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Social Interaction

Video-Based Studies of Human Sociality

The Experiencing Face: Communicative and Felt Aspects of the Face During Kissing and Hugging Between Romantic Partners

Julia Katila

Tampere University

Abstract

In this study, I uncover the moment-by-moment emergence of what I call an “experiencing face” during kisses and hugs between romantic partners. At such moments of intimate touch, the facial gestures often momentarily “shut down” to simply give way to experiencing the emotion and tactile “being-with another person” (M.H. Goodwin, 2017: 76). Focusing on the multisensoriality of the face during kisses and hugs, I reflect on some ways of face-on-communication—direct communication through faces touching. Previous EMCA studies have taken a communicative (see Ruusuvuori, 2013) approach to facial expressions. I add to the study of facial expressions by including a focus on the simultaneity of, and an interplay between, communicative and felt aspects of the face in interaction. Taking a phenomenological perspective on interaction studies based on Merleau-Ponty (1962), I approach facial postures from an intercorporeal framework (Meyer et al., 2017): facial postures are expressions of “living bodies” (Streeck, 2013) entailing felt and communicative features.

Keywords: face-on-face communication, romantic couples, touch, affect

1. Introduction

Feeling in interaction, and feeling the other person, plays a great part in intimate encounters involving touch. Feeling—by which I refer to not just feeling particular emotions, but especially the multisensoriality and *felt* aspect of social encounters more generally—occurs through the whole body and can be communicated to other people via a number of embodied means, especially via facial expressions. In this study, I deploy video analysis of interaction (e.g., Streeck, Goodwin & LeBaron, 2011) to explore how feeling an intimate touch, including kisses, hugs, caresses, and touching of the foreheads, is communicated through and plays out in the facial expressions of romantic partners.

I identify and illustrate the emergence of what I call an *experiencing face*—a facial expression of both feeling and “showing an orientation towards” feeling an affective moment. Akin to a “thinking face” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986, p. 59), an “experiencing face” enables the participants in the interaction to continuously make visible their ongoing involvement. Experiencing face includes a display of orienting towards inner feeling: the eyes of the participants are closed, and the facial expression indicates enjoyment and involvement in the ongoing tactile encounter (Image 1.).

Image 1. *Experiencing face*



Image 1: Experiencing face

Given that the participants continue to display the experiencing face, even if the other person cannot see it, experiencing face is not only there for the purpose of communication. Instead, drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenological perspective on the human body, I propose that facial

expression is also a way for a living body to feel affect and not merely an interactional display of it. In other words, a facial *display* of affect—communicative in the sense that it is explicitly available to others—is synonymous with *feeling* the affect being displayed. Thus, the facial expression *is*, at the same time, the actual feeling as well as an interaction resource for communicating about it.

Feeling and experiencing emotion and affect are some of the ways for the body to inhabit the world that is already available and to communicate to others. In their analysis of an auto shop owner's handling of a car in front of a customer, Cuffari and Streeck (2017) describe how “the hand [of an auto shop owner] not only gathers information, it also ‘announces’ that it does, and potentially what it is gathering” (p. 184). In the same way, a participant displaying an experiencing face during a kiss or hug actually feels the feeling while at the same time announcing that they are doing so and potentially what they are feeling.

Moreover, during affectionate moments, the faces of the participants are not only visually available resources that enable visual access to ongoing engagement and feeling. In this study, I will also describe forms of tactile face-on-face communication in which the faces of the participants touch, acting as multisensorial fields of intercorporeal engagement. As described by Cekaite and Malva Kvist (2017) in their study of caregivers soothing crying children, faces are intimate areas on the human body that often touch during soothing embraces (i.e., “head-to-head formation,” p. 113). In the current study, I find that during kissing and hugging interactions between romantic partners, the participants' faces are often able to feel each other's facial expressions through touch. Hence, facial expressions manifest a multisensorial interplay of the visual and tactile, as well as communicative and felt, aspects of affection. I will illustrate some of these manifold forms of “face-on” communication and how they play out during tactile intimacy.

While most EMCA studies on facial expressions draw from a tradition of viewing emotion as primarily communicative (see Bavelas & Chovil, 2018; Ekman, 1997), I add to the video-based study of facial expressions by including a focus on experiential and felt aspects of the face in interaction. I approach facial postures from an *intercorporeal* perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) to videoanalysis (Katila and Raudaskoski, 2020; Katila and Turja, 2021; Meyer et al., 2017); they are expressions of “living bodies” (Streeck, 2013), entailing expressive and felt aspects.

2. How Can the Feeling Body be Approached Through EMCA-Based Video Analysis?

In this study, the focus is on the *felt* aspect of intimate human commerce and how feeling in interaction is communicated to another person through facial expressions. While interaction studies often use the terms emotion and affect interchangeably (e.g., Ruusuvuori, 2013, p. 331–332), I follow Roald, Levin, and K ppe (2018, p. 205) by referring to “affect” as an overarching term, including both “emotions” and “feelings.” Moreover, I utilize these authors’ understanding by using the term “feelings” to refer to felt aspects of experience, whereas “emotions” refer to more distinct experiences, such as anger, joy, or surprise (ibid.).

