

# Haptic Communication: The Hidden Language of Human Touch

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Siblings laugh as they are tickled

Haptic communication is a branch of nonverbal communication that refers to the ways in which people and animals communicate, and interact via the sense of touch. Touch or Haptics, from the ancient Greek word *haptikos* is extremely important for communication; it is vital for survival. The sense of touch allows one to experience different sensations such as: pleasure, pain, heat, or cold. One of the most significant aspects of touch is the ability to convey and enhance physical intimacy. The sense of touch is the fundamental component of haptic communication for interpersonal relationships. Touch can be categorized in many terms such as positive, playful, control, ritualistic, task-related or unintentional. It can be both sexual (kissing is one example that some perceived as sexual), and platonic (such as hugging or a Handshake).

Touch is the earliest sense to develop in the fetus. The development of an infant's haptic senses and how it relates to the development of the other senses such as vision has been the target of much research. Human babies have been observed to have enormous difficulty surviving if they do not possess a sense of touch, even if they retain sight and hearing. Infants who can perceive through touch, even without sight and hearing, tend to fare much better.

Similarly to infants, in chimpanzees the sense of touch is highly developed. As newborns they see and hear poorly but cling strongly to their mothers. Harry Harlow conducted a controversial study

involving rhesus monkeys and observed that monkeys reared with a "terry cloth mother", a wire feeding apparatus wrapped in softer terry cloth which provided a level of tactile stimulation and comfort, were considerably more emotionally stable as adults than those with a mere wire mother. For his experiment, he presented the infants with a clothed surrogate mother and a wire surrogate mother which held a bottle with food. It turns out that the rhesus monkeys spent most of their time with the terry cloth mother, over the wire surrogate with a bottle of food, which indicates that they preferred touch, warmth, and comfort over sustenance.

Striking, pushing, pulling, pinching, kicking, strangling and hand-to-hand fighting are forms of touch in the context of physical abuse. In a sentence like "I never touched him/her" or "Don't you dare to touch him/her" the term touch may be meant as euphemism for either physical abuse or sexual touching. The word touch has many other metaphorical uses. One can be emotionally touched, referring to an action or object that evokes an emotional response. To say "I was touched by your letter" implies the reader felt a strong emotion when reading it. It usually does not include anger, disgust or other forms of emotional rejection unless used in a sarcastic manner. Stoeltje (2003) wrote about how Americans are 'losing touch' with this important communication skill. During a study conducted by University of Miami School of Medicine, Touch Research Institutes, American children were said to be more aggressive than their French counterparts while playing at a playground. It was noted that French women touched their children more often than the American parents.

## Categories

Heslin outlines five haptic categories:

- Functional/professional - expresses task-orientation
- Social/polite - expresses ritual interaction
- Friendship/warmth - expresses idiosyncratic relationship
- Love/intimacy - expresses emotional attachment
- Sexual/arousal - expresses sexual intent

The intent of a touch is not always exclusive and touching can evolve to each one of Heslin's categories.

## Functional/Professional

Managers should know the effectiveness of using touch while communicating to subordinates, but need to be cautious and understand how touch can be misunderstood. A hand on the shoulder for one person may mean a supportive gesture, while it could mean a sexual advance to another person. Working with others and using touch to communicate, a manager needs to be aware of

each person's touch tolerance.

Henley's (1977) research found that a person in power is more likely to touch a subordinate, but the subordinate is not free to touch in kind. Touch is a powerful nonverbal communication tool and this different standard between a superior and subordinate can lead to confusion whether the touch is motivated by dominance or intimacy according to Borisoff and Victor.

Walton stated in his book that touching is the ultimate expression of closeness or confidence between two people, but not seen often in business or formal relationships. Touching stresses how special the message is that is being sent by the initiator. "If a word of praise is accompanied by a touch on the shoulder, that's the gold star on the ribbon," wrote Walton.

### **Social/Polite**

Moving from one haptic category to another can become blurred by culture. There are many areas in the United States where a touch on the forearm is accepted as socially correct and polite. However, in the Midwest, this is not always an acceptable behavior.

The initial connection to another person in a professional setting usually starts off with a touch, specifically a handshake. A person's handshake can speak volumes about them and their personality. Chiarella (2006) wrote an article for Esquire magazine explaining to the predominantly male readership how handshakes differ from person to person and how they send nonverbal messages. He mentioned that holding the grip longer than two seconds will result in a stop in the verbal conversation, thus the nonverbal will override the verbal communication.

Jones explained communication with touch as the most intimate and involving form which helps people to keep good relationships with others. His study with Yarbrough covered touch sequences and individual touches.

Touch sequences fall into two different types, repetitive and strategic. Repetitive is when one person touches and the other person reciprocates. The majority of these touches are considered positive. Strategic touching is a series of touching usually with an ulterior or hidden motive thus making them seem to be using touch as a game to get someone to do something for them.

