wedding, being overly cheerful at a funeral), this obviously could lead to potential ostracism. For the rule itself, continuously breaking could weaken the rule's social power. Second, feeling and expression rules are enforced, for example through claims and comments that act as reminders of these rules. For example, when someone says, "you should not display such behavior in this situation, you should be ashamed of yourself!" when you curse in front of your children. According to Hochschild (1979, p. 564), the rights and duties of a feeling have three properties: (1) extent (one can feel too much or too little shame, think about the term *overreacting*), (2) direction (one can feel shame while one should be proud), and (3) duration (after a couple of months, one is expected to get over a breakup). Third, emotion cultures are learned. Emotional socialization – the process by which individuals learn their emotion culture and develop their emotional beliefs – is crucial for becoming an emotionally competent actor (Peterson, 2006, p. 122). Again, we expect different behavior from a two-year-old toddler (tantrums!) than from an 18-year-old adolescent (FOMO!), or from a 40-year-old parent (de-escalating toddler tantrums). Fourth, feeling and expression rules are subject to change and differ between social groups (culture, class, gender etc.). As described above, certain emotional behaviors are historically more tied to men's roles (e.g. bossiness), whereas others are more tied to women's roles (e.g. empathy and care). Similarly, historically working-class cultural expressions – such as attending a football match (Edensor, 2015) – require different ways of expressing emotions compared to quintessential upper-class activities like attending the opera (Bull, 2019). Fifth, feeling and expression rules are ideological and hence serve the interests of particular social groups.

Building upon this literature, we perceive awkwardness as a domain spanning emotion, one that is not tied to a specific occasion such as weddings (happiness), concerts (excitement), children's sports games (pride), or funerals (sadness). Feeling awkward, we argue, results from a misfit between subjective feelings ("I'm feeling X"), feeling rules ("I should be feeling Y"), and expression rules ("I should express my feelings in Z's way"). For example, awkwardness might arise from a rather unsuccessful real-life date after months of chatting on social media. One could think, "I should be feeling love and excitement to finally meet this person in real life", but may think, "this person does not really meet my expectations. In fact, I find them quite annoying". This leaves the question, "I am expected to behave a certain way on a date, how do I end this date without hurting their feelings?" Therefore, awkward feelings are the result of interactions going wrong, emerging from mismatches between subjective feelings, rules, and the occasions in which the interaction occurs.

Emotions are not ineffable but articulated through vocabularies

Emotion cultures: Vocabularies

Besides norms and beliefs, emotion cultures encompass vocabularies. As Harris (2024, p. 8) argued: "Despite a preconception that Americans sometimes have – that emotions are ineffable – people regularly do discuss and label their emotions, both weak and strong ones". Emotion vocabularies outline categories of meaning that are used to describe our emotional experiences (Peterson, 2006). Hochschild referred to these vocabularies as framing rules, which are closely linked to feeling rules as they imply each other. As such, emotion cultures include emotional reflexivity: what am I feeling (emotional identification) and how can I articulate that feeling (emotional labeling)?

This reflexive process can be complicated for several reasons (Rosenberg, 1990, pp. 5–6). First, different emotions have similar manifestations. Crying, for example, could be a manifestation of sadness, happiness, disappointment, and so on. Second, emotions can be mixed. For example, upon graduating, one might feel proud of their achievements, but might also experience sadness and nostalgia because their college life has truly come to an end. Third, ambiguity can arise from a lack of feeling and/or expression rules, or the experience that there is a mismatch between one person's experience of a certain feeling, and the other person's experience. Classic examples include mismatches in the meaning of love among different people (see Swidler, 2001). For some, it is strictly reserved for long-term relationships, while others may easily hop from one partner they think they love to another. Fourth, a language may lack an appropriate term to identify or label a specific feeling. Sometimes, we might experience a feeling that is difficult to put into words, but once we have the words for it, it suddenly becomes "a thing". Rosenberg (1990, p. 5), for instance, argues that non-German speakers might be less likely to experience – or recognize – *Schadenfreude*. Similarly, the Dutch word *gezellig* (referring to a specific kind of cozy, fun, convivial, or lively situations) is very clear to Dutch speakers but can be more difficult to fully capture for those not acquainted with the term.

Popular culture as a source for emotion labels

Hence, language plays an important role in identifying and articulating emotions – it acts as a tool that people have created to make sense of a situation. Often, people articulate emotions to refer to their assessment or perspective of a particular situation, and, as such, emotions are tools that label social interactions (Harris, 2024, p. 87; Swidler, 1986). Consider the teenager yelling "AWKWARD!!!" when they see their parents kiss. Yet, awkwardness as a label of this kind is a fairly recent development. As a cultural phenomenon, awkwardness did not gain mainstream attention until the 2000s. The rise of awkwardness in the early 2000s is no surprise. While emotion labels were previously learned through socialization and sometimes by learning a new language (which allowed, for example, English speakers to enjoy a *gezellige* evening filled with *Schadenfreude*), both the Internet and cringe culture accelerated the spread of new phenomena at lightning speed. These phenomena are now instantly accessible through downloading and streaming. Think about Socially Awkward Penguin (year of origin: 2009, according to Know Your Meme),[2] classic television series such as *The Office UK* (2001), and even an MTV comedy-drama *Awkward* (2011). Thus, while people are culturally socialized through language, they can also learn new tools through, among other sources, popular culture.

However, this does not mean that the experience of awkwardness did not exist before the 2000s. Social interactions have been going wrong since the invention of the spoken word – or perhaps even long before. Instead, these experiences may have been labeled as (or confused with) embarrassment, shyness, shame, or anxiety. Goffman (1956) stresses, for example, the ubiquity of embarrassment, writing that "[i]n our Anglo-American society at least, there seems to be no social encounter which cannot become embarrassing to one or more of its participants" (p. 265). In Chapter 1, we described how awkwardness relates to similar emotions. We want to reiterate that the emergence of the label 'awkwardness' has reshaped how we categorize emotions. In the past, feelings now seen as awkwardness were simply labeled as embarrassment due to the lack of a distinct term. With this new label, we can now differentiate more precisely between various emotional experiences that were once grouped together.

Emotions do not just happen but are managed

We often think of emotions as things that just happen to us, that are inevitable and beyond our (rational) control (Harris, 2024). Consider the sudden spark you might feel when an acquaintance turns into a love interest, or the outburst of rage following a seemingly minor incident, such as stepping on a piece of Lego after a long day at work. From a young age, people are told to follow their heart and to let emotions and feelings affect their decisions. In other words, we are often led to believe that emotions are automatic and guide our behavior. However, this is only part of the story. Emotions do not only affect us; we also actively manage and manipulate how we feel. As we described in the previous chapter, we adopt different roles and emotions that suit the performance we aim to present in our interactions with others.

Emotion work and acting

Indeed, the presence of feeling rules in many social occasions compels us to engage in emotion work – the management of feelings and expressions to achieve social appropriateness. More precisely, emotion work refers to the act of trying to change the extent, direction and duration of an emotion – both subjective feelings and their expressions – to fit what is desired or deemed appropriate in a certain situation (Hochschild, 1983). This work can take the form of surface acting to comply with expression rules, where one alters outward expressions to follow the expressive guidelines of an occasion. For example, primary school teachers might smile encouragingly when a pupil presents their first book review, even if the review is unconvincing. In some cases, this is even ingrained in a job description, such as with waiters who are required to keep smiling, even if they have received no tip at all. However, sometimes following feeling rules requires deep acting. Deep acting goes beyond the surface manifestation of emotions, and aims to alter how people *actually* feel (Hochschild, 1983, p. 42). This involves not only changing one's expressions but also trying to alter one's feelings by deceiving oneself. Consider people repeating affirmations during childbirth or job interviews ("You are strong, you are smart, you can do this!"), taking a bath to calm their nerves, young university teachers dressing up to feel more confident, or a football team talking negatively about the opposing team in the locker room to evoke a stronger sense of passion and determination to win the match. Thus, emotion work is present to some degree in all social interactions.[3]

Emotion work has several key characteristics. First, the focus of emotion work is on the act of trying, rather than the actual outcome, as it involves reflexivity regarding emotions and how to manage them (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). For example, you may try to feel sad or happy about something. In other words, motivation ("what I want to feel") mediates between feeling rules ("what should I feel") and emotion work ("what I try to feel"). Second, emotion work differs from suppressing or controlling feelings. Hochschild (1979, p. 561) distinguishes between evocation, which focuses on a desired feeling that is initially absent, and suppression, which focuses on an undesired feeling that is initially present. For example, after a difficult breakup, one might want to get over their ex-partner as soon as possible. Therefore, one might evoke negative feelings about the ex-partner (e.g. poor cook, bad taste in music), and suppress positive feelings (those years were nice, but not *that* nice). Third, as emotion work entails both aspects of emotions (feelings and expressions), techniques of emotion work are cognitive, bodily and expressive (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562). Cognitive emotion work involves trying to change mental schemata, such as images, ideas, or thoughts. Thus, images of our ex-partner may move from the mental category of "loved one" to "someone from the past I no longer care about". Bodily emotion work is the act of trying to change the somatic or other physical symptoms of an emotion, such as the nervous presenter trying not to shake. Finally, expressive emotion work involves trying to change expressive gestures to alter inner feelings, such as smiling at oneself in the mirror to feel happier or more confident.

Emotional deviance

Though often used to achieve specific goals (such as winning a match), surface and deep acting are also ways to avoid emotional deviance (Thoits, 1990, p. 181). Emotional deviance refers to experiences or displays of emotion that differ in extent, direction and duration from what is expected in a given occasion. For instance, if a football team were to speak lovingly about the opposing team and even hug them during the match, it would come across as quite awkward. Similarly, a waiter ranting about their mistreatment after receiving no tip, a grumpy groom, or a happy widow all demonstrate mismatches between experienced and displayed emotions, as well as situational expectations. While emotional deviance might be a characteristic of certain mental illnesses, everyone may experience situations of emotional deviance, especially in situations of ongoing stress or when they lack sufficient support for their feelings (Thoits, 1990). Awkwardness in this context may be most closely related to everyday awkwardness (Kotsko, 2010);

awkwardness as the result of individual misconduct (see Chapter 1). There are also structural conditions that may contribute to emotional deviance. This includes having to play multiple roles, such as being someone's friend and their GP, or (sub)cultural marginality, including having to meet the demands of multiple cultures or subcultures. Certain interactions are more likely to increase emotional deviance, such as role transitions (becoming a parent or starting a lecture as a teacher) and occasions with rigid rules (e.g. coronations, graduations, Dutch circle birthday parties). In these contexts, cultural awkwardness (Kotsko, 2010) might flourish (Chapter 1). Finally, of course, in order to experience deviance, clearly defined feeling and expression rules must be in place. Without such rules, or with poorly defined ones, it becomes more likely to express "wrong" emotions in the eyes of other participants. This idea most strongly resonates with Kotsko's (2010) radical awkwardness (Chapter 1).

In the following empirical chapters, we will explore the relationship between awkwardness, emotion work, and emotional deviance more explicitly. But first we will discuss the empirical data and methods we will draw upon Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9,

Notes

1 In social psychology, these feeling rules are often referred to as "emotion norms": cultural expectations regarding how people should feel in particular situations; or, socially acquired standards for assessing the appropriateness of emotions that we experience and display (Thoits, 2004).
2 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/socially-awkward-penguin
3 In contrast to emotional labor which focuses on emotion management in occupations (which is explained in-depth in Hochschild, 1983).

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5 Analyzing awkwardness

Though awkwardness appears to be everywhere – from teenage vocabulary to cringe television and from beds to desks – it is strikingly absent in one context: empirical academic research. With some exceptions within the realm of psychology, such as the work of Clegg (2012a; 2012b) drawing upon qualitative interviews and experimental settings, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on what awkwardness actually is, how, where, and when it arises, and how people deal with it. That is, evidence that goes beyond snippets of popular culture and primarily philosophical reasoning in the already limited work on awkwardness (Kotsko, 2010; Plakias, 2024). Taking the sociological grounding of the previous chapters, we seek to address this profound research gap by building toward a better understanding of awkwardness in different spatial-temporal contexts. In this chapter, we explain how we will analyze awkwardness.

We do so by building upon four empirical studies of awkwardness in different contexts (everyday life, work, dating, and self-help), using interviews, ethnographic research, content analyses of (social) media posts and videos, and topic modelling of tweets. These contexts are embedded within the main theoretical concepts outlined in the preceding chapters. Working, for example, is a specific occasion which is guided by a context-specific script. Work typically occurs within a specific situation (office, factory), which brings about certain professional roles, expected performances, and feeling and expression rules. For instance, in most occupations, emotional expressions like crying are deemed "unprofessional". As a result, work often needs ample emotion work in order to be done successfully. Dating is a key example of an interaction ritual. It is clearly scripted, consisting of many informal rules that decide who initiates the interaction, and how. It too is dependent on rhythmic entrainment, only successful when sufficient emotional energy is evoked. Self-help is a type of emotion work within the context of neoliberal emotion cultures; it seeks to commodify the emotion work required by many of today's social settings, including work and dating. Everyday life, finally, fits within interactions in the broadest sense, comprising potentially all concepts addressed before. This chapter describes the background of each of these studies, as well as the data and the methods used to analyze these data.

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Our focus is not on developing separate theories of awkwardness in the domains of everyday life, work, dating, and self-help; instead, we will develop a sociological theory and typology of awkwardness – moving beyond a simple definition. Hence, our empirical work will be integrated in three chapters which build toward a sociological typology of awkwardness in the conclusion: awkward interactions (Chapter 6), awkward times (Chapter 7), awkward spaces (Chapter 8), and dealing with awkwardness (Chapter 9). Before we move on to these chapters, we will first discuss below what data and analyses we draw from in them.

Awkwardness in (not so) everyday life[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic: A hotbed for awkwardness

As discussed in Chapter 3, our everyday interactions may seem mundane, but they are actually shaped by a complex web of implicit norms, scripts, and rituals. These social guidelines are usually stable and consistent. However, major events can disrupt the status quo, challenging everything we know about how we interact with others. One of such events took place in our recent history.

When, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the infection control measures abruptly changed social interactions throughout the world. This external shock created new routines, and transformed old ones, which soon became a goldmine for researchers specialized in the study of social interactions (see e.g. Collins, 2020; Mondada et al., 2020). First, the measures forced people to work and meet online, collapsing work and private space, replacing face-to-face interactions by mediated interactions. Whereas working and meeting others from home is not new, online education and work suddenly became mainstream (Parker et al., 2020). New rules and routines had to be internalized almost overnight, forcing students, workers and basically everyone else to learn and engage in new practices in the digital realm. Second, social distancing meant the rules of offline interactions became restricted. Handshaking, hugging, or kissing generally were no longer socially accepted. Instead, new rules of physical interaction were introduced, such as the Wuhan shake or the elbow bump. As a result, people began to act in new ways without yet knowing or having internalized a new code of conduct. Ergo, the COVID-19 crisis defamiliarized the familiar on a global scale. In these moments of unlearning old routines and learning new ones (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), awkward interactions flourished. Therefore, our research focuses on how people discuss their experiences with COVID-19-induced awkward interactions on Twitter (now X), in news media articles, and in interviews we conducted after the pandemic.

This part of our empirical research is driven primarily by Goffman's and Collins' work on interaction rituals and emotional energy. Their original research was drafted at a time when interactions occurred mainly face-to-face. Though such interactions have been declining in general – with an increasing share of our time now spent online – the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process. At the onset of the pandemic, Collins (2020) deliberated on how sharp disruptions to the normal conditions of social interaction affected the validity of his Interaction Ritual Theory (see Chapter 3). He noted that non-face-to-face forms of communication have the potential to supplement – but not to supplant – face-to-face communication. As we explained in Chapter 3, bodily co-presence is important in successful interaction rituals, because it facilitates a mutual focus of attention, shared emotions, and rhythmic entrainment – think about the emotions felt in attending a football match or watching a movie together.

Collins (2020) observed that COVID-19 pandemic hampered successful interaction rituals in two ways. First, with most offices now requiring telework, many businesses tried to compensate the loss of social interactions by introducing mediated alternatives, such as virtual water cooler sessions or drinks. Anyone who has been part of such endeavors will probably confirm Collins' (2020) observations that the degree of (emotional) involvement in such sessions is often limited. Seizing up the situation even in offline occasion is a perilous moment, let alone when having to do this in a remote setting. The conditions for successful interaction rituals require synchrony (Collins, 2004) which is hard to achieve with a lagging video feed and distorted voices. Second, by the almost worldwide obligation to wear facemasks and keeping at least 1.5-meter distance, bodily co-presence became more complicated (Katila et al., 2020). This complicated non-verbal and even verbal communication, giving rise to misunderstanding and potentially awkward interactions. What do these developments teach us about awkwardness in everyday life? How important is face-to-face interaction? And how quickly does one (un)learn social norms?

Data and methods: Social media, news media, and interviews

To address these questions, we took a three-step approach. First, in order to map which COVID-19-related topics people considered awkward, we analyzed English language tweets[2] related to awkwardness. The outcomes of this first step informed our search strategy for the second step of our analysis that focused on the English language[3] news media articles that described specific COVID-19 awkwardness-inducing interactions in greater detail. Third, we added ten interviews with (Generation Z) students about resuming their normal life after the pandemic.

Social media data

Twitter (currently known as X) is one of the largest online social networks that allows users to post and interact via messages known as tweets. Twitter discourse observations are often used as a source in traditional media reporting (Broersma & Graham, 2013) and social science research (McCormick et al., 2017). To understand how Twitter users discussed awkwardness during the pandemic, we used a combination of search terms, combining the word-stem of "awkward*" and the following COVID-19 related terms: "covid*", "corona*", or "rona". To access these data, we used a Twint script which is frequently used in social media research (Bonsón et al., 2019). We collected English language Twitter data from the 1 January 2020 until the 31 December 2020, covering the early stages of the pandemic in which people were already social distancing by their own initiative before official measures and lockdowns took place; these were also the months in which people felt less confident about new forms of communication.

The dataset resulted in 23,802 tweets, and included tweet text, date of the tweet, username, number of replies, and favorites. Eighty-eight percent of tweets were from unique users. The text data were cleaned in Python by stemming and lowercasing, and removing stop words (e.g. and, or, that), corpus-specific words included in >80% of the text (e.g. awkward and coronavirus), and rare words that appeared in less than 200 tweets. We use Twitter data cumulatively to look for themes, rather than analyzing concrete users, which should be similar to anonymous public observation. Additionally, to protect the users from any unwanted attention, we anonymized all the tweets and private Twitter accounts mentioned in this research.

Topic modelling (TM) – an inductive unsupervised machine learning technique – was used to discover themes associated with awkwardness in the context of COVID-19 on Twitter. We used the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling technique that explores latent structures in texts by clustering words that occur in documents together more frequently than one would expect by chance (DiMaggio et al., 2013, p. 578). Moreover, LDA arranges these latent structures, or themes, proportionally. This helps to identify which themes are more or less dominant. While tweets can have multiple themes at once, for the purpose of this study we only look at the dominant themes of the tweet. Specifically, the theme with the highest proportion in the document. To conduct TM analysis, we used mallet tool for Mac (McCallum, 2002). By running the topic models with increasing number of topics and qualitatively assessing the coherence of topics' output and how logical are the analytical categories, we settled on a topic model with 30 topics.[4]

As the aim of this book is to analyze awkwardness in relation to social interactions, we selected broad search terms representing context in which these social interactions occur to ensure the topics are exhaustive. Therefore, TM output also included topics related to awkwardness in the context of COVID-19 but not related to social interactions (e.g. the way governments handled COVID-19 response, awkwardness in relation to vaccines, countries, presidents, and number of deaths worldwide). We have discarded the topics not related to social interactions (the complete TM is available on request; please see Giolo et al., 2023, for more details about the data collection and analysis).

The number of topics related to social interactions was 10 (Table 5.1). In other words, awkward social interactions represent one-third of the COVID-19 discourse for topics that were considered awkward.[5] In line with the observations of Collins (2020), the TM also shows that these topics are usually driven by two (meta)interactions of distance. First, they referred to *socially distant* interactions, usually mediated forms of interactions (e.g. topic 7). Second, *social*

Table 5.1 COVID-19 and awkwardness topics

	Topic	*Proportion (%)*	*Keywords*
1	New/old life comparison	40	talk lol shit good friends back virus person things weird made making life meet work end real ppl date friend
2	Small talk	19	school guy asked kids told mom silence call made died work dad phone back room virus talking started friend week
3	Situation scripts	13	door front walk back contact walking hold eye paper room open full drink close beer dog line street morning toilet
4	Family/celebrations	10	family year stay home friends christmas conversations safe party birthday holiday avoid gatherings thanksgiving members dinner happy love conversation due
5	Etiquette	10	hands hand hug shake handshake bump elbow fist handshakes hugs kiss shaking greeting wave touch give wash bumps greet weird
6	Masks	7	mask masks wearing wear face spread public smile protect uncomfortable question smiling avoid put air hide prevent mouth strangers nose
7	Video calls	7	video vaccine call home calls working meeting virtual meetings shots office online loves etiquette phone jill mumbles check work tips
8	Displaying COVID-19-like symptoms	5	cough public coughing sneeze allergies symptoms start throat thinking cold swear real breath water fever sneezing breathing run nose coughs
9	Delivery/rides	3	delivery food door driver relationship questions raises card response ride car Beijing pizza uber early order leave handle drop drivers
10	Hair/looks	3	hair stage cut grow growing looked phase side inside length short top dying haircut birx ideas long cnn reaction growth

distancing interactions led to uncertainties on how to interact in a situation in which anyone close by can be a potential super spreader (or virus denier) (e.g. topics 6 and 8). Most of the awkward interactions that occurred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic happened at the intersection of those (meta)interactions involving distance (e.g. pretty much all other topics). These data will allow us to draw conclusions about what people found awkward during the pandemic, and where (i.e. in what kinds of occasions) this awkwardness manifested. In the next chapters, we will refer to the type of study (EVERYDAY) and the tweets (T) by referencing the specific tweet number (x): EVERYDAY, Tx.