From the perspective of video-based EMCA research, affect and emotion are treated as something emerging as externally observable displays (Ruusuvuori, 2013) or stances (e.g., Goodwin & Goodwin, 2024, p. 140; Goodwin et al., 2012), created by various semiotic resources and stemming from the ongoing interactional situation. As a result, approaching the felt aspects of affect and emotion can be methodologically challenging, as the “real” existence of the felt aspects of emotion and affect is difficult to verify. Video-based EMCA does not deny the existence of subjective feelings per se, but it is simply believed that they cannot be observed through video analysis.

To be able to approach the felt aspect of interaction and how feeling is communicated to another person, I combine the methodological approach of video-based EMCA (that is, the focus on the observable) with Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) understanding of affect, emotion, and the feeling body. According to Merleau-Ponty, bodies are already primarily feeling and affective beings; as such, the felt aspect of interaction is not a question but a *starting point*. That is, for Merleau-Ponty, affect is central to—and even inseparable from—human embodiment and subjectivity. Accordingly, affect is not just something potentially added to our embodied actions; instead, it is already embedded in all perceptions. As Roald et al. (2018, p. 208) explain Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, pp. 160–161) thinking, affect is a way to aim at things around us and to respond to their call in a pre-reflective and discursive manner (i.e., motor intentionality). This carnal affective relationship with the world stems from the double-faceted nature of the body’s perception. The body simultaneously perceives itself through perceiving the world and also by being perceived by the world: it is both “subject” and object” but never entirely either. To have a body, Roald et al. (2018) propose, is “not a passive state of *having* or being submitted to experience, but rather to actively *be* an experience, an affective experience” (p. 208, emphasis in original).

More distinct emotions, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962), come into existence in gestures; for instance, anger comes into existence in an angry gesture (p. 184), or love comes into existence in the acts of love (pp. 382–3). In describing Merleau-Ponty’s approach to emotions, Roald et al. (2018) explain: “In the same

manner as we acquire a body by living or acting through it, the feelings of love and anger are only actualized as emotions by living them, for example, through acts of kissing or shouting” (p. 211).

In my understanding of human embodiment, I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s view of affect and emotion as something embedded in our embodied behavior, such as gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations. This means that there is no doubt that *feeling* or the felt aspect are present in the affective and emotional displays of the participants—otherwise, the participants’ bodies would be treated as mere instruments for communication.

It should be made evident that taking as given that affective displays involve feelings does not mean that an analyst (or any other person) would know *exactly* how someone else feels. Rather, it is meant that human beings, including the analyst, interpret other human beings’ conduct as the conduct of living and feeling bodies. This is only possible by deploying the basic empathy embedded in having living bodies of their own. The experience of the “livingness” of another body is not experienced directly as one’s own, but “nonprimordially.” In describing Stein’s ([1917] 1989, pp. 7–11) notion on the *nonprimordial experience* of others, Colombetti (2014) writes: “When I see a hand tensely contracted in a fist, I do not experience this tenseness in my own hand, as if my hand were itself tensely contracted in a fist. At the same time, however, I do not just see the other’s hand and judge that it is tense; rather, I experience the tenseness in the other’s hand” (p. 174).

The same logic of embodied experience holds true when interpreting other people’s emotions, feelings, and affect. We, as human beings, including interaction analysts, do not just see facial movements in another person’s face and then make the judgment that these are symptoms of, for instance, joy, grief, or love, but we immediately *experience* specific emotions in the person’s countenance (Colombetti, 2014, pp. 176–177; see also Hamington, 2004, p. 54). It is this embodied and experienced aspect of interpreting another living body’s (who is also like me, a human) affective expression that also enables the “verification” of the existence of the felt aspect (see Katila and Raudaskoski, 2020, for a lengthy discussion on the role of the researcher’s body in interaction analysis). In the current context, this all simply means that feeling in the participant’s facial expressions is treated as being *observable* by the analyst nonprimordially, given that feeling is already immanent in the participant’s observable conduct.

Taking the idea of living and feeling bodies as a starting point for my analysis of intimate behavior, my analysis particularly uncovers how the felt and communicative aspects co-emerge in the facial expressions of the participants and how these expressions are inherently *multisensorial*.

3. The Multisensoriality of the Felt Bodies in Intimate Encounters

Recent interaction research has turned its focus not only to multimodal, but also multisensorial (Goico et al., 2021; Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018; Mondada, 2019) aspects of human sociality. For instance, during intimate encounters, such as kisses and hugs among family members, Goodwin and Cekaite (2018) have found the co-occurrence of touch and affect in the “creaky” tone of voice. During kissing interactions, vision and the sense of touch also seem to be closely connected. For instance, even if facial expressions are not their point of focus, Goodwin and Cekaite (2018) mention that sometimes the occurrences of kisses and hugs are accompanied by facial expressions of delight, including closing the eyes (p. 177).