More common than the sequential touches are the individual or single touches. They must be read by using the total context of what was said, the nature of the relationship and what kind of social setting was involved when the person was touched.

Yarbrough designed a blueprint for how to touch. She designated the different body areas as to whether they are 'touchable' or not. Non-vulnerable body parts (NVBP) are the hand, arm, shoulder and upper back, and vulnerable body parts (VBP) are all other body regions.

Civil inattention is defined as the polite way to manage interaction with strangers by not engaging in any interpersonal communication or needing to respond to a stranger's touch. Goffman uses an elevator study to explain this phenomenon. It is uncommon for people to look at, talk to, or touch the person next to them. While it may be so crowded that they 'touch' another person, they will often maintain an expressionless demeanor so not to affect those around them.

### **Friendship/Warmth**

It is more acceptable for women to touch than men in social or friendship settings, possibly because of the inherent dominance of the person touching over the person being touched. Whitcher and Fisher conducted a study to see whether therapeutic touch to reduce anxiety differed between the sexes. A nurse was told to touch patients for one minute while the patients looked at a pamphlet during a routine preoperative procedure. Females reacted positively to the touch, whereas males did not. It was surmised that males equated the touch to being treated as inferior or dependent.

Touching among family members has been found to affect the behavior of those involved. Various factors are at work within a family setting. As a child grows older, the amount of touching by the parent decreases.

Boys distance themselves from their parents at an earlier age than girls. There is more touching with the same sex parent than with cross-sex parents.

A study of nonverbal communication on how men 'converse' in bars shows that women like men to touch, but it is their touching of other men that intrigues them. The men who are touching others are perceived as having a higher status and social power than those that aren't touching others.

The study found that women were more receptive to men who demanded the most social space, and that when a woman comes into a bar, men will move their drinks far apart to signal to her that they have space in their 'domain' for them.

### **Love/Intimacy**

#### **Healthy Touch**

The primary nonverbal behavior that has the biggest effect on interpersonal relationships is touch.

The amount of touching increases as a relationship moves from impersonal to personal.

Three areas of public touch between couples have been studied: the amount of touch between a couple in the initial stages of a romantic relationship, how much touching goes on between the

couple and the extent of touching with the amount of touch men and women displayed and who initiated the touch and when they initiated it.

Public touch can serve as a 'tie sign' that shows others that your partner is "taken". When a couple is holding hands, putting their arms around each other, this is a 'tie sign' showing others that you are together. The use of 'tie signs' are used more often by couples in the dating and courtship stages than between their married counterparts according to Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall.

Studies have also shown a difference between the sexes on who touches when. In the initial stages of a relationship, men often follow socially prescribed gender roles. Patterson indicated that men fulfilling this social role would touch more and after initial touch in casual relationships and as the relationship became more intimate during serious dating or marriage relationships, women would touch more. American culture still dictates that men 'make the first move' in the context of a dating relationship.

Touching between married couples may help maintain good health. In a study by University of Virginia psychologist Jim Coan, women under stress showed signs of immediate relief by merely holding their husband's hand. This seemed to be effective when the woman was part of a satisfying marriage.

## **Violence**

Touching in intimate relationships may also be violent at times. McEwan and Johnson categorize violent touch in relationships into two categories: intimate terrorism and common couple violence. Intimate terrorism is characterized by a need to control or dominate a relationship, escalation over time, high frequency and severity. Common couple violence, on the other hand, is often a result of minor conflict. Common couple violence is less frequent and severe, and does not escalate over time. There are two major differences between intimate terrorism and common couple violence. Common couple violence comes in episodes rather than escalating over time. One study in 1999 by Geiser gave further evidence to this notion and reported that in fact males are significantly more likely to engage in nonverbal aggression and violence. Persons seeking help with violent intimate relationships may contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline or The National Violence Prevention Network.

## **Sexual/Arousal**

According to Givens (1999), the process of nonverbal communication or negotiation is to send and receive messages in an attempt to gain someone's approval or love. Courtship, which may lead to love, is defined as a nonverbal message designed to attract sexual partners. During courtship, we exchange nonverbal communication gestures to tell each other to come nearer and nearer until we

touch. Essential signals in the path to intimacy include facial nuzzles, kissing and caressing each other.

Courtship has five phases which include the attention phase, recognition phase, conversation phase, touching phase, and the love-making phase. Haptics takes place more during the last two phases.

The touching phase:

First touch: Is likely to be more "accidental" than premeditated by touching a neutral body part and where the recipient either accepts the touch or rejects it through body movement.

Hugging: The embrace is the most basic way of telling someone that you love them and possibly need them too.

Intention to touch: A nonverbal communication haptic code or cue is the intention behind it. Reaching your hand across the table to a somewhat unknown person is used as a way to show readiness to touch.

Kissing: Moving in concert by turning heads to allow for the lips to touch is the final part of the fourth stage of courtship, the kiss.

