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Kory Floyd

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SPOTLIGHT SCHOLAR

Empathic Listening as an Expression of Interpersonal Affection



Kory Floyd

*Hugh Downs School of Human Communication
Arizona State University*

In personal relationships, empathic listening may serve relational functions similar to affectionate communication. Consequently, theories of affectionate communication—such as affection exchange theory—can offer empirically testable predictions and theoretic explanations relevant to empathic listening behavior. This article considers the conceptual fit of empathic listening as a form of affectionate communication and identifies some empirical generalizations for the study of empathic listening.

The first duty of love is to listen. — Paul Tillich, theologian and philosopher (1886–1965)

In October 2003, a small, unassuming booth was erected in the main concourse of Manhattan's Grand Central Terminal. Called a StoryBooth, it offered visitors the opportunity to record a 40-minute conversation with someone who mattered to them. Seth Fleischauer, 25, brought his 83-year-old grandfather to the StoryBooth and interviewed him about his marriage to Seth's grandmother and his devotion to her before she died of Alzheimer's disease. Quadraplegic John Abruzzo recorded a conversation with his coworker Michael Curci, who, along with nine others, carried Abruzzo down 69 flights of stairs when evacuating the World Trade Center on September 11. Mary Johnson interviewed Oshea Israel, who had recently been released from prison for shooting and killing Mary's teenage son, Laramiun, in 1993. Perhaps it was the coziness of the booth or the spirit of its sponsor—the nonprofit organization StoryCorps, which aims to record and preserve stories of the American experience—that prompted people to share. Many described their conversations as transformational . . . not only those who spoke, but those who listened. Some of the more than 30,000 recordings made in New York and at StoryBooths around the country appear in a 2007 book, appropriately titled *Listening Is an Act of Love*.

And so it seems to many people. Poverty lawyer and activist William Stringfellow called listening “a primitive act of love in which a person gives himself to another's word” (Dancer, 2005, p. 23). When we listen to others, we offer not only our time but also our psychological presence, our cognitive attention, and our emotional responsiveness, all of which are finite and thus valuable interpersonal resources. Extending the effort to listen to someone may therefore be conceptualized as an expression of affection for that person, at least in situations when listening is not otherwise expected or compensated (e.g., as with a therapist).

Conceiving of listening as an act of affection situates listening among a range of behaviors known to convey messages of care, love, and fondness for the recipient. Consequently, as Bodie (2012) has suggested, theoretic principles relevant to the expression and exchange of affection may be useful in predicting and explaining some interpersonal listening behavior, particularly that associated with empathic listening.

To make that case, I will define affectionate communication and explicate affection exchange theory, a neo-Darwinian perspective treating affectionate behavior as adaptive. Next I will identify some characteristics of empathic listening that allow it to qualify—in defined circumstances, at least—as an affectionate behavior. Finally, I offer testable empirical generalizations relevant to empathic listening in interpersonal communication that are consistent with affection exchange theory.

THE COMMUNICATION OF AFFECTION

It is difficult to exaggerate the consequence of affection in the human social experience. Along with food, water, and oxygen, intimate relationships belong atop any list of true needs for such a social primate as humans. Baumeister and Leary (1995) explicated that sentiment in their *need-to-belong hypothesis*, although the necessity of positive social relationships—and positive regard within those relationships—has been posited for more than half a century (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). For much of my own career, I have argued that humans need not only to *be* loved but also to *be shown* they are loved, that is, to exchange messages of affection with important people

in their lives (see, e.g., Floyd, 2006). Empirical research supports that contention. For instance, those who receive more affection as infants experience significantly less emotional distress in adulthood (Maselko, Kubzansky, Lipsitt, & Buka, 2011). People who are more affectionate as adults are also happier, in better mental health, in better physical health, and more likely to be in satisfying relationships than people who are less affectionate (Floyd, 2002). Affection is so important that *Scientific American Mind* called it the single most important skill for effective parenting (Epstein, 2010). How do people accomplish this critical communication task? Let us first differentiate affectionate communication from its underlying emotional experience and then identify the three primary behavioral strategies people use to express it.