Previous research has associated both facial expressions (Ekman & Friesen, 1969) and touch (Hertenstein et al., 2006) with communicating emotions. Laboratory studies, for instance, have argued that “facial expression changes are highly likely to communicate real-time changes in affective responses to touch” (Mayo et al., 2018, p. 88). It has been suggested that touch has a sharpening effect on interpreting another person’s facial expressions: for instance, smiling faces could be rated as friendlier when accompanied by touch. Conversely, facial expressions influence the interpretation of touch, that is, smiling faces increase, whereas frowning faces reduce, the pleasantness of concomitant touch (Ellingsen et al., 2013; Knapp & Hall, 1997).

From a phenomenological perspective, facial and tactile expressions of emotion are expressions of the carnal affective relationship with the world and the bodies in it (see Section 2). Living bodies constantly feel the world and other bodies through multiple senses, as well as being simultaneously felt by other living organisms. This involves a complex multi- and intersensorial landscape. All body movement, including sensorial behavior such as vision and touch, includes kinesthesia, awareness of the position, and movement of one’s body. Moreover, when moving one’s face into certain postures during cycles of kissing, one is at the same time feeling one’s body moving and touching, as well as feeling the other person’s body moving and being touched by it. Merleau-Ponty (1968) refers to this intertwining and reversibility of bodies during moments of touching and being touched as chiasm (e.g., p. 265). Accordingly, a multiplicity of interrelated senses are at play during moments of kissing, not only touch and kinesthesia, but the feeling of being touched and “interkinesthesia” (see Behnke, 2008, p. 144). Interkinesthesia, or the perception emerging when bodies move together, enables an intercorporeal connection through meaningful body movements, such as walking or gesturing together (Katila and Philipsen, 2022; Philipsen and Katila, 2021).

Moreover, our bodies are constantly responsive to their interoceptive experiences. Interoception can be defined as the sense of the physiological condition of the entire body (Graig, 2002, p. 655); in essence, it is a term used to describe signals arising from inner organs (Vaitl, 1996, p. 2). Interoception is

often associated with sensing emotions (e.g., Critchley & Garfinkel, 2017; Seth, 2013). During moments of kissing and hugging, the other person is being felt closely, and the interaction is often especially affective in nature. This may have consequences for the interoceptive experience, as being close to one another enables partially sensing the other body's interoceptive responses as well, especially the heartbeat. Being able to feel the other person while also feeling oneself, moments of kisses and hugs may even include *inter*-interoceptive experiences.

4. Materials and Methods

The data entail video recordings of the naturally occurring lives of 10 couples living in Finland. I documented the everyday life of each couple for seven days for 10–20 hours a day with 4–5 video cameras set up in different rooms. I was not in the participants' homes during the recordings but visited the participants every day to change the memory cards of the cameras. The participants gave informed consent to participate in the research, including the collection of video data. The research protocol followed the guidelines for research with human participants by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK, 2019), and an ethical review by the Ethical Committee of Human Subjects of the Tampere region was conducted before the study. Drawing from a large corpus of up to 250 naturally occurring cases of kissing and hugging in the couples' everyday lives, I chose three extracts that exemplify the phenomena of interest: experiencing face during kisses and hugs, and the creativity of the forms of affection through faces-on communication.

Methodologically, I draw from both co-operative (C. Goodwin, 2018) and intercorporeal (Meyer, Streeck & Jordan, 2017) perspectives on video analysis of interaction. These are particularly suitable for the analysis of emotion and affect (see Katila and Raudaskoksi, 2020; Katila & Turja, 2021) and will allow me to focus on semiotic, embodied, and multisensorial aspects of the participants' embodied behavior. Besides involving the empathetic interpretation of the researcher's body in the analysis (Katila and Raudaskoksi, 2020), I use the research participants' interviews to interpret their own embodied behavior and its context. By showing the participants videos of their own interactions, they are given an opportunity to account for their own interpretations of the interactional events. As elaborated in Section 2, the researcher's empathetic body involves nonprimordial access to the participants' felt, affective, and emotive behaviors.

Analyzing facial expressions during kisses has its challenges, as often one or both participants' faces are not entirely visible in the video, a problem also reported by Kendon (1975, 1981). In the study, I only used cases where both participants' faces were visible most of the time. Moreover, video recording such intimate settings may distract the participants or influence their behavior, as

kissing, especially in the private space of people's homes, is often regarded as behavior only to be witnessed by its participants. Sometimes, kissing is purposefully done publicly for outsiders: for instance, when families are being videoed for a family album (Mondada, Monteiro & Tekin, 2020). In Kendon's (1975, 1981) study, the participating couple was sitting in a public space, on a park bench, and were not told that they were being video-recorded (p. 324). However, this procedure would hardly pass today's ethical regulations.

In my study, the real influence of the cameras is difficult to estimate, but the participants themselves reported forgetting the presence of the cameras after a day or two of recording. The participants were instructed on how to use the cameras and were allowed to turn off the cameras at any point when they so desired. Sometimes, this happened when the participants were about to have sex.

To secure the anonymity of the participants, I will use line drawings of the screenshots of the videos and pseudonyms in the data examples. The verbal transcription conventions are presented in Appendix 1. The conventions were modified for my purposes from the work of conversation analyst Gail Jefferson (2004). In addition to more conventional transcription signs, ❤ before utterances is used to indicate partner-targeted, affectionate voice, something resembling an infant-targeted and high-pitched "baby talk" or "motherese" voice (see Fernald, 1985), often addressed to babies by caregivers. Moreover, @ is used to indicate speech produced with a smiley voice.

