



Touch and Closeness in Naturally Organized Activities

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Countless aspects of touch and closeness have been questioned in an unprecedented way during the recent Covid epidemic. Social practices as banal as greetings were both reflexively and practically challenged and sometimes deeply altered, resulting in painful experiences of tactile deprivation and social isolation for many people. This forced collective experiment produced an unusual awareness of the embodied nature of our relation to the social and material world. As Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1979]) insisted, the body should neither be conceived as being *in* the world nor as being the world itself; the body is *of* the world, both part of it and distinct from it. And much of this complex relationship can be enlightened by a better understanding of touch and closeness. The purpose of this special issue is to bring forward empirical studies of a variety of naturally organized activities where touch and closeness play a crucial role, in order to explore their practical and experiential significance.

Touching has been often extended to a range of phenomena Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1979]) referred to as *compresence* and *intercorporeality*, the *primordially embodied practices and experiences by which coordination and mutual adjustment to a shared world, including other human bodies, are achieved* (Meyer et al., 2017). For instance, Cekaite (2018), studying hugs or soothing embraces between young children and their parents, examined how their entire bodies are progressively gathered, building a hug together. Here again, such studies have moved the frontier of multimodal video analysis to empirical research which shed light on the way in which tactile contact

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makes possible and determines our relation to others and to the world we inhabit with them. The purpose of this special issue is to address such questions through detailed empirical studies of situated practices, in order to describe and understand how such classical post-phenomenological areas are brought into play and practically dealt with in various courses of action.

Recent studies of touch in interaction (Cekaite & Mondada, 2020), both in everyday family settings (Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018) and professional/institutional contexts (Burdelski et al., 2020; Nishizaka, 2007; Streeck, 2017) have convincingly and precisely investigated how touch, which had been explored in phenomenology from a philosophical perspective, features into the organization of social activities. The studies collected in this special issue address practices of touch and closeness in settings as diverse as classrooms (Heinoenen and Tainio), orientation and mobility training for persons with visual impairment (PVI) (Yasusuke et al.; Relieu), physiotherapy (Keel), equine therapy (Mondémé), martial arts (Lefebvre), and improvised dance (Bovet).

The interest in gathering these studies lies as much in the diversity of practices as in the thematic convergences that could be observed between them. The purpose of this introduction is to highlight these themes by specifying how the various papers contribute to them.

Where is Touch – When is Touch?

While “touch” could be strictly reserved for actual contact between two bodies, such a restriction would run the risk of losing the richness of the term’s polysemy¹. Reiki massage, for instance, seems to be as efficient, if not more, during non-contact than contact phases (Paterson, 2007: ch. 8), and such crucial non-contact phases of the massage could hardly not concern touch. This conceptual caution is not restricted to contact versus non-contact: the various papers of this special issue invite us to consider the richness, subtlety and diversity of practices of touch and closeness. An obviously related question concerns the temporal organization of touch and how it affects closeness. So far the investigation of touch-in-interaction has focused on relatively brief instances of contact. Yet, can touch be reduced to the contact moment? Does it really start when contact is made and stop when it ceases? Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1979]) eloquently called for considering vision as a form of touch. Rather than settling this issue theoretically, we suggest to observe how touch is temporally structured in naturally organized activities: what happens before, during and after contact? Is touch prepared, announced, accompanied, accounted for, through verbal or other bodily means?

In their study of classroom settings, Heinoenen and Tainio observe practices of *sustained leaning* (as forms of tactile connections between two students) that stand out for their unusual duration. These durable contacts can configure and redefine

¹ Hence, in this presentation, our usage of the contrast *contact vs. touch*, but note that contact does not necessarily imply skin-to-skin, as in most hugs and shoulder slaps, unless the clothing is considered an extension of the skin.

