

A TOUCH EXPERIMENT

Dianne Lifton, New Society Aug 1968

NB this copy is verbatim and uses some language that I would not consider acceptable now

'A group of people taking separate routes approach people in the street and physically touch them in a deliberate manner. On each encounter the idea of the experiment should be discussed and a leaflet on the subject given. If the subject is sympathetic suggest that he/she takes several leaflets and continues the experiment with other people. Thus a series of spontaneous and continuous happenings occur'

The first experiment took place in the Portobello Road, west London, on Saturday 1 June 1968. It was a warm sunny day and there were many people wandering about happily and willing to be distracted. This should be remembered when considering the results of the experiment.

The experimenting team, including myself, consisted of seven people – three women and four men, average age 24. Because I wanted people to react freely and openly without their feeling that they were being recorded or subjected to a formal survey, we made no attempt to record information on each encounter, and the following observations are based on verbal and written reports made by the team after the experiment took place. We each developed a set method of touching people: Pam touched with one hand on their shoulders, both Saleem and Peter touched at shoulder level, John used both his hands on both shoulders and I put both my hands firmly round the person's waist, while Mark put his arm right round people in a very friendly manner.

We started at 11.30am all of us feeling nervous and apprehensive. We all experienced great difficulty at first. I touched the first person I came to – a girl of about 20 who was obviously frightened (possibly sensing my own fear) and could not get away quickly enough. But when we

started touching people who responded enthusiastically we became elated and by lunchtime were feeling really high on the experience. Most of our good responses came from younger people, mostly hippies who responded openly and honestly. But there were some exceptions.

I approached an elderly lady and her face lit up with joy when I touched her. She was obviously so pleased at my making some kind of contact and speaking to her, and although she might not have understood much of what I said to her about the experiment, she thanked me for my 'kindness' as I left.

Two policemen stiffened with official caution on my touching them but soon relaxed and walked off down the road, laughing and discussing the leaflet together.

Mark touched a middle-aged couple who thanked him and a middle-aged Cockney woman reacted with pleasure and interest. A bowler-hatted 'city gent' in a pin-striped suit was enthusiastic and went off and touched someone else straight away.

Pam touched two middle-aged American women who "... reacted with pleasure and some thrill (one could imagine them recounting this to the bridge club at home – a real tourist experience) they enjoyed the whole thing and brought it immediately to a personal level, asking me questions about me."

Coloured (*sic*) people were without doubt among our most successful encounters. We found that most of them (if not all) reacted with joy, calm, enthusiasm and warmth: "A West Indian, about 30, reacted warmly, called us by name, announced how much he was in favour people relating to one other, took some leaflets to carry on the experiment and jokingly told John to follow him with a camera to get some incidents of racial prejudice on film, ha ha." A West Indian woman reacted with much laughter and warmth and an Indian man reacted with 'pleasure and poise'. A Brazilian made friends with us immediately, bought us beer and came

back to have lunch with us. Peter touched a tall Negro (*sic*) who immediately put his arm round him saying 'Yes baby?' The experimenter explained to him and he replied: 'There's nothing like physical contact'. All coloured encounters without shock or any sense of being disturbed, which indicates an admirable cool.

Continental on the other hand, could not on the whole understand what the fuss was about. Those who understood the British taboo about touch seemed to like the idea of the experiment. Others appeared to regard it as a contact of a purely sexual nature (despite the great deal of physical contact there is between friends on the continent).

Young couples were usually very responsive (we made sure we touched both of them) and many took leaflets to continue the experiment.

Two nuns, on being touched, took hold of each other while I explained the idea of the experiment and one of them said, 'But we don't like being touched.'

Some experimenters met with people who immediately thought they wanted money. "Several people either offered me money or tried to get away saying they hadn't got any on them." A lot of people were surprised to find the leaflets were free and that they could keep them.

We all experienced unfavourable responses but would not put them higher than 25-30 per cent. Some people were obviously annoyed and wanted to get away quickly. One man seemed to sum up an attitude of a whole group of encounters by saying: "I don't like being touched by anyone unless we have been introduced." When I introduced myself by name, he said: "But I don't like being introduced except by someone else>"

There were other obstacles many of which we had predicted. Some men's first reaction on being touched by a woman was that she was soliciting. But it was easy to quickly establish the nature of the contact. The men in the team had more

trouble: some girls thought they were being accosted by them while some men seemed to think it was a homosexual approach.

Ten to fifteen per cent of our encounters were so enthusiastic that they took a number of leaflets to carry on the experiment with other people. And eventually one started over-hearing comments like: "Was that the one that touched you?" "No it was the little fat one." We finished the experiment at 5pm feeling elated and exhausted. We also felt the need to make more experiments of this kind.

Pam concluded: "Most important to me in this experiment is the sense of enlarging the possibilities of community behaviour and aesthetic reflection in an urban situation. The experiment itself does not involve large numbers of people, the 'touched', but the ripples spread through talk and news-avid mass media, and the expectation of thousands of people, their sense of what is possible, of what might happen is slightly altered. In a social sense they will have become more aware of the idea of 'contact' as a 'good', and they will have run through, if only in their minds, the experience of meeting, touching, an absolute stranger. I do not feel that these events, touch, happenings, are important in themselves. They are important as process, they change the look of things, shift our interior furniture, just a little, bit by bit, and so the world moves."

This experiment has no real conclusion. But it demonstrated the possibility of spontaneous happenings initiated by the attempt of anyone or any number of people at any place and at any time, to make contact with each other, and it suggested that these happenings could have a therapeutic value. We will make more experiments with the hope of producing more 'therapeutic happenings', encouraged by our first attempt, and such as that of the man who said: "Come over here and touch my mate, it will do him good."