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Uses of interpersonal touch in educational settings: A methodological commentary

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ABSTRACT

Touch is a primordial resource for interaction and for managing social relations, something that quite literally connects us with other human beings. This discussion paper approaches the articles in this special issue from a methodological perspective by reflecting on analytical challenges and possibilities in investigating interpersonal touch in educational encounters. It will briefly outline relevant methodological issues and transcription-related concerns in approaching interpersonal touch from a multimodal and sensorial research perspective. Key ideas in the empirical articles are then discussed with a view to what kinds of insights the articles in the special issue generate for future studies of interpersonal touch in educational settings.

1. Introduction

Touch is a primordial resource for interaction and for managing social relations, something that quite literally connects us with other human beings. At the same time, interpersonal touch is not always an unproblematic resource in different classroom contexts and with diverse student populations. With its focus on how interpersonal touch is used in a range of instructional settings, the current special issue offers a much-needed and timely contribution to the field of Education and to research on sensoriality in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (EMCA) (Goico et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2017; Mondada, 2021). The detailed and insightful analyses in the issue highlight the role of touch and haptic practices as a ‘grain of sand’ that throws light on larger debates about the roles that attention, control, power, social norms, and the surrounding material environment – among others – play in practices of teaching, learning, and socialisation.

My aim in this commentary is mainly methodological in that I hope to reflect on both analytical challenges and possibilities in investigating haptic educational practices. I will begin by briefly outlining what kinds of methodological and transcription-related considerations a sensorial and multimodal approach to analysing interpersonal touch brings to the fore. I will then summarise what in my view were key ideas in the empirical papers, and reflect on some analytical possibilities that the insights generated by the current collection of papers present for future studies hoping to explore how interpersonal touch may contribute to teaching and learning through social interaction.

2. Transcribing and analysing touch as a multimodal and sensorial phenomenon

The papers in the special issue draw from the methodological frameworks of EMCA and micro-ethnography, which are highly suitable approaches for investigating touch as an interactional phenomenon by using video recordings as the primary source of data. A

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multimodal lens and a sensorial conceptualisation of social interaction (see e.g. Mondada, 2021) direct attention to how participants deploy touch either on its own or, more usually, together with other simultaneously used interactional resources (such as talk, gaze, gesture, and mobility) to construct and make sense of social action. As a phenomenon, touch is characteristically reciprocal and intercorporeal (Meyer et al., 2017): when we touch someone, we also sense their touch on our skin, and vice versa. Touching is also a temporal action, and, for instance, the duration of a hug can give clues about the social relations between huggers to other participants. As the papers in the special issue convincingly demonstrate, subtle qualitative differences in the nature, tone, and intensity of touch can be interactionally consequential, such as when a preschool teacher recalibrates a “controlling grip” into a “soothing stroke” in a reproach situation in response to the child’s compliance (Cekaite and Bergnehr, 2023).

Researchers of multimodal social interaction are very familiar with the crucial role of transcription in the analytical process. Transcription choices embody theoretical and ontological distinctions about the phenomenon under scrutiny, as articulated early on by Ochs (1979). A transcript is no objective record of what happened in a situation, but already an analysis of what may be relevant in the construction and interactional organisation of the situation. This is particularly clear when transcribing practices involving touch, which often includes questions about how everything else that takes place simultaneously relates to, and builds on, the instances of touch. It also raises fundamental questions about how social action unfolds temporally and sequentially (Keevallik, 2018; Mondada, 2018). Moreover, transcribing touch also involves categorising them verbally as particular kinds of haptic actions (e.g. a grip, light stroke, tap, pat, etc.), which are not necessarily neutral. Indeed, as Karvonen et al. (2023) show in their study, in some situations the participants themselves also verbalise touches, and use those verbal labels to negotiate the normative acceptability of the touch. Finally, transcription inevitably involves a trade-off between level of detail, technicality and readability, as well as a conversion of a three-dimensional action into the two-dimensional representation of that action on the printed (or electronic) page. Against this backdrop, it was interesting to observe that each of the papers in the special issue approached transcription in a slightly different way, with a view to finding the best way to make existing transcription conventions fit their analytical focus and task, but perhaps also highlighting slightly different aspects of the haptic practices in the focal setting.

3. Highlights in individual papers

Karvonen et al. (2023) investigate student-student touches in Finnish classrooms, focusing on affectionate touches that nevertheless get treated as problematic either by the recipient of the touch or a bystander adult. In negotiating this kind of ambiguity in what the touch is supposed to be like, the students invoke social norms related to respecting personal integrity and avoiding disturbing the other’s engagement. The focal episodes very nicely illustrate the moral order(s) of touching in classrooms and offer a meaningful contribution to a long line of research on how rules and norms are managed in teacher-student (e.g. Hazel & Mortensen, 2017; Macbeth, 1991) and in peer interaction (e.g. Evaldsson, 2005). Here, transcription is very relevant because at stake for participants is the purpose and quality of the interpersonal touch they give and receive, and they themselves verbally categorise it in particular ways. The focal cases thus raise interesting questions about the relationships between a description of the touch in the transcript and the analysis, the ‘lived experience’ of the recipient of the touch, and their verbalisation of the touch. Another transcription-relevant issue in the paper is the use of two different kinds of transcriptions in ways that seem sensitive to whether or not the haptic practices involve talk.

