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**Interaction rituals and ‘social distancing’: New haptic trajectories and touching
from a distance in the time of COVID-19**

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ABSTRACT

Previous research in the social sciences has shown that haptic interaction rituals are critical for maintaining social relationships. However, during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, ‘social distancing’ was encouraged in order to avoid the spread of disease. Drawing on data from self-ethnography as well as publicly available resources, in this study we explore some new, locally negotiated haptic trajectories to accomplish interaction rituals in the time of coronavirus. Firstly, we present self-ethnographic observations of distancing in face-to-face encounters from our everyday lives. Secondly, utilizing methods of microanalysis of naturally occurring interaction, we investigate video recordings of the embodied negotiation of space and touch among politicians. We analyze three different ways in which politicians negotiate transitional moves in this haptic ritual when one party initiates a handshake: repairing, declining, and apologizing. Our analysis shows that politicians adapt their entire bodies in conjunction with talk, gestures, and laughter not only to accomplish the greeting, but also to remedy the potentially face-threatening situation of not getting the greeting right. This research has implications for better understanding the spontaneous ability of human beings to invent new ways of engaging with each other. Moreover, it adds to our knowledge of how the materiality of human bodies can impact forms of sociality.

KEYWORDS

Haptic interaction rituals, embodiment, touch, greetings, social interaction, COVID-19

Introduction

The coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19), that has spread across the world has extensively influenced the life of the human species. Not only causing death, sorrow, and fear, and a major economic crisis, it has also led to reorganizing the structures of society.

For example, institutions have had to restructure the division of labor, families have had to manage new forms of childcare, and schools are trying out different forms of education.

Importantly, this pandemic has clearly influenced our social habits, disrupted our schedules, and changed the forms and quantity of our social encounters. Evident in phrases such as “social distancing,” “quarantine,” and “shelter in place,” which appear in the media, we have witnessed a natural experiment, where basic forms of human sociality have been extensively altered by a sudden change: the pandemic.

The ways in which people engage with each other, especially through touch and other bodily rituals, have suddenly become carefully restricted so that bodies do not get contaminated by the virus. In the present report, we examine some novel practices and embodied choreographies for performing interaction rituals in the time of coronavirus, which are tailored and creatively designed to respond to restrictions and orders to practice forms of “social distancing.” Our analysis is divided into two sections. First, we provide self-ethnographic examples of changes in organization of space in face-to-face encounters in Westside neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Secondly, we focus on the transition from haptic practices which involve changing form using the palms of the hands (handshaking) to now using less intimate body parts, elbows (elbow-bumps), among a specific group of people – politicians.

Highlighting our bodies’ materiality and vulnerability, touch (Montagu, 1986) and close interaction, crucial to our health and well-being, have become potentially dangerous to us. In touch, our bodies become momentarily intertwined, sensing and being sensed (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2003). In addition to resonating effects and embodied meanings, this intercorporeal connection can also result in the leaking of unwanted materials from one body to another: viruses and bacteria. Unlike machines, the human body is a living creature (Parviainen et al., 2019), and therefore can also get sick and die. Previous interaction studies have rarely highlighted the influence of the material vulnerability of our bodies – that they can, for instance, catch disease – for our basic forms of human sociality.

Social relationships constitute a crucial part of what it is to be a human being (Enfield, 2009). Accordingly, how we interact with one another in our everyday encounters has important, constantly negotiated consequences for the quality, intimacy, and affectivity of

our relationships. Intercorporeal forms of human sociality, especially touch and face-to-face contact, have been crucial in creating, maintaining and recovering social relationships. (e.g., M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018; Katila, 2018, a, b, Katila and Philipsen, in press; Mandelbaum, 2003.) These practices and rituals for social relationships have been an essential topic for microanalytic studies. Such work has been inspired by Erving Goffman's groundbreaking ideas on, for instance, the rituals of face-to-face behavior in public places (Goffman, 1963), social relationships (Goffman, 1971), participation (Goffman, 1981) and the interaction order (Goffman, 1983).

Regardless of the challenging situation, humans as a species are fundamentally social animals; we seek and find ways to be in social connection with others. As a result, the virus has prompted new manifestations of the 'interaction engine' – a set of tendencies, abilities and behavioral dispositions towards interaction with one other with which humans are natively endowed (Levinson, 2006: 44–48) – witnessed in a rise of new forms of maintaining social relationships, and caring for each other at a distance.