Affection and Affectionate Behavior

Defining the term “affection” requires distinguishing it from “affectionate communication.” As used in contemporary scholarship (see Floyd & Deiss, 2012), “affection” denotes an emotional state of fondness and intense positive regard that one organism (such as a person) experiences for a specific other. We *feel* affection, that is, for a particular person or other entity (such as a pet). In comparison, “affectionate communication” denotes the expression of affectionate feelings from one organism to another. Whereas affection is something we *feel*, affectionate communication is something we *do*. To qualify as affectionate communication, the expression of affectionate feelings must be directed at the target of those feelings. If Elizabeth feels affection for Robert, she is not engaging in affectionate communication when she discloses her feelings to Jennifer, but only when she conveys them to Robert directly.

Although affection and affectionate communication overlap substantially, they do not necessarily covary. We often have affectionate feelings that, for a variety of reasons, we choose not to express to the target of those feelings. Just as we may have feelings we do not express, we also may express feelings we do not have. “Affectionate communication” includes the expression of insincere or false affection, as when one partner says, “I love you” only to induce sexual interaction. Although we often express the affection we feel and feel the affection we express, neither can be assumed.

Much extant research has focused on the benefits of affectionate communication, not affection *per se*. In particular, although several studies have adjudicated the positive aspects of *receiving* affectionate expressions, much recent research has confirmed that *sending* affectionate messages is also beneficial, above and beyond the benefits associated with affection that is received in return. The latter point is especially relevant to the current paper’s argument that listening can be conceived as an expression of affection, given that engaging in listening behavior within the context of an interaction would represent the expression, rather than the receipt, of an affectionate message. Whether expressed or received, however, it is the communication of affection rather than the emotional experience of it that covaries with those benefits.

Three Strategies for Conveying Affection

Specifying that “affectionate communication” comprises those behaviors that convey feelings of affection begs the question of what those behaviors are, exactly. Floyd and Morman (1998) recognized that people express affection in myriad ways in their relationships, and that some relationships favor particular modes of expressing affection over others. Their tripartite model of

affectionate behavior adds operational clarity to the issue by proposing three forms of affection display, namely verbal, direct nonverbal, and indirect nonverbal expressions.

Verbal expressions of affection comprise spoken or written affectionate expressions, such as “I love you” and “I care about you.” The *direct nonverbal* communication of affection includes nonlinguistic or paralinguistic behaviors that denote affection within the relationship or speech community in which they are enacted. In North America, for instance, those behaviors routinely include kissing, hugging, and holding hands. Finally, *indirect nonverbal* expressions of affection are behaviors that connote—rather than denote—affection via the provision of social or material support. Those can include actions such as helping with a task or lending the use of a car. Unlike with verbal and direct nonverbal expressions, the affectionate connotation in indirect nonverbal expressions is ancillary to the behavior itself, and is consequently less overt.

Although several theories can explain individual aspects of affection exchange—such as when an affectionate act is likely to be reciprocated or interpreted in a given manner—affection exchange theory offers a more comprehensive explanation that situates affectionate behavior among those behaviors that are adaptive for human reproduction and survival.

Affection Exchange Theory

Why do people express affection at all? The available evidence immediately rejects a socio-cultural, anthropocentric explanation. Whereas some cultural variation exists in *how* people communicate affection, there is no such variation in *whether* they do; affectionate behavior characterizes interpersonal communication in every known human culture (Floyd, 2006). Moreover, affectionate communication is not limited to humans but also observed in a wide range of both mammalian and non-mammalian species (Floyd, 2006). Those observations—especially when considered in tandem—indicate that any explanation limited to humans and focused on social or cultural causes would necessarily be severely limited, and they suggest re-framing the question to ask: *For what purposes would a tendency toward affectionate communication have evolved?*

