

## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Survey on hand gestures relevance in patient practitioner communication: a homeopathic example



Max Escher<sup>1,\*</sup>, Arndt Büssing<sup>1</sup> and Thomas Ostermann<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Integrative Medicine, Witten/Herdecke University, Gerhard-Kienle-Weg 4, 58313 Herdecke, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Department of Clinical Psychology, Witten/Herdecke University, Alfred-Herrhausen-Str. 50, 58448 Witten, Germany

**Background:** Gestures play an important role in medical communication.

**Methods:** 94 homeopaths (Mean age 49.6 years, 20% male) completed a 20-item questionnaire on utilization and relevance of gestures in patients' symptom description.

**Results:** After excluding nine items due to low validity ( $n = 4$ ) or low item total correlation ( $n = 5$ ), factor analysis of the questionnaire resulted in the following three dimensions explaining 66.6% of variance: 'Hand gestures in relation to verbal expressions' (5 items; Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ), 'Hand Gestures describing the experience of bodily and mental symptoms' (4 items; Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.74$ ) and 'practitioners' behavior and active attitude in observing hand gestures' (2 items; Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

**Conclusion:** The survey shows how homeopathic therapists view patients' hand gestures, whether they use these diagnostically and how this relates to their homeopathic practice. Practitioners with only homeopathic influence on this topic are highly congruent to findings on hand gestures from other domains.

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## Introduction

Sensation Method is a new approach in case taking and analysis in homeopathy developed by a group of homeopathy headed by the Indian homeopathic doctor Rajan Sankaran. This approach focus in case taking is identifying a global pattern of perception in the various symptoms presented by the patient. In the analysis, these patterns are then related to proven and sometimes even extrapolated patterns from the homeopathic materia medica.<sup>1,2</sup> This approach is suggested to be an advancement of the concept of generalization in Bönninghausen and Boger by some authors.<sup>3–5</sup> Spontaneous hand gestures in the patients' narrative of symptoms are often considered vital

in the identification of the specific pattern of experience. Examples for this phenomena of patients using hand gestures to describe otherwise not verbally expressible sensations has been repeatedly reported in case studies by Sensation Method homeopaths in their case taking.<sup>6–10</sup>

The debate in the homeopathic community regarding the innovative value of the Sensation Method has been highly controversial.<sup>11</sup> In order to provide a more evidence based approach to the discussion of Sensation Method we focused on the existing research on hand gestures as means of gathering meaning in general and of the patients' illness experience in specific.

In recent years, gestures have come into focus of linguistics and various other disciplines of the social science. While a variety of research is conducted in these fields, gestures only play a minor role in research on patient practitioner communication or are only reported in a very general and superficial manner.<sup>12</sup> This is even more astonishing as hand gestures are often used by patients in their description of symptom quality and severity and their

\*Correspondence: Max Escher, Institute for Integrative Medicine, University of Witten/Herdecke, Gerhard-Kienle-Weg 4, 58313 Herdecke, Germany.

E-mail: [max.escher@posteo.de](mailto:max.escher@posteo.de)

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experience of illness in particular with regards to pain experience as shown in a preliminary literature review by the authors.<sup>13</sup>

In clinical setting qualitative studies in the medical areas of general practice,<sup>14</sup> narratives on pain,<sup>15,16</sup> cardiology<sup>16,17</sup> and psychotherapy<sup>18</sup> examined hand gestures functions in conveying meaning. In his work on the gestural re-embodiment of symptoms<sup>14</sup> demonstrated that gestures are used by the patients to visualize and present their complaints using fragments of transcripts with pictures from vast collection of video recordings from patient-practitioner interaction. In 2002, Hyden & Peolsson reanalyzed video recordings of patients' narratives on their pain experience. They found patients to use gestures to convey information or content of speech in pointing, iconic and symbolic.<sup>15</sup> The pointing function was further investigated by Stukenbrock<sup>24</sup> in the setting of interdisciplinary pain conference. She found patients and physicians to use pointing gestures orchestrated to generate a referential system of discourse. A systematic feature approached was used to quantify the information content of speech and hand gestures in the communication of pain.<sup>19</sup> This study showed that information on the location of symptoms are mainly convey in gestures, whereas pain quality is most often convey by a not complementing combination of both.

