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An Introduction to Affectionate Communication

The choicest thing this world has for a man is affection.
– Josiah Gilbert Holland

Social scientists have long considered affection to be among the most fundamental of human needs (Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972; Schutz, 1958, 1966), and with good reason. The expression of affection is one of the primary communicative behaviors contributing to the formation (Owen, 1987), maintenance (Bell & Healey, 1992), and quality (Floyd & Morman, 1997, 1998, 2000a) of human relationships. It contributes to physical health (Komisaruk & Whipple, 1989), mental well-being (Downs & Javidi, 1990), and academic performance (Steward & Lupfer, 1987), and mitigates loneliness (Downs & Javidi, 1990) and depression (Oliver, Raftery, Reeb, & Delaney, 1993). Often, it is through one's expression of affection for another that a relationship is formed or transformed; indeed, relational partners often remember the first hug, the first kiss, or the first time the words "I love you" were spoken (see Owen, 1987). Affection is truly a central component of many social and personal relationships, from those that are casually close to those that are deeply intimate.

Despite the intuitive notion that affection is always a *positive* component of relational interaction, however, having affectionate feelings – and particularly communicating them – can in fact be fraught with risk. Consider the story of Jason and Lisa. They attend the same high school and have been dating each other for 3 months. In that time, they have enjoyed each other's company and confidences, and have both developed affectionate feelings for the other. For some time, Lisa has wanted to tell Jason that she loves him, but she has refrained from doing so

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because she worries that Jason might not reciprocate her expression. Jason, by contrast, has been able to sense Lisa's eagerness for them to express their feelings for each other verbally. He feels that he probably does love Lisa – or at least, that he is strongly attracted to her – and he would have said so already but he resents feeling pressured to say it. Finally, one evening while on a date, Jason takes Lisa's hand and says, "I love you." Even though she has been eagerly anticipating this moment for a long time, hearing Jason say the words aloud gives Lisa an uneasy feeling and questions begin flooding her mind. Does he really mean it? Is he saying it just because he wants to sleep with her? Is he saying it because he wants to make their relationship exclusive? Lisa doesn't feel ready for either sexual involvement or relational commitment, so she is caught somewhat off guard by Jason's expression and doesn't know what to say in response. Rather than feeling overwhelmed with joy, Lisa has a stress response. Sensing this, Jason begins to question whether he should have said anything in the first place. He wonders why his expression made Lisa flustered, and more important, why she didn't say she loves him back. He thinks that maybe she really doesn't love him; he feels embarrassed at having made the unreciprocated gesture and hurt at seeing Lisa's response. Jason and Lisa avoid each other for several days afterward, each uncertain as to what the other might be thinking or feeling. Their self-doubt and uncertainty cause each to consider terminating the relationship.

This example illustrates the true paradox of affection: Although expressing affection is often intended and usually perceived by others to be a positive communicative move, it can backfire for any number of reasons and produce negative outcomes, including mental and physical distress and even the dissolution of the relationship within which it occurred. These outcomes are often dictated not by the affectionate act itself but by the ways in which people negotiate their competing needs: their needs to give affection and not to give it, and their needs to receive affection and not to receive it. Both Lisa and Jason felt affection for each other and wanted that to be verbalized. However, Lisa avoided saying so because she feared a lack of reciprocation, and Jason delayed saying anything because he didn't like feeling pressured to express his feelings. Although Lisa was happy to hear of Jason's feelings for her, she was also overwhelmed with questions about his intentions and motivations for expressing them. Her uncertainty, in turn, caused her not to reciprocate the expression, leaving Jason embarrassed and hurt. Ultimately, Jason's expression of affection for Lisa – which he intended to be a positive act

and which they both wanted to occur – ended up inhibiting their relationship rather than advancing it.

The primary goal of this text is to discuss why affectionate communication is often so volatile: why it can produce very positive effects and why, even when it is enacted with benevolent intentions, it can produce quite negative outcomes. The reasons are many. Communicating affection to another person can elicit numerous benefits, including the establishment or maintenance of a significant relationship, the reciprocation of the affectionate feelings, and a host of salutary mental and physical effects. It also can entail substantial risks, including misinterpretation, misattribution, and the lack of reciprocation. Like many other social exchanges, the expression of affectionate feelings can lead to relational outcomes that are predicated on this cost–benefit ratio. For Jason and Lisa, even through the rewards of their affectionate behavior were evident to each of them, the costs – including Lisa's uncertainty and Jason's embarrassment at her lack of reciprocation – outweighed them, and a negative relational outcome was the consequence.