Three theories, in particular, shed light on that question, the most commonly tested of which is *affection exchange theory* (AET; Floyd, 2006). AET is neo-Darwinian in that it assumes the foundational principles of Darwin’s (1859) theory of evolution by means of natural selection. As Floyd, Hesse, and Pauley (2009) articulate, engaging in affectionate expression is adaptive insofar as it enhances the ability of individuals to survive and procreate. AET reasons that if affectionate behavior is adaptive in those ways, then physiological systems exist to motivate it through physical and emotional reward. Indeed, much experimental research has documented that reductions in stress hormones and increases in pleasure-providing hormones occur in the wake of affectionate behavior and are largely responsible for the physical and emotional rewards that accompany it (e.g., Floyd et al., 2007; Floyd, Pauley, & Hesse, 2010; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008). AET proposes that affectionate behavior produces positive outcomes through the physiological activity it induces, and that it induces specific physiological activity *because of the adaptive benefits affectionate behavior conveys*.

Two other perspectives offer similar but slightly different explanations for the benefits of affectionate behavior. First, Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) *need to belong hypothesis* (NBH) argues that close relationships are so fundamental a human need that failing to form and maintain them is physically and psychologically aversive. To satisfy their need to belong, NBH explains

that people require not just the emotion of affection but also the manifestation of it (e.g., via affectionate communication). Accordingly, relationships are unsatisfactory if they provide affectionate emotion in the absence of affectionate behavior (as in a long-distance marriage) or if they provide affectionate behavior in the absence of affectionate emotion (as in an anonymous sexual encounter). According to Baumeister and Leary, affectionate behavior is positive because it meets a fundamental drive for attachment and affiliation. Second, Taylor et al.'s (2000) *tend-and-befriend theory* (TBT) offers that expressing feelings of care to loved ones—and receiving such expressions in return—benefits people during stressful situations by accelerating their physiological recovery from stress. TBT also explains that the stress-alleviating benefit of affectionate interaction is more pronounced for women than for men because it is driven principally by the hormone oxytocin, which is more bioactive in females than in males.

Each theory takes a slightly different focus, but all three provide explanations for affectionate behavior that are not limited to particular species, specific cultures, or precise historical, political, or economic circumstances. Rather, all three perspectives argue that *affectionate communication is adaptive*, meaning that it contributes in some way to the survival and/or replication of one's genes. For instance, the tendency to eat regularly is adaptive by ensuring a steady supply of nutrients that are essential for survival. Likewise, sexual tendencies are adaptive because humans are a sexually reproducing species, so sexual activity ensures species proliferation. The tendency to give and receive affectionate communication may be similarly adaptive. Although a hug and kiss do not directly provide nutrients or facilitate insemination, they contribute relational and health benefits that are important for both survival and reproduction (for a more extensive discussion, see Floyd, 2006).

Can listening, particularly empathic listening, serve similarly adaptive purposes and therefore behave as an affectionate gesture? In the next section, I will argue that many features of empathic listening share conceptual space with affectionate communication in general, implying that theoretic principles relevant to affectionate communication may also be informative with regard to empathic listening behavior.

EMPATHIC LISTENING AS AN AFFECTIONATE GESTURE

The concept of empathy, which can trace its roots back to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics* (Parrella, 1971), focuses on one's effort to adopt the perspective and infer the experiences—the emotional experiences, usually—of another. Listening with empathy as an explicit goal was central to the person-centered psychotherapeutic approach developed by Carl Rogers (1959, 1961, 1966). Rogers's phenomenological theory emphasized empathic listening practices that reflected:

- a concern for accurately reflecting the experiences of the speaker;
- unconditional positive regard, defined as confirmation or validation of the speaker, rather than necessarily agreement with the speaker's message;
- “presentness” to the speaker, including active involvement in the conversation, receptivity, and openness;
- equality with the speaker, or the avoidance of manipulation or coercion; and
- a nonevaluative stance wherein the listener offers support and withholds value judgments (Rogers, 1962; see also Johannesen, 1971).

Rogers's definition of empathy is certainly not undisputed; as Batson (2009) explained, at least eight discrete conceptual definitions of empathy can be culled from the literature. Nonetheless, Rogers's definition identifies the behavioral and perceptual elements of empathic listening likely to be relevant to an understanding of listening as affection.