News media data

To gain better insights into the mechanisms behind awkward interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also investigated the use of awkwardness in coronavirus-related English language news media, again during the period ranging from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020, in the US and the UK. We used the Nexis Uni database and included 20 of the most read newspapers in the UK (YouGov, 2020) and US (Infoplease, 2020). Building upon the observations of Collins (2020) and our own Twitter analysis, we focused on mediated interactions and everyday interactions affected by social distancing measures. The queries used to find news items related to awkwardness and COVID-19 measures were “social distancing” and “awkward”. “Awkward” and “Zoom” or “Skype” were used to include news articles on mediated interactions through the most prevalent videotelephony platforms. This sampling procedure resulted in a sample of 50 units (32 social-distancing and 18 mediated interaction). In order to identify convergence points within their narratives of awkwardness that could provide a deeper understanding of this emotion and its objects, thematic text analysis was chosen (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These data will be used to gain a better understanding of how awkward interactions arise, and what exactly makes them awkward. In the next chapters, we will refer to the type of study (EVERYDAY) and the articles by referencing the source and year: EVERYDAY, name outlet, year.

Interview data

Finally, we conducted ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with international students living in the Netherlands. These students, often seen as digital natives, are typically more comfortable with mediated interactions (e.g. via social media or chat applications) compared to those who grew up in a time when face-to-face interactions dominated (Yates et al., 2015). However, this group also tends to rely more heavily on social interactions with relative strangers outside their households (e.g. at parties or on dates) than, for example, parents of young children or married couples. Consequently, this group was significantly affected by the pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). In total, ten students were interviewed by research assistants. The interviews lasted between 43 and 96 minutes, with an average duration of just over an hour. Eight of the respondents identified as women, and two as men, with ages ranging from 19 to 30 years (average age 24.5). To account for the cultural influences on social interactions (Hsu, 2017), we deliberately sought out a culturally diverse sample. Our respondents came from countries such as India, the United States, France, South Africa, Turkey, Portugal, Brazil, Germany, Mexico, and the Netherlands. However, to ensure they all experienced similar COVID-19 measures, all respondents were residing in the Netherlands at the time of the interviews. These data will be used in particular for a better understanding of how people define awkwardness, what makes them feel awkward, and how they deal with awkward interactions. In the next chapters, we will refer to the type of study (EVERYDAY) and the respondent (R) by referencing respondent number (x): EVERYDAY, Rx.

Awkwardness at work[6]

Why new work practices are making us feel even more awkward

The second empirical context consists of work settings. If there is one thing that cringe comedy tells us is that work in itself is a prime location for awkward interactions. Having survived the full gamut of awkward experiences as a teenager, most of us will only further immerse in awkwardness after starting our first job. Work-related awkwardness is so omnipresent and intense that it has even made its way into a board game. In *Awkward Moment at Work*, drunk 30- or 40-somethings compete to perform the best reactions to all too familiar awkward work interactions, such as accidental emails, wardrobe malfunctions, embarrassing slips of the tongue, and workplace romances.

Work is also awkward because, while we have considerable control over whom we interact with in our personal lives – such as friends and partners – this control is significantly diminished in work settings. Avoiding certain social interactions or individuals in the workplace is often challenging, if not impossible. Moreover, the inherently hierarchical nature of most workplaces creates fertile ground for a wide range of transgressions. It is no wonder that one of the most popular, and notably awkward, sitcoms is set in *The Office*. Our research zooms in (pun intended) on the awkward moments in the occasion of work by exploring the rules and roles in professional interactions. Contrary to party games, popular sitcoms, and existing studies on workplace (mis)behavior[7], workplace interactions are not only awkward due to capital misdemeanors; awkwardness also manifests in the more mundane interactions. Which desk can I take in open office plans? When am I allowed to disturb other colleagues? And what happens when I forget to unmute myself on Zoom?

The research on workplace awkwardness draws heavily from the sociology of interactions discussed in Chapter 3, particularly Goffman's concepts of the frontstage and backstage. In the frontstage, individuals perform for others, while in the backstage, they can step out of character and prepare for public interactions (Goffman, 1959). Traditionally, many workplaces maintained a clear separation between these two spaces, using physical barriers like cubicles or walls to provide employees with privacy and distance. However, in today's increasingly popular open-plan offices and co-working spaces, this separation is much less apparent. Personal workspaces are often shared, with employees working in close physical proximity, sometimes even at the same desk or table. In these environments, social proximity becomes a feature of the business model rather than something to be managed or minimized (Waters-Lynch and Duff, 2021). This constant state of co-presence creates a dynamic where individuals are not only aware of those around them but also feel as though they are being (consciously or subconsciously) monitored in their every action (Goffman, 1963). Observing how individuals manage face-work in these open environments – where maintaining face and properly withdrawing are far more challenging than in private or traditional workspaces – could provide valuable insights. In open-plan offices, the backstage is more likely to spill into the frontstage in unpredictable ways, making awkward interactions almost inevitable. In other words, open-plan offices may serve as breeding grounds for awkward social interactions.

The decision to focus on co-working spaces is a deliberate one that goes beyond their potential for generating awkward interactions. Co-working has rapidly expanded across the globe, driven by the rise of flexible work arrangements and the increasing number of workers operating outside traditional office environments. For freelancers in the knowledge economy, the lines between personal and professional life have become increasingly blurred (Lazzarato, 2004). These individuals are often displaced from conventional workplaces, conducting their work in coffee shops, bedrooms, or even on sunny beaches. What makes co-working spaces particularly interesting is their paradoxical nature. Although work is often performed individually and many co-workers are nomadic, these individuals pay to work in spaces where physical proximity to peers – that is bodily co-presence – is actively sought. Co-working spaces provide practical benefits such as access to amenities and the opportunity for social interaction and collaboration. However, these environments also force professionals into constant and often unplanned interaction, as privacy and barriers are intentionally minimal (Wijngaarden, 2023). This makes co-working spaces an ideal setting to observe the scripts, rituals, and interactions that shape work-related occasions. The open, shared nature of these environments provides unique opportunities to study both formal and informal social dynamics, enabling researchers to capture how individuals manage professional and respond to unplanned awkward interactions.

Data and methods: Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews

The study of work therefore uses empirical material from a qualitative study on co-working, including both ethnographic fieldwork as well as in-depth interviews.

Ethnographic fieldwork

We draw from empirical research in eight shared workspaces located throughout the Netherlands, focusing on ethnographic fieldwork in one particular co-working space. To observe how potentially awkward interactions were shaped, played out, and (not) followed up on, we spent in total one month in October 2015 participating and observing in a co-working space. The focus of this ethnographic research was on what Goffman (1963) refers to as unfocused interaction – the exchange of information in interactions where people are co-present but none takes the official center of attention. These unplanned interactions, often taking place in the workspace itself, near coffee machines, in cafés or at entrances were particularly valuable for understanding the dynamics of frontstage and backstage transgressions and how they were handled. The research also examined how the timing of interactions influenced the perceptions of awkwardness in a given occasion. In the following chapters, we referred to these data by referencing to the work study fieldnotes: WORK, fieldnotes.

Interviews

We also draw upon interviews with workers in co-working spaces. Forty-six workers were interviewed between September 2014 and October 2015. Seventeen identified as women, 29 as men. Their ages spanned the full breadth of the labor force, from early 20s to nearing retirement age. These interviews lasted approximately 55 minutes (ranging from 30 to 97 minutes). All interviews were recorded and then subsequently transcribed to allow qualitative analysis in a constructivist grounded theory approach. These data will help us better understand of how workers themselves experienced these awkward interactions, and how they sought to minimize awkwardness at work. We referred to these respondents (R) in the following chapters as WORK, Rx.

Awkwardness in dating[8]

"And she looked nothing like her profile picture"

Dating is an exciting part of life and traditionally serves to determine whether two individuals are compatible for a committed romantic relationship. Despite dating being heavily scripted – the expected and appropriate behavior of gender roles is highly institutionalized (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Rose & Frieze, 1989) – the notable pile of books promising to help introverted singles to make a crushing impression on their love interest shows that dating is experienced as a social minefield for many. In other words, dating is a social occasion in which awkward interactions are ubiquitous (Tashiro, 2017). Dating obviously is not a new phenomenon. The dating market has tortured people since time immemorial. Yet, especially since the 1910s dance craze, dating has become a consolidated part of people's lives in many parts of the Global North (Stoicescu, 2019). In traditional dating, physical proximity is an important starting point for meeting new people, such as at parties or at work settings (Rosen et al., 2008). Until quite recently, dating primarily took place through birthday parties of mutual friends, sports clubs, drunk encounters in a bar, or newspaper ads. Yet, while dating has been a quintessential co-present occasion, the rapid rise of online dating markets – apps specifically – has turned the practices of meeting the potential significant other upside down (Cummings et al., 2002; Schwartz & Velotta, 2018).

In 2019, about half of Americans under 30 had used apps such as Tinder to find a romantic or casual partner (Vogels, 2020). Online dating apps are appreciated for presenting a quicker and wider range of available potential partners, allowing for a faster cycle of recuperation after a failed connection, and making the process more enjoyable by making the required social and communications skills more manageable (Lawson & Leck, 2006). Online dating apps give strangers the opportunity to interact, and the lack of visual cues makes awkward interactions less confrontational than in non-digital contexts (Hardey, 2004). The online dating process is inherently grounded in (first) impression management (Goffman, 1963; Ward, 2016) as digital communication allows individuals to better strategize their self-presentation (Walther, 1996). Thus, compared to offline dating, the process leading up to a physical date is often preceded by developing elaborate expectations about a specific person. As a result, message receivers are more likely to form a romanticized idea of others. Based on this idealization, the risk of disappointment may increase if the expectations built in the online context are not met (Lawson & Leck, 2006).

Online dating introduces a whole new array of awkwardness. While traditional dating behaviors are relatively established, the social rules of online dating are still evolving. In this study, we explore online dating to understand how awkward interactions arise in situations that were once well-scripted but are now increasingly unsettled. Whereas existing studies or books on awkwardness and dating have often focused on negative emotions such as shame (Albury et al., 2021), or mishaps such as calling your partner by the wrong name (Scholfield, 2011), we seek to go a step further. We focus on the awkwardness evoked by online dating and the transition from online to offline interactions, particularly how the experience of awkwardness intensifies when expectations – shaped by impressions and emotions (cf. the sociology of interactions and emotions) – are unfulfilled.

Data and methods: Interviews with online dating millennials

The intention of this research is to uncover how millennials navigate awkwardness in online dating. Given that our focus is on understanding the experiences of individuals engaged in online dating and the meaning they attach to these experiences, we conducted semi-structured interviews. These interviews provided detailed descriptions and explanations of participants' (online) dating experiences (Flick, 2014). In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with millennials active on the dating app Bumble Bizz[9], following the strategies outlined by Blackwell et al. (2015) and Ward (2016). The platform works similarly to other dating apps: users design a profile stating their objectives and are "matched" with like-minded people who are open to connecting. The profile built for this research clearly stated its purpose, and provided a brief description of the study's objectives, and interview candidate criteria. The location settings for the profile were set to a 160 km radius from the device's location. This approach allowed recruiting a diverse sample population from larger cities as well as from smaller rural areas across the Netherlands, with participants having experience on different online dating apps. This provided opportunities for contrasting perspectives and experiences of awkwardness, ultimately enriching the findings of this study.

Those interested in participating in the study were able to "match" the profile to initiate communication. After answering their questions and explaining more about the study in detail, arrangements were made to schedule an interview conducted either via phone or Skype call. For this study, purposeful sampling was the most suitable method. Participants were aged between 24 and 39 years old and were previously or currently active on an online dating app. In total, 8 women and 7 men were interviewed. Eleven respondents were Dutch, while the others were of Mexican, German, Chinese or Vietnamese nationality. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were used for their names. The interviews focused on participants' ideas and formulations of awkwardness, explored their perspectives on the overall online dating dynamic, and into specific examples of awkward situations they had encountered. The measures taken to deal with such moments of awkwardness along with their consequences on themselves and others were also addressed. As with the other studies, the interviews were transcribed for qualitative analysis. These data will help us better understanding what awkwardness means in the context of online dating, and how the participants dealt with awkward interactions. Additionally, these data offers unique insights into the relationship between offline and online awkwardness. We referred to these data in the next chapters by providing each respondent a number: DATING, Rx.

"Curing" awkwardness through online self-help videos[10]

An awkwardness industry

After examining how awkwardness manifests in three distinct social contexts – everyday life, work, and dating – we can also observe that awkwardness takes on a new form in today's neoliberal society: as a productive theme in self-help content. Individuals seeking to avoid awkward interactions or overcome feelings of awkwardness are drawn to these resources. Under the influence of neoliberalism, capitalism, and individualism, the concept of the self has become highly malleable, constantly evolving, and something to be actively shaped and maintained (Giddens, 1991). In other words, people are continuously constructing, sustaining, and revising personal narratives that form the foundation of their self-identity. Simultaneously, and perhaps consequently, personal identity is increasingly determined by consumption, both through internal self-narratives and through the external expression of one's "consumption identity" (Giddens, 1991). In societies like the Netherlands and the United States, where neoliberalism is the dominant ideology, the individual is seen as responsible for their own happiness, success, failure, health, and all the other conditions we might find ourselves in. Following this logic, the self is seen as a vessel for infinite improvement. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that self-help has become a popular resource for helping people determine and achieve their goals in life (Bergsma, 2008; Scott, 2004), be it in dating, in reaching career achievements, or simply finding a sense of belonging.

Self-help books align with the ideal of infinite self-improvement, offering individuals strategies to (re)gain and exercise autonomy over their lives. This empowerment is always framed from an individual perspective: with enough willpower, it is suggested, one can overcome any obstacle (Rimke, 2000). For instance, Scott (2004) discusses the rise of a "shyness industry" built around self-help books and therapeutic programs that frame shyness as an individual problem to be conquered. These resources often promote a moralistic discourse that encourages people to see shyness, or awkwardness, as a personal flaw in need of correction (Scott, 2004, p. 135). Self-help advice aimed at "curing" awkwardness can be found across a wide array of media, including books, magazines, television, blogs, and video games. Although much of this advice is often based on superficial psychological research and theory, it is typically repackaged to appeal to a broader audience. People are primarily drawn to self-help books for pragmatic reasons. Compared to professional counseling or therapy, self-help books are more affordable, easily accessible, and allow readers to engage with the material at their convenience. They offer the privacy of self-exploration without the need for direct interaction with others, while also providing a sense of belonging to an imagined community of readers who share similar challenges (Starker, 1989). This sense of community is further amplified by platforms like YouTube, where self-help content is freely available. Users can engage with a community of their choosing through comment sections and community posts, strengthening the feeling of connection while preserving anonymity. This accessibility makes it easier for individuals to seek out advice and support, reinforcing the appeal of self-help as a resource for managing feelings of awkwardness.

While there is a significant amount of research on self-help books (also outside of the psychological scope, see e.g. Gwynne, 2024; Philip, 2009), less is currently known about more novel sources of self-help, such as YouTube.

YouTube hosts a vast amount of self-help materials, ranging from personal anecdotes by amateurs to professional videos by academic institutions. Our aim in this study was to gain a sociological understanding of how awkwardness is discursively constructed in self-help videos on YouTube. Specific attention was paid to the following questions: What is identified as the source of awkwardness in these videos? What types of advice are offered to prevent, overcome, or mitigate awkwardness? How is awkwardness valued – negatively or also positively?

Data and methods: Multimodal discourse analysis of self-help videos

Having outgrown its status as a mere entertainment platform, YouTube in its current form has the potential to increase users' autonomy over what and how to learn. It provides access to a wide range of topics: from knife sharpening and playing the guitar to theoretical physics and car maintenance, though often in an environment with no (or very limited) gatekeeping. Similar to the study of awkwardness in everyday life mentioned above, YouTube offers an unfiltered setting for self-help narratives, providing insight into Western societies' non-academic perspectives on awkwardness. Analyzing these self-help narratives can reveal how awkwardness is discussed, as well as strategies to deal with awkward interactions.

We examined a collection of eight YouTube videos (see Table 5.2 for details)[11] to analyze how awkwardness is discursively framed in online self-help content.

Table 5.2 Self-help videos dealing with awkwardness

Video Title	*Channel*	*Length*	*Year*	*Views*	*#Subscribers*
How to deal with embarrassment	Watchwellcast	05:00	2012	975,368	962K
7 Things Socially Awkward People Can Relate To	Psych2Go	05:16	2021	94,530	6.11M
4 Steps to Stop Being Socially Awkward	TopThink	10:04	2019	749,451	2.07M
If You Are Socially Awkward, WATCH THIS! | How To Overcome Social Awkwardness	Amir	08:57	2017	86,696	27.4K
CBT Self-Help for Anxiety	Getselfhelp	05:22	2016	76,180	5.94K
How To Turn Awkwardness Into Attraction	Charisma on Command	12:02	2019	2,202,125	4.67M
3 Ways to Beat Social Anxiety!	Kati Morton	08:34	2018	609,758	1.08M
How To Overcome Your Awkwardness	The Feminine Fancy	12:56	2020	23,003	147K

These videos were identified using the search term "awkwardness self-help" on YouTube. With this sample, we conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of the videos' content, following Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). While semiotic or discourse analyses typically focus on one specific mediality, multimodal discourse analysis allows for the incorporation several modes of signification into one's analysis. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) ask, "what modes are used and therefore what materials are invoked, and therefore, what are the senses which are involved?" (p. 28). In the case of YouTube videos, both video and audio may be invoked to create meanings that would not be possible through either modality individually.

The search term "awkwardness self-help" was used, because it yielded a set of videos of which most offer advice about how to overcome or lessen feelings of awkwardness. Contrarily, searching for "awkward self-help" yielded primarily video essays criticizing self-help in general, without having much to do with awkwardness, let alone providing advice on awkwardness. Data were gathered using two separate incognito web browsers to minimize the influence of browser history or cookies. Search results showed up in varying orders depending on the browser (sorted by relevance as per YouTube's default setting), but the obtained videos consistently appeared in a more or less similar order. After roughly the first 20 videos, search results began to differ quite significantly per browser, thus limiting reliability. Some videos had to be omitted because their subject matter was more about self-help conceptually, rather than offering advice about awkwardness. Furthermore, inclusion was limited to one video per channel in order to not skew the results too much in one direction, since it can be assumed that one channel's conception of awkwardness remains stable across multiple videos. In total, eight videos were selected and downloaded using an online YouTube to MP4 converter. The obtained videos can be divided into two categories.

In the first group, videos consist of content creators speaking directly to the camera in a close-up shot of their face, thereby mimicking a face-to-face conversation. In this category, which includes three of the total eight videos, the camera functions as a placeholder for an otherwise human interlocutor (Raun, 2012). The close-up shot of the camera creates a sense of intimacy and makes the content creators appear more trustworthy to their audience. YouTube, in this sense, functions as a "technology of intimacy" (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), enabling internet users to form connections with the people they follow online. YouTube is particularly well-suited for fostering intimacy, as it not only allows content creators to share their content, but also facilitates direct interaction with their audience through comments through videos, likes and dislikes, community posts, and polls. As such, YouTube affords the creation of affective relations between creators and their audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), which is something that an older, non-interactive medium like television would not have been able to do. Two of the videos in this group are specifically gender-oriented. The channel *Amir* describes itself as “the one stop shop channel for men’s fashion, lifestyle, and mindset videos”, and writes that “[i]f you want to become an Alpha male in all aspects of your life, this is the channel you want to subscribe to”. The women-oriented channel *The Feminine Fancy*, on the other hand, describes itself as “[a] place for women to learn how to exude their femininity”, and writes that “on this channel, you’ll find videos on femininity, elegance, modern homemaking, style and beauty”.

The second category consists of five videos in which a narrator delivers spoken text while visuals illustrate and/or elaborate on what is being said. Visuals consist of drawn animations, clips from popular media, and slideshow-like schematics. The visuals can either reinforce what is being said by the narrator in a slideshow-like manner or add information to provide an additional layer of meaning to the video overall. These videos do not contain the same community element that category one does, but they are in general more informative, rather than opinion-based. Some of the videos make explicit references to scientific research, and since voice-overs can more easily and strictly follow a script, these videos’ information is more structured. What is more, the fact that the visuals follow the narration makes it easy to follow along and visualize the situations that are being described. Viewers may therefore enjoy a variety of benefits from the combination of audio and visuals, such as improved attention, understanding, and retention of content (Kosterelioglu, 2016). These videos will provide data to gain a better insight into how people (should – at least according to these videos) – deal with awkwardness. We will refer to these videos in the following chapters by referring to: SELF-HELP, name video.

We will draw on all data described above to present our empirical findings and work toward a theory and typology of awkwardness in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Notes

1 The empirical research of this section was done in collaboration with Guilherme Giolo, Alina Pavlova, Nyota Kanyemesha, and Lara de Poorter. Parts of it have been published as Giolo, G., Pavlova, A., Wijngaarden, Y., & Berkers, P. (2023). Handshakes and hashtags: How changing social interactions make us feel awkward. *Continuum, 37*(4), 522–534.

2 We chose Twitter because it allows researchers to download tweets without being registered (Bail, 2012).

3 Our decision to opt for English language (UK/US) media has largely been driven by the fact that awkwardness itself is an English expression.

4 The standard default number of keywords in Mallet is set to 20.

5 It is worth mentioning that topic proportions add up to more than 100% because tweets often have more than one topic. In our analysis, we assign a single topic to a tweet where the topic proportion is higher than 50%.

6 This research is part of an (unpublished) PhD dissertation of one of the authors; see Wijngaarden, Y. (2019). Spaces of co-working: Situating innovation in the creative industries. ERMeCC Dissertation series.

7 See e.g. Pierce et al. (1996) on workplace romances, or Sun et al. (2023) on workplace gossip.

8 The empirical research of this section was done in collaboration with Maria Diaz (Erasmus University Rotterdam MA thesis).

9 Bumble Bizz is a social networking app focused on developing career and professional connections. Motivations for joining the app vary from looking to collaborate on projects, to simply looking for mentors specifying on their professional field. Recruiting study participants is also a popular reason for individuals to join the app.

10 The empirical research of this section was done in collaboration with Mannes Kocken as part of his MA traineeship.

11 Views and subscribers at the time of writing – 2021.

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6 Awkward interactions

In this chapter, we present a general theory of awkwardness based on extensive empirical research. First, we address the question what awkwardness is and what it means to people. We describe how awkward feelings arise when a social interaction is perceived as going wrong by at least one of the involved participants. Hence, when we refer to awkwardness, we specifically mean interactional awkwardness, where issues with a script lead to awkward feelings – uncertain, uncomfortable, self-conscious. We also show how these feelings can be felt vicariously. Rather than focusing on these feelings themselves, we emphasize where they originate.