quite complex relations inside the classroom. Looking at each other during sustained leaning might furthermore underline the established closeness, and at the same time, emphasize its boundaries against other co-present students. Relieu shows that before tactile sequences of orientation and mobility training to PVI in the streets can take place, the bodies of the instructor and the trainee have to be specifically arranged and co-oriented. This is not only a practical ergonomic condition for hand contact but also necessary for the intelligibility of the orientation of the map that is tactily produced. Thus, before the map drawing, the instructor and the PVI achieve the embodied closeness required for the map drawing to occur. Understanding “touch” requires also a precise and detailed analysis of the temporal organization of tactility. Relieu focuses on the sliding trajectories of the drawing finger on the hand palm, their projectabilities, and their relation to the ongoing talk. Once a street has been drawn, felt and named into the hand palm, the drawn street persists, at least for a while, after the contact between the drawing finger and the touched hand palm has ceased. Yasusuke et al. contrastively show that the orientation and mobility instructor tends to establish contact through the cane without preparation nor announcement, in order to “guide” the PVI trainee’s “perception” (Nishizaka, 2020) and have her tactily identify ground elements that are crucial landmarks in urban paths. The orientation and mobility instructor thus strongly inflects his visibly impaired student’s movements by literally taking the hand through her cane but never touching her hand or arm. Some phases of improvised dance, as analyzed in Bovet’s paper, can also display a narrow entanglement between the dancers in motion, while at the same time avoiding contact. Dancers establish F-formations (Kendon, 1977, 1978), gazing at each other as one way to achieve closeness-at-a-distance from the outset of their performance. Throughout the course of their dance, they re-mobilize distinct F-formations not only to display to the audience that they form a duet but also to build up a narrative structure that constitutes its climax in moments of contact. In his comparative study of Aikido and American Kenpo, Lefebvre identifies a common syntax of martial intercorporeality, which is based on the simultaneity of whole-body movements that articulate the attack-before-contact with the counter-attack-before-contact, while the oponents get closer to each other, and the attack-in-contact with the counter-attack-in-contact during opponents’ body contact. In contrast to studies that have investigated how interactants’ embodied conduct is integrated into the syntactic structuring of turns-at-talk and/or contributes to its organization, he thus approaches whole-body movements as syntactic units “in their own right”. In their study of physiotherapeutic practice, Keel and Caviglia reveal that the physiotherapist alternates between nearly touch, as an accompaniment of the patient’s instructed moves, and corrective touch. The occurrence of corrective touch is prepared and preconfigured through the deployment of “professional vision” (Goodwin, 1994) and nearly touch. It is their reflexive articulation that allows the physiotherapist to identify something in the patient’s instructed exercise movements that requires her corrective intervention. In her study of equine therapy, Mondémé shows how therapists attempt to raise the tactile awareness of their clients, by having them distinguish various forms of contact with the horse, such as grooming or petting, on the head or on the belly, and their consequences on the relation between caring client and cared for animal.

These examples testify to the underestimated variety of touch practices, which tend to be reduced to the frank movements of bare and active hands. The papers of this special issue show the emic relevance of this diversity of touch, and its consequentiality on courses of intercorporeal action. As for the nature and location of touch, they also show that the temporal organization of touch must be closely observed, which is not possible within a dualistic approach that makes a clear distinction between moments of touch and non-touch.

What to Touch? Touch as Hand-based Actions and Explorations

Our moving hands form a natural interface with the world. Through contact, pressure, brushes, etc., our hands fingers, and other limbs, intervene in the very organization of various activities and interactions. This natural ability can in turn be specialized and trained to become a professional and/or expert touch (Merlino, 2020). Many institutional settings are constituted as such by their expert tactile and haptic practices. Dancers learn where and how to handle their partner, and what choreographic affordances are provided by such handling. Bovet shows that in improvised dance, the actual contact and/or haptic grasp of the partner's body specifies possibilities for the next joint moves. Relieu describes how during orientation and mobility courses, occasioned maps (Garfinkel, 2002; Psathas, 1979, 1992) are interactionally traced by the instructor's hand to be felt and noticed in the student's palm in order to represent the form of an urban crossing for all practical purposes. Lines and stops marked on the palm are embedded into the accompanying talk, which reflexively contributes to their mutual intelligibility. However, as remarked by Gibson (1966), focusing on the actions of the hand might distract us and make us forget that the hand itself has also sensing capacity, or put differently: "The perceptual capacity of the hand goes unrecognized because we usually attend to its motor capacity, and also because the visual dominates the haptic in awareness" (Gibson, 1966: 123 f.). Within the same setting, but in the course of an exercise that consists of using a "two-point-touch long cane technique" for identifying obstacles in the streets, Yasusuke et al. show that the instructor uses his hands to take control of the student's cane only in order that she feels in her own hand, that is, as Gibson (1966: 100) puts it, at the end of the cane, what is important to identify in a certain portion of the street. As stressed by Keel and Caviglia, physiotherapists have at their disposal a variety of tactile and haptic hand and finger gestures that allow them to intervene in the patient's body, or on the contrary to suggest the direction of a movement to be exercised. Whereby not only the level of pressure but each finger positioning and moving in relation to the patient's body can be of relevance for accomplishing one action, e.g., correcting instructed action, rather than another, e.g., feeling the patient's body for assessing the patient's instructed action, respectively its resonance on another body part. Equine therapy, as studied in Mondémé's paper, precisely seeks to work on clients' difficulties or inability to relate to others by experimenting with tactile interactions with animals. The therapeutic assumption is that through such experiments the clients learn the effects of tactile manipulation on the horse's perceivable behavior, and how the very relation to the horse can be worked through this, restoring some parts of a trouble-

