Mother-Child Reports of Affectionate Communication with Fathers: Associations with Family Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction

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This study examined the possibility that mothers’ and children’s perceptions of affection with the children’s father spill over to perceptions of affectionate communication in related family subsystems, and affect individual levels of family and life satisfaction. Using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), we tested these relationships with 75 mother-child dyads reporting on perceptions of affection with fathers. The results show that both mothers and children perceived the family subsystem outside of their direct experience as more affectionate when they reported higher levels of affectionate communication with the father. In addition, affectionate communication with the father was linked to both family and life satisfaction for mothers and children. Implications for understanding spillover of affection in families are discussed.

Keywords: Affectionate Communication; Life Satisfaction; Family Satisfaction; Spillover

Affectionate communication, or “an individual’s intentional and overt enactment or expression of feelings of closeness, care, and fondness for another” (Floyd & Morman, 1998, p. 145), is a significant predictor of relational satisfaction and well-being in families (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Several potential explanations exist, but family members are most
certainly interdependent, and the experiences and expressions of any one individual cannot be fully understood without also examining the others (Cox & Paley, 1997; White & Klein, 2002). Moreover, messages, meanings, and characteristics of family relationships appear to spread (i.e., spillover) between family subsystems (Stroud, Durbin, Wilson, & Mendelsohn, 2011). As such, this study examines the possibility that perceptions of affection and feelings of individual and relational well-being spill over between family subsystems. We focus on reports from mothers and children in family subsystems that include the father (i.e., the mother/father and child/father subsystems), to examine the effects of affectionate communication exchanged in one family relationship on another subsystem completely outside of one’s direct experience. Thus, this study poses a fairly rigorous test of the principles of interdependence and spillover in families.

Theoretical Perspectives

Two complementary theoretical perspectives help explain how affectionate communication expressed in one family subsystem can affect other family members. First, according to systems theory (as applied to families), family members are interdependent, and mutually influence one another’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (for reviews, see Bahg, 1990, and Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). Although this idea may seem self-evident, it carries important implications for understanding how affection in families works. For example, one analysis of a national sample of family systems showed that mothers’ displays of marital warmth were positively related to both children’s warmth toward their fathers, and higher amounts of fathers’ warmth toward their children (White, 1999). Thus, the interdependencies between individuals help explain the structure through which affection can affect entire families.

Additionally, the spillover hypothesis (Erel & Burman, 1995) predicts that both negative and positive spousal moods, affective states, and interaction can “spillover” and affect the interactions within parent-child relationships, and vice versa (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). For example, when relationships between parents/spouses are marked by affection and a sense of well-being, so too are the relationships between parents and children in the same system (Stroud et al., 2011).

Put together, these theoretical perspectives suggest the possibility that affectionate communication expressed in one family subsystem may not only relate to the levels of affection perceived in another subsystem, but also to the family and life satisfaction of family members within and outside that subsystem. Whereas systems theory helps explain the nature of the associations between the variables (i.e., interdependence), the spillover hypothesis helps explain the mechanism by which the effects of affection carry through the system.
Perceptions of Affectionate Communication in Family Subsystems

Although affectionate communication in one family subsystem has been associated with actual reported affectionate communication in others (Fauchier & Margolin, 2004; White, 1999), the influence that perceived affectionate communication in a family subsystem has on perceptions of affection in other subsystems remains undetermined. Yet, such findings would enhance understanding of how family relationships become positive social environments. For example, in a study on attributions that people have about others’ expressions of liking and disliking, Floyd (2000) showed that conversational partners tended to attribute a partner’s positive behaviors to internal and controllable sources (e.g., “she acted that way because she likes me and decided to show me”). Floyd (2000) reasoned that, when individuals attribute another person’s positive behavior as internal and controllable, they are more likely to see that person as caring. Applied to the current context, a mother’s perception of child-father affection may be linked to her direct experience of affectionate communication with the father, as spousal expressions of affection may influence her perception of the father as an intrinsically affectionate person. Thus, by way of the spillover model, perceptions likely carry over into family subsystems outside of one’s direct experience. This logic also applies to child reports of their interactions with their fathers, and we thus predict that:

H1: Mother reports of mother-father affection will positively associate with mother perceptions of child-father affection.
H2: Child reports of child-father affection will positively associate with child perceptions of mother-father affection.
H3: Mother reports of mother-father affection will positively associate with child perceptions of mother-father affection.
H4: Child reports of child-father affection will positively associate with mother perceptions of child-father affection.

Affectionate Communication and Family Satisfaction

Systems theory and the spillover hypothesis are not commonly coupled to explain the transference of affectionate communication and personal or relational well-being, but research consistently demonstrates that affectionate communication is linked to relational closeness, relational satisfaction, and family satisfaction among family members (Floyd & Morman, 2001; 2003; 2005; Floyd & Morr, 2003; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Hesse, Rauscher, Roberts, & Ortega, 2014). This study focuses on the transference of family satisfaction, which is conceptualized as “a person’s felt experience or perception about the quality of the relationships and life within a family” (Burns & Pearson, 2011, p. 174). Although Hesse et al. (2014) draw from affection exchange theory (AET, Floyd, 2006) to explain the connection between affectionate communication and family satisfaction, they also propose that perceptions of family environmental climate (i.e., perceptions of interaction qualities between members of other family subsystems) are a main mechanism by which the relationship between those two variables exist. Therefore, we expect to find that:
H5: Mother reports of mother-father affection will positively associate with mother family satisfaction.
H6: Child reports of child-father affection will positively associate with child family satisfaction.