Therefore, the second question we address in this chapter is: what makes people feel awkward in social interactions? Our results show that awkward feelings are often the result of the absence of a script in social interactions (e.g. how to greet in times of a pandemic), a deviation from a script (e.g. accidentally ignoring to shake hands when meeting someone), or the failure to perform a script successfully (e.g. shaking someone's hand for too long). Finally, we consider how the relationship – or lack thereof – between the participants may contribute to awkwardness, whether due to familiarity, hierarchy, or cultural differences.

Awkward feelings as the outcome of social interactions

We begin by describing how awkwardness feels to our respondents. How do people describe feeling awkward? Most respondents we interviewed were quite adept at verbalizing these feelings. While they occasionally referenced related concepts, awkwardness' closest relative – embarrassment – was notably absent from their descriptions (cf. Chapter 1). Moreover, all empirical evidence suggests that people see awkwardness as a distinct emotion, consisting of three core ingredients: uncertain, uncomfortable, and self-conscious. In a nutshell, uncertainty about how to behave in a social interaction leads to discomfort, which causes (self-conscious) overthinking and makes the interaction feel forced and unnatural.

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Uncomfortable

First, the word most frequently used to describe awkward feelings is "uncomfortable" (or sometimes "uneasy"). For example, one of our respondents defined awkwardness as follows: "Um, if I like, think of a word that pops up, it's uncomfortable. Um, I think this this feeling of feeling uncomfortable in a situation" (EVERYDAY, R1). Another respondent in this study further defined awkwardness as "being in an uncomfortable situation that you don't know how to deal with. I think that's just how I feel when I feel awkward. It's just like when I'm just in a situation that doesn't make me feel nice, and then I don't know how to deal with it. And that makes it kind of awkward because, like, you're just stuck in this place where you can't fix it, but it's just there" (EVERYDAY, R3). In other words, she refers to interactions where a script is either missing or has been deviated from, where "there's also the anxiety that you should be doing something or you should be doing something differently". Other respondents described this anxiety as feeling "helpless" (EVERYDAY, R2) or "a kind of hotness rising in your chest" (EVERYDAY, R1).

Uncertain

Second, the source of discomfort often stems from feeling uncertain about how to handle the situation or what to say. Uncertainty is seldomly mentioned as a term itself, but often part of the reason why people feel uncomfortable, as seen in the examples above. Felicia of *The Feminine Fancy* (SELF-HELP) says that "when you are in a social situation and you're feeling awkward, it's because you are probably questioning – at least wondering – what the people around you are thinking about what you have to say". Hence, uncertainty is tied to the presentation of oneself. The discomfort coming from uncertainty then makes people very much aware of themselves. For example, one respondent, when discussing dating, mentioned the challenge of dealing with uncomfortable silences: "You know that you're trying to figure out something to say. And when you say something, the other person also knows that it's not because you want to start this conversation naturally" (EVERYDAY, R5).

Self-conscious

Third, feeling self-conscious is frequently cited as a component of feeling awkward: "Maybe you feel a bit self-conscious, right? You might feel like you're the source of the awkwardness, or feel sorry for the other person if they're struggling with the situation. You might notice that the other person is having trouble, or realize you're struggling to navigate it yourself" (EVERYDAY, R6). In other words, this respondent connects uncertainty – am I or the other person the source of awkwardness – with feeling self-conscious. As another respondent put it: "I think awkwardness just comes from overanalyzing and overthinking about stuff. Behaving or talking to someone spontaneously is never going to be awkward because you're not thinking about it too much" (EVERYDAY, R2). This heightened self-consciousness can make implicit social norms become explicit. One interviewee, for example, contemplated conversational silences in the following manner: "trying to fill awkward silences is forced, you know. It's not like a natural interaction. It's oh, everything is forced" (EVERYDAY, R5). Feelings of being forced instead of natural make non-declarative culture – our cognitive-emotive associations – explicit (Lizardo, 2017; Patterson, 2014). While awkward silences may linger, the unnaturalness of the interaction amplifies the awkwardness, affecting all participants involved.

These empirical findings about how people define awkwardness are largely consistent with how Plakias (2024) defined awkward feelings, which consist of discomfort, uncertainty, and self-consciousness. However, in contrast to Plakias, we argue that awkwardness *is*, in fact, an emotion. We offer two key arguments for this position. First, as demonstrated above, our respondents clearly perceive awkwardness as an emotion. Plakias claims that "awkward feeling[s] lack intentional content, characteristic physical displays, physiological sensations, and action tendencies" (pp. 43–44). However, some of our respondents do explicitly refer to clear physical sensations, such as the "hotness in your chest" mentioned above. Moreover, they respond to awkward feelings as they would to emotions, as we will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 9. To echo the well-known sociological theorem: if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. Second, our focus on the sociology of emotions – particularly the work of Hochschild – enables us to differentiate between emotional expressions (which is the primary focus and limit of Plakias' argument) and subjective feelings. Even without explicit outward expression, emotions are still experienced internally, and in this sense, awkwardness is undoubtedly an emotion.

Interactions, scripts, and performances: Where do awkward feelings come from?

Awkward interactions and awkward individuals

This leads us to the question: where do these awkward feelings originate? The short answer would be: from social interactions going wrong. Most participants in our studies perceive awkwardness as a product of social interactions, rather than as a trait of inherently awkward individuals. Awkwardness occurs when "an interaction does not go as you had thought it would go" (EVERYDAY, R9). Another respondent also emphasized that awkwardness is found "mainly [in] social interactions with people whose opinions you care about. You want to present the best possible image of yourself, and you just don't want to do anything foolish, like having awkward pauses in a conversation" (EVERYDAY, R2). In dating, awkwardness was often linked to "the fear of not being accepted by the other person […] in those situations, you find yourself doing things that make you want to bang your head against the wall […] like 'Nooo, I should not have done that!'" (DATING, R10). These respondents echo what we know from the sociology of interactions: meaning arises from individuals who aim to maintain their face by presenting their best self to others. In other words, social interactions are – quite directly and explicitly – framed in the terminology of Goffman (1956), especially when it comes to definitions of the situation, performances, and saving your face.

We did find some instances where awkwardness was attributed to individuals, but this was primarily seen in self-help videos on YouTube. In almost all of these videos, a distinction was made between awkward and non-awkward people, such as: "Non-awkward individuals typically centralize their social life, while those who are awkward might be aiming a little to the side" (SELF-HELP, Psych2Go). Here, awkwardness is framed both as an individual characteristic and as something negative that requires change, which aligns with the neoliberal sensibilities of the Western world and the self-help industry in particular. Some interview respondents also referred to awkward individuals, but they often nuanced this view by providing context: "I feel like I am somewhat more awkward than the average person […] I also think awkwardness can originate when two people do not go together well" (EVERYDAY, R10). Thus, we found little evidence in the interviews of what Kotsko (2010) calls "everyday awkwardness" – awkwardness situated within the individual, rather than as part of a broader set of characteristics of the interaction and situation. This may suggest that locating awkwardness 'within' the individual is primarily a feature of the broader neoliberal discourse (rather than a common form of meaning-making among people). In this discourse, awkwardness is not seen as an inherent feature of an interaction (and the emotion it generates), but as a marker of identity in late modernity, where the self is part of a reflexive self-improvement project in an increasingly complex and globalized world (Giddens, 1991). Awkwardness, in this sense, is not only a feature of an interaction or an emotion but also a discourse that reverberates across various fields, from self-help to cringe comedy.

Awkwardness, scripts, and performances

Most respondents considered awkwardness to result from social interactions going wrong. But why do social interactions go wrong? One answer involves social scripts and how social actors perform them. A script essentially helps people anticipate and navigate the course of an interaction by providing rules and expectations tied to a specific social occasion: "I feel awkward when I don't get the reaction that I was expecting" (EVERYDAY, R7). When discussing awkward feelings earlier, we hinted at three sources of uncertainty: (1) the absence of a clear script, (2) a deviation from the script, and (3) an unsuccessful individual performance of a script.

Absence of a clear script

First, in case a social occasion lacks a clear social script, the pattern of conduct of what is considered appropriate – and what is not – is unclear, resulting in awkwardness. One respondent explained: "Yeah, it's just something that's very unexpected, a situation or an interaction that nobody really knows how to deal with this because it doesn't fit into [...] You can't just apply a rule to it. It's just kind of like, oh, what happens now?" (EVERYDAY, R6). This respondent refers to occasions in which the rules are (at least somewhat) absent. This makes any internalized social script unfitting, leaving the lines of action for dealing with the situation also unclear and therefore uncertain. Saying the *wrong* thing, at least in the eyes of the participants, is therefore much more likely in situations with absent rules than in familiar ones (e.g. birthday party: shake hands, congratulate). This makes such interactions a fertile ground for awkwardness.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a key example of an event that disrupted most social interactions, leaving them without a clear script. Consider, for example, the most basic form of communication: greeting. "During the pandemic, you were aware of the distance when greeting [...]. It felt uncomfortable. Before the pandemic, there were etiquette norms, like three kisses for family, hugs with friends, and so on. These unspoken norms disappeared, and suddenly you had to discuss it" (EVERYDAY, R10). Here, the pandemic led to awkward feelings of discomfort and self-consciousness – unspoken things needed to be discussed – as social scripts disappeared. It is not surprising, then, that two major topics in the topic modeling described in Chapter 5 are occasion scripts (encompassing tweets including words like "walking" and "street"), and etiquette (with words like the "dreaded handshake", "elbow bump", and "greeting") (see also Giolo et al., 2023). Indeed, awkwardness flourished in the caveats of unlearning old scripts and learning new ones (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

However, it wasn't just the pandemic itself that socially confused people. Once the coronavirus was somewhat contained, and most people and institutions returned to their usual routines, many still struggled: "It will be kind of weird because people will be like, oh my God, do I give them a handshake? Should I not? How close can I stand to them? It's awkward because you're like, okay, now what? How do I interact now? Because you can't interact the same way as during COVID" (EVERYDAY, R2). Twitter users in our social media study expressed similar concerns, saying: "I swear it's gonna be real awkward re-learning human interaction after this" (EVERYDAY, T4272). Some even suggested maintaining pandemic behaviors to end awkward interactions: "Even after COVID-19 dies down, I'm keeping the new social norm of yelling 'social distancing!' and walking away to end awkward interactions" (EVERYDAY, T3652). As such, the process of relearning old scripts and unlearning new ones is again a hotbed for awkward interactions.

While Kotsko's (2010) concept of radical awkwardness – the panic caused by having no norm at all – might have seemed abstract in his pre-coronavirus book, the past few years have shown that a lack of scripts is far from a hypothetical situation. This form of awkwardness, to conclude, arises when social scripts suddenly disappear or become less clear, forcing people to unlearn old behaviors and develop new forms of social interaction, sometimes from scratch. In Chapters 7 and 8 we will discuss two subtypes of awkwardness as resulting from the absence of a clear script: time-off awkwardness (time) and out-of-place awkwardness (space).

Deviation from a script

Second, another source of awkwardness arises when someone, in the eyes of at least one social actor in the interaction, makes a social transgression of the script. When someone deviates from a script, they violate what is considered appropriate behavior within specific occasion, disrupting the expected lines of action. Hence, it breaks down the shared definition of a situation (Goffman, 1956). This immediately raises the question of whose definition is correct, often causing stress or confusion among participants. Social transgressions can be accidental or intentional. Accidental mishaps are common, as one respondent explained: "Like tripping and falling, and your platter of food goes all over the floor. You're not necessarily weird yourself, but everybody's like 'oh, that's awkward'" (EVERYDAY, R6). In the self-help videos, similar scenarios were frequently discussed. For instance, in Charisma On Demand's video *How To Turn Awkwardness Into Attraction* (SELF-HELP), a potential cause of accidental transgressions is described: "One way that you can unintentionally cause an awkward moment is by not knowing, and then not following social protocol in any given situation".

However, social actors are not mere cultural dupes who always adhere to the script. Sometimes, they intentionally deviate from social expectations. One respondent shared an example of such an interaction: "We met up here and went to get coffee. We were sitting on a bench, and then his friend comes over and says, 'Hey man, what's up? Can I have a cigarette?' And he's like, 'Yeah, but I'm kind of on a date right now.' That was already awkward. His friend didn't believe him, which was a red flag. But then he proceeded to smoke and talk with him for 15 minutes while I was just sitting there, like, okay" (EVERYDAY, R6). In this example, a third person disrupted the shared definition of the situation as a date. This made the respondent question the situation: why would a friend not believe it's a date? What does that say about my date? Rather than reasserting the situation as a date by challenging his friend, the man deviated from the dating script by engaging with his friend, leaving his date feeling awkward.

In conclusion, this form of awkwardness arises when at least one social actor in an interaction is perceived by another social actor as deviating from the script. Hence, when deviations remain unnoticed, there are no awkward interactions. While such deviations may be caused by weak norms that are difficult to adhere to (Kotsko's (2010) cultural awkwardness), this does not need to be the case as deviations can also occur in occasions with strong norms. They may even encourage people to purposively deviate (which would fit under Kotsko's (2010) everyday awkwardness banner). In Chapters 7 and 8, we will discuss two subtypes of awkwardness as a deviation from a script: odd-time awkwardness (time) and odd-stage awkwardness (space).

Unsuccessful individual performance of a script

Third, awkwardness can also occur when a social actor knows and follows the script, but their performance is perceived as unsuccessful by others. Even if someone adheres to the rules, they may rely on surface or deep acting techniques to try to make their performance convincing (Hochschild, 1983). A lack of acting skills or understanding, however, can diminish the success of the interaction. While these interactions may technically follow the script, they are often failing to generate the emotional energy that a successful interaction would produce (Collins, 2004). This is similar to attending a lackluster concert or a poorly executed theater play: although all the elements are present – such as the stage, audience, props, and a performance – it lacks the vibrant energy that makes a show truly engaging, or even worthwhile to be part of. In fact, such concerts or plays may themselves feel awkward. In Chapters 7 and 8, we will discuss two subtypes of awkwardness as a failing individual performance: no-flow awkwardness (time) and no-show awkwardness (space).

While a lack of a script or a deviation from a script leads to uncertainty about the situation or the social expectations, failing performances are often linked to being overly self-conscious and unnatural. In the context of dating, online daters found a mismatch between someone's self-presentation and others' perception of such presentation rather awkward. This was most evident in participants' descriptions of awkward dating profiles. These profiles were characterized by individuals who were seen as trying too hard, often appearing inauthentic, vain, or even narcissistic (see Williams & Copes, 2005). One respondent described a person with an awkward profile as: "[…] someone who is kind of disconnected from who they are as a person, and from the person they want to be […] I don't know, like their profile is lacking a mindful connection […]. Like you can see through the narcissism" (DATING, R10). The phrase "see through the narcissism" reveals the profile owner's failure to present an authentic self, at least from the respondent's perspective. In other words, the profile owner lacks first-person authenticity (Moore, 2002), as the image they project is not a true representation of who they "really" are. Instead of authentically being themselves, they are deliberately performing a "better" version of themselves, unsuccessfully engaging in surface acting. Their performance is perceived as exaggerated. One respondent explained this type of awkwardness: "What

I also find quite awkward is people trying to make their profile overly sexy or exaggerated. I think like, okay, that's not necessary, what are you trying to give off? That's just one part of you, why are you putting that so much in the spotlight?" (DATING, R7). Respondents identified inauthenticity through indicators such as an overemphasis on physical appearance or stereotypically attractive hobbies, instead of intellect or genuine personality, as a way to attract others.

This example also demonstrates that awkwardness can be felt vicariously – without directly being part of a social interaction – by observing an interaction going wrong. Previous research has shown that witnessing someone else commit a social blunder and imagining oneself in their position can evoke vicarious emotions, particularly embarrassment (Paulus et al., 2013). Thus, vicarious awkwardness occurs when an observer perceives an interaction as awkward, even if the people involved do not see it that way. An entire genre of film and television thrives on this feeling (which we seek to avoid but are paradoxically drawn to, as noted by Kirschbaum & Berkers, 2024).

Awkward actors: Who makes you feel awkward in interactions?

One key issue in awkward interactions, which has often been overlooked in the relatively under-researched field of awkwardness, is the relationship between the social actors involved. Interactions – whether viewed through a Goffmanian lens or more broadly – can include a range of participants, from passive bystanders to close kin. The role of external perception in shaping one's mental state highlights the importance of others' opinions in the experience of awkwardness (Cooley, 1902; Rochat, 2009). The composition these 'external perceptions' plays a significant role in determining how and when something is perceived as awkward. In our study, we identified three factors that influence the likelihood of a social interaction becoming awkward: (1) familiarity, (2) role/hierarchy, and (3) cultural background. In short, engaging with social actors who are unfamiliar, who hold different positions in a hierarchy, or who come from different cultural backgrounds increases uncertainty about whether others share the same expectations of the interaction. A lack of shared definitions of the situation makes it more likely that things will go wrong.

Familiarity

First, familiarity with the people involved in the interaction reduces the likelihood of awkwardness. As one respondent explained: "Uh, among friends, I don't recall experiencing that [awkwardness] at all because, you know, you already have a pretty accurate image of the person in your mind. And, like, one little slip-up or something isn't going to change that. But when someone doesn't know you very well, I'm more mindful and conscious of how they might be perceiving me. And that, I think, is what leads to awkwardness" (EVERYDAY, R2). According to this respondent, when someone knows you well, there's no need for constant impression management because they already have a certain impression of you. Therefore, a failing performance, or one that is slightly off-script (Goffman, 1967/2017), is less likely to result in extreme uncertainty, discomfort, or self-consciousness. For example, lashing out at your parents or long-term partner during stressful events is typically deemed more acceptable than scolding your boss's secretary. Similarly, spilling coffee on your blouse at home is no big deal, but in a classroom setting, it might make you feel awkwardly self-conscious.

However, in situations involving less familiar people, there tends to be greater uncertainty about whether one's actions will be well-received by others. This can manifest in awkward interactions, such as jokes falling flat, unreciprocated hugs or high-fives, or inadvertently offending someone's taste. Such social gaffes were frequently observed in the workplace study, where new employees had to navigate the basics of working together and adapt to a specific co-working culture. For example, coworkers were often sarcastic or irritated when new members asked practical questions, implying that co-working required a certain level of professional proficiency. An awkward exchange occurred when a new member asked if he had placed his screen on the correct shelf. A woman responded ironically, saying, "It'll probably be destroyed tomorrow. That's how people act here. Or they'll remove the keys from your keyboard" [WORK, fieldnotes]. As the audience laughed, the new member quietly put his screen back on the desk and retreated to a more backstage work setting (i.e. working with headphones on). In this case, unfamiliarity increased the likelihood of making the "wrong" impression, thereby heightening the potential for awkwardness. "There are few things socially awkward people dread more than phone calls", says YouTuber *Psych2Go* in *7 Things Socially Awkward People Can Relate To* (SELF-HELP), and "especially if you don't know who's on the other end of the line, there's no way to know what to expect if you answer". The root cause of awkwardness in these instances is uncertainty – both in what to expect from an interaction and how to behave as a result. This often leads to awkward silences, as one respondent noted: "There's this pressure to, uh, talk all the time, especially when you're meeting someone new. You know, if there's a silence, oh, it's a bad sign" (EVERYDAY, R7).

It's worth noting that unfamiliarity can also arise in interactions with familiar people you do not interact with often, as illustrated by a tweet: "Am I the only one who has the most awkward interactions with their dad? Like, I'm just sitting here in silence with him, and he's like: 'So, what do you think about the coronavirus?'" (EVERYDAY, T9720). A particular kind of awkwardness occurs in high-stakes, low-familiarity encounters, where impression management becomes even more critical, as the outcome can have long-term consequences. Meeting your in-laws for the first time is a classic example of this type of awkwardness. This brings us to the second point.

Hierarchy

Second, the hierarchy of relationships in a given interaction also impacts the degree of awkwardness. As in the example of meeting in-laws, the stakes are higher when one person in the interaction holds more power or influence. The need for a successful performance becomes greater when one is dependent on the other person in some way. A Twitter user captures this well: "Awkward moment when you bump into your big boss in the metro and walk together to the office. Should I talk about the weather? Or the Wuhan coronavirus in Japan? Or should I talk about the increase in single premium products profitability due to the zeroization of time value of option guarantee?" (EVERYDAY, T64) Here, the author is unsure about what topic is appropriate, reflecting uncertainty about the boss's expectations. Similarly, a participant in the everyday awkwardness study alluded to these power dynamics when she said: "Things that are awkward only happen, I think, when there's already a lot of stress, like when you're interacting with professors or supervisors in the lab" (EVERYDAY, R2). Awkwardness can also occur when hierarchical roles are inverted or disrupted, such as in this tweet: "My boss's boss told me to tell someone they had to leave the building due to COVID. It was my boss's boss's boss. Awkward" (EVERYDAY, T14954). In this case, the author was asked to step outside the usual hierarchy – and deviate from the script – by giving instructions to someone in a higher rank, which created a feeling of awkwardness.

Cultural background

Third, the likelihood of awkwardness is influenced by the degree to which people in the interaction share a cultural background, as well as their understanding and sensitivity toward intercultural communication. As Kotsko (2010) notes, interactions with people from different cultures can unsettle established social scripts. What one person considers appropriate behavior may not translate well in another culture, leading to a weakening of norms and, consequently, a sense of what he calls cultural awkwardness. One respondent emphasized the importance of a shared cultural background in minimizing awkwardness: "Whenever I go to meet Mexicans in Germany, I immediately notice that many things that may feel awkward with international people – even those I know well – aren't awkward with these Mexicans I've just met. There's already an understanding of what's okay to talk about or how to talk about things. We all come from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and speak the same language, so there's no barrier. We fully understand each other. This cultural similarity makes awkward situations less likely to arise" (EVERYDAY, R9). A shared cultural background, both in terms of socioeconomic status and language, reduces the need for extensive emotion work, making interactions smoother and more likely to produce emotional energy (Collins, 2004).

On the other hand, intercultural interactions introduce uncertainty. What should I expect from the other person? How should I behave? Respondents gave two main reasons why intercultural interactions often evoke awkwardness. The first is the difficulty in generating emotional energy, as it is harder to establish a shared understanding. One respondent shared: “Since I’ve been in the Netherlands, I’ve noticed that cultural differences, like your sense of humor or pop culture references can create awkward situations. For example, I might make a pop culture reference that someone from Turkey would get, but someone else might not. It makes so much sense in my head, and it would make sense to another Turkish person, but when I try to explain it here and it doesn’t land, I feel pretty awkward” (EVERYDAY, R7). This gap in understanding, however, extends beyond a shared cultural vocabulary – or a shared meaning given to symbols, rituals, beliefs, frames, repertoires, etc. (see e.g. Spillman, 2020). In other words, pop culture references become symbols that represent something broader, and affect how the story or interaction is interpreted (Wray, 2014). A misunderstanding at the outset of an interaction can shape the rest of the exchange.