some intercorporeality. When the horse displays unease, by pulling, for example, his ear back or moving his head abruptly, the therapist might invite the client to take such reactions into account as displays of distress and advise the client to scratch specific body parts of the horse or to use a softer brush, until the latter displays comfort. In his study of Aikido and American Kenpo, Lefebvre insists on “whole-body movements,” to stress that, even when the attack or counter-attack is a hand strike, it involves the whole body. Not only is the performance of the attack or counter-attack relying on the whole body but it is also occasioned by the specific display of the other’s body and of the opportunities it affords, in particular foot and leg movements which indicate specific balances.

Touch with Whom? Touch as a Resource for Managing Closeness (Being-together in the World)

Mobility is a key feature of the social production of spatiality, but it is also a powerful leverage for achieving and managing closeness to others through our capacity to feel, via our skin and flesh, contact or pressure with persons, animals, or objects. Because humans are animated and moving creatures (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011), tactility has to be resituated in the whole dynamics of bodily activities and sensitivities, and not reduced to contact. Besides, this is not only our hand that engenders contact, but our entire articulated body, able to establish a huge variety of tactile moves with others and the world. “There is a tendency in literature to emphasize instances of active touch that are in the foreground of our experience. However, touch is much more pervasive than this, and touches that fall into the experiential background do not distinguish boundaries so cleanly” (Ratcliffe, 2008: 92, discussed in Katila, 2018: 17). Contact occurs during many socially organized activities. For example, people walking at close range together as a dyad of two acquainted persons have frequent contact with each other. Depending on other contextual features, a contact is one among many background features of this activity of walking together (such as pace, trajectory, etc.). Contact can also be an explicit attempt to attract the attention of the recipient to some other, mutually available phenomenon: the recognition of someone else who is coming nearby, a funny event, etc. Therefore, the local sense of a contact has to be found from a close examination of the configuration of constitutive details of some activity. The physical contact with others, including its projection, preparation and/or avoidance, becomes a resource in various settings but also constitutes the very driving force of gestural, embodied trajectories.

Several papers of this special issue address the connections between various forms of tactility, and how they redefine social relationships. Inspired by the notion of intercorporeality as a fundamental aspect of social interaction (see, for example, Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018; Katila, 2018; Meyer et al., 2017). Heinonen & Tainio focus on intimate leaning touch activities between peers in classroom interaction. They show that this intercorporeality contributes to the formation of embodied participation frameworks which sustain the making of “we-ness,” that they define as a “close amicable bonding,” while keeping other students at a social as well as physical distance. In the same vein, Relieu highlights the formation of a specific mutual, embodied co-

arrangements for initiating hand-drawing during an orientation and mobility course with a visually-impaired student. In order to be ready to draw a map on the hand, the co-participant assemble their bodies in a new way, which makes available a surface to be drawn on, and a tool to draw. Such bodily co-arrangements anchor new participation frameworks in the interaction and sustain the production of a practical intercorporeality. Bovet describes the subtle proxemic work through which the dancers make visible to themselves and to the audience that they form a duet. The fact that the two dancers stand on a scene, walking with their naked feet on the same wood-made platform, contributes to make them visible as a pair and helps them to feel together the tactility of the wood. Some intercorporeal connexion is available from this common, tactile progression on the same square of wood. From within this duet, they play with the distance between them to compose a choreographic narrative that culminates in a strong mutual grasp. Lefebvre addresses a form of intercorporeality that is specific to martial arts, namely that “you have to be connected to your partner, to what he is doing, in order to act appropriately yourself”. While contact amongst opponents is decisive in the accomplishment of Aikido and Kenpo in general and their mutual connection more specifically, Lefebvre’s study shows that and how it is strongly anticipated in pre-contact phases.

Who is Touching? The Agency of Touch – Beyond the Active-passive Dualism

The well-known duality of touch, both active (the oriented-to movement) and passive (our capacity to be affected), has been stressed by phenomenology since Husserl (1989 [1934]). Merleau-Ponty’s seminal example (1964 [1979]: 191) shows that, when my hands touch each other, I can feel my left hand either as actively manipulating the right hand or as being manipulated by it. Moreover, touch being a reciprocal sense (Meyer & Streeck, 2020), anyone who touches someone else is also touched by her. When joint action is based on touch, it becomes then difficult if not impossible to identify who initiates and who follows².

