



C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon now touch me, babe

By Stephanie Salter

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Sick of seeing and hearing my fellow Americans yelling at and demonizing one another over — of all things — the future of our good health, I need an antidote.

So, today, we turn from noise and nasty vibes to the quiet, but surprisingly communicative realm of touch. Interesting things are going on in the field of touch communication research, some of the most interesting only 35 miles from here in Greencastle.

Matthew J. Hertenstein, an associate professor of experimental psychology at DePauw University, is discovering that our fairly neglected sensory system of touch can speak a powerful and articulate language. Even more promising, the language can cut across gender and cultural lines and be effectively used by people who are complete strangers.

Hertenstein & Co. have conducted experiments here and in Spain and Pakistan. I ran across their most recent work in the New York Times science section. A short piece by Nicholas Bakalar described a study of 248 subjects (age 18-36 from DePauw) who participated in a series of experiments in the university's Touch and Emotion Lab, which Hertenstein founded.

Broken into various two-person "dyads" of one communicator (or encoder) and one receiver (or decoder), the subjects managed a high accuracy level in communicating eight distinct emotions through touch:

Anger, fear, happiness, sadness, disgust, love, gratitude and sympathy.

No matter the configuration of the dyad — male-male, male-female, female-female, female-male — the accuracy in communication was considerably higher than can be accounted for by chance.

Perhaps most exciting, the encoders and decoders didn't know one another. On average, pairs of silent strangers — one person in each pair blindfolded to block visual cues from facial or body language — managed a 50 to 78 percent accuracy rate in communicating specific emotions via touch.

Following conservative experiment protocol, Hertenstein and his fellow researchers set a chance rate of 25 percent for their analysis. (Often, the rate is set at 11 percent.) Even the very lowest communication rate in the experiment — 42 percent female sadness conveyed to blindfolded males — was 17 percent higher than the chance rate.

And the duration of all the touches was in seconds, not minutes, most as brief as five seconds.

The encoders used a wide variety of touches, from intertwining fingers to lifting the decoder's body. Females and males often chose different gestures to encode the same emotion; men most effectively used shaking to convey happiness, women swung the decoders' arms or swayed their torsos. But both genders decoded or understood the touches just about equally.

A download of the study (www.depauw.edu/learn/lab) and a phone call to Hertenstein, who was just about to leave for nine months' sabbatical in California, opened a whole new world. With his colleagues — Rachel Holmes and Margaret McCullough at DePauw, and co-author Dacher Keltner at the University of California, Berkeley — Hertenstein is working to raise the profile of touch nearer to that of two well-studied areas of communication, voice and facial expressions.

"The skin is the largest organ of the human body. If you spread an adult's out, it would be the size of a twin-bed mattress," Hertenstein said. Yet our scientific knowledge about the communicative power and complexity of our touch sensory system lags way behind what we know about visual and aural communication.

Our keep-your-hands-to-yourself culture compounds the problem.

"We are at or near the bottom among contact cultures," Hertenstein said. (Our touch-challenged mates are in the United Kingdom and Japan.)

Never a huggy-touchy people, unlike Latin cultures, we have increased the prohibition over the last few decades in our reaction to the well-publicized incidence of child sex abuse. In trying to protect kids from predators, we've cut them off from the nurturing, healing, stabilizing powers of touch from teachers, relatives, one another and even parents.

That sorely deprives children and adults.

"Every morning I ask my 3-year-old if he wants a back rub, and he says yes. So for four or five minutes, I rub his back," Hertenstein said. "We have science to back up the benefits of what that contact produces. We know touch reduces our levels of stress hormones like cortisol and raises the levels of helpful chemicals like oxytocin. It promotes a sense of security and well-being, which is especially important for kids. And it's reciprocal. I touch my son and he is inherently touching me."

Hertenstein said the current state of touch in the United States is "an interesting paradox." Thanks to science, we have begun to understand the therapeutic power of touch on the ill, elderly, injured and stressed-out.

"The ascendancy of massage therapy in our non-touching culture has been remarkable," he said. "But touch seems to be OK only in the clinical context, not out of it."

Hertenstein acknowledges that doing his sort of work in this country "is somewhat akin to swimming upstream." He also emphasizes that he is not on a mission to elevate the importance of touch to, say, vision. Nor does he discount the differences among humans in our affinity for touch. Some people, no matter where they live, don't like physical contact.

"There are babies who are touch-averse from day one of their lives. That has nothing to do with upbringing or culture," he said.

But most humans, like the lower primates, tend to respond positively to positive touch. Through his and his colleagues' experiments, Hertenstein hopes to learn more about why.

The better we understand the function of touch in our hardwiring, the more we can expand our tactile vocabulary and possibly use our nonverbal, nonvisual sensory system to communicate with one another.

Communication is a good thing. It has been known to make us less inclined to scream at each other or to believe that whole segments of our own population are villains who are out to hurt or kill us.

Hertenstein's work in the Touch and Emotion Lab at DePauw indicates we are capable of major advancement. Those accuracy rates for communication through mere touch are encouraging.

As he put it: "It's like, we're doing something pretty well that we don't even practice. Imagine if we did."