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Psychotic symptoms are linked to movement patterns

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Disordered communication is a core problem in schizophrenia patients' everyday functioning. Our research group has worked on measures of nonverbal behavior that can be used to evaluate social interaction. We conducted projects with this embodiment background addressing nonverbal behavior in role plays with schizophrenia patients (378 role-play scenes involving 27 outpatients), in actigraphic data (100 schizophrenia spectrum patients), and also in psychotherapy sessions and healthy dyads in conversation. In schizophrenia research, we found that the amount of movement during social interaction and the structure of actigraphic timeseries of patients' everyday behavior were linked to symptom profiles of patients. In healthy dyads, synchrony was related to interaction type and predicted the affective pleasantness of conversations. In psychotherapy, relationship quality was embodied in nonverbal synchrony between therapist and patient. This suggested that beyond the mere amount of movement, the degree of synchrony between patients and others varies with patients' symptoms and social cognition. Nonverbal synchrony was assessed objectively using a video-based algorithm (Motion Energy Analysis, MEA) developed in our group. In schizophrenia, lower nonverbal synchrony was associated with symptoms (negative symptoms, conceptual disorganization, lack of insight), patients' verbal memory and self-evaluation of competence. Results suggested that synchrony is an objective and sensitive indicator of the severity of patients' problems. Social synchronization is viewed as an important, usually unconscious, capacity that regulates social interaction and expresses the satisfaction with social exchange. Its analysis provides insights in the relationships between symptoms and social cognition and offers promising targets for psychotherapeutic interventions.