

Touch and Affect: Analysing the Archive of Touch Biographies

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This article examines touch and its significance from an affect studies perspective. Touch makes our bodies more-than-one in a very concrete way, yet in body and affect research it has largely remained a philosophical abstraction, with few empirical explorations. Our theoretical deliberations are based on empirical material consisting of ‘touch biographies’ written by people of various backgrounds in the 2010s in Finland. The biographies are embodied-affective data, and our analysis of them offers a novel perspective on the ways touch forms a part of affective relations and communal history. Touch works in and between bodies through affects in social bonds. Moreover, the exploration of touch biographies demonstrates that people draw upon different affective repertoires, and their experiences concerning touch are highly variable. The touch biographies highlight diverse and multi-temporal ways of attuning to, registering and recognising the social as it happens. Furthermore, our discussion opens up a new perspective on the study of affective privilege and inequality.

Keywords: touch, affect, affective history, embodied-affective data, social bonds, Finland

Introduction

Often and much in my life I have longed for human closeness as well as a sincere, warm and gentle touch. Much love flows between you when you're hand in hand and only the heart speaks. (Kaija, b. 1944)

Could an exploration of touch offer useful aspects for the study of affective social relations? Can theories of affect shed new light on scholarly work on the sense of touch? This article suggests so, even though it has been claimed that the association between touch and affect is too obvious for in-depth scholarly work (Sedgwick, 2003: 17). Furthermore, we assume that the exploration of touch produces knowledge of the ways in which affect works in the social (see Ringrose and Renold, 2014: 773). We propose that touch is a central part of affective histories, and thus a relevant object of study from the perspective of intersubjective, familial, communal and social ties. We base our theoretical deliberations on empirical material from ‘touch biographies’ written by ordinary Finnish people of various backgrounds. In their accounts, altogether 68 authors narrate their lives through the ways in which they have touched, been touched, experienced touch and been socialised to touch. These focuses were specified in a public call for entries to a writing competition, which the first author announced in cooperation with the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (FLS) in 2011. These touch biographies provide affectively loaded accounts of diverse experiences, and as such speak to the psychological significance of touch. By examining this affective archive

of touch, we reveal the varied affective repertoires that are enacted in, through and in retreat from touch. By ‘affective repertoire’ we refer to a particular way of describing one’s experiences of touch during the life course. Some people associate touch with warmth and care, some with pain and humiliation. For others, the repertoire is best described in terms of lack, as our analysis will demonstrate. Not only do people have different affective repertoires concerning touch, but the ways they register touch may also differ because of their personal histories. This highlights how different people might feel a similar kind of touch in different ways.

Touch is an everyday medium for meaningful intercorporeal acts, in both human-only interactions and those between humans and non-humans. However, it has received little attention and is often taken for granted (Classen, 2005a: 1; Paterson, 2005: 161), perhaps due to its historical status as the ‘lowest’ human sense in western thinking (Synnott, 1997: 128–145). Some research on tactile contact has been conducted. Cultural histories of the sense of touch have traced its shifting status and meanings in Europe (e.g. Classen, 2012; Harvey, 2003), while cultural anthropologists have considered cross-cultural variations in hierarchies of the senses and the role of touch in their interplay (e.g. Goody, 2002; Howes, 2010; Howes and Classen, 2014).

Evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists have considered touch as a vital form of human bonding, especially for children (e.g. Field, 1995; Jablonski, 2006; Montagu, 1971). The importance of skin contact in early object relations has been discussed by psychoanalysts (Anzieu, 1989; Bick, 1968; Lafrance, 2009; see also Walkerdine, 2010), and touch’s role in everyday communication has been observed in psychological studies (e.g. Cecaite, 2015; Dibiasse and Gunnoe, 2004; Hertenstein et al., 2009). Psychological studies have also discussed the importance of touch in emotion regulation, including interpersonal co-regulation (Coan et al., 2006; Debrot et al., 2013; Gross, 1998). The most systematic branch of empirical research on touch concerns its use in nursing (e.g. Dobson et al., 2002; Estabrooks, 1989; Leonard and Kalman, 2015). However, these studies do not foreground affective intercorporeality in the context of touch, whereas we elaborate on how touch ‘functions’ in and between bodies through affects.

Anthropologists have provided particularly rich insights into such issues as the indispensability of sensory practices for understanding social ties and have long recognised the affective component of ‘we-ness’, especially in ritual contexts (see Skoggard and Waterston, 2015). The anthropology of the senses sensitises us to the multiple ways in which humans communicate through non-linguistic modalities. It also directs our attention to ‘structured’ sensations and feelings, i.e. the social regulation of corporeal practices and experiences in a particular time and cultural context (cf. Classen, 2012). However, by drawing upon notions from affect theory, we seek to enrich anthropological understandings of the interplay or even inseparability between touch and affects in particular. Our analysis demonstrates that touching habits are best understood not as a mere collection of cultural norms, but rather as deeply embodied and experienced psychically. Consequently, we will argue that touch is a vital part of affective histories and related power relations.

