Affection received from fathers as a predictor of men's affection with their own sons: Tests of the modeling and compensation hypotheses

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Affection Received From Fathers as a Predictor of Men’s Affection with their Own Sons: Tests of the Modeling and Compensation Hypotheses

Kory Floyd and Mark T. Morman

The present study takes a developmental approach to predicting the amount of affectionate communication fathers give their own sons by examining the amount of affection men received from their own fathers. Two developmental orientations are addressed: the modeling hypothesis, which predicts that positive behavior patterns exhibited by parents will be replicated in their children’s own parenting, and the compensation hypothesis, which predicts that negative parenting behaviors are compensated for in children’s parenting of their own children. We combined these approaches to advance a hybrid prediction that, when applied to affectionate communication, calls for a curvilinear relationship between the affection men received from their own fathers and the affection they give their own sons. Five hundred six men who were fathers of at least one son participated in the current study, and the results provided direct support for a combined modeling-compensation hypothesis.

The importance of the father-son relationship to men’s development and effective socialization can hardly be exaggerated. 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 can benefit a number of aspects of men’s lives, including sons’ academic achievement (Snarey, 1993), sons’ communication behaviors (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Yerby, 1981; Fink, 1993), sons’ relational communication with his spouse (Beatty & Dobos, 1993), sons’ and fathers’ emotional health (Berry, 1990), and fathers’ adult development and psychosocial adjustment (Snarey, 1993). Indeed, the fathering role appears well suited for instilling the confidence, autonomy, and high personal expectations associated with men’s achievement in life (Poppenoe, 1996; Stacey, 1996).

When fathers are actively involved in the lives of their sons, their sons turn out to be less aggressive, less overly competitive, and better able to express feelings of vulnerability and sadness (Brody, 1996). These same boys don’t feel the need to act out or show aggression in order to win their fathers’ love and attention. Brody’s research also suggests that boys with actively involved fathers observe how their dads handle various life situations and thus learn how to deal with similar scenarios in appropriate and thoughtful ways. Fathers who were described as close and nurturing had adolescent boys who showed a greater capacity for empathy and had more flexible attitudes about gender and life. Fathers who were directly involved in the raising of their sons produced men who were better able to resolve conflict, had healthier social relationships, and exhibited a heightened capacity for sharing intimacy (Pollack, 1998). In studies of families in which the father stays home to raise his children while the mother works outside of the home, sons seem to identify early

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with this nurturing fatherly role and thus themselves show more caring behaviors toward friends and siblings (Pruett, 1989). The same boys were also found to be more relaxed concerning gender roles and appeared less fearful of bending traditional norms of masculinity, yet they were also able to maintain a confident sense of self and indicated strong feelings of self-acceptance.

However, much of the extant 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 fathers (Doherty, 1991; Gerson, 1993; Levant, 1992; Lillie, 1993). Negative paternal relationships, it is assumed, propel men down a life-long path of emotional trauma and doom them to repeat the same cycle of negative fathering with their own sons. Some scholars have investigated various correlates of effective fathering, ranging from the communication of affection between fathers and sons (Morman & Floyd, in press), to issues of relational satisfaction (Beatty & Dobos, 1992; Martin & Anderson, 1995), confirmation (Beatty & Dobos, 1993), and intimacy (Buerkel, 1996). However, much, if not most, research in this area focuses on negative aspects of the father-son relationship, 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 Morman & Floyd, in press). 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.

The purpose of the present study is to examine affectionate communication in the relationships of fathers and sons. Our investigation takes a developmental approach, focusing on the levels of affection that men received from their own fathers as an important predictor of the affection they show their own sons. Two developmental perspectives regarding parental behavior, which have received considerable amounts of attention from researchers interested in the father-son relationship, are particularly informative. The first, known as the modeling hypothesis, argues that individuals replicate the parenting styles they received in their families of origin by, for instance, matching the level of relational involvement they experienced from their parents when they were growing up. Conversely, the compensation hypothesis argues that when individuals are exposed to negative parental behaviors in their families of origin, they attempt to compensate for those patterns by taking a more positive role in raising their children. Below, we discuss perspectives and then offer a “hybrid” prediction that combines the reasoning underlying the two perspectives.
Although the modeling and compensation hypotheses are relevant to the behaviors of mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, we will center our discussion on the father-son relationship.