Of the reviewed literature only a fraction of the studies explicitly investigated hand gestures in the patient-practitioner interaction.<sup>10,14,17,20-24</sup> Some found that in patient-practitioner interaction hand gestures facilitated a mutual alignment.<sup>15,25-27</sup> Other studies reported or advised the use of gestures intentionally as intervention.<sup>23,25-28</sup>

The use of hand gestures is connected to the concept of their role in conceptualization and revealing of implicit knowledge.<sup>29</sup> The idea of hand gestures as a spyhole into patients implicit or subconscious knowledge is wide spread in time and field of research.<sup>7,8,10,23,26,28,30-32</sup> Yet a more specific idea is that spontaneous hand gestures can help patients in conceptualization.<sup>15,26-28,31,33</sup> This is also connected to the ideas of gestures representing a global — that means somatic and mental — experience pattern.<sup>8,10,22,26,28,31,34,35</sup>

The phenomena of patients using gestures to describe otherwise not verbally expressible sensations has also been reported in case studies by Sensation Method homeopaths in their case taking<sup>6-10</sup> and focusing therapists in exploration of patients' illness experience.<sup>26</sup>

However, little is known about general and Sensation Method homeopathy practitioners' perspective, usage and appraisal of manual co-speech gestures and their relevance for practice. This pilot-survey was designed to gain a better understanding of the perspective, usage, appraisal and general relevance of manual co-speech gestures by these practitioners. Taking the importance of gestures in homeopathic case taking of Sensation Method into account, we decided to conduct the survey in a sample of Sensation Method practitioners attending to a seminar on further medical education on the Sensation Method. We aimed at exploring whether practitioners of sensation

method were agreeing to statements in accordance to results described in the literature of hand gesture research in medical communication and were consciously using patients' hand gestures in the case taking process.

## Material and methods

### Questionnaire

A core group of three physicians and one methodologist developed a pool of items in a consensus process based upon the presumed and confirmed functions and meanings of patients' hand gestures described in a prior pilot systematic review.<sup>13</sup> The questions were designed to reflect the dimensions of 'relationship between speech and hand gesture', and 'observation of hand gesture'. The reported theoretical perspectives and practitioners' reactions on patients' hand gestures were formed into affirmative statements. Items were scored on a 5-point scale from disagreement to agreement (0 — does not apply at all; 1 — does not truly apply; 2 — don't know; 3 — applies quite a bit; 4 — applies very much). The final questionnaire included 20 items on perspective on, utilization and relevance of gestures in patients' symptom description and 14 items on sociodemographic data and context of work.

### Study population

A convenience sample of 306 homeopathic practitioners attending two seminars on Sensation Method homeopathy with varying degrees of expertise were asked to participate. The attending homeopaths were physicians as well as health practitioners (German: 'Heilpraktiker'). In Germany, health practitioners are licensed health care professionals who have passed an exam by a public health office on basic medical knowledge. A health practitioner may practice a wide range of health services and various complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices including homeopathy.<sup>36</sup>

The questionnaires were distributed to the seminar attendees by distribution to their seats or were handed the questionnaire personally at the beginning of the two to three day seminars on the Sensation Method homeopathy in Munich and Badenweiler in Spring 2010.

Participants were instructed to carefully read the questions and answer the questions without long reflection. They were informed that there were neither right nor wrong answers since everybody would have made different experiences in practice and would answer on these grounds differently. They were asked to fill out and instructed to return the questionnaires on leaving at the door at of the seminar by the seminar organization in a specially designed container. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality, and gave informed consent to participate.

### Ethical considerations and data security

As this was a non-invasive questionnaire survey there was no necessity to obtain a vote from a local research ethics committee.<sup>37</sup> However, the rules for good

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