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“Don't touch”: Negotiating the boundaries of acceptable touching in classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In peer interactions within educational settings, students touch each other to display affection, to build a sense of togetherness and to manage each other's participation. On the other hand, embodied acts between students can also be physically forceful, embarrassing, or feel uncomfortable. While certain touch types such as caressing, stroking and tapping are typically associated with displays of affection, all touches are situated, and participants locally negotiate their meanings, functions, and appropriateness. In this article, we examine how boundaries of acceptable touch and rights to touch others are locally negotiated in the classrooms. We analyze three episodes in which the touch-recipient or a bystanding teacher rejected an affectionate student-to-student touch, and the rejection included a verbal description that portrayed the touch as a violation, thus assigning a moral meaning to the tactile act. The data for the study consists of video-recorded classroom interaction, and multimodal conversation analysis is used as the method for analyzing the data. Our analysis shows that in these episodes, two kinds of moral orders were invoked: a more universal one that demands respect for a person's bodily integrity and an institutional one that demands students to maintain an orderly classroom by refraining from disturbing the other's engagement in pedagogical activities.

1. Introduction

Human-to-human touch has various important functions in many institutional settings, including schools (e.g., Routarinne, Tainio, & Burdelski (Eds.), 2020). Earlier research on touch in educational settings has shown that teachers use physical contact to encourage, praise, show affection, and build positive relationships with their students as well as to control students' conduct and manage their participation and attention (e.g., Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018; Cekaite, 2020; Heinonen, Karvonen, & Tainio, 2020; Routarinne et al. 2020). In addition, touch constitutes an important resource for teaching manual and bodily skills (e.g., Lindwall & Ekström, 2012; Råman, 2019), and forms of body knowledge, such as how to perceive, feel, and experience one's own body (e.g., Reed, 2020) in diverse instructional settings.

In peer interactions within educational settings, students touch each other to display affection and build a sense of togetherness through playful teasing and different forms of physical closeness (e.g., Goodwin, 2008; Katila & Niemi, 2022; Keränen, Viljamaa, & Uitto, 2020; Tainio & Heinonen, 2021). On the other hand, tactile conduct can also be a means of exclusion in peer interactions

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(Goodwin, 2006; Svahn & Evaldsson, 2011). Moreover, earlier studies indicate that students use tactile practices in guiding and managing each other's participation in learning tasks (Jakonen & Niemi, 2020; Kääntä & Piirainen-Marsh, 2013; Wakke & Heller, 2022). Thus, in schools, touch appears as an important resource in accomplishing institutional tasks, that is, teaching and learning, and for creating and maintaining social relationships that constitute prerequisites for learning and well-being.

Previous studies on touch at school indicate that different material ecologies, as well as different pedagogical activities provide different affordances for tactile behaviors. In traditional classrooms where students have their own desks, student-to-student touches occur more rarely than in classrooms where students sit in pairs or in small groups (e.g., Ahlholm & Karvonen, 2021; Tainio, Karvonen, & Heinonen (Eds.) 2023). The most diverse body of student-to-student touches occur during pedagogical activities that take place in physical locations outside classrooms, such as corridors or halls furnished with couches and cushions. These kinds of activities are frequent especially in schools that are designed as open learning spaces. (e.g., Jakonen & Niemi, 2020; Niemi & Katila, 2022.)

While some of the tactile practices in educational settings appear to be fairly conventionalized (e.g., Heinonen, Karvonen, & Tainio, 2020; Tainio & Heinonen, 2021), all touches are situated, and participants locally negotiate their meanings, functions, and appropriateness. In this study, we were particularly interested in classroom situations in which the touch recipient, a student or a bystanding teacher treats an affectionate touch as problematic. By "affectionate touch", we refer to touch types that are typically associated with displays of affection and closeness, such as caressing, stroking, tapping, or hugging (cf. Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017). They are common and customary ways of constructing and maintaining close relationships between human beings throughout their lifespans, also in certain institutional settings (e.g., Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2018; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017; Mononen, 2019). Among affectionate touches, we include playful touches, such as mock-fights, which are salient methods of building rapport/we-ness especially in children's peer interactions (e.g., Ballard, Green, & Granger, 2003; Katila & Niemi, 2022). Within the established field of research into touch in educational settings, one of the themes that has received less attention is affectionate touch, and particularly when affectionate touch is treated as problematic in interaction. In this study, we examined how the participants locally negotiate the boundaries of acceptable touch and rights to touch others in the interactional activities that constitute the everyday social world of classrooms. While negotiation may also involve acceptance, reshaping, or avoidance, we focused on episodes in which affectionate student-to-student touch is verbally described as a violation of a particular moral order.

More specifically, we ask the following research questions:

- 1) How do participants employ verbal and bodily resources to display their orientation to an affectionate touch as problematic?
- 2) What moral rules and norms do participants explicitly invoke in displaying their orientation to an affectionate touch as problematic?

2. Ethnomethodological perspective on morality of touch in the classrooms

The appropriateness of touch is governed by a set of socioculturally anchored expectations regarding who touches whom and how and in what kind of situation touching was initiated (Cekaite, 2015; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018). While researchers from different fields largely acknowledge the importance of interpersonal touch for health and well-being across the ages (e.g., Field, 2014; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017), touch as physical contact can involve considerable physical force or violate a person's bodily integrity (e.g., Cekaite & Mondada, 2021; Meyer & Streeck, 2020; Saarinen et al., 2021). In educational settings, physical and sexual violence is strictly prohibited by legislation, for example in Finland, which is the context of our study. Notwithstanding, embodied acts between students occur frequently and they can be physically forceful as well as experienced as embarrassing or uncomfortable (e.g., Cekaite, 2013).

In addition, both meaning and affectional valence of touch behavior are sometimes difficult to determine, and actions can be designedly ambiguous, that is, open to multiple interpretations, so that the speaker (or actor) can deny unwanted interpretations (e.g., Speer, 2017). For instance, different forms of mock aggression, which are common ways of showing affection and building closeness especially among young male students, are constantly at risk to escalate into fight if the intersubjectively shared frame of playfulness collapses (Tainio, Karvonen, & Heinonen (Eds.), 2023). In a similar vein, butt slaps, pinning, or other types of touches directed to private areas of the body may convey a sexual tone that can be treated by the touch-addressee either as playful teasing or harassment. The interpretation depends on, for instance, the relationship between the participants, as well as the preceding and simultaneously occurring verbal and embodied conduct (cf. Sunnari, 2009).

