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THE HUG: TRANSFORMING NATURE INTO CULTURE

Carol C. Mukhopadhyay

Introduction

A major theme in my courses is the impact of culture on how individuals experience reality. When General Education courses on human sexuality began to dominate my teaching load, I was challenged to develop new exercises to illustrate this point. What was initially a frightening assignment (how to teach a course on sex!!) has become an exciting and fresh venue for getting across familiar anthropological messages. One such message is how humans transform nature into culture, and the following will demonstrate how you can have your students transform nature into culture.

This activity works regardless of class size or type of room. It is an opportunity for a "hands-on" activity in large lecture classes and I've used it effectively with as many as 140 students. The activity is appropriate for any class (or workshop) at least partially designed to convey the subtlety and complexity of culture, such as in introductory four-field anthropology or cultural anthropology courses. The discussion segment can also be tailored to specific courses. I have used it in human sexuality, gender and culture, and language and culture classes as well. The actual exercise takes less than five minutes. The discussion ranges from 15 minutes to over an hour, depending on your goals. It serves as an easy referent throughout the course for virtually every basic "culture" concept. An effective follow up is the Albatross activity (see Mukhopadhyay 2004).

Anthropologists often focus on how humans transform the natural world through technology and other aspects of material culture. But equally important and perhaps more compelling for students are the ways in which culture takes "nature," that is our bodies and our "natural" biological capacities, and transforms nature into culture. We end up with "cultural bodies," our biological capacities and natural "instincts" shaped by culture, our "natural" senses – touch, smell, taste, sight, sound – no longer experienced directly but through a cultural filter.

"The Hug" gets students thinking about how one human capacity, touch, has been altered and shaped by culture. You should use it the first or second class session after introducing course themes and the concept of culture. The exercise has students standing up and hugging the person next to them followed by a discussion of the hug as a complex but minute piece of culture, illustrating more abstract cultural concepts and processes, and how what is "natural" (touch) becomes transformed into and experienced as "cultural" (a hug).

Doing and Discussing "The "Hug"

Doing "the hug" is quite simple. After asking students to stand up, pause for a few seconds until they are all standing. Then quickly ask them to hug the person next to them. You may have to repeat it a second time, "please hug the person next to you... or across from you!" Students are often startled, but most will follow your directions. For those few (usually male-male pairs) who seem reluctant to hug, again (in a persuasive but friendly voice) repeat the instruction. They will generally comply, often with a version of the hug that requires minimal physical contact. You can mentally

note this because it will be useful in the subsequent discussion.

After the class has completed the hug (2 to 3 minutes), ask them to sit down and then discuss what has occurred and how it relates to your course themes. First ask students for their opinions on why you had them do "the hug." Students will likely remark that it is an "ice-breaker." That launches a discussion of the concept of an "ice-breaker" as a device for "warming up" relationships between strangers or dissolving tensions in a social setting. You can also comment that our culture has historically rendered what is "natural," sexuality, into a subject fraught with tension and embarrassment, one not comfortably discussed in public, among strangers, or in a classroom. So we need "ice-breakers" to diffuse the culturally-created tension associated with sex![1]

The hug as "ice-breaker," however, rests upon the use of touch and this provides an opportunity to begin the discussion of how what is natural becomes cultural. Humans are naturally responsive to and indeed crave touch, as infant studies established long ago. We see this in all primates, with their love of grooming and activities (including sex) that involve touch.[2] You can point out that humans are particularly naturally responsive to touch because we have so little body hair compared to other primates. Our entire body is, in a way, one enormous erogenous zone! If you ask students what else we use touch for, they will probably tell you that we use touch for social purposes, to establish, express, and maintain relationships, as well as to diffuse tension and reduce conflict. If not mentioned, you can suggest that we "keep in touch" with other folks through touch, whether through grooming, stroking, holding hands, or the myriad of other ways this "natural" capacity is culturally expressed.