The second reason for intercultural awkwardness stems from differences in communication styles. For instance, one respondent highlighted how cultural differences in social behavior can make things awkward: “Say you go to a party in the Netherlands, meet people, talk to them. But the next day, even if they recognize you on campus, they won’t say hi. It’s mostly Northern Europeans, like Germans or Dutch. They just turn away, which feels super awkward” (EVERYDAY, R5). This example illustrates how the interpretation and follow-up of interactions vary across cultures. It also demonstrates how contextual factors like place (party/campus) and time (night/day) influence interactions and can contribute to awkwardness.

A sociological model of awkward interactions

In conclusion, this chapter presents our central theory on awkwardness (Figure 6.1): (1) awkward feelings – uncertain, uncomfortable, self-conscious – are the outcome of social interactions going wrong, as perceived by at least one of the social actors involved. First, as these interactions take place in the

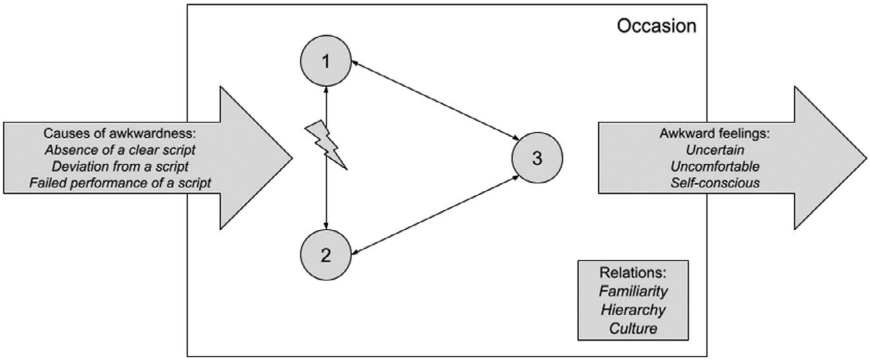

Figure 6.1 A sociological model of awkward interactions.

context of a social occasion with its own rules, awkwardness can result from the absence of a script, a deviation from it, or a failing individual performance of a script. Second, feelings of awkwardness are impacted by the relationships between social actors, such as differences in familiarity, hierarchy, or cultural background. These factors can lead to *interactional awkwardness*, or in cases where individuals are not directly involved, *vicarious awkwardness*.

The next chapters will delve further into the temporal and spatial dimensions of awkwardness.

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7 Awkward times

In the previous chapter we developed a general sociological theory of awkwardness. Here, we have already touched upon some temporal aspects of awkwardness, such as the importance of smooth – often referring to well-timed – performances, and the distinction between interactional awkwardness, which occurs during a social interaction, and vicarious awkwardness, which can hypothetically occur after an interaction has taken place. Time, however, plays a role in awkwardness beyond current and past performances. As we alluded to in the Introduction, social interactions require split-second decisions, and these decisions impact the further development of the interaction. Time, therefore, plays a key role in interactions going in the wrong direction. Think of the highly popular meme: "That awkward moment when …". In this chapter, we ask how time, in the broadest sense of the word, plays into awkward interactions.

First, as we defined awkwardness as an interaction going wrong, things can become awkward at different moments in its temporal sequence – in anticipation, during, or even (long) after a social interaction. Hence, besides interactional awkwardness, social occasions can lead to anticipatory awkwardness and social interactions result in retrospective awkwardness. Second, specific occasions, such as a workday or a wedding, also provide a temporal script, prescribing what is appropriate behavior and what is not. For example, for a care worker on a night shift, receiving a work phone call at night is part of the job. However, for an academic, it might be rather awkward to receive a call from the department head in the middle of the night.

As we will explain in this chapter, three temporal subtypes can be distinguished. First, in the absence of a script, people may experience "time-off awkwardness", where they are unsure of what is the appropriate temporal structure. Second, a deviation from the prescribed script would lead to "odd-time awkwardness". Third, even when one follows the script, things can still become awkward if a performance is poorly timed, such as in the case of awkward silences. We refer to this as "no-flow awkwardness". We will further unpack each type of awkwardness later in this chapter. But first, we will provide an in-depth discussion of the temporality of awkwardness.

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Temporality of awkwardness: How it unfolds over time

Although we might experience awkwardness as a sudden bang, it rarely comes out of the blue. Awkward interactions usually follow a temporal sequence. Based on an analysis of 16 narratives of awkward interactions, Clegg (2012) identified three stages of awkwardness: (1) anticipation, (2) intensification and magnification, (3) resolution. We argue that a final stage should be added to this sequence: (4) retrospection (see Figure 7.1). While intensification and expansion are present in any interactional awkwardness, anticipation and retrospection occur only in specific cases. Awkwardness is not limited to the social interaction itself but can also arise when reflecting on a (not so) distant past or when preparing for a (not so) near future. Hence, it may refer to interactions that likely will go wrong (future), are going wrong (present), and have gone wrong (past).

Anticipation and anticipatory awkwardness

The first step of awkward interactions is anticipation. Things can already get awkward before a social interaction takes place as some occasions are latently awkward and some interactions therefore require preparation to reduce uncertainty.

Anticipatory awkwardness

First, while awkward interactions are often unexpected, some social occasions are imbued with latent awkwardness – such as first dates – even when there is a clear social script. As we explored in the previous chapter, this is often due to the high stakes of the interaction and the nature of the relationship between the participants. Engaging with unfamiliar people in high-stakes interactions increases uncertainty and anxiety, which in turn heightens self-consciousness. For instance, on many first dates, individuals do not know each other, yet the stakes might involve finding a life partner – unless one is a serial Tinder dater. The key point is that awkwardness can start well before the social interaction takes place. In anticipation, people may already dread potential awkwardness, leading to what we call anticipatory awkwardness.

In the dating research, for example, initiating conversation was often described as an awkward process among participants. Women, in particular, struggled with deciding who should initiate the conversation and how to

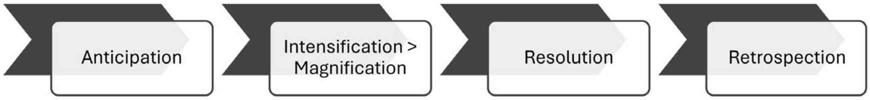

Figure 7.1 Temporal sequence of awkward interactions (based on Clegg, 2012).

do so, especially since this "duty" was often assigned to men. Men did not necessarily express responsibility or enjoyment in initiating, but women often preferred or expected that men took the initiative. As one respondent (woman) explained: "I still have no clue how I should start the conversation myself. I feel a bit lost [...] Somehow, I feel like they [men] should be doing this instead of me" (DATING, R14). Another respondent echoed this sentiment: "I feel like the man should take the first step. So, for me, it was a bit against my nature to send the first message" (DATING, R13). These quotes reflect an expectation that men should initiate the conversation, creating awkwardness when women feel compelled to take the initiative themselves. This situation highlights the tension caused by deviating from the script, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, can signal different social faux pas to participants. For example, "traditional" men might perceive such women as overly assertive, while "traditional" women may view such men as lacking masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Preparing for offline and online interactions

Anticipatory awkwardness, therefore, affects how people prepare for interactions. Most interviewees perceived offline interactions as more prone to awkwardness. Online, they argued, there is more time to respond (both verbally and behaviorally) before an interaction becomes awkward. One respondent from our everyday awkwardness study explained: "I think it's quite hard to be awkward online. I mean, of course you can be awkward online, but people actually have time to think about what they're going to say before they post. [...] But offline, once the situation happens, there's no way of saving it because the person saw it happen right in front of them" (EVERYDAY, R3). Offline interactions offer less time to prepare and curate one's presentation, while online communication provides more control, reducing uncertainty. As another respondent (during an online Zoom interview) said: "[Online] you're very much in control. You can even control what sort of camera angle you show. I mean, right now I'm making sure my favorite side is closer to the camera" (EVERYDAY, R2).

However, the additional preparation time in online interactions can also create higher expectations. Online dating, for example, allows participants to present themselves in a favorable light (Ellison et al., 2006). Some respondents in our dating study noted that this control also brought pressure to be more creative and unique in their messages. As one participant shared: "You want to make sure the message is fun, that they don't think you're boring, but at the same time, you don't want to come across as too flirty or send the wrong message" (DATING, R14). Another respondent echoed this concern: "[In real life] you can create a conversation in seconds, but now you actually have time to think about what you're going to say, so it feels more 'perfectionistic' – you have to say the right thing" (DATING, R1). In this context, the feeling of awkwardness did not arise from a lack of flow (which we will discuss later in this chapter) or a social misstep, but from the challenge of crafting the "right" message. While the idea of saying the right thing was commonly expressed, respondents often could not pinpoint exactly what that would be, likely because it varied from person to person. Nevertheless, the pressure to craft the perfect message was a significant source of awkwardness, particularly in anticipation of social interactions. This underscores the idea that awkwardness can manifest not only during the interaction itself ("that awkward moment when …") but also before, as people anticipate awkwardness.

Intensification, magnification, resolution, and interactional awkwardness

Second, once entering a social occasion and engaging in a social interaction, awkward feelings may arise – and labeled as such – when at least one social actor experiences an interaction going wrong. Again, this may stem from a combination of factors: a perceived absence of a script, a deviation from a script, an unsuccessful individual performance as well the relationship between the social actors – such as their level of familiarity, hierarchy, and cultural differences (see Chapter 6). Once it becomes clear a social interaction is going wrong, social actors direct their attention to the assumed cause of their awkward feelings – an awkward elbow bump due to a lack of script during the pandemic, someone making snarky comments in a Zoom call under the assumption of being muted, or a colleague trying too hard to be professional. This sudden focus on specific behavior intensifies the social interaction as it interrupts its flow. This maginfies awkwardness by transforming awkward feelings into awkward expressions, such as expressing anxiety, leaving long silences, and showing hesitation. In this phase, awkwardness often spreads among the social actors in the interaction (see Chapter 8). This is where interactional awkwardness generally occurs, as outlined in Chapter 6.

Third, after the awkward experience, participants typically attempt to *resolve* or transform the situation by either avoiding it (e.g. by avoiding eye contact or pretending to take a phone call) or by acknowledging it (e.g. by making a joke). We saw examples of these resolution strategies in the co-working fieldwork discussed in the previous chapter, where a co-worker joked about "remov[ing] the keys from your keyboard" [WORK, fieldnotes] after a new co-working member asked a question perceived as awkward. While avoiding awkwardness can sometimes intensify the very feelings being avoided, addressing the awkwardness can stabilize the interaction and restore social harmony (Clegg, 2012; Kotsko, 2010). We will explore such strategies in more detail in Chapter 9.

Retrospection and retrospective awkwardness

Finally, awkwardness does not always occur in the present. Expanding on Clegg's (2012) typology, we introduce the concept of retrospective awkwardness, which is often experienced some time after the interaction has taken place. Just as we might anticipate awkward moments, we might cringe when thinking about a past social blunder or feel uneasy recalling a joke made by our boss that was in poor taste. And unlike shame, such awkward feelings are linked to a specific interaction, not to a person (see Chapter 1). Awkwardness, therefore, can occur not only synchronously with a situation but also when reflecting on the past or preparing for the future. Consider those high school photos our parents might still display: big glasses, braces – elements of a past we prefer to distance ourselves from, especially when introducing a new partner (who might already feel awkward about meeting the in-laws) to these relics. In line with Veblen's (1899/2017) evolutionary approach to taste, we might experience a sense of retrospective "aesthetic nausea" when seeing such old pictures. The fact that all our respondents so readily provided instances of awkward interactions from both the recent and distant past highlights the lingering nature of awkwardness.

Temporal subtypes of awkwardness

Time is also an important factor in relation to the script of an occasion, as it provides the appropriate temporal structure of how the script and the occasion should unfold. We identify three ways in which timing and scripts can cause awkwardness: (1) time-off awkwardness, (2) odd-times awkwardness, and (3) no-flow awkwardness.

Time-off awkwardness: No script, unscripted time

Time-off awkwardness occurs when there is an absence of a clear script – when it has essentially been "turned off" or is "offline", so to speak. While most social occasions are highly scripted, there are moments when we must navigate both major and minor disruptions. One of the biggest upheavals in recent years was the COVID-19 pandemic, which required rewriting many social scripts, even for mundane interactions like greeting others. Without established scripts, the timing of interactions becomes unclear, creating uncertainty about when certain actions are appropriate. In our everyday awkwardness study, respondents expressed this uncertainty clearly: "That awkward time when someone stops working and starts their day. Like, what time is it okay to go over and ask them about something? Or, you know, ask if they want to watch TV, cook together, or run to the supermarket?" (EVERYDAY, R9). The pandemic created a lot of unscripted time, especially as people were working almost entirely from home. This unscripted time contributed to awkwardness in several ways.

First, the lack of structure during the pandemic led to uncertainty about work-life balance, which in turn created awkwardness. Similar to the quote mentioned above, one respondent described how this confusion affected interactions at home: "And then this awkwardness at the end of the day of when are you really done? When does our time together start? And also, do you maybe need some time alone before our time together starts and after you've stopped working?" (EVERYDAY, R8). Here, the awkwardness arose from two uncertainties: the potential to interrupt someone during their work, as it was not clear when the "workday" officially ended, and the uncertainty over whether the person was open to social interaction. Additionally, it introduced awkwardness as people attempted to create new ways to organize their time. The same respondent, for example, asked her partner: "Do we put it in our Google calendars or not?" Previously routine daily structures had now become subjects of negotiation.

A second form of time-off awkwardness arises during the transition from one occasion to another. For example, during Zoom meetings, there is often "unscripted" time before the meeting officially begins. As one Twitter user noted: "hopping on Zoom calls one (1) minute late so you don't have to initiate awkward small talk as the first person to show up". Indeed, in this liminal phase between entering the Zoom call and the start of the meeting, participants might engage in small talk, while others, who may not belong to the same social group, might simply stare at their screens or quickly finish emails. This type of awkwardness also occurs in offline settings where the script is less clear. For instance, can a lecturer make a personal phone call in the classroom before the official start of the session? Here, awkwardness arises because the gathering has not yet fully transformed into a formal occasion, leaving the occasion-specific script ambiguous.

Odd-time awkwardness: A script, wrong time

A deviation from the script can lead to odd-time awkwardness. This type of awkwardness occurs when something is done, as the name suggests, at an odd moment – a moment that does not fit the occasion's script. Earlier in this chapter, for example, we mentioned that a late-night work call might be normal for people in some occupations (think about midwives or drug dealers), but rather odd for a teacher or a dentist. Minor gaffes in this context are, for example, showing up too early to a meeting, which "actually implies you're disruptive to other people's work schedules. *Awkward* [italics in original]" (Williams, 2016). In our co-working research, we found ample evidence of this type of awkwardness. As we will elaborate in the next chapter on awkwardness and space, in co-working spaces, workers have to navigate between a backstage, in which they focus on their own work, preparing their performances, and a frontstage, in which they play the role of a successful entrepreneur. In line with existing studies on co-working, researchers (Blagoev et al., 2019; Butcher, 2018; Wijngaarden, 2023) showed how the occasion of a co-working space was governed by a variety of (temporal) scripts that designate specific moments when talking is allowed and moments when disrupting the workflow is deemed inappropriate. One of the co-workers, for example, emphasized this by mentioning that "when I'm here, I want to do business. I like it when people talk about their kids, but that's only suitable when you're taking a coffee break" (WORK, R28). Speaking up had a ritualistic character. Only during for example designated times, such as lunch or coffee breaks, co-workers felt encouraged to engage in conversation. These breaks then were "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention, producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and group membership" (Collins, 2004, p. 7). However, outside such rituals, breaking the silence was viewed as awkward. Co-workers were sarcastic or annoyed when new members asked practical questions they considered unnecessary disruptions to their workflow, demonstrating that group membership requires proficiency in the role of a professional creative worker. In response, many respondents revealed feeling "afraid to ask 'stupid questions'" (WORK, R8).

No-flow awkwardness: A script, bad timing

One can also follow the script in the scripted temporal sequence; yet the performance of the script may be unsuccessful in terms of flow. In *Interaction Ritual Chains,* Collins (2004) outlined how the rhythm of the conversation is essential to the generation of rhythmic entrainment, and as such, generating emotional energy. The rhythm of the conversation is defined by the turn-taking of the participants, which has been studied extensively since the 1970s. In one of the most cited studies on this topic, Sacks et al. (1974) outline a basic set of rules that govern such turn-taking, depending on the social interaction. Whether turn-taking is controlled by the speaker (who will decide who speaks next), or involves self-selection of next speakership, speakership should not overlap, yet also should not be absent (in this case, the initial speaker may continue until the next speaker self-selects). Or, in the words of Collins (2004, p. 67): "One person speaks at a time; when the turn is finished, another person speaks". Crucial to successful conversation is that the gaps between turns, and thus speakers, should be less than 0.1 seconds. Collins (2004, p. 69) explicitly links a lack of flow (pauses being longer than 0.1 seconds, or overlapping speakers) to awkwardness: "Some conversations are awkward, lacking in solidarity because they are full of pauses, and other conversations are hostile and mutually at loggerheads because the participants keep interrupting one another and struggle to keep the other from speaking".

Given the importance of turn-taking in conversations, it is no surprise that respondents frequently cited poor timing as a primary cause of awkwardness. Especially awkward silences (prolonged silence between turns) were mentioned extensively. One respondent explained the awkwardness of silence this way: "You are uncomfortable, and you don't have really words or like nothing pops up in your mind to take this feeling away. It's awkward silence, like it's silent, but it's not like a comfortable silence. You know that you're trying to figure out something to say" (EVERYDAY, R5). This respondent also connected awkward silence to the flow of the interaction: "It's like it's forced, you know. It's not like a natural interaction". Another respondent echoed this sentiment: “When the conversation just doesn’t naturally flow” (EVERYDAY, R1), awkwardness is more likely to occur. These awkward feelings can even lead to further awkwardness, as one Twitter user humorously illustrated: “Cutie at Starbucks drive-through starts flirtin’ with me. COVID lockdown has me forgettin’ how to conversate: She hands me muh card back after payin’: Our convo turns to awkward silence: I leave not knowin’ what to do, forgettin’ muh drink” (EVERYDAY, T20590). Thus, keeping the conversation flowing may help prevent awkwardness, as we will discuss in Chapter 9: “So that my speech flows well and there’s not a chance for awkwardness to happen” (EVERYDAY, R2).

While awkward silences may seem less urgent in online interactions, there is still an expectation of appropriate conversational flow. For example, if someone takes too long to respond to your messages, the situation can become awkward after a certain point. In the context of online dating, awkwardness often stemmed from uncertainty about one’s standing in relation to a match and the emotional investment made before meeting offline. Situations like delayed responses to texts, difficulty interpreting flirtatious advances, or unclear intentions were common sources of uncertainty regarding the relationship’s progression. However, participants found it challenging to actively clarify their doubts, feeling they lacked substantial grounds to do so. This tension – between wanting to understand the relationship better and feeling it inappropriate to seek clarification – fueled awkwardness. Such lags in online interactions hinder the success of these exchanges because they disrupt the synchronicity needed to evoke emotional energy (Collins, 2004). The absence of face-to-face interaction in the online space makes it inherently difficult to achieve the flow required for true rhythmic entrainment (see also Collins, 2020). As a result, the stagnation in what should ideally be a smooth process creates awkwardness.

Offline, however, there is less time to perform the necessary emotion work to ensure one’s emotional expression aligns with the occasion’s feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979). One respondent explicitly mentioned the fast pace of emotion work required in face-to-face interactions: “When you’re face-to-face, you have to figure things out quickly and make it convincing, like you’re relaxed and not under pressure. But when you’re on your phone, you can say whatever you want without looking the person in the eye. You don’t feel judged. […] For me, online interactions are much easier” (EVERYDAY, R5). Thus, while the lack of flow in online interactions may inhibit rhythmic entrainment (and with it, emotional energy), it can also prevent interactions from going *really* wrong, as we will discuss in Chapter 9.

Finally, beyond verbal interactions, our research shows that no-flow awkwardness can also occur in physical behaviors when social actors fail to consider timing in their actions. A clear example is how one respondent described the importance of timing in everyday rituals, such as holding the door open as a gesture of politeness: “A thing that I always felt awkward about is when people hold the door open for you. You do this a lot here.

Sometimes people even hold the door for me when I'm all the way at the end of the hallway. Okay, so, now you're forcing me to run. And yeah, that part is awkward because it's like, okay, I'm gonna run now because you've been holding the door for me. That part's pretty awkward. But I understand it's social politeness, and people do it out of that. But when it's my turn to hold the door open, I never know what the appropriate distance is for holding it. Like, do they have to be right behind me? Or do I also have to hold the door open for someone all the way down the hall?" (EVERYDAY, R2). Thus, in such cases of no-flow awkwardness, people adhere to the script, but they implement it with a timing that inhibits the flow of the (unfocused) interaction.

This example also illustrates how the spatial setting of an interaction – in this case, the distance between individuals – can lead to or influence awkwardness. In the next chapter, we will further explore how space impacts awkward interactions.

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8 Awkward spaces

In this chapter, we discuss how space can be a potential source of awkwardness and explore how various spatial contexts influence its manifestation. All social interactions are embedded in specific social spaces, which can range from physical spaces like elevators and supermarkets to virtual environments such as online conferencing tools and dating chatrooms. Despite the significance of spatial contexts, sociological studies have not consistently accounted for spatial factors (Gieryn, 2000). Even more so, the spatiality of awkwardness has been largely overlooked in the limited literature on this topic. In this chapter, we investigate the meanings people attribute to different spaces and how these interpretations shape the way social interactions are perceived.[1] We examine how awkwardness can be contagious, spreading through space.