We extend our discussion from particular acts of touching to intergenerational and communal affective processes where touch is present even though its significance often remains unrecognised and unconscious. Our elaboration has been inspired by Valerie Walkerdine (2010) and Luis Jimenez (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012) who highlight the affective aspects of social relations and identify the importance of non-discursive affective practices (e.g. Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012: 51). Practices, psychical processes, ideologies, habits, norms and socio-economic conditions interrelate in complex ways, and the biographical narratives on touch make sense within these constituents of the ‘affective history’ of Finland. In her discussion of affective history, Walkerdine (2016: 700) stresses that the ghosts of past experiences, transmitted across generations, shape present experiences. This has been extremely important for us when trying to catch the specific tones of touch biographies.

Touch biographies

I come from probably the most touch-phobic region in the entire world, Ostrobothnia. In my family or kin we don't hug, we barely talk. When we meet we shake hands at most, be it informal or formal, and even when the last encounter took place many decades ago. I do not remember sitting in my parents' laps. As an adult, I have hugged them a couple of times.
(Kinnunen, 2013: 1)

The initial idea for studying touch arose from the first author's wondering whether her impressions of Finnish culture as ‘touch evasive’ were widely shared, and whether her own memory of receiving little touch during childhood was a common one. Further, she was fascinated by the notion that lived ‘skinscapes’ (Howes, 2010), including their natural and social elements, vary across cultures, as do symbolic and affective ways to touch – or avoid it (e.g. Finnegan, 2005; Howes, 2010). The realisation that the tactile history of her own hands was quite different from her mother's or grandfather's was startling; touch is regulated across cultures according to gender, age and class, for example. Touch also structures cultural lives, values and practices, and is a ‘fundamental medium for expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies’ (Classen, 2005a: 1). Kinnunen finally decided to write a book on ‘Finnish touching culture’, combining autobiographical extracts (the book starts with the passage cited above) with the touch biographies of other people. We have not come across the genre of ‘touch biography’ elsewhere, so the data is unique.

The competition Kinnunen announced together with the FLS was titled ‘Touch in Finland: warmth, fear or trust?’, and this resonated with many accounts in the biographies submitted to the competition. The participants were not asked to write about ‘affect’, and it was likely the term would be unknown to most of them. Kinnunen's theoretical interest was not in any case in affect theories at that time. However, the idea was to see how her own affective experiences of touch resonated in fellow Finns– what

kinds of response the call would evoke in the writers. It was anticipated that the participants would not necessarily have reflected on their personal histories from the perspective of touch before, and many writers' comments confirmed this. In this sense, the writing competition was an initiative for an 'evocative' cultural writing where the participants' experiences and feelings were foregrounded and put into dialogue with the scholar's own autoethnographic accounts (see Skoggard and Waterston, 2015). As a result, the authors reflected on touch in their biographies, including a wide range of affective experiences.

Two major groups contributed to the competition. Firstly, 43 touch biographies were submitted by the FLS Archive's own writers' network. Of these, 38 were by women and only five by men, which was itself a gendered affective response to the call. The writers were mainly elderly women, and the majority were retired. Secondly, Kinnunen asked a group of students in higher education to contribute to the collection as part of courses she taught during the 2010s. Twenty-five female students responded to the call; 22 of them were in their 20s. In all cases, participation was voluntary and the accounts were anonymised. Here, some details in the biographies have also been altered for the sake of anonymity.

The touch biographies provided accounts of non-human touch, ranging from pets to natural elements. However, our focus in this article is on human touch, which was also the most pivotal form of touch for the majority of the authors. The importance of human touch also became evident in accounts where the authors wrote about the absence of caring touch. Kinnunen was affectively moved by the fact that numerous older writers said they had only a few memories of caring touch during their childhoods, and that this had somehow determined their relationships in later life. Many of the authors were suffering from the cumulative trauma of an environmental failure to provide care (see Clough, 2016: 11). The younger women's touch biographies told quite different stories, yet their accounts too were shaped by particular affective histories where the habits of generations, classes, genders and families played a part. In this sense, our discussion concerns 'Finnish' culture, of which both touch and its absence have been a vital part. Since we hope our contribution opens up new insights into how sociocultural patternings and repatternings of touch occur through affect, we therefore now turn to a closer look at the relations between touch and affect.

Touch and affect

Touch is a concrete, perceivable and expressive act, understandable in its cultural contexts, as cultural anthropologists have emphasised. We learn a 'tactile code of communication that underpins the ways in which we engage with other people and the world... we learn what to touch, how to touch, and what significance to give different kinds of touch' (Classen, 2005b: 13). It is noteworthy, though, that culture does not straightforwardly regulate touch; touch also constitutes bodies and their affective interconnectedness. As pointed out above, culture does not provide us with a mere collection of norms, but rather foregrounds affective relations where we experience

touch in embodied and psychical ways. Responses to touch depend not only on socialisation to touch, but simultaneously also on specific acts and situations, as our analysis of touch biographies will demonstrate. Therefore we believe that research on touch gains analytical depth from affect theories which, despite their varied articulations (see Blackman, 2012: 9; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012: 115; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 3), highlight the importance of the body and intercorporeality.

