



Touch as social control: Haptic organization of attention in adult–child interactions

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Abstract

This study examines the interactional organization of sustained (temporally extended) control touch, deployed in adult–child encounters in Swedish primary school and family settings. The detailed analysis shows that sustained touches are employed by adults to manage and monitor children's participation, usually calling for 'appropriate' displays of attention to particular activities. Sustained touch sets the evolving limits on the child's postural orientation and movements by establishing a sensorial, corporeal contact and is instrumental in arranging the child's bodily positioning into a particular participation framework. Retrospectively, it orients to the child recipient's inattentiveness and inappropriate participation. Prospectively, it solicits and sustains the child's coordinated and attentive participation in activities that constitute a state of talk, e.g. interactionally 'big packages' (Sacks, 1995), i.e., adults' extended instructions or disciplining. In multi-tasking situations, sustained touch works to manage the multiple overlapping participation frameworks. The adult, already engaged in a talk-based activity, constrains the touch recipient's conversational contribution, or puts it on hold, using sustained touch as a prosthetic resource to signal her/his prospective attention. In all, the interactional analysis of interpersonal touch shows how the situational conditions, social roles and relations inform and shape body behavior.

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1. Introduction

Touch plays an important role in human interaction, including areas such as achieving another person's compliance and displaying status, intimacy, and affection. As a sensory/communicative modality it has, thus far, largely been the focus of psychological studies measuring, for instance, the effects of interpersonal touch on infant development, social power, solidarity and compliance (Hertenstein and Weiss, 2011). Such studies have examined the forms and functions of touch (usually in laboratory environments), suggesting that the communicative potentials of touch are contextualized by the multimodal, interactional situation. Interactional studies have only recently engaged in an investigation of the 'when', 'why' and 'how' of touch, demonstrating the interactional organization and socializing potentials of haptic actions (Cekaite, 2010; Burdelski, 2010; Tulbert and Goodwin, 2011; Kääntä and Marsh-Piirainen, 2013; Moore, 2013).

Taking its starting point in an interactional perspective, the present study focuses on a significant yet under-researched area, namely, the ties between touch and social control. The study examines the interactional organization of control touch used in adult–child interactions (in primary school settings for 7-year-olds and in families in Sweden). Control touches are defined here as haptic acts that are used to control another person's behavior. More specifically, the focus in

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on temporally sustained, physically light adult–child touch that is used to manage the recipient’s body to achieve compliance and to monitor the child’s embodied actions in the (evolving) participation frameworks (e.g., re-directing another person’s attention or altering his/her behavior). It is argued that an examination of embodied practices can provide concrete insights into the mundane corporeal features of social interaction and outline some of the ‘body techniques’ (Mauss, 1973) relevant to inculcating socially and physically accountable ways of acting in everyday interactions.

2. Theoretical perspective and prior research on touch

Theoretically, the present study adopts the view that intersubjectivity is material and embodied: Moving bodies experience, resonate with, initiate and constrain the actions and movements of other bodies by deploying a full range of semiotic resources, tools, and modalities available within a shared sensory and corporeal space (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Csordas, 2008; Goodwin, 2000; Streeck et al., 2011). Coordination of interaction, in addition to talk, is linked to the apperception of the movement (or the stability of other bodies) on the basis of one’s own kinesthetic experiences (Sheets-Johnstone, 2012: 29).

Touch, as a communicative/sensory mode, is fundamentally characterized as an ‘immediacy behavior’ (Montagu, 1971). The communicative potentials of touch are commonly bidirectional and contingent and touching or letting someone else touch one can escalate the balance of intimacy (Linell, 2009). Prior research has shown that particular aspects of touch, such as its form and duration, can influence how it is interpreted and that ‘the perceptions and interpretations of nonverbal behaviors’ are located in the context in which they occur (Hertenstein and Weiss, 2011; Fleck and Chavajay, 2009: 284). Some studies have suggested, for instance, the prevalence of coordination of talk and various types of touch (Jones and Yarborough, 1985).

Recent interactional studies have brought attention to touch in social interaction, demonstrating that touch behaviors can be organized as orderly patterns of corporeal actions (Goodwin, 2016). Studies taking an anthropological perspective have revealed the deployment of multisensory (touch, smell, gaze) resources in adult–child (socializing) interactions (de León, 1998; Ochs et al., 2005; Goodwin, 2006). Ethnographic evidence based on a micro-analysis of interaction shows that control touch in adult–child directives is deployed to construct and negotiate the frameworks of co-orientation and compliance, initiating and at times enforcing the accomplishment of the requested action. ‘Shepherding’ control touch enforces the child’s locomotion, reconfiguring the alignment of bodies vis-à-vis each other: Adult speakers can reposition the body of a child recipient toward the target activity, steering or carrying the child toward the final destination (Cekaite, 2010, 2012; Goodwin and Cekaite, 2013). Forceful touch is used for disciplining the child’s bodily actions, as in staging, organizing and enforcing a time-out (McIlvenny, 2009).

Touch as a corporeal form of behavior is thus embedded in and linked to the social and cultural context, and constitutes some of the ‘body techniques,’ i.e., methods used to monitor and impose specific bodily action patterns (Mauss, 1973). Appropriate bodily participation, i.e., children’s morally relevant embodied gender conduct, is shaped and corrected through haptic prompts and instructions (Burdelski, 2010). Touch is also used to organize multimodal participation frameworks and calibrate children’s attention, shaping pre-verbal and verbally developing children’s interactional participation (de León, 1998, 2012; Ochs et al., 2005) and older children’s accomplishment and orientation to routine tasks (Goodwin, 2006; Tulbert and Goodwin, 2011). While these studies have investigated touch that manages the child’s bodily actions by bringing the body into motion (and enforcing movement), the uses of temporally extended, passive forms of touch in adult–child interactions, when taking control of and establishing the child’s attention, have thus far been less explored.

3. Socialization of attention and participation

Joint attention and mutual orientation constitute some of the pre-requisites for coordinated action and sociality (Goodwin, 2007) and the ‘[p]articipation framework, sustained through joint attention, is a basic analytic unit of socialization and learning’ (de León, 2012: 104). Joint attention is thus ‘fundamentally an interactional process inseparable from the flow of social activity’ (Brown, 2012: 35). A number of ethnographic studies have examined children’s attention when it is aimed at persons, social actions and activities, rather than looking at very young children’s attention to objects (e.g., toys), as in much of the psychological research conducted in laboratories (Tomasello and Ferrar, 1986). These studies demonstrate that attention is acquired and deployed by young children from early on and is linked to socialization and ‘attention-organizing behaviors’ (de León, 2012; Tulbert and Goodwin, 2011).

Participation and involvement in situation (‘actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties’, Goodwin and Goodwin, 2004: 222) are guided by situational requirements that are of a moral character (Goffman, 1963: 240), and according to Goffman’s theoretical view, ‘[I]imits are put on those kinds of emigration of the self which can occur without leaving one’s physical position’ (Goffman, 1963: 194). In concrete terms, participation in social interaction, for instance, hinges on the establishment and maintenance of interactional space, i.e., various spatial-orientational arrangements for sustaining a common orientational perspective, such as the F-formation (facing formation) (Kendon, 1990), where

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