Second, we identify three spatial subtypes of awkwardness. First, in the absence of a clear script, people may experience "out-of-place awkwardness". This often takes the form of conflicting scripts, for example, teaching in a park during the pandemic may lead to awkwardness as a park is associated with leisure activities such as a picnic, which conflicts with the script of the occasion of teaching. Second, "odd-stage awkwardness" refers to awkward feelings resulting from a backstage performance accidentally entering the frontstage, for example when one accidentally unmutes during an online work call and private conversations are overheard. Third, even when one follows the script, things can still become awkward due to the absence of physical co-presence. Hence, as online interactions mostly lack intimacy (feelings of closeness) and synchronicity (interactions happening real-time), they are often still perceived as awkward, particularly when they are taken from the virtual to the physical. This spatial subtype is referred to as "no-show awkwardness", as the lack of co-presence, in Goffmanian dramaturgical terms, leads to a performance, but not a show.

Spatiality of awkwardness: How it spreads through space

One key spatial characteristic of awkwardness is its ability to spread through space, almost like a contagion. Similar to embarrassment, awkwardness has the potential to affect those nearby, spreading in what Goffman (1956, p. 268)

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referred to as “ever-widening circles of discomfiture”. This contagious nature of awkwardness makes it a ubiquitous and a difficult-to-avoid experience. While people may control their own scripts and performances, they remain vulnerable to the actions – or missteps – of others. However, the infectiousness of awkwardness is not always negative. In fact, some cultural phenomena, such as cringe comedy, capitalize on the ubiquity and spread of awkwardness (Kirschbaum & Berkers, 2024, 4). Our empirical studies reveal similar findings, with participants frequently describing awkwardness as contagious. One respondent commented: “I think it can also be the case […] that one person being awkward makes the other person awkward. And both people end up feeling awkward, because I think awkwardness is something that people feel in the room” (EVERYDAY, R3). This reinforces the notion that awkwardness is not confined to the individual but can spread to those in the same space. Similarly, a Twitter user observed: “Damn, I think awkward breakout rooms on Zoom might be more contagious than COVID-19 itself” (EVERYDAY, T15561). The comparison to a virus in this context highlights the shared, contagious, and often uncomfortable experience of awkwardness.

Awkwardness can spread through multiple sensory channels. In *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman (1963) vividly describes creature releases – “fleeting acts that slip through the individual’s self-control and momentarily assert his ‘animal nature’” (p. 68). It is easy to imagine such slips leading to awkward interactions, whether in a public restroom or due to accidental snoring. Yet, in most cases, awkwardness seems to spread through visual cues. In the context of dating, for example, we found that observing another person’s confidence levels influenced how comfortable individuals felt around them. This reflects emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994), where perceiving others’ discomfort can lead the observer to feel awkward as well. Interestingly, not being able to read such visual cues can also give rise to awkwardness. In Chapter 6, we discussed how some people struggle to understand the social cues around them, often due to inexperience or anxiety. This can lead to a failure to properly perform the script for a given occasion. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated this, as non-verbal and even verbal communication became more challenging with the widespread use of face masks and social distancing measures. As one respondent reflected: “You can’t see people […] you can’t really connect with them” (EVERYDAY, R4).

In the preceding paragraph, Respondent 3 from our study on everyday interactions suggests that awkwardness can feel as though it’s “in the room”, almost like an aerosol that spreads to everyone present. This may explain why some spaces seem inherently awkward. Elevators, in particular, are quintessential awkward spaces because they highlight the structural issues of public encounters: contact avoidance, feigning preoccupation, absenting oneself, and breaking the automatic nature through which co-present bodies initiate interactions (Hirschauer, 2005, p. 58). The awkwardness of elevators has not gone unnoticed by social media users who often joke about these moments: “We all thought elevator rides couldn’t get any more awkward, and then COVID said ‘Hey, hold my beer’” (EVERYDAY, T11878), and “The new awkward elevator silence is when you’re the first to log into a Zoom meeting after the host” (EVERYDAY, T6461). In confined spaces like elevators, awkwardness has no escape – it lingers, intensifying the discomfort. Avoidance strategies are limited to commands like “Don’t be awkward. Don’t make eye contact. Don’t make a sound …” (EVERYDAY, T2983), while everyone waits silently for the doors to open. For a more detailed sociology of elevators, Hirschauer’s work (2005) provides a useful foundation.

Spatial subtypes of awkwardness

Space is also an important factor in relation to the script of an occasion, as it provides the appropriate spatial structure regarding where the script and the occasion should unfold. We identify three ways in which space and scripts can cause awkwardness: (1) out-of-place awkwardness, (2) odd-stage awkwardness, and (3) no-show awkwardness.

Out-of-place awkwardness: Changing spaces, conflicting scripts

The first spatial dynamic influencing the potential for awkwardness involves being in the right place versus being *out of place* during a particular occasion. As discussed in Chapter 3, people gather in situations – “the full spatial environment anywhere within which an entering person becomes a member of the social gathering that is (or does then become) present” (Goffman, 1963, p. 18). This environment is part of what Goffman calls social occasions – “the wider social affair, undertaking or event, bounded in regard to place and time and typically facilitated by fixed equipment; a social occasion provides the structuring social context in which […] a pattern of conduct tends to be recognized as appropriate” (Goffman, 1963, p. 18). These occasions typically come with an expected script. However, the spatial setting of a given situation may create a conflict between the scripts associated with different occasions, leading to what we refer to as out-of-place awkwardness. In this case, a lack of a clear script is not caused by an external force – like a pandemic – but by conflicting scripts. We will now clarify what we mean by out-of-place awkwardness through several examples.

In the everyday awkwardness study, one respondent recalled a situation where a professor took the occasion of teaching into unscripted spatial territory – a park: “During the pandemic, pretty much everything was online. At the start, I had one professor who wanted us to hold class in the park while the weather was still nice in September. It was so cute. He came with his lawn chair and his hat, and he was like, yeah, the university won’t let us meet in person. But here we are. We’re just in the park, talking about ethnicity. I thought, okay, this is awkward. It was such a different social setting. You know, like everybody just kind of had their blankets, like for a picnic. And he had his baseball cap on, and we were putting on sunscreen, but then he was handing out sheets, and it felt a bit off. It was a good experience, but it felt weird because it was just very different. One guy even forgot to bring a towel to sit on, and the professor was like, oh, here, I brought extra towels for you to sit on. It was very sweet, but it felt more like something a grandpa would do at a picnic with his grandkids. It was also our first class, so I was sitting in a circle in a park with a bunch of people I didn't know, and there was a guy in a lawn chair just telling us things" (EVERYDAY, R2). When the professor held class in the park, the student found it awkward because it was "such a different setting". The park was more associated with occasions like a picnic with family ("a grandpa having a picnic with all his grandkids") rather than with teaching. Moreover, teaching typically doesn't involve handing out towels, nor does that action seem appropriate in a classroom context. Thus, the source of awkwardness was that interactions in a social situation got "caught within the domain of two different occasions" (Goffman, 1963, p. 20).

The abovementioned division of roles between teachers and students came up in other respondents' experiences as well. One person remarked: "I think interactions with professors have always been a little bit awkward. For instance, when you're taking a break, and everybody's walking out of the classroom and you're like, okay, bye. That has always been a slightly strange social situation for me. If it's a good class, you're bonding with the professor, they're talking about interesting things, and you're taking notes. Then, when they say 'break time,' and you're leaving, it feels odd. Or, for instance, you see the professor getting coffee, and it becomes a whole situation …" (EVERYDAY, R6). This example shows that interactions in the classroom can generate emotional energy (Collins, 2004), a chain of positive interactions that may lead to social bonding. However, this example also shows that this emotional energy is not easily transferred to another occasion. Instead, having a high emotional energy in one occasion (the classroom) might make things awkward if the interaction continues in another (at the coffee machine).

Another example comes from the context of dating. Dating is still typically expected to happen in person, at places like bars or work. People often ask a couple: "Where did you meet?" Unsurprisingly, most respondents in the dating study were critical of online dating apps, calling them superficial and unromantic. They felt that interest in potential partners was often based on brief profiles and quick judgments. Some respondents expressed a desire for a more spontaneous and authentic dynamic: "Yes, I want to meet them by accident. Like it's meant to be" (DATING, R12), or "online dating takes away the excitement" (DATING, R5). In their eyes, online dating dynamics restricted the romance and excitement of "finding" love. The amount of planning prior to meeting a potential candidate, such as the construction of a profile and swiping through available options, felt constraining and gave dating platforms an awkward character according to the respondents. They preferred physical spaces – and their equipment – such as bars for dating, believing that genuine emotional connections were better achieved face-to-face.

Online dating felt superficial in comparison. Similarly, respondents assumed that emotional energy was something primarily limited to offline occasions. The awkwardness arises from the clash between two seemingly incompatible occasions – the pursuit of romantic love and the structured space of online dating – and results in a lack of a clear script.

Finally, we found evidence of out-of-place awkwardness emerging not just from the location – such as a park versus a classroom or online versus offline – but from the people inhabiting that space. Here, awkwardness stems from a mismatch between the occasion and the expected social actors in that space. A clear example of this type of awkwardness would be answering a phone call with "Hey honey", only to realize it is your boss on the line, not your partner. Similarly, walking into a lecture hall expecting to find your own students but mistakenly interrupting a macroeconomics class can feel quite awkward ("Oops, sorry, wrong room!"). This type of awkwardness was also reflected in some of the respondents' experiences. One respondent described the discomfort of walking through campus without encountering anyone familiar: "Yeah, I recognized that when I was walking through campus and didn't know anyone, it felt awkward or uncomfortable. I was used to seeing at least three people I knew" (EVERYDAY, R4). In this case, teaching as a social occasion takes place on a campus where one expects to encounter familiar faces. When that expectation is not met, it creates a sense of awkwardness and feeling "out of place" – an emotion anyone over 40 attending an EDM party might easily relate to.

Odd-stage awkwardness: When the backstage accidentally enters the frontstage

The second temporal subtype we will discuss builds on Goffman's (1959) distinction between frontstage and backstage performances, as discussed in Chapter 3. As we described, Goffman discerns a frontstage, where individuals present their performances to others, and a backstage, which is ordinarily unseen by others and where they can step out of character and prepare their public performances. To avoid awkward interactions, a clear boundary must be maintained between the frontstage and the backstage. When a backstage performance accidentally enters the frontstage, it becomes awkward due to a deviation from the script of a specific occasion (the reverse, where the frontstage moves into the backstage, seems to yield fewer awkward moments). We refer to this as odd-stage awkwardness.

Teachers, for example, usually do not comb their hair after they have entered the classroom. They ensure they look presentable before starting the class. If they do so in the school bathroom and run into a student, both might find that somewhat awkward, as this is backstage behavior of a person students would normally only see in a frontstage setting. While such social gaffes are innocent in nature, more serious deviations are also possible. Notable examples are hot mic moments, such as then United States

President Ronald Reagan, whose joking with sound technicians was accidentally recorded and escalated Cold War tensions when he said: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes" (BBC News, 2019). We will explore this type of awkwardness in more detail below.

First, the pandemic provided many examples of odd-stage awkwardness, as people were working from home and meeting through online conferencing tools. They were engaging in professional interactions with colleagues, a social occasion, while being in the typically quintessential backstage setting of their homes. As socially distant interactions became more common and many people were learning how to navigate video calls, backstage talk and behaviors often made their way into the frontstage. This happened primarily as boundary work – muting the microphone or camera – was done improperly. For example, "Not knowing you unmuted yourself on zoom accidentally and all the Sunday school kids hear your house conversation, until another teacher calls your phone and tell you 'we all can hear you'" (EVERYDAY, T19205), or "Gotta love 2020 lockdown. Was sitting in a zoom meeting with my camera on and realized my tampon gave out, my pad gave out, and I had a stream of blood running UP my asscrack … Camera OFF!" (EVERYDAY, T6701). In some cases, social actors gave away backstage information without even realizing this themselves: "That awkward moment when coworkers who weren't in a relationship are at the same house on two different devices during a zoom meeting" (EVERYDAY, T6639). A successful online performance also requires setting the stage and removing inappropriate props, as this Twitter user pointed out: "My little cousin is over at my apartment and right now he has his Zoom class for school due to covid and It's so awkward with these zoom classes going into the kitchen. The man can't eat his Bolio with chorizo con papa in peace" (EVERYDAY, T22351).

Second, our work study reveals how odd-stage awkwardness manifests in offline settings, specifically in (open) workspaces. Of course, most of today's occupations require some interaction with others, and many white-collar jobs take place in at least partially open offices. Though occasional interaction is beneficial for most jobs, open workspaces – think of cubicles – introduce a distinctive form of awkwardness (along with popular culture spin-offs, such as *The Office*). In some workspaces, frontstage and backstage are separated by some form of barrier (such as walls), allowing or forcing employees to retain their distance; in open workplans this is much less self-evident. This becomes even more significant in an upcoming type of workspace that we will examine to better understand odd-stage awkwardness: the coworking space. In coworking spaces, unrelated coworkers (usually freelancers) are often working on the same table or desk. In fact, the social proximity in coworking spaces constitutes the business model (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2021), rather than something that must be contained. This inherently engenders a situation of continuous co-presence, in which users are close enough to others to be perceived and (subconsciously) monitored in whatever they do (Goffman, 1963).

Work usually requires frontstage performances: we must stay "in our role" to be taken seriously in our profession. As Goffman (1959) emphasizes: frontstage performances require backstage practice and preparation (see also previous chapter on preparing for social interactions). Academics might practice their conference presentation, marketeers their pitch, and nurses might need some minutes to recover after dealing with an uncooperative or severely ill patient. Our work study – based on extensive ethnographic research in coworking spaces – showed that though physical backstages are unattainable in coworking spaces, a performed boundary between a backstage – characterized by silence, avoiding (non-)verbal interaction, and retreating to individual work practices – was upheld most of the time (Wijngaarden, 2023).

This performed boundary between the frontstage and backstage is predominantly defined by unobtrusiveness. In line with existing studies of coworking and shared offices (e.g. de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019), one of the first things we noticed during fieldwork in coworking spaces was the extended periods of silence. Despite working in a coworking space, and thus being bodily co-present, many workers safely retreated to their perceived private spheres by, for example, using involvement shields (Goffman, 1963), such as wearing headphones avoiding unnecessary eye contact, and utilizing the available workspace. For as long as the silence is collectively convincingly performed (or shared, as de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019, put it), the backstage work environment remains undisturbed, preventing awkward interactions. After remaining silent for an hour or more, breaking the silence became more difficult as the boundary between backstage and frontstage became more established. In the ethnographic research, we noticed that, as the silence persisted, it became more likely that breaking the silence would lead to awkward interactions. Our fieldnotes, for example, were full of comments in the line of: "It has been quiet for over two hours". Where early in the day people frequently asked questions and offered drinks, people now leave and enter without speaking" (WORK, fieldnotes). However, after several new people entered the scene in quick succession – and where thus not affected by the duration of the silence – coworkers seemed to be more likely to start talking (this finding resonates with those from studies of open-office environments, see e.g. Peteri et al., 2024).

No-show awkwardness: Failed performance, synchronicity, and intimacy

Finally, even when one follows the script, things can still become awkward due to the absence of physical co-presence. Here, a lack of intimacy and synchronicity leads to a failing performance, not able to generate sufficient emotional energy. This spatial subtype is referred to as "no-show awkwardness", as the lack of co-presence, in Goffmanian dramaturgical terms, leads to a performance, but not a show. The focus of this final section is on the awkwardness that can arise when interactions between a group of social actors shifts from virtual to physical space.

In previous sections, we explored how space functions as part of the script for an occasion. For example, we expect a wedding to take place in a church, not in a store. These spaces themselves carry specific expectations and are associated with certain emotions. People assess the appropriateness of these feelings by comparing their emotional responses to what they believe the feeling rules are: the shared (often latent) guidelines that dictate how we should try to feel (Hochschild, 1979, p. 564). In other words, feeling rules are the norms that govern what emotions are deemed appropriate in a given situation. These rules are also spatially bound. A church, for instance, typically calls for reverence and can evoke different emotions depending on the context. These might include sadness during a funeral, happiness at a wedding, or boredom for a teenager who would rather spend their Sunday morning with friends than at a church service. The latter feeling may not align with the parents' perception of the appropriate emotional response within the church setting.

But do these feeling rules and scripts also extend to virtual spaces? Previous research suggests that technology-mediated interactions are often perceived as being of "lower quality" compared to face-to-face interactions (e.g. Fernback, 2007). Studies indicate, for instance, that online environments are less likely to foster meaningful exchanges (Hine, 2013), encourage disinhibition and unsocial behavior (Kilvington, 2021), and that the growing emphasis on mediated interactions can detract from more meaningful in-person connections (Cahir & Lloyd, 2015). As a result, people tend to have unrealistic expectations when interactions shift from virtual to physical spaces, particularly regarding the perceived intimacy between participants, and the synchronicity of the interaction. This disconnect can lead to awkwardness and a lack of emotional energy (see Chapter 7).

But why are virtual interactions – lacking physical co-presence – often considered lower quality? Based on our analysis of news media coverage during the pandemic, we found that virtual or mediated interactions were frequently seen as less capable of fostering synchronicity. Chatting and emailing, for example, rarely lead to a shared emotional experience. Often, participants must wait a considerable amount of time for a response, which disrupts the natural rhythm of conversation. In occasions like online dating, this delay can make the experience feel more like a job interview. As one source noted, "a dodgy connection can really ruin what is already a pretty awkward date" (EVERDAY, The Sun, 2020). As Collins (2004) suggests, these lagging interactions rarely generate sufficient emotional energy (see also the previous chapter regarding time).

Similarly, a lack of intimacy – both in terms of physical closeness and emotional familiarity – makes it harder to establish trust. When we interact with others, we read a variety of social cues and emotional expressions to gauge whether we are on the same page. Are we sharing our definition of the situation? Is the other attentive to the script of the occasion? Is their performance convincing? These questions help us assess the suitability of those we interact with. This challenge was reflected in the news media articles we studied, where authors described numerous failed social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of intimacy. One author (EVERDAY, Hancock, 2020) described the awkwardness of online therapy: "Trust me, it would've been a lot easier [to go through regular psychological therapy], and way less awkward, than sitting in silence with a therapist in front of you for 45 minutes". Another (EVERYDAY, Gallagher, 2020) lamented how social distancing measures made comforting rituals in times of grief impossible: [Attending a funeral during lockdown] "was very awkward; all I could say to my grandad was hello and goodbye, even though he was really upset and his wife had just died. I don't have a way with words, and you can't do what comes naturally and just hug them".

Our research on online dating echoed this need for intimacy. Respondents were often vocal about the limitations of online interactions, especially during the transition from the virtual realm to real life. For many, face-to-face interaction is essential to confirm whether a potential partner is truly a good fit after dating online. Awkward moments often arose when the flow of conversation did not match between the online and offline mode of interaction. One respondent noted: "The fact that she spoke a lot through online messaging but not in real life was really confusing" (DATING, R11). Here, the sudden increase in synchronicity led to confusion, as the respondent realized he was out of sync with his date. Another interviewee also emphasized the importance of smooth interactions, and how an increase of synchronicity may expose a lack of rhythmic entrainment: "It's awkward when there's no flow because if it's a first meeting, you're expecting to get to know the person, but there's just silence, and you can't progress with your purpose" (DATING, R4).

To avoid hiccups when transitioning from virtual to physical space, participants took several steps to prevent mismatches: "So it's important to make it clear from the beginning. To avoid complications" (DATING, R4). One respondent for example described his procedure as follows: "So obviously before I do connect [offline] with someone, I read their profile and see [their] likes and stuff, and make sure that I don't put myself in a situation that's gonna be awkward" (DATING, R10). Some participants went further by incorporating phone calls as an intermediary step: "I like to have a phone call […] hearing their voice can confirm a lot of what you thought about someone" (DATING, R5). These strategies allowed participants to gather more information and test their compatibility, minimizing uncertainty and reducing the potential for awkwardness during in-person meetings. In other words, by "getting closer" to their potential dates, they strengthened their sense of intimacy, and a phone call may – to some extent – establish a synchronicity that online messaging lacked. This aligns with Collins' (2004) argument that physical co-presence is crucial for generating emotional energy and building social bonds. These measures also helped weed out potential partners who, while compatible online, might not be a good fit in the long run.

As we move forward, the next chapter will further explore how people navigate and deal with these awkward interactions, examining strategies that help manage awkwardness as well as the possible consequences of choosing a particular strategy.

Note

1 Our conception of space echoes the work of Gieryn (2000). Yet, this meaning-imbued denominator of a certain area is what he calls *place*. Space, in his work, is devoid of cultural interpretation. Nevertheless, for the sake of consistency, we use the term "space", as this is common both in the online as well as offline work to denote certain meaningful abstract geometries (think about coworking spaces, or cyberspace).

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9 Dealing with awkwardness

In the previous chapters, we discussed what awkward feelings are, distinguished between different types of awkwardness (including temporal and spatial subtypes), and outlined where such interactions come from. This chapter addresses how people deal with awkward interactions. What strategies do they use to restore the interaction order when things become awkward? We identified two main strategies for dealing with awkward situations: avoiding and directing. First, avoiding means not being confronted with an awkward interaction, whether in the past, present, or future. Awkwardness can be avoided directly by physically or virtually exiting the situation, for example, by ghosting. It can also be avoided indirectly, mainly through the use of small talk to keep an interaction flowing (avoiding awkward silences) and find common ground for more meaningful interactions. While avoiding awkwardness reduces the need for emotion work in the short run, this strategy may backfire in future encounters with the people that were avoided. Second, directing refers to directly and immediately addressing an awkward interaction. This approach includes a variety of strategies: (1) creating distance as a way to make one less self-conscious, (2) communicating directly and honestly to decrease uncertainty about what others expect, and (3) embracing awkwardness through humor to reduce discomfort by re-establishing a shared definition of the situation. We will address why people choose one strategy over another and how they learn such strategies.

Main strategies to deal with awkwardness

Social interactions are often well-scripted (and social actors have internalized these scripts). Therefore, they usually feel like a smooth process. We run into someone, say "hi, how are you doing?", and go on with our lives. Or, we interact with someone for a specific purpose in a routine way, paying at checkout, for example, without even being fully aware of the intricacies of the interaction. Yet, when awkwardness becomes explicit, social interactions become less self-evident. This magnification of awkwardness leads us to feel uncertain, uncomfortable, and self-conscious. As a result,

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people have a powerful desire to resolve awkwardness, which requires an immediate intervention (Clegg, 2012). After awkwardness breaks down social interactions – a social interaction going wrong – an effort is needed to reconstruct the interaction order by protecting all participants from losing face (Goffman, 1959). Our respondents often felt the burden and responsibility to keep the interaction afloat, or in Goffman's (1955) words, to rely on protective practices. Hence, "each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable" (Goffman, 1959, p. 9). As we discussed in Chapter 3, achieving such a (veneer of) consensus requires emotion work.

