



Art mediated intra-interpersonal touch and space: Korean art therapy graduate students' cultural perspectives on sharing attachment based cloth albums[☆]



Noah Hass-Cohen, PsyD, ATR-BC^a, Sunhee K. Kim, PhD, LCAT, ATR-BC, ATCS^{b,*},
Selina Mangassarian, MA^c

^a Couples Family Therapy Program, California School of Professional Psychology/Alliant International University, 1000 S. Fremont Ave., Alhambra, CA, United States

^b Department of Expressive Arts Therapy, Seoul Women's University, 50th Memorial Bldg. No. 620, 621 Hwarangno, Nowongu, Seoul 139-774, Republic of Korea

^c California of Professional Psychology/Alliant International University, 1000 S. Fremont Ave., Alhambra, CA, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the cultural meaning of art mediated intra and interpersonal touch and space (AMITS) phenomena amongst a group of Korean, female, graduate students ($n = 22$). In a workshop, each student created and shared a personalized Attachment-Based Cloth album. While sharing their albums, the participants' cultural based AMITS behaviors included frequent reaching out to, touching, and manipulating their partner's album. Analyses of a survey suggested that AMITS themes were respect, care, and support, the degree of which was mediated by familiarity. Engaging with AMITS also facilitated the expression of autobiographical memories and interpersonal relationships, communication of respect, and could replace some of the functions of physical touch.

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Introduction

This qualitative study recorded and analyzed close and intimate art mediated touch and space (AMITS) behaviors that were observed during an Attachment-Based Cloth (ABC) album workshop. During the workshop, graduate art therapy master and

doctoral level female students at Seoul Women's University were asked to make a cloth album with at least five pages. Exploring such art-based attachment work sheds light on the understanding of phenomena such as interpersonal touch (Clyde Findlay, Lathan, & Hass-Cohen, 2008).

Interpersonal touch is an innate human need that mediates interpersonal space and communication (Jones, 1994). Touch directly conveys emotions and enhances the meanings of both verbal and nonverbal relational communications; such contact has shown to be a powerful and quicker form of communication when compared to verbal communication; unfortunately there is a paucity of psychological and neuroscience research on touch

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +82-2-970-5889.

E-mail addresses: shk0612@swu.ac.kr, shk0612@gmail.com (S.K. Kim).

(Gallace & Spence, 2010). Based on our key word searched the same is true for art therapy literature on gender and culture-based interpersonal touch and space. Furthermore, there is little research on same-gender touch, and almost none on Asian cultures.

Touch is associated with the development of lifetime attachment strategies and relational security (Hass-Cohen & Clyde Findlay, 2015). Perhaps this is because our skin, the largest human organ, is a literal and symbolic protective container for the self (Anzieu, 1989). From birth onwards interpersonal touch predicts how the developing infant will relate to others (Jean, Stack, & Fogel, 2009). Thus physical contact has important positive implications for the development of secure attachment, which predicts relationship quality and functioning (Hesse, 1999; Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959). Thus people's attitude toward touch can reveal an autobiographical history of insecure or secure attachments by illuminating withdrawal tendencies associated with social isolation or a propensity for close secure relationships as "touch may be the most profound of the approach-avoidance signals" (Jones, 1994, p.119). So touching not only evokes a recollection of self and social autobiographical memories, it can also influence negative or positive relational interactions (Guerrero & Andersen, 1991).

Art therapists frequently find themselves in a supportive, third-hand, touching role in the art therapies (Kramer, 1986). Unlike traditional therapy, art therapy requires that clients touch the materials with their hands, work in shared or close quarters with other family or group members, and have the opportunity for accidental and/or instrumental touch between members and with the therapist who in helping with technical aspects of art making, may touch the client's art and possibly their hands (Hass-Cohen & Clyde Findlay, 2015). The later authors have also hypothesized that AMIT mediates the development of therapeutic relationships and attachment.

Culture influences how individuals display, interpret, and react to interpersonal touch (Ditzen et al., 2007). The U.S., Northern Europe, and Asia are considered non-contact countries because little touch is used between individuals, compared to individuals from Latin America, Greece, and Italy (Field, 2010; Remland, Jones, & Brinkman, 1995). As reviewed by Gallace and Spence (2010), during preschool years and through high school, same-gender pairs tend to touch more frequently than cross-gender pairs. This effect is greater among females than males. However, as people mature, college students and adults are more likely to exhibit cross-gender than same-gender touching (Remland et al., 1995). Gender and culture research also suggested that touching behaviors can be an expression of dominance (DiBaise & Gunnoe, 2004).