What remains to be elucidated are the multiple ways in which this subject-object duality is rooted in, and as such practically constrains, naturally organized activities. Beyond touch, the description of tactility in action requires to make use of a variety of verbs. As highlighted by Heinonen & Tainio, when studying sustained leaning touch between adolescents, the distinction between active-passive touch can for obvious reasons not be perceived by outside observers. Drawing on our own everyday experiences of sustained leaning touch, it might be quite reasonable to say that this is also true from a member’s perspective. In their investigation of how guiding the visually impaired student can be mediated through the cane, Yasusuke et al. introduce a distinction between two types of “guided touch” within instructional sequences in orientation and mobility training. Guided touch is employed in one case to perform a “proving and achieving demonstration” (Sacks, 1992). In this scenario, the demon-

² The complex agency of touch may even be an occasion to question the sometimes simplistic sequentiality that is ascribed to talk in interaction on the basis of audio-visual data and transcripts.

stration of a particular situation is executed as a “redoing” of the verbal description of that situation (“you’ve gone too far”), essentially reiterating the assertion to establish comprehension. In the second case, guided touch takes the form of a “learnable demonstration” (Zemel & Koschmann, 2014) without any explicit vocal remark. Mutual understanding is achieved from within the mobile performance, within the sequential context of the ongoing activity, and through intercorporeality. Investigating the participation frameworks alternations, according to which the improvised hand-drawn map is either done by the student guided by the instructor or by the latter using the former’s finger to draw into his palm, Relieu suggests that the two pedagogic configurations are treated by members as valuable means for sustaining the student’s orientation in an urban setting. With respect to therapeutic settings, Keel and Caviglia describe how the physiotherapist touches the patient while being at the same time touched by the patient, for example when she positions her hand (palm up) under the patient’s shoulder, to access intra-bodily resonances, which are not publicly available as it is the case with respect to inter-bodily resonances (Fuchs, 2017). Being touched while touching thus makes it possible for the physiotherapist to assess if the patient’s instructed body movements engender unwanted tensions in her shoulders. Similarly, Mondémé points out that in equine therapy the therapist invites the client to “feel” the bodily reactions he perceives while touching the horse’s body as displays of distress. Bovet shows that one dancer catches the other’s hand, who accepts this grip and acts as a counterweight while moving. Here, the contact initiates a new phase of their duet, that they co-elaborate while feeling each other’s weight and pressure. Their entire bodies are involved in this type of interaction, which reflexively finds its own way through their mutual participation in the ongoing cooperation. In contrast, Lefebvre describes how achieving martial intercorporeality, i.e., being connected to your opponent before and during body contact, is crucial for determining the appropriate next(s) whole-body movement(s) and for coordinating your movements with those of the opponent in a “sequentially organized simultaneity”.

How to Observe and Describe Touch? Methodology Beyond (Video) Visibility

Last but not least, the contributions also raise questions concerning the ways closeness and touch can be researched in original *ways*. Multimodal studies remain fundamentally based on the observable - and video-recordable - character of sociality for the investigation, which leaves aside many essential aspects of being in and sensing the world-around-us. Lefebvre (see also Lefebvre, 2020) has drawn on his expertise in martial arts to understand (and make explicit) aspects of actions that can at best be glimpsed on the video recording and at worst simply ignored. Keel and Caviglia enrich their detailed video analysis with experiential insights gained from being the physiotherapist and patient of the analysed sequence. Taking into account their respective experiences they discuss how studying touch and being touched requires methods of inquiry that allow to transcend the scope of visually and hearably observable phenomena. Relieu enriches his understanding of the instructor/student interaction with his ethnographic knowledge of the orientation and mobility courses.

Moreover, he mentions how the very possibility to videorecord the hand drawing exercise rests on his ability to reflexively adjust the camera focus to a strong transformation of the field of attention to which the co-participants are attending. Bovet resorts to the professional vision of experienced dancers, as elicited in in-depth interviews, to gain a better understanding of what is at stake when dancers visibly touch each other or avoid doing so. Heinoenen and Tainio exploit interviews to highlight the ways teachers and students reflect upon leaning touch. Taking into account how participants felt during sustained leaning touch or how they interpret it when observing occurrences of leaning touch, allows them to identify leaning touch as a crucial resource to display and feel friendship in the school setting. Mondémé draws on Merleau-Ponty's notion of esthesiology to treat the animal as an interacting partner in its own right, able as such to contribute to the achievement of intercorporeality. By focusing on moments in which the interactants speak out their interpretations of the ways the horse reacts to the clients' touch in situ, Mondémé respecifies esthesiology as a member's phenomenon.

Far from circumscribing these themes, the papers presented in this special issue suggest their interest in phenomenology-inspired empirical observation and invite to expand the field of observation.

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