In general, we distinguish between two main strategies in dealing with awkwardness: avoiding and directing. First, avoiding awkwardness may be a central objective during social interactions to ensure every participant's moral right to preserve their dignity. Our data show that people use both direct and indirect avoiding strategies. Direct avoiding entails physically or virtually exiting a (potentially) awkward interaction, such as bailing on a date or ghosting an online interaction. Indirect ways to avoid awkward interactions are lying and using small talk to fill awkward silences. We will unpack these strategies below.

Second, instead of avoiding awkwardness, one can direct awkwardness in social interactions. We found three ways people direct awkwardness. The first strategy is creating distance, either between oneself and the other or oneself and awkward feelings. Creating distance from the other is often done by being extremely polite, hoping to detach from the awkward interaction. Women, for example, may use this strategy to avoid giving the impression that they are interested in their conversation partner, especially when he happens to be an eager, single man. Creating distance between the self and awkward feelings is often done by normalizing awkwardness, hoping to distance oneself from the awkward interaction. People can do so, for example, by telling oneself that even presidents or royals sometimes make a faux pas (again, Joe Biden's Zelensky-Putin mix-up, for example, comes to mind here, Khazan, 2023). A second strategy is directing an awkward interaction hands-on, through direct and honest communication, for example, by explicitly mentioning that you noticed a coffee stain on your white shirt, and that this looks a bit silly. The third and final strategy which respondents said they used is to embrace awkwardness through humor. We will discuss these strategies – and why people opt for them – in more detail below.

Avoiding strategies

Avoiding means not being confronted with an awkward interaction in the past, present, or future. This section explores direct avoiding strategies, both face-to-face and online, as well as more indirect strategies. Finally, it reflects on the consequences of using avoiding strategies.

Direct avoiding strategies: Physical and virtual exiting

One of the most ubiquitous avoiding strategies is to exit an awkward interaction. Often this literally means removing your body from a (potentially) awkward interaction. One interviewee described this as a flight strategy she uses when she "realize[s] something is not right in this social situation" (EVERYDAY, R8). Some online dating app users we interviewed would invent excuses for leaving the date early, or communicate unwillingness to continue contact via text rather than face-to-face. For example, they explained: "Yeah, I do have a codeword with a housemate in which we would say 'pineapple'. And she would call me and so I could make an excuse to leave secretly" (DATING, R1). Another, however, explained that she found this a difficult strategy to implement in face-to-face interactions: "I always feel awkward and I would never … I don't think I could do it in someone's face. So far it's always online" (DATING, R3).

As the previous quote highlights, avoiding is not always straightforward, especially when interactions are not voluntary (such as dating), but are driven by professional demands. In the context of work, we found that some co-working space users experienced difficulties in navigating frontstage and backstage and the face work that is demanded of them. Being in a co-working space, after all, demands maintaining face (upholding the image of a successful worker). This setting, however, did not grant them the opportunity to retreat to a more private space to have personal conversations or to express their emotions regarding setbacks or difficulties. Here, avoiding became entrenched in strict daily routines through the implementation of various involvement shields (Goffman, 1963), such as wearing headphones to avoid interactions.[1] The challenges of avoiding awkwardness in a work context also showed in our study of Twitter users. For example, one user stated during the pandemic: "I used to feel bad for being too awkward and shy to create relationships with my coworkers but with covid I am glad I don't have to feel bad for actively avoiding people lol" (EVERYDAY, T13307). In these contexts, avoiding requires ample emotion work (Hochschild, 1983).

Exiting can also take a virtual form, where people withdraw from online interactions. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the (un)mediated context affects how awkwardness manifests, and how it can be resolved. In online dating, ghosting is a common way of avoiding having to deal with rejection, as one can avoid the overall awkwardness of losing face (LeFebvre, 2017). Online avoiding strategies are often considered easier than embodied forms of avoidance. As Respondent 3 above highlighted: it is far easier to get out of a conversation online. Similarly, one of the dating respondents explained: "I think that breaking up with someone digitally, or ghosting, makes it very easy […] you don't have to deal with human consequences" (DATING, R2). Silence, in this case, can speak louder than words and is enough to communicate disinterest in further interaction. In a similar vein, but in a different context, our study of everyday awkwardness showed that respondents often explained how being in online meetings eased avoidance. For example, one respondent said that “you can leave whenever you want to. Instead, when you’re stuck in a classroom. And if you’re uncomfortable in a classroom, there’s nothing you can do” (EVERYDAY, R8).

Indirect avoiding strategies: Voids, flow, depth

Besides escaping awkward interactions, avoiding also encompasses more indirect strategies to dodge awkwardness. The most often-mentioned way to do this is to strategically use small-talk[2] to fill the gaps in social interactions, mainly awkward silences in conversations (see Chapter 7), “to keep the conversation going” (EVERYDAY, R1). One of the tweets, for example, discusses how the “[c]oronavirus is the perfect small talk I desperately needed to fill the awkward void I create in every conversation” (EVERYDAY, T1443). Voids, in this context, are hiccups in the flow of conversations that need to be avoided. This again indicates that synchronicity – an alignment in time – is crucial for avoiding awkwardness (see also Giolo et al., 2023), and that awkwardness is not only a lack of script or a breakage of scripts (Plakias, 2024), but rather a lack of savoir-faire to smoothly execute a script in synchronicity with the other participant(s) in the interaction (Goffman, 1955; see also Riggio et al., 2020).

People use various strategies to avoid awkward interactions by filling gaps in the conversation. In several instances, avoiding awkwardness through small talk took the form of asking questions. For example, one respondent in the everyday study used this strategy: “Asking questions is something I do a lot. I believe I can come up with questions quite easily and the other must provide an answer right, so they need to speak up. That is great. It also prevents me from talking on and on. It may be awkward for a few minutes, but it works to get the conversation going” (EVERYDAY, R10). Similar to the arguments mentioned above, small talk here is used to improve the flow of interactions – a natural rhythm of turn-taking (Collins, 2004). Another respondent uses a similar strategy: “So if I am, for example, interacting with someone, I would try to think of what kind of things I can say to them. I have some questions that I use to fill awkward silences. For example, like very generic questions”. However, this does not work, according to this respondent, if “the other person is not really invested that much in the situation” (EVERYDAY, R4).

The importance of being invested also resonates in another strategy beyond improving the flow of the interaction: ensuring the interaction has sufficient “depth”. When asked how a respondent dealt with awkward interactions, she for example, replied: “I think usually by trying to say something and make small talk […] and then you just focus on the conversation usually. Especially if you can talk about something that’s not super small talkish, but something like your university course. You can have a genuine conversation on that matter, and then you’re just kind of focusing on the content. That’s how I just focus on what the other person is saying, and then it's fine, right?" (EVERYDAY, R6). In this example, (small) talk is used as a strategy to avoid awkward silences that happen when a conversation lacks depth and focus. Small talk is a way to "find some common ground" (EVERYDAY, R1) to kick-start a deeper (read: more meaningful) – and therefore less likely to be awkward – conversation. Again, this shows that ample emotion work goes into keeping awkwardness at bay. People like the respondent above show the many ways they engage in surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) to comply with expectations regarding small talk (sufficient flow, sufficient depth).

Other indirect avoiding strategies may include lying, blaming others, or distracting. Considering our research methods, it may not be surprising that we did not find much evidence of these avoidance strategies being used, as interviews are spaces where people present a particular self, which likely does not include lying. One interviewee, however, uses some combination of lying and blaming others. In the first instance, he takes a direct communication approach (see below) by asking "even if what I said was not appropriate", but he follows up by arguing: "yeah, if I don't know if I offended you, I can always pin it on our cultural differences. You know? I can get away with that" (EVERYDAY, R9). Similarly, Wherry et al. (2019) pinpoint lying (under the guise of obfuscating their own financial circumstances) as a way to evade the awkwardness of not wanting to lend (too much) money to friends and kin.

Consequences of avoiding as a strategy

Avoidance may have many short-term benefits. One of the benefits is that it – especially direct avoidance – reduces the need for emotion work (Hochschild, 1983), which means that awkward feelings are suppressed and their expressions are kept away from public display. Direct avoidance strategies are a quick fix that often does not require deep acting (Hochschild, 1983, p. 42) – trying to alter how one feels about an interaction to deceive oneself into thinking that, for example, "everyone makes mistakes" (we will return to such normalization strategies later in this chapter). One respondent gives a vivid example of the (short-term) benefits of avoidance, explaining the advantages of avoiding awkward interactions in thesis supervision: "I like doing supervisor meetings online. […] If you should encounter threatening awkwardness, it's easier to get out of it. As soon as you click the leave button you can have your emotional breakdown. You cannot break down [in face-to-face meetings]. As soon as the supervisor turns around and goes back to their office, you have to get off campus, get out of the building, get your bike home, and navigate traffic. You're not supposed to navigate traffic when you're in emotional upheaval, as that can be dangerous, even if you're just biking" (EVERYDAY, R8).

However, some respondents indicated that adopting avoidant responses to already uncomfortable interactions, such as rejection in dating, may also cause negative social outcomes, including triggering a sense of self-consciousness, hurting others' feelings more than intended, or creating an unnecessary amount of uncertainty. For instance, avoidant forms of rejection resulted in more awkward situations in the future like meeting each other again by accident and pretending to have never met before (DATING, R4) or feeling the impulse to hide when running into each other by chance in public (DATING, R3). Hence, while requiring less short-term emotion work, avoidance may not only prolong awkwardness (Clegg, 2012) but may demand more ad hoc emotion work in the long run. As one Twitter user stated: "So, like I've been ghosting this guy like this whole corona time, and I don't know how to apologize, and like, he came to the class today and I just left because it was sooooo awkward" (EVERYDAY, T22046). In the words of author Sam Scholfield in her awkwardness survival guide: avoiding is "[a]n option for those who do not care about the consequences ..." (2011, p. vii). The same respondent we quoted above argued in a similar fashion: "Avoidance can be a huge problem. If you avoid too many things in life, it's just going to cause a whole bunch of problems for you, and it's going to intensify the fear and things" (EVERYDAY, R8).

Directing

The directing approach refers to directly and immediately addressing an awkward interaction. This approach encompasses a variety of strategies: (1) creating distance, (2) communicating directly and honestly, and (3) embracing awkwardness. These strategies address different aspects of awkward feelings: creating distance is a way to make one less self-conscious, communicating directly decreases uncertainty over what others expect, and embracing awkwardness reduces discomfort by re-establishing a shared definition of the situation.

Creating distance: Normalizing and being polite

The first strategy involves creating distance, either between oneself and one's own awkward feelings or between oneself and others. Creating distance between the self and awkward feelings is often done by normalizing awkwardness. This is most clearly illustrated in the context of online self-help videos. In almost every description of awkward feelings or instances, it was followed up with a phrase such as "these moments are uncomfortable and annoying, but they're inevitable" (SELF-HELP, TopThink), "if you identify as socially awkward, you are not alone" (SELF-HELP, Psych2Go), or "you are not alone, and there are other people who are actually feeling the same way as you – if not worse" (SELF-HELP, Amir). By describing awkwardness as common or even inevitable, it is presented as a ubiquitous experience, which cannot be escaped. Thus, the most frequent advice provides reassurance that there is no reason to feel awkward in the first place. Awkwardness happens to everyone – it is very normal – and people should therefore not worry about feeling awkward from time to time. This line of reasoning also popped up in the interviews. For example, one respondent argued: "I'm not sure if it's only for awkwardness, but I've been doing therapy for almost a year now. […] Um, and I think it also kind of worked for awkwardness as well because like as I said earlier, probably everyone at some point in their lives feels awkward. […] And it's very human. […] Awkward things happen, and that's how I deal with it, I guess" – (EVERYDAY, R7).

Normalizing awkwardness is often followed by the advice to create emotional distance between the self and others. Having established that social unease often stems from worrying about the opinions of others, self-help videos often make an effort to emphasize the fact that this worry is ungrounded. *TopThink* (SELF-HELP) illustrates this by saying: "No one worries about what you do as much as you do, so don't be scared to make connections and be yourself. Live your life like no one's watching, because most of the time, no one is". Similarly, the first tip given by *watchwellcast* (SELF-HELP) in their video titled *How to Deal with Embarrassment* is to "force yourself not to be the center of the universe", because "whatever just happened isn't as big a deal as your mind is rapidly making it". In discussing such emotional distancing, both *watchwellcast* and *TopThink* refer to "the spotlight effect" (Gilovich et al., 2000). This is the phenomenon whereby people overestimate the degree to which others notice them, their actions, and their appearance. In many cases, when people feel like they did something clumsy or embarrassing and people are judging them for it, nobody even noticed. These YouTube videos attribute awkward feelings not so much to the awkward interaction per se, but rather our individual tendency to overthink social encounters. The experience of awkwardness is presented as mostly an internalized experience, and something that is magnified manifold by our own brains, but for which there is usually no reason to feel bad about it. Coping with awkwardness, therefore, could mean decreasing interactions with people that come with clumsy interaction skills. "Don't dwell; change the channel!" says *watchwellcast* (SELF-HELP) for example. In a way, these channels argue not for better surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) to improve the emotional expressions, or even learning skills to improve the performance one gives off (Goffman, 1959), but rather to engage in deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) to change one feels about the situation.

Cognitive emotion work – changing one's mindset about how to feel about awkward interactions – is not easy. Deep acting takes incredible effort. As such, many respondents returned to surface acting in practice (Hochschild, 1983). One of the ways they did so was by using a more discursive strategy to create distance between the self and others: being extremely polite. Politeness is grounded in moral principles rather than merely maintaining harmonious interactions, even if this implicates uncomfortable moments of awkwardness. For example, in the dating study, respondents voiced that even if continuing the relationship was no longer wanted, they decided to respect others' time and feelings by sitting through the date for a decent amount of time until it seemed appropriate to leave. Here, they emotionally disengaged from the occasion (i.e. no longer perceived it as an actual date), but physically remained present to avoid awkwardness. One of the respondents explained this in the following way: "So when you meet for real, you know right away that it's not a good match, but you still need to go on a date […] You're a total arsehole if you say 'okay, now that I see you let's not do this.' I would never do that" (DATING, R5). Similarly, another respondent argued: "I have a rule that it doesn't matter what, when I first meet a person, I always give an hour of my time because that person came to meet you so […] I feel it's very rude to say 'oh, I have to go' and leave …" (DATING, R4). Thus, instead of *actually* being engaged in a date, they put up the performance of a date in order to save the face of the other, and themselves (cf. protective practices, see Goffman, 1955).

Communicating directly and honestly

Second – and quite contrary to the preceding strategy – one can address an awkward interaction by communicating directly and honestly. A main source of awkwardness arises from uncertainty: "Having to read a situation that is not clear" (EVERYDAY, R1). Therefore, a situation can be made less awkward by directly addressing the awkwardness of the situation, which is in itself awkward at first. As the respondent above articulated: "It may feel uncomfortable to overcome that barrier of asking or putting it explicitly out there. But once that has been done, the situation feels comfortable, at least it's more like being on the same page instead of wondering 'are they okay with me doing this, or are they not okay with me doing this'? So, I think it definitely feels like an awkward barrier to overcome, to actually ask someone […] how they feel about [the situation], but once that's overcome, it's like, okay, a sigh of relief in a way". Hence, communicating directly and honestly may help to establish a shared definition of the situation. However, as another respondent put, it may require taking "a deep breath" (EVERYDAY, R2) and explaining your train of thought to the other.

Moreover, just as some slight dishonesty in the name of politeness was considered a moral choice, for some respondents, actually communicating directly and honestly was viewed as the most moral – or even political – act. As one interviewee argued: "I try to be vocal as much as I can, because I think, as a society, we are taught to hide our unpleasant feelings, like when you're sad or when you feel awkward or when you feel depressed, anxious, whatever. Um, we always think these are feelings to hide and suppress, but I think in the long term it doesn't work. And instead of hiding them or suppressing them, I am trying to feel them and encourage others to feel them and be more open about it as well. Um, yeah. I still, when I tell people that I can be awkward or something like that, I think it helps them, like it makes them feel more comfortable usually" (EVERYDAY, R8). In the context of dating, thoughtfulness and expressing honesty tactfully were used and appreciated in maintaining interaction as pleasant as possible by both men and women. For example, a respondent argued that dishonesty caused awkward and unpleasant interactions: “I’m not interested saying, and being like ‘I don’t know, let’s see, let’s talk about it next week …’ You know like all these make up excuses. Yeah. I really don’t like it” (DATING, R6). Similarly, another respondent emphasized to “just be honest, maybe he met someone else, or is talking to someone else … but don’t [reject without a true explanation], that’s not cool” (DATING, R2). Although having open and clear communication as part of a rejection after an in-person encounter was considered highly uncomfortable and often awkward for both parties, many interviewees preferred undergoing it to avoid the larger future risks of the avoidance strategy, as we discussed earlier. If rejection was not addressed clearly, it may escalate awkwardness by creating uncertainty and causing others’ emotional distress.

Embracing the awkward

Third, one can address the interaction not just by being honest but by embracing the awkward, often with humor. To follow the emergency guide of a Twitter user: “How to manage our new reality with Covid-19; no more handshaking and here’s what you can do to prepare: ‘1- Accept that it’s going to feel awkward, 2- Decide ahead of time what you feel comfortable with, 3- Use humor to defuse the discomfort’” (EVERYDAY, T1904). This approach resonated with many of the studies’ respondents. For example, one respondent argued: “I just kind of joke about it. I think that kind of breaks the ice, you know? If you in an awkward situation and then you just kind of make fun of the situation and people are just laughing along with you, then it’s like, whatever” (EVERYDAY, R1). The prevalence of joking was also visible in our ethnographic research on co-working, where backstage/frontstage transgressions discussed in the preceding chapter (such as loud typing, accidental cursing or making other unwanted noises) were corrected with humor – both by the transgressor as well as by other participants in the workspace. Following Collins’ (2004) interaction ritual chain approach, this strategy turns the negative emotional energy of a potentially failing interaction or performance into positive emotional energy through collective laughter.

Making fun of the interaction also provides a shared definition of the situation – viewing it as funny rather than failed – and lowers the tension, as a respondent stated: “Laughing is always good as it creates breathing space” (EVERYDAY, R10). The shared definition argument also clearly resonated in the interviews: “I think normally, when I feel it’s an awkward moment, I try to relieve the pressure off the other person by telling a joke, laughing, or even just saying, ‘Oh, this moment is awkward, right?’ That way, you know you’re on the same page” (EVERYDAY, R5). Again, this shows clear efforts of respondents to save the faces of others and themselves, and to turn a failing performance into a successful one. Being on the same page is crucial here as it helps to reduce social discomfort: “Normally it helps because normally I am even more uncomfortable when I see that the other person is uncomfortable. So if I see that they are less uncomfortable, I'm also less uncomfortable" (EVERYDAY, R5). By keeping awkwardness contained, therefore, it is less likely to spread and thus, one is less likely to be affected by it, as we saw in Chapter 8.

Consequences of directing as a strategy

In general, addressing awkwardness immediately tends to lead to more stable social interactions, while avoidant behavior may prolong awkwardness, resulting in an uncomfortable experience (see Clegg, 2012). However, the different strategies of directing awkwardness all have their own disadvantages. First, creating distance very much relies on cognitive emotion work (Hochschild, 1983). This means convincing oneself that awkwardness is ubiquitous, often goes unnoticed, and that there is no need to focus on it or feel self-conscious. However, whereas this may work for some people, this may require "years of therapy" for others.

Second, while embracing awkwardness can be effective for some, it also brings its own challenges. As Scholfield puts it: "Not only are you not freaking out or being weird, you're taking one for the team by giving everyone an out through chuckles instead of OMGs" (2011: viii). However, there is a risk that a joke may backfire, making the interaction even more awkward. In this situation, "you're maybe making a joke and then ending up offending someone" (EVERYDAY, R8). This is especially risky in intercultural communication "because the joke [only] works in certain situations" (EVERYDAY, R8). Here too, though some people may be better at putting themselves at ease by creating an emotional distance, embracing awkwardness requires a certain social sensibility that not everyone possesses in all interactions. One respondent, for example, continued: "Some people have like a social flexibility and acuity. They just know what is appropriate in which situations. And I don't have like that natural, organic feeling for it" (EVERYDAY, R8).

Finally, the strategy most respondents indicated works best is direct and honest communication. Social desirability may be a factor here, as many people feel it is the strategy they *should* opt for, even if it isn't always their preferred approach. Yet, in the short run, this strategy will likely make things very awkward, as several respondents also pointed out. It involves making parts of the interaction – which you may want to avoid – explicit. Here, we see clear connections to the work of Kotsko (2010), who argues that overcoming awkwardness as participants in an interaction has a unifying effect, building enriched social connections and a sense of community. Correspondingly, Plakias' (2024) main argument is that awkwardness, if addressed correctly, can lead to moral and social improvement. A collective recognition of where our scripts fail (because they no longer fit our needs or have become outdated) may – as she states – allow us to engender positive societal change. While determining a causal relationship between direct and honest communication about awkwardness and social improvement exceeds the scope of this book, the idea certainly resonated with some of the respondents.

Choosing strategies and learning to deal with awkwardness

As we outlined above, people are not powerless or left at the mercy of the whims of potentially awkward interactions. They have some agency that affects the interaction, and the (severity of the) awkward feelings that might follow from them. In this final section, we discuss why people choose one strategy over another, and how people perceive some strategies to be more successful than others. We assume that such decisions are driven by the meaning that people give to the interaction. In other words, if people define a situation as awkward, it will prompt them to take certain actions (Spillman, 2020). These actions can be shaped by the emotional energy that they hope to receive from the interaction (cf. Collins, 2004), meaning that positive interactions leave positive emotional energy that might – in the longer run – be beneficial for future communication and feelings of solidarity (between persons or groups). Another factor that can be taken into account is the amount of emotion work associated with the strategy (Hochschild, 1983), as we already touched upon earlier in this chapter. Below, we outline four types of reasons why people choose different strategies: other-directed choices, self-directed choices, medium-directed choices, and culture-directed choices.