5 Analysis

5.1 The multisensorial aspects of facial expressions

In Extract 1, I will illustrate the multisensorial affordances of the face during intimate touch. While the lips often act as a focal point for an affectionate touch, touching the whole face enables another way to co-experience the other person and share an intimate moment. Moreover, when touching one another's faces, facial expressions such as smiles become available primarily through the sense of touch. In Extract 1, a married heterosexual couple, Silja (SI) and Pekka (PE), are lying on their bed on a Saturday morning, talking and cuddling. The couple has been together for 15 years, and they have three children. While two of their children are occupied with their hobbies and one of them is watching TV in another room, the couple gets to spend some rare time alone. For the Saturday night, the couple has hired a nanny, as they are planning on going on a date, and in Extract 1 they are talking about the forthcoming date. As the participants expressed in the interviews, they used to be in the habit of going out, just the two of them, almost every month. However, due to the Coronavirus outbreak, which was still ongoing during the time of the recording, this had not been possible for some time.

Extract 1.

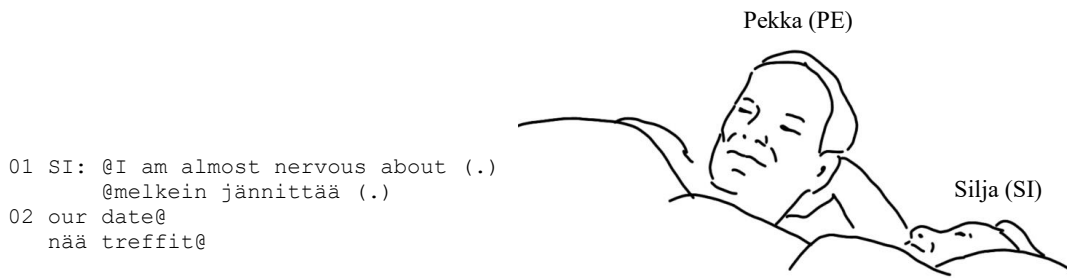


Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

After being quiet for some time, in Figure 1.1, Silja turns her gaze toward Pekka, smiles, and speaks coyly, saying that “@I am almost nervous about (.) our date@” (lines 1–2). Attending to the affective nature of Silja’s confession, Pekka immediately turns his gaze toward Silja and moves close to her, asking for confirmation (line 03) with an equally smiling tone of voice. Both mirroring each other’s flustered smiling expressions, the two meet in an intense facial formation, with their eyes still open but squinting (Figure 1.2).

Pekka is approaching Silja, but, given that she is smiling to the extent that her teeth show (see Kendon, 1975, 1981), her face is not assembled in a “kissable formation” (Mondada et al., 2020, p. 60). As a result, an alternative trajectory for intimacy occurs: Pekka is still also smiling himself and touches Silja’s cheek with his smiling mouth (Figure 1.3). Simultaneously, Silja is giving a positive verbal response to Pekka’s confirmation request, still produced with a tone of voice clearly audible as smiling (line 04). During this what could be called an “affective peak” (Knudsen & Stage, 2015, pp. 8–9), the faces of the participants emerge in

an experiencing face. Given that their eyes are now closed, they are unable to see each other's smiles. However, due to the multisensorial affordances of facial expressions, they are able to directly feel each other's smiles through the sense of touch and also hear the smile in Silja's voice (line 04). Spending a moment in this intimate face-*on*-face formation full of affect enables the participants to feel each other and co-embody the emerging affect: the flustered "cute nervousness" about their forthcoming date. At this moment, the participants are not just presenting, but actually "living" the romantic affect (Katila & Raudaskoski, 2020, p. 457; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of Extract 1. First, facial expressions, in this case a smile, are entirely multisensorial and intercorporeal bodily events. Usually only analyzed from a visual perspective, a smile can be sensed not only through vision, but potentially also through the sense of touch and hearing. Moreover, Extract 1 supports previous research indicating that for lip kissing to occur, a certain bodily formation and formation of the face and lips are required (Kendon, 1975, 1981; Mondada et al., 2020). However, it also shows how alternative forms of face- and lip-mediated intimacy can emerge: communication which is not just face-to-face, it is actually face-*on*-face—unmediated conversation occurring through the skin of the cheeks, lips, and other parts of the face. During such moments, both gestural and intercorporeal aspects are at play. A smile, as a gesture of positive emotion, is laminated with actually *feeling* the skin of the other person while the other person is feeling the skin of one's own face. The face, often treated as an especially touch-sensitive area of the human body (see Cekaite & Malv Kvist, 2017, p. 115; Hertenstein & Weiss, 2011), therefore affords a locus for the bodies to emerge in an intimate "compresence" or single intercorporeality (Cekaite, 2018; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In Extract 2, I explore another example of this direct "face-on" communication.

