

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 126 (2014) 106

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

ICTTP 2014

The 'Social Present' in interacting dyads

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Abstract

The therapeutic relationship is an important change factor in psychotherapy, and disordered communication is a core problem in many patients' everyday functioning. Our research group has worked on measures of nonverbal behavior that can be used to evaluate social interaction. We performed a number of projects on this embodiment background, addressing nonverbal behavior in dyadic interaction processes in psychotherapy (104 therapy sessions of 70 patients) as well as healthy dyads discussing topics of general interest (two projects included 84 and 51 dyads, respectively). Nonverbal synchrony was assessed objectively using an automated video-analysis algorithm (Motion Energy Analysis, MEA) developed in our laboratory. All participants were unaware of the synchrony measure being assessed. In the initial psychotherapy project, we found the quality of interaction was embodied in the degree of nonverbal synchrony between therapist and patient. In healthy dyads, synchrony was related to the type of interaction and predicted the affective pleasantness of the conversations. This suggested that beyond the mere amount of movement, the degree of nonverbal synchrony between people was a pivotal predictor of features of the interaction, as well as an objective and sensitive indicator of the severity of patients' problems. In general, social synchronization is an important, usually unattended, capacity that regulates social interaction and expresses the satisfaction with social exchange. Its analysis provides valuable insights into embodied social cognition and produces promising targets for psychotherapeutic and other interventions. Here we report on a recent elaboration based on MEA. This concerned our definition of a duration measure of the social present ('nowness') of a dyad. The social present was defined as the size of the temporal window within which the nonverbal motion streams of interactants are significantly correlated. A pilot study showed that this duration has an extension of around 5 s. We discuss the associations of the social present with trait and state variables of the participants.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the International Conference on Timing and Time Perception.

Keywords: Embodiment; Nonverbal synchrony; Psychotherapy; Social present

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