**The Modeling Hypothesis**

The modeling hypothesis predicts that men who experienced high levels of involvement from their fathers in their family of origin are significantly more likely to become highly involved fathers with their own children (Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Kagan, 1958; Manion, 1977; Musson, 1969; Musson & Distler, 1959, 1960; Reuter & Biller, 1973; Sagi, 1982). The modeling hypothesis argues that a father's nurturing behavior (expressing affection, offering encouragement, being attentive toward the child) serves as a model for their sons, thus increasing the likelihood that the son will more favorably identify with his father's positive example of the male parenting role (Biller & Solomon, 1986). Furthermore, the degree to which a father participates in the life of his son has been found to be positively associated with how much his own father was involved in childrearing behaviors (Manion, 1977). Thus it appears that men who had fathers who were loving, nurturing, accepting, and involved raise sons who are more inclined to model these positive fathering behaviors when they produce children of their own. Additional support for the modeling hypothesis comes from research reporting that boys who became the most well adjusted men later in life had strong, accomplished fathers who shared childrearing responsibilities with their wives (Block, 1971).

While research supports the prediction that highly involved fathers produce sons who go on to become highly involved fathers in their own right, less evidence supports a negative modeling hypothesis (i.e., that a harsh, uncaring style of fathering is likely to be replicated by a man in his own parenting style). On the contrary, studies report that the great majority of men with childhood experiences of a severe or inadequate parent do not go on to replicate this pattern with their own children (Elder, 1974; Elder, Liker, & Cross, 1984; Finkelhor, Gelles, Hotaling, & Strauss, 1983; Strauss & Gelles, 1986; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

**The Compensation Hypothesis**

A comparably large amount of research supports the compensation hypothesis, which predicts that men who experienced little paternal involvement within their childhood family of origin are more likely to compensate by becoming highly involved fathers with their own sons (DeFrain, 1979; Eiduson & Alexander, 1978; Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Radin, 1988). The compensation hypothesis argues that men who are dissatisfied with the fathering they received will feel compelled to remake the fathering experience into something more positive for their own sons, thus compensating for a perceived lack of caring, nurturing, or involvement from their own fathers. Two qualitative studies of the fathering experience found that most men do not view their own fathers as positive fathering models and want to be better role models for their own sons than their fathers were to them (Daly, 1995; Ehrensaft, 1987). The compensation hypothesis is also supported by research that found negative associations between low own-fathers' involvement and new fathers' planning prior to birth to be the primary caretaker (Pruett, 1987), and between high involvement and perceived low quality in the fathering one received (Barnett & Baruch, 1987).
Rethinking the Modeling and Compensation Hypotheses

At first glance, it would appear that the modeling and compensation hypotheses are mutually negating; logically, one variable cannot be both directly and inversely related to another. However, such a conclusion would fail to account for an important causal variable operating in each hypothesis, which is the strength of the identification between parent and child (Kagan, 1958). According to developmental perspectives such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1969), people encode modeling only to the extent that they identify with, or feel positively toward, the source of the behavior (in this case, one’s father). When one views another favorably, then one sees reward in imitating the other’s behaviors; if such identification is not present, then one would see reward in compensating for the other’s behaviors rather than imitating them. Thus, modeling should occur only in the presence of strong identification and compensation should occur only in its absence. This line of reasoning has implications for affectionate communication in the father-son relationship. As Belsky (1984) noted, “fathers who are warm, nurturant, and involved probably rear sons who identify with and model them, whereas noninvolved fathers, who in all likelihood generate a weak identification and a low probability of being modeled, perhaps stimulate a compensatory process that later prompts sons to parent in a manner expressly opposite that of their own fathers” (p. 86).

There are two important implications of this discussion. The first is that, once the process of identification is considered, the proper prediction to be derived from both the modeling and compensation hypotheses is an asymptotic one. That is, modeling of a father’s affection level should occur only if the father was nurturant and affectionate (leading to strong identification); it should not occur if the father was distant and unaffectionate (leading to weak identification). Conversely, compensation for a father’s affection level should occur only if the father was distant and unaffectionate. A graphic representation of these asymptotic relationships is displayed in Figure 1.

Of course, the second implication is made evident by simultaneously considering these two mutually inclusive asymptotic predictions: that a combined modeling-compensation hypothesis would predict a U-shaped, curvilinear relationship between how affectionate a man’s father was with him and how affectionate he is with his own son. That is, those men who are most affectionate with their own sons are those who had either highly affectionate or highly unaffectionate fathers themselves.