To understand the theories relevant to affection and the empirical research that has focused on its exchange, it is necessary first to disentangle the underlying emotion from its behavioral manifestations. Although affection and the expression of it often cooccur, they are, in fact, independent phenomena, and distinguishing between the two is particularly important given that people can experience either in the absence of the other. Detailed definitions of each term are offered subsequently.

Affection and Affectionate Communication

Any mission to understand a social phenomenon relies on the clarity of its conceptual definitions. This is especially important for a phenomenon such as affection, both to sort through the multiple ways in which researchers have defined it and to make clear the distinction between affection and the behaviors through which it is made manifest. Toward this end, this section begins by defining the *experience* of affection and then addresses the *expression* of affection, which is the major focus of this text.

The Experience of Affection

The term *affection* originally derived from the Latin *affectio* and its earliest appearances (c. 1230 A.D.) were in reference to "an emotion of the

mind" or a "permanent state of feeling." In the late 14th century, its usage evolved from a mere "disposition" to a "good disposition toward" something, such as a person or an idea. Later, writers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and most of the early British ethical writers used *affection* to index a positive emotional disposition toward others that bore a resemblance to *passion* but was relatively free of its sensuous elements and volatile nature (e.g., parents' affection for their children as opposed to their passion for each other).

Contemporary theoretic and empirical work on affection has not retained this conceptual distinction from passion, but it has retained the focus on a positive emotional disposition that is externally directed. For instance, Floyd and Morman (1998) conceptually defined affection as an emotional state of fondness and intense positive regard that is directed at a living or once-living target. Although the target is often another human, people most certainly feel affection toward animals (especially pets) and perhaps even toward favorite plants. Several distinctions about the emotional experience of affection warrant discussion. First, unlike some emotions, affection is not evoked by a simple stimulus; a discrete event can elicit surprise, fear, or anger, for instance, but feelings of affection develop over time as a collective response to multiple stimuli from the same target.[1]

Second, affection is not an innate response. Rather, affection is innate only insofar as humans have an adaptive capacity for it, a point that will receive more focused attention in this text. The application of affection to a particular target is conditioned and target-specific. For instance, most people feel more affection toward their own children than toward the children of others (see Floyd & Morman, 2002). Similarly, one may feel affection toward a friend whom no one else appears to like. Moreover, people can develop affection for others whom they themselves previously disliked; first impressions, although powerful, are not irrevocable.

Finally, like many emotions, affection should be distinguished from the behaviors through which it is presented. This distinction is frequently not drawn in empirical research – researchers may purport, for instance, to study *affection* when in fact they are studying *affectionate behavior*. It

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[1] Although people do have visceral experiences of attraction or even lust immediately upon interacting, these experiences are to be distinguished from genuine affection; indeed, they can, and often do, occur in the complete absence of fondness or positive regard.

is imperative to draw this distinction, however, for the simple reason that affectionate feelings and affectionate behaviors do not necessarily coincide. As this text will discuss in detail, most communicators have the capacity to feel affection without expressing it, and most can also express affection without feeling it. Thus, to truly understand affectionate communication, it is necessary to separate it from its underlying internal experience.

The Expression of Affection

The primary focus of this text is on the expression of affection, or the behaviors through which the experience of affection is presented. The term *presented* is used deliberately here, to acknowledge that one need not actually be experiencing affection in order to express it. Consequently, affectionate behaviors are defined herein as those that portray or present the internal experience of affection, whether accurately or not.

The goal of presenting or portraying affectionate feelings is therefore dependent on the enactment of behaviors that either denote or connote such feelings to the recipient. Whereas some affectionate behaviors are minimally equivocal (e.g., hugging, saying "I love you"), many others are far more indirect and some, such as idiomatic expressions, connote affectionate feelings only for a specific target who will interpret them in that manner. Communicators have many possible reasons for conveying affection equivocally; this text will discuss the strategic use of indirect affectionate gestures and the important relational purposes they serve.

