Consistencies in Body-Focused Hand Movements

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Abstract

Irrelevant self- or object-manipulations are a common part of human nonverbal behaviour. While the systematic association between stressful settings and the occurrence of these body-focused hand movements has suggested to many authors that they are an indicator of arousal (e.g. LeCompte, 1981), other authors have suggested that body-focused movements act as an aid to attention focusing during distraction (e.g. Barroso et al., 1978).

In this series of investigations attempts were made to relate an attention narrowing measure (using a reaction time probe procedure) to body-focused movement frequencies. No significant correlations were obtained. Experimental attempts to increase body-focused movement frequencies by manipulating the level of distraction experienced by the subjects were also not successful. It was concluded that no simple relationship exists between body-focused movement occurrence and distraction.

While body-focused movements have been researched for more than half a century there is still little information concerning individual and cross-cultural consistencies in body-focused movement production.

Over a series of studies the preferences of individual subjects for particular forms and frequencies of body-focused movement were examined. While comparisons of some settings demonstrated that the subjects were consistent in body-focused movement preferences other settings showed much lower levels of consistency. Attempts to relate a variety of relevant personality measures to body-focused movement

frequencies showed little consistency across experimental settings. However, different tasks were consistently associated with different frequencies of body-focused movement.

The consistent association of body-focused movements with particular tasks was examined for four groups of subjects drawn from different cities (Adelaide, Brussels, Rome and Sheffield). While some quantitative differences between the cities were observed, the same significant task effects were obtained in each city. Naturalistic observations of body-focused movement performance in public settings were recorded from seven cities (Adelaide, Antwerp, Brussels, Munich, Paris, Rome, and Sheffield). Similar associations between settings and body-focused movement production were observed in each city.

Overall the data collected suggested that body-focused movements are produced for similar reasons by subjects from different cultural backgrounds. The stress model was the most successful predictor of setting differences in body-focused movement occurrence.