5.2 Co-operative eyebrow flashing

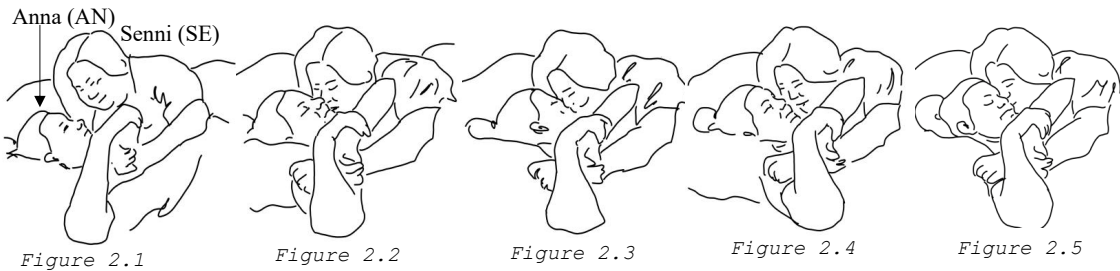
In Extract 2, we will witness an intimate moment mediated primarily through "face-on" communication—communication occurring solely on and through the faces. Besides directly touching each other's faces through kisses, the participants emerge into a spontaneously unfolding "co-operative action" cycle where they recycle with minor transformations (C. Goodwin, 2018) each other's eyebrow flashes and smiles. This co-participated sociality escalates into an affective peak manifested through the experiencing face. Thus, an experiencing face enables the participants to feel and communicate the feelings stemming from the multisensorial experience. These multisensorial moments, involving (at least) the vision, sound, and sense of touch, especially exemplify the explorative and creative nature of forms of touch and face-mediated intimate sociality.

In Extract 2, we observe a nighttime ritual of a female couple, Anna (AN) and Senni (SE), who have been together for four years (see Extract 1). The couple is

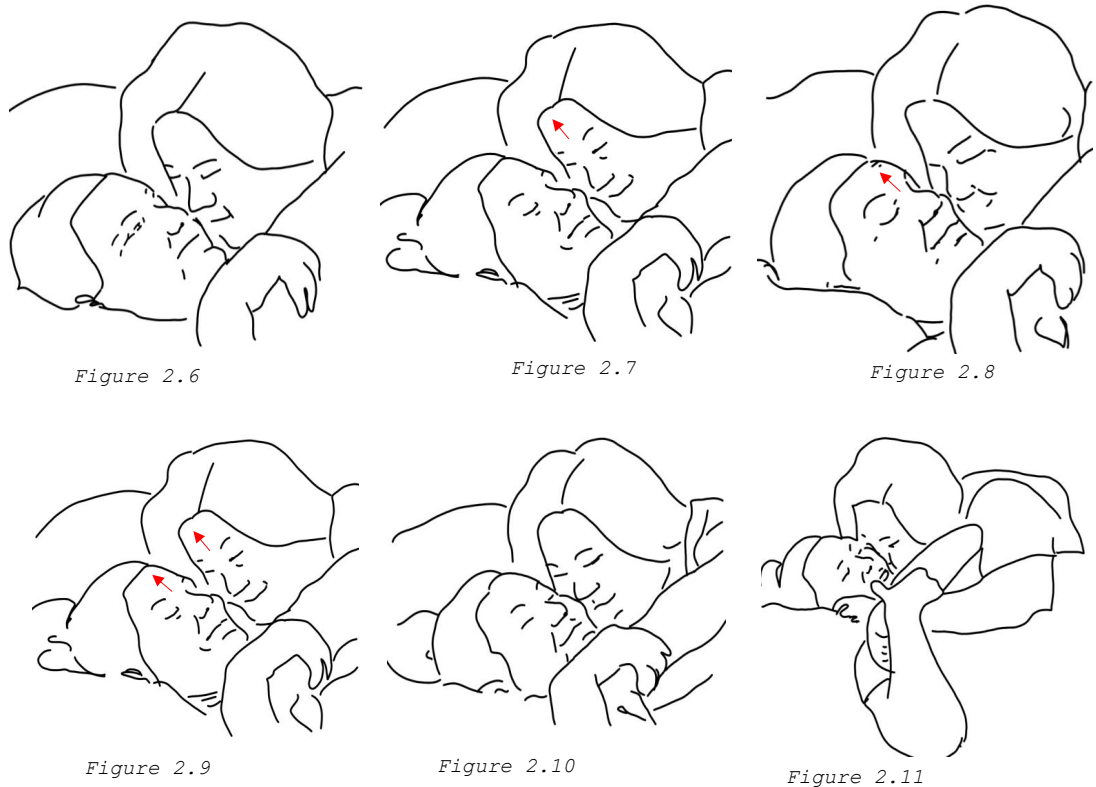
lying on their bed and after 15 minutes or so of talking and cuddling are about to say goodnight. Drawing from Goffman’s (1971) work on interaction rituals (p. 79), Goodwin and Cekaite (2018) have suggested that saying goodnight is a form of “boundary intertwining” (p. 136), often involving touch and extended intimacy among family members. Extract 2 begins with Anna attempting to close the encounter by saying, “Okay? (.) Good night you can turn around” (line 01).

Extract 2.

