

Touch as a Form of Nonverbal Communication across Cultures

Modern scholars consider touch as the act or an instance of touching; the physiological sense by which external objects or forces are perceived through contact with the body [1]. As well as providing information about surfaces and textures, it is a very significant component of nonverbal communication, which can be expressed through handshakes, holding hands, kissing, back patting, high fives or even brushing an arm. Fidgeting with our own hands or running our fingers through the hair are also messages in nonverbal communication process. Touch is one of the earliest forms of communication for any human being, and it continues to be very important throughout our early years. However, the meaning of the message sent by a touch strongly depends on the situational context. Such variety of touches urged scholars upon developing haptics, the study of perceptions, functions, and meanings of touching as communicative behavior across cultures. A touch can often say as much as a lot of words. When someone we know is in trouble or in sorrow, taking hold of his or her hand or putting an arm around the shoulder often is much more effective than words. The nearness, the closeness, the touch says that you are ready to help if needed [2].

Touching is considerably influenced by people's background and culture. Some cultures are very expressive when it comes to physical touch. For example, in Italy, a big hug and kiss on each cheek is considered a common and acceptable greeting, in Japan, a proper greeting consists of a respectful bow and no touch at all.

Different cultures encode and decode touch behavior in different ways. The latest research papers prove that touch communicates distinct emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, sympathy, love, and gratitude. Working with others and using touch to communicate, we need to be aware of each person's touch tolerance. Different standards in touch between a superior and subordinate can lead to confusion as to whether the touch is motivated by dominance or intimacy. A person in power is more likely to touch a subordinate, but the subordinate is not free to touch in kind [3: 48].

In early autumn 2007, newspapers around the world announced one of the regular French-German summits. The information was accompanied by the pictures, where readers could see French President, coming in very close and giving Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel his usual warm embrace when he arrived in Berlin. By that time, reporters had already noticed that grabs, hugs, and back-slaps are Nicolas Sarkozy's tools for connecting with people [4]. "Angela Merkel, who is very reserved, does not greatly value the outpouring of affection from her French opposite number – his way of kissing her on every meeting and touching her and handling her shoulders in front of the cameras", wrote *Le Parisien* on September 12, 2007. In America and Canada, such physical touches could have been considered as a display of "sexual harassment", but A. Merkel interpreted Sarkozy's behavior as pushing her around and trying to impose himself as boss of Europe since he had won the presidency.

Modern scholars differentiate such types of touch as ritualistic touches, positive effect touches, playful touches, control touches, task-related touches, hybrid touches, and accidental touches.

Ritualistic touches help make transitions in and out of focused interaction and are subdivided into:

- greeting: part of the act of acknowledging another at the opening of an encounter;
- departure: part of the act of closing an encounter.

Positive effect touches express positive emotions and happen mostly between persons with close relations. They are classified as:

- support: nurture, reassure or promise protection; generally occur in situations, which either virtually require or make it clearly preferable that one person show concern for another who is experiencing distress;
- appreciation: express gratitude for something another person has done;
- inclusion: draw attention to the act of being together and suggest psychological closeness;
- sexual: express physical attraction or sexual interest;
- affection: express generalized positive regard beyond mere acknowledgment of the other.

Playful touches lighten an interaction. They express a double message involving a verbal or nonverbal play signal, which implies the behavior is not to be taken seriously. These touches fall into:

- playful affection: lighten interaction; the seriousness of the positive message is diminished by the play signal; indicate teasing and are usually mutual;
- playful aggression: like playful affection lighten interaction, however, the play signals imply aggression; are initiated, rather than mutual.

Control touches direct the recipient's behavior, attitude or feelings. Almost all of these touches are initiated by the person who attempts influence. These touches are subdivided into:

- compliance: attempt to direct behavior of another person, and often, by implication, to influence attitudes or feelings;
- attention-getting: direct the touch recipient's perceptual focus toward something;
- announcing a response: call attention to and emphasize a feeling state of initiator; implicitly request effect response from another.

Task-related touches perform a task and are classified as:

– reference to appearance: point out or inspect a body part or artifact referred to in a verbal comment about appearance;

– instrumental ancillary: occur as an unnecessary part of the task accomplishment;

– instrumental intrinsic: accomplish a task in and out of itself, that is, a helping touch.

Hybrid touches involve two or more of the meanings described above and fall into:

– greeting/affection: express affection and acknowledgement of the initiation of an encounter;

– departure/affection: express affection and serve to close an encounter.

Accidental touches do not have any meaning as they are unintentional. Brushes make their basis [5].

Based on the amount of touching that occurs within a culture countries are divided into:

– High-contact cultures: Middle East, Latin America, Russia, Ukraine, Spain, France, Italy, other Mediterranean countries, African countries, and Mexico. In a high-contact culture, people face one another directly, often look in the eye, interact closely with one another, often touch one another and speak in a quite loud voice. We are more likely to receive a friendly hug or pat on the back from these cultures' representatives.

– Low-contact cultures: In China, Japan, South and North Korea, you are unlikely to be touched in a business situation and any kind of touching will cause discomfort. In a low-contact culture, people face one another more indirectly, avoid looking in the eye, interact with a certain space with one another, engage in little or no touching, and speak in a soft or moderate tone of voice. In low-touch countries, the handshake is the only accepted form of touching in business and is the only time you are expected or allowed to make physical contact.

– Moderate-contact cultures include United States, Canada, Britain, northern European countries, Australia, and New Zealand. Moderate-contact cultures have a mixture of high- and low-contact cultures [6: 129].

Even within a community, culture of touch varies. For example, handshakes vary in length and strength of grip depending on the actual (or hoped for) degree of intimacy between the two people shaking hands. We should keep tabs that different cultures have their own standards and expectations about the amount of touching permitted, which should be respected, learned, and followed by a stranger.

Literature

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