Human Affection Exchange:
I. Reproductive Probability as a Predictor of Men's Affection with Their Sons

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The present study examines the communication of affection in men's relationships with their fathers and with their sons. Drawing from affection exchange theory and contemporary theorizing about fatherhood, three predictions are advanced: 1) heterosexual men receive more affection from their fathers than do homosexual or bisexual men; 2) fathers communicate affection to their sons more through the use of supportive activities than through direct verbal statements or nonverbal gestures; and 3) men communicate more affection to their sons than they received from their fathers. Fifty men with at least one son completed questionnaires regarding affectionate communication in their relationships with their sons and their fathers. Half of the men were self-identified as exclusively heterosexual and the other half were self-identified as exclusively homosexual or bisexual. The predictions received substantial support.

Key Words: father-son relations, communication of affection, affection exchange theory, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual

The father-son relationship may be at once the most important and the most challenging male-male relationship in the life course. Fathers and sons can affect each other's lives substantially, in both positive and negative ways, even during sons' adult lives (Beatty & Dobos, 1993). Positive father-son bonds improve sons' acade-
mic achievement (Snarey, 1993), sons' communication behaviors (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Yerby, 1981; Fink, 1993), sons' relational communication with their spouses (Beatty & Dobos, 1993), sons' and fathers' emotional health (Berry, 1990), and fathers' adult development and psychosocial adjustment (Snarey, 1993).

However, much of the existing literature on the father-son relationship reflects a common assumption that most men have dysfunctional and emotionally distant relationships with their fathers. Dubbed the "role-inadequacy perspective" by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997), this orientation focuses on men's shortcomings as fathers and appears to permeate research on men and fatherhood (Doherty, 1991; Levant, 1992). Although some scholars have investigated positive aspects of father-child relationships, such as relational satisfaction (Beatty & Dobos, 1992; Martin & Anderson, 1995), confirmation (Beatty & Dobos, 1993), and intimacy (Buerkel, 1996), much, if not most, research in this area focuses on more negative aspects such as aggressiveness (Beatty, Zelley, Dobos, & Rudd, 1994), conflict (Comstock, 1994), and dysfunction (Lee, 1987).

It is certainly the case that many paternal relationships are enormously challenging and that characteristics such as aggression and conflict are useful to study. A focus on these aspects, however, can obscure attention on the more positive aspects of the relationship, particularly those communication functions associated with positive relational variables. One such communication function that has received little attention in father-son relationships is the expression of affection, even though affectionate communication is a central component of familial relational development (see Floyd, 1997a; Floyd & Morman, 2001). Possibly because anecdotal accounts abound of highly contentious father-son relationships, researchers may be inclined to believe that most fathers and sons are not especially affectionate. However, human relationships are often simultaneously characterized by seemingly contradictory communication patterns (see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), making it plausible that affection, and the expression of affectionate feelings, are important even in the most contentious father-son relationships.

Affectionate communication can be fraught with risk, however, and many fathers and sons have difficulty expressing feelings of affection for one another even when they feel them (Morman & Floyd, 1999). Why is it that some father-son relationships are more affectionate than others are? The present study, guided by the principles of affection exchange theory, examines this question. Specifically, it addresses the effect of men's sexual orientation on the affectionate communication they have with their sons and with their own fathers, and examines differences in the behaviors used to encode affection with sons for both heterosexual and homosexual/bisexual fathers. A preview of affection exchange theory is provided below, although with the formulation of specific hypotheses.

**AFFECTION EXCHANGE THEORY**

Affection exchange theory (AET: Floyd, 2001) treats affectionate communication as an adaptive behavior that contributes to humans' long-term viability and procreative success. Assuming the Darwinian principle that survival and reproduction are superordinate human motivations, AET posits that affection exchange contributes to sur-
vival because it promotes pair bonding and the increased access to resources pair bonds provide. Affection exchange also contributes to short-term reproduction success by signaling to potential mates that one is a viable candidate for parenthood. Finally, affection communicated from parents to their children is posited to contribute to the parents' long-term reproduction success by increasing the chances that the children will reproduce, causing the parents' genes to pass on to future generations. Because affection exchange is an adaptive behavior, according to AET, then it is also governed by the very motivations it serves. AET thus further provides that affectionate behaviors vary in their forms according to which superordinate motivation is being served and that affection exchange increases in amount the more directly such motivations are being served.

