1 An Introduction to Affectionate Communication

Few communicative behaviors are more consequential to human survival and flourishing than the exchange of affection. If that claim sounds hyperbolic, one need consider only a few important truths about the human condition to appreciate its accuracy.

Chief among these is the observation that humans are born in a state of considerable immaturity. A newborn giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*) will walk and run behind its mother within its first few hours of life. Mountain lion cubs (*Puma concolor*) learn to hunt within six months, and giant tortoises (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*) fend for themselves from the moment they are born. In sharp contrast, humans lack the physical and cognitive capacity at birth to meet even their most basic needs and typically do not achieve self-sufficiency until the second or third decade of their lives.

Humans therefore rely nearly entirely on others to meet all of their needs – food, shelter, clothing, security, medical care, education – for their first several years. A child who cannot elicit significant continual investments in its care is a child who will not survive infancy. Child-rearing, however, is a costly endeavor (US Department of Agriculture, 2017). Raising even a single child to adulthood requires substantial sacrifices with respect to money, time, space, privacy, freedom, and career opportunity. It is often a considerable marital stressor, as well (Belsky & Pensky, 1988), particularly when a family contains multiple children (Heaton, 1990).

To make such a significant investment – and willingly so, as most humans do – requires an equally significant motivator. Codified laws (Levesque, 2011) and culturally defined expectations (Keller, Vöelker, & Yovsi, 2005) certainly prompt parental caregiving, at least in modern times, but a more primal and more ubiquitous motivator for investing in offspring exists among humans in the form of the emotional experience known as *love* (Kanazawa, 2001).

Evolutionary psychologists such as Buss (2015), Freese, Li, and Wade (2003), and Kanazawa (2004) explain that humans – like all living organisms – have evolved phenotypic characteristics that promote at least

two superordinate goals: *viability* (individual survival) and *fertility* (replication of individual genetic material). Some such characteristics manifest physically, such as immunocompetence for recovery from illness or beauty for mate attraction, but psychological characteristics such as intelligence and social competence have also evolved to contribute to survival and reproductive success.

Among the most potent psychological characteristics to serve human evolutionary goals are emotions, which can powerfully motivate behaviors critical for survival and reproduction (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017). Fear, for instance, motivates caution when interacting with potentially harmful elements (Öhman & Mineka, 2001). Jealousy prompts increased surveillance of potential threats to a significant pair bond (Wiedermana & Kendalla, 1999). Even disgust contributes to safety by promoting expulsion and avoidance of pathogenic contamination (Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2009). Similarly, as articulated by Buss (2006), love serves multiple functions related to reproductive success. These include attracting mates and solidifying romantic partnerships, displaying relational commitment and sexual fidelity, and facilitating sexual access.

Importantly, the evolutionary functions of love also include motivating investments in the wellness of offspring. Apart from legal, cultural, ethical, or religious obligations to do so, humans routinely invest resources in raising and caring for their children out of a profound sense of love for those children. By motivating parents to sacrifice their own resources for the health and welfare of their offspring, parental love contributes not only to the parents' reproductive success but also, and even more crucially, to the children's survival.[1]

Considered in these terms, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to call love a matter of life or death.

The internal experience of love is insufficient for producing these outcomes, however. Rather, the *manifestation* of that emotional experience – the expression and exchange of affection – is required. The subsequent sections define and clarify the concepts of the experience and expression of affection and detail how social scientists came to understand their importance for well-being.

Affection and Affectionate Communication

To understand how humans experience and express affection – and, more importantly, *why* they do so – it is necessary to clarify the conceptual definitions of these terms. That is particularly useful 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 expressed. This section begins by defining the *experience* of affection and then addresses the *communication* of affection, which is the principal focus of this text.

The Experience of Affection

The term *affection* derives from the Latin term *affectio*, and its earliest appearances (c. AD 1230) were in reference to "an emotion of the mind" or a "permanent state of feeling." During the late 1300s, its connotative meaning 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, such as parents' affection for their children as opposed to their passion for each other.

Theoretic and empirical work on affection in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has largely ignored this conceptual distinction from passion, but it has continued to reflect the focus on a positive, externally directed emotional disposition. In their paper on the psychometrics of affectionate communication, 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. The target of an individual's affection is often another human, of course, and in this conceptual definition, feelings of affection can arise in a range of human bonds, including those between romantic partners, parents and children, siblings and other relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers (e.g., Bartels & Zeki, 2000; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994). People typically feel different magnitudes of affection in various relationship types, and often express their affection differently in different relationships (see, e.g., Floyd, Sargent, & Di Corcia, 2004), but genuine feelings of affection can develop in virtually any positive interpersonal bond. Genuine affection can also characterize people's relationships with public figures, such as celebrities (Leets, De Becker, & Giles, 1995), even when those relationships are merely parasocial rather than interpersonal (see, e.g., Bond & Calvert, 2014).

