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An Anthropology of the Handshake

Bjarke Oxlund

In addition to its mounting health and financial consequences, the current COVID-19 crisis may also fundamentally alter one of the most common human gestures: the handshake.

The Shaky Future of Handshaking

U.S. president [Donald Trump](#) anticipates a future where risk of contamination will bring the social convention of shaking hands to rest.¹ Many epidemiologists will celebrate if Trump's prophecy comes true, as the handshake is indeed a bit of a viral and bacterial bomb. Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and one of Trump's advisors, is even more adamant. In a recent [Wall Street Journal](#) podcast, he said that in his opinion we should never shake hands again, as it would be good to prevent coronavirus disease and to decrease instances of influenza.²

Obviously, Fauci is speaking from a strictly medical point of view. Even [self-professed germaphobe](#) Trump has admitted that the handshake has deep-seated symbolic meaning and that as a politician there are no two ways about it — he simply has to continue to

shake hands.³ Even though Trump has in the past deemed handshakes barbaric, disgusting and “very, very terrible,” he has himself entered into one awkward handshake after the other at the White House when foreign heads of state have come to visit.

The most hilarious incident to date must be the [19-second handshake](#) that Trump exposed Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe to in February 2017.⁴ It was, however, more in keeping with the current recommendation of maintaining social distance when two months later Trump awkwardly [refused to shake hands](#) with German chancellor Angela Merkel,⁵ although the advent of COVID-19 was almost three years away.

Although the importance of epidemiology has experienced a thrust like never before, rumors of the demise of the handshake may turn out to be somewhat exaggerated. Not only is handshaking a practice that dates back to ancient Greece, it is also a bodily gesture carrying so many layers of cultural meaning and psychic connotations that in many situations it is almost unfathomable to imagine a future without it.

The Cultural History of Handshaking

Today's handshake has a very long prehistory and is shown to date back almost 3,000 years, when it was first depicted in ancient Greek reliefs and on gravestones. In terms of written sources, the poet Homer described handshakes in both the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey” as displays of trust in pledges. Later, the Roman poet Ovid captured the meanings of peaceful agreement often attached to the handshake when he wrote in “Metamor-

phoses" that Sabine women persuaded their fathers and husband to stop fighting: "The men let their weapons and their mettle fall, and, having laid by their swords, the fathers-in-law shake hands with their sons-in-law and receive their handshake."⁶

By most accounts, the handshake is historically linked to the purpose of conveying peaceful intentions among armed men. By holding forth the right hand with an open palm, they could demonstrate that they were not armed. The up-and-down movement of the shaking itself has also been seen as a way to reveal weapons hidden in the sleeve. Arguably, during the first 2,800 years of shaking hands, the gesture was limited to making deals or burying the hatchet. That is also the case in Shakespeare's "As You Like It," in which two characters shake hands and swear brotherly allegiance.

According to Dutch historian Herman Roodenburg, the handshake as an everyday gesture of greeting and leave-taking goes back to the 16th century, when a British manners manual cherished the good old Scottish shaking of the right hands. Yet, handshaking was largely unknown in elite circles before 1800. Through in-depth studies of European elite etiquette manuals of the time, Roodenburg has concluded that when the manuals finally made mention of the handshake in the 1850s, it was deemed improper outside the sphere of friendship.⁷

An oft-quoted source of today's egalitarian handshake is the 17th-century Quaker movement, which broke with the social conventions of using polite gestures such as bowing and curtsying. Quakers declined gestures of

deference and preferred to greet one another by giving hand, because it connoted respect and friendship and eliminated all hierarchical distinctions. These connotations of equality and respect may or may not have accompanied the Quaker movement as it spread from England to the European and American continents, but it is interesting that similar versions of the handshake hold currency in European politics today.

In December 2018, Denmark passed a law requiring any new citizens to shake hands at their naturalization ceremony. Critics have seen the legislation as a way to target Muslims, who might be reluctant to shake hands with members of the opposite sex for religious reasons. Yet, that critique holds little value for then [Minister of Immigration Inger Støjberg](#), who claimed, "If you don't shake hands, you don't understand what it means to be Danish, because in Denmark we have equality and that is something generations before us fought to achieve."⁸

It is curious that the minister's version of what the handshake represents in terms of equality comes so close to the Quaker handshake just described. On one hand, to say that the handshake is particularly Danish does not make sense in view of the long and geographically dispersed history of the gesture. On the other hand, the meanings of equality between human beings irrespective of gender, age and social status evoked by the minister actually do come across as particularly Danish. Yet, the proper Danish handshake and the Danish version of equality apparently have little room for differences in religious beliefs.

