

## Changing taboos – The power of taboos and why we still need them

A taboo is a strong social prohibition (or ban) relating to any area of human activity or social custom declared as sacred and forbidden; breaking of the taboo is usually considered objectionable or abhorrent by society (1).



### Introduction

The word “taboo” came from Polynesia, and was first used in English by the great explorer, Captain Cook. (This is ironic, given that his “discovery” of Australia is a great taboo for Aborigines!). Taboos help to set limits in the modern world. Most taboos exist because they are beneficial in some way to the survival and health of a society. They operate in nearly every area of life – sexual, racial, political, economic – but are most obvious in our basic drives. These are sexuality, violence, belief systems, gender. With this in mind, this document focuses on taboos specific to sex/sexuality, gender and religion/morality.

We would like to address how taboos are changing, as well as the way that the same taboos continue to manifest across decades. Most interesting still, is the context for taboos, as they give a clue as to why and how that taboo exists. Curiously, taboos may help to support the society as a whole, but they do not always help the individual. In this case, tribes may play a role in supporting the individual in fighting mainstream taboos, for example, the gay community. However, these tribes also create taboos of their own to help define the group.

It is also true that certain regions have their own taboos. In this report, we take a rather general perspective on England, but wish to emphasise the differences that exist across regions and what we may term tribal groups. This is important when we recognise how these areas are often neglected by the London-centric, southeast based media. Cities by nature tend to be more multicultural or pluralist, and people who live in them are challenged to be broadminded. Even so, taboos in the regions may serve to maintain their unique flavour and cohesion.

We would like to emphasise the difference between doing a taboo activity and talking about it. While abortions have been practised for many years, it is still quite unusual for a woman to talk openly about it, even with her friends. The same would be true of many sexually taboo activities. This means that these taboos are only partially broken, perhaps in transition (“transitional taboo”); they still maintain sufficient mystique to keep people silent.

People may enjoy talking about taboos generally, because it appeals to their need for a sense of the forbidden. However, they are likely to remain quite private about their own personal taboos. Thus taboos have a social function for the group, and they also have a personal function by shaping identity, and the kinds of tribes to which individuals choose to belong. This is the power of taboos in human life.

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## Some themes

- Taboos are not the same as morals. It is not about distinguishing right from wrong. Taboos are repellent, not merely undesirable.
- Not related to religion, but from culture. It is taboo to disagree with accepted wisdom from the culture.
- Taboos exist not solely because they reflect something that the weight of opinion says is bad, but because they give a society unity and a coherence.
- Taboos set limits. There is no taboo without authority – the new authorities are broadcasters, media personalities, fashion, or individuals. We are more educated, more aware, less reverential of certain expert sources.
- There is a shift to different types of taboo, eg personal responsibility-based taboos, such as health, environment, ethics (this is because there are fewer institutions taking responsibility and the legacy bodies are losing credibility).
- New taboos seem to be based on the fantasy of homogeneity: is the big modern taboo acknowledging difference? Political correctness tries to be inclusive. For example, it is taboo to not engage in conspicuous compassion.
- While taboo behaviours may be the same, speaking out against them is now allowed. Fear of speaking up used to be because we feared judgment. However, we may still be silent about our own personal taboos.
- Taboos disgust and excite –the paradox of taboos is they are very often forbidden fruit.
- Changes in taboos may come from the change in a secondary issue. For example, the taboo against anal sex has been challenged with the rise of AIDS, as society continues to address the epidemiology and find solutions for this disease.
- We are commonly asking why not – like children who are not willing to accept rules anymore. This is how taboos are challenged.
- Development of drug therapies influences taboos. You can't treat a problem unless you talk about it, eg Viagra, Cialis, Levitra for Erectile Dysfunction, newer effective therapies for AIDS.
- We can make money out of new taboos!! See low carb diets, healthy holidays, or impotence treatment.
- International media are important for challenging and creating taboos. The media have an investment in keeping taboos alive – they make great stories!
- Which comes first? Changes in language or do changes in taboos create new language?
- Each age has new taboos: wife-beating, child pornography - sins we might summarise as abusive behaviour.
- The value of comedy and humour is in showing us our taboos.
- Note: everyone thinks that their pet taboo is the last!

## Speaking out

Perhaps one of the biggest changes in our concept of taboos is that, while the taboo may not have changed, the ability and willingness to speak out against it has changed. Obviously there were paedophiles in the 40s, 50s among respected members of our society, such as clergy and school teachers. But it is only since the taboo of speaking out against and questioning such people, has been broken that have we seen this explosion in cases being reported and offenders punished. No doubt both the taboo against paedophilia and not speaking out against clergy and teachers etc served good purposes originally as they helped to cement the respect for authority that was needed at the time. Now circumstances have changed, as people become better educated and less reverential of religion and governments.

Today, people are far more willing to blow the whistle. Overall, there is more transparency, and people or companies that are found to have hidden vital information, are soon given short shrift. George Bush has suffered in this instance with his ill-fated reasons for going to war against Iraq. Some see this ability to blow the whistle as a positive move; others see it as the “collective nanny” of British society.

## Are we all the same?

Many taboos are created because we are not all the same. For example, children, old people or animals need more protection because they are more vulnerable. Beliefs that men and women were different from each other led to old taboos, such as single parenting, menstruation, or women having careers. However, beliefs that we are all the same appear to be eroding taboos, but also eroding eccentricity. The old colourful characters in music, sport, politics are on the decline. It may even be that brands are reducing eccentricity, because of the way that non-use of brands increasingly defines someone as uncool, or not part of the group.

The concept of sameness has also infiltrated the EU, where it seems that moral values, beliefs and currencies must be standardised. Many cultures, including Britain's, vigorously reject this. People want to be free to have their own beliefs, their own taboos. The trend for political correctness (PC) is already seeing a powerful backlash, because it creates taboos that many see as unnecessary. PC seems to be a way of keeping everything somewhat bland. In an attempt to avoid this homogeneity, society has fragmented into various tribes, which have their own rules and their own taboos.

To take away our taboos is to take away part of our identities.

Continues.

## References

Listed in original.



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