AET has multiple implications for affectionate communication in father-son relationships. In this paper, I examine three issues in particular: 1) how men's sexuality affects the amount of affection they received from their fathers; 2) how the amount of affection men communicate to their sons varies according to the manner in which it is expressed; and 3) how the amount of affection men received from their fathers compares to the amount of affection they communicate to their sons. Subsequently, I discuss each of these issues in detail and advance applicable hypotheses.

### Sexuality as a Mediator of Affection from Parents

The third postulate of AET provides that parents contribute to their long-term reproductive success (that is, success beyond the generation of their own children) by expressing affection to their children, because affection is seen as a resource that ultimately contributes to the children's ability to attract mates. If reproductive success is, in fact, an underlying motivation for communicating affection to one's children, then it stands to reason that the children's likelihood of actually passing their parents' genes on to future generations mitigates the amount of affection they receive from their parents. This reasoning is reflected in Daly and Wilson's (1995) construct of "discriminative parental solicitude," which explains that parents are sometimes forced to invest resources unequally in their children so as to maximize their own chances of having their genes passed on.

The implication of this discussion is that parents should express more affection to children who are the most likely to contribute to the parents' long-term reproductive success. Applying this reasoning, Floyd (2001) found that men communicate more affection to their biological sons than to their nonbiological sons (such as stepsons or adopted sons), the latter of whom cannot contribute to the fathers' reproductive success because they do not carry his genes. An additional implication of this reasoning, however, is that even biological children may not receive equal amounts of affection, or any other resource, if they are not equally likely to reproduce. One context in which such a prediction can be tested is in the relationships of parents with their heterosexual and homosexual children.

Specifically, AET predicts that parents express more affection to their heterosexual children than to children who are homosexual or bisexual, the latter group being less likely to reproduce biologically. Importantly, it is not the children's actual reproductive behavior but their *probable* reproductive behavior that should be influ-
ential. Thus, the prediction holds regardless of whether the children have actually reproduced. In the current study, in fact, this prediction is tested by comparing a sample of heterosexual men with a sample of homosexual and bisexual men, all of whom are fathers themselves. The specific hypothesis is that heterosexual fathers report having received more affection from their own fathers than homosexual or bisexual fathers (H1).

Despite this first hypothesis, AET provides no reason to predict that heterosexual and homosexual/bisexual fathers differ from each other in the amount of affection they communicate to their own sons. To examine potential differences that may emerge, however, I pose this as a research question: do heterosexual fathers and homosexual/bisexual fathers differ from each other in the amount of affection they express to their sons (RQ1)?

**Forms of Affection Between Fathers and Sons**

The fifth postulate of AET provides that the manner in which affection is communicated varies according to which superordinate goal(s) it serves. In recent years, several scholars have posited that when it comes to affection or other intimate behavior, men adopt a “covert” manner of communication whereby affectionate messages are hidden in seemingly innocuous behavior so as to avoid possible ridicule (see for example, Floyd & Morman, 1997; Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993). For instance, a man may express affection to his male friend not through the use of overt verbal statements (e.g., saying “I love you”) or nonverbal gestures (e.g., hugging), but by doing his friend favors like helping with a house project or giving him tickets to a sporting event. Swain (1989) proposed that these types of behaviors have the advantage of encoding an affectionate message while leaving that message plausibly deniable should its intention be questioned. In this example, the man may invite questions about his sexuality, for instance, if he were to express his affection through direct verbal or nonverbal statements; such questions can be mitigated by encoding the message in supportive but not overtly affectionate behavior, however.

It may seem at first that fathers and sons would be immune to questions about the intention behind their affectionate communication, and to a certain extent, they are. Floyd (2000) reported that men’s homophobia significantly predicted negative evaluations of overt male-male affection they observed, except when they were told that the men they were observing were related (brothers or fathers and sons). In a separate study, Floyd (1999) found that it was common for observers of overt male-male affection to conclude that the men they were observing were probably related to each other. However, even father-son relationships are subject to masculine role prescriptions for socially appropriate behavior. To avoid even the appearance that their affectionate behavior might be sexual in nature, AET predicts that men communicate affection to their sons more through the use of supportive activities than through direct verbal or nonverbal expressions (H2).