Despite formal regulations, there are several more or less explicitly stated moral norms concerning appropriate touch conduct in school and classroom. From an ethnomethodological perspective, moral order manifests in courses of action that are perceived as normal and thus taken as unquestionable by members of society (Garfinkel, 1964). In schools and classrooms, moral norms become visible in ways in which the participants manage and negotiate boundaries of acceptable behavior locally, particularly in the interactional activities that constitute the social world of the classroom (Cekaite, 2013; Hazel & Mortensen, 2017; Margutti & Piirainen-Marsh, 2011; Niemi, 2016; see also Bergmann, 1998). Specifically, rules and norms concerning appropriate behavior are invoked in situations in which some action is treated as problematic (Garfinkel, 1964; Heritage, 1984; Tholander, 2002).

From an ethnomethodological perspective, an instance of touch conduct cannot be defined as self-evidently and inherently problematic as such. Instead, it constitutes a violation of a rule only when it is framed retrospectively as a transgression by an interactant (e.g., Sterponi, 2003). In classrooms, participants can calibrate the appropriateness of, for example, students' behaviors (including touch behavior) against different, sometimes conflicting, moral orders, of which some are specific to a particular pedagogical activity, while some apply more generally to students as institutional actors (Hazel & Mortensen, 2017; Jakonen, 2016; Niemi, 2016; Pietilä et al., 2021). Moreover, participants can orient to each other's behavior as (in) appropriate in terms of general civil morality pertaining to norms of appropriate behavior in general, such as not pushing and jumping in the queue, or in terms of

interactional morality, that is, moral obligations related to collaboration in joint action by producing situationally relevant next actions, such as taking the classmate's or teacher's hand if it is offered for hand-shaking (e.g., Peräkylä et al., 2022). For instance, an affectionate peer-to-peer touch that is appropriate in terms of both generic civil morality and interactional morality, may be treated as a transgression of classroom-specific moral order if it interferes with the ongoing pedagogical activity. For example, if a student puts their hand on other student's shoulder, the action can be treated as problematic and denied by the teacher if the teacher interprets it as an activity that hinders the students to stay involved in the pedagogic interaction (e.g., Tainio & Heinonen, 2021). Alternatively, some other tactile activities that could be considered as violations of generic civil morality, such as restraining a peer's access to a shared device by blocking their hand, can be treated in classroom interaction as non-problematic if they are understood to advance the accomplishment of the ongoing pedagogical activity (e.g., Jakonen & Niemi, 2020).

Earlier studies have shown that participants can display their orientation to their own or other's action as inappropriate through various discursive resources such as accusations (e.g., Cekaite, 2013; Niemi & Bateman, 2015), reproaches (e.g., Macbeth, 1990; Tainio, 2011), complaints (e.g., Cekaite, 2013), irony (e.g., Piirainen-Marsh, 2011) and accounts, apologies, excuses, and justifications (e.g., Hazel & Mortensen, 2017; Sterponi, 2003). Vocal and embodied resources, such as prosody, voice quality, gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and tactile actions can be also used to signal disapproval (Goodwin, 2006; Heinonen, Karvonen, & Tainio, 2020; Macbeth, 1990; Niemi & Katila, 2022). While management of student behavior is part of the teacher's institutional tasks, the students, too, can treat each other's (Jakonen & Niemi, 2020; Lehtimaja & Tainio, 2019; Niemi & Katila, 2022) or the teacher's (Lehtimaja, 2011) conduct as inappropriate.

Participants can treat someone's (touch) conduct as a transgression and thus display their orientation to that person as accountable for violating moral order without evaluating it explicitly. An explicit negative description, however, may serve as a resource for framing the behavior as problematic and thus also provides justification for questioning, criticizing, or rejecting it (e.g., Bergmann, 1998; Cekaite, 2013). All activities can be described in different ways; and the descriptions are always designed for specific and local interactional purposes (Cekaite, 2013; Drew, 1998). In providing an explicit negative characterization of touch behavior, the participant not only treats it as problematic but often also invokes the moral order that it has violated. Thus, these descriptions reveal the rules and norms that the participants consider as shared, expecting them to be complied with by the other party as well. In this study, we focused on these descriptions to recover (some) moral orders that govern the appropriateness and acceptability of (touch) conducts in the classroom.

3. Data and methods

The data for the study consisted of more than 100 h of video-recorded classroom interactions among students aged between 7 and 15 years in Finnish schools. The corpus included recordings from general education and preparatory classrooms in elementary school and general education classrooms in lower secondary school. All participants and students' guardians provided informed consent for the collection and use of their video data for research purposes. All names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

For our research project *Koskettava koulu* (Touch in school) we identified from our data all interactional sequences that involve touch. The episodes where the touches are treated as problematic are remarkably rare in our extensive video data corpus; most student-to-student and teacher-to-student touches were treated as non-problematic. For the purposes of this study, we handpicked altogether 20 cases in which one participant treated another participant's touch as problematic. In these episodes, the participants displayed their orientation to touch as problematic, first, by using embodied means such as pushing the touch initiator aside, grasping their hand, or even responding to unwelcome touch with a forceful act such as hitting or kicking. Second, they mobilized various vocal means independently or in temporal sequences synchronized with the embodied responses. The vocal means make use of, for instance, response cries (Goffman, 1978), directives (e.g., Goodwin, 1990), and informings or complaints directed at a teacher (e.g., Cekaite, 2013).

For the purposes of this research, we performed a detailed analysis of those episodes that were launched by a student-to-student touch that was, according to our interpretation, affectionate (altogether 7 episodes). In the remaining episodes, we interpreted the sequence-initiating touch as either accidental or controlling. In going through this small collection, we became particularly interested in the ways in which participants verbally described tactile act as inappropriate or problematic. While these cases were rare in our data, we consider them as worth examination because they make visible, and thus provide us with access to, (some of the) moral orders the participants orient to when appraising the appropriateness and acceptability of touch conducts in the classroom. The three examples we analyze in this article, illustrate particularly well the phenomena we are interested in.