Why might listening—and empathic listening in particular—qualify as an affectionate gesture? At least three characteristics of active empathic listening—defined by Bodie (2011, p. 278) as “the active and emotional involvement of a listener during a given interaction; an involvement that is conscious on the part of the listener but is also perceived by the speaker” — share significant conceptual overlap with the corpus of recognized affectionate behaviors (Floyd & Morman, 1998). First, empathic listening behaviors demonstrate immediacy. Second, empathic listening often results in the recipient feeling better understood and validated. Finally, recipients of empathic listening acknowledge an investment of time and energy that implies their worth to the listener. This section explicates each characteristic in greater detail.

Nonverbal Immediacy

Nonverbal immediacy comprises those behaviors that connote psychological closeness with others, such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, standing or sitting in close proximity, using an open body posture, and speaking with warm vocal tones (see Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2010). Research with both adults (Jones & Guerrero, 2001) and children (Roberts & Strayer, 1996) confirms that effective empathic listening incorporates nonverbal immediacy behaviors.

Nonverbal immediacy behaviors have long been associated with messages of affiliation, intimacy, and affection as well (see, e.g., Andersen & Andersen, 1984; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Floyd, 1999). Some, particularly tactile behaviors, function as tie signs to indicate the presence of a relational bond (Afifi & Johnson, 1999). Others, such as eye contact (Burgoon, Manusov, Mineo, & Hale, 1985), smiling (McAdams, Jackson, & Kirschnit, 1984), and vocal warmth (Burgoon & Newton, 1991) are routinely identified as nonverbal means of conveying interest and investment in others.

It would stand to reason, therefore, that listeners who use nonverbal immediacy behaviors are more effective than those who do not at conveying empathy and support, and empirical research bears this out. Bodie and Jones (2012) found that listeners who used high nonverbal immediacy behaviors were rated as more supportive than were those who used moderate or low immediacy behaviors (see also Bodie, 2011, Study 2; Jones, 2011). Lewis and Manusov (2009) similarly reported that actively listening to a partner's description of a difficult event, including using immediacy behaviors, can reduce the partner's distress.

Feelings of Validation

Opining that AET may offer theoretic direction for listening research, Bodie (2012) argued that, “listening is one type of affectionate communication . . . that fosters intimate interaction by enhancing feelings of being understood, a vital component of interpersonal need fulfillment” (p. 117). That sentiment was key to Carl Rogers's phenomenological theory of personality

(Rogers, 1959) and his client-centered therapy (Rogers, 1966). Rogers hypothesized three conditions necessary for therapeutic change, one of which was the establishment of *unconditional positive regard* wherein the therapist listens to the client in a manner that connotes respect, acceptance, and a total lack of negative judgment.

According to Rogerian theory, the need for positive regard is not limited to the therapeutic relationship but pervades all significant relationships in life, particularly during child development. As youngsters, we have an innate need, according to Rogers, to receive love, affection, and attention from our parents on an unconditional basis. When parental respect and love vary according to our behaviors, we develop what Rogers called *conditions of worth*, wherein we come to believe we are worthy of our parents' love only if we have some thoughts and engage in some behaviors but not others.

The need for positive regard is an innate biological need in Rogerian theory; therefore, to the extent that individuals cannot satisfy that need in their parental relationships, they will turn elsewhere to meet it. Empathic listening, when done in an open, nonjudgmental manner, can convey unconditional positive regard, thus implying to the recipient that he or she is loved and cared for irrespective of the content of his or her message. Informative on this point is Pistrang, Picciotto, and Barker's (2001) finding that highly empathic listeners explore meanings with their conversational partners, acknowledge their partners' concerns, summarize their partners' statements, suggest solutions, and comment on experiences they share with their partners. Similarly, Gearhart and Bodie (2011) found that empathic listening correlates positively with a person's emotional sensitivity and social sensitivity to others.