Touch as a basis for the human 'interaction engine'

Evidence from different fields suggests that the basis for the human interaction engine is primarily tactile in nature. Born with a limited ability for visual perception (Slater, 2002), touch is an ontogenetic precursor for social communication (Botero, 2016). Like chimpanzee mothers (Goodall, 1986), the caregivers of human infants constantly monitor the infant's behavioral state, inform us about their corporeal copresence, and communicate through touch (Botero, 2016; de León, 1998). Accordingly, touch is our bodies' carnal way of interacting and 'being-with' one another (M.H. Goodwin, 2017); through touch we communicate emotions such as care and empathy (Cekaite and Kvist Holm, 2017; Raia, Goodwin and Deng, 2020), or irritation and annoyance (Katila, 2018b).

While many studies of the communicative aspects of touch focus on infancy, touch continues to be essential for our relationships and social interaction throughout human life (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen, 2019), in particular, within families (M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018), and between lovers (Meyer and Streeck, in press). Importantly, touching another person can take forms other than physical contact. As argued by Fulkerson (2012: 2), "in touch, as in vision and audition, we can and often do perceive objects and properties

even when we are not in direct or even apparent bodily contact with them.” This is because, as Fulkerson explains, rather than being a “contact sense,” touch is a “connection sense” (ibid.). Parallel to this, Tahhan (2013: 45) suggests that touch can mean practices of being in connection in other than merely physical ways. Touch can assume manifold forms if taken as purely relational and affective phenomena, felt in the wholeness of bodies, instead of being finite—something Tahhan (2013: 46) refers to as ‘touch at depth.’

Touch and Body in Practices of managing space in face-to-face encounters

When individuals are in one another’s co-presence, they are constantly communicating with each other through tacit body symbolism (Goffman, 1963, 1971). Among other things, we are able to inform each other whether we are engaging in the same ‘participation framework’ (Goffman, 1981; C. Goodwin and C. Goodwin M.H., 2004), ‘with’ (Goffman, 1971), or ‘interactional space’ (Mondada, 2013). Goffman (1971) referred to the range of embodied signals and behaviors through which people reproduce their relationships and the level of intimacy as ‘tie-signs’ (p. 194).

Drawing much from Goffman, previous studies have shown how important the organization of bodies in social space is for managing moment-to-moment social relationships. Touch and distance play a carnal role. For instance, participants of intimate mother-child dyads have been shown to constantly negotiate their relationship and intimacy by organizing their bodies in space in relation to each other in different ways, though various haptic practices (de León, 1998, 2012; Katila, 2018, a, b). Interactional studies have furthermore uncovered the complex interrelations between mobile bodies and space (Haddington et al., 2013), between parties of non-intimate relationships as well. These studies have suggested, among other things, that the ways of positioning and moving our bodies in relation to each other, reveal whether we are acting or moving as individual vehicular units (Goffman, 1971: 6–11) or mobile formations (McIlvenny et al., 2014: 104–105), where more than one individual is involved.

Crucially, these practices for caring for social relationships through assembling bodies in space in different ways are ritualized in nature. Greetings or salutations manifest forms of *phatic communication*, described by Malinowski (1936: 313) as follows:

‘a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words [...] They fulfil a social function and that is their principal aim, they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener [...] Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Once more, language appears to us not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action.’

From Malinowski’s (1936: 313) perspective, greetings provide ways of tying people together through ‘social sentiment.’ Rather than being used for explicit information exchange, they instead function to maintain and negotiate social relationships (Enfield, 2009; Duranti, 1992; Hillewaert, 2016; Kendon, 1986: 247–248).

Rituals such as salutations and farewells mark the transition of either increased or decreased access to another (Goffman, 1971: 79). M. H. Goodwin and Cekaite (2018:136) have examined how such access rituals are performed at the boundaries of activities within American and Swedish families. ‘Boundary intertwinings’ (M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018: 136) are practices designed with an eye to the intimacy and nature of the relationship, hugs and kisses being especially salient (M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018: 121–183). If touch is not available, forms of distant intimacy are practiced among family members, who may adopt ‘kissing gestures’ – aural and visual equivalents to the tactile kiss – to greet or say goodbye through videocalls (Gan, Greiffenhagen, and Reeves, 2020). In public and less intimate settings, hand-shakes are routinely used to initiate, manifest and renew social relationships, as a form of greeting and meeting another person (Duranti, 1992; Hillewaert, 2016; Kendon, 1986).

Failing to greet another person appropriately may have direct consequences for our embodied relationships. This becomes pivotal in the time of coronavirus, as our habitualized interaction rituals were suddenly restricted in order to prevent the spread of the virus. While touch between close family-members was still allowed, this restriction majorly influenced the haptic practices between intimate relationships outside of the closest family circle.

Methodological background

This study adopts the view that social life and forms of sociality are fundamentally embodied, material, and *intercorporeal* – an understanding developed by Merleau-Ponty from Husserl's earlier work, and referring to a view of human bodies and meaning-making as carnally intersubjective and constituted by their material relations and interactions with each other (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2003; Meyer, Streeck and Jordan, 2017: xvi).