Such a prediction, of course, assumes that affection is considered to be a positive element of the father-son relationship, rather than a negative element. If affection were evaluated negatively, then one would not expect sons to identify with affectionate fathers and the predicted correlational chain would be broken. Although it is intuitive that affectionate communication is consistently welcomed and positively evaluated, recent studies suggest that this may not always be the case in all relationships. Rather, affectionate behavior by a relational partner can elicit negative responses if it comes as a negative expectancy violation (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999; Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999), if it is accompanied by unfavorable attributions (Floyd, in press; Floyd & Morman, 2000), or if it is communicated more intensely than is appropriate for the developmental trajectory of the relationship (Floyd, 1997).

Importantly, however, social expectations surrounding affectionate behavior in the family mitigate against many of these potential problems (see Floyd & Morman, 1997). For instance, one rarely has to worry whether an expression of affection in a
parent-child relationship is romantic in nature, or whether it is inappropriate due to a lack of familiarity between sender and receiver (see Floyd, in press). Given the nature of the father-son relationship, we believe that affectionate communication will generally be judged favorably, as affection has long been considered to be among the most fundamental of human needs (Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972; Schutz, 1958). As such, we predict that it is associated with positive characteristics of the father-son relationship. In the present study, we examine three such characteristics: 1) the degree of closeness fathers and sons feel toward each other; 2) the extent to which fathers and sons feel satisfied with their relationship; and, 3) the degree of positive involvement that fathers and sons have in each others’ lives. On the basis of this discussion, we hypothesize that the amount of affectionate communication in father-son relationships is linearly related to each of these:

H1: Affectionate communication between fathers and sons is linearly related to their closeness, their satisfaction with their relationships, and their degree of positive involvement in each others’ lives.

If our first hypothesis is supported, and affection is associated with positive aspects of the father-son relationship, then a combined modeling-compensation hypothesis, predicting a curvilinear relationship between affection received from one’s own father and affection shown to one’s son, can be advanced. Specifically:

H2: Affection men received from their fathers has a U-shaped curvilinear relationship to the affection they give their own sons.

Of additional interest in the present study are potential differences in the amount of affection characterizing men’s relationships with their fathers and with their sons. Even if, as we hypothesize, affection received from one’s father is systematically
related to affection given to one's son, these variables may still differ in their central tendency. Our specific prediction is that men are more affectionate with their own sons than their fathers were with them. We base this hypothesis on what some 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. Paramount among these changes is the increased expectation that fathers should be more nurturant, more loving, and more involved in the raising of their children than fathers previously were (Backett, 1987; Lamb, 1986; Marsiglio, 1995; Pleck, 1987). We reason here that one result of these shifts in the conceptualization of fatherhood is that fathers engage in more expression of affection with their children than their own fathers did with them. Consistent with that reasoning, we further predict that mean differences will also be seen in men's reports of their involvement, satisfaction, and closeness with their fathers and their sons. Our specific hypothesis is:

H3: Men's levels of affection, closeness, relational satisfaction, and positive involvement are higher in their relationships with their sons than in their relationships with their fathers.

Method

Participants

Participants were 506 adult men who were fathers of at least one son. The men ranged in age from 25 to 94 years, with a mean age of 49.07 years (SD = 8.81). Nearly half (44.3%) were Caucasian, while 33.2% were African-American, 14.1% were Hispanic, 3.3% were Native American, 3.1% were Asian, and 3.9% were of other ethnic origins. Most (82.8%) were married, 12.9% were divorced, 3.3% were never married, and 1.0% were widowed. At the time of the study, 15.5% had a high school education or less, 26.6% had completed some college but had no degree, 35.0% had an associates' or baccalaureate degree, and 22.8% had a graduate or professional degree. Most (54.5%) of the participants lived in the Midwestern United States, while 18.8% lived in New England, 2.9% in the Northwest, 8.3% in the South/Southeast, 15.3% in the Southwest, and 0.2% in Puerto Rico. The men had an average of 1.82 sons (SD = 1.97) and 1.25 daughters (SD = 2.39).

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 suggesting 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. Specifically, prior to their sons' adolescence, fathers tend not to discriminate in the types and amount of affection they show to sons and daughters; however, once sons enter adolescence, sociocultural proscriptions against male-male affection begin to constrict men's patterns of affection exchange with their sons (but not with daughters) (see Salt, 1991). Because our purpose in this study was to examine father-son affection within these normative constraints, we elected to exclude from consideration sons who were still young children.