We used multimodal conversation analysis (e.g., Mondada, 2016) as a tool for a detailed examination of how the participants negotiate the (in) appropriateness and (un) acceptability of tactile behaviors in moment-by-moment interactions. As a research method, multimodal conversation analysis aims at describing how participants use a range of interactional practices to accomplish different social actions and achieve and maintain shared understanding (e.g., Goodwin, 2000). In our analysis, we focused on verbal and embodied means participants used to display their orientation to a particular touch conduct as problematic. We paid specifically attention to explicit negative verbal descriptions that portrayed touch conduct as a violation of certain moral order.

To a significant extent, our examples consist of visual and embodied action in space. The positioning of participants in relation to each other, and the nature of the physical contact, becomes more accessible to the reader through a visualization. Therefore, we applied Laurier's (2014, 2019) graphic transcription for inscribing the visual and embodied action. We document the touch sequences in focus with a series of visual panels accompanied with captions and speech bubbles.

4. Analysis

Next, we will analyze in detail three episodes in which an affectionate touch by a student was explicitly rejected by the recipient, that is, another student or a bystanding teacher. These three examples represent cases in which a participant treats another participant's touch as a violation of different types of moral order (cf. Hazel & Mortensen, 2017). Although the forms of tactile acts in these episodes vary from gentle and soft touch to more forceful mock aggression, these touches are initiated as affectionate in that they represent forms of touch associated with a demonstration of affection (cf. Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017). As our analyses will show, however, the form of touch does not dictate its reception. Instead, the participants negotiate both its meaning and acceptability in situated ways.

In the first excerpt, a student touches her peer's foot with her foot. While the initial contact appears accidental and is treated as such by the touch recipient, the episode turns into playful teasing as the initial touch recipient repeats a similar touch several times. Finally, the touch recipient reports his peer's touch conduct to the teacher. He describes it as disturbing, thus appealing to students' moral obligations to maintain classroom order. In the second excerpt, the teacher intervenes in mock aggression by a student toward another student and names the student's tactile conduct as beating, thus invoking the moral norm that obliges to respect another person's physical integrity. In the third example, a student's physical integrity is again at stake. The touch recipient, a male student, calls a gentle touch by a female student as "fondling," thus treating it as a violation of a moral norm and invoking an interpretation of sexual harassment.

4.1. "Malla's feet disturb me"

Our first example illustrates a case where a student describes a peer's playful, teasing touch as disturbing and thus treats it as problematic. The touch is treated problematic in terms of the classroom norm that obliges students to maintain classroom order and respect each other's right to engage in pedagogical activities without disruptions. Moreover, the touch recipient addresses the teacher as the recipient of his report, thus invoking her authority and responsibility to manage an orderly classroom. The excerpt that follows is from a mathematics lesson in a 6th grade classroom (12 years old students). The students are expected to work on their textbook exercises, but many of them engage in conversation with their peers. The teacher appears to treat this as acceptable, or at least she does not intervene in the students' conduct. In the light of earlier studies, this is in no ways exceptional: it has been shown that students often ask for help from and advice their peers when working on individual tasks (e.g., Jakonen & Morton, 2015). Here, we focus on two students, Malla and Jani, who sit opposite to each other. While the distance between students is quite long for touching the other with hand, this seating arrangement affords both incidental and intended contact between outstretched legs under the table. During this episode, the teacher stands behind her desk and pages through the mathematics textbook.

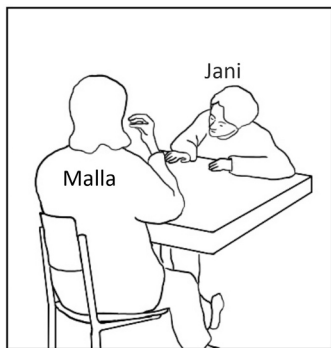


Fig. 1 Jani writes on his book, gaze directed at book.

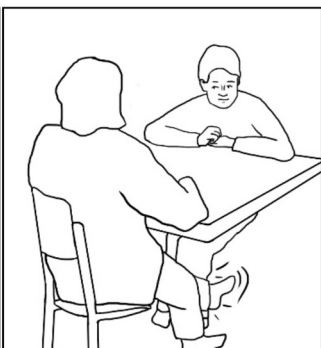


Fig. 2 Jani corrects his position and moves his legs so that his leg touches Malla's leg.

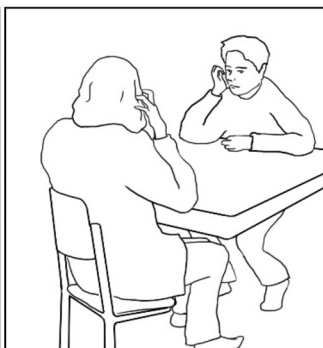


Fig. 3 Malla and Jani move their legs backward; Jani straightens his upper body.



Fig. 4 Malla stretches her leg, touches Jani's leg or knee. Jani smiles broadly, moves his chair backwards.

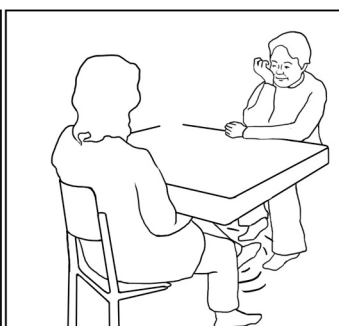


Fig. 5 Malla slides forward on her chair, reaches Jani's legs with her feet and makes a contact.

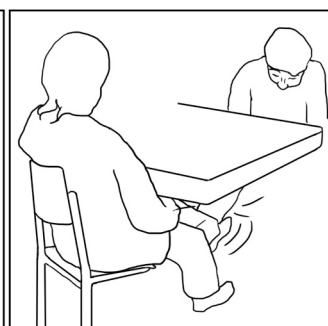


Fig. 6 Jani lowers his head, looks under the desk and moves his hands under the desk.

Malla touches Jani's leg or knee quickly and repeatedly with her foot.

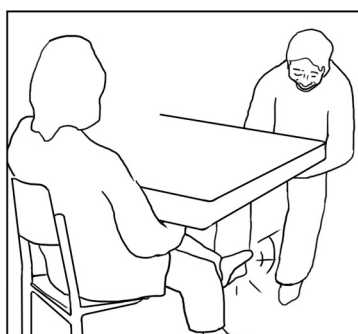


Fig. 7 Jani pushes his chair backwards. Malla stretches her leg toward Jani.