**Comparing Affection with Sons to Affection from Fathers**

The final prediction of interest in the present study is not directly derived from AET.
Rather, it reflects what many have called the "changing culture of fatherhood" (Daly, 1995; LaRossa, 1988), whereby important shifts have occurred in the way that fatherhood is conceptualized and in the expectations that are placed on fathers. Chief among these changes is the increased expectation that fathers should be more nurturing, more loving, and more involved in the raising of their children than fathers previously were (Backett, 1987; Lamb, 1986; Marsiglio, 1995; Pleck, 1987). On this basis, I reason here that one result of these shifts in the conceptualization of fatherhood is that men express more affection with their sons than their own fathers did with them (H3).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 50 adult men who were fathers of at least one son. Half of the participants were self-identified as exclusively heterosexual and half were self-identified as homosexual or bisexual. The participants ranged in age from 33 to 70 years, with a mean age of 47.80 years ($SD = 8.34$). At the time of the study, 11.8% of participants had a high school education or less, 20.6% had completed some college but had no degree, 35.3% had an associate's or baccalaureate degree, and 32.3% had a graduate or professional degree. A majority (61.8%) of participants lived in the Midwestern United States, while 14.7% lived in the Northeast, 11.8% lived in the Northwest, 8.8% lived in the South/Southeast, and 2.9% lived in the Southwest. Most (71.4%) were married at the time of the study, while 14.3% were divorced and 14.3% were never married. Participants had an average of 1.91 sons ($SD = 0.92$) and 0.86 daughters ($SD = 0.97$).

PROCEDURE

Undergraduate research assistants at two medium-sized universities recruited men to participate in the study. To qualify, a potential participant had to have at least one son who was at least 12 years of age. The decision to exclude from the sample fathers whose oldest sons were younger than 12 was made based on research showing that the nature of father-son affection, including the amount and type of affection shared between fathers and sons, changes substantially once the sons enter adolescence (Salt, 1991). Identifying a viable sample of homosexual men who are fathers is a challenging task, especially given many such men's reluctance to identify themselves as homosexual even in the context of a confidential research study. As a result, studies of gay fathers with extremely small sample sizes are not uncommon (e.g., Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a, b, 1992; Miller, 1979). In the present study, a snowball sampling technique, using personal referrals from some participants to other potential participants, was used to recruit the subsample of homosexual fathers. Afterward, the same sampling techniques were used to recruit a subsample of heterosexual fathers with the same number of participants.

Qualified men who agreed to participate were given a questionnaire to complete and an addressed, postage-paid envelope in which to mail it to the researcher. Each
participant was asked to report on his relationship with his oldest son. Although it may somewhat limit generalizability, this decision was made in the interests of standardizing selection procedures among men with multiple sons in order to avoid a selection bias whereby fathers may choose to report on the son with whom they have the most positive relationship. The sons on whom participants reported ranged in age from 12 to 37 years, with a mean age of 19.44 years (SD = 6.00). Most (85.7%) were participants' biological sons, while 8.5% were adopted sons and 5.8% were stepsons. In addition to reporting on their relationships with their sons, participants also reported on the level of affection they received from their own fathers. Most (91.2%) reported on their relationship with their biological father, while 5.9% reported on an adoptive father and 2.9% reported on a stepfather. Slightly over half of the participants' own fathers (55.9%) were living at the time of the study.

**Measure**

*Affectionate communication* was measured with the Affectionate Communication Index (ACI: Floyd & Morman, 1998). The 19-item, Likert-type instrument is comprised of three subscales measuring the amount of affection participants communicate to a particular target through direct verbal expressions, through direct nonverbal expressions, and through affectionate social support. Participants completed the ACI once in reference to how affectionate their own fathers were with them (alphas were .82 for verbal, .88 for nonverbal, and .88 for support) and again in reference to how affectionate they are with their own sons (alphas were .78 for verbal, .86 for nonverbal, and .74 for support). The ACI has demonstrated multiple forms of convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity (see Floyd & Morman, 1998, 2001; Morman & Floyd, 1999).

**Results**

*Comparing Homosexual Fathers to Heterosexual Fathers*

The first hypothesis predicted that homosexual men receive less affection from their fathers than do heterosexual men. The three forms of affection (verbal, nonverbal, support) were analyzed together (average \( r = .71 \), Bartlett test of sphericity \( \chi^2 = 50.97, p < .001, df = 3 \) in a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), with sample (heterosexual v. homosexual) as the independent factor. The covariate was the number of siblings participants had. The first hypothesis is based on AET's prediction that parents are more likely to expend resources on children who are the most likely to reproduce; however, there is reason to believe this effect may be moderated by the total number of children from which parents have to choose. Specifically, if they have several children, then parents may be more inclined to withhold resources from those unlikely to reproduce because there are others whose likelihood of reproducing is greater. If they have only one or two children, parents may be less inclined to withhold resources, even from those who are unlikely to reproduce, because parents have few other options, if any, for seeing that their genes are passed on to future generations.
However, the covariate was nonsignificant, and it produced inverse but non-significant bivariate correlations with all three forms of affection (average $r = -.11$). The analysis was thus re-run without the covariate. The MANOVA produced a significant multivariate effect for sample, $\Lambda = .61, F (3, 46) = 6.32, p = .002, \eta^2 = .39$.