Having established that touch is "natural," you can then turn to how "the hug" illustrates the complex ways culture shapes and regulates "nature." First comment on how easy it was to invoke a relatively uniform, patterned, complex set of behaviors from them by simply uttering a set of sounds, indeed only one syllable, "hug." Then ask, naively, if they thought consciously about how they would "hug." Did they think, "what part of my body do I use?" And "where shall I touch the other person?" No, they "automatically" invoked a cognitive pattern stored somewhere in their brain as though it were "natural." You can point out they didn't stroke their fellow student's genitals, their head, their ears, nor their toes, but only specific parts of the other person's body. And they used their hands for touching rather than their feet, nose, or shoulders. Then ask them to try to identify additional knowledge or "rules" a hypothetical Martian would need to know in order to hug appropriately. By focusing on rules, students discover rules about where to touch, with what parts of the body, using what type stroke, and explore what one does with one's eyes (or feet) while hugging, with the fingers of one's hands, with one's face, with one's eyes. You can also point out the time element: how long the touch should last and discovering that it depends on the relationship between the individuals.

This creates an opening for discussing additional elaborate "rules" for hugging having to do with one's social identity, social relationship and relative social status. Ask who can and cannot hug? Who is supposed to (or not supposed to) hug whom? In what contexts? You can lead a discussion on how touching is gendered in our culture and how traditionally, at least among northwestern European Americans, culture has restricted post-puberty males from mutual "hugging" (and other intimate touching). If

appropriate, explore the feelings of male students who were reluctant to "hug" another male. You can cite cultural examples where same-sex touching rules differ. It is often culturally acceptable (and comfortable) for two adult male friends to hug or hold hands in public. The same behavior by a male and female, even if married, would be inappropriate and embarrassing to both the couple and onlookers in the same culture

You can also explore variations in student experiences, relating them to broader themes. For example, you can point out that student discomfort tends to come from violating implicit social and cultural rules of hugging. Not all students share the same cultural rules, however. For example, one young Muslim female student was distressed at the idea of hugging a male student but was willing to hug her female classmates. The discomfort we experience is very real and reflects how much culture can alter our natural responsiveness. We experience touch filtered through a cultural lens. We use cultural knowledge stored in our brains to monitor our emotional and physical reactions. In the case of touch, if the touch does not fit the cultural rules (by whom, where, when, how), we respond with discomfort, even in the naturally most responsive parts of our body. Finally, reiterate how deeply culture affects our emotional and physical responses to all sensory stimuli: smells, taste, sound, as well as touch.

In a human sexuality class, you can problematize the entire topic of "sexuality." Start by asking students whether "the hug" they just gave and experienced was a "sexual" hug? And then ask what would make a hug "sexual?" Is sexuality a set of behaviors? What constitutes "sexual anatomy?" What about the intentions of the hugger (or recipient)? Could the same behaviors have different cultural meanings in different social contexts (such as in the context of a doctor's office)? In different cultures?

Finally, you can use "the hug" to introduce the topic of enculturation and cultural transmission. Here, ask students to reflect on how they learned the complex cultural rules for hugging. Most students born in the United States would have no conscious memory of learning "the hug" or other cultural models of touching and greeting but you can use the experience to discuss implicit and explicit enculturation processes, cultural rules, and sanctions.

Summary

I have found "The Hug" a simple, yet effective, way to put some flesh on the more abstract idea that culture takes what is "natural" and turns it into something "cultural." Touch is natural but we experience it culturally, as in a "hug." Students also begin to understand and appreciate the complexity of culture at the micro-level of a "hug." End the class by telling them "if you think a hug is complex, wait until you have to describe a date."

References Cited

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[1] I also point out that both hugging and studying sexuality in a formal classroom is culturally "weird" even though we are "naturally" capable of both activities.
[2] I use Meredith Small's writings on bonobo chimpanzees (cf. What's Love Got to Do with It) for a vivid description of the frequency and multiple uses of "touchiness" (including sexual touching) among some of our closest relatives.