In a study on cross-cultural same-gender touch, Willis and Rawdon (1994) found that generally, male and female U.S. college students expressed hesitancy toward touching unspecified people but were comfortable touching particular people. Gender, familial relationships, proximity and familiarity are important mediating factors (Heslin, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 1983; Jourard, 1966; Sussman & Rosenfeld, 1978). As for same-gender touch, Muslim-Malaysian students expressed less positive attitudes, Spanish students expressed positive attitudes, while Chilean females expressed more positive attitudes toward same-gender touch than Chilean males (Willis & Rawdon, 1994). Generally, women engage in and are more comfortable with same-sex touch than men (Burgoon, Walther, & Baesler, 1992; Crawford, 1994). This is consistent with literature suggesting that female therapists use touch more often than their male counterparts, and they are more likely to touch children or older clients (Bonitz, 2008), with hand-to-arm being the most popular type of touch (Hall & Vecchia, 1990). Females were more likely than males to communicate and decode sympathy more effectively, through touch (Hertenstein & Keltner, 2011). Professionally, there are many legal and ethical constraints related to the topic of touch (Bersoff, 2008). Information was not found

for non-Malaysian Asian or Korean students. However, in an informal post-ABC workshop dinner meeting, participants shared with the facilitators that female-to-female touching of certain articles, such as scarves and jewelry, is common amongst Korean females. Finally, a discussion about the use of touch and its boundaries in art therapies (Phelan, 2009) and in Korean and other psychological/professional associations is lacking.

Touch and attachment

Touch is one of human's earliest senses; infants explore the world by grasping on to their mothers and to objects, feeling their texture, weight, and temperature (Field, 2010). The first experience with positive interpersonal touch often comes from caregiving cuddling. Such early tactile experiences contribute to "shaping and characterizing the emotional, relational, cognitive, and neural functioning of the adult" (Gallace & Spence, 2010, pp. 253). Conversely, the lack of interpersonal and physical touch has a detrimental effect on development and well-being. These negative effects were clearly observed in studies of adopted Romanian orphaned children: infants that received minimal touch from caregivers led developmental delay in neural, cognitive, and social aspects (McCabe, Rolls, Bilderbeck, & McGlone, 2008; Maclean, 2003). Children with a history of sexual and/or physical abuse may also have memories of painful and/or pleasant touch, creating long-term damage (Beckett et al., 2006).

Interpersonal touch can communicate different types of emotion such as anger, fear, disgust, love, gratitude, and sympathy; for instance, anger may be communicated through hitting, squeezing, and trembling, while fear may be communicated through trembling, squeezing, and shaking (Hertenstein, Keltner, App, Bulleit, & Jaskolka, 2006). Negative emotions are predominantly associated with insecure attachment and with hyper-activation of the brain's fear centers (Perry & Hambrick, 2006). Both pleasant and painful touches trigger activation in the orbitofrontal cortex, a brain area associated with autobiographical memories (Gallace & Spence, 2010). The cingulate cortex, associated with the management of anxiety provoking stimuli and information sent by the fear center of the brain, is also implicated in touching (Field, 2010).

Happiness is communicable via touch as well. While love is expressed through soft touches and long stroking, gratitude may be expressed through gestures like a handshake, and sympathy through soft, calm, repetitive touches with long pauses, such as stroking or patting (Huisman & Frederiks, 2013).

There is little research on interpersonal touch as it relates to cloth-made relational objects, such as the ABC albums. However as early as 1959, Harlow and Zimmerman showed that young monkeys preferred "cloth mothers", regardless of whether they provided food, while monkeys that had only a "wire mother," which provided food, were observed to have gastrointestinal trouble, illuminating the importance of security soft objects.

Indeed, babies, young children, and sometimes the elderly may form an attachment to soft, comfort-providing, security objects, such as toys or blankets. Often these objects are used as an alternative to or in conjunction with interpersonal touch in forming attachments. Although this developmental phenomenon is familiar to many parents, it is understudied in children (Fortuna, Baor, Israel, Abadi, & Knafo, 2014) and even more so in adults (Cohen & Clark, 1984). Functioning as a "transitional object," touching and holding these objects reduces anxiety and increases security (Winnicott, 1953). Relying on security objects is especially high when children are upset and/or when separated from their caretakers. For adults, touching and sharing of objects associated with hugging may also reduce stress. In a fascinating experiment, a human-shaped soft cushion, used as a mobile phone, was reported to decrease

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