Like many scholars, we see affect as calling into question the boundaries between mind and body, affect and experience. We consider affect as an umbrella term that refers to various senses, sensations, feelings and embodied emotions, as well as to registers of experience best described as trans-subjective, non-conscious, incorporeal and immaterial (see Blackman, 2012: 4). Both affect and touch are said to be ambivalent, simultaneously active and passive in operation, and to entail the diametricality of affecting and being affected (Paterson, 2005: 163). Touch makes our bodies more-than-one: one cannot touch without being touched. It is questionable whether touch itself can be categorised as an affect, although previously it has been so (e.g. Fox, 2015: 9). Nonetheless, touch can generate and intensify affects, even though the ways humans respond to touch are not always easy to identify. Affects also generate touches. At all events, the concept of affect enables us to articulate energies, sensations and feelings of, around and within the act of touch.

French philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, Nancy and Derrida have addressed touch, and the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (2011) has written about its relationality, connecting it particularly with feminine sexualities. In sociocultural and feminist theories of the body and/or affect, touch has largely remained a philosophical abstraction, with few empirical explorations. However, we argue that an exploration of touch can utilise affect studies by offering a concrete way to grasp the workings of affect in everyday social settings. It is difficult to imagine another example that would capture in such concrete ways the processes of life and vitality that circulate between bodies (Blackman, 2012: 4). Current work on affect rejects the assumption of bodies as singular and, bounded, searching for new theoretical and methodological innovations to enable the exploration of intercorporeality and trans-subjectivity (e.g. Blackman, 2012; Blackman and Venn, 2010: 8; Seyfert, 2012). Touch is literally about opening into something quite other (Paterson, 2005: 166), and investigating it draws attention (back) to the materiality and the intercorporeality and trans-subjectivity of the body, which affect theories have called for (e.g. Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012: 117). Reading touch biographies has attuned us to consider how bodies with their lived histories and own intentions as well as traces of past bodies are present in tactile encounters. Encounters though (re)constitute the abilities of bodies to affect and be affected upon (cf. Seyfert, 2012: 32) hence challenging the persistence, repetition and power of affective patterns.

Touch biographies are written narratives, and there is an inevitable question about the limitations of textual material for the study of sensory experiences and affects. This issue is regularly raised in affect studies, where many researchers highlight affect as

exceeding human agency and subjectivity. Consequently, affect is seen as beyond language categorisation: at best, semantics and semiotics can provide distorted traces of affect, not a medium for it (Knudsen and Stage, 2015: 4). The very first critical affective experience for a human being is a sensation of literally being held, and in this sense affect and touch are prelinguistic and deeply embodied (Walkerline, 2010: 96). Nevertheless, ‘meaning-making’ is not the same as signification, and we believe that touch biographies document valuable traces of embodied knowledges and affectivities. We did not seek descriptions of affect in single accounts in the belief that the texts would provide a medium for affect; rather, we tried to examine the touch biographies as an archive, and to read different biographies simultaneously, in order to grasp transgenerational, communal and cultural aspects of touch.

Archive of the affective history of Finland

Since the first author’s book was the first of its kind, the cultural specificities and histories of touch in Finland are hard to address. This article can be regarded as a pioneering attempt to open up a discussion of the issue of Finnish touching culture(s). It is still noteworthy that several of the touch biography authors saw Finland as having its own peculiarities – many, for example, considered Finnish culture to be touch-evasive or violent. To better understand the stories submitted, instead of turning to previous studies on touch in Finland – an impossible task – we enriched the data by reading other archive materials, particularly concerning traditional childcare practices. We also familiarised ourselves with studies concerning post-war trauma, which helped to contextualise the biographies under certain socio-material conditions.

Touch was not always named as such in these archive materials, but references to it could be read between the lines even in cases where it was not directly addressed. The touching culture(s) identifiable in the biographies were similar to those present in the other archive materials, and for us this confirmed the significance of touch in affective relations. To sum up some conclusions from this extended archive material, it is noteworthy that although Finland today is a country where children’s rights are emphasised and physical punishment forbidden by law, in Finland’s traditional agrarian culture children were predominantly raised to respect their parents, often with strict discipline and physical punishment. This was justified by the Lutheran doctrine of children as naturally inclined towards wickedness, which could be prevented by ‘pious’ chastisement. It was also in line with German ‘black pedagogy’ and North American pedagogical trends (see Synnott, 1997: 158–162), which advised parents to ignore their babies’ cries and to feed them according to a strict schedule. In Finland, this was still common practice in the 1940s and 1950s, probably due to the pervasive child welfare clinic system and the strong influence of one authoritative paediatrician (who later rejected the views he had previously promoted). Hence the archive materials are also stories of institutional practices and their hold on human subjects (cf. Clough, 2016).

Finland was a poor country with a large agrarian population at the turn of the century, and people had to work very hard to survive. Along with hunger and war, this context

undoubtedly moulded touching habits. Years of oppression at the turn of the century, civil war in 1918, and finally the Winter and Continuation Wars in 1939–1946 were a vast tragedy for Finnish families. Approximately 300,000 children directly suffered from the war as orphans, war children who were sent abroad, or children who lost their homes. The mothers worked hard at home all the time, meaning that older children had to look after their younger siblings. When traumatised fathers returned from the wars, the mothers and children had to take care of them (Kivimäki 2013). The need to manage alone developed into a social virtue during the years of reconstruction. ‘The strong manage alone, the weak in each other’s laps’ is a traditional Finnish saying, found with many variations. You were supposed to survive through hard work and willpower. However, the traumatic experiences continued to ‘haunt’ new generations through silences, distances, violence and mental disorders.