Heller’s study (2023) investigates the use of professional touch as a device for managing the disengagement and visible distress of an adolescent student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in an inclusive classroom in Germany. In my view, the study demonstrates effectively just how complex the notion of (dis)engagement can be when it is analysed from an interactional perspective as something that involves simultaneous deployment of interactional resources that change on a moment-to-moment basis (see also Jacknick, 2021). Sometimes a student’s embodied displays are (treated as) more relevant signals of engagement than their talk. Compared to other articles in the special issue, the multi-tiered transcription system is very systematic and detailed, and it must have taken considerable work. However, one can see an analytical payoff in the form of being able to show how the teachers work to re-engage the student in a stepwise manner and to analyse in detail what the relationship between touch and the re-engagement practices is. Through this, the reader begins to see just how finely tuned the teachers’ calibration of touch is to the student’s conduct. The study also has interesting implications for understanding pedagogical practices in other kinds of team-teaching settings where instruction is accomplished through the cooperation of two professionals.

Burdelski (2023) investigates touch outside the classroom walls, during guided preschool walks in urban outdoor settings in Japan where children are socialised into ways of moving safely in traffic from an early age onwards. Guided walks are a key socialising activity for achieving this. As Burdelski shows, participants use distinct and situated forms of touch, such as when the teachers employ their bodies to “shield” the children from moving cars or when children hold each other’s hands as a way to ensure movement as a group. The paper thus superbly illuminates how touch is not only a resource for organising forms of participation that are sensitive to the details of the material environment, but also how interpersonal touch (in the form of hand-holding) can itself constitute an object of instruction and socialisation in an educational setting. There is also a connection with Heller’s study in that the focal haptic practices in Burdelski’s paper are resources for guiding other participants’ attention. However, the object of attention is a relevant material feature of the environment (cars) rather than the ongoing pedagogical activity as in Heller’s study, which presents a need to deal with the object in ways of transcribing the data.

Cekaite and Bergnehr’s (2023) study is also set in a similar educational context, exploring how preschool teachers use touch to mitigate disciplining acts in preschool classrooms in Sweden. The authors show how the teachers’ haptic practices orient to multiple simultaneous concerns, combining control or discipline-related and affective interactional work. For instance, this could take the form of a “soothing touch” to mitigate a simultaneous verbal directive or a longer-term “half-embrace” that guides the child’s attention and

limits their room for wiggling during a pedagogical activity. I found that the notion of convergence of control and affection is a significant insight, describing how the teachers' haptic practices enable them to accomplish the 'double task' of exercising control and care in situated ways. Another very interesting part of the analysis relates to how corrective and disciplining activities can involve a gradual transformation of an initial controlling touch to a touch that is more concerned with affective aspects, in ways that show sensitivity to the child's conduct. This kind of pedagogical responsiveness to the recipient of the touch, as well as a focus on professional practices that aim at establishing or restoring institutionally relevant forms of engagement parallels some of the findings in [Heller's study \(2023\)](#) and contributes to research on engagement (e.g. [Pehmer et al., 2015](#)). Here, too, it is similarly crucial to pay analytical attention to the intensity of touch, its temporal trajectory vis-à-vis other simultaneous resources in order to be able to show this kind of subtle professional work done by the preschool teachers.

The study by [Tyagunova and Breidenstein \(2023\)](#) investigates how teachers use touch during one-on-one individualised instruction in so-called 'open' classrooms in German primary schools. In these kinds of classrooms, students may simultaneously be working on very different tasks, and the authors show how the teacher deploys touch to set up an interactional space and an embodied participation framework for guiding early years students in their task work of writing letters. The framework is intercorporeal and "nested" in that the teacher is standing behind the seated student so that both participants can sustain a focus of attention on the student's task materials, their visual perspectives aligned. This kind of arrangement relies on both sustained touch (the continuous contact of the bodies) and shorter-term forms of manual guiding (see also [Kääntä & Piirainen-Marsh, 2013](#)), such as when the teacher holds the student's hand and instructs the shaper of a letter by co-writing. I think the authors show very nicely how learning to write thus takes place through intercorporeal practices of 'lending' a skilled hand to the student, one that mediates the written letter and provides a sensory experience of an appropriate position of the pen on the paper, its gravity, and movement as the letter is taking shape. Of all contributions to this special issue, the paper had perhaps the clearest focus on instructional touch, alongside the study by [Burdelski](#). It also serves as a useful reminder of how touch is a transportable resource that can be deployed in a new kind of pedagogical environment in seemingly 'old' ways, and in that way be a resource for organising the built space socially.