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 researchers. 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 53 years, with a mean age of 21.30 years (SD = 7.13). Most were biological sons conceived in participants' current (70.5%) or former (20.6%) marriages, while 7.4% were step-sons and 1.4% were adopted sons. Several questions also asked participants to report on their relationships with their own fathers. Most (94.0%) reported on their relationship with their biological father, while 2.1% reported on an adoptive father, 2.6% reported on a step-father, and 1.3% reported on an other father figure (e.g., an uncle, a grandfather, or another male who raised them as a father). Over a third of the participants' own fathers (42.5%) were living at the time of the study.

Measures

**Affectionate communication** was measured with the Affectionate Communication Index (ACI: Floyd & Morman, 1998). The 19-item, Likert-type instrument measures the amount of affection participants communicate to a particular target with verbal expressions, nonverbal behavior, and through affectionate social support. Participants completed the ACI once in reference to how affectionate their own fathers were with them (hereafter referred to as “affection-received”; alpha = .94), and again in reference to how affectionate they are with their own sons (“affection-given”; alpha = .90). The ACI has demonstrated multiple forms of convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity (see Floyd & Morman, 1998; Morman & Floyd, in press).

**Relational closeness** was assessed with the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale consists of a set of Venn-like diagrams, each representing different degrees of overlap of two circles. One circle in each pair is labeled “self” and the other circle is labeled “other,” and participants are instructed to select the pair of circles that best depicts the nature of their relationship. The IOS scale has been extensively validated in both experimental and correlational research paradigms (see Aron et al., 1992).

**Positive relational involvement** was measured with a 15-item Likert-type scale developed for this study. Participants completed the scale once in relation to how involved they are with their own sons, and again in relation to how involved their own fathers are with them. The scale includes items assessing how much time fathers spend with their sons, how involved they feel in their sons’ lives, and how positive their interactions are. Coefficient alphas were .91 for participants’ involvement with their sons and .92 for how involved participants’ fathers were with them. **Father-son satisfaction** was assessed with a nine-item Likert-type scale developed for this study. The measure addresses the extent of participants’ satisfaction and contentment with the nature of their relationships with their sons and with their fathers (e.g., “My relationship with my son/father is just the way I’d want it to be”). Coefficient alphas were .92 for relational satisfaction with sons and .94 for relational satisfaction with fathers. Finally, participants’ **gender role orientations**, which were used as control variables in the regression analysis, were measured with the assertiveness-
TABLE 1
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR STUDY VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affection given to son</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affection received from father</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive involvement with son</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive involvement with father</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship satisfaction with son</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship satisfaction with father</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to son</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to father</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All measures were scored on a 1–7 scale.

responsiveness measure developed by Richmond and McCroskey (1990). This 20-item Likert-type scale uses items related to assertiveness (e.g., competitive, aggressive, strong personality) to measure masculinity and items related to responsiveness (e.g., sympathetic, gentle, compassionate) to measure femininity. Coefficient alphas were .91 for masculinity and .85 for femininity.

All of the measures used a range of 1 to 7 wherein higher scores indicate greater values of the variable. Means and standard deviations for the study variables are reported in Table 1.

Results

Initial Data Reduction

Multiple-item measures were subjected to principal-components factor analyses to assess their dimensionality. In the cases of positive relational involvement, relational satisfaction, and fathers' masculinity and femininity, the analyses produced clean single-factor structures with high primary loadings, strong internal reliability estimates, and few complex items. Examination of the eigenvalues and scree plots for the factor analyses of affection-given and affection-received suggested that either one- or three-factor solutions were viable. Although the ACI can be divided into separate subscales representing verbal, nonverbal, and support-based affection, we elected in this study to retain the single-factor solutions due to the high intercorrelations among the subscales, the lack of different predictions for the different subscales, and the desire for parsimony and analytic simplicity.

Relationships With Involvement, Satisfaction, and Closeness

One-tailed Pearson correlations were used to test for relationships between affection and the positive involvement, relationship satisfaction, and closeness participants felt toward their fathers and their sons. A family-wise Bonferroni-corrected alpha of .008 was employed to compensate for the increased Type I error rate associated with conducting multiple correlations. Correlations between participants' affection-received and their involvement, satisfaction, and closeness with their own fathers involved only the subsample (n = 194) of participants whose own fathers were living at the time of the study.