Of course, the experience and the expression of affection are inextricably linked and I do not wish to suggest otherwise. However, for a number of reasons that will be discussed in this text, they do not *necessarily* cooccur. As empirical research has indicated, it is not uncommon for feelings of affection not to be communicated, for instance, or for expressions of affection to be insincere. Sometimes these incongruencies between experience and behavior are strategic; for example, one might fail to express felt affection in order to avoid appearing overly eager for relational escalation, or one might express unfelt affection in order to gain sexual access or other favors. In other instances, of course, incongruencies between experience and behavior may be purely unintentional. One might intend to say, "I love you," to one's spouse before leaving for work but get sidetracked and leave the expression unmade.

There is much to know about affection and affectionate communication:

- What verbal and nonverbal behaviors do people use to express affection to others? How is the encoding of affection influenced by age, sex, type of relationship, or situational context?
- What behaviors do people interpret as expressions of affection? How closely are these related to the behaviors used to encode affectionate messages?
- Under what conditions are people most likely to communicate affection to others, and for what reasons do they do so?
- Why might people express affection when they do not feel it? Why might they fail to express affection when they do feel it?
- How do people interpret expressions of affection when they observe them between others? Do observers make different interpretations than the receivers themselves?
- With what individual characteristics is affectionate communication correlated? Do highly affectionate people, as a group, differ from less affectionate people?
- When are people most likely to reciprocate affectionate expressions? What happens when they do not?
- What are the possible mental and physical health benefits associated with receiving affection? What benefits, if any, accrue to those who express affection, as opposed to receiving it?

A large and diverse body of research has addressed many of these questions. Other questions remain to be answered. The purpose of this text is therefore twofold: to summarize and critique the existing body of theoretic and empirical work on affectionate communication, and to acknowledge some of the questions about affection and affectionate behavior that have yet to be addressed. A more detailed preview of this text appears subsequently.

A Preview of the Chapters

Before examining the empirical research on affectionate communication, this text describes and critiques the major theoretic paradigms in which this research has been conducted, and identifies several specific theories within each paradigm that either have been empirically tested or espouse principles that are relevant to the experience or expression of affection. This critique comprises Chapter 2. As noted, most of the theories discussed in that chapter were not developed with the specific purpose of explaining affectionate behavior; however, many have been profitable for the advancement of knowledge in this area, and

their contributions, as well as their limitations, are acknowledged in later chapters.

The subsequent four chapters are devoted to examining the empirical research on affectionate communication and to summarizing both what is known and what is yet to be learned. Chapter 3 details studies of affection encoding – those that have examined how affection is communicated and how individuals select from among their options for expressing affection to others. This chapter also discusses the effects of individual, contextual, and relational characteristics that influence how affectionate people are and what forms of encoding affection are considered appropriate for a given situation. Similarly, Chapter 4 focuses on studies of decoding and response. This chapter examines the behaviors that carry affectionate meaning for receivers and observers, and the manner in which people react to expressions of affection, both cognitively and behaviorally.

Chapter 5 addresses the benefits of affectionate communication, and Chapter 6 addresses the risks. Both sending and receiving expressions of affection are associated with a range of benefits, including physical and emotional benefits to the individuals involved and benefits to the maintenance and satisfaction levels of their relationships, and this research is reviewed in Chapter 5. In particular, this chapter details new research on cardiovascular and endocrine function that makes a compelling case for why affectionate communication is associated with the benefits that it is.

Despite these benefits, however, affectionate exchanges often also expose senders and receivers to multiple risks. For example, an expression of affection can easily be misinterpreted to be of either greater or lesser intensity than the sender intended (e.g., if a woman tells her friend that she loves him, she may have intended to express platonic love but he may interpret the statement as a romantic gesture). Moreover, recipients of affectionate gestures, even in established relationships, may run the risk that the gestures do not reflect genuine affectionate emotion but are enacted for ulterior motives. Chapter 6 discusses these and other potential risks for senders and receivers of affectionate communication.

As theory and research on affectionate communication have advanced and matured, new questions have arisen that await empirical testing. At various points in these four chapters, examples of such questions are identified in bold print; this is done both to acknowledge the limitations of existing research and to stimulate future inquiry along several important lines. It must be recalled that having unanswered questions is neither problematic nor undesirable, but is instead a normal characteristic of the scientific process.