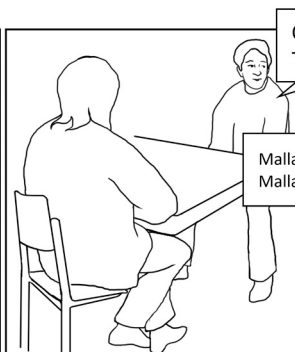


Fig. 8 Jani turns his head left, gazes at the teacher. Malla puts her feet on the floor.



Fig. 9 Malla moves her legs under her chair. Jani moves gaze back to M smiling, and moves his chair back to its original place.

Example 1: "Malla's feet disturb me"

In the beginning of the excerpt, Malla and Jani appear to be involved in working on their exercises; at least Jani leans his upper body forward, his gaze is directed at the book on the table in front of him, and he writes something on the page (Fig. 1). Then, he turns the page and, in correcting his posture, moves his legs under the table so that they touch Malla's feet (Fig. 2). After a short contact, both students move their legs backward (Fig. 3). Jani raises his gaze from the book and looks at Malla. He smiles and appears to say something, although it is impossible to hear his words from the tape because of the loud background noise in the classroom (Fig. 4). While Jani is talking, Malla stretches her left leg so that it briefly touches Jani's leg. Jani does not visibly react to the touch, appearing to treat it as incidental, and Malla repeats the action. This time, Jani responds with a broad smile and moves his chair backward, away from Malla, as if to avoid further contact. So far, incidental touching has progressed into intentional but playful touching. The playfulness is warranted by the exchanges of smiles.

Next, Malla slides forward on her chair and reaches for Jani's legs with her left foot (Fig. 5). Jani tries to avoid the touch by moving his leg to the side, but Malla moves her foot to the side as well, touching Jani's knee and then putting her leg on the floor. Jani lowers his head, presumably to see Malla's leg(s) under the desk, and simultaneously moves his hands under the table, as if to prepare to catch Malla's feet (Fig. 6). Malla moves her leg up and down twice, and it appears that she manages to touch Jani's knee, but she apparently does it so quickly that Jani is not able to get hold of her foot (Fig. 6). Instead, he moves his chair backward to escape further contact (Fig. 7). Malla stretches her leg once again, but this time she does not manage to reach Jani's leg. Simultaneously, Jani changes his footing (see Goffman, 1979) from playful to complaintive: he straightens his upper body, turns his head, directs his gaze at the teacher, and calls the teacher (Fig. 8).

Jani's verbal turn can be characterized as a complaint or tattling. First, he solicits the teacher's attention by addressing her as *ope* ('teacher') (cf. Lehtimaja, 2011), thus foregrounding her institutional role in the classroom. Next, he returns his smiling gaze to Malla, but verbally reports about Malla's behavior to the teacher (Fig. 9). By naming the activity as disturbing, he not only reports the event but also presents Malla's conduct as blameworthy in terms of its consequences. More specifically, the description displays Malla's activity as a violation of a norm that obliges students to respect each other's rights to engage in academic activities without being interrupted or otherwise disturbed by their peers. Officially, classroom management is the teacher's professional task and responsibility, but students can also take up positions prototypical of a teacher and reproduce similar practices or assist the teacher in managing other students' conduct (e.g., Tholander, 2002). In this example, Jani calls upon the teacher to draw her attention to Malla's conduct and, more specifically, the violation of the moral order of the classroom that she committed. However, his turn-at-talk is produced with an exaggerated complaining tone, and his facial expression communicates playfulness rather than, for instance, frustration or annoyance, which could be expected to follow from a (more serious) distraction. Moreover, he formulates the report in such a way that Malla's feet, rather than Malla, are guilty of transgression. Thus, Jani's tattling appears to be built, at least partly, as teasing, and thus directed also to Malla. However, notwithstanding its humorous tone, it also makes Malla's conduct known to the teacher, therefore exposing her to sanctions. Consequently, Malla stops poking as soon as Jani starts calling the teacher: she puts her feet on the floor and pulls them under her own chair (Figs. 8–9).

In the first example, we saw how an incidental touch of legs is used to start a sequence of reciprocal affectionate teasing touches. Finally, the accidental initiator changes his footing from a teasing stance back to a serious stance, with an orientation toward classroom order. During the whole sequence, the activities were produced in a playful manner, framing the episode as joyful teasing between peers. Moreover, the playfulness of activities seems to increase as the sequence progresses.

4.2. "Don't beat"

The second example illustrates a case where the teaching assistant (TA) intervenes in a student's mock aggression toward a peer during a classroom lesson. In this example, a student-to-student touch that appears as a relatively harmless bump to get the recipient's attention develops into mock aggression. This kind of tactile contact between students requires physical proximity between them. In this example, students sit around a large table, and this seating arrangement affords an opportunity to close bodily contact between students who are located next to each other, sitting side-by-side. In contrast to the previous example, tactile activity is not treated problematic by the touch addressee but by the TA to whom the touches are visibly available. He intervenes in the students' touch conduct by moving closer to the students, gazing at them, addressing the toucher by name, and producing a negative verbal directive in which he names the activity as beating. This description treats the touch conduct as violent, thus indicating that the student's action violates the moral norm of respecting the bodily integrity of another person.

The data come from a transition classroom for newly arrived students in Finland. The students are aged between 7 and 12 years, and most of them are of Russian and Estonian language backgrounds, whereas the language of schooling is Finnish. The regular teacher and TA are absent from work, and the students are extremely restless, so the substitute teacher and TA are constantly required to intervene in disturbing student behaviors, including physical touch between the students. In this excerpt, students are working on an individual task: coloring the flags of the Nordic countries. During the activity, the students are allowed and even expected to talk with their peers and teachers in Finnish, as learning Finnish is the main goal of preparatory education.

