

Haptic perception in sexuality

Kurt Seikowski and Sabine Gollek

Haptic perception and the functions of the skin

The connections between haptic perception and sexuality arise initially from the actual realisation organ of this form of perception – the skin. The skin itself, however, fulfils various functions, which are related more or less to differing aspects of haptic perception. This is illustrated by two different approaches to skin function which have a number of similarities (Tab. 1).

With respect to our query, the following skin functions appear to be important for the connection between haptic perception and sexuality: The skin, as an organ of *borders or contact* with the environment, or as *protection against stimuli*, protects the body against environmental influences such as temperature and humidity fluctuations. In sexual contacts, a partner's cold or sweaty hand on one's own skin is usually experienced as

reducing lust and evoking rejection. Physical contact which is warm and not unpleasantly damp opens the body for sexual stimulation.

The terms describing the skin as a *sensory organ* and the skin-self as *intersensoriality* or as the *basis for sexual excitement* cover the perception of tactile sensations like cold and warmth, burning, itching, tickling, prickling – that is, all the qualities directly connected with sexual sensations and which are mediated by *touch*. Sexual contacts can in a sense 'get under one's skin', whereby the erogenous zones play a special role.

Anzieu [1] discusses at this point two further functions which are relevant with respect to impaired sexual development. Under the skin-self as a *system of tactile sensory traces*, he sees the totality of pleasant and unpleasant skin experiences, which represent a sort of information system for the outside world. Touching which was experienced as inadequate was stored and actualised in later forms of physical contacts.

TABLE 1. FUNCTIONS OF THE SKIN

On the analogy Borelli [35] (Seikowski and Haustein [36])	According to Anzieu [1]
1. Skin as a limit organ between environment and one's own	1. Skin-self as a support (cohesions) of the psyche
2. Skin as a contact organ to the environment	2. Skin-self as a protection against stimuli
3. Skin as a sense organ	3. Skin-self as a container of the external sense organs
4. Skin as an impression organ for the viewer	4. Skin-self as individuation
5. Skin as an expression organ for the presentation with regard to the environment	5. Skin-self as intersensoriality (sense of touch)
6. Skin as sexual jewellery	6. Skin-self as a basis of sexual excitement
7. Skin as social protection	7. Skin-self as a libidinous charging
	8. Skin-self as a system of haptic sensory traces
	9. Skin-self as a self-destruction mechanism

Thus, for example, it can even come to 'skin rejection' of a person whom one believes one loves. Due to unpleasant prior experience, the skin remains 'distrustful'. According to Anzieu [1] this prior experience, which was experienced as traumatising, may even lead to expression of physical contact conflicts on the skin: the skinself as a *self-destructive mechanism* in the sense of self-mutilations of the skin. More will be said of this phenomenon later.

Touching as a connector between haptic perception and sexuality

At the latest since the experiments of Harlow et al. [2, 3] on Rhesus monkeys which showed how much more important warmth and touching by a fake mother was than a wire construction with food for the development of the young, there is no longer any doubt that touching with all of its pleasant (warmth, gentleness) and unpleasant (violence, pain, cold) properties influences the haptic perception of a mammal [4]. This recognition has also become established in everyday speech [5]: one has the 'right touch' or the 'wrong touch'; one get 'in touch' or 'in contact' with others; many people have to be 'handled with velvet gloves', others are 'thin-skinned' or 'thick-skinned'. In certain situations, we want to know how something 'feels', deep emotional experiences 'touch' us, etc.

Sexual contacts without touching are hard to imagine. Touching appears to be an essential mediator factor for functioning sexuality. But this does not mean only the purely physical contact. Three different qualities are connected with touching, if sexuality is considered. Touches can indicate tenderness. Here, gentle caresses can be experienced either as soothing by the other or progress to sensual caressing which are (generally) experienced as lustful or elicit a 'prickling' between two people. Likewise, caresses can have an erotic character – bound with the desire to act out sexual lust [6]. For this reason, the phenomenon of 'touching' appears to us to be most suit-

able to illustrate the relationship between haptic perception and sexuality.

Touching and sexual development

It was observed in an experiment by Harlow et al. [2] that motherless dams (monkey mothers that had grown up without their own mothers) never adopted the normal sexual-enticing positions or reacted to them. This gives rise to the assumption of a touching deficit which may lead to later sexual impairment in these female monkeys. Montagu [5] is of the opinion that appropriate 'mothering' is necessary to promote the development of a normal sex life. He transfers these relationships to people as well, and postulates that sufficient physical contact in childhood is essential for the development of normal sexuality.

In this respect, it appears helpful to rate touching differentially under the aspect of development.

Touching as a form of affection and acceptance

This form of touching already plays a role during pregnancy, in that the expectant mother and other reference persons stroke the abdomen, to which the child itself can already react. Recent studies have even shown that this form of acceptance can lead to erections in male fetuses as early as the 26th week of pregnancy [7].

During normal childhood development, ones own child is caressed and embraced. There is also more or less lustful physical contact in caring for the child. Montagu [5] assumes that later more pronounced sexual desire among men is partly because of an advantage over girls that the sex organ is outside the body. This means that in hygienic measures for a male infant would result in considerably more cutaneous stimulations than would be the case for girls.

Touching as affection and acceptance has not only a care-giving function (e.g., warmth and tenderness as a necessary prerequisite to general