The Ubiquity of the Business Handshake

In a 2019 piece on the business handshake, Sheryl N. Hamilton outlines how pandemic times may bring about a “shifting habitus of hygiene” where the handshake becomes unstable and socially contested. She ends up concluding, however, that the business handshake occupies such an iconic cultural status as a signifier of contract that its centrality as the way of practicing business relationality is fairly resilient to change. Her argument goes as far as saying that in business the handshake is a haptic gesture that has asserted legal status. What is more, Hamilton finds evidence of the ubiquity of the business handshake in

the vast pedagogical business writing on the proper use of body gesture.⁹

A quick search on the internet validates this point, where many versions of a proper handshake are offered. But it is almost always a central notion that the proper handshake should be firm and not last too long. YouTube videos and self-help lists about the proper handshake abound (see Box 1), and [recruitment agencies](#) offer insights under slogans such as “Nail the handshake, land the job” and “The secret to landing a job is in your hands — literally.”¹⁰

Recipes for proper handshakes share the sentiment that first impressions last and that the salutation is so much more than a greeting. This is also why social psychologists and neuropsychologists have spent a

Box 1: A blog on American culture and business provides the following recipe for job success¹¹

The Handshake: 4 Tips for Success

1. Make eye contact and smile

If you want to make a good impression when you are shaking hands, you also need to connect with the person through the eyes and the smile.

2. Shake with one hand only

When you add another hand, it appears fake. This has been called the “politicians handshake.” To convey confidence and build trust, shake with one hand only.

3. Don't give a weak handshake

If your handshake is weak or limp, you will be perceived as lacking confidence or as being introverted which is not a positive quality to display in a job interview in the United States. If you are not sure how firmly to shake, remember that the strength of your handshake should match the other person's strength.

4. Always shake hands before and after the meeting or interview

Most American people will expect to shake hands at the beginning and at the end of a formal business gathering.

lot of time testing whether the handshake is actually indicative of an individual's personality type. Although the deeply gendered dimensions of the firm handshake, with its privileging of masculine gestural traits, warrant more scrutiny, psychologists have allegedly found evidence of a link between handshakes and personality types.¹² Speaking from an anthropological point of view, however, the actual function of different handshakes is probably more interesting than what personality types might be associated with different kinds of shakes.

Many years ago sociolinguist Deborah Schiffrin argued for an understanding of handshake gestures as access rituals that are communicative in function. She delineated three main handshake types: openers, closures and collapses. Where openers are future-oriented handshakes that indicate the intention to increase access, closures are handshakes that indicate that the shakers have already shared increased access and that it is now ending. Collapses are handshakes that tend to assemble the greeting introduction and the farewell event into one occasion, where there is no actual relationship between the shakers, such as when a celebrity or politician shakes hand with members of a large crowd of followers.¹³ This last example also goes to show that it is not just a matter of function but also a matter of context and social situation.

Handshakes Across Scale and Situation

In some ways it is wrong to ask if COVID-19 is the end of the handshake as we know it.

One insight of this brief article is that the handshake is not simply a quotidian gesture of greeting and leave-taking but also an access ritual imbued with a multitude of meanings according to its enactment in varying contexts and situations. It is an anthropological truism to note that it is not possible to know the handshake in a strictly singular sense, but it is precisely because handshakes take on so many different meanings that the COVID-19 situation prompts us to consider their future.

Taking the cue from an understanding of handshakes in the plural sense, it becomes possible to initiate a public conversation about which versions of the handshake are deemed more desirable than others and thus worth preserving. Evoking an unfair caricature, one could say that epidemiology only offers an either-or choice between shaking hands and not shaking hands. An anthropology of the handshake offers insights on the contextual and situational aspects of handshaking that has the potential to qualify the discussion of the need to maintain better hand hygiene in pandemic times. A main feature that must always be kept in mind is the scale of any social situation.

Is it necessary to make the rounds and greet everybody attending a wedding or a small conference by shaking hands? Surely, it is polite according to standing etiquette, but maybe the collapsed handshake's purpose is not important enough to legitimize the spread of viral and bacterial loads between 25 and 100 individuals. Would it feel awkward for the candidate in a job interview not to shake hands with the five members of the interview panel? Yes, it probably would, and the shaking of hands between six individu-

als does not represent a high level of risk. Is it important for relatives attending a funeral to have the priest greet them with a handshake as they leave the church? It might be. At least, the fact that COVID-19 currently prevents this practice has already prompted angry opinion pieces in Danish newspapers about the unworthiness of burial ceremonies during the crisis.

It has become evident that handshakes not only vary in function and meaning but do so according to social context, situation and scale. Based on these insights, a public discussion should ensue on the advantages and disadvantages of holding on to the tradition of shaking hands as the conventional gesture of greeting and leave-taking in a variety of circumstances. Although the media coverage of heads of state has paid a lot of attention to the greeting of presidents and prime ministers as of late, it is hard to imagine that heads of state will no longer engage in handshakes to convey meanings of friendship and deal-making. It is thus noteworthy that Roodenburg ended his historical analysis 30 years ago by remarking that handshakes are indeed as important as matters of state, since they *are* matters of state.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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