4. Future prospects for researching touch in educational encounters

Altogether, the papers in this special issue point to possible subtle differences in the way touch is used across different educational settings, socio-cultural contexts, and the human life course. For instance, the practices and functions of touch seem very different in papers that report on preschool ([Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2023](#); [Burdelski, 2023](#)) and early years learning settings ([Tyagunova & Breidenstein, 2023](#)) as opposed to classrooms involving adolescent students ([Karvonen et al., 2023](#); [Heller, 2023](#)), which indicates there may be systematic differences in the haptic organisation of classroom instruction and participation at different educational levels. As suggested in the previous section, the papers also demonstrate that analysing the role(s) of touch in educational interactions calls for paying attention to at least the following aspects:

- Is touch the 'main' resource implementing a social action or one aspect of a multimodal action package?
- What kinds of temporal (e.g. brief vs. sustained) and sequential trajectories does touch involve?
- What is the intensity of a touch and its possible changing dynamics?
- How to make sense of the recipient's experience of, and response to, a touch? Is it always even possible to identify who is touching whom?

Each of these aspects presents challenges to transcription and analysis, and may well present a need for innovation in the analytical process. The final aspect is perhaps the most difficult in investigating educational touch because not all touches are observably responded to or reacted to, even if they are nevertheless sensed and experienced by the recipient. The relative ease of analysing the observable conduct of the participant who touches another participant can potentially hide the recipient's side in the situation. Indeed, the analytical focus of the articles in this issue is mainly on how adult professionals use touch as a resource for professional practices, with the exception of the study by [Karvonen et al.](#) and partly also [Burdelski](#). Yet, being able to show how students respond to professional touch is crucial if we want to investigate the linkage between touch and student participation or learning.

The 'lived experience' of being touched can be tricky to access with the methodological approach of EMCA – at least if the experience is conceptualised as a physiological sensory phenomenon. However, as the special issue convincingly demonstrates, touching is also socially organised, and the papers in my view succeed in offering interesting prospects for exploring the recipient's experience further. For instance, [Karvonen et al. \(2023\)](#) show how the recipients of a touch verbalise their sensory experiences by formulating the touch as e.g. "beating" or "fondling", and in [Burdelski's \(2023\)](#) study, children refuse hand-holding by describing the sensation of the other's hand as "icky". These kinds of verbalisations are highly interesting because they are a participant's way to pinpoint their orientation to the social meaning and nature of the prior touch, not 'just' the prior social action (as in the next turn proof procedure, [Sacks et al., 1974](#)). In other words, verbalisations may allow the interactional consequences of a particular interactional resource (touch) and a social action to be teased apart.

In addition to verbalisations of the sensory experience, students' reactions to being touched become observable as (non-)alignment with the action involving touch, be that the teacher's manual guiding of a student's hand to accomplish writing ([Tyagunova & Breidenstein, 2023](#)) or a reproach designed to remedy inappropriate or disengaged conduct ([Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2023](#); [Heller, 2023](#)). Thus, while an EMCA approach does not enable the analysis of 'direct' evidence of the physiological sensory experience of being touched, it can tell quite a lot about how participants routinely make such experiences into accountable interactional objects and orient to them as relevant features of the pedagogical activities.

In some parts of the sequential analyses, I also found that the papers take steps towards problematising or even deconstructing a dichotomous relationship between a giver and a receiver of a touch. Such an intercorporeal (Meyer et al., 2017) conceptualisation of touch was perhaps clearest in the notion of 'skinship' in Burdelski's study (2023) and the concept of 'body-Umwelt tie' proposed by Heller (2023). Heller's observations about the hyper- and hypo-sensitivity associated with ASD also raise another interesting question about the intersubjectivity of touch, which could be pursued further in future studies. If participants have a very different physiological sensitivity to touch, how do they negotiate a shared sense of what a touch is and what it is meant to do in instructional settings? Teachers have a responsibility to design their haptic actions not only as respectful towards the students but also to recipient-design them in a more basic intersubjective manner. If touch does not have an intersubjectively shared meaning, what kinds of other interactional resources are needed to align participants' perspectives? Can this lead to the kinds of ambiguities of touch as analysed in the paper by Karvonen et al. (2023)? This can also have methodological implications: In analysing video-recorded touching practices, analysts are also faced with the task of making sense of the touch, classifying it, and creating taxonomies of haptic actions (e.g. whether a touch is controlling or affectionate). Perhaps this is something that relies on our member's experiences of what a touch feels like. Part of the accountability of touch is that we can see a touch as something that 'must' feel soothing. But if the sensorial sensitivity of a recipient of the touch is not the same as ours, what kinds of consequences does it have for interaction?

All in all, the studies in this issue convincingly demonstrate that touch is a powerful resource for organising learning activities, both in and beyond the classroom. Being able to deploy touch in situated, culturally appropriate, and recipient-designed ways is part of the professional competence that teachers use to engage students and direct their attention during learning activities. Touch is very much a normatively organised resource, and the "cultures of touch" (Cekaite, 2020) can look very different even within the institutional frame of a single classroom, depending on whether it is used in teacher-student or peer interaction. The special issue both consolidates research on interpersonal touch in education and will hopefully also inspire further research on haptic instruction, socialisation, and learning. One area on which future studies could direct attention is the interface between interpersonal touch and learning, for example by exploring its role in the construction of knowledge and expertise, perhaps in activities that involve embodied objects of instruction and learning.

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