The politics of black power handshakes

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In addition to using the eyes, clothing, and speech for communication, every culture makes use of touch. One widespread form of touch is the handshake. In our own society it takes many forms and has numerous cultural rules for its performance. The way a person shakes hands has meaning. Some fraternal organizations have subtle movements included in their handshakes, which are secret and express solidarity of membership. In this article, John Baugh examines some of the "grammatical rules" for shaking hands among black Americans. He shows how the decision to shake hands is often more complicated than the handshake itself.

The scene is a public swimming pool in a black working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles, on the opening day of the summer season. The staff members, some black from the local community and some white from other communities, are making and reestablishing acquaintances. In a typical reunion, two black staff members greet each other with this dialogue:

Howard: "Hey babe, what's happening? It's been a while."
Douglas: "Well, you know how it is. Always slow and not enough dough."
Howard: "I heard that."

While they talk, Howard and Douglas use the black power handshake, which, in this neighborhood, consists of three separate grasps executed in rapid order.

A white staff member, Dave, then approaches. He lives outside the local community, and neither Howard nor Douglas knows him. They greet him with some hesitation: