

Exploring the Psychological Processes Underlying Touch: Lessons from the Alexander Technique

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The experience of touch is significant; both in its positive implications and in how it attracts caution and controversy. Accordingly, physical contact within psychological therapy has been shown to improve well-being and the therapeutic relationship, yet the majority of therapists never or rarely use touch. This research aimed to explore psychological processes underlying touch through the Alexander Technique, a psycho-physical technique taught one to one using touch. Six individuals who had received the Alexander Technique were interviewed, and 111 completed surveys. Interview data suggested an incompatibility between touch and the spoken word, which was understood through the way touch lacks verbal discourses in our society. The largely simplistic and dichotomous verbal understanding we have (either only very positive or very negative) could help understand some of the societal-level caution surrounding touch. Touch was seen also as a nurturing experience by interviewees, which influenced inter-personal and intra-personal relational processes. Developmental models were used to frame the way touch strengthened the pupil–teacher relationship and the way pupils’ intra-personal psychological change seemed linked to this relational experience. The surveys largely supported these findings, and discussion is made around the notable way pupils negatively interpreted the intention of the survey. Implications for the use of touch in psychological therapies are discussed, as are limitations and ideas for future research. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key Practitioner Message:

- Touch is a powerful experience, and physical contact within psychological therapy has been shown to improve well-being and the therapeutic relationship, yet the majority of therapists never or rarely use touch.
- The AT is an alternative therapeutic approach to psycho-physical well-being that offers an interesting model to study the impact of touch.
- Findings from those that have used the technique reaffirmed that touch can improve well-being and can be a powerful force in the ‘therapeutic relationship’. Accounts drew strong parallels with developmental experiences, which may be of particular interest to those working psychodynamically.
- Findings also highlighted the lack of discourses our culture has for touch and how the ones we share can be super-imposed onto experiences. This should be kept in mind when discussing all types of physical contact with clients.
- Outcomes from AT pupils cannot be generalized to those seeking psychological support; however, the findings accentuated the power of holistic working. This is important as we begin to understand more around how emotions are held in the body.

Keywords: Alexander Technique, alternative, touch, psychological therapies

INTRODUCTION

Touch is a complex phenomenon. Often presented as essential for growth and well-being, it simultaneously attracts caution and controversy. Models of infant development are particular advocates for the positive implications of touch. Attachment theory suggests touch to be vital for the bond between infant and caregiver, which lays the foundations for later psychological development (Jones,

1994). Research also suggests that touch can induce positive hormonal changes. Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, and Light (2008) investigated married-couple groups taking part in a warm-touch intervention programme and found increased levels of oxytocin and decreased levels of amylase, which they linked to participants’ reduced stress levels and increased feelings of calm. Theories of embodiment outline that we interact with the world through our physical being, and psychological ill health occurs when we move our identity away from our body experience (Kepner, 1993). The theory suggests touch to be a vehicle for reducing feelings of separateness from one’s physical presence, thus increasing psychological well-being.

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Certain psychological theories support the benefits of positive touch. The humanistic tradition promotes openness and genuineness in the therapeutic relationship, with Rogers (1961) supporting the holding and embracing of clients. Babette Rothschild (2000) argued in *The Body Remembers* that psychological tensions can manifest physically. Reichian theory understands anxiety in particular to be held as muscular tension, leading to the development of vegetotherapy. The latter has influenced the growth of body psychotherapy, which uses touch as a primary therapeutic tool (Totton, 2003). The Interactive Cognitive Subsystems (ICS) model proposes that information flows between physical and psychological subsystems, so experiences impact individuals both physically and psychologically (Barnard & Teasdale, 1991). This would imply that positive physical contact can result in psychological benefits.

Research into touch in psychotherapy is limited but largely supports the positive influence of appropriate touch. Body-oriented psychotherapies are said to target awareness, breathing and the melting of 'body armour' (Smith, 1985, p. 119), and touch in Gestalt therapy has been suggested to help address these areas (Imes, 1998). Horton, Clance, Sterk-Elifson, and Emshoff (1995) found that clients of non-body-oriented psychotherapies felt that the use of touch (physical contact more than a formal handshake, including a hug or hold) increased their self-esteem and made them feel more valued as a person and more positive towards the therapeutic process. Additionally, 69% of clients reported touch to facilitate a stronger bond, deeper trust and greater openness with their therapist. Touch was therefore shown to do the following: (a) improve psychological well-being; and (b) strengthen the therapeutic relationship.

Touch seems to be a potentially powerful psychological tool, yet 90% of psychological therapists never or rarely use touch (Stenzel & Rupert, 2004). Theoretical reasons for this include the psycho-analytic assertion that touch interferes with a client's transference, that it may break therapeutic and professional boundaries and/or that it may re-traumatize those with histories of abuse (Bonitz, 2008). Other fears are that touch may be misunderstood as sexual (Phelan, 2009), that it could lead to a 'malignant regression' in which the client loses self-observation and becomes unhealthily dependent upon the therapist (Balint, 1968) and that it could create or enhance power differentials between the client and the therapist (Bonitz, 2008). An increasing number of legal claims have been brought against therapists in recent years, which may have guided touch into being a risk management issue rather than a clinical intervention (Zur, 2007). This aversion could be specific to the 'low-touch' cultures of the USA and the UK; however, this issue has been scarcely researched with more ethnically diverse samples (Zur & Nordmarken, 2009).

Research on touch in psychotherapy is reported to be increasingly focused on ethical concerns rather than theory and technique (Bonitz, 2008). The more that research is preoccupied with ethics, the longer this culture of fear around the use of touch could perpetuate. This issue serves to hinder the development of understanding and knowledge about touch.

One way to explore this is to research a context where ethics are less intrusive due to touch being integral and expected and where it takes places in a caring yet professional relationship. This can help move the focus away from ethics and back to theory and technique.

The Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique (AT) is an alternative therapeutic approach that works with the mind and the body. It is a unique model that is neither a psychological therapy nor a pure physical therapy but a psycho-physical technique that aims to re-educate body use (Gelb, 2004). The AT conceptualizes the mind and body as the 'self', which is the technique's primary focus (Tarr, 2011). People seek the technique to address 'stress, pain and underperformance' through gaining maximum use with minimum unnecessary tension (STAT, 2007). The AT aims to achieve 'good use of self' through proper head, neck and back alignment. It does this through 'means whereby' the *process* of movement, rather than the result, is the focus. Learning not to do is as important as learning to do in the AT as individuals receiving the AT, or 'pupils', learn to cognitively inhibit unhelpful physical habits.

The technique is taught one to one and usually offered in weekly sessions. The pupil works with a teacher to explore self-knowledge and achieve self-management, leading comparisons to be drawn between the AT and cognitive behavioural, mindfulness and Gestalt therapies (Armitage, 2009).

Research suggests that the AT has psychological benefits including reduced depression, improved attitudes to self (Stallibrass, Sissons, & Chalmers, 2002), better coping with stress, increased confidence and control (Stallibrass, Frank, & Wentworth, 2005), reduced performance anxiety (Valentine, Fitzgerald, Gorton, Hudson, & Symonds, 1995) and increased awareness and calm (Armitage, 2009).

Gentle rather than manipulative touch is at the core of the AT, which is said to be for communication, reflection and encouragement of self-acceptance (Farkas, 2010).

Unlike in other therapies the teacher does not use their hands to manipulate but to 'feel' the effect of the student's thinking on the degree and patterns of muscle tension in the body and to convey to the student the degree and distribution of muscle which would enhance posture and ease of movement (Stallibrass & Hampson, 2001, p. 15).

Considering how integral touch is to the AT, research in this area is limited. In a large-scale randomized controlled trial looking at back-pain reduction, pupils were found to value the hands-on aspect of the AT (Yardley et al., 2009). Armitage (2009) concluded that AT pupils felt that there is something very important about touch and that it is relaxing and helps the learning process. Following interviews of AT teachers, Mowat (2006) proposed that touch helps bring about some of the psycho-physical change to pupils' neuromuscular systems described earlier. She also argued that touch may bring up developmental, pre-verbal issues for pupils and that it may change the pupil-teacher 'relational dynamics' (Mowat, 2008, p. 176). Further detailed explorations into the psychological processes underlying touch in the AT have not been made.

Rationale

Touch seems to be a powerful psychological tool, yet it is rarely used and little researched in a psychotherapy context. For the focus to move away from ethics and back towards theory and technique, touch could usefully be explored in a therapeutic context where touch is more expected and more integral. The AT is not a psychological therapy but is a psycho-physical approach aimed at improving use of the self. It is made up of a dyadic pupil-teacher relationship, it produces psychological benefits and it shares methodological similarities with psychotherapies, yet the use of touch is at its core. The touch is not mechanistic but a way for the teacher to take in information and to reflect in an accepting and reassuring manner that demands nothing (Farkas, 2010), almost paralleling the role of words in therapy. This makes understanding the psychological processes underlying touch in the AT an interesting area of research.

What is learnt from touch in the AT could help further understanding around the implications of touch in psychological therapies. Even though findings from a psycho-physical technique cannot be applied directly, the AT provides a good opportunity to expand knowledge of this relatively unexplored area. This is especially relevant as understanding increases around the way emotions are held within the body. Perhaps if we understood more about processes underlying touch and how touch influences psychological benefits and the therapeutic relationship, then we may be able to think differently about touch in psychotherapy.

The purpose of the research was twofold. It aimed to explore the psychological processes underlying touch in the AT and to further understand the implications of using touch in psychological therapies.

Research questions

The research aimed to address the following:

1. How is touch in the AT experienced by pupils?
Within this are the following questions:
 - a. How does touch contribute to (or impair) any psychological change?
 - b. What is the impact of touch within the pupil-teacher relationship?
2. How can the research extend our understanding of the implications of touch in psychological therapies?

METHOD

Design

This exploratory study employed a mixed-method design. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate qualitative data, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Jarman, & Osborne, 1999) was used to analyse the data (Study 1). A supportive questionnaire survey using a descriptive design was used to produce quantitative data to triangulate findings (Study 2). Therefore, experiences of touch in the AT were explored in depth with a small number of participants, whereas a larger survey investigated whether other participants' experiences of touch were the same or whether they differed.

Participants

Participants for Studies 1 and 2 were AT pupils. They were recruited via the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT), who are in contact with AT teachers around the country. Participants were required to be over 16 years of age, English speaking and could be either current pupils or ex-pupils of the technique. These criteria were selected to maximize the potential number of respondents.

Measures

Demographic information

This was gathered from all participants in Studies 1 and 2. This included age, gender, ethnicity, gender of teacher, number of AT lessons and the period pupils had been having lessons.

Study 1—Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews explored participants' experiences of touch in the AT. Subsections of questions were based around the research questions. Avenues to explore were

drawn from relevant literature, including attachment theory, embodiment literature, the ICS model and biological theories of touch. Questions were formed around research on touch in psychotherapy and literature that suggests the negative impact of touch (see Introduction). Both positive and negative consequences of touch were addressed. Open-ended questions and prompts were devised to help draw out information from participants. So that the suitability of the rationale, research questions and interview schedule can be checked, a pilot interview was conducted. The interviewee found it hard to put words to her answers, so more prompts were made available.

Study 2—Surveys

The survey was made up of 28 Likert scale questions, which asked pupils to rate their answers on a 1–7 scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree. The choice of 7 points provided pupils with a range of answers to select from, as well as an opportunity to give a neutral answer. The final question asked for any further comments the pupils might have. As already mentioned, questions were based on the research questions and relevant literature to explore pupils' experiences of touch in the AT. Again, both positive and negative aspects of touch were addressed. So that the suitability of the rationale, research questions and survey can be checked, a pilot survey was given to four pupils. As a result, changes were made to the wording of certain survey questions.

Procedure

Study 1—Interviews

Interview participants were sourced from AT teachers who were members of STAT. Teachers were emailed to see whether their pupils would be interested in taking part. Teachers then passed on the contact details of those willing to take part to the primary researcher who sent these pupils further information about the study. If they then consented to take part, the researcher contacted them to arrange a time, place and date convenient to the participant. At the interview, the researcher obtained written informed consent, which involved requesting permission to audio-record the interview. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 50 min and 2 h.

Study 2—Surveys

To recruit for the survey, we sent emails by STAT to registered AT teachers explaining the purpose of the research. An example of the survey was attached to the email. They were asked to contact the primary researcher with an estimation of how many surveys they could feasibly pass on via paper copies or email. Survey packs were then posted or emailed to the AT teachers who responded. Each survey included a description letter

and, if posted, a stamped addressed envelope for the pupil to send the survey back. The description letter explained that by completing and posting or emailing the survey back, the pupils had consented to the information being used in the research. A contact email address was included for any pupils who wanted to give further information. These pupils were asked to contact the researcher for a survey to be sent directly to them.

Data analysis

Study 1—Interviews

The interview data were transcribed and then analysed using IPA on the basis of the guidelines by Smith et al. (1999). IPA was chosen because the study aimed to learn something about the respondents' experiences and meanings made of touch in the AT. Data analysis considered the content and complexity of those meanings. The primary researcher read one transcript at a time, on multiple occasions, and recorded significant and interesting points. Key words and themes that emerged from at least three of the six participants were recorded. Connections between these themes were then explored to structure what was extracted from the data. Interpretation was strengthened through re-analysing transcripts and discussing the data with another IPA researcher and the secondary researcher. The primary researcher took four lessons of the AT to better understand the process, and they approached the research with a largely positive view about touch, with the assumption that it could be psychologically beneficial. Through discussions with the secondary researcher who had been learning the AT for several years and through keeping a reflective diary, the researcher was able to recognize and acknowledge how their own experiences of touch and the AT impacted on the data interpretation process.

Study 2—Surveys

The survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics: frequencies, means, standard deviations and ranges. The focus was on individual-item response.

RESULTS

Study 1—Interview Data

Five women and one man who together had a mean age of 57 years (standard deviation [SD]=10.35) were interviewed. They estimated having learnt the AT for an average of 4 years and 4 months. Four of the interviewees had only had one teacher each, one had been taught by two teachers and one had been taught by four teachers. All interviewees

indicated they were White and of British origin. The following quotes have been anonymized using false initials.

Four superordinate themes emerged from the data, which are described in Figure 1.

Theme 1. An Incompatibility between Touch and the Spoken Word

A superordinate theme the interview data produced was a sense of real discordance between touch and the spoken word.

a. Cannot put it to words

Within this theme, pupils seemed to feel that they could not put words to their experiences of touch. They spoke about touch being experienced on an imperceptible, unspoken and an altogether deeper level. One pupil explained 'I don't come away thinking oh you've been touched' (TH, 119). Another pupil suggested that touch does not meet the 'cerebral' (OT, 402) level. In fact, the majority spoke about having 'never thought about' (FS, 725) touch before the interview.

Pupils felt that there were no words with which to talk about touch. Pupils described trying to verbalize their experiences of touch as 'very very difficult' (FI, 40–41), 'a challenge' (OT, 810) and resulting in 'bizarre ramblings' (FI, 273–274).

b. Words are not good enough anyway

Pupils would use certain words and then find them inappropriate, implying that putting words to touch can unintentionally make it seem a negative experience.

Theme 1. An incompatibility between touch and the spoken word

- a) Can't put it to words
- b) Words aren't good enough anyway

Theme 2. Touch as a nurturing process

Theme 3. Touch as a relational experience

- a) The power of touch in the pupil-teacher relationship
- b) Touch changes the relationship with the self

Theme 4. But...

- a) I'm comfortable with touch, others might not be
- b) Gender reservations

Figure 1. Interview themes

I was going to say it's quite manipulative but that's the wrong word 'cos obviously manipulative isn't... It's very clever actually. Very subtle, but very effective (FI, 315–316)

This dilemma could have led pupils to question the helpfulness of trying to put words to touch.

It was quite nice not to think about it and just enjoy it (OT, 402)

Further disharmony was highlighted by pupils feeling that words can be judgmental and clinical, whereas touch is free of this.

I may almost feel, not as though I was being told off, because she wouldn't, that's not the way it's done, but I think instinctively that's how I might interpret it. Whereas because it's just physical, it's just silent; there's no judgment attached to it (FI, 121–123)

In fact, pupils voiced that words are an inferior substitute for touch as a teaching method. Two pupils described how being asked to drop your shoulders can lead to inappropriate movements that are habitually connected to the meaning of those words.

Or my uh view of standing up straight I guess before I got to the AT was of a rather military y'know the shoulders thrown back and the head sort of at an odd angle and I think I'm standing wonderfully erect. But she'll come along and put her hands on your shoulders and cause them to sink a bit. And or just touch you on your head which causes your neck to stretch a bit. Um those are very powerful ways of you realising gosh that does feel better that's much more natural and there's no effort in it in the way that there was effort in y'know standing to attention (SF, 287–292)

Touch seemed to help pupils 'apply Alexander Technique thinking to the situation' (FI, 326–327), which can be complex and, without touch, could be 'very frustrating' (FI, 229).

Theme 2. Touch as a Nurturing Process

A second superordinate theme to be extracted was of touch being a nurturing process. The interviewees described previous negative experiences of touch in comparison with the now gentle touch of the AT. Pupils described previous osteopathy as 'sometimes quite brutal' (FI, 50) and previous massage that had been 'aggressive', 'violent' and 'really digging' (TH, 303, 304, 305). One pupil described the importance to her that in the AT 'you get to keep your clothes on and nothing that they do hurts you' (FI, 213).

Pupils seemed to feel that touch can be a healing experience in the AT. A pupil described her teacher as having 'healing hands' (OT, 48), and two pupils compared touch in the AT with the 'laying on of hands' (FI, 60; TH, 191). One pupil drew comparisons between the effect of touch and an advert that showed matted threads being lined up and repaired after the pouring on of a fabric conditioner.

A sense of a physical and emotional release came from the interview data.

So if you imagine wax and um the heat of this hand makes it feel as though my um muscles just sort of melt and I'm very knotted up (OT, 54)

This strong imagery was used to convey this pupil feeling physically 'unwound' from touch, which 'gave me carte blanche to kind of go bleuugh and release a whole lot of that pent up emotion as well' (OT, 150–152).

Pupils described that touch in the AT resulted in feeling looked after, safe and reassured. One pupil felt that 'touch is important to human beings as a form of comfort' (TH, 286–287) and that 'I quite like this feeling of being looked after' (FS, 239).

This feeling of safety and reassurance seemed to develop into pupils feeling able to explore and expand independently.

It takes you into regions perhaps you would have feared to move yourself. Um. But you realise oh that's ok that's possible. So uh that is reassuring. And it gives you confidence too (SF, 132–133)

One pupil described the value of 'having the nurturing caring hands of someone encouraging my body to do something' and that 'it's such a lovely feeling when, when somebody gives your body the opportunity to let go and expand' (OT, 741–742). Pupils described the process as one that does not foster dependence.

you can recreate that situation even when you're not with your instructor (FI, 574–575)

The theme of nurture extended to pupils linking their touch experience to childhood. One pupil felt 'there's something kind of almost maternal' about touch in the AT (FI, 375). Talking about touch made another pupil reflect on the way children learn physically through their environment.

Theme 3. Touch as a Relational Experience

Another superordinate theme to emerge was that of touch being a relational experience.

a. The power of touch in the pupil–teacher relationship

A sub-theme that fell into this category was the power of touch in the pupil–teacher relationship. Pupils spoke about touch allowing a two-way feedback and communicative process with the teacher.

My body responds to her touch, she presumably feels the reciprocity of that touch so she goes back to her, it feeds back to her and she knows what to do next (OT, 71–73)

Another pupil described that 'for every action you're doing you're getting constant feedback' (TB, 446–447).

Pupils felt that, through touch, the teacher's self 'imprints' (TH, 238) onto the pupil's self. One pupil described that 'it helps you at the time to experience it deeply but then I think it does stay with you' (TH, 98–100). The imagery of impressions on wax (OT, 53) also seemed to be an analogy for this process of imprinting.

Pupils seemed to feel that touch signals being alongside someone, that someone is sharing the load. Pupils explained how the teacher can 'take the strain' (OT, 418) and that the pupil can 'give her the weight' (TB, 34). This draws some parallels with the previous theme of touch being a nurturing experience.

Touch also seemed to be experienced as unique to the teacher and that she is 'giving a part of herself' (FS, 175). This seemed to result in a sense of respect and gratitude towards the teacher.

they are prepared to bring or give this much of themselves which is transmitted through their touch which helps to build the rapport and the relationship (OT, 556–567)

Another pupil described the touch as 'so uniquely related to y'know your instructor' and as 'so clearly part of (Teacher's name)-time' (FI, 615).

Pupils seemed to suggest that touch is able to work because of the intimate yet bounded relationship between the pupil and the teacher. One pupil interestingly said that touch 'is part of the professional relationship' (SF, 368) and not the personal relationship unlike, perhaps, other relationships. The quality of the touch was described as fittingly 'reassuring but in a non-personal kind of way' (TH, 297).

b. Touch changes the relationship with the self

A further sub-theme extracted from the data was that pupils felt that touch changes the relationship they have with themselves. Primarily, it emerged that touch helps pupils learn about themselves and increase their awareness of themselves.

I think I'm relaxed but I'm not and I can immediately feel that as soon as, as she starts to touch me really (TH, 23–24)

Furthermore, pupils described how touch improves communication with the self. One pupil explained 'if (Teacher's name) touched my shoulder it almost just helped the message get from there through my arm down to my hand' (FI, 66–671). Another pupil said 'all the time I'm talking to my body ... how would I know that if she didn't show me, there's no point in just saying go up from there unless she's touching me at the same time (FS, 457–463).

Pupil also spoke about touch improving their view of themselves. One pupil explained 'I regard my body with a bit more respect now' whereas before she had viewed it as 'a troublesome object that dragged me back' (SF, 328–329). One pupil explained 'she has taught me through all this it's okay, it's okay to receive she's taught me to find space for myself umm without feeling selfish' (FS, 134–136).

Theme 4. But...

Pupils largely saw touch as a positive experience; however, a few exceptions to this were voiced, which formed another superordinate theme to be extracted from the data.

a. I am comfortable with touch, others might not be

A sub-theme in this category was pupils describing how they feel comfortable and 'never bothered' (TH, 319) by touch in the AT but that 'some people might be a bit more freaked out' (FI, 218).

I can see (sigh) there are people for whom touch is difficult isn't there but um that isn't the case for me. I am someone who'll put my hand on someone else's arm (SF, 165–167)

b. Gender reservations

Another reservation pupils seemed to have was around the gender of their teacher. The pupils who commented on this seemed to suggest they would not like a teacher whose gender differed to their own teacher.

But I wouldn't feel happy with a man touching me here and here and here. I just wouldn't feel happy with that. That's too too close thank you (FS, 711–713)

The male interviewee felt he would not like a male teacher, but a female interviewee felt her husband would feel more comfortable with a male teacher.

Maybe it is a gender thing ... I think he'll be more comfortable going to Alexander with a man, um I think rather than a woman (TH, 333–335)

Notably, pupils who had had more than one teacher had fewer reservations. The pupil who had been taught

by two teachers and the pupil who had been taught by four teachers had no gender reservations. The pupil with four teachers also had no reservations over others feeling comfortable with touch. This pupil felt there was a danger of becoming 'stuck in a fur-lined rut' (OT, 520) only having one teacher.

Study 2—Survey Data

Quantitative Data

One-hundred and twenty-six surveys were posted out to be passed onto pupils. Six teachers were emailed copies of the survey to pass on electronically; however, the exact number of pupils to receive these was not recorded.

One-hundred and eleven pupils, 26 men and 79 women, and six pupils of unknown gender returned surveys. Four surveys were emailed to the researcher, and the others were posted. One pupil reported having a male teacher, 101 reported having a female teacher, and the others did not indicate the gender of their teacher. The most frequently indicated age category of respondents was 56–65 years, and the most frequently indicated time since first lesson was 1–3 years. The majority of pupils indicated they were White British. See Table 1 and Figure 2 for the full demographic information.

Pupils rated their answers on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Table 2 outlines the findings from the survey data. Points of interest are discussed with mean scores and the corresponding SD in parentheses. Mean scores were relatively high for comfort with touch (6.62, SD .66), for touch helping pupils understand the technique (6.19, SD 1.12), for touch being for pupils' benefit not their teacher's (6.12, SD 1.46) and for touch helping pupils feel relaxed (6.08, SD 1.20). Mean scores were also high for touch increasing feelings of body connectedness (6.06, SD 1.26) and for touch increasing self-awareness (6.00, SD 1.23). Pupils agreed that touch helped them trust their teacher (5.89, SD 1.46), that they felt in control when touch was used (5.70, SD 1.38), that it helped them

Table 1. Demographic information of the 111 survey participants including their gender, the gender of their Alexander Technique teachers and their ethnicity

Percentage of pupils (N = 111)	
Gender - Pupil (teacher)	
Male	23.9 (0.9)
Female	72.4 (91.8)
No response	3.7 (7.3)
Ethnicity - Pupil	
White British/English	74.3
European	0.9
Asian	2.8
Mixed race	0.9
No response	21.1

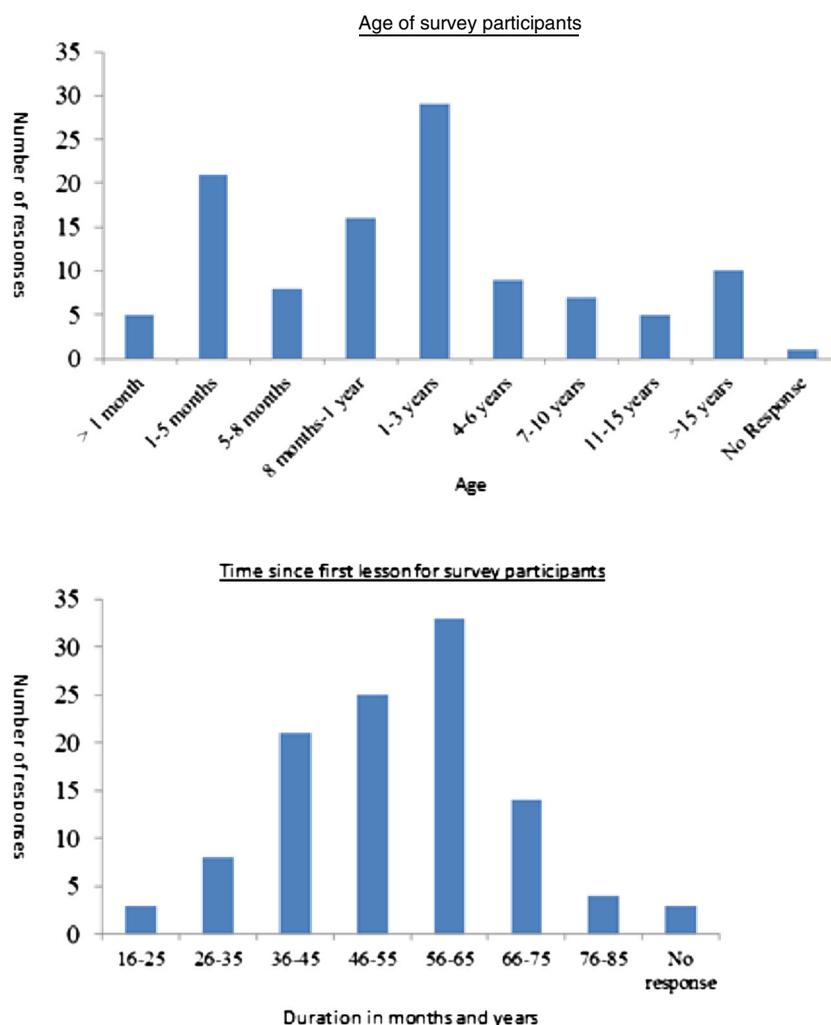


Figure 2. Demographic information of the 111 survey participants including their age in years, time since first Alexander Technique lesson and total number of Alexander Technique lessons

communicate with their teacher (5.55, SD 1.56) and that it made them feel cared for (5.32, SD 1.65).

Pupils felt that there were rarely times touch should not be used (1.40, SD .92) and that they had not wanted to know their teacher for longer before it was used (1.62, SD 1.11). Pupils did not agree that touch made them feel vulnerable (2.05, SD 1.49), that it opened up negative emotions (2.07, SD 1.46) or that it opened up emotions that could not be dealt with (1.75, SD 1.29). Agreement was also low for touch making pupils feel in a position of less power than their teacher (2.17, SD 1.48) and for boundaries feeling broken (2.66, SD 1.96); however, 14.4% of pupils (16) agreed (scores of 6 or 7) that touch sometimes broke boundaries, with 45.9% (51) strongly disagreeing (scores of 1).

Mean scores regarding awareness that touch would be used and that touch had been discussed with pupils

showed agreement (5.62, SD 1.74; 5.26, SD 1.57); however, less than half of pupils strongly agreed (scored 7) that this was the case (48.6%; 30.9%).

Scores were in the middle range (>3 to <5) for touch fitting with the reason pupils sought the technique (3.22, SD 1.96) and for touch making pupils feel safe (4.44, SD 1.61), suggesting less strong agreement either way. Scores were also in the middle range for touch opening up positive emotions in pupils (4.49, SD 1.76), increasing feelings of personal control (4.59, SD 1.67), increasing feelings of closeness to the teacher (4.64, SD 1.74) and making pupils feel better about themselves (4.92, SD 1.64). Scores were also in the middle range for touch making pupils feel valued (4.91, SD 1.87) and for it improving their mood (5.06, SD 1.63); however, 42.3% of pupils agreed (scores of 6 or 7) that this was the case.

Table 2. Survey data listed in descending order of mean score

Survey question	Mean (1–7, strongly disagree–strongly agree)	Standard deviation	Minimum score (min = 1)	Maximum score (max = 7)	Range
I am comfortable with the use of touch in the AT	6.62	0.66	4	7	3
Touch helps me understand the technique	6.19	1.12	2	7	5
The AT improves my psychological well-being	6.17	1.08	2	7	5
I feel physical contact in the AT is for my benefit rather than my teacher's	6.12	1.40	1	7	6
Touch helps me to feel relaxed	6.08	1.20	2	7	5
Touch in the AT makes me feel more connected with my own body	6.06	1.26	1	7	6
Touch in the AT increases my self-awareness	6.00	1.23	1	7	6
Touch helps me trust my teacher	5.89	1.46	1	7	6
I feel in control when touch is used in my lessons	5.70	1.38	1	7	6
I was aware before my first lesson that touch would be used	5.62	1.74	1	7	6
Touch helps me to communicate with my teacher	5.55	1.56	1	7	6
Touch helps me feel cared for	5.32	1.65	1	7	6
The use of touch has been discussed clearly with me by my teacher	5.26	1.57	1	7	6
Touch in the AT improves my mood	5.06	1.63	1	7	6
Touch in the AT makes me feel better about myself	4.92	1.64	1	7	6
Touch helps me feel valued	4.91	1.87	1	7	6
Being touched makes me feel closer to my teacher	4.64	1.74	1	7	6
Touch in the AT increases my feeling of being in control of myself	4.59	1.67	1	7	6
The use of touch opens up positive emotions within me	4.49	1.76	1	7	6
Touch in the AT makes me feel safe	4.44	1.61	1	7	6
Being touched in lessons fitted with the reason I sought the AT	3.22	1.96	1	7	6
Sometimes being touched can feel as if a boundary has been broken ^a	2.66	1.96	1	7	6
Being touched makes me feel in a position of less power than my teacher ^a	2.17	1.48	1	7	6
The use of touch opens up negative emotions within me ^a	2.07	1.46	1	7	6
Touch in the AT makes me feel vulnerable ^a	2.05	1.49	1	7	6
It opens up emotions within me that I cannot always deal with ^a	1.75	1.29	1	7	6
I would have liked to have known my teacher for longer before touch was used ^a	1.62	1.11	1	7	6
There are times when I feel touch should not be used in my lessons ^a	1.44	.92	1	7	6

^aQuestions targeting negative experiences of touch.

Qualitative Data

The survey asked pupils to add further comments should they wish, and an unexpected amount of responses were given. As the data were simple comments rather than rich interview data, a thematic analysis was carried out (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A primary theme to emerge from these additional data was *negative interpretations of the intention of the survey*, with pupils responding to it as a threat or challenge and jumping to the defence of their teachers.

Your survey appears to seek to draw out the issues that pupils with control issues or difficulties with physical contact might have

This survey annoys the hell out of me because it suggests that touch is inappropriate

Pupils also spoke about *touch's incompatibility with words*, with comments suggesting that touch is hard to talk about and that putting words to touch can make it seem negative. One pupil felt the survey asked the 'wrong questions', and others felt the survey was 'dangerous' and 'worrying'.

The other data also seemed to map onto themes from the interviews and so is presented in this way. In particular, touch was spoken about *as a nurturing process*, as a healing, 'comforting amelioration' that fosters independence.

Alexander Technique has played a large role in my recovery from serious skeletal malfunctions. I have complete confidence in my brilliant teacher. From only being able to crawl around on all fours I can now walk and enjoy life

The idea of *relationships* was also strong in these data. Two-way feedback featured in the survey comments with one pupil explaining that 'feedback from touch is very important to see how neutral you are and to trace changes'.

Within these additional data, pupils also commented that touch helped pupils learn about and communicate with themselves and that it improved their relationship with themselves.

Touch seems an essential part of the process and is useful in changing/heightening awareness of how you perceive your body

There were also some elements of exceptions or *buts* from the survey comments with one pupil feeling 'I think that some of my answers could have been different if I had had a different teacher'.

DISCUSSION

The research set out as a phenomenological study where participants are invited to put words to their experiences, thus assuming this is possible. The degree to which pupils struggled with this process was striking; however, they did find the words. A great deal can be learnt not only from what they did say but also from the difficulty they experienced saying it.

A theme emerging in both the interviews and surveys was the incompatibility of touch with the spoken word. Despite being a major form of communication from an early developmental stage, touch is a non-verbal process and therefore rarely spoken about. Social constructionist theory outlines how social interactions, verbal and non-verbal, shape our perceived reality (Burr, 1995). The cultural discourses that develop through these interactions shape meaning for all aspects of life. The 'low-touch' cultures of the USA and the UK may have a limited number of *verbal* discourses and commonly used metaphors for touch (as they lack a cultural utility), which could be why interviewees struggled to find words to describe their experiences. The discourses that do exist and are shared within the context of mass media appear simplistic and dichotomous, i.e. either only very positive ('healing hands') or very negative (unwanted sexual touch). These concepts were all visited during the interviews, highlighting how we can only call up culturally available discourses to explain the as yet undefined. However, if this already-held meaning is largely negative, then attempts to impose new neutral words to add depth of meaning cannot move the

narrative away from the predominantly negative. This process was arguably occurring during interviews. This may also help understand the survey comments, which showed pupils negatively interpreting the meaning of the neutrally intended questions, viewing them as a threat or challenge. Without readily available and wide-ranging language for touch, the survey might have had the most readily available verbal meanings super-imposed onto them. This might offer one explanation of why touch can be viewed with fear and uncertainty on a wider societal level and why discourses do not develop, as unless there is a wider societal need to do so, it currently feels better not to put words to touch.

Alternatively, it may not be necessary to put words to touch, as it may be viewed as standing alone as a form of communication. The interviewees experienced touch as superior to words when learning and understanding the technique, e.g. they felt that words can be judgmental and critical but that touch is free of this. Again taking a social constructionist stance, we have many more verbal discourses and meanings associated with the spoken word, whereas touch has more limited discourses, which might not involve criticism/judgment.

In line with a lack of shared verbal meanings for touch, a range of psychological frameworks are needed to conceptualize the results. Another prominent theme to emerge from the interview data was of touch as a nurturing experience. Interviewees described touch as making them feel safe, looked after and able to explore and expand independently, and they even made links to childhood experiences. Triangulating this finding, we find that survey pupils seemed to agree that touch made them feel cared for. In this, there seemed to be something reminiscent of early parent-infant attachment experiences, which are seen as integral to psychological development and well-being. Healthy attachment processes allow infants to feel safe and secure to explore and develop and are largely non-verbal (Bowlby, 1969). Indeed, pupils seek the AT to develop, often because of physical or psychological 'setbacks', and they do so in the context of a dyadic relationship. Touch, a pre-verbal experience in its earliest form, is vital to attachment processes and is at the core of the AT. One survey participant powerfully described 'from only being able to crawl around on all fours I can now walk and enjoy life'. These findings support accounts from AT teachers that touch in the technique can mirror developmental processes (Mowat, 2006).

Notably, survey participants did not seem to feel strongly either way that touch made them feel safe or that it increased their personal control. It may be that those who felt more positively about touch were given information from their teachers about the interview. It may be that words are limiting when talking about touch and the interviewees were given more space to reflect on their

experiences. Furthermore, interviewees had on average been learning the technique for longer than survey respondents, so perhaps it takes a certain length of time for touch to have this benefit.

There seemed to be something significant about touch being a relational experience. The role of the relationship in models of development is paramount. Object relations theory is a psychological framework, largely linked to Klein (2002a, 2002b) and Winnicott (1969), that focuses on the importance of dyadic relationships in early infant development. It seems well placed to understand some of these processes because, as discussed, pupils often seek the AT to develop both physically and psychologically, and this takes place in the context of a dyad, often using non-verbal techniques. Object relations theory outlines the process of introjection in which inter-personal relationships are internalized and qualities from external others (usually the parent) are projected into the infant. This is largely through somatic experiences such as touch (Ivey, 1990). The themes around the importance of the pupil–teacher relationship, especially regarding imprinting and the teacher giving something of their self, draw parallels with this process. Re-introjection is another object relations process in which the other processes and ‘detoxifies’ information projected from the infant and feeds it back for the infant to re-internalize (Ivey, 1990). Pupils in both the interviews and the survey spoke about two-way feedback, with the teacher communicating back what they had learned from the pupils through touch. Therefore, touch may be experienced so powerfully in the AT pupil–teacher relationship because of its reminiscence with these early developmental processes, possibly supported by the interviewees’ apparent preference for female teachers.

The special nature of this relationship may explain why interviewees could not imagine lessons with another teacher, or others replicating this relationship, unless they had had multiple teachers themselves. Indeed, one pupil compared only having one teacher with being ‘stuck in a fur-lined rut’ (OT, 520). Furthermore, pupils’ apparent preference for female teachers suggests a differentiation between male and female touch, which implies that our constructs for touch are not gender neutral. Indeed, Slepian, Weisbuch, Rule, and Ambady (2011) found softer touch experiences to provoke the categorization of gender-neutral faces as female, whereas a tougher touch led to categorization as male.

Object relations theory denotes that a child experientially derives an image of the self through these early relationships. It describes how positive self-representations are internalized if there is a good and healthy contact with the other. In object relations therapy, the therapist is containing and facilitating with the aim that the client internalizes this mode of relating with himself/herself. It is hoped that

through this, the client will become their own object of nurture, thus improving their relationship with the self and their image of the self (Ivey, 1990). Reflecting this process, AT pupils in both studies spoke about their teacher’s gentle touch improving how they communicate and relate with themselves. One pupil previously viewed her body as ‘troublesome’ but now treated it with ‘more respect’. Mowat (2008) presents a mirror to this process when she describes a psychoanalyst’s experience of the AT as integrating self-states and aiding self-healing.

Extending from this, the AT may help pupils discover that they *can* have a relationship with themselves. Survey participants explained how touch helped them feel more connected to their bodies, which links with Armitage’s (2009) findings that the AT increases body awareness. Craig (2002) argued that developing a focus on the body through touch may tie into systems in the brain that help with interpretation of physical sensation, which thus increases people’s awareness of themselves and understanding of the emotions or affect they experience from this physical experience. Touch may reduce feelings of separateness from one’s body, and through feeling embodied, pupils may feel more relatable, both to others and to themselves. Waskul and van der Riet (2002) outlined how experiences of embodiment are central to ‘who we think we are’ (p. 487). The links between touch, body awareness and the ability to relate positively with the self may help explain findings that women with body image problems report fewer nurturing tactile experiences during childhood (Gupta, Schork, & Wateel, 1995).

These factors suggest that pupils had a strongly positive emotional response to their AT lessons. This reflects previous findings of positive psychological effects associated with the AT (Armitage, 2009) and supports the benefits of this approach on an individual’s well-being.

More than half of the pupils disagreed that they were aware touch would be used (which countered the researcher’s assumptions), yet despite this, the majority felt they had not wanted to know their teacher longer before touch was used. Tarr (2011) suggested that the AT’s focus on the ‘self’ (the mind and body united) reduces emphasis on the individual’s body, which perhaps minimizes any fears related to hands-on work to the body. As highlighted by one interviewee, being fully clothed during AT lessons may also make it an easier experience.

At the outset of the study, the primary research question concerned the way touch in the AT is experienced by pupils. As discussed, touch appeared to be experienced at a largely non-verbal level that seemed superior to words, by being judgment free and more appropriate to understanding the technique. Pupils described feeling nurtured by touch and that it helped them relate more

positively with themselves, drawing parallels with early developmental experiences. These findings suggest that touch positively influenced pupils' psychological well-being, which was another area questioned at the outset of the study. In addition to this, survey pupils felt that touch made them feel relaxed and the interviewees described feelings of 'release'. This may signal pupils letting go of unnecessary muscle tension, but in addition to this, tactile contact may have induced calming hormonal changes and/or decreased autonomic nervous system activity as documented in other touch interventions (e.g. Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008; Lindgren et al., 2010).

The results suggest that touch is experienced as a powerful part of the pupil-teacher relationship, which addresses another of the initial research questions. Survey pupils largely agreed that touch helped them trust their teacher, and many felt valued by their teacher through touch. Interviewees spoke about touch helping two-way communication and that it made them feel alongside their teacher and that the teacher was giving a part of themselves. However, the survey pupils neither agreed nor disagreed that touch made them feel closer to their teacher. Nevertheless, the findings support and expand on Mowat's (2008) view that touch changes the dynamics in the AT pupil-teacher relationship. Not only does it seem to strengthen the pupil-teacher relationship, but touch being *part* of this relationship also seems powerfully reminiscent of early developmental experiences, which may have contributed to the psychological changes described earlier.

Hall (1990) argued that to move 'towards a psychology of caring' and away from often unhelpful preoccupations with 'curing' (p. 129), psychologists need to pay specific attention to areas such as touch. In line with this, the second research question addressed how the research can help understand the implications of touch in psychological therapies. As described in the Introduction, the gentle touch of the AT serves a communicative, accepting and reflective function (Farkas, 2010) and, as the findings suggest, helps pupils learn about themselves, relate better with themselves and improve psychologically in a number of ways. This seems highly relevant to psychological therapies. One prime example being the similarities between these processes and compassionate mind psychotherapy, within which psychological change centres around clients treating themselves with greater acceptance and compassion (Gilbert, 2009). Additionally, the self-awareness that comes from feeling embodied is similar to the awareness in the present moment that mindfulness approaches emphasize (e.g. Linehan, 1993). Touch also seemed to strengthen the pupil-teacher relationship, and research suggests that a strong therapeutic relationship plays a powerful part in psychotherapy outcomes (Norcross, 2011). The psychological benefits could be understood through early developmental

experiences, which may sit uneasily with psycho-analytic assumptions that childhood issues cannot be resolved through later therapy-based re-parenting. However, object relations literature (Glickhauf-Hughes & Chance, 1998) suggests that touch in a trusting therapeutic relationship with a client who has sufficient ego development can create a 'benign' rather than 'malignant regression' (Balint, 1968), which can increase awareness, overcome defences and master the developmental phases of trust, attachment and dependence. This seemed to reflect the experience of many of the pupils in this study. Mowat (2008) argued that such deep change can only come about from bodywork and as a result argued for greater integration of AT and psychotherapy. She interestingly argued for the flip side, that AT teachers would benefit from training in psychotherapy skills. The ICS model would further support the idea that working only in one system limits outcomes, as experiences impact individuals physically and psychologically (Barnard & Teasdale, 1991). Consequently, it seems touch, and certainly holistic working, has a lot to offer within psychological therapies.

However, the extent to which findings can be specifically applied to psychological therapies is limited. Psychotherapy clients may be more sensitive to negative emotional reactions, power differentials and boundary breaks in response to touch than the AT pupils who participated in this study. Taking an object relations stance, psychotherapy clients are more likely to have less developed egos, in which case these individuals may not benefit as positively from touch (Glickhauf-Hughes & Chance, 1998). Also, as highlighted by interviewees, those who feel uncomfortable with touch are unlikely to have AT lessons, so the opinions discussed may not be widely generalizable. The process of touch in the AT draws parallels with words in psychological therapies; however, the *type* of touch used may not be the same as that considered in the majority of psychological therapies. The latter may involve a therapist deciding whether or not to shake their clients' hand or to hold their hand when they are crying. Perhaps as understanding develops around how emotions are held within the body, psychological interventions may become more body focused, emphasizing awareness and tension release in a more similar way to the AT. However, touch has not been broken down enough in this study to account for the different intentions touch in the majority of psychotherapies might have. This research serves the function of demonstrating how touch can be experienced, in what ways it can be beneficial and perhaps why it is sometimes a fearful concept, so that more informed choices can be made around its use.

In the evaluation of this study, one particular strength was the rich data collected from the interviews. The exploratory design allowed for an open investigation that suited this relatively 'untouched' area of research. The interview participants were reflective and articulate, often

using analogies to help them access, understand and communicate their experiences, making this an effective population when studying an area that struggles for words. The surveys allowed the research to highlight the difficulty of trying to define an experience of one modality within the confines of another.

One limitation of the study was that AT teachers gave pupils the surveys, and they also put forward interview participants. As discussed, in some instances, the survey data did not reflect what the interview data stated. Therefore, it is possible that teachers provided interview participants who felt more favourable towards touch and, as suggested in the demographic information, those who had had more experience of it.

Experiences of touch are likely to differ within cultures that have different values and where touch has developed different meanings. As respondents were primarily White and British, the findings cannot be generalized beyond relatively 'low-touch' cultures such as the UK.

Another limitation of the study was the difficulty of further exploring the issue of gender that arose from the interviews. Interviewees appeared to not want a teacher whose gender differed to that of their own teacher, but those who had had more teachers had fewer reservations around this. Unfortunately, these areas were not tapped in the survey, and the majority of pupil respondents and their teachers were women, which limited useful further data analysis. Nevertheless, the dominance of women in the sample and the apparent preference for female teachers noted from the interviews suggest that gender is a significant issue when it comes to touch.

Touch may not have many verbal definitions, but it is a complex and multifaceted experience. There are different types of touch even within the AT itself; however, this study discusses touch in a very general manner. This limits how far it can be applied to psychological therapies as discussed. However, it was felt that as touch is so poorly understood, the first steps in this exploration would naturally be more general. Future research could focus on specific aspects of touch in the AT, such as the reassuring touch, the quieting touch and the energizing touch, all of which are said to be part of the teacher's 'accepting hand' (Farkas, 2010). If different types of touch were shown to have specific psychological outcomes, then touch could be incorporated more purposefully and with more understanding into psychological therapies.

To further understand the implications of using touch in psychotherapy, research into psychotherapy clients' opinions and experiences of being touched by their therapist needs to be built upon. Research including that by Horton et al. (1995) suggest the potential benefits for both the client and the therapeutic relationship; however, this could be extended by focusing on specific therapies. The approaches mentioned in this paper, such as compassionate mind, may be found to incorporate touch in a more

effective way. Research into therapists' feelings towards using touch should be expanded upon, and considerations should be made around how touch can be incorporated into training programmes.

The research opened up interesting questions regarding the links between touch, body awareness and the ability to relate more positively with the self. This could be researched more specifically in future, either within the AT or within other body-focused therapies, which could give further information regarding implications of touch in psychotherapies.

Summary

The research highlighted some interesting and complex psychological processes that underlie touch, including how we communicate about it, its role in individual change and its powerful influence on relationships. The apparent psychological benefit of touch delivered through a one-to-one, professionally boundaried relationship supported the relevance of touch within psychological therapies, and despite not being able to make specific clinical applications, the significance of holistic working was highlighted. The study yielded interesting and rich data, largely due to the willingness and eloquence of the interviewees and what the process of collecting survey data revealed. Future academic research, greater discussion in psychotherapy training programmes, and community-level discussions at schools and through local media could increase the forums for this significant but unspoken issue. These platforms could begin to expand the verbal meanings we have of touch and help harness the power of this important process.

If we only talk and refuse to touch, we may miss, and clients may miss, an opportunity to find an inroad to the unexpressed feelings that are blocking their ability to live and love fully. Touch is an infant's first and most intimate human contact. Touch may sometimes reach all the way to a soul that is deaf to words alone.
(Imes, 1998, p. 198—on touch in psychotherapy).

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