We felt it was important to consider how historical material conditions, political circumstances and social structures inescapably become part of tactile memory, deeply affecting communal psychological processes. This aspect is at the core of Walkerdine and Jimenez’s (2012: 3) psychosocial understanding too: how a community’s affective experiences are produced in response to its social history and present, and transmitted across generations (Walkerdine 2016, 702). In Finland’s case we see a resemblance to Walkerdine and Jimenez’s (2012; Walkerdine 2010) studies of communal trauma following the closure of a steelworks in the South Wales valleys in 2002. They state that the closure of the steelworks meant a rupture in the working community’s affective ties: the loss of a sense of ‘being held’ in communal beingness. They build their analysis on the psychoanalytic works of Esther Bick (1968) and Didier Anzieu (1989) in particular. These authors argue that the psychic skin, which provides us with an affective sense of our boundaries and the experience of the self as whole and safe, depends on the early sensations of being literally held. If the caregiver holds the baby enough, the child’s psychic skin-ego, as Anzieu terms it, feels that it has safe boundaries, and is therefore able to have caring affective relations with others. Conversely, intersubjective bonds bring feelings of being held and contained, and the rupture of these bonds causes a sense of disintegration and loss of being held. Finland’s historical events and ideological trends undoubtedly meant a rupture in both the intergenerational (carnal) and communal senses of being held, each exacerbating the other. In these circumstances, silences and avoidances – ‘behaving as nothing has happened’, as many writers put it – constituted a pervasive form of appropriate modes of being. This was perhaps essential for the survival of the community, but it was not without harmful consequences, as Walkerdine (2010: 109) implies.

Embodied-affective data in historical perspective

The fact that the biographies were written during the 2010s forms a specific backdrop for the narratives they provide. During the 1900s, the ideals concerning ‘good childhood’ shifted drastically in western countries. Attachment theory became the primary model for understanding childhood development, particularly emphasising the

significance of mother-child bonding. This paved the way for intensive parenting and emotional care (Smyth and Craig, 2017). In Finland, attachment theory started to gain popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, whereupon the child's needs were no longer perceived as mainly physical demands. Nevertheless, avoidant attachment strategies are still exceptionally common today among Finnish infants compared with many other countries. Avoidant attachment strategy refers to an insecure attachment model between infant and caregiver. This develops when the child perceives the caregiver as unavailable when a need for protection and comfort arises. The child consequently becomes reticent regarding intimacy, learning to rely on itself. This is culturally valued behaviour in societies such as Finland, where individual independence is encouraged. (Tirkkonen, 2015.) Thus, although living conditions rapidly changed in Finland due to economic growth and new childcare trends, already-established attachment models, and the affective patterns intertwined with them, continued to reoccur and 'haunt' Finns, albeit often unwillingly or unconsciously. However, the narratives are also stories of the pervasiveness of attachment theory and its ideal of intensive parenting, regardless of whether it actually transformed touching habits.

The importance of the specific writing context becomes visible when we consider the touch biographies from the perspective of memorising. For example, the sadness many authors express about the absence of touch is also about memory arising in a historical moment when touch is differently valued and promoted: many of the recalled instances took place decades ago, in very different social situations. Hence, the contemporary accounts cannot be considered as straightforward facts, even though they provide access to some traces of tactile memories. The current fascination with affects results partly from the tendency to view them as a route to explore life in relatively authentic forms, as if uninfluenced by the 'social'. However, affects are not lenses onto 'truth' or 'reality' (see Hemmings, 2012; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012), and it is important to remember this when discussing the relation between touch, affect and memory. The exploration of touch biographies nonetheless provides an opportunity to acknowledge one important circuit through which cultural meanings and social (power) relations are felt, imagined, mediated, negotiated and/or contested (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012). We therefore consider the biographies to include traces of transgenerational affective histories in Finland, which of course are not limited to the destructive ones.

The memories inscribed in narratives are best understood from the perspective of embodied experiences that have psychical relevance. The biographies are examples of embodied-affective data (on embodied data see Walkerdine, 2010), produced by affected persons recalling their past trajectories and constituting their personal temporalities. On the one hand, the authors ponder how touch is embedded as part of everyday life, and they relate that certain patterns felt natural – whether those patterns would be best characterised as caring touch or cruel violence. On the other hand, it is possible to identify several affective peaks (see Knudsen and Stage, 2010: 8): authors say a touch has shaken their soul or even saved their lives, for example. This kind of

affective peak can only be understood against a different naturalness – as a single, ‘different’ touch, felt so strongly that it can be remembered in detail decades later.

Finally, we think that the biographies are useful for thinking the alternative ways in which the social is attuned to, noticed and registered. The methodologies employed in the humanities and social sciences have been criticised for relying on language and sight, and a demand for other ways of noticing has been discussed (Blackman and Venn, 2010). Affects move through bodies in ways that are often difficult to see (see Blackman, 2012), yet the touch biographies display a range of alternative ways of attuning to, noticing and registering the social. The experiences of touch – such as descriptions of warm, cold, tough, genuine, healing or energising touch – shed light on these alternative repertoires, and on how they are shaped in response to particular communal histories. When we speak of touch in Finland, it seems impossible to separate interpersonal and communal touching patterns: they are inseparably tied to each other.