01 AN: okei? (.) hyvää yötä saat kääntyä
 okeyh? (.) good night you can turn around



02 SE: 'joooh'
 'yeah'



03 AN: ♥lavjuu

Instead of obeying Anna’s suggestion to turn around and say good night, Senni approaches Anna smilingly, and their gazes meet in a close facial formation (Figure 2.1). Following this, Senni gently kisses an area just next to Anna’s mouth

while both women close their eyes, and Anna's facial expression merges into an experiencing face with a smile, expressing her enjoyment as a recipient of the kiss (Figure 2.2). Here, Anna composes her face as a sensorial field able to feel Senni's face and touch. At the same time, Senni, being the active participant in the kiss, can feel Anna's facial expressions through touch, and, for example, her cheeks, which have risen from the smile. Anna then twists her head slightly, allowing a kiss on her mouth to happen (Figure 2.3). The two withdraw from the kiss, only to find themselves in an intense "eye-to-eye ecological huddle" (Goffman, 1963, p. 95), monitoring each other from a close distance with squinted eyes (Figure 2.4). Senni plants another caressing kiss on Anna's cheeks as their faces again evolve into the experiencing posture (Figure 2.5).

After the kiss, a turning point in the communication follows: whether to initiate another kissing round or to close the encounter and go to sleep. Senni withdraws slightly from the kiss but continues observing Anna from a short distance. The two stare at each other for a few seconds, after which Anna blinks her eyes slightly, as if a foreign object had entered her eye (Figure 2.6). This still undefined movement of the eyes is treated as a social signal by Senni, and she, recycling Anna's initial eye movement with an interpretative transformation (C. Goodwin, 2018), produces an eyebrow flash—a gesture with her eyebrows high up, accompanied by a "flirting smile"—a similar kind often worn when producing a non-serious or performative wink (Figure 2.7).

Previous studies have suggested that eyebrow flashes sometimes occur in types of actions seeking contact, for instance, during greetings (Ekman, 1979, p. 187; Hinde, 1975, p. 300). Technically, raised eyebrows afford a wider field of unimpeded vision (Hinde, 1975, p. 188) and therefore enable more intensified monitoring of the other person. In the current context, the eyebrow flash, together with the smile, initiates a playfully flirtatious interaction scene. As it appears, following Senni's facial posture (Figure 2.7), the affective atmosphere of the encounter changes immediately from merely affectionate into affectionate, accompanied by a humorous or non-serious "flirtatious" flavor. This eyebrow flash and smile by Senni is immediately mirrored by Anna with a similar expression (Figure 2.8). This raising of eyebrows in turns is followed by both participants incorporating a heightened version of the same gesture at the same time, with eyebrows rising even more extensively and the faces even more explicitly implying flirtatious expressions (Figure 2.9). This wordless exchange of affect through facial expressions results in collaborative appreciation. The participants deploy an experiencing face with their eyes again closed and face smiling to the extent that their cheekbones are touching and affording a channel for an intimate tactile feeling-with (Figure 2.10). Now, the emotional atmosphere transits away from the flirtatious back to the mere affective. Senni takes hold of Anna's head and gives her another intense kiss on her cheek in a "head-to-head formation," with their faces touching (Cekaite & Malva Kvist, 2017, p. 113, Figure 2.11). At the same time, Anna verbalizes the emotion already immanent in the

facial gestures and kisses, uttering “love you” (line 03) with an affectionate tone of voice.

In Extract 2, we witness some forms of faces-on communication, such as touching each other’s cheekbones to feel each other’s bodies and (smiling) facial expressions. Immediate access to the other person’s face enables sensing, among other things, the other person’s ongoing orienting toward engaging with each other. When the eyes are closed, touch becomes the primary medium for intercorporeal body-to-body communication. The simultaneous closing of the eyes is a way for the bodies to cherish the affective and multisensorial “pouring into each other” manifested in the moments of a kiss. At the same time, through the experiencing face, the participants continuously show each other that they are oriented toward feeling the moment. Thus, the closing of the eyes can allow for an intercorporeal intensification of affect among the bodies of intimate partners who are feeling and being felt by each other through touch. Moreover, the kisses in Extract 2 are followed by brief moments of intense face-to-face formations with eyes open, enabling the participants to also visually confirm that the other person is engaging and feeling the moment in the same way. In Extract 2, I also observed a creative co-operative action cycle of playfully flirtatious eyebrow flashes. The familiarity of the bodies, due to their long-term relationship history with countless previous cases of kissing, affords a fruitful substrate for such exploratory forms of human intimacy to occur.

5.3 Multisensorial mirroring and pushing foreheads against each other

In Extract 3, I will illustrate another set of novel and playful ways of face-on communication, involving squinting-of-the-face gesture, multiple kisses, mirroring each other’s facial expressions, and pushing the foreheads together. The creativity and multiplicity of these forms of intimate human commerce demonstrates the rich ecology of facial expressions and face-on-face communication afforded by a close human relationship. Each couple has its own ways and rhythms for showing affection, including unique facial expressions. Importantly, kissing is only one means for faces to touch in order to manifest affection. In Extract 3, we follow a married heterosexual couple, Sanni (SA) and Tatu (TA), who have been together for seven years. It is Saturday, and the couple spends most of the day on the sofa, watching a TV series, playing video games, talking, and cuddling. As the extract begins, Tatu is just finishing drinking water from a glass, and Sanni quickly checks her phone, which is lying on the sofa (Figure 3.1).

