



Touching at depth: The potential of feeling and connection



Diana Adis Tahhan

School of Social Sciences and International Studies, The University of New South Wales, Sydney NSW 2052, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 November 2010

Received in revised form

15 March 2012

Accepted 15 March 2012

Keywords:

Touch

Body

Flesh

Feeling

Senses

Heart

ABSTRACT

The senses are often talked of as bodily senses. Although more recently there has been valuable work on the cross-over of the senses, it is still common for our understanding of the senses to be located in the finite body: the body that hears, smells, sees, tastes and touches. There is a defined subjectivity and identity logic here which ontologically impacts on how we feel, particularly in the context of touch. For example, if it is *my* body that touches, it must be *my* body that feels. Or, if *my* body touches another, *that* body feels my touch and vice versa. Emphasis is on intersubjectivity and separate bodies/senses rather than on *feeling, connection* and *emotion*. This paper explores affective and embodied meanings of touch. It moves beyond common assumptions underlying most literature on touch, assumptions which regard touch as physical and visible. Touch cannot be viewed primarily as a bodily sense for it then emanates from a finite body, a body which is separate, subjective and contained. This type of touch (or body) stifles the potential for feeling and connection. When touch is viewed as 'flesh' or 'mi', however, we become aware of a non-finite logic of the world which helps us reassess touch. There is a sensuous and embodied connection in flesh that is at the 'heart' of this type of touch. This paper develops the notion of a '*touching at depth*' which helps us move beyond the senses in a bodily (and therefore finite) capacity and explore an encompassing space and relationship in touch that brings out the potential of feeling, connection and emotion.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The senses, in particular, the sense of touch, are often assumed in popular discourse as a 'bodily' sense. Although touch is sometimes conceived as affective and metaphorical (i.e. I was deeply *touched* by an experience), it is usually grounded in discourses of physicality and visibility (i.e. I touch your hand with mine). It seems that describing touch vis-à-vis physical terms such as tactile communication, bodily contact and physical contact enables us to understand tangible and concrete experiences of touch. Affective forms of touch, on the other hand, are linked to emotions or feelings. The emotional sense of touch is less extensively researched than the physical (Detamore, 2010; Dixon and Straughan, 2010; Paterson, 2007), presumably because it is harder to conceptualize and move beyond this priority on the *physical*. Often described in terms of the heart or mind, being *touched* or *affected* by an experience seems more intangible and less locatable than the physical sense of touch, particularly because it brings up the question of *feelings*.

Specific works devoted to 'touch' or 'touching' tend to take for granted the very meaning of touch, and more often than not,

perpetuate assumptions about physical and visible forms of touch (Josipovici, 1996; Montagu, 1986).¹ A fundamental issue here is that such meanings of touch restrict our understanding to the finite, located matter: the physical body. And touch which emanates from a finite body often presumes subjectivity (*my* body, *your* body, *that* body) and tells us very little about the actual *lived* experience of touch. Such contained notions limit our understanding of the emotional sense of touch and the potential for feeling and connection.² This type of touch is rational, known, social, passive or active action, contained within a framework of the body that is separate and split from anything else. This paper argues that touch

¹ See theorists such as Detamore (2010), Paterson (2007), Povinelli (2006), and Tuan (1993) who recognize this distinction.

² For example, when Montagu speaks of touch, he speaks of subjects, objects and bodies: "bodily contact with the other...provides the essential source of comfort, security, warmth" (1986, 95). However, he does not explore the ways in which such feelings of comfort, security or warmth become possible through touch in the first place. Josipovici (1996), moves beyond Montagu's analysis and speaks of the "essential relationship" in touch. He talks of space, time, distance, proximity and presence, leaning towards an understanding of embodiment, but he too still limits touch to the boundaries of bodies, subjects and objects. Such contained explanations of touch pose conceptual problems for understandings of feeling and connection.

E-mail address: diana.adistahhan@gmail.com.

which emanates from the finite body reduces the potential for feeling and connection; physical touch or touch *from* the 'body' also makes it harder to appreciate the nuanced and manifold meanings of touch. Although emotional forms of touch, for example, suggest we need to attend to the importance of affect and feelings, existing conceptual frameworks are limited to approach these different forms of touch.³

This paper explores touch within the context of feeling and connection.⁴ Touch is not viewed within its traditional finite sense of emanating from the body or physicality, nor is touch viewed as a purely affective, 'interior' experience of a purely 'emotional' kind. Rather, this paper adopts a relational understanding of touch which relies on a more complexly embodied and sensuous experience of touch, and helps us explore the relations between the emotional and physical sense of touch. This relational understanding is described in this paper as a *touching at depth*.⁵ When people connect with other people, objects and their environment, they feel a *wholeness*, a potential, a connection that isn't located, and isn't finite. *Touching at depth* is this relational quality which relies on the ontological change from Cartesian body to wholeness. In other words, *touching at depth* relates to the moment of 'real' intimacy, love or meeting between people. *Touching at depth* is not locatable in a particular body part or particular sense – there are no separate subjects, bodies or parts coming towards the other with purpose and motive; rather, this form of touch has intimate manifestations (is not only physical or *from* the 'body') and finds meaning through an embodied felt relation and deep sense of connection – there is an openness to who the person actually is, and a renunciation of prior self to the feeling and person (that is, the positionally defined body of the 'touching' person and the person 'being-touched' can no longer be felt).