Affective inequalities

It is evident that people have complex relations to touch, and that their experiences differ greatly. Whilst affective repertoires in some biographies emphasise caring and loving touch, others concentrate on reflections of hurtful touch. Of course, people can – and mostly do – have a mixture of experiences. Occasionally the authors state that they have had experiences ‘too heavy to put in this biography’, or they are unable to articulate their painful memories. For some, the ‘bad’ experience occurs when people they do not feel close attempt to hug them, or when a stranger sits next to them on a bus. Others describe intimate violence or constant beatings that seem to become mundane.

Some authors report having remarkably pleasant experiences throughout their lives. Toini, for example, gives the following title to her touch biography: ‘I have never been beaten.’ It seems that she recognises her own privileged position in the self-reflexive account she has produced. Indeed, several authors who were physically disciplined found it unbearable, and even felt that their parents hated them. Toini, by contrast, says the warmth and love between family members was almost tangible in her childhood, and later she received caressing touching from her (late) husband:

All my memories about touch related either to my childhood home or to the home I shared with my husband are only positive. (Toini, b. 1937)

Later in her life Toini too encountered some unwanted experiences. She recalls a few incidences of sexual harassment, but they do not seem to cast doubt on the status of touch as a resource in her life. Her self-narration is an example of what we identify as affective privilege. If privilege is defined as access to resources, maintaining a feeling of being contained, loved and safe (cf. Walkerdine, 2010) throughout one’s life surely constitutes such a privilege. Having access to energising touch and being able to participate in culturally appropriate and valued forms of touching can likewise be seen

as a form of privilege. For Toini, for example, hugging friends and playing with children are ‘natural’, untroubled and pleasurable.

The same kind of affective privilege could be read from several accounts by young women, which probably is telling of a cultural shift concerning touching habits. Still, a notable number of biographies introduce younger authors who have been subjected to violence from the early stages of their lives. Helena has witnessed many kinds of violence, been a victim of violence, and acted violently herself. She encountered physical discipline as a child. She recalls the touching between children in her day care as mainly ‘violent’, and she experienced unwelcome touching by a male teacher at school and other sexual harassment as a pre-teen. Later she cut herself and had several abusive boyfriends. The following extract depicts only a few of her experiences.

There are many occasions when someone has tried to rape me, and my then boyfriend actually raped me when I had passed out. [--] I have hit my mother, who has also shaken and scratched me. [--] My father could take me down with the help of some kind of guardian grip if I was loud and yelled as part of my teenage hysteria. [--] Occasionally, my parents became abusive towards each other. (Helena, b. 1986)

For Helena, acts of touching resonate with a different affective repertoire from that displayed by Toini. Instead of being a resource and a means of human bonding, touch has drained her. Certain affective repertoires became normalised in her life, as neither family, lovers nor educational institutions protected her from violence. For us, it seems possible that in her childhood, Helena’s body learned a specific affective register where touch was experienced *as* violence – no matter whether all touches, for instance between children were violent. In any case, Helena’s repertoire of touch, and ways to register touch, have changed. She now has several pleasant memories of touch, and says that touching is ‘solely a positive thing’ in her current situation, where she finds it difficult to accept that she has passed the violent behaviour on.

Our analysis of the touch biographies produces knowledge of the ways in which the affective realm serves as a ground for social difference and inequality. Just as there are many writers who recognise their own affective privilege, there are many who recognise their misfortune or disadvantage. Some explain this by referring to general societal conditions, while others speak of family inheritance or bad luck. In any case, we suggest that experiences of touch as part of affective processes should be identified as sites of privilege and disadvantage. Not only do people have different affective repertoires concerning touch, but it also seems that the affective registers available to them become differentiated.

The body’s inability to act

At that time something unfortunate, which I haven’t bothered to recount, also happened. I brought the wrong person home, and they didn’t

understand I didn't want to have sex. At night they came inside me and I remember something broke at that time because I didn't want it. (Heidi, b. 1984)

In some cases, being touched inappropriately manifests itself as the body's incapacity to act and/or be acted upon. The extract above does not directly name the act it describes; it simply calls it unfortunate. Heidi briefly states 'something broke at that time,' which we see as an affective trace of being raped and the trauma that followed. Indeed, the feeling of breaking is characteristic of trauma, and refers to disintegration as a result of a loss of the sense of containment (Walkerdine, 2010: 97; also Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012: 53). One way affect discloses itself is through traces, gaps and absences (Blackman, 2015). We think the language here – especially the rupture in its texture – is capable of expressing affect or traces of it (Knudsen and Stage, 2015: 4). This kind of writing also makes it clear that traumatic memories do not occur primarily in a verbal register. Instead, they are often unrepresentable and unspeakable (Blackman, 2010; Smith and Watson, 2010: 28). This makes visible the difference between affect and affectivity. Heidi does not refer to a single affect; rather, the affectivity can be read between the lines.

Heidi goes on to write about hurtful touch and its close connection with her sexual realm. She says that 'pain will stick in your mind and become a bogey.' Here again, without using the vocabulary of sexual violence, she articulates a trace we interpret as referring to a trauma. The disappearance of the past is among the common symptoms of trauma (Brisson, 1997: 23), and in Heidi's case trauma restricts the way she memorises the past. However, she refers to a process of breaking, which does have a temporal dimension: something that once was in its place is no longer there, and she is not the same person as before. Again, this can be seen as a reference to a violation of the affective sense of her boundaries resulting from a traumatic experience.