Implicit Worth

Allocating time, attention, and empathic energy to someone else can constitute an affectionate message within the framework of AET. When creating the tripartite model of affectionate communication strategies (Floyd & Morman, 1998), we discovered that 1) affectionate messages in many relational contexts are implicit rather than explicit, and 2) implicit messages are often just as valued by recipients as explicit ones. To convey affection for a friend, for instance, one might perform a favor such as taking the friend to a concert or helping the friend move to a new apartment. In such instances, the time, attention, and effort given to the friend are recognized as resources of value whose provision implies an underlying affectionate sentiment, even if that sentiment is never articulated concretely. Indeed, we have found that in some relationships, such as those between fathers and sons, affectionate messages are more commonly encoded in indirect, implicit ways than in direct verbal or nonverbal ways (e.g., Morman & Floyd, 1999).

Empathic listening, therefore, represents resources of value—time, attention, and effort—whose provision, like that of Floyd and Morman's (1998) indirect nonverbal gestures, may connote affectionate feelings for the speaker (see Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Such a relationship would likely be linear, with greater amounts of affection associated with greater amounts of empathic listening.

Even though the above speculations are instructive, listening has not yet been studied empirically as an affectionate behavior, per se. Were a theoretic framework such as AET to be applied to listening behavior—and to empathic listening in particular—however, some specific predictions would be warranted, which appear next.

EMPIRICAL GENERALIZATIONS

Considering listening behavior, and empathic listening behavior in particular, from the perspective of affection exchange theory yields at least three general predictions. These are presented here as empirical generalizations, more similar in their level of abstraction to theoretic propositions than to testable hypotheses. From these generalizations, however, both hypotheses and research questions could be logically derived.

Empirical Generalization 1

Interpersonal behaviors associated with empathic listening are decoded as expressing affectionate intent.

We have seen how empathic listening incorporates behaviors, such as nonverbal immediacy behaviors, that frequently accompany affectionate exchanges. It is therefore logical to posit that recipients and even third-party observers would decode such behaviors as conveying affectionate sentiments. That is perhaps particularly true when more overt forms of affection, such as kissing or saying “I love you,” are less common. In many men’s relationships, for instance, such as those between brothers or fathers and sons, indirect forms of affectionate behavior (including spending time together and sharing activities) are both more common and considered more important than more direct forms (Floyd & Morman, 2000; Morman & Floyd, 1999).

When empathic listening is performed as a requirement of the context rather than voluntarily—as with a therapist, for instance—it should not necessarily denote affectionate sentiments on the part of the listener. Regardless, however, the first empirical generalization may still apply: observers of the interaction, and even the recipients themselves, may decode the clinician’s behaviors as expressing affectionate feelings even when no such feelings exist. Freud identified such a phenomenon in psychoanalysis as transference, the patient’s projection of feelings for another person onto the therapist (see Racker, 2011). Consequently, whereas the therapist may have no feelings of genuine affection for the patient, the patient may still decode the therapist’s behaviors as expressing just such a sentiment.

Empirical Generalization 2

As a form of affection, empathic listening is subject to a norm of reciprocity.

Like many other interpersonal behaviors, expressions of affection are highly reciprocal; those who communicate the most affection to others typically receive the most in return (see, e.g., Floyd, 2002). Affectionate behavior therefore follows what Gouldner (1960) described as a norm of reciprocity, an implied social contract stipulating that receipt of benefits obligates the receiver to reciprocate in kind. As applied to affectionate behavior, the norm of reciprocity implies not only that expressions of affection usually will be reciprocated but also that failure to reciprocate an affectionate gesture will a) be noticeable, b) lead to feelings of guilt on the part of the failing reciprocator, and c) lead to distress and to a sense of being exploited on the part of the other. Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell (1993) have documented that very pattern of reaction in the analogous context of unrequited love.

Reasoning from that position, one would hypothesize that both parties to an empathic listening episode would recognize the listening as an investment of resources—cognitive, affective, and temporal—whose provision incurs an obligation for later reimbursement. If Amy, having been in distress and received empathic listening from Doug, were later to fail to make time to listen to Doug during his time of need, she would violate the norm of reciprocity, causing her to feel guilty and Doug to feel exploited.

Empirical Generalization 3

It is possible to misconvey affectionate intent via listening behaviors, either unintentionally or voluntarily.