The term intercorporeality thus refers to the co-experienced and embodied nature of human sociality. Merleau-Ponty (1968) famously used the example of one hand touching another one to talk about this sensorial coexistence: When hands of a same body touch, they can catch each other and themselves touching and being touched – sensing and being sensed – at the same time (ibid: 141, 263). Merleau-Ponty (1969: 142) also suggests that something similar is happening between different bodies: “Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well [...] Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each?”

Touching of hands exemplifies quite well the reversibility of bodies and the bodies catching each other sensing and being sensed. However, intercorporeality means much more than just touch. It is a way of seeing the emergence of human behavior, perception, and affect in fundamental unison, which is incorporated by the multisensorial co-existence of bodies.

Informed by Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2003), this paper aims to explore the embodied, material and corporeal aspects of sociality. Moreover, exemplified well in practices such as handshaking, intercorporeal forms of sociality equally entail ritualized, habitualized and semiotic aspects. We are constituted through our interpersonal relationships, actualized in everyday, ritualized interaction practices. We therefore focus on the experienced as well as semiotic (Goodwin, 2000; 2018) manifestations of human sociality.

We use microanalysis of video-recorded interactions as a method to capture forms of intercorporeal sociality (C. Goodwin, 2018; M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018; Streeck et al., 2011). Microanalytic methods aim at uncovering the communicative, affective, and experienced aspects of interaction to view how these aspects are manifested in participants'

body movements and orientations, such as in their verbal, facial, and gestural expressions (C. Goodwin, 2018; M.H. Goodwin et al., 2012). In this study, we ask how people manage avoiding habitualized interaction rituals while still maintaining their relationships when they are encouraged to avoid touch and bodily contact.

The data for this study are drawn from our self-ethnographic observations conducted during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Los Angeles, California as well as public video resources online dealing with political meetings in several different countries: the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany. The meetings include politicians' speeches, news conferences and formal encounters. We made a collection of instances where politicians touch (or intend to touch) each other and examine in detail how the parties accomplish their social relationships while performing social distancing.

Analysis

Self-ethnographic observations during the time of COVID-19

During the time of the pandemic, with the demands of social distancing, people around the world needed to collaboratively re-evaluate what it means for bodies to be 'together' (Goffman, 1971: 19). Given that this virus is shown to be spread through close contact and via respiratory droplets produced when people cough or sneeze, neither skin-to-skin touch between people, nor self-touching (e.g., an un-washed hand touching one's face) is encouraged in order to avoid the spread of disease. This difficult time clearly threatens the cherished traditions of being connected with others through close bodily proximity and physical contact.

Despite the restrictions, we found that people creatively adjusted to a new reality and found solutions in order to sustain relationships with each other. While we noticed a tendency to avoid close contact through actions such as the hug, the importance of still seeing the other person's face, either online or face-to-face, became of crucial importance. For instance, drawing from Gan and Katila's own experiences, we witnessed ourselves in an encounter where we could have exchanged supplies without seeing each other, but wanted to meet face-to-face and greet each other from a window (Figure 1, March 17, 2020 on the West side of Los Angeles, when mandatory face-covering was not yet effective).



Figure 1: Greeting and exchanging materials through a window without coming into close physical proximity of each other

Source: Photos taken by Y. M. Gan and J. Katila

When greeting each other face-to-face, we were prohibited from doing what we would have ordinarily done: hugged each other. Furthermore, the spatial organization and distance between us had radically changed. We met at the boundary of two spaces – the house and outdoors – and were more physically distant from each other than in our previous encounters. However, we were able to participate in intercorporeal copresence – experiencing and being experienced by each other through visual and aural means in a same ‘common vivid present’ (Schütz 1962: 219–220). Thus, even if we could not touch, we were able to greet each other at the same time – touch from a distance –with the multisensorial richness of face-to-face interaction (through the intonation in our voices, gestures, body postures, facial expressions, and more).

Restrictions entailed in practicing social distancing reminded us about the importance of shared and routinized activities for our social relationships when continuing our daily outdoor routines as well. In order not to stop a weekend ritual of a morning hike, dating

back over twenty years, the hikers of Kenter Canyon transformed the practice of ‘walking together as a with’ (Goffman 1971), into *walking together at a distance*. For example, Figures 2(a) to (c) were taken in March 2020, and Figure 2(d) was taken after April 7, when local mandatory face-covering was observed.