Jenni's life today is also haunted by a trauma. Jenni was sexually abused as a child. She says her trauma was activated recently, since she met her abuser again. In her biography, the border between past and present is blurred in a specifically embodied way (see Blackman, 2015). Jenni suffers from several psychosomatic symptoms and is about to lose her will to live.

I am 26 now. [--] Don't know if I want to live until my next birthday. (Jenni, b. 1988)

She writes that the only thing that helps is crying in the lap of her beloved partner. She also says her partner's body has become an exclamation mark, and adds that she is not sure how she can manage to carry on a relationship. Affect marks the body's belonging as well as non-belonging to the world and society (cf. Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 2), and in Jenni's case the trauma generates intense feelings of non-belonging, as she cannot help but feel out of place from time to time, even in her own relationship.

Violence is a way to reinforce hierarchies and pull subjects apart. The idea of the porosity of the skin and the permeability of bodies, much elaborated in affect theories, thus has little explanatory power with regard to violent relationships. Instead of blurring boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' or self and Other, affects can dynamically produce social asymmetry. The next author dedicates a great deal of her touch biography to remembering her mother. Johanna seems to be doing some kind of emotion work to cope with the contradictions of her childhood. She and her mother have apparently been very close, but Johanna criticises her mother, whom she describes as suffering from low self-esteem. However, she seems to understand and defend her.

My mother was really bothered about what other people thought, she didn't really have opinions of her own as she was so insecure. She didn't want to spank me, but still somehow believed that was what she was supposed to do, on the basis of her own childhood. [--] Once she beat me on my thighs with a belt, but I noticed she too got scared because of that. (Johanna, b. 1966)

Touch may get its power from the hierarchy between the one touching and the one being touched, as is the case with physical punishment. However, the extract above draws attention to the way affects later override the asymmetry between a punishing parent and a punished child. Johanna interprets her mother's violence as extending beyond the actual situation she describes, as she sees violence as part of an intergenerational affective history rather than associating it with the mother-daughter relationship per se. This serves to distance the violence from her intimate relationship with her mother. Further, the recognition of her mother's fear seems to enable the maintenance of a close relationship.

Recollections of damaging touch demonstrate how touch can blur or shrink experiences of space-time. The writers with traumatic experiences seem to have lost their sense of temporal being (see Brison, 1997: 22) and their ability to construct a temporal narrative of their lives, as can be read in Heidi's and Jenni's biographies. Rather than being a narrative, trauma is an experience that recurs, often causing sensory flashbacks that immobilise the body (Brison, 1997). Johanna for her part is looking for evidence of certain affects so as to be able to continue to bond with her mother. By rationalising her mother's behaviour and explaining it in an emphatic way, she is able to control her own affective responses and constitute an understandable temporal narrative of her past.

Sticky affectivities

Several touch biographies describe attempts to transform ways of touching and being touched. The following extract was written by an elderly woman who has no memories of sitting in her mother's lap, and who stayed with a violent partner for decades. Now she characterises her second marriage as a 'dream come true', and writes that she has recovered from all traumas and can touch others with open arms – except her siblings.

The following quotation shows how affects can be the site of change and transformation as well as sites that arrest, stick and solidify (Blackman, 2012):

She visited us seldom but always brought something nice for me. She once asked me to sit on her lap but I didn't because I was shy and the touch of an adult felt strange and repulsive. I was perhaps seven. When I refused, my older sister grabbed me and hauled me onto the aunt's lap. I cried and managed to escape to another room. [--]

In my opinion hugs [--] are empowering and warming. In the end, I have to note that as an inheritance from our home, we seven sisters have never, as children, adults or elderly people, hugged each other. (Esteri, b. 1943)

Esteri's biography gives us an idea of the persistence, repetition and power of affective patterns. As a child, she became so used to the absence of caring touch that when it suddenly happened she panicked. Her story is not exceptional, as many of the elderly writers say they have suffered from the lack of caressing touch throughout their lives. Although this did not really happen with Esteri, she nevertheless describes how habits of touch and a shared affective past recur in the sisters' mutual encounters in an 'unexplainable' way. Esteri's biography underlines that the personalisation of affect is a product of relational histories made up of repeated interactions, narratives and habitual body routines (see Wetherell, 2012: 121).

As discussed above, the touch biographies include references to traumatic experiences. Especially when trauma is understood as the body's incapacity to act, lack of touch alters the ways in which bodies are (in)capable of acting. However, not all inabilities or incapacities should be read as evidence of trauma. The following example rather manifests an affective pattern adopted during childhood than a trauma. Marianne is a mature woman who did not receive caring touch as a child; nor did her mother protect her from her violent father. Later, when her mother was seeking a caring touch, Marianne's body refused to comply.