Misinterpretations of affectionate expressions are not uncommon. I have found in my own research both that platonic gestures can be misinterpreted as romantic and that romantic gestures can be misinterpreted as platonic (Floyd, 2006), due to substantial overlap in the behaviors used to signal both. Because it involves an investment of time and affective attention, and because it is accompanied by nonverbal immediacy behaviors, empathic listening can also be misconstrued in interpersonal interaction.

Many misinterpretations are unintentional on the part of the sender. As noted above, for instance, psychotherapy clients may misconstrue a clinician's listening behavior as connoting personal interest. Many forms of psychotherapy call for clinicians to behave in caring, empathic ways toward clients—including by listening nonjudgmentally, asking probing questions, demonstrating interest, and maintaining nonverbal immediacy—that mirror behaviors characteristic of encounters with close friends and intimate partners. It may not be difficult, therefore, to misconstrue the meaning of those behaviors and to respond in kind—by making gestures of friendship oneself—even when they are inappropriate for a professional relationship.

Indeed, in interpersonal exchanges, some senders use affectionate gestures *intending* for those gestures to be misinterpreted. To initiate sexual interaction, for instance, Matt tells Lisa that he loves her, knowing she will interpret his statement as a gesture of romantic love even though he doesn't actually feel that way toward her. In a survey of more than 1,000 American college students, I found that nearly 90% had used affectionate communication for a manipulative purpose such as that (Floyd, 2006). Besides saying "I love you" to Lisa as a means of initiating sexual access, Matt might also enact other behaviors that convey affectionate sentiments, including listening intently and empathically to her, even though his motives were ulterior. Whether intended on the part of the sender or not, misinterpretation of empathic listening may be as likely as misinterpretation of other affectionate behaviors in terms of connoting greater or lesser emotional intensity than is genuine.

CONCLUSIONS

Noting the relative paucity of theory in listening research, Bodie (2009) articulated five criteria by which listening theories should be evaluated. First, they offer an organized, coherent account of which phenomena are relevant and how they are interrelated. Second, they explain why the identified relationships exist. Third, they describe the relevant relationships as simply and elegantly as possible. Fourth, they give rise to testable hypotheses. Finally, they offer accurate predictions, that is, hypotheses that are routinely verified rather than falsified by empirical data.

Although I certainly would not nominate AET as a “listening theory” per se, I would submit that it offers a theoretic basis for expecting empathic listening to operate as a form of indirect nonverbal affection in personal relationships. Many of its logically derived hypotheses, already confirmed for other behaviors, are theoretically applicable to empathic listening as well, as I have illustrated in this paper. AET would further predict that the ability and willingness to listen empathically in personal relationships is correlated with markers of relational quality (such as closeness, intimacy, satisfaction, and commitment), whereas the lack of ability or willingness to listen empathically would be cited as evidence of relational deterioration, mirroring how the lack of affection is similarly cited (Floyd, 2006).

The framework of AET has little to say about forms of listening that lack strong relational connotations, such as informational listening done in a classroom or aesthetic listening done at a symphony. Listening to learn about a professor’s discipline or to enjoy a violinist’s solo implies less about the listener’s feelings for the person being heard than does listening to empathize and support. As such, empathic listening should operate as an affectionate resource in many relationships, implying messages of value and worth and incurring obligations for reciprocity.

Viewing empathic listening from the lens of AET also raises potentially useful questions about its health benefits. Robust literatures already illuminate the physical and mental health benefits associated with affectionate behavior and with social support in general (see, e.g., Floyd & Afifi, 2012). People who receive high levels of supportive, affectionate communication are healthier than those who do not, other things being equal. To what extent do outcomes such as anxiety, stress, and immune function covary with the availability of an empathic listener in one’s life? Does receiving empathic listening reduce stress hormones or buffer immunocompetence in ways that are health protective? Those and other questions of importance await investigation, but AET offers a theoretic basis for posing them.

As the StoryBooth experiences illustrated, empathic listening can be a transformative act of love for those who receive it and for those who offer it. Consequently, it shares conceptual space with the communication of affection in personal relationships and may therefore be informed by theoretic principles relevant to affectionate communication.

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