

Is Awkwardness Avoidable?

July 23, 2012

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In his brilliant book [Awkwardness](#), Adam Kotsko analyzes the US version of the television show *The Office*, concluding it, unlike its British counterpart, shies away from the emancipatory potential of awkwardness by concluding it's ultimately the result of inherently awkward individuals.

As his key example, he cites the arc of Charles Miner (*The Wire*'s Idris Elba), a high-powered Dunder Mifflin executive who visits the Scranton branch for a short while as part of his attempts to improve northeast sales. Miner's arrival forces Jim into a series of awkward comic mishaps, thus suggesting Jim's normal level of cool isn't just because he's a naturally cool person but only because he's particularly well-suited to his normal situation. But Miner ultimately reveals himself to be overly aggressive, thereby, Kotsko argues, showing Jim's awkwardness was merely a result of Miner being a fundamentally awkward person and thus withdrawing the tentative suggestion that awkwardness might actually be situational.

I think this is a misreading that shows the limits of a theory of awkwardness that lacks a notion of competence. For this arc shows precisely the opposite of what Kotsko says it does: it shows that awkwardness *is* fundamentally situational.

Miner's addition to the series marks the rare appearance of a character that is more competent than Jim. However much Jim may feel himself above the petty stressors of the Scranton office, Miner is far above that, executing with a similar level of suave at a much higher rung in the organization. When Jim comes face-to-face with a superior talent, it immediately reduces him to the level of gibbering awkwardness his coworkers are always finding themselves in, thereby demonstrating Jim's level of comfort isn't an innate character trait, but simply the result of being well-adapted to his absurd environment.

The reveal of Miner's aggression is not an undercutting but an emphasis of this theme. How did Miner get to be so cool? Was he just born with even more innate coolness than Jim and thus is able to be awkward in fewer situations? On the contrary, this coda reveals. Miner got to where he is through an aggressive ambition. His relentless striving has forced him to be competent in more and more business situations so he can move up the corporate ladder.

The Office operates under a sort of Peter Principle of awkwardness. [The Peter Principle](#) says employees are promoted to the level of their incompetence (since as long as they remain competent, they keep getting promoted). *The Office* demonstrates that being incompetent is awkward, so people are thereby promoted to the level of their awkwardness. Thus Michael Scott (Steve Carrell),

who is actually a quite talented and thoroughly comfortable salesman, gets promoted to regional manager, where he is an awkward and incompetent dolt. We can only assume that Miner is normally at the level of his awkwardness as well; he only seems cool when slumming it in Scranton, the same way that Jim only gets to seem cool by being unambitious enough to persist in a job he is obviously too good for. It is our ambition that makes us awkward, the show argues.

This is emphasized in the later plot where David Wallace (Andy Buckley), who appears as a confident corporate CFO in earlier seasons, gets made redundant in Dunder Mifflin's acquisition by Sabre and is forced to retire to his suburban mansion with his generous severance package. Without a corporate ladder to climb but with his ambition intact, he now finds himself working on a startup (producing a vacuum for children's toys called "Suck It"). But his competence as an upper executive is worthless as a startup founder and makes him so painfully awkward that even Michael can't stomach it. (Later, when Wallace returns to the corporate world, he's immediately unawkward again.)

The clear message is the opposite of Kotsko's reading: we are all awkward when we're out of our depth; our only escape from awkwardness is to develop a competence for a particular situation. But even that is short-lived: our ambition will drive us to leave such non-awkward comforts for the next challenge — and even if we don't, the vagaries of economic forces may still push us into a role we are ill-suited for. The only refuge from this pervasive awkwardness is the pervasive boredom of unambition.

P.S. Kotsko's followup, *Why We Love Sociopaths* is even better.