Extract 3.



Figure 3.1

Figure 3.2
01 TA: ähh

Figure 3.3

Figure 3.4

Figure 3.5
02 SA: °@mmmm@°

Figure 3.6

03 SA: ♥mitä SINÄ ajattelet
♥what are SINÄ thinking about
(maximum pitch 458Hz)



Figure 3.7

04 SA: ♥EN MITÄÄN
♥NOTHING
(maximum pitch 444Hz)



Figure 3.8

05 TA: ♥EN MITÄÄN
♥NOTHING
(maximum pitch 470Hz)



Figure 3.9



Figure 3.10



Figure 3.11



Figure 3.12

Tatu takes the glass aside, still holding it, and makes an “ähh” sound to communicate that he has now finished drinking (line 01). He turns his gaze toward Sanni, who at the same time leaves her phone on the sofa and turns toward Tatu. After moving their bodies into a kissable formation like this, Tatu

produces a full-face squinting gesture with his eyes closed and squinting and his mouth drawn into a wide, closed smile. Treating this expression as an invitation to kiss, Sanni approaches her partner and kisses his lips, both participants beginning to display an experiencing face (Figure 3.3). After this, the two withdraw into face-to-face formation, looking at each other, with Sanni caressing Tatu's head gently with her right hand and resting her left hand on Tatu's thigh. The participants then again merge together in a kiss (Figure 3.5). This time, Sanni offers her cheek to Tatu and puts her arms around him to hold him tightly. Tatu responds by planting multiple successive fast kisses on Sanni's cheek. To this, Sanni again responds by a smiling "mmmm" sound' (line 3.5), through which she is able to communicate her enjoyment to Tatu, as the participants' eyes are closed in an experiencing face. Again, the affectionate huddle, enabling the bodies to feel and be felt by each other, involves multiple senses, including touch, sound, and vision. The multisensorial concert of actions occurs both simultaneously and sequentially, in turns. While the bodies are constantly and simultaneously touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, they still carefully attend to each other's actions by responding to them in relevant ways, such as Sanni kissing Tatu (Figure 3.3.) after Tatu's inviting facial expression (Figure 3.2), Tatu kissing Sanni's cheek after Sanni offers her cheek (Figure 3.5), or Sanni vocalizing her enjoyment as Tatu kisses her on the cheek (line 02).

After Tatu's kiss on Sanni's cheek, there is another kiss on her lips (Figure 3.6). In Figure 3.7, the participants return to a face-to-face formation similar to that in Figure 3.4, where both were gazing at each other from a close distance, and Sanni was caressing Tatu's hair. Only now, Sanni, closely monitoring Tatu's facial expressions, utters a question "♥what are YOU thinking about?" with a particularly high-pitched (up to 458 Hz) tone of voice (line 03). Not waiting for Tatu's response, she responds on his behalf with an equally high-pitched (up to 444 Hz) and even more empathized tone, saying "♥NOTHING" (line 04). At the same time, she deploys a special exaggerated facial expression, matching the tone of her voice: she opens her mouth wide and tilts her head to the right with eyes closed and eyebrows high up (Figure 3.8). Immediately attending to Sanni's performance, Tatu copies Sanni's expression by opening his mouth and raising his eyebrows while tilting his head to the left (Figure 3.9). Moreover, he imitates the facial expression with an almost identical repetition of Sanni's previous high-pitched utterance "♥NOTHING" (line 05, up to 470 Hz).

The extremely high-pitched and even childlike tones of the voices used by the participants resemble an affective tone called "motherese" or "infant-targeted talk" produced by caregivers targeting infants (Fernald, 1985). Rising up to almost 500 Hz, the voice frequencies of both Sanni's and Tatu's talk are

extraordinarily high, especially for adult males.¹ In their interviews, Sanni and Tatu reported that this way of talking was a habit they had created at some point in their relationship history. Although Sanni's and Tatu's tones of voice were of the highest pitch, almost all of the 10 couples I studied used some form of affective, partner-targeted tone of voice when talking to each other, especially during moments of tactile affection.

As a result of this affective mirroring sequence, a flow of reciprocated interactional moves involving the faces of the participants occurs. Responding to Tatu's previous action, Sanni moves her head toward Tatu by shaking her head slightly (Figure 3.10). As the participants' heads are now almost touching, Tatu takes his turn to approach Sanni with a similar head-shaking movement. Eventually, the participants' foreheads touch, and as the movement intensifies, Tatu frowns, his eyes squinting, and the two push their foreheads against each other (Figure 2.11), before withdrawing back to close face-to-face formation (Figure 3.12). This forehead-to-forehead touch resulting from the co-operative facial matching resembles one of the creative ways in which participants in intimate relationships can show bonding behavior and affection besides kissing and hugging. Parts of the participants' faces—their foreheads—are touching; communication occurs directly through *feeling* the other person's face.