Other-directedness

First, an other-directed choice is motivated by the desire to help the other participant(s) keep the interaction going and other participants' performance afloat. Once again, we see the tendency for people to engage in protective practices (Goffman, 1955), intervening to resolve awkwardness caused by others. In this case, the other person can, for example, be seen as socially less capable (i.e. having fewer conversational skills or savoir-faire). Some respondents mentioned that they felt responsible for situations like slow or tedious interactions, and would use strategies like small talk to keep awkwardness at bay. For instance, in the dating study, some participants expressed that they felt the need to keep the conversation going when their date demonstrated low social skills. One respondent, for example, said she felt a "pressure to keep the conversation going" (DATING, R9), while another explained that, because his date was shy, he "should put in more effort than [his date]" (DATING, R4).

Self-directedness

A self-directed choice is usually made to position and perceive oneself in a positive light. Respondents – especially those in the dating study – explained that though awkwardness is inevitable, the way it is navigated – directly, clearly, and tactfully – is paramount to achieving a positive outcome for both parties. For the individual delivering a rejection, using this strategy could enhance their image as being "morally correct". Failing to be clear about a rejection, particularly when romantic feelings are not mutual, was seen as prolonging awkwardness and creating a negative experience. However, as we saw above, this morality also appeared in other strategies, such as withholding full honesty to preserve the situation. Thus, this shows that sometimes similar arguments are given for different strategies, and vice versa, depending on the situation.

Medium-directedness

Differences in situations, therefore, also affect the strategies available (and pursued) for people who find themselves in (potentially) awkward interactions. The most profound difference is related to the medium of communication. Respondents, therefore, made medium-directed choices. Our dating study shows rejecting someone that you have only interacted with online is often handled more lightly than after an in-person interaction. Similarly, hitting the exit button in a Zoom meeting ("oops, connection problems) is often much easier than walking out of a crowded room. Direct avoiding strategies were therefore much more prevalent in online-only interactions, whereas indirect avoidance strategies or embracing the awkward was seen as more effective in unmediated (i.e., face-to-face) interactions.

Culture-directedness

Finally, cultural backgrounds and settings also affected which strategy was embraced, and which ones were avoided. Cultures, as we discussed in Chapter 6, also manifest in the different ways emotions are experienced and expressed. Hochschild (1979) calls these emotion cultures. Emotion cultures affect the way we *think* we should feel about the interaction (e.g. the need to keep the conversation afloat, or not). This includes the feeling rules, as well as how we are expected to express our emotions: the expression rules. Our study of everyday awkwardness clearly demonstrated this, as the respondents were a highly diverse group of people who shared experiences of working or studying in a multicultural environment. One of the respondents, for example, reflected on how different cultures were more or less inclined to choose certain strategies: "It's probably a cultural thing. I hate making generalizations, but let's say Dutch people are more direct, they're more comfortable with saying things directly, whereas South Africans tend to be more indirect. We don't necessarily confront situations head-on. We prefer to navigate them in other ways, which adds complexity but helps maintain peace" (EVERYDAY, R1). Clearly, this respondent recognized different expression rules about speaking one's mind. The contrast between Northern and Western European cultures vis-à-vis for example Latin (or in this case, South African) cultures came up frequently in all of the studies. While this often contributed to awkwardness (for instance, the cold and distanced Dutch circle birthday party is a notable example), it also influenced which strategies people selected to address awkwardness. Unclarity about different emotion cultures might therefore exacerbate the awkwardness of a given interaction, particularly when repair measures only deteriorate the situation.

However, this cultural reflexivity also underscores the agency people may have in dealing with awkwardness: those who are more culturally sensitive might be more inclined to consider how their strategy might affect others. The data from our co-working study emphasize the importance of learning to use the right behavior, but also the right coping strategies for the right occasions. The ethnographic research, for example, highlighted several moments where older workers explicitly explained the workplace culture to new entrants (such as the informal rules about who gets coffee and when). This also aligns with existing research on co-working, which shows that there is a significant learning component involved in being absorbed into the co-working community (Butcher, 2018). Similarly, respondents from the dating and everyday awkwardness studies also disclosed that they "learnt" how to deal with awkward dates: "It's kind of like a skill set that you have almost, I think, like, oh, I couldn't go on dates and not feel awkward. I feel like you always feel a bit awkward, but just like learning to deal with it" (EVERYDAY, R6). These skills might include learning "how to be rejected", and "to keep a straight face when somebody says something that's either cringey or very funny, but meant seriously" (EVERYDAY, R6).

This ability to learn to adapt, perhaps, might give us hope in dealing with the "awkward age" we presumably live in (Kotsko, 2010; Plakias, 2024). Though life in an increasingly complex society might put us in more awkward situations, we may also become more adept at adapting to these situations, learning to make the most of our awkward lives.

Notes

1. De Vaujany & Aroles (2019) wrote a more extensive piece on how silence was maintained in co-working spaces.
2. Small talk can in itself also be a source of awkwardness as some Twitter users aptly describe. For example, "One thing I am thankful for from covid-19: No more awkward small talk with the delivery guy. Drop the pizza off, knock and go. Perfection" (EVERYDAY, T16036).

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Conclusion and discussion

That was awkward, folks!

In this section, we will discuss our main findings by addressing our research questions: (1) what is awkwardness and what does it mean to people? (2) what makes people feel awkward in social interactions? (3) how does time affect awkward interactions? (4) how does space impact awkward interactions? and (5) how do people deal with awkward interactions? We will present a working definition and typology of awkwardness, outline its key dimensions, explore common coping strategies, and compare its occurrence across four societal domains: everyday life, work, dating, and self-help.

A sociological theory of awkwardness

In the previous chapters, we demonstrated that awkwardness is indeed everywhere – or at least in everyday interactions, at work, in dating, and within self-help contexts. Moreover, throughout our empirical research, none of our respondents claimed immunity to awkwardness, suggesting that it affects everyone to some degree. Our data further confirm that awkwardness arises within social interactions between people. Only in online self-help videos is awkwardness framed as an individual trait – likely for commercial reasons, as it is easier to market a "cure" for a personal issue than for a social dynamic. In most cases, awkwardness is experienced as a negative emotion that people seek to resolve (either by avoiding or directing it). However, our research also revealed instances where awkwardness can serve as a positive force, especially when it helps individuals adapt to new situations and revise social scripts. Awkwardness highlights moments when our social scripts and performance skills fall short, prompting us to find ways to keep interactions on track. Though we live in an increasingly complex world, we also show an incredible ability to maintain the social order – a core topic in sociological inquiry.

This underscores the need for a thorough sociological analysis of awkwardness. In contrast to prior research (Kotsko, 2010; Plakias, 2024), which has largely defined awkwardness through personal observations of the author (n=1), popular media, and pre-existing theories, we build on extensive empirical research to develop our sociological theory of awkwardness. We define awkwardness as *awkward feelings that result from social interactions going*

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wrong, as perceived by at least one of the actors (in)directly involved. Partially contradicting previous studies, we found that awkwardness is three things all at once: (1) an emotion, (2) an outcome of a social interaction, and (3) culture. In other words, awkwardness is the outcome of social interactions going wrong (drawing on the sociology of interactions), resulting in awkward feelings (drawing on the sociology of emotions), which are given cultural meaning through labeling – often using popular culture references (drawing on cultural sociology). We will unpack each of these elements below.

Awkwardness as an emotion

Our empirical research shows that awkwardness includes feeling uncertain, uncomfortable, and self-conscious. While our findings partially align with some previous studies, we draw a different conclusion. Earlier work has argued against defining awkwardness as an emotion, claiming that "awkward feeling[s] lack intentional content, characteristic physical displays, physiological changes, and action tendencies" (Plakias, 2024, pp. 43–44). However, drawing from the sociology of emotions – particularly the work of Hochschild (1979, 1983) – we are able to differentiate between emotional expressions (which Plakias primarily emphasizes) and subjective feelings. Even without outward expression, emotions are experienced internally. As shown in Chapter 6, our respondents clearly perceive awkwardness as an emotion, and some even describe physical sensations, such as "a hotness in your chest". Therefore, we demonstrate that awkwardness is indeed an emotion. In line with emotion theory (Peterson, 2006), our respondents emphasized that emotions, and the ability to manage them, are skills learned through socialization. As they encountered awkward interactions more frequently, they became better at the emotion work required in such contexts. We also argue that awkwardness is a domain-spanning emotion. This refers to an emotion that is not tied to specific occasions (such as parties or breakups), but rather an emotional misfit that looms in all social interactions. However, inherently awkward occasions, where awkwardness is the feeling rule (cf. sadness and funerals, pride and graduations), did not emerge in our empirical research.

Awkwardness as an outcome of a social interaction

Our second main point is that awkwardness is indeed a product of social interactions going wrong, rather than being a trait of inherently awkward individuals. This perspective is not new in research on awkwardness. Both Kotsko (2010) and Plakias (2024) adopt similar views. However, by harnessing the sociology of interactions, we are much better able to provide a more nuanced understanding of what *exactly* makes interactions go wrong. Focusing only on the absence of scripts, we argue, overlooks the many other ways awkwardness manifests. Moving beyond awkwardness as resulting from a lack of script (as Plakias would argue), we develop a more sophisticated model of awkwardness as interactions going wrong.

Thus, in addition to awkwardness arising from the absence of a script in social interactions (e.g. how to greet someone during the pandemic), we found that awkwardness also emerges from deviations from a script (e.g. accidentally failing to shake hands when meeting someone), or from failure to perform a script successfully (e.g. shaking someone's hand for too long). All of these situations can be classified under what we call interactional awkwardness: awkwardness resulting from interactions going wrong. Interactional awkwardness can also affect people not directly involved in the social interaction, leading them to experience vicarious awkwardness. Goffman's early work on embarrassment seems highly applicable to awkwardness in this context, as he described it as "contagious, spreading, once started, in ever widening circles of discomfiture" (Goffman, 1956, p. 268). Finally, we found that the degree of interactional awkwardness is affected by the relationship – or lack thereof – between the participants in the interaction. Awkward feelings are more likely to arise when participants are unfamiliar with one another, when there is a hierarchical relationship between them, or when they differ significantly in terms of cultural background.

Awkwardness as culture

Above all, we are profoundly influenced by our backgrounds as cultural sociologists, a term used for researchers interested in "how meaning-making happens, why meanings vary, how meanings influence human action, and the ways meaning-making is important in social cohesion, domination, and resistance" (Spillman, 2002, p. 1). In the context of this book, we understand awkwardness as a meaning people assign to their experiences (the interaction) and the emotions they associate with those experiences (the feelings accompanying the interaction). An important point that we are making in the book is that this meaning – awkwardness – is not biologically given. While we may feel certain emotions during failed interactions, it is only when we assign a name or emotional label to those feelings that we are able to make sense of what is happening. Using the terminology of Lizardo (2017), we must understand how awkwardness becomes part of our public culture, before we can grasp how it becomes part of our declarative culture (where we can articulate why something is awkward) and non-declarative culture (the cognitive-emotive associations we develop during and after awkward interactions).

As Kotsko's (2010) work emphasizes, awkwardness has irrevocably entered public culture of global media industries, finding expression in cringe comedy (see Kirschbaum & Berkers, 2024), (humorous) self-help and popular science books (Scholfield, 2011; Tashiro, 2017, among many others), and in pretty much every high school student after being seen with their parents: "awkward!" Since this meaning is not biologically inherent, awkwardness, as a label, is a social construction, developed through repeated human actions.

As our respondents showed, what is considered awkward, or even how to successfully navigate social interactions, depends on social and cultural contexts. For example, proper birthday party etiquette or even simple greetings can vary widely across local and national cultures. Some respondents mentioned cultural differences in addressing problems (with some countries being more direct than others), while Twitter users discussed the difficulties of "saying hi Latino-ly" during the pandemic. This indicates that awkwardness is a spatially (and temporally) situated and contextualized phenomenon, warranting a more nuanced approach.

A typology of awkwardness

We will now further develop our typology of awkwardness, which is summarized in Table C.1. Above, we outlined our general theorization of awkwardness, where awkward feelings are the result of social interactions going wrong. We referred to this general definition as interactional awkwardness. When such interactions make non-participants feel awkward by proxy, we coined this vicarious awkwardness. We also argued that some interactions, spaces and times may feel awkward by nature. Yet, these are not "naturally" awkward; rather, they are all social constructions. For example, when it comes to interactions, meeting the in-laws for the first time often leads to anticipatory awkwardness for many people. Our sociology of awkwardness provides an answer to the question why such interactions are perceived as awkward: interactions are more likely to go wrong when one is unfamiliar with the people involved, and the stakes of a proper performance – giving the right impression – are high. In a similar vein, people often identify elevators as one of the most awkward spaces in the modern world. Yet, there is nothing naturally awkward about elevators. They consist of a confined space that allows us to go from A to B, just like busses or escalators. What makes elevators awkward spaces is that they make it difficult-to-avoid contact, and that there is – at least temporarily – no escape. Recently, most people have endured many awkward moments between logging into an online video call and the official start of the meeting. These moments are not awkward by nature, but because they occur during "unscripted" time.

Table C.1 A typology of awkwardness

	Lack of script	*Deviation from script*	*Failed performance*
Interactions	(Vicarious) interactional awkwardness		
Time	Temporality of awkwardness		
	Time-off awkwardness	Odd-time awkwardness	No-flow awkwardness
Space	Spatiality of awkwardness		
	Out-of-place awkwardness	Odd-stage awkwardness	No-show awkwardness

Our typology highlights the different "constructs" that may make an interaction feel more or less awkward. By extending previous theories of awkwardness, we introduce the elements of time and space. Both from a temporal and spatial perspective, awkwardness manifests in a variety of types, affected by the temporal and spatial setting in which the interaction occurs. These temporal and spatial types show some overlap, as each type seems to be driven by a specific complications in social scripts: the lack of a clear script, the deviation from a script, and the failed performance of a script. Table C.1 illustrates how each of these complications, within the temporal and spatial domains, evokes a specific subtype of awkwardness. We will define and summarize each subtype below.

Temporal subtypes of awkwardness

Building on – and extending – Clegg's (2012) typology, we identified a temporality of awkwardness: a sequence many awkward interactions follow through time: (1) anticipation, (2) intensification and magnification, (3) resolution, and (4) retrospection (see Figure 7.1). The first refers to situations that are imbued with latent awkwardness. For example, respondents frequently referred to "opening" a conversation in a dating setting. The latter refers to the lingering feelings of awkwardness. Even long after an awkward occurrence, respondents often reported still cringing when recalling it. Similarly, things that were once not perceived as awkward (such as high school portrait photos) can now evoke retrospective discomfort.

Beyond mapping awkward interactions on a temporal scale though, our data have shown three subtypes of awkward interactions related to time. First, time-off awkwardness occurs when there is an absence of a clear script. The timing of interactions, as such, is literally turned off. One of the most significant upheavals in recent years was the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many social scripts had to be entirely rewritten – even for the most mundane interactions, such as greeting others. Without established scripts, the timing of interactions becomes ambiguous, creating uncertainty, discomfort, and self-consciousness about *when* it is appropriate to do certain things. The example of the unscripted, liminal time between entering a video call and the actual start of the meeting serves as a clear example of such time-off awkwardness.

Second, a deviation from the script can result in odd-time awkwardness. This type of awkwardness is caused by doing something, as the name suggests, at an odd moment; one that does not fit the occasion's script. The phrase "speaking out of turn" literally captures this type of awkwardness: one speaks at the wrong moment, or before it is their turn. In our research, such instances often were observed in the work study, in which co-workers were bound to very specific yet informal interaction rules, and breaking these rules (by, for example, speaking up during a moment of quiet) was experienced as awkward.

Third, even when there is a clear script for a particular occasion that is not deviated from, interactions can still become awkward if the individual performance of the script fails due to a lack of flow. We refer to this subtype of awkwardness as no-flow awkwardness. One of the most common examples is the awkward silence. Awkward silences do not indicate an absence of a script or a deviation from it. Instead, they signal poor execution, often due to prolonged silences between turn taking (online or offline), leading to a performance which fails to generate shared emotional energy.

Spatial subtypes of awkwardness

Besides these temporal aspects, we also found a strong spatial component to awkwardness: its ability, or even tendency, to spread through space, almost like a contagion – as Kotsko (2010) suggests. Similar to embarrassment, awkwardness has the potential to affect those nearby. This contagious nature of awkwardness makes it a ubiquitous and hard-to-avoid experience. While people can control their own scripts and performances, they remain vulnerable to the actions – or missteps – of others.

We identified three subtypes of awkward interactions related to space, which we termed out-of-place awkwardness, odd-stage awkwardness, and no-show awkwardness. First, out-of-place awkwardness may occur when the spatial setting – both space as location and space as people – of a given situation may create a conflict between multiple occasions and their respective scripts. Here a lack of a clear script is not caused by an external force – like a pandemic – but by conflicting scripts. In Chapter 8, we, for example, discussed situations in which interactions between students and professors became awkward as they found themselves in a spatial setting where the normal teacher-student script was unfitting, such in a park or at the coffee machine. In such situations, participants may experience awkwardness as they feel uncertain about which script to follow (if any): a jovial greeting, a solemn nod, or a lack of acknowledgment altogether.

Second, when a backstage performance *accidentally* enters the frontstage, interactions become awkward as one deviates from the script of a specific occasion, such as the office, the classroom, or the dentist's appointment. We refer to this spatial subtype as odd-stage awkwardness, as the performance ends up on the wrong stage. Ubiquitous examples include forgetting to mute during a work-related Zoom call while talking to your partner (about things certainly not meant for the Zoom audience), or a co-worker in an open office setting who forgets the presence of others and curses after receiving an unpleasant email.

Third, even when there is a clear script and one follows it, interactions can still go wrong, as we saw above with time. Similar to – and often in tandem with – the lack of flow we discussed above, the absence of physical co-presence can also lead to a type of awkwardness caused by a failed performance of a script. For example, in online dating, there is a script that one can relatively easily follow by simply not saying something weird. Even AI-chatbots such as ChatGPT are probably capable – when prompted correctly – of engaging convincingly in an online dating conversation. Yet, as such online interactions mostly lack intimacy (feelings of closeness) and synchronicity (interactions happening real-time), they are often still perceived as awkward, particularly when transitioning from virtual to physical interactions. We refer to this spatial subtype as no-show awkwardness, as the lack of co-presence, in Goffmanian dramaturgical terms, leads to a performance, but not a show.

How people deal with awkwardness

In Chapter 9, we discussed the strategies people use in awkward interactions to restore order when an interaction is going wrong. The data revealed two main strategies: to avoid and to direct. First, avoiding means not being confronted with an awkward interaction, whether in the past, present, or future. Awkwardness can be avoided directly by physically or virtually exiting, for example, leaving the room or by ghosting. It can also be avoided indirectly, primarily through the use of small talk to keep an interaction flowing (avoiding awkward silences) and by finding common ground for more meaningful interactions. While avoiding awkwardness reduces the need for emotion work in the short term, this strategy may backfire in future encounters with the people avoided. Second, directing refers to directly and immediately addressing an awkward interaction. This approach includes a variety of strategies: (1) creating distance to make oneself less self-conscious through normalizing awkwardness or being polite as a form of cognitive emotion work, (2) communicating directly and honestly to reduce uncertainty over what others expect, and (3) embracing awkwardness through humor to alleviate discomfort by re-establishing a shared understanding of the situation. Finally, we addressed why people choose one strategy over another and how they learn such strategies. They may want to help others save face or choose a strategy that makes themselves look morally correct. Their choice may also depend on the medium – ghosting is easier than escaping through a restaurant's toilet window during an awkward date – or may be influenced by cultural preferences, such as varying communication styles that favor directness.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Being the first extensive empirical study of awkwardness, we do not consider this the final study of awkwardness. Instead, we hope to provide a solid base for future studies of awkwardness – or related emotions. In this final section of the book, we reflect on our approach and identify suggestions for further research.

The nature of awkwardness

We started the book with a claim that "[w]e're all socially awkward now" (Bonos, 2021). This question about whether awkwardness is indeed everywhere, and whether we are all affected somehow remains an important avenue for future research. We have shown that awkwardness is ubiquitous in a variety of occasions, from everyday life to self-help, and from work to dating. We did not specifically examine occasions in which awkwardness is less likely to emerge. In other words, when one is looking for awkwardness, one will probably find awkwardness. Yet, beyond the scope and approach of our research, there may be awkward-free pockets of society (perhaps a sauna or carnival could qualify). These may be worthwhile to identify and study, to understand why awkwardness is largely absent there. Similarly, our study suggests that everyone has been in awkward interactions at some time and to some extent. Yet, as the many self-help videos and books on awkwardness claim, some people may be less likely to be affected. Besides individual traits or skills, some people might be perceived as less awkward as individuals because their social position allows them to act more awkwardly than others, while also feeling less awkward. We will get back to this below.

In this book, we have offered a general sociological theory and typology of awkwardness. However, we are aware of that "awkward" is an English-language term which may not exist in other languages and countries. For example, in Dutch, we speak of *ongemak,* which comes pretty close in terms of meaning to awkwardness. Yet, its etymology is not the same, as it does not refer to "going in the wrong direction". In the Netherlands – a country that is permeated by English-language cultural content – it is quite common to use the English expression awkward, particularly among young people (Assen, 2023). However, this may not be the case everywhere. The term may not have spread across the globe to a similar extent. We hypothesized that the term awkwardness has traveled mainly through (English-language) popular culture (cringe comedy, memes), making it easily accessible as a label to classify certain feelings. Yet, we were unable to empirically test this hypothesis. Hence, it would be valuable to further study such vocabularies of awkwardness by doing cross-national studies on the accessibility of the label across countries and languages, as well as the existence (or absence) of other-language alternatives for the term.

Furthermore, the limited availability of academic literature on awkwardness makes it difficult to establish a clear and definitive typology of awkwardness. While a similarity between awkwardness and embarrassment can be assumed – an idea that has informed much of the current research – a more targeted, empirical study of the experience of awkwardness and how it compares to other self-conscious emotions is needed. Access to such information would allow for a more focused discourse analysis, both during the sampling phase of the research and at the stage of analysis. The clearer the definition of awkwardness, the more informed the comparison between it and other emotions can be. For example, in Chapter 1, we discussed how emotions can be part of a family of emotions, and fall under the umbrella of a master emotion. In the case of awkwardness, such a master emotion could, for instance, be shame (Scheff, 2003).