The final phase, love-making, which includes tactile stimulation during foreplay known as the light or protopathic touch. Any feelings of fear or apprehension may be calmed through other touching like kissing, nuzzling, and a gentle massage.

## Meanings

Touch research conducted by Jones and Yarbrough (1985) revealed 18 different meanings of touch, grouped in seven types: Positive affect (emotion), playfulness, control, ritual, hybrid (mixed), task-related, and accidental touch.

### Positive Affect

These touches communicate positive emotions and occur mostly between persons who have close relationships. These touches can be further classified as support, appreciation, inclusion, sexual interest or intent, and affection.

Support: Serve to nurture, reassure, or promise protection. These touches 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

These touches serve to lighten an interaction. These touches communicate a double message since they always involve a play signal, either verbal or nonverbal, which indicates the behavior is not to be taken seriously. These touches can be further classified as affectionate and aggressive.

Playful affection: Serve to lighten interaction. The seriousness of the positive message is diminished by the play signal. These touches indicate teasing and are usually mutual.

Playful aggression: Like playful affection these touches are used to serve to lighten interaction, however, the play signal indicates aggression. These touches are initiated, rather than mutual.

## Control



An Afghan police officer pats a child on the head.

These touches serve to direct the behavior, attitude, or feeling state of the recipient. The key feature of these touches is that almost all of the touches are initiated by the person who attempts influence. These touches can be further classified as compliance, attention-getting, and announcing a response.

Compliance: Attempts to direct behavior of another person, and often, by implication, to influence attitudes or feelings.

Attention-getting: Serve to direct the touch recipient's perceptual focus toward something.

Announcing a response: Call attention to and emphasize a feeling state of initiator; implicitly requests affect response from another.

### **Ritualistic**

These touches consist of greeting and departure touches. They serve no other function than to help make transitions in and out of focused interaction.

Greeting: Serve as part of the act of acknowledging another at the opening of an encounter.

Departure: Serve as a part of the act of closing an encounter

### **Hybrid**

These touches involve two or more of the meanings described above. These touches can be further classified as greeting/affection and departure/affection.

Greeting/affection: Express affection and acknowledgement of the initiation of an encounter

Departure/affection: Express affection and serve to close an encounter

### **Task-related**

These touches are directly associated with the performance of a task. These touches can be further classified as:

Reference to appearance: Point out or inspect a body part or artefact referred to in a verbal comment about appearance

Instrumental ancillary: Occur as an unnecessary part of the accomplishment of a task

Instrumental intrinsic: Accomplish a task in and out of itself i.e., a helping touch.

### **Accidental**

These touches are perceived as unintentional and have no meaning. They consist mainly of brushes. Research by Martin in a retailing context found that male and female shoppers who were accidentally touched from behind by other shoppers left a store earlier than people who had not been touched and evaluated brands more negatively, resulting in the Accidental Interpersonal Touch effect.

### **Culture**

The amount of touching that occurs within a culture is largely based on the relative high context or

low context of the culture.

### **High Contact**

In a high contact culture, many things are not verbally stated but are expressed through physical touch. For instance, Cheek kissing is a very common method of greeting in the Latin Americas, but among European individuals it is an uncommon form of greeting. Different cultures have different display rules, the degree with which emotions are expressed. Cultural display rules also affect the degree to which individuals share their personal space, gaze and physical contact during interactions. In a High contact culture, such as South America, Latin America, Southern Europe, Africa, Russia, Middle East and others, people tend to share more physical contact. High contact cultures communicate through long gazes, long hugs, and share a decrease in proxemics and etc.

### **Low Contact**

Low contact cultures such as: The United States, Canada, Northern Europe, Australia & New Zealand and Asia prefer infrequent touching, larger physical distance, indirect body orientations (during interaction) along with little shared gazes. In the Thai culture, kissing a friend on the cheek is less common than in the Latin Americas. Remland and Jones (1995) studied groups of people communicating and found that in England (8%), France (5%) and the Netherlands (4%), touching was rare compared to the Italian (14%) and Greek (12.5%) sample.

### **Internal Differences**

Frequency of touch also varies significantly between different cultures. Harper refers to several studies, one of which examined touching in coffee houses. During a one-hour sitting 180 touchings were observed for Puerto Ricans, 110 for French, none for English and 2 for Americans. (Harper, 297). In order to know if someone was touching more frequently than normal it would be necessary to first know what is normal in that culture. In high touch countries a kiss on the cheek is considered a polite greeting while in Sweden it may be considered presumptuous. Jandt relates that two men holding hands will in some countries be a sign of friendly affection, whereas in the United States the same tactile code would probably be interpreted as a symbol of homosexual love (85).

### **Emotion and Touch**

Recently, researchers have shown that touch communicates distinct emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, sympathy, love, and gratitude. Moreover, the accuracy with which subjects were capable of communicating the emotions were commensurate with facial and vocal displays of

emotion.

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