Chapter 5

Touch as a Part of Daily Communication with Family and Friends

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to explore the use of tactile communication in daily interactions with friends and parents. The participants were 429 students. The questionnaire consisted of: behavioral measures; touch-attitude scale; well-being; internet use; and demographic variables. Females showed more positive touch-attitudes, reported more touch behaviors in communication with same sex peers and parents, and reported more confidential talks with both friends and parents. Males and females did not differ regarding the use of touch in communication with the opposite sex. Participants used more tactile behavior in communication with parents than with friends. Those who used tactile communication more with parents, also reported more tactile communication with friends, and more confidential talks with both friends and parents, and rated higher the importance of the Internet in communication. Students with high levels of well-being showed more positive touch-attitudes, reported more tactile communication with both friends and parents and reported more confidential talks with friends.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Overview: Ends and Means

This chapter reports on original, questionnaire-based research into attitudes towards, and (self-perceived) patterns of, tactile engagement on the part of late-stage adolescents in the course of various types of communicative interactions with parents and friends, with special attention to possible gender differences. To this end, specialized research instruments were developed, so a concomitant objective was to assess their reliability. The study further explores the extent of correlation between these initial results and two additional factors: (a) attitudes toward more mediated forms of regular communication, in this case the perceived importance of Internet communication with peers; and a (b) general sense of personal well-being. Insofar as certain correlations were in fact successfully identified, the predictive utility of the measures in question appear to be supported, producing an overall positive yield on both the empirical and methodological planes.

Research Focus: Uniqueness of Touch among Sense Modalities Used in Human Communication

Of the three sensory modalities routinely utilized by humans as channels of deliberate communication – vision, hearing, and touch – touch has thus far been the least a focus of systematic research in the social and behavioral sciences. Moreover, the vast majority of such studies have focused on tactile interaction in a home environment with infants and toddlers, because during these developmental phases a child’s linguistic competence is still in a relatively rudimentary stage. This project contributes to the ongoing advancement of scholarly/scientific insights into a seldom-considered age-cohort within what is already a much under-studied wider communicative domain.

There is little if any dispute within Linguistics, Anthropology, and allied disciplines that the most distinctive feature of human communication is language. Nonetheless there is likewise universal awareness that linguistic production is only one – and from an evolutionary standpoint, only a very recently developed – mode of communication. During face-to-face interaction, nonverbal cues are always present in the form of facial expressions, bodily stances/movements and other paralinguistic signs. Nonverbal signals routinely support, enhance, modify and/or replace verbal messages. One of the most powerful forms of nonverbal communication occurs when people touch (Knapp & Hall, 1992). Touch is an interactive modality that can further affect the meaning of both verbal and other nonverbal messages. For example, a given word or a particular look can convey multiple different messages and/or trigger divergent interpretations, depending on whether or not they are accompanied by physical touch.

Touch is the most basic and direct form of communication (Barnett, 1972; Geldard, 1960), one used long before the emergence of language. This is true not only from an evolutionary and ethological perspective, but also developmentally. From birth, touch is still what guides humans in exploring and connecting with the external world, including our conspecifics. At birth, with the other senses yet to mature, touch is the most developed sensory modality (Hertenstein, Keltner, App, Bulleit & Jaskolka, 2006), and the one that initially plays the most vital role in the social, psychological, cognitive and physical development of the child (Field, 2014). Touch is thus seen as having both phylogenetic and ontogenetic primacy. Phylogenetic primacy presumes that touch was used as a means of communication during primate evolution before human language was developed (Dew & Jensen, 1977), while ontogenetic primacy refers to