Figure 2: Walking together with social distancing

Source: Photos taken by M. H Goodwin

When walking together at a distance, we noticed that it was harder to hear and see each other by comparison with the ordinary practices of managing space when mobile (see Goffman, 1971: 6–11; McIlvenny et al., 2014: 104–105). Moreover, from the perspective of outside observers, we were not necessarily shown to be walking ‘together’ (Goffman, 1971:19). However, despite the spatial restrictions, we experienced joy and fulfilment from being able to move and be mobile together. We were united by an ‘interkinaesthetic’ (Behnke, 2008) form of being-with each other, as well as collaboratively cherishing nature and its multisensorial aspects (birdsongs, colors and smells of the plants, clear blue skies, and textures of various surfaces). Three of the hikers who walk together every day starting at seven AM instituted a new ritual of having cappuccino and homemade almond-meal-flax meal bread together (standing at a distance of six feet apart) outside the home of one of the hikers after the walk.

While the details of our everyday observations are limited to the specific contexts and life situations we experienced, they allow us to understand something some general about the dynamic and creative ability of human beings to replace well-worn interaction practices with new ones, in different ecological contexts. The materiality of human bodies – the facts that we are living tissues and can, for instance, catch disease and contaminate others – create environmental restrictions and niches through and within which the manifestations of human sociality unfold in creative directions.

In what follows, we will turn our analytic attention from mundane encounters to high-stakes political settings. Despite these special times, politicians still needed to meet face-to-face, and manage the interaction rituals of greeting while showing an executive governmental level example of doing social distancing to citizens. Importantly, when presenting themselves in public space, politicians are not only accountable to one another at the level of their own personal relationships; they also represent the citizens of their countries and are responsible for maintaining good relationships between heads of state. We present a microanalysis of naturally occurring instances of how politicians negotiated types of interaction rituals, whether handshaking or elbow-bump, without touch through intercorporeally orchestrated negotiations of bodies.

Embodied negotiations of space and touch among politicians

Power dynamics are frequently involved in how politicians greet (Wang, 2017). Handshaking, which is recurrently deployed by politicians, engages the palms and fingers of the hand – which are especially touch-sensitive areas of one's body. However, it is precisely these parts of the body, which are treated as particularly vulnerable for contaminating the virus. Consequently, in the era of COVID-19, handshaking practices pose a whole new set of interactional challenges for how to manage the ritual without frictions in social relationships.

Next, we will analyze cases where a person with higher status (prime-minister or president) initiates a handshake with their fellow politician. Given the importance of the aspects of status in interaction practices (e.g. Duranti, 1992; Hillewaert, 2016), the addressee of the handshaking is left in an interactionally delicate position regarding how to respond to the

initiation. Participants must appreciate the rules of not shaking hands during COVID-19, while still respecting the social relationship and maintaining the social faces of the participants. We analyze three different solutions to such a dilemma, all of which orient to the saliency of touch, including repairing, declining and apologizing for touch.

Repairing the way of touching

In his news conference on Friday March 13, 2020, American president Donald Trump declared that the coronavirus pandemic was a national emergency for the United States. As is widely known, Trump is famous for his personal unconventional political style, including bold and caricatural hand gestures (Ingram, 2018), and handshakes (Wang, 2017), which he adopts as a medium to practice micro-power towards another person, pulling and pushing, and captivating the other person's hand for longer than a usual handshake.

In the time of coronavirus, new ways of greeting, such as elbow bumps, became appropriate practices in his haptic repertoire. Extract 1 provides an example of a news conference (resource from *whitehouse.gov*), where the White House invited responsible people from different areas (such as industry and healthcare) to talk about their measures in facing the pandemic. Bruce Greenstein, executive vice president of the Louisiana-based Home Health (LHC) Group, was invited to talk about his company's testing preparation. Extract 1 begins at the moment when Greenstein has finished his brief speech.

The collected instances are transcribed using well-established conversation analysis transcription conventions established by Gail Jefferson and described in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974: 731–733). In addition to more conventionalized transcription signs, we have adopted the symbol @ to indicate speech produced with a smiley voice. In order to show the embodied features of the action, we provide frame grabs in relation to the talk in the transcript to illustrate the simultaneity of talk and embodied actions.