Communication by lightly pushing with the head can be found elsewhere in the animal kingdom. For instance, cats do something called head bunting to other cats and humans, and this has been associated with bonding behavior. Zawistowski (2015, p. 38) has suggested that cat bunting has to do with olfactory communication, and it may help to ensure social cohesion among a group of cats, for instance. While cat and human behavior are not directly comparable, the light touching of each other's foreheads, in Extract 3, at the end of co-participated facial expressions, seems to act as an escalation of intimate bonding behavior. In Extract 3, it is possible to witness a highly attuned, affective moment enabled by the participants' careful mutual monitoring of and attending to each other's facial actions.

6. Conclusions

In this study, I have illustrated the occurrence of facial expressions during moments of kissing and hugging between romantic partners. In particular, with my focus on both the felt and communicative aspects of these intercorporeal moments, I have uncovered two interrelated phenomena that occur during such moments. First, I described the emergence of something I call an *experiencing face* during kisses and hugs. Experiencing face is a way for a body to feel the other person, as well as feeling being felt by them. At the same time, it is a way

¹ For instance, in a study that included 2,472 participants, the mean voice frequencies of ordinary conversations were reported as 111.9 Hz for male and 168.5 Hz for female participants (Berg et al., 2016).

to communicate, orienting toward this feeling and being felt. Second, I proposed the multisensoriality of facial expressions by illustrating something I call *face-on communication* during moments of kissing. Face-on communication is the direct communication of feelings through faces touching; it is the sensing of each other's facial expressions, such as smiles, through the sense of touch.

In Extract 1, Silja and Pekka shared an affective moment of being nervous about their forthcoming date through their cheeks touching while smiling. During this moment, the participants were able to feel each other's lingering emotions in the smile through the sense of touch. In Extract 2, Anna and Senni also had their cheeks and lips touching, enabling a multisensorial field of experience. The participants, closely monitoring and attending to each other's facial movements, emerged into a cycle of co-operative eyebrow flashing, through which they were able to share a non-serious flirtatious moment. In Extract 3, the highly affective tones of voice of Sanni and Tatu was accompanied by the mirroring of each other's facial postures, resulting in an affective peak, manifested in touching foreheads. These movements of the body exemplify the creative and wide range of forms of intimate "haptic sociality" (M.H. Goodwin, 2017) beyond kissing.

Together, these examples manifest the inherent multi- and intersensoriality of moments of tactile affection among romantic couples. During such moments, faces and expressions can potentially be accessed through both vision and touch, and sometimes at the same time. Multiple forms of intercorporeal attunement are at play, including touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, and moving and moving with, as well as types of intersensorial attunement not observable by video, namely, gustatory and olfactory. When the faces are not touching, an intercorporeal experience of emotion could be accomplished visually by mirroring the other's facial expression. By this *facial mimicry*—a term used by psychologists to refer to individuals' tendency to "exhibit changes in their own facial expressions in response to emotional expressions of another person" (Seibt et al., 2015, p. 1)—the participants could momentarily witness each other having access to the same kinesthetic experience and therefore also witness each other having access to the same corporeal feeling.

This simultaneous feeling of one's own and the other person's body enables the extension of one's own kinesthetic and interoceptive field into an intercorporeal one. The other person's body, felt close in and through touch, emerges intimately as co-existing with one's own body. Importantly, one's own body is not felt the same as that of the other's, for then there would be no *interaction* or *intercorporeality*. Rather, one's own body, including its sensorial functions, momentarily unfolds as being and sensing *with*. This multisensorial intercorporeality is a rich substrate for sharing and feeling emotions together, and facial expressions play a major role in this.

As I've shown, the face plays a multitude of roles in the encounters exemplified in the extracts, transiting from face as a gesture, face as an expression, and as a way or medium to inhabit emotion. In one moment, it can be a resource for co-

operative facial gestures, while in another it can be a medium for simply feeling the other through touching cheeks. I also showed how facial gestures, such as a smile, can be felt directly through touch on the other person's body. Tactile affection in intimate relationships can therefore provide rich substrates for the emergence of gestures from facial "functions" and "expressions" (see Dix & Groß, 2023/this issue).

This study has illustrated that the face is a salient locus for sharing intimate moments. Faces enable the emergence of intercorporeal bodily feelings—feeling the other person's body while being felt by them—through a multitude of creative ways in which they can touch each other, such as cheek to cheek, lips touching the cheek, lips touching lips, or the cheek or forehead touching the other's forehead. Being able to express emotion, communicate through gaze direction, and talk and kiss using the mouth, the face is a carnal medium for human beings to feel together.

Appendix 1. The transcription conventions used in the conversations

- (0.5) Numbers in brackets indicate a time gap in tenths of a second.
- (.) A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a micropause of less than two-tenths of a second.
- = This indicates an absolute contiguity between utterances.
- () This indicates an unclear utterance or another sound.
- :
- :
- :
- .
- ,
- ?
- °°
- Under This indicates the speaker's emphasis.
- CAPITAL This indicates the speaker's extreme emphasis.
- @ @ This indicates speech produced with a smiley voice.
- (()) This indicates the analyst's comment.
- ❤ This indicates affectionate, partner-targeted voice

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