People most certainly also experience affection toward animals, especially those kept as pets. Several studies attest to humans' feelings of attachment and love for their pets (Julius, Beetz, Kotrschal, Turner, & Uvnäs-Moberg, 2013; Smolkovic, Fajfar, & Mlinaric, 2012) and the ability of pet keeping to attenuate loneliness (Marinšek & Tušak, 2007). Pet keepers report significant attachment to pets – especially dogs

(Zasloff, 1996) – and experience both support (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011) and stress reduction (Miller et al., 2009) in interactions with their animal companions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people grieve the death of a pet (Podrazik, Shackford, Becker, & Heckert, 2000), although not typically with the same magnitude as the death of a close human companion (Rajaram, Garrity, Stallones, & Marx, 1993).

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, keeping and feeling affection for an animal is a somewhat puzzling behavior, given that it entails virtually no benefit for viability or fertility, at least beyond the animal's value to protect its owners from attack.[2] Archer (1997) argued persuasively, however, that pets engage adaptive human responses that evolved to facilitate human bonds (particularly parental bonds). Consequently, humans can feel intense levels of affection for their pets and derive great satisfaction from those relationships, perhaps even more so than with other humans.

Several distinctions are worth noting about the emotional experience of affection. First, unlike some emotions, affection is not typically evoked by a simple stimulus. Whereas a discrete event can elicit surprise, fear, disgust, or anger, feelings of affection usually develop longitudinally as a collective response to multiple stimuli from the same target. Although Fredrickson (2013) has proposed a redefinition of love as existing in micro-momentary interactions between people, several studies using a prototype approach have found that people inherently conceptualize love and affection as more stable and long-term experiences of intimacy, commitment, and trust (see Aron & Westbay, 1996; Fehr & Russell, 1991; Regan, Kocan, & Whitlock, 1998).

Second, whereas humans have an innate capacity to experience and express affection (a point that will receive more focused attention in the next chapter), the application of affection to a particular recipient 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, 2001).[3] Similarly, one may feel affection toward a co-worker or neighbor 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 necessarily irrevocable.

Finally, like many emotions, affection should be distinguished from the behaviors through which it is communicated. This distinction is sometimes not drawn in empirical research; scholars may purport, for instance, to study *affection* when in fact they are studying *affectionate behavior*. It 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 to express affection without feeling it. Thus, to truly understand affectionate communication, it is necessary to separate it from its underlying emotional experience.

The Communication of Affection

The primary focus of this text is on the communication 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 communication is defined herein as encompassing those behaviors 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., kissing, 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, and this text discusses the strategic use of indirect affectionate gestures and the important relational purposes they can serve.

The experience and the expression of affection are inextricably linked, but for many possible reasons, they do not *necessarily* co-occur. As empirical research has indicated, it is not uncommon for feelings of affection not to be communicated or for expressions of affection to be insincere or even deceptive (see Gillen & Horan, 2013). Some incongruencies between experience and behavior are strategic; for example, one might fail to express felt affection to avoid appearing overly eager for relational escalation (Owen, 1987), or one might express unfelt affection to gain sexual access or other favors (Floyd, Erbert, Davis, & Haynes, 2005). Other incongruencies between experience and behavior may be purely unintentional. For instance, one might intend to say, "I love you" to one's spouse before leaving for work but get sidetracked and leave the expression unsaid.

Understanding what affection and affectionate communication are is necessary, but it is not sufficient for supporting the claim that they

matter. As the next section details, such a claim has been widely accepted only for a relatively short period of time.

Understanding the Value of Affectionate Communication

It may seem axiomatic that healthy relationships – particularly romantic and parental bonds – are affectionate relationships. In marriage, a lack of spousal affection is one of the two most-cited reasons for seeking marital therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004) and is among the most commonly identified bases for seeking divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). In parent–child pairs, multiple studies attest to the long-term psychological and even physical damage that can be done to children who grow up lacking parental affection (e.g., Carroll et al., 2013; Michiels, Grietens, Onghena, & Kuppens, 2010). Indeed, the suggestion that any intimate relationship can thrive without affection may seem fundamentally untenable.

The importance of affection was neither presumed nor accepted as obvious prior to the mid-twentieth century, however. Before that time, medical authorities warned parents against showing affection to their children. Psychologists argued that expressing affection to children would make them needy and demanding, and physicians cautioned that it would promote the spread of infectious disease (Blum, 2002). Those views went largely unchallenged until the pioneering work of Harry Harlow.