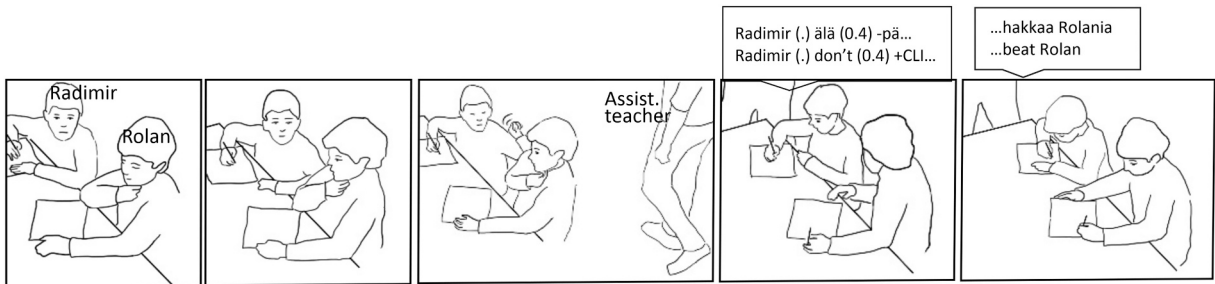


Fig. 1 Rad bumps Ro's elbow.

Fig. 2 Rad repeats bump.

Fig. 3 Rad repeats hits. Rolan whines in gibberish and wriggles. Ass. teacher appears from right.

Fig. 4 Rad turns back to coloring. Rol gazes at teacher.

Fig. 5 Rad on taks Rol turns on task.

Example 2: "Don't beat"

1 Rolan?: (sit se teki näin) % (0.4) @väävauvauvau@ (0.4) @miiat&*soli@
 (and then it did like this) % (0.4) @Wa:, wa-ow-wa-ow@ (0.4) @miiat&*soli@
 Rolan %raises his head, gaze at Eetu
 Radimir &raises his head, gaze at Eetu &#gaze at Rolan
 Radimir * #bumps Rolan twice
 #Fig.1 #Fig. 2

2 Rolan: % §((whines in gibberish, wriggles))
 Radimir %hits Rolan's upper arm five times with his left fist
 assist. teacher §walks behind Radimir and Rolan, stops on Radimir's right side (Fig. 3)

3 Assist. teacher: Ra%di#&mir (.) älä (0.4) -pä +#hakkaa Rolania
 Ra%di#&mir (.) don't (0.4) CLI +#beat Rolan
 Radimir % turns his upper body, sets his left hand on table, gazes on his paper and continues coloring
 Rolan &gaze at assist. teacher +gaze at paper, continues coloring
 #Fig. 4 #Fig 5

Example 2: "Don't beat" (transcript)

Before the excerpt, Rolan looks at his paper and colors the flag. Simultaneously, one student (presumably Rolan, but we cannot be sure) says something; the turn-of-talk ends with a series of animated sounds that appear to mimic the siren of an emergency vehicle. Just before these sounds, Rolan raises his head and directs his gaze at Eetu, who sits obliquely front left of him (l. 1). Radimir, who sits on Rolan's right side, stops coloring, raises his head, and looks at Eetu's direction. Then Radimir turns his head, gazes at Rolan (Fig. 1), and simultaneously bumps Rolan's upper arm with his elbow twice (Fig. 2). The bumps resemble taps recurrently used as an attention-getting touch (see [Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007](#); [Routarinne et al., 2020](#)). Instead of giving a preferred response, that is, displaying his availability, Rolan finds these bumps an opportunity to express being affected and starts to whine in gibberish. As a response, Radimir reshapes his tactile acts: he starts to hit Rolan's upper arm with his left fist. Rolan adjusts his body to the beats and twists it as if being hit forcefully. He also raises amplitude in his playful moaning and adjusts it rhythmically to Radimir's hits. The sounds resemble response cries to a continuing pain (cf. [Goffman, 1978](#)) (l. 2/ Fig. 3).

Despite the seemingly intense hits, the participants orient to Radimir's tactile conduct as mock aggression, that is, embodied actions that appear aggressive but are neither designed nor oriented to be serious physical threats ([Saleh, 2020](#)). This kind of mock aggression is a common way of building and maintaining close relationships among children and youth, especially boys; therefore, even strong measures such as hits or holds can be understood as affectionate touches if the participants display orientation to them as such. In this example, through exaggeration, the participants frame the activity as playful and thus non-serious: Radimir's and especially Rolan's body movements are remarkably wide, and their trajectories are carefully stylized in ways that are shown to be characteristic to playful teasing (e.g., [Katila & Niemi, 2022](#)). Dramatic impression is polished by Rolan's performative response cries (cf. [Goffman, 1978](#); [Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018, 75–76](#)). The interpretation of the episode as non-serious is further supported by the fact that Rolan does not make any attempts to avoid or stop blows or report Radimir's action to the teacher, who sits next to him. In fact, Rolan appears to smile slightly, and his position resembles that of embodied response to a playful tickle. Moreover, the substitute teacher who sits on Rolan's left side (not visible in the picture), does not intervene into the episode in any way, and thus displays his orientation to this incident as non-serious.

Despite the students' framing of the episode as playful, the TA intervenes in Rolan's behavior. Already in the beginning of the episode, the TA, who has stood on Eetu's left side (not visible in the picture), turns his gaze to Radimir's and Rolan's direction, then

walks around the table, and passes behind the boys (l. 2/Fig. 3). He stops on Radimir's right side, addresses him by name, and produces a negative directive, “*Radimir älä (0.4)pä hakkaa Rolania*” (‘Radimir, don't (0.4) CLI beat Rolan’) (l. 3/Fig. 4). After hearing the first syllable of his name, Radimir stops the movement of his hand and sets his hand on the table (Fig. 4). Simultaneously, he turns his upper body forward toward his desk, directs his gaze at the paper in front of him, and continues coloring with the pen he has held in his right hand during the whole episode. In doing so, he orients to the TA's address as a reprimand, not as a request to direct his gaze to him or to give a verbal response, these two being among the recurrent responses in the classroom when being addressed by the teacher. In turn, Rolan stops both whining and wriggling.

The directive produced by the TA uses a negative format typical to forbidding. After the negative verbal imperative *älä*, equivalent to “do not” the TA self-interrupts and then, after a short pause, continues with a clitic particle *-pä*. This clitic particle turns an imperative clause into a suggestion that is unproblematic and easy to comply with. Furthermore, it is typically used in asymmetrical interaction by the more powerful party. (About the functions of clitic particle *pä*, see ISK § 835). In this example, the suffix is produced after a pause as an increment. The increment can be explained by the fact that Radimir has already given up “beating” immediately after being addressed by the teaching assistant. In fact, both Radimir and Rolan had already displayed an embodied orientation to the pedagogical task before the TA completed the directive (Fig. 5). This indicates that both students are aware that their behavior represents a transgression of classroom norms without being told so by the teacher.