Touching at depth, as an analytical tool, aims to move beyond conventional forms of touch, and to provide a language for intimate forms of touch and feeling. Firstly, however, it is necessary to provide some account of the methodological approach employed in this article as well as the theoretical implications of *touching at depth*.

³ For example, emotions are often located within some notion of the interior of the human being, and such notions are often associated with reflection and memory (see Davidson et al., 2005). Dixon and Straughan (2010: 453) note that in more recent years, geographers have begun to look at emotions more broadly in the context of self, other places, people, things, etc.

⁴ Elsewhere I have referred to this in the context of intimacy (Tahhan, 2008). This has been called love by Metcalfe and Game (2002) and meeting by Buber (1958) and is based on a logic where there are no separate subjects, bodies or objects but a relational meeting between whole and active beings. Manning calls similar forms of touch "tender" (2007, 12) while Levinas refers to an intimate caress which "aims at neither a person nor a thing. It loses itself in a being that dissipates..." (Levinas, 1969: 259). In other words, there is "nothing" actually being touched. There is no body of the subject or body of the object.

⁵ This research on touch originally developed from a Japanese cultural context, where physical forms of touch are uncommon and relationships usually rely on more indirect and subtle forms of communication (i.e. Lebra, 2004; Tahhan, 2007). Ethnographic research conducted in Japan revealed various ways of having meaningful relationships. Most participants commented on their non-tactile forms of closeness with their loved ones. Often, these forms were grounded in greetings or daily rituals which highlighted care and love. However, what was so caring or loving about that particular context was not always clear. Although this paper does not draw on the specific cultural examples of Japanese relationships, it is important to note that the thoughts regarding *touching at depth* emerged from this cultural context and that some of the examples used in this paper are embedded with similar notions of touch. Most importantly, however, although *touching at depth* was inspired by this cultural context, it is not necessarily restricted to it. This paper reveals a wider applicability of *touching at depth* which is more universally significant and connects experiences and meanings of touch and intimacy.

1.1. Lived experiences and touching at depth

This article is based on three personal accounts of intimacy which help to draw out this notion of *touching at depth*. Elsewhere I have explored *touching at depth* in a Japanese cultural context (Tahhan, 2007, 2008, 2010). However, to truly appreciate the nuances of the feelings and emotions and depth (which I was struggling to conceptualize at the time), I had to go back to the 'real' intimacies of the life in which I participate, that is, I had to connect with my own feelings, body and lived experience to be more "honest and more engaged" (See Richardson, 2000: 924) with my research. The three personal accounts are reflections recorded over the past decade as I have tried to develop this notion of *touching at depth*. These reflections are based on a sense of intimate participation that isn't subjective (or clearly, objective). The whole methodological and conceptual point of *touching at depth* is that we are not engaged as selves, as 'autos', but as participants in relation. This becomes more meaningful when done phenomenologically (see Moustakas, 1994).

The article deliberately draws on my own personal lived experience and perceptions in relation to three specific situations because of their ability to provide insight into the embodied and sensuous nature of touch. All three reflections draw on experiences of self-and-other, in order to draw out the theoretical implications of intimate relationships. The first reflection was written during pregnancy, when I became aware of different, more embodied ways of touching, while the second and third accounts are two memories from my childhood, both which evoked strong feelings of security and connection with my family. The tone and voice in the first reflection is different to the other two reflections, and asks us to engage with the text in different ways. This was not deliberate nor was it conscious at the time. The first reflection is written in first person and present tense. The fact that I was actually pregnant *at the time* meant that I felt present to and in "open dialogue" (Welch, 2001: 68) with the text as I wrote it. The other two reflections, on the other hand, were recorded several years after the 'rituals' had ceased, and use more of a distanced voice. This seems to require a different sort of attention, not just because of the way they were written (where I was neither subjective nor objective) but because they are based on an intimate sense of participation that is not quite so obviously 'touch' (i.e. sound of laughter, being in the same space). I needed to engage with and feel the text and "create spaces in and around...[these reflections] from which new things [could] continue to erupt" (Brearley, 2001: 29). From there, the meaning of touch could also develop.

Before we attend to the empirical materials that will inform our understandings of *touching at depth*, it is necessary to unpack the phenomenological meanings of touch which are the foundation of this paper, meanings which draw on European as well as Eastern concepts of embodiment, and which are not necessarily bounded by cultural contexts.

1.2. Theoretical implications of touching at depth

This article seeks to describe the feelings and connections possible between people vis-à-vis *touching at depth*. In intimate encounters, there is a depth between people which is characterized by a non-Euclidean space where the quality of the feeling is undefined (*whole*). This notion of wholeness is a distinguishable state from 'totality'. Totality is definable and bounded; on the other hand, this feeling of wholeness is derived from different experiences of state and being, where whole cannot be defined: it is open and connective. This feeling moves touch from the container of the finite, subject-object's body to a *fleshy* relation that incorporates more than just body. Therefore, the potential of feeling and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/946740>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/946740>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)