Two years later my mother had a cerebral infarction. I visited her at the hospital just two days prior to her death. [--] She was about to cry, but even in that situation I just couldn't touch her, I just chatted about all sorts of things. I tried to feel guilty about that, but found that impossible is impossible. (Marianne, b. 1940)

Her biography also highlights again the ways in which the here and now is marked by a number of different and asymmetrical experiential temporalities (Lewis, 2010: 222): her past seems to come to life when she and her mother are supposed to touch, and she simply cannot do it. The absence of caressing, loving touch in Marianne's childhood haunts her relationship with her mother throughout her life. This and other narratives of absence or lack can be viewed as stories about the ghostly traces of touch, and about

how the relational nature of experience remains alive and well in/through the repertoire of lack, longing and absence.

Marja-Leena is an old woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Although she starts her touch biography by writing that the topic does not really interest her, she manages to write many pages about her childhood. Her account forcefully illustrates how the past comes alive in the moment of writing, and how affects reach beyond chronological time. Affects do not follow the linear ticking of the clock (Wetherell, 2012); rather, they are defined by their rippling effect – they move sideways as well as backwards (Ahmed, 2004). The disease might have contributed to the intensity Marja-Leena re-experiences the agonizing events of the past. She writes that she got a headache from writing down memories concerning a painful period in her life, and she therefore had to stop writing. She has written in the margin:

If I look back at that time, I start to shake. (Marja-Leena, b. 1931)

By 'that time' she means her childhood, when she worked as a maid in a household where she was slapped, punched and psychologically abused. She says she 'survived' but would give that period away if she only could. Now the memory of these past events has power to shake her, even though they took place many decades ago. Her touch biography emphasises that touching bodies are particular bodies with their own intersubjective histories, social positions, intentions and so on. Marja-Leena had only meagre means to improve her life in post-war Finland, especially as she came from a poor family. Her mother actually had to give her to a foster home, but Marja-Leena voluntarily left that home, ending up working as a maid when she was 11 years old. At that time she was both a minor and a dependant, and the housewife could beat her as a consequence of her superior position in terms of generation, class and status.

The biographers demonstrate that people often feel obliged – however reluctantly or even unconsciously – to repeat the touching habits they have been socialised into throughout their lives. This includes how ways of touching persistently resonate with past experiences, even though people struggle to change existing habits and patterns. This demonstrates the limits of individual agency. It further illustrates that some bodies are more vulnerable than others because of their social positioning, while some are also rendered more vulnerable than others as a result of socialisation into certain affective patterns.

Transforming healing touch

Some accounts describe fleeting moments that are pregnant with meaning and carry tremendous significance beyond their immediate contexts. Helka writes that she has had two 'soul-turning' experiences of touch in her life. The first of these was in her early school years, when she hurt herself in gymnastics. The teacher rushed over to her, took her onto her lap and asked how she was. Helka burst into tears – of affection, not pain, as she was not used to receiving any caring touch from her parents.

I couldn't stop crying, no matter how hard I tried. [--] It was more than my little heart could bear, it was a new experience. (Helka, b. 1942)

Another revolutionary experience took place in her early teens, when her older sister, to Helka's surprise, braided her hair. Again, she burst into tears. Helka writes that her 'longing for warmth, home and lap' has remained throughout her life, and her 'skin is still yearning'. However, she writes that she has been able to be tender towards her own children. Her touch biography suggests that this can be explained by these two pivotal experiences, which widened the affective repertoire she had become used to in her childhood.

The following memory comes from a touch biography entitled 'The nurse I will not forget'. It describes a single act of hugging, yet the hug is characterised as life-saving. It is written by a young woman, Hanna, who was hospitalised after a suicide attempt. Hanna recalls that her misery went unrecognised, as the staff believed that she had been in an accident. One day a 'different' nurse managed to encounter and touch her in a healing way. It remains unidentified what exactly 'saved' her life, but she recalls both the rhythm and the intensity of the footsteps, the quality of touch, and the words of this nurse.

The steps were soft, much softer than the rest, strong... and they stopped. I closed my eyes but the steps did not continue. 'Just go,' I thought. Warm hands landed slowly on my shoulders. 'It's going to snow soon,' the new arrival said, 'the last leaves are already falling, but you are not allowed to fall with them. Fight no matter how much it hurts. Imagine there is a lovely boy somewhere out there waiting for you, and if something happens to you he will be broken-hearted, waiting for the rest of his life, because he never got a chance to know you.' I started to cry. The new arrival just put her arms around me and held me tightly but safely. For a long time I just cried and cried, but the new arrival did not leave... and saved my life. (Hanna, b. 1985)

Heterosexual future trajectories play a significant part in the way a new future is imagined in this touch biography. This imaginary trajectory seems to revitalise the author, together with the healing touch. Touch does not only refer to the concrete act where skin serves as the surface; the body is not bound by the skin (Blackman, 2010: 170). Discussing 'touch therapies', Paterson (2005: 166) writes that they aim to go beyond the skin and 'deeply into the affective realm'. Similarly, in the extract above affectivity is registered through touch, and touch does not only refer to the concrete, perceivable act. As Walkerdine (2010: 95) reminds us, intersubjective bonds can also evoke feelings of being held, contained, safe and alive. Here, a single act of hugging restores these feelings. The memory also points to the manifold temporal dimensions of affect: the hug in itself is forceful enough to transform the experience of time. The hug ends the suicidal period and starts a new life path.