As hypothesized, affection-given was linearly related to positive involvement with sons, \( r(504) = .62, p < .001 \), relational satisfaction with sons, \( r(503) = .45, p < .001 \), and closeness with sons, \( r(495) = .51, p < .001 \). Thus, participants' relationships with
their sons were closer, more satisfying, and more involved the more affectionate they were with their sons. Moreover, affection-received was linearly related to positive involvement with fathers, \( r(189) = .61, p < .001 \), relational satisfaction with fathers, \( r(189) = .47, p < .001 \), and closeness with fathers, \( r(192) = .60, p < .001 \). That is, participants who received more affection from their own fathers reported having closer, more satisfying, and more involved relationships with them. Notable are the magnitudes of the correlation coefficients, most of which constitute large effect sizes. The first hypothesis is supported.

### Modeling and Compensation: Predicting Affection-Given from Affection-Received

Hierarchical regression analysis, with affection-given as the criterion variable, was used to test for a curvilinear relationship with affection-received. Multicollinearity diagnostics led us to use Z-scored predictor variables. Five control variables were entered in the first step. Because prior research has indicated that father-son affection is influenced by the ages of the father and son (e.g., Salt, 1991) and the gender role orientations of the father (e.g., Morman & Floyd, in press), we entered as control variables fathers’ age, sons’ age, fathers’ masculinity, and fathers’ femininity. The fifth control variable was whether participants’ own fathers were still living at the time of the study (dummy-coded such that 1 = alive and 0 = not alive); we entered this variable to control for its potential effect on participants’ recollections of how much affection they received from their fathers.

The linear effect of affection-received was entered in the second step, and the quadratic (U-shaped) effect of affection-received was entered in the third step. (An initial regression also included the cubic effect entered in a fourth step, but the cubic component was nonsignificant and was subsequently removed.)

The results of the regression are reported in Table 2. The first block, which contained control variables, produced a significant change in \( R^2 \). This was due to significant positive effect of participants’ femininity, \( \beta = .49, t = 11.80, p < .001 \), participants’ age, \( \beta = .15, t = 2.29, p = .02 \), and participants’ masculinity, \( \beta = .09, t = 2.20, p = .03 \), and a significant negative effect of sons’ age, \( \beta = -.15, t = -2.36, p = .02 \). The linear effect of affection-received on affection-given was positive and significant, \( \beta = .25, t = 6.13, p < .001 \). However, the addition of the quadratic
component in the third step reversed the sign associated with $\beta$ for the linear component, indicating that the quadratic effect was suppressing the linear effect. The quadratic effect was significant, $\beta = .30$, $t = 3.47$, $p = .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .34$.

A graph of the curve is provided in Figure 2. For illustrative purposes, we computed means and standard deviations for affection-given at ten points along the curve, and these are reported in Table 3. As the curve illustrates, the effect of affection-received on affection-given is indeed U-shaped, although there appears to be a difference in central tendency between the two ends of the curve such that men with highly affectionate fathers communicate more affection to their sons than do men with nonaffectionate fathers. To examine this, we conducted a two-tailed independent-samples $t$-test comparing those men who received the most affection from their fathers (highest three groups on Table 3) to those who received the least (lowest three groups on Table 3). Affection-given was the dependent variable. As the regression curve suggested, men with highly affectionate fathers reported communicating more affection to their sons ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.81$, $n = 35$) than did men with highly unaffectionate fathers ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.13$, $n = 34$), $t(67) = -2.83$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$ (CI: 0.32, 0.89).

Comparing Father Relationships and Son Relationships

The third hypothesis predicted mean differences in men's affection, positive involvement, relational satisfaction, and closeness with their own fathers and with their sons. One-tailed pairwise $t$-tests were used to address the hypothesis. Compari-
TABLE 3
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR AFFECTION-GIVEN, BASED ON LEVELS OF AFFECTION-RECEIVED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Affection-Received</th>
<th>Mean for Affection-Given</th>
<th>St. Dev. for Affection-Given</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Levels of affection-received represent ten equally spaced intervals along the distribution of affection-received scores. All means for affection-given are on a 1–7 scale.

Discussion

Our purpose in this study was to examine affectionate communication in men’s relationships with their sons. Through our discussion of two developmental approaches to parenting behavior, we arrived at a combined modeling-compensation hypothesis which predicted that men are most affectionate with their sons when they had fathers who were either highly affectionate or highly unaffectionate. Because this prediction assumes that affection is favorably evaluated in father-son relationships, we also examined its correlations with positive relational characteristics.