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Chapter 7 returns to the issue of theory by considering the adequacy of existing theoretic explanations in light of empirical findings and in light of questions that remain largely unanswered. This chapter observes that several extant theories have fruitfully advanced knowledge on various aspects of affectionate behavior; however, no single theory has as yet been able to explain all (or even most) of the empirical findings, or to address some of the most provocative theoretic questions about affectionate communication. The need for a more comprehensive theory of human affection exchange is identified, and this chapter details one candidate for such a theory, *affection exchange theory*. Its assumptions and principles are discussed in detail, and its abilities to account for existing empirical findings and to resolve apparent contradictions are identified.

This text ends in Chapter 8 with the identification of several general conclusions about affectionate communication that are explained by affection exchange theory and supported by existing empirical work. Where appropriate, this chapter also offers important qualifications on these conclusions, so that their proper application can be appreciated.

The study of affectionate communication presents social scientists, and consumers of their work, with a true challenge. It is imperative to physical and mental health that humans give and receive affectionate expressions, yet they can evoke uncertainty, discomfort, and even physical distress. Affectionate behavior is critical to the formation and maintenance of personal relationships, yet it also can be the demise of those relationships. It is a paradoxical human phenomenon and fertile ground for scientific inquiry.

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Thinking about Affection

The Theories

> They do not love that do not show their love.
> – William Shakespeare

To fully appreciate the implications of social scientific research, one must begin with both a working knowledge and a critical assessment of the theory or theories in which that research is grounded. For two reasons, this is particularly important for understanding the research on affectionate communication. First, a great deal of the research has been exploratory and atheoretic. This is not problematic in principle, but it ought to encourage consumers of this research to consider the theoretic implications that findings from such studies might have. Second, the theory-driven research on affectionate communication has used multiple theories that represent considerable diversity in assumptions and foci. This requires that the conscientious reader exercise caution when comparing studies to each other.

The literature on affectionate communication is a theoretically eclectic one, and there are at least two reasons why. One is that researchers studying affectionate communication have directed their attention toward a diversity of questions, so theories that are useful in one area have not necessarily been useful in others. For instance, theoretic principles that can explain why a given affectionate behavior is or is not reciprocated during an intimate exchange may not be able to explain why highly affectionate people have greater immunocompetence than their less affectionate counterparts. The second, and perhaps more important, reason is that, before now, there has not been a comprehensive theory about affectionate communication to use. This necessarily limits the growth of an area of study, and this book will offer one possible remedy to this situation.

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This chapter is divided into two major sections representing the primary theoretic paradigms within which research on affectionate communication (and indeed, much of human communication) has been conducted. I have labeled these the *sociocultural* and *bioevolutionary* paradigms. Each approach is described in terms of its history and paradigmatic assumptions, and then several specific theories grounded in each paradigm are described. Some of these theories, particularly those associated with the sociocultural paradigm, have been used in published research on affectionate communication, and representative studies are identified for each. Others are included because of their ability to illuminate aspects of affectionate behavior in ways that competing theories cannot.

An important caveat – one that will be reiterated later in the book where the theoretic status of the affectionate communication literature is scrutinized more closely – is that most of the theories described in this chapter were not developed for the purpose of explaining and predicting affectionate behavior. Rather, they were developed to account for other phenomena (e.g., behavioral adaptation, politeness) and their tenets have been applied to the study of human affection. This caveat is important because some critiques of these theories *as they have been applied in affection research* do not necessarily implicate the utility of the theories in total, but only of their abilities to account for affectionate behavior.

An additional caveat is that the lists of theories included under each paradigm are representative, not exhaustive. Rather than attempting to index all theories with implications for affectionate behavior, this chapter focuses on those that either have received empirical support in affection research or have clear, compelling, and testable implications for human affection exchange. Moreover, the theories discussed in this chapter vary in their level of specificity and the level of abstraction at which they are pitched. Some are aimed narrowly at specific phenomena (e.g., interaction adaptation theory), whereas others make broader theoretic statements from which more specific predictions can be deduced (e.g., need to belong).

Bioevolutionary Paradigm

In its most fundamental form, the bioevolutionary paradigm suggests that propensities for particular behaviors are rooted in the adaptive advantages those propensities would have conferred on our premodern ancestors and in the ways that such adaptive advantages are currently manifested in human physiological systems. For instance, to explain