Extract 1

Trump corrects his manner of handshaking (Frame grabs extracted from video on *WhiteHouse.gov*)

01 Greenstein: **Thank** you.

02 Trump: Thank you, (that's) fantastic.

03 Greenstein: ((turns body towards Trump))

04 Trump: ((extends his hand))



Figure 3a

05 Greenstein: ((moves up his elbow))

06 Trump: **AH OHH.**

07 Trump: ((puts hand down&moves up elbow))



Figure 3b

09 ((Greenstein and Trump touch elbows))



Figure 3c

10 Others: **Heh-heh-heh**

11 Greenstein: Practice that.

12 Trump: @Ohkeyh, I like that.

13 That's good.@



Figure 3d

At the beginning of Extract 1, Greenstein has just finished his talk about how his group has been prepared for testing for coronavirus, and, in line 01, he closes his talk with an

expression of gratitude: “Thank you.” As Hymes (1971: 69) has noted, the use of “thank you” often marks transitions in the segments of interactions. Trump also displays his appreciation by saying “Thank you, (that’s) fantastic.” (line 02). After that, Greenstein turns his body in the direction of Trump. Greenstein’s ‘body torque’ (Schegloff, 1998: 536) projects the relevance of a haptic greeting, while Trump simultaneously turns towards him. However, instead of the ritualized hand-shaking practice, Greenstein raises his right elbow towards Trump, who visibly raises his hand towards Greenstein (Figure 3b). We witness a brief moment of creative adjusting of the bodies’ trajectories in relation to each other negotiating the manner of touching. Trump dons a bewildered facial expression with his lips expressing a pout. While both Trump and Greenspan gaze towards one another, they produce mismatching haptic gestures (Figure 3b).

Next, Trump expresses a realization of a ‘change-of-state’ (Heritage, 1984: 266) in his current knowledge by saying “**AH OHH.**” on line 06. At the same time, he transitions his hand-shaking posture into an elbow-up: the elbows of the Greenstein and Trump touch (Figure 3c). At the same time, Trump has his gaze down, with a hint of an embarrassed smile which attends to the delicacy of the occasion. The action is, moreover, laminated with affective stances – laughter and smiley faces – by most of the overhearers in the background (line 10). While already turning away and not facing Trump anymore, Greenstein still addresses a directive “Practice that.” (line 11) to Trump, referencing practices he should keep in mind in the future.

Next Trump provides a positive evaluation (“Okay, I like that. That’s good”) while adjusting the microphone to initiate a new action sequence (line 12 and Figure 3d). He is producing this verbal utterance with a light smile, which retrospectively colors the action with lightheartedness (see Kaukomaa et al., 2015). Such an utterance not only performs facework by displaying appreciation for respecting the rules of social distancing (and not to be taking seriously being corrected by Greenstein); but in addition it implies that he has independently come to the conclusion of liking the gesture (thereby recovering his status and social face.)

Declining touching

In Extract 2 (from *The Guardian*, March 3, 2020) we illustrate an example where one party noticeably avoids conducting a handshake greeting. In this example, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel walks towards her seat to sit next to the interior minister, Horst Seehofer. Merkel extends her hand to Seehofer while she approaches him.

Extract 2

Seehofer rejects shaking hands with Merkel (frame grabs used with permission from *The Guardian*)



Figure 4a
((Merkel (MER) walks towards Seehofer (SHF)))



Figure 4b
((MER gazes at SHF and prepares her hand))



Figure 4c
((MER stands next to SHF and extends her hand towards him))



Figure 4d
((SHF declines handshaking))



Figure 4e
((MER moves into an open body gesture, she and other co-participants burst into laughter))



Figure 4f
((MER smiles, lowers head and opens her hand. The woman next to MER holds her hands))



Figure 4g
((woman produces a cross gesture with her hands; MER gazes at SH. The participants laugh))



Figure 4h
MER: That is the right thing to do. (translation)
((MER returns towards SHF, she smiles and does a stop gesture))

In Figure 4a, Merkel enters the room and approaches her seat, which is next to Seehofer. Before Merkel comes within sight of Seehofer, but is not yet visible to Seehofer (Kendon and Ferber, 1973), she already glances at Seehofer, and starts to prepare her hand (Figure 4b). When she enters within reachable distance of Seehofer, she twists her body into a facing formation with Seehofer and extends her hand towards him (Figure 4c).

Simultaneously (Figure 4c), Seehofer responds to Merkel's gaze wearing an apologetic expression on his face, but does not reciprocate Merkel's haptic initiative. Instead, while producing his response with a relevant body part – his hand – he declines touching Merkel by forming a rejecting hand gesture (Figure 4d). This action not only appears in a mismatching position for handshaking (palm of the hand facing downwards), but also with a mismatching hand (his left hand, while Merkel had initiated the handshaking with her right hand). However, while clearly abandoning the projected handshake, Seehofer's hand gesture towards Merkel still displays from a distance the relevance of the handshake (4d). In addition, he applies a slightly embarrassed facial expression, with his left shoulder slightly pushed back. Through this posture, he is acknowledging the face-threatening side of refusing to touch. As a response to Seehofer's posture, Merkel suddenly steps away (Figure 4e), with an 'surrendering' open body gesture with hands to the side. Furthermore, her face and mouth are open wide as in an expression of surprise. In synchrony with Merkel's stepping-away movement, Seehofer changes posture in his chair; his body moves more towards Merkel, while his mouth slightly mirrors Merkel's mouth opening, though his shoulders remain in an embarrassed, lowered position (Figure 4e). Therefore, in this moment, the bodies move simultaneously in opposite directions but still remain in a facing formation, wearing opposite but complementary body postures; Merkel's body is 'open', while Seehofer's is 'closed.' By co-participating in each other's body movement and postures in this manner, Merkel and Seehofer collaboratively recognize the awkwardness of 'failing' to greet appropriately, and perform face work.