In his directive, the TA names Radimir's tactile activity as beating, which refers to repeated and violent striking aimed at hurting or injuring the subject. This description invokes a moral rule that forbids violating another person's bodily integrity. In the light of what is shown in the video, the description is rather exaggerated. The TA's turn is formatted as laconic and downplayed, and it thus appears to display an orientation to hits more as playful than serious cases of school violence: had he interpreted the touch conduct as serious violence, he would have probably reacted to it more quickly and with more powerful means. According to our interpretation, the TA uses this strong formulation to invoke an unquestionable moral norm instead of appealing for an orderly classroom and a pedagogically appropriate behavior, presumably because the students have during the whole lesson displayed considerable indifference toward classroom order. This interpretation is further supported by the students' responses: they both react to the TA's intervention by orienting themselves to the pedagogical activity they are expected to engage with.

While bodily contact between students does not always interfere with the ongoing pedagogical activity, in this example, and in the previous one, it interfered with the task students were expected to carry out and thus constituted a transgression of moral order of classroom, however playfully the tactile acts were conducted.

4.3. “Don't fondle”

Our last example illustrates a case where a male student rejects his female peer's gentle touch using both embodied and verbal means. Rejection of touch consists of embodied (pulling out and pushing off, facial expression of dislike, irritated tone of voice, or directing gaze away) and verbal (negative directive) actions. As in the previous examples, different modalities are temporally organized in such a way that the less intensive forms of rejection (pulling out) precede the more intensive ones (pushing or a verbal directive). Moreover, the touch recipient describes the tactile activity as fondling, thus referring to sexual harassment and invoking the moral norm of respecting other's bodily integrity.

In this example, the participants are 15-year-old secondary school students working on a grammar task. A group of four students are placed in a separate room, and their activities are recorded for research purposes. During the group work, two female students, Iida and Emilia, focus on the task. The other two students, Antti and Kirsi, are more oriented to extracurricular activities that could sometimes be interpreted as flirting with each other, that is, communicating romantic interest: they orient bodily to each other and away from other members of the group, synchronize their non-verbal behavior with each other, play together with objects such as a pen, and engage in different forms of self-touching (e.g. stroking hair and self-grooming). In addition, they occasionally touch each other, apparently by accident or under the pretext of some activity. This kind of designed ambiguousness is characteristic to flirting (e.g. Speer, 2017). While Kirsi is more active in initiating both verbal and embodied interactions between the two, Antti allows tactile contacts to occur and continue, thus confirming the existence of an intimate relationship between them. In the beginning of this excerpt, all four students sit side by side in a row. Antti and Kirsi sit very close to each other, with their arms almost touching each other, while the distance between Kirsi and Iida who sits next to her on the other side, as well as the distance between Iida and Emilia is considerably longer. This formation illustrates that while the seating arrangements afford opportunities to bodily contact, the students can regulate their physical distance to the person next to them and thus seek to advance or avoid touching or being touched.

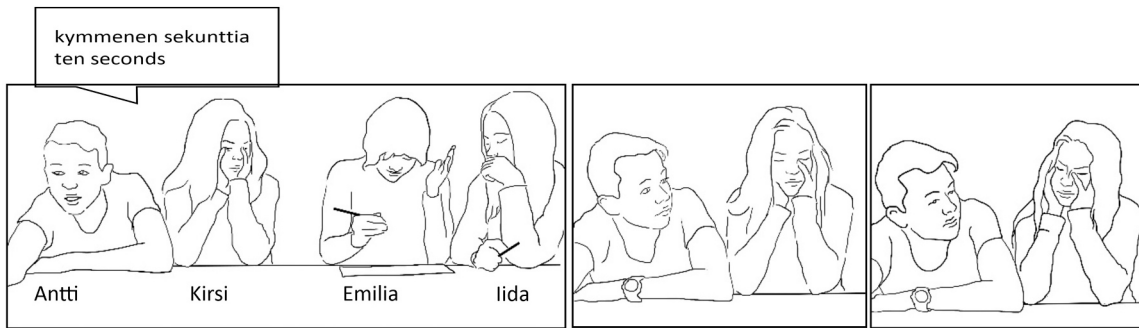


Fig. 1 Kirsi keeps track on time for task completion. Antti directs attention to away from task. Emilia and Iida work on task.



Fig. 2 Antti turns his head, gaze to Kirsi's direction. Kirsi closes her eyes.

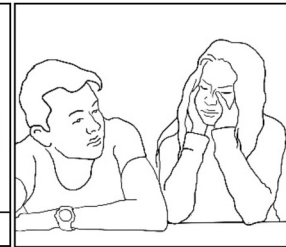


Fig. 3 Kirsi turns head to Antti's direction.

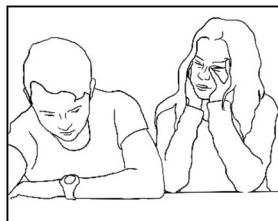


Fig. 4 Antti looks down at his watch. Kirsi observes Antti.

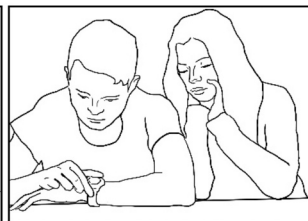


Fig. 5 Kirsi tilts her head, leans toward Antti. Antti engages with his watch.

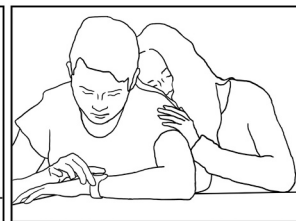


Fig. 6 Kirsi leans her head on Antti's shoulder and places her l. h. on his upper arm.



Fig. 7 Kirsi rests on Antti's arm. Antti starts to pull out.



Fig. 8 Kirsi keeps leaning on A. Antti continues pulling out.



Fig. 9 Antti swings his body, making a grimace.



Fig. 10 Antti frowns and pushes Kirsi off.



Fig. 11 Kirsi turns her head to Antti, gazes at him and smiles. Antti is adjusting his watch.