A final point here is that, especially in Chapter 6, we touched upon vicarious awkwardness, particularly in the context of dating. Yet, we did not study this explicitly. In other words, we did not address explicitly how being a mere witness of a social performance, or even an unfocused interaction, affects whether and how awkwardness is felt. Though existing studies have touched upon awkward television generally (Duncan, 2017; Middleton, 2013), and audiences and cringe comedy specifically (Kirschbaum & Berkers,2024), we lack a thorough understanding of how awkwardness is experienced by spectators of everyday life interactions. Thus, more research is needed to distinguish vicarious awkwardness from interactional awkwardness in general.

Adhering to and performing social scripts

Another point for future research concerns the relation between adhering to and deviating from social scripts. This connects to the key sociological debate of agency versus structure (see Chapter 2). In our empirical research, we identified a deviation from the script as a potential source of awkwardness. However, some deviations may result in awkward feelings, while other may not. We identified several factors that may contribute to this in relation to the social actors involved in an interaction – familiarity, hierarchy, culture. Yet, some degree of deviation from an occasion's script may still be perceived as authentic or creative. For example, in his book *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker (1982) describes how artists must, to a certain degree, follow artistic conventions to ensure their work is understood by the audience. However, if they adhere to these conventions too rigidly, their work becomes boring and unoriginal. On the other hand, if they deviate too much, their audience may fail to comprehend – or even appreciate – the artistic output. Similarly, Goldberg et al. (2016) – building on a linguistic analysis of over 10 million email messages exchanged within a high-technology firm – demonstrate that a low cultural fit in language use (i.e. using different scripts) may be beneficial for employees, especially when they do not bring additional networks or knowledge to the table. Thus, further research on social scripts could explore this original-awkward axis: when are deviations perceived as adventurous, and when do they make interactions go wrong?

Besides adhering to scripts, we also showed how the performance of a script matters. Specifically, our empirical research frequently highlighted that the fluency by which scripts are performed can be learned. This aligns with a rich body of research in sociology, including the pinnacle of cultural sociology: the habitus as the "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" that are transmitted from generation to generation through socialization (Bourdieu, 1990). Integral to habitus is a person's cultural capital, which is generally defined as "widely shared, high-status cultural signals, attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials" (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 156). In other words, the more one is familiar with the dominant culture, the more likely they are to achieve success in education and society (Bourdieu, 1977; Jæger & Breen, 2016). The fluency of the (right) social scripts is an integral component of a person's cultural capital, residing not only in their declarative culture but also in their non-declarative culture (Lizardo, 2017). Though the acquisition of cultural capital and the importance of the habitus is well-researched (see e.g. Lizardo, 2021), the connection between cultural capital, learning social scripts, and awkwardness would benefit from a more comprehensive investigation.

Measuring awkwardness

Beyond future research that seeks to refine the theoretical understanding of awkwardness, other empirical approaches could also provide valuable insights. Below, we outline some limitations of our study and suggest directions for future research

First, we believe we offer quite a broad spectrum of cases, spanning everyday encounters, work, dating, to self-help. In nearly all cases, we included both physical and virtual interactions. Yet, there are limitations to some of the specific methods we used. As we discuss in more detail below, relying on interviews, for instance, has significant limitations, as many of our implicit associations and actions are embedded in our non-declarative culture and are not easily put into words. If one wants to *really* understand how certain social interactions are processed, verbal methods of conversations may not be the most effective way. Other methods may be useful for gaining such insights, such as ethnographic research. While we conducted some ethnographic research in a co-working context, the data were not specifically focused on observing awkwardness. Hence, future research may involve an ethnographic study of awkwardness in social interactions specifically. In this context, classical ethnomethodological breaching experiments (Garfinkel, 1967) may be the most imaginative – undoubtedly very awkward – way to draw out awkward interactions across various settings. This is particularly important as awkwardness is often embodied in the way emotions are expressed. Yet, the body is largely absent from this study and so are the bodily aspects of emotion work (see Chapter 4). Thus, using awkwardness not only as a research subject but also as a research method could yield important insights into social scripts and social interactions. Moreover, our interviewees preferred to address awkwardness directly and honestly – at least that is what they told us. We already hinted that there may be some social desirability in these answers. Observing actual social interactions going wrong may provide different data which may help to falsify or confirm these findings.

Second, to develop our theory and typology, we draw on our empirical data. However, there are caveats in our data that focused studies could further explore. For example, though we identify a subtype of awkwardness called retrospective awkwardness, we have little empirical data on this specific type. Yet, this type of awkwardness also raises intriguing (academic) questions, such as: how long do these flashbulbs of post-interaction awkwardness last? When does retrospective awkwardness turn into shame? And how do people learn – or not learn – from such awkward interactions? Furthermore, in the context of self-help, we analyzed the content of self-help videos but not their reception. Future research might zoom in on the audience of self-help texts more, for example, by studying YouTube comments or Reddit threads.

Third, one of type of awkwardness in our typology is caused by a lack of script for a given occasion (see Table C.1), a cause of awkwardness that also resonates with existing studies on this topic (e.g. Giolo et al., 2023Kotsko, 2010; Plakias, 2024). For obvious reasons, our focus has been on the COVID-19 pandemic as a clear case where many social occasions lacked a script. However, given that social occasions are scripted by definition (this is, after all, is what makes it an occasion, see Goffman, 1963), events such as the pandemic are exceptional situations that – hopefully – are an exception rather than the rule. Thus, especially because of a lack of script is given such prominence in studies on awkwardness, we suggest further investigation of other cases in which social scripts (temporarily) disappear to better understand the prevalence of this type of awkwardness.

Social inequalities in awkwardness

Even though engaging with social inequalities is one of the core tasks of sociology as a discipline (Gamoran, 2021), we did not pursue an in-depth analysis of awkwardness in relation to social inequalities in this book. This does, however, not mean that this topic was fully absent from our analysis. For example, especially when it comes to dating, social scripts were highly gendered. This comes as no surprise, considering the ample existing research on (acceptable) gender roles and framing within dating (e.g. Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008) and beyond (see e.g. Boston & Levy, 1991, on young children's perspectives on gender roles, England et al., 2011, on film and Disney princesses, and Berkers & Eeckelaer, 2014, on the framing of artists' lifestyles to name just a few). Though our analysis implicates that these gender roles are connected to awkwardness, future research may further dissect how awkwardness is affected by gender. Potential avenues for future research could, for example, focus on awkwardness caused by performing the "wrong" gender role, or on whether gender affects how and if we perceive a social gaffe as awkward. We anticipate that one's positionality likely also impacts the degree of leeway people have to deviate from the script as some groups will be more strongly policed and held accountable than others (cf. the idea of "doing gender", West & Zimmerman, 1987). This, in turn, may also lead to different ways in how people (are expected to) deal with awkwardness.

Another inequality that clearly resonated with awkwardness, but has received slightly less sociological attention, is the persisting generational inequality in access to and proficiency with digital technologies – especially between those that grew up with such technologies (the digital natives, see e.g. Bennett et al., 2008) and those that are still tied to their landline phone (Yates et al., 2015). In our empirical chapters, we demonstrated how often awkwardness manifested as a mismatch or transition between online and offline settings, and that both online and offline interactions require a specific skillset in order to know, adhere to, and perform the occasion's scripts. Since young people are generally more adept at using digital technologies (ranging from keeping up with meme culture, see Shifman, 2013, to blurring one's background in Zoom), we expect that a digital divide may very well translate into an awkward divide. Future research could assess how age (especially in relation to technology) affects awkwardness, and examine how technological interactions affect sociality, social scripts, and awkwardness (cf. Collins, 2020; Giolo et al., 2023). In addition, given that most of our data comes from interactions with relatively young people (i.e. millennials and gen-Z), we would encourage a cross-generational study to investigate how awkwardness manifests and is experienced by different generations.

Finally, whereas awkwardness is often seen as a negative outcome of social interactions, there are instances where awkward feelings are the goal of engaging with other people. Our respondents emphasized that they felt social scripts can be learned and adjusted whenever the situation demands it. The COVID-19 pandemic provides the clearest example of this, when, at some point, many people became accustomed to wearing facemasks and felt they were crossing a boundary when entering a store without one. This opens up possibilities for engendering positive change. Beyond the rather benign examples of spilling coffee on one's shirt, awkwardness may also make us painfully aware of where norms clash (as Kotsko, 2010, already pointed out), or of when we do something that negatively affects other people (e.g. accidentally insulting other people). Plakias (2024) also highlights this potential of awkwardness, discussing, for example, the current emphasis on pronouns, which makes introductions in e.g. work or educational settings perhaps more awkward for cisgender people (who are often accustomed to discussing pronouns), but less awkward for people who are often misgendered or feel the need to speak up about their gender. Adapting to a script that is new for many may feel awkward at first, but it could eventually contribute to a more inclusive society.

In a similar vein, some respondents also brought up the ableism that transcends all segments of society, such as a respondent who kept wondering: "Why am I like this? Why is it so weird when I interact with people. Why are they weird? And as I started reflecting on these issues, I was thinking about anxiety, or maybe depression or other issues. But then I started reading about neurodiversity, and I started thinking about the possibility that I might not be neurotypical, as I always thought I was. Reading about this term helps me. [...] Normal people are different, so they interact differently. So now, what I can is to make myself and others feel as comfortable as possible" (EVERYDAY, R7). Here, just like the label awkwardness helps people make sense of their experiences when interactions go wrong, the label of neurodiversity helps individuals understand why things might feel awkward for them. It also shifts the discourse around abilities to interact, framing it in a more inclusive way: not "disabled", but "neurodiverse". This, however, is just one example of how experiences of awkwardness can be leveraged for social change. We encourage other researchers to take up this topic and further empirically assess how awkwardness can be a social force. As sociologists have been pointing out for decades, our societies and social interactions will most probably only grow more complex, and in most settings, social solidarity is waning while inequalities are growing (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Putnam, 2000). Awkwardness is everywhere, it affects everyone, and that might, eventually, be a good thing.

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Index

Note: Page references in *italics* denote figures, in **bold** tables and with “n” endnotes.

aesthetic nausea 93
agency 35, 119, 121; human 29, 35; individual 48; *vs.* structure 26, 131
anticipation/anticipatory awkwardness 12, 19, 89, 90–91, 126
awkward actors 84–88; cultural background 86–87; familiarity 84–85; hierarchy 86; sociological model of awkward interactions *87*, 87–88
awkward/awkwardness 47–57, 80–82; analyzing 59–73; anticipation/anticipatory awkwardness 12, 19, 89, 90–91, 126; in complex world 6–7; and COVID-19 pandemic 60–61; as culture 1, 10, 18–19, 125–126; curing through online self-help videos 69–73; in dating 67–69; dealing with 109–121; defined 16, 89; deviation from a script 82–83; emotions 9–10, 124; empirical study of 9; in entertainment media 1; everyday 11, 16–17, 56, 60–65, 80, 83, 86, 91, 93, 100, 111, 120–121; interactional 8, 12, 77, 88, 89–90, 92, 125–126, 131; is everywhere and affects everyone 2; measuring 132–133; nature of 129–131; as negative and positive emotion 3; and new work practices 65–66; no-show 8, 13, 83, 98, 104–107, 128–129; odd-stage 12, 98, 102–104; of online therapy 106; as outcome of a social interaction 124–125; out-of-place 8, 12, 82, 98, 100–102, 128; as a personal trait 2–3; radical 18, 57, 82; retrospection/retrospective 2, 12, 89, 92–93, 132–133; self-help videos dealing with **71**; social inequalities in 133–135; sociological approach to 3–6; sociological theory of 123–124; spatiality of 98–100; spatial subtypes of 100–107, 128–129; stages of 90; strategies 109; temporality of *90*, 90–93, 127–128; theorizing 16–22; in time and space 19–20; typology of 7–9, 13, **126**, 126–127; unsuccessful individual performance of a script 83–84; vicarious 8, 12, 84, 88, 89, 125–126, 131; at work 65–67
awkward emotions as individual expressions 47–49
awkward feelings 17–18, 96, 98, 109; interactions 79–84; as outcome of social interactions 77–79; performances 79–84; scripts 79–84; self-conscious 78–79; uncertain 78; uncomfortable 78
awkward individuals 79–80
awkward interactions 77–88; awkward actors 84–88; awkward feelings 77–84; and awkward individuals 79–80; interactions/scripts/performances 79–84; social interactions 77–79
awkwardness industry 69–71
awkward silences 12, 79, 85, 89, 95–96, 109–110, 112–113, 128, 129
awkward spaces 98–107, 126; *see also* spaces
awkward times 89–97; temporality 90–93; temporal subtypes of 93–97; *see also* time

backstage performances 102–104
Becker, H. 131
behavioral norms 10, 33
beliefs 11, 26, 43, 87; cultural 18; emotional 11, 47, 52–53; of social group 10, 24–25
Black Pete 24–25
Blumer, H. 34–35
Bumble Bizz 69, 74n9

capitalism 70
Castells, M. 6
categories 28, 29
ChatGPT 129
chronically awkward 16
Clegg, J. W. 19, 48, 59, 90, 92, 127
cognitive emotion work 56, 115, 118, 129
collective effervescence 43–45
Collins, R. 42, 43–44, 60–61, 63–64, 95, 105–106, 117
common sense 47–49
commonsense notion of awkwardness: as individual emotional expression 11; as individual trait 10–11, 33–34
computer nerds 52
"consumption identity" 70
COVID-19 pandemic 4, 18, 40, 93, 96, 99–100, 106, 127, 133, 134; and awkwardness 60–61; and awkwardness topics **63**; interview data 64–65; news media data 64; social media data 61–64
co-working: community 121; culture 85; member 92; research 94, 117, 121, 132; spaces 9, 11, 66–67, 73n6, 94, 103, 104, 111, 121n1
cultural background 86–87
cultural beliefs 18
cultural objects 31
cultural sociologists 26–27, 30–31
cultural sociology 27–29
culture: analyzing 26–27; awkwardness as 10, 18–19; commonsense ideas of 10; co-working 85; defined 25; elements 10; as given, fixed and unimportant 24–25; studying 25–27
culture-directedness 120–121
Curb Your Enthusiasm 18
customs of social group 10, 24–25

Dahl, M. 18, 19, 22
dating 11, 59–60, 99, 101, 119, 127; apps 4; awkwardness in 67–69; data and methods 68–69; honesty 116–117; interviews with online dating millennials 68–69; thoughtfulness 116–117; *see also* online dating
dealing with awkwardness 109–121, 129; avoiding strategies 110–114; consequences of avoiding as strategy 113–114; consequences of directing as strategy 118–119; creating distance 114–116; culture-directedness 120–121; direct avoiding strategies 111–112; direct/honest communication 116–117; directing approach 114–119; embracing 117–118; indirect avoiding strategies 112–113; learning to 119–121; medium-directedness 120; normalizing/being polite 114–116; other-directed choice 119; physical exiting 111–112; self-directed choice 119–120; strategies to 109–121; virtual exiting 111–112; voids/flow/depth 112–113
deviance, emotional 56–57
deviation from script 82–83
direct/honest communication 116–117, 118
Durkheim, E. 43

Edelmann, R. J. 21, 22
Elias, N. 6
embarrassment 10, 21–22
emotional beliefs 11, 47, 52–53
emotional deviance 56–57
emotional energy 42–45
emotional expressions 50
emotional labor 57n3
emotional norms 11, 47, 57n1
emotional socialization 53
emotion cultures: feeling and expression rules 50–51; rules and emotional beliefs 52–53; vocabularies 53–54
emotion norms 57n1
emotions 47–57; awkward/awkwardness 9–10, 47–49; as biological/individual 50–53; defining 49–50; managed 55–57; negative 3; not ineffable/articulated through vocabularies 53–55; positive 3; primary 50–51; and ritual theory 42–43; secondary 50–51; as social/collective 50–53; sociology of 49–50
emotion work 47, 50, 55–56, 57; and acting 55–56

ethnographic fieldwork and interviews 66–67
etiquette norms 81
everyday awkwardness 11, 16–17, 56, 60–65, 80, 83, 86, 91, 93, 100, 111, 120–121

face-to-face interactions 96, 105, 111
failed performance 104–107
familiarity 8, 77, 84–85, 88, 92, 105, 131
feelings 47–57; defining 49–50; and expression rules 50–51, 57n1
focused social interactions 36–37
frontstage performances 102–104

gatherings 37–38
gezellig 53
Goffman, E. 9, 21–22, 28, 35–38, 40–44, 52, 55, 60, 65, 67, 98–99, 102, 104, 110, 125
Goldberg, A. 131
group norms 20

Harris, S. 48, 50, 53
hierarchy 8, 26, 77, 84, 86, 92, 131
Hochschild, A. R. 49, 52–53, 56, 79, 120, 124
How I Met Your Mother? 31
humiliation 20

implicit norms 60
individual expressions 47–49
individualism 70
interactional awkwardness 8, 12, 77, 88, 89–90, 92, 125–126, 131
Interaction Ritual Theory 61
interactions 42–45; awkward feelings 79–84; social 77–79
interviews: data 64–65; ethnographic fieldwork and 66–67; with online dating millennials 68–69; work 67
intimacy 104–107

Kotsko, A. 1, 7, 16, 17, 18, 22, 28, 34, 38, 48–49, 57, 80, 82–83, 86, 118, 124, 125, 128

lack of intimacy 104–106
Lizardo, O. 125

meaning 28; cultural objects 31; organization and institutions 30; social interactions 31; studying 30–31
meaning-making: as collective process 29; and humans 27–28; importance of 29–30
medium-directedness 120
millennials: online dating 68–69
Mills, C. W. 51
multimodal discourse analysis71–73

neoliberalism 70
news media data 64
new work practices 65–66
no-flow awkwardness 83, 89
norms 11, 24, 26, 51, 53, 134; behavioral 10, 33; emotional 11, 47, 57n1; etiquette 81; governing 18; group 20; implicit 60; social 4, 18, 61, 79; strong 83; weak 17, 83, 86
no-show awkwardness 8, 13, 83, 98, 104–107, 128–129

odd-stage awkwardness 8, 12, 98, 102–104
odd-time awkwardness 8, 12, 13, 83, 89, 94–95, 127
The Office UK 1, 54, 65
offline interactions 91–92
online dating 9, 91, 96, 102, 105, 128; apps 101, 111; ghosting 111; platforms 11; research on 106; structured space of 102; *see also* dating
online dating apps 68–69, 101
online dating millennials 68–69
online interactions 91–92, 96, 98
online self-help videos: awkwardness industry 69–71; curing awkwardness through 69–73; data and methods 71–73; multimodal discourse analysis of 71–73
online space 96
online therapy 106
other-directed choice 119
out-of-place awkwardness 8, 12, 82, 98, 100–102, 128
overreacting 52

Patterson, O. 27–28
performances 80–82; awkward feelings 79–84
physical co-presence 12, 98, 104–105, 106, 128
Plakias, A. 3, 7, 17, 34, 39, 48–49, 79, 118, 124, 134
pop music 48

popular culture 28; as source for emotion labels 54–55
primary emotions 50–51
professional interactions 65, 103

radical awkwardness 18, 57, 82
retrospection/retrospective awkwardness 2, 12, 89, 92–93, 132–133
rituals 26, 42–45; ingredients 43–45; theory 42–43
rules and emotional beliefs 52–53

Schadenfreude 53
Scholfield, S. 2, 5, 114, 118
Scott, S. 70
scripts 38–40, 80–82; awkward feelings 79–84; deviation from 82–83; unsuccessful individual performance of 83–84
secondary emotions 50–51
self-conscious 109, 114, 118, 124, 127, 129–130
self-directed choice 119–120
self-help books 70
self-help videos dealing with awkwardness **71**
Sex Education 1
shame 16, 20, 44, 51–53, 55, 68, 93, 130, 133
"shyness industry" 70
Simmel, G. 6, 27
situations 37–38
social awkwardness 19, 48
social distancing interactions 63–64
social groups 10, 24–25
social inequalities in awkwardness 133–135
social interactions 8, 10, 12, 31, 98, 110, 112, 123–125, 135; anticipation of 92; awkward feelings as outcome of 77–79; awkwardness as outcome 17; as dramaturgy 35–42; face-work 40–42; failed 106; focused 36–37; gatherings and situations 37–38; navigate 126; outcome of 124, 134; performances 40–42; in retrospective awkwardness 89; social occasions and scripts 38–40; stable 118; stages 40–42; unfocused 36–37; well-scripted 109
socially awkward 1
socially distant interactions 63
social media data 61–64
social norms 4, 18, 61, 79
social occasions 4–5, 10, 12, 33, 35–36, 38–40, 52, 55, 89–90, 93, 100, 133
social patterns 38
social psychology 57n1
social scripts 131–132
sociological approach, to awkwardness 3–6
"the sociological imagination" 51
sociological model of awkward interactions *87*, 87–88
sociological theory 7; of awkwardness 11–12, 123–124
sociology of emotions 49–50
sociology of interactions 34–35
spaces 98–107, 107n1; and awkwardness 19–20; co-working 94, 103, 104, 111; as location 128; online 96; as people 128; *see also* awkward spaces
Spillman, L. 27, 29, 30
stereotypes 28
strong norms 83
subjective feelings 50
symbolic interactionism 34–35
symbols 29, 31, 43–44, 87
synchronicity 104–107

Tashiro, T. 2, 16, 48
"technology of intimacy" 72
time 17, 19–20, 38, 89–97, 126, 127; and awkwardness 19–20; no-flow awkwardness 83, 89; odd-time awkwardness 8, 12, 13, 83, 89, 94–95, 127; time-off awkwardness 8, 12, 13, 82, 89, 93–94, 127; unstructured time/unscripted 93–94, 126; *see also* awkward times
time-off awkwardness 8, 12, 13, 82, 89, 93–94, 127
Tinder 68, 90
topic modelling (TM) 62–63
Twitter (X) 61–62, 86

unfocused social interactions 36–37
unstructured time/unscripted 93–94, 126; *see also* time-off awkwardness
unsuccessful individual performance of scripts 83–84

Veblen, T. 93
Vergesellschaftung 6

vicarious awkwardness 8, 12, 84, 88, 89, 125–126, 131
virtual interactions 105, 132
vocabularies 11, 53–55

weak norms 17, 83, 86
White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture 18
Williams, R. 25
work: awkwardness at 65–67; data and methods 66–67; ethnographic fieldwork and interviews 66–67; interviews 67; new work practices making us feel awkward 65–66
wrong time 94–95; *see also* odd-times awkwardness

YouTube 9, 11, 70–72, 80, 85, 115, 133