At the same time, it is possible to hear that overhearers not visible in the camera co-participate affectively in the encounter, laminating the action with laughter (Figures 4e–g). This reconstructs the face-threatening situation as an event that invites laughter, thus attending to the delicacy of the situation and upgrading interpersonal intimacy (Goffman,

1955; Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff, 1987; Katila and Philipsen, in press). Moreover, after Merkel's embarrassed and surprised posture in Figure 4e, the woman next to Merkel as well as Seehofer shift into smiling facial expressions (Figure 4f), collaboratively shaping the affective atmosphere as humorous.

Furthermore, in Figure 4f, the woman gazes at Seehofer, while taking hold of and 'shaking' her own hand. Through this self-touch greeting to Seehofer she brings to the fore the saliency of hands and touch by providing a form of embodied meta-commentary on what is being laughed about. At the same time (Figure 4f), Merkel raises the palm of her hand facing Seehofer, while lowering her gaze down and away, her body gestalt (Mondada, 2014: 140) commenting on the necessity of halting the action of handshaking while providing a type of a wave gesture to greet from a distance.

Merkel then, in Figure 4g, enters back into a facing formation with Seehofer to monitor his reactions to her gesture. They smile and look at each other to reconcile, while the woman, positioned between Merkel and Seehofer, produces a cross gesture with her hands, which concretely conveys that handshaking is forbidden. Her combined gestures signal a rejection of the activity of hand shaking while collapsing into laughter. In a next move, in Figure 4h, Merkel once more upgrades her remedial actions by walking towards Seehofer, and putting both of her hands up to display that handshaking must stop. At the same time, she explicitly states, "That is the right thing to do" (Figure 4h). The action is co-participated in by Seehofer with both a smile and mutual gaze, but he is not putting any more corporeal effort into the action—his body tacitly communicating about his inability to touch by ceasing the movement of his hands.

This encounter happens in the time of coronavirus when the number of confirmed cases had risen in Germany. Seehofer's noncompliance with Merkel's gesture would have been treated as a violation of the interaction ritual for greeting and a face-threatening act on his part in another time. Given the current situation Merkel is the one who produces a number of facework actions to reconcile and account for initiating the handshaking. However, it is not only Merkel who produces the remedial work. Seehofer participates in her apologetic bodily behavior by providing moment-by-moment complementary body movement in synch with Merkel's gestures, bodily postures, and movement. Moreover, the potential

embarrassment influences all co-present, and we can witness how overhearing coparticipants partake in reformulating the emotional atmosphere from collaborative embarrassment to laughable.

This extract yet again shows how greeting rituals are essential for maintaining and renewing social bonds: not only those who directly participate in the greeting, but also those who are publicly seen to evidence the greeting. Given that the occasion is performed by politicians, video-recorded and seen by a wider public, the importance of the remedial action becomes salient in a special way. When not successful, interaction rituals can even become pivotal sources for damaging the social relationship, if necessary remedial work is not done (Goffman, 1971).

However, in Extract 2 and others, we have also witnessed how humans creatively come up with spontaneous bodily trajectories and alternative ways of ‘touching from distance’ to secure their social relationships. This is evidenced in the spontaneous and synchronized body gestures of Merkel and Seehofer, which make publicly available the saliency and relevance of touch, alongside the remedial work done by the woman next to Seehofer and Merkel, and co-laughter of other participants. Hand-gestures, together with laughter, bodily postures and facial expressions, can therefore become crucial forms of intercorporeal connection from a distance, functioning to remedy face-threatening social situations.

Apologizing for touching

In a third example we will examine how the prime minister of Holland, Mark Rutte, apologizes for shaking hands with the scientific representative of the Dutch Institute for Public Health, Jaap van Dissel, with a number of remedial practices such as laughter and touch (from *RTL Nieuws*, March 9, 2020). Prior to the initiation of talk in Extract 3, Rutte has just announced to the public that from now on “we are stopping shaking hands,” but are allowed to “shake feet, touch elbows as you wish.” After that, he reaches his hand towards van Dissel. As health representative, van Dissel may be even more accountable for being seen as taking responsibility for presenting a good example in terms of health practices during COVID-19.