In seminal experiments (Harlow, 1958; see also Harlow & Zimmermann, 1958), Harlow separated infant rhesus macaques (*Macaca mulatta*) from their mothers and situated them in his primate laboratory to be reared by two types of mechanical surrogate "mothers." One surrogate was covered with heavy mesh wire; the other, although also crafted from wire, was covered with thick, soft terrycloth. Harlow divided the macaques into two groups, one in which the wire surrogate dispensed food and the terrycloth surrogate did not, and one in which the opposite was true.

Regardless of the experimental condition, Harlow observed the same pattern of behavior: the macaques clung to the terrycloth surrogate whether it provided food or not and visited the wire surrogate only to receive food. In his later studies, Harlow exposed the macaques to stressful stimuli, such as a noise-making teddy bear, and he found that, virtually without exception, the macaques would cling to the terrycloth surrogate for comfort. When he denied them that opportunity by

removing the cloth-covered surrogates from their environments, the macaques quickly demonstrated signs of physical and psychological distress, such as disengaging, curling up in a ball, and sucking their thumbs.

Although they strained the limits of what would today be considered ethical animal research, Harlow's studies were nonetheless groundbreaking in their demonstration of both the need for attachment and the consequences of denying that need. Humans share approximately 95 percent of their DNA with rhesus macaques, elevating the likelihood that the two species share various central nervous system structures that make attachment behaviors – including comforting and the sharing of affection – similarly rewarding and beneficial. In the latter half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century, behavioral science has taken on the mantle of extending Harlow's insights by exploring the benefits of attachment and affection to humans and human relationships.

Among humans, many questions about affection and affectionate communication have attracted empirical attention:

- Which 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?
- 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?
- Do people have a "trait" level of affectionate behavior? 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 mental and physical health benefits associated with receiving affection? When people lack an adequate degree of affection, what mental and physical consequences correspond with that deprivation?

A large and diverse body of research has addressed many of these questions, and many 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 the text appears subsequently.

A Preview of the Chapters

Before reviewing the empirical research on affectionate communication, it is helpful to revisit the major theoretic paradigms that have framed such research. Chapter 2 undertakes this task by differentiating socio-cultural and bio-evolutionary paradigms and identifying several specific theories within each that either have been empirically tested or propose principles that are relevant to the experience or expression of affection. Although many of the theories discussed in that chapter have been profitable for the advancement of knowledge related to affectionate communication, most were not developed with the specific purpose of explaining affectionate behavior, which necessarily limits their explanatory and predictive power for understanding the expression of affection. Chapter 2 therefore ends with a review of affection exchange theory, which was developed specifically to remedy those limitations.

The subsequent eight chapters are devoted to detailing the empirical research on affectionate communication and to summarizing both what is known and what is yet to be learned. Chapter 3 addresses both conceptual and operational definitions of affectionate communication, introducing a commonly used tripartite model for affectionate expression and critiquing frequently used measurement models and manipulation strategies. Chapter 4 describes research that accounts for individual variation in the propensity to express affection. Genetic and environmental antecedents are identified and distinguished. 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. Conversely, Chapter 5 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 cognitively and behaviorally.

In Chapter 6, research that compares and contrasts relationship types is reviewed. This chapter offers theoretic arguments for why romantic, familial, and platonic relationships should differ in their affectionate behavior, and then summarizes empirical findings regarding how relationships vary in both their form and frequency of affectionate expressions. In addition, this chapter describes how affectionate communication is associated with indices of relational quality, such as satisfaction, closeness, liking, and love.

Some of the most provocative research on affectionate communication has explored its associations with health and wellness. Chapter 7 details the strong and varied associations between affectionate communication

and mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and autism spectrum disorders. The focus on wellness is extended in Chapter 8 into the realm of physical health, where connections to cardiovascular, metabolic, endocrine, and immune function, as well as susceptibility to illness and pain, are described.

Despite their many benefits, affectionate exchanges often also expose senders and receivers to multiple risks and opportunities for abuse. Chapter 9 details the "dark side" of affectionate communication by explicating its most potent risks and problems and by describing ways in which affectionate behavior can be used for deceptive and even manipulative purposes. This chapter also addresses the correlates and consequences of being deprived of adequate affection (including mental health impairments and deficits in sleep function and pain management) and explores the counterintuitive idea that receiving too much affection is associated with drawbacks for individuals and their relationships.

The purpose of the final chapter is to be both retrospective and prospective. Chapter 10 begins by looking back at some of the broad claims that the affectionate communication literature supports, including critiques of existing theory. It then looks to the future of affectionate communication research by posing provocative and fruitful questions, such as whether the propensity for affection is heritable, how technology and social media can serve people's affection needs, and the extent to which affectionate behavior is a promising clinical intervention for physical or mental ailments.

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