Univariate results indicated that the heterosexual participants received more nonverbal affection from their fathers ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.40$) than did the homosexual participants ($M = 2.01, SD = 1.21$), $F (1, 48) = 5.38, p = .027, \eta^2 = .14$. Heterosexual participants also received more supportive affection from their fathers ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.19$) than did the homosexual participants ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.71$), $F (1, 48) = 6.00, p = .02, \eta^2 = .16$. Finally, the heterosexual participants reported receiving more verbal affection from their fathers ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.19$) than did the homosexual participants ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.71$), $F (1, 48) = 18.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$. The first hypothesis is supported.

The research question asked whether the two samples differ from each other in the amount of affection they give their own sons. Two-tailed independent-samples $t$-tests comparing the heterosexual and homosexual samples with respect to affection given to sons revealed nonsignificant mean differences for all three forms of affection. Thus, although the heterosexual and homosexual participants differ in the amount of affection they received from their fathers, they do not differ in the amount of affection they give their own sons.

**Comparing Modes of Expressing Affection to Sons**

The second hypothesis predicted that fathers communicate affection to their sons more through supportive activities than through direct verbal or nonverbal expressions. A repeated-measures MANOVA, with form of affection as the within-subjects variable and sample (heterosexual v. homosexual) as the between-subjects factor, produced a significant multivariate within-subjects effect for form of affection, $\Lambda = .16, F (3, 46) = 84.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .84$. The multivariate effect was probed with one-tailed pairwise $t$-tests. Results indicated that fathers in the heterosexual sample communicated affection more through supportive activities ($M = 5.60, SD = .090$) than through direct nonverbal expressions ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.35$), $t (23) = 9.15, p < .001, \eta^2 = .83$. Likewise, fathers communicated affection more through supportive activities than through direct verbal expressions ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.37$), $t (23) = 4.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .56$. For the homosexual sample, results indicated that fathers communicated affection more through supportive activities ($M = 5.81, SD = 0.84$) than through direct nonverbal expressions ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.45$), $t (23) = 9.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .85$. Likewise, fathers communicated affection more through supportive activities than through direct verbal expressions ($M = 4.07, SD = 1.44$), $t (23) = 4.62, p < .001, \eta^2 = .57$. The second hypothesis is supported.

**Comparing Men's Affection with Their Fathers and Their Sons**

The third hypothesis predicted that men express more affection to their sons than they received from their own fathers. A repeated-measures MANOVA, with form of affection and affection partner (son v. father) as within-subjects variables, and sam-
ple (heterosexual v. homosexual) as the between-subjects variable, produced a significant multivariate within-subjects effect for affection partner, $\Lambda = .49$, $F(3, 46) = 32.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .52$. The multivariate effect was probed with one-tailed pairwise $t$-tests that compared verbal, nonverbal, and supportive affection given to sons and received from fathers. Again, these tests were conducted for the heterosexual and homosexual subsamples individually.

For the heterosexual subsample, results indicated that participants communicated more verbal affection to their sons ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.37$) than they received from their own fathers ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.27$), $t(23) = 2.66, p = .009, \eta^2 = .32$. Contrary to the hypothesis, participants communicated virtually the same amount of nonverbal affection to their sons ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.35$) as they received from their fathers ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.40$), $t < 1$. However, participants communicated more supportive affection to their sons ($M = 5.60, SD = 0.90$) than they received from their own fathers ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.19$), $t(23) = 2.58, p = .011, \eta^2 = .31$.