Extract 3

Mark Rutte apologizes for shaking Jaap van Dissel's hand (frame grabs used with permission from the *RTL Nieuws*)



Figure 5a

((Rutte (RUT) shakes hand with van Dissel (DIS)))



Figure 5b

((DIS points towards RUT's hand))



Figure 5c

Rutte: Oh sorry, we cant do that any more.



Figure 5d

Rutte: Sorry, sorry!



Figure 5e

Rutte: Oh NO! NO!
((RUT, DIS and co-participants laugh))



Figure 5f

Rutte: OVER! OVER! OVER!
((continued laughter))



Figure 5g

((RUT and DIS touch each other's elbows))



Figure 5h

((RUT shepherds DIS away from scene))



Figure 5i

((walking together in a haptic formation))



Figure 5j

((RUT taps DIS's back))

In Figure 5a, just after finishing his talk Rutte turns towards van Dissel and initiates a handshake, which is reciprocated by van Dissel. The bodies spend a moment in multisensorially solicited co-presence touching and being touched, gazing and being gazed at (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2003), coordinating the salutation rhythmically with two beats of hands shaking together (Kendon, 1986: 247–8).

After the handshake, Rutte starts to withdraw from the encounter. However, Rutte's body movements away from van Dissel are laminated with van Dissel's pointing gesture towards Rutte's hand (Figure 5b). Van Dissel's gesture not only corporeally displays that he is not aligning with finishing the encounter; more importantly it brings into public awareness that Rutte himself has broken the rules of tactile communication that he had just declared. Van Dissel's body-posture communicates blame towards Rutte; he dons an 'offended' face, while his hands are pointing towards the 'crime-scene,' Rutte's hands. Even though Rutte is not at this point directly gazing at van Dissel, van Dissel's expressions are still in his field of experience.

Accordingly, in Figure 5c, van Dissel then turns his body back towards Rutte, who is actually turning away and shrinking his body to show unwillingness to touch. In spite of van Dissel's withdrawn body posture, Rutte thunders towards him, grasps him with both hands in a move of apology, while van Dissel allows it to happen with minimal commitment (Figure 5d). Rutte does that one thing that he is not supposed to do in the time of corona – touches van Dissel even more. While engaged in this haptic formation, both Rutte and van Dissel wear embarrassed facial expressions (Heath, 1988), avoiding direct mutual gaze while laminating the action with awkward smiles which seek to remedy the insult. As has been shown in the context of family interactions (M.H Goodwin, 2017; M.H. Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018), touch can be important for reconciling 'insults' in relationship practices. Moreover, these tactile practices for maintaining social bonds are so deeply rooted that they are prioritized over 'following the rules' of hygiene and health, even in this high-stakes situation.

The touching does not end here. Rutte tries to grasp van Dissel's elbow, perhaps already trying to choreograph an elbow-bump posture (Figure 5e); however, van Dissel then takes hold of Rutte's elbow and lightly pushes it away (Figure 5f). In Figures 5e and 5f, Rutte is

laminating the action with vocal metacommentary (“Oh NO! NO! OVER! OVER! OVER!”) while glancing towards the audience a couple of times and managing the awkwardness of the situation with laughter, much like we saw in Extract 2 as well. The bodies negotiate the aboutness of the situation and their embodied postures through haptic actions; together their body movements attempt to engage in a shared rhythm. The bodies assemble themselves into an elbow-bump posture, which is performed towards the audience. Moreover, due to the special corporeal design of our hands and elbows on the ‘sides’ of our bodies, an elbow bump is also harder to produce than a handshake with bodies facing directly each other.

Rutte and van Dissel in Figure 5h walk way ‘together’ (Goffman, 1971: 19), in a haptic formation (Figure 3i). With a friendly tap on van Dissel’s shoulder (Figure 5j), Rutte (in Figures 5h–5j) ‘shepherds’ (Cekaite, 2010) van Dissel from the stage. In politics as well as in family interaction (Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018) such moves provide visible displays of who has the power to physically guide the other into a new social space. Thus the relationships of participants are once again reconfigured. Interestingly, without the need for haptic negotiation of new practices and having to reconcile the habitualized practice, the two would not have walked together away from the scene in an intimate formation like we witness here. In one way, the shared experience brought the bodies closer, instantiated by the highly performative nature of the encounter.

Humans, as other primates, utilize touch in moments of reconciliation for social relationships (de Waal and van Roosmalen, 1979). These social relationships are not only consequential for the individuals, but also for entire nations, as heads of state are stand-ins or representatives of entire nations. In this respect, following the rules of social distancing appear to take second place of maintaining social relationships.