It can be surmised from the touch biographies that most participants were more likely to write about affectively intense experiences than about the everyday. Even though affect does not need to be especially forceful (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 2), several authors connected such intense experiences to their own psychical well-being. The extracts above speak to the might of touch, since they demonstrate that sometimes no more than a single touch is needed to transform someone's life. It is not only about the physical act itself, though – rather, the affective energy sensed in the communication appears to be the most significant factor. The fact that touch is experienced as healing and empowering again highlights the relational nature of bodies, and of the happenings of the social. It also speaks to the importance of touch as a vital part of social bonds.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed how touch is shaped, experienced and interpreted through cultural processes. We have analysed touch biographies written in Finland in the early 2010s. The biographies are embodied-affective data, and our analysis of them offers a novel perspective on how touch works in and between bodies through affects. Both mundane acts of touching and avoiding touch are part of affective relations and communal history. In particular, the focus has been on the ways how touch generates and intensifies affects in sociocultural realms. Yet touch also represses, twists or neutralises previous affects, mediates already-existing affects, transfers one's current affective state and so on, as our analysis has demonstrated.

The biographies reveal different affective repertoires, and this has sensitised us to affective inequalities. Some authors associate touch predominantly with care, love, closeness and energetic warmth. In these biographies, touch is registered as a lifelong resource, thus representing a kind of privileged affective repertoire. Other authors conspicuously associate touch with traumatic experiences such as child abuse or sexual violence. Touch biographies suggest that this kind of affective repertoire has narrowed the way several authors register touch in actual situations. A specific kind of affective repertoire around mixed feelings of deprivation, longing and haunting pain can also be read and felt in the biographies. A lack of touch has even traumatised several authors. In some accounts, a single 'transforming' touch is experienced as healing, a sort of affective peak capable of restoring the sensation of being held and thus contributing to psychic well-being.

Our exploration of touch biographies and other historical materials as an affective archive has shed light on affective relationships in intersubjective, familial, social and communal relations. Following the discussion of how affective histories shape the present, and of how sensory relations are responses to particular social histories (Walkerline 2010; 2016), we have analysed touch biographies in the context of particular psychohistorical and ideological conditions in Finland, such as collective post-war trauma and childcare ideals. Some ways of touching, such as violent touching or the absence of caring touch, were unbearable or traumatic for many authors. However, we propose that absences and silences can be interpreted as essential for the

reconstruction of the post-war community and for communal survival under harsh conditions (Walkerdine, 2010: 108–109), even though the consequences for individuals were often harmful.

In our theoretical elaboration, we have brought studies on touch together with affect theories. Touch calls attention to the body as deeply relational in conscious and unconscious, willing and unwilling ways (cf. Skoggard and Waterston, 2015), and to the ways in which affects circulate between bodies. Indeed, affect is itself an active agent that ‘works’ in and across human bodies, also without any intentional human agency, as we have stressed in our analysis. Also this way, the touch biographies highlight the intercorporeal and trans-subjective aspects of (human) life, and decentre the idea of autonomous individual subjects. Even though the term ‘biography’ privileges the autonomous individual, touch biographies are also histories from in-between. Our analysis of the biographies has shed light on the ways in which subjects/bodies are neither entirely open nor closed (see Blackman, 2012: 23). Touch and affectivities intertwined with/in/through it always exceed the individual body, and are sites of both repetition and change.

Getting hold of the way touch is experienced and felt requires attunement to alternative registers and repertoires. Lisa Blackman (2012: 25) writes about a methodological sensitivity that requires many eyes and ears and can work with traces, gaps, absences, submerged narratives and displaced actors in order to shape a form of mediated perception. The touch biography authors have indeed provided us with many eyes and ears – as well as many skins, memories, fantasies and so on. However, the mention in some texts of fantasies and dreams again directs our attention to the way affect exists at the limits of the phenomenal (Lury, 2015: 238). When and how affect enters the realm of the phenomenal, and the extent to which these entrances can be expressed in the biographies, is anything but fixed. Our analysis of touch biographies has enabled us to sense that relational energies are a significant part of the social texture. It is not only that people have experiences that are felt in a variety of ways, or that the experiences can be categorised as ‘privileged’ or ‘less fortunate’. The touch biographies draw attention to diverse and multi-temporal ways of attuning to, registering and recognising the social as it happens.

Finally, touch biographies highlight personal experiences of time, rather than offering retrospective life narratives. In some biographies the multidimensionality of time was very concrete: ruptures in the text, descriptions of shaking, embodied memories, comments addressed to significant others, and accounts of symbolic touching. Even as an ongoing act, touch both resonates with our past and orients us towards the future. Biographies exemplify how affects constitute a memory system of their own: affective registers carry the past, present and future within them in non-linear and unpredictable ways. Of course, reading through the biographies has itself been an affective journey for us, albeit one beyond the scope of this article.

Notes

- 1) We would like to thank the three anonymous referees for their insightful comments and Lisa Blackman for her suggestions for further development of our ideas. We wish to express our heartfelt thanks to Lisa Blackman and Patricia Clough for commenting on a first draft of this article during a workshop in 2016; our warmest thanks also to all workshop participants and others who have commented the paper in its different stages.
- 2) Taina Kinnunen's work was funded by the Finnish Work Environment Fund. Marjo Kolehmainen's work was funded by the Academy of Finland project 'Just the two of us? Affective inequalities in intimate relationships' (grant number 287983).

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