Example 3: "Don't fondle"

In the beginning of this excerpt, Iida and Emilia work on the task. Kirsi loosely monitors them and comments on the time remaining (Fig. 1). Her facial expression communicates fatigue and being bored; she leans her chin on her hands, with her eyes almost closed (cf. Goodwin, Cekaite, & Goodwin, 2012). Antti, in turn, appears disengaged from the task interaction. He fiddles with his pen and gazes away from the other students and the task paper in front of them on the table (Fig. 1). Following Kirsi's turn-of-talk, Antti turns his head to the left and gazes at her direction (Fig. 2). A bit later, before completing her turn, Kirsi closes her eyes (Fig. 2), and turns her head to the right, that is, to Antti's direction (Fig. 3). Antti glances forward, toward Emilia and Iida (Figs. 2 and 3), and the researcher (not shown in the images), who is behind the camera in front of the students, and then looks down on his wristwatch. Simultaneously, he turns his left arm to see the clock plate better (Fig. 4). Kirsi holds her orientation to Antti and observes him as he brings his right hand close to his wrist, grasping the clock plate. Then, she closes her eyes again and starts to lean her upper body slowly toward Antti who is engaged with his watch (Fig. 5). When her head reaches Antti's shoulder, she gently places her left hand on Antti's upper arm (Fig. 6). Throughout the movement, she keeps her eyes shut, and her facial expression communicates exhaustion.

While Kirsi's leaning toward Antti's shoulder is designed as a publicly observable performance of falling asleep because of exhaustion and boredom caused by the grammar task (or, more widely, by the school or one's existence as a whole), it also creates an impression of a tender, intimate touch. This impression of intimacy is a result of its features, especially the fact that large areas of the body, including the head and face, are used in contact. Moreover, experimental studies have indicated that light and slow strokes, like

the one Kirsi produced with her left hand on Antti's arm, and the way in which she lays her head on Antti's shoulder, are typically associated with a close and intimate relationship between participants (e.g., [Suvilehto, 2018](#)). Therefore, it could be characterized as designedly ambiguous action (e.g., [Speer, 2017](#)). According to [Speer \(2017\)](#) by designing the flirting actions in such ways that they are open to multiple interpretations the actors can secure their possibility to deny unwanted interpretations and thus protect their face in the case of rejection.

Meanwhile Antti seems to be deeply engaged in looking at his wristwatch and, at first, appears not to react at all the bodily contact initiated by Kirsi (Figs. 5 and 6). This indifference can be seen as a disaffiliative response: it does not actively accept the invitation to close contact, although it lets the touch happen (cf. [Cekaite & Mondada, 2021](#)). However, Kirsi does not appear to interpret Antti's passivity as a sign of rejection; instead of withdrawing, she maintains the contact and appears to put even more weight on her leaning. When Kirsi places more weight on her leaning, Antti starts to pull out to the right as if to withdraw from the bodily contact and thus to show that he treats the touch as unwelcome (Fig. 7). However, instead of moving back, Kirsi maintains the bodily contact by leaning further to the right, adapting to Antti's movement (Fig. 8). As a response to the prolonged contact, Antti upgrades the intensity of his resistance. He straightens his upper body and pushes Kirsi away. Simultaneously, he verbalizes a negative directive *älä hiplaa* (don't fondle). (Fig. 8.) Then, he swings his upper body so that Kirsi must move, thus breaking the bodily contact between them (Figs. 9 and 10). Despite the ostensible harshness of the rejection, Kirsi does not appear to treat it as a serious offense; she snorts and smiles, as if treating Antti's reaction as playful (Figs. 10 and 11).

During the whole trajectory, Antti also displays other rejection cues; his facial expression expresses dislike with pressed and downward curved lips (Figs. 7–9), and he holds his gaze on the table, avoiding eye contact with Kirsi. In his negative directive, Antti describes Kirsi's tactile behavior as *hiplaaminen* ('fondling, groping'). The verb *hiplata*, which we have translated as "to fondle", refers to recurring, soft, and light physical touches, but in certain contexts, it can also carry a sexual connotation. When used in this context, that is, as part of a negative directive, it invokes an impression of sexual harassment and, consequently, a moral norm that demands respect for a person's bodily integrity.

While tactile contact is private in the sense that the sensorial experience of touching and being touched is only available to the toucher and the touched, it is visibly available to co-participants who may monitor the ongoing touch. According to [Goffman \(1971, 194\)](#), a tactile behavior can function as an embodied, public "tie sign," that is, an expression that manifests the nature of a relationship between the participants. In this excerpt, Kirsi's touch behavior can be understood to both construct or maintain and manifest a close and intimate relationship between herself and Antti. Correspondingly, the vigorous rejection of touch by Antti not only publicly displays his stance toward the touch as unwanted but may also be interpreted to dispute the intimate relationship between the two. While Kirsi sits next to Antti and leans her head on his shoulder, she is not able to see his face. Antti is naturally aware of this fact; presumably his facial expression - the frowning eyebrows and making a grimace - that displays his orientation to the touch as unwelcome is presented more to other students than to Kirsi. Moreover, Antti glances repeatedly at the camera, thus presumably treating it as an audience of his performance.

The third example shows two different alignments toward close body contact. One participant, Kirsi, displays boredom with schoolwork and affection to a peer. The other student, Antti, is also not oriented toward the task but appears to be aware of the camera. Considering that her touch is mainly leaning, his verbal formulation of this as fondling is exaggerated. In this example, as in the previous ones, tension is present between the touch and its linguistic formulation.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In classrooms, the meaning and appropriateness of tactile acts are negotiated locally, and also touches that are affectionate with respect to their form can be treated as violations of a particular moral order by the participants. In this article, we analyzed three episodes in which an affectionate touch between students was described as a violation of moral order by the touch recipient or a bystander teacher. In all three examples, touches emerged between students who were located physically close to each other. Socio-material organization of furniture and bodies thus afforded tactile acts between students in all these examples.