Discussion

Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological perspective attempted to make the familiar “seen but unnoticed” (ibid: 36) visible and to find ways to talk about familiar things. His famous breaching experiments were designed to violate the commonly accepted social norms to seek people’s reactions. In the time of coronavirus, the world became a locus for natural

breaching experiments as all of a sudden the everyday lives and familiar interaction practices of people around the world were disrupted by the virus, and people needed to creatively come up with new ways of interacting and maintaining their social relationships. Moreover, the ‘seen but unnoticed’ importance of taken for granted practices like haptic interactional rituals became suddenly salient in a special way.

In this paper, we discussed some distinctive features of human sociality in the time of coronavirus. In addition to describing some instances from our everyday life observations, we analyzed in detail three different naturally occurring cases where politicians negotiated their haptic interaction rituals. When one party initiated a conventional form of handshaking, we found, that the other party could repair the handshaking initiation by initiating a less intimate manner of greeting (Extract 1); decline touching (Extract 2); or apologize for touching the other (Extract 3). Most importantly, our cases revealed that when a violation of the social distancing rule occurred, remedial work for maintaining each other’s face and social relationships was critical. We found that politicians adapted their whole bodies, alongside with talk, gestures and laughter not only to accomplish the greeting, but also to remedy the potentially face-threatening situation of not getting the greeting right. What is more, not only the parties involved in the greeting, but also others co-present who were publicly seen to witness the violation, participated affectively in the shared emotion, remedying embarrassment with laughter, smiling facial expressions, and gestures, which reformulated the face-threatening awkwardness as a ‘laughable’ (Goffman, 1955; Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff, 1987). Accordingly, moments of embodied negotiations over relationship rituals between politicians involved onlookers as well as principals; all co-present parties in the shared intercorporeal space participated in the affective frame through their embodied actions.

By describing in detail, the transformation in habitual forms of haptic rituals, our study contributes to our understanding of the influence of our bodies with respect to the materiality of interactional practices. We are living bodies, and we can contaminate others through disease; when our safety is threatened, this influences the trajectories of our ordinary interaction routines. However, our cases also provide evidence that we are, in a very primordial sense, social beings. For example, our analysis shows that in the most face-

threatening moments when a violation occurred, reconciliation seemed to take priority over the physical distancing rules (See Extract 3).

In the process of writing this article, the situation with the coronavirus has been constantly developing. Our cases involving politicians represented a time (March 2020) at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in US, Holland, and Germany, and the restrictions for interaction rituals such as greetings and face-coverings have become even more strict ever since, even among politicians. While being unable to capture the whole timeline of the coronavirus, and having examined only a few selective cases, our analysis sheds light on the creativity of human beings to design new ways of co-participating in their social relationships, which are locally negotiated novel samples of human sociality. Supporting previous findings from family settings (Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018), we discovered that touch played an important role as a feature of relationship ritual in institutional encounters as well, even during the corona - not only as a form of greeting, but also as a way of remedying social relationships.

However, we also find that touch is not only physical. Even when physical touch was banned, our self-ethnographic observations as well as microanalysis of politicians' handshakes exemplified well that other forms of intercorporeal connection, such as walking and appreciating nature together, greeting from a distance, self-touch in the presence of others, gesturing, and co-laughter were adopted to share an affective moment, and acknowledge the other person and the social relationships. Moreover, our everyday observations showed that human beings creatively find ways to "touch at depth" with each other. As described by Tahhan (2013: 52), "*Touching at depth* is the moment of meeting, intimacy and love[...] it is the felt quality of connection, a relational existence between people." (*emphasis added*)

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Appendix: Data sources

The pictures used in the transcription (in Extract 1, 2, and 3) are frame grabs from videos published in the following sources.

Extract 1: Trump corrects his manner of handshaking

“Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Conference”. White House Webpage *whitehouse.gov*. March 13, 2020.

URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference-3/>

Extract 2: Seehofer rejects shaking hands with Merkel

Frame grabs were used with permission from Courtesy of Guardian News & Media Ltd.

Caroline Davies, “Elbow-bumps and footshakes: the new coronavirus etiquette”, *The Guardian*. March 3, 2020.

URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/elbow-bumps-and-footshakes-the-new-coronavirus-etiquette>

Extract 3: Mark Rutte apologizes for shaking Jaap van Dissel’s hand

Frame grabs were used with permission from the *RTL Nieuws*.

“Sorry! Sorry! Oeps: Rutte schudt hand na afkondigen handenschudverbod”, *RTL Nieuws*, March 9, 2020.

URL: <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/video/video/5050092/oeps-rutte-schudt-hand-na-afkondigen-handenschudverbod>

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