Support was obtained for all of the hypotheses. Specifically, the amount of affection participants received from their own fathers was associated with how close, involved, and satisfying their relationships with their fathers were. Likewise, the amount of affection participants gave their own sons was associated with the closeness, involvement, and satisfaction of those relationships. These are important, if intuitive, findings, considering a growing body of research that draws attention to numerous potential risks associated with affectionate communication. The nature of the father-son relationship may protect it from a number of these problems.
however, allowing affection to contribute to feelings of closeness and satisfaction rather than to raise questions about appropriateness or cause attributional crises.

In the context of the current investigation, the finding that affection correlates with positive relational states fuels the combined modeling-compensation hypothesis through its implication that affectionate fathers should endear stronger identificatory bonds from their sons than should distant, unaffectionate fathers. If this is the case, then the communication patterns of nurturant, affectionate fathers should be modeled, and the patterns of distant, unaffectionate fathers compensated for, in the ways men father their own sons. This hypothesis called for a U-shaped curvilinear relationship between affection-received and affection-given, and this was the pattern that emerged. However, it was not the case that men at both ends of the curve were equally affectionate with their own sons. Rather, men with highly affectionate fathers communicated more affection to their sons than did men with highly unaffectionate fathers, although both sets of men communicated more affection to their sons than did those men in the middle of the regression curve. This finding suggests that, although the overall relationship was quadratic, modeling was a somewhat more prominent pattern within that relationship than was compensation. Thus, men with affectionate fathers appear more likely to model their fathers’ behaviors than men with unaffectionate fathers are to compensate for it. Importantly, however, the results indicate that although modeling is evident in the relationship between affection-received and affection-given, the combination of the two hypotheses provides the most powerful model in terms of predicting men’s affectionate communication with their sons.

That men’s femininity, masculinity, age, and sons’ age were significant control variables in the regression was unsurprising, given previous research attesting to their effects on affectionate behavior (Morman & Floyd, in press; Salt, 1991). The strong predictive effect of femininity is particularly unsurprising given the numerous studies that have found affectionate behavior to be more characteristic of women than of men (e.g., Barbato & Perse, 1992; Floyd, 1997; Floyd & Morman, 1998; Snell, 1986; Wallace, 1981).

The combined modeling-compensation hypothesis is a useful contribution to father-son research in general, and research on affection in particular, because it highlights the patterned nature of parent-child communication and the extent to which parents contribute to their children’s own parenting behaviors. Future research might apply this reasoning to other areas of parent-child interaction, such as type or amount of conflict or self disclosure, to determine whether parents’ contributions to their children’s parenting behaviors follow patterns similar to what we identified here for affection.

These findings are also encouraging in their suggestion that emotionally distant, unaffectionate patterns of paternal communication are not destined to be repeated in succeeding generations, but are, at least with respect to affection, largely compensated for as men attempt to create stronger and more positive relationships with their sons than they may have had with their own fathers. The sample-wide mean differences in affection, positive involvement, satisfaction, and closeness characterizing participants’ relationships with their fathers and their sons are additional testimony to this apparent trend.

A few limitations of the current study may temper interpretation of the results. Perhaps the most important stems from our having participants report both on their
relationships with their sons as well as their relationships with their fathers. This single-source approach has the potential to inflate the magnitude of relationships between variables, in much the same way that common-method variance can influence findings. There are several options for alleviating this limitation in future studies; one, which we are employing in research currently underway, is to have participants report on the affection they received from their fathers and to have participants' sons report on the affection participants give them.

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 would be important subgroups to address in future research on modeling and compensation, however. Are men less likely to model or compensate for their own fathers' behaviors in the way they raise non-biological sons? Or, does modeling and/or compensation influence how men father, irrespective of whom they are fathering? These questions are critical to address for the sake of generalizeability, given ever-increasing diversity in the demographic structure of the family.

Despite these limitations, however, the present study provides a set of strong and consistent findings with respect to men's communication with their fathers and their sons. The most important implications of these findings are that affectionate communication is a positive, rather than negative, characteristic of father-son relationships, and that the communication patterns men experienced with their own fathers are an important correlate of the patterns they engage in with their own sons. That men reported being more affectionate, involved, satisfied with, and close to their own sons than their fathers also contributes to a growing consensus among fatherhood researchers that the fundamental “culture” of fatherhood is shifting, away from a stoic, detached parenting style and toward one that is more nurturant and demonstrative. Given the favorable relational characteristics with which affection is associated, we believe this can only be viewed as a positive social development.

References


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