In all three episodes, the rejection of touch was multimodal, using both vocal and embodied resources and, in addition, the touch conduct was described verbally as a violation of a moral order. While different modalities intertwined, the rejection was built incrementally so that less intensive and intrusive means such as gaze and withdrawal preceded more intensive and intrusive ones such as talk or bodily actions including pushing the toucher away or attempting to impede physical contact. In these ways, the touch recipient or a bystander teacher retrospectively displayed their orientation to the touch behavior as problematic and prospectively set up the relevance for remedial moves, that is, stopping the ongoing tactile activity (cf. [Schegloff, 2007](#), 217–219; [Sterponi, 2003](#)). In all examples, the rejection turned out effective: the touch initiator withdrew from the bodily contact.

In our examples, no attempts were made by the touch initiator to deny or dispute the description, and thus interpretation, of the touch provided by the touch recipient or a bystander participant, even though for us as researchers, these descriptions appeared exaggerated, considering what we observed on tape. However, the video does not provide access to individual sensory experiences, as they are felt by the participants, let alone to subjective experience based on, for instance, earlier experiences on touching and being touched (e.g., [Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019](#)). The fact that the descriptions provided by the touch recipients were not resisted or challenged may indicate the right of the touch recipients to their own experiences. [Goodwin \(2006, 43–44\)](#) argued that transgressions do not have to be articulated explicitly if the target is presumed to know that violation has occurred and is accountable in a very strong way for its occurrence. Consequently, we conclude that descriptions are needed to show why a particular touch is problematic in those situations in which their problematic nature is not obvious.

From an ethnomethodological perspective, tactile conduct constitutes a rule violation only when it is treated as such by an

interactant. In the light of our entire data, it is obvious that similar tactile acts can be treated as non-problematic or problematic, depending on, for instance, who touches whom and in what kind of situation. Elsewhere, we have reported cases where the participants orient to tactile means, for instance, for guiding students' attention to the pedagogical tasks and activities (e.g. [Heinonen, Karvonen & Tainio, 2020](#); [Routarinne et al., 2020](#); [Routarinne, Tainio, & Burdelski \(Eds.\), 2020](#)), or showing affection and building close relationship between the participants ([Heinonen & Tainio, 2022](#)). In this article, we paid particular attention to episodes in which the touch was rejected, and, in addition, the rejection included a verbal description that portrayed the touch as a violation, thus assigning a moral meaning to the tactile act. Consequently, the description of the tactile act invoked the moral order that was breached, thereby justifying the treatment of the touch as problematic. In these examples, the participants referred either to universal moral order that demands respect for a person's bodily integrity or to a more local, institutional one that demands students to maintain an orderly classroom by refraining from disturbing the other's engagement in pedagogical activities.

In example 1, the institutional moral order of maintaining an orderly classroom and not disturbing other student's engagement in studying was foregrounded and, furthermore, confirmed by inviting the teacher to interfere in the situation. The touch episode between two students opened with an incidental contact and transformed into playful teasing as the recipient of the initial tactile act took the opportunity to make use of a touch type for bantering. Finally, the touch recipient reported the event to teacher as "disturbing". This example also illustrates ambiguousness of tactile conducts: both the meaning and the affective valence of a touch can be interpreted in various ways, ranging from incidental contact to affectionate teasing or malicious disturbance. Correspondingly, the recipient can invoke different moral rules and norms to display their orientation to the touch as (non-) problematic. Moreover, the example shows how the participants can shift between, and play with, different interpretational frames during the same episode.

In example 2, the TA named the student's tactile conduct as 'beating', thus invoking a moral norm that demands respect for the person's bodily integrity. The laconic and downplayed turn design, as well as accompanying embodied conduct, however, indicated that, rather than serious violence that threatens the student's personal integrity, he oriented to the episode as violation of classroom order. A similar orientation is displayed by the participants of the touch episode: they return to their pedagogical activities as a response to TA's request. The interpretation of the incident as non-serious is further strengthened by the lack of intervention by the teacher sitting next to Rolan. The example illustrates that the participants do not apply moral rules and norms in predetermined ways; instead, rules and norms appear as flexible resources that the participants can use creatively in different situations and for different purposes; they can, for instance, appeal for unquestionable moral rules to achieve local, institutional goals such as keeping and restoring classroom order.

In example 3, orientation to classroom order was treated as less important while the verbal formulation of rejection foregrounded the demand for a person's bodily integrity. However, the performative non-task activities by the two students made evident for other participants that these two students intentionally violated the classroom norm of participation and joint engagement in pedagogical interaction in this group work situation. In this example, the tactile contact takes place between two students who have, during the same lesson, been continuously involved in interactions that could be characterized as flirting. The tactile act that initiates the sequence analyzed in this article appears as designedly ambiguous: on the one hand, it is a performance of extreme boredom and fatigue, but on the other hand, it features a touch type that is typically associated with a close and intimate relationship between participants. The touch recipient picks the latter meaning, treating the touch conduct as problematic due to its excessive intimacy; he describes the touch as "fondling", thus referring to sexual harassment and invoking a rule of respecting the other's personal integrity. Therefore, it does not only treat a single touch as problematic, but also questions the existence of intimate relationship that justifies such close physical contact. According to our interpretation, the touch-recipient directs his negative directive also to other students as well as the researcher behind the camera. Due to its designedly ambiguous form, however, the interpretation of touch by the recipient can always be disputed, and the availability of this way out may explain why the touch-initiator appears to take rejection relatively lightly.

Altogether, the three examples analyzed in this article illustrate that instead of realizing or applying pre-existing rules and norms in pre-determined ways, the participants make sense of meaning and appropriateness of each other's touch behaviors in situated ways. Our analysis shows that both actions accomplished through tactile acts and their valence can be negotiated throughout the sequence, and the participants were able to shift flexibly between different interpretational frames. Thus, our study reinforces the fundamental claim of ethnomethodologists that the actors are not 'judgemental dopes' who reproduce the existing social and cultural norms (e.g., [Garfinkel, 1964](#)); rather, they draw on different moral norms creatively and flexibly to accomplish their goals.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Transcription key

.	falling intonation
,	level or slightly rising intonation
:	sound stretch
@	animated voice
(.)	pause, less than 0.3 s
(0.5)	length of pause
[]	overlap

- ((laughs)) transcriber's descriptions or comments, contextual information
 (-) indecipherable
 &, %, *, + the exact starting points of gestures and embodied actions are indicated with different symbols, showing their position within a turn at talk
 # Fig the exact point where screen shot (Figures) has been taken is indicated with a specific sign (#) showing its position within a turn at talk

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