For the homosexual subsample, results indicated that participants communicated more verbal affection to their sons ($M = 4.07, SD = 1.44$) than they received from their own fathers ($M = 1.94, SD = 1.04$), $t(23) = 5.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .64$. Participants also communicated more nonverbal affection to their sons ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.45$) than they received from their own fathers ($M = 2.01, SD = 1.21$), $t(23) = 3.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .49$. Finally, participants reported communicating more supportive affection to their sons ($M = 5.81, SD = 0.84$) than they received from their own fathers ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.71$), $t(23) = 5.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .69$. The third hypothesis is supported, except with respect to heterosexual men's nonverbal affection.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study addresses affectionate communication in the relationships of fathers and sons and the conditions under which it is more or less likely. Affection exchange theory was applied to the task of predicting that men's sexual orientations and the forms of affection they used would be associated with the amount of affection fathers and sons share. Predictions drawn from the theory were substantially supported.

With respect to sexual orientation, the results demonstrated that men who were self-identified as homosexual or bisexual received less verbal, nonverbal, and supportive affection from their fathers than did heterosexual men. AET explains this difference as a function of parents investing discriminatingly in their children so as to maximize the likelihood that grandchildren will be produced. According to the theory, children who are less likely to reproduce biologically will receive, on average, fewer resources from their parents than children who are more likely to reproduce, and affection is one such resource. It was thus predicted that fathers communicate less affection to children who are gay or bisexual than to heterosexual children, and the prediction was supported for all three forms of affectionate communication measured. Paradoxically, it is theoretically irrelevant that nearly all of the homosexual/bisexual participants in the current study had, in fact, biologically reproduced. According to the theory, these men's sexual orientation ought to make them less likely than heterosexual men to have done so.
However, affectionate communication between fathers and sons is not always in the form of overt verbal statements or nonverbal gestures. The second hypothesis predicted that fathers communicate affection to their sons more through the use of supportive activities, such as doing favors for them, than through direct verbal statements or nonverbal affectionate gestures. This prediction was supported for both the heterosexual and homosexual fathers. Notable here were the effect size estimates, which indicated that form of affection accounted for an average of more than 70% of the variance in the amount of affection fathers communicated to their sons. This finding supports the speculations of other theorists (e.g., Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993) that men are most likely to express intimate or affectionate feelings for each other in ways that are not overtly affectionate, perhaps to avoid the possible ridicule that such behaviors might invite from others. As my own previous research has found (Floyd, 1995, 1996, 1997a, b; Floyd & Morman, 1997, 2001; Morman & Floyd, 1998), even men who are related to each other are not immune from concerns for avoiding such ridicule.

Finally, the results indicated that participants were more affectionate with their sons than their own fathers were with them. This was true for both heterosexual and homosexual fathers for all forms of affection, with the exception of heterosexual men’s nonverbal affection. The effect sizes were again notable, with relationship accounting for an average of nearly 50% of the variance in participants’ reports of affection. This difference in what men received from their fathers and what they express to their sons appears to reflect what others have called a changing culture of fatherhood, whereby men are encouraged or expected to be more nurturant with, and less detached from, their children than previous generations of fathers were.

Three limitations of the current study should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. The first stems from having participants report both on their relationships with their sons as well as their relationships with their fathers. This single-source approach may inflate the magnitude of relationships between variables, in much the same way that common-method variance can influence findings. Although within-subjects statistical designs such as those employed herein are designed to deal with such shared variance, future studies using father-son dyads will aid in mitigating the potential problems of the single-source approach. A second limitation of the current investigation is that almost all participants reported on full biological relationships with their sons and fathers. This homogeneity makes generalization to other configurations of the father-son relationship, such as step-father/step-son or adoptive relationships, problematic. These will be important subgroups to address in future research, given ever-increasing diversity in the demographic structure of the family.

Although small sample sizes are more the rule than the exception in research on gay fathers, the size of the sample should be considered a limitation to the study’s external validity. Certainly, a larger sample would be expected to be more representative of the population from which it was drawn and would therefore yield more generalizeable results. With respect to the present findings, however, it must be remembered that small sample sizes attenuate statistical power. When one considers that nearly every hypothesized comparison in the present study achieved statistical significance despite the sample size—and more important, that several of the comparisons produced moderate or large effects—then the present results become even
more impressive because they suggest that the effects would be of even greater magnitude with a larger sample. Considered in this light, these findings attest to the predictive power of affection exchange theory and suggest that future research along this line of inquiry is warranted.

NOTE

1. For parsimony's sake I will use the terms “gay fathers” or “homosexual fathers” when I refer to the subsample of homosexual and bisexual fathers. However, these terms should be understood to be inclusive of both homosexual and bisexual fathers.

REFERENCES