Our approach would also suggest that affectionate communication in one subsystem could potentially affect the satisfaction of other family members. Spillover between family subsystems aside, parents are typically invested in promoting affection and warmth throughout the family unit, in part because they carry a stake in creating close family relationship systems (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971). As such, they are likely sensitive to messages that indicate movement toward (and away from) the goal of family closeness and positivity (McLaren & Sillars, 2014; Sillars, Smith, & Koerner, 2010). As such, affection between fathers and children would positively relate to the mother’s family satisfaction partly because affection exchanged in the father/child subsystem represents movement toward a mother’s goal of family closeness. Thus, we predict that:

H7: Child reports of affectionate communication in the child-father subsystem will positively associate with mother reports of family satisfaction.

Conversely, mother-father affectionate communication is likely associated with child family satisfaction. For example, spouses who express high levels of affection between one another also tend to have close parent-child relationships, which would reasonably affect children’s perceptions of family well-being (Fauchier & Margolin, 2004). Likewise, Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp (2003) observed that children were happier and more emotionally secure when parents integrated affectionate communication into everyday marital conflict conversations. Such evidence suggests that the quality of parental interaction bears at least some weight on children’s perceptions of family quality. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H8: Mother reports of mother-father affectionate communication will positively associate with child reports of family satisfaction.

Affectionate Communication and Life Satisfaction

The degree of emotional sustenance one perceives in his/her family associates with satisfaction with life in general (Adams, King, & King, 1996). Life satisfaction is conceptualized as a form of subjective well-being that involves an assessment of one’s overall quality of life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). In addition to the fact that interdependent people would have greater opportunity to share positive, rewarding experiences together, AET posits that affectionate communication promotes human reproductive and survival capacities, and should (in typical cases) be linked to indicators of physiological reward and human well-being. Indeed, research supports this idea at physiological (e.g., Floyd, Hesse, & Haynes, 2007; Floyd, Pauley, & Hesse, 2010) and psychological levels (Floyd, 2002; Horan, 2012). In fact, early research on trait affection and affection exchange also showed that highly affectionate people were more likely
to score higher on a measure of happiness, and to be socially engaged and satisfied with their primary romantic relationship (Floyd, 2002; Floyd et al., 2005). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H9: Mother reports of mother-father affection will positively associate with the mother’s life satisfaction.
H10: Child reports of child-father affection will positively associate with the child’s life satisfaction.
H11: Mother reports of mother-father affection will positively associate with child reports of life satisfaction.
H12: Child reports of child-father affection will positively associate with mother reports of life satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Undergraduate students at a midsized northwestern university and their mothers responded to an online survey in exchange for extra course credit. Students were eligible to participate if their biological mother was married. Student participants each received an email link to the child and mother survey, and were asked to forward the email to their mothers. Mothers volunteered for the survey separately, and no incentive was attached to the mother’s response. That is, students received extra credit regardless of their mother’s participation. Adult children ranged from 18 to 42 years old (M = 21.12, SD = 3.50) and mothers ranged from 36 to 61 years old (M = 50.16, SD = 6.30). Of the 75 dyads, 29 were mother-son dyads and 46 were mother-daughter dyads. Moreover, 56 mothers were married to their child’s biological father. Ethnicity reports from the 150 participants were as follows: 135 White-Caucasian, two African American/Black, four Asian, three Native American, three Latina/o, one other, and two participants who did not report.

All participants were asked to report perceptions of affectionate exchange in mother-father and child-father relationships. Participants also completed items measuring family satisfaction and life satisfaction. The surveys took roughly 15 minutes to complete. The surveys were confidential, as participants reported their and their mother’s initials so their data could be matched. After the data were matched, dyads were assigned an identification number, and identifying information was deleted.

Measures

Affectionate exchange

Affectionate communication was measured using Floyd and Morman’s (1998) Affectionate Communication Index (ACI). The index consists of 19 items measuring nonverbal, verbal, and social supportive affection on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = never to 7 = always). The items were worded to gather mother reports for
spouses, mother reports of father-child, child reports of father-mother, and child reports of father-child (e.g., “My spouse [(step) father] and I praise each other’s accomplishments”). The scores of each measure were averaged to yield overall scores for father-mother affectionate exchange ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.30$, $\alpha = .94$ for child reports; $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = .93$ for mother reports) and child-father affectionate exchange ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.53$, $\alpha = .94$ for child reports; $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.44$, $\alpha = .94$ for mother reports).

**Family satisfaction**

The four-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) was utilized to measure satisfaction with family life (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Items were re-worded to reflect satisfaction with family life versus couple satisfaction and were measured on different 6-point Likert-type scales (e.g., “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your family life”: 1 = extremely unhappy to 6 = perfect). The four items were averaged to form a single scale ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = .84$ for child reports; $M = 4.91$, $SD = .85$, $\alpha = .77$ for mother reports).

**Life satisfaction**

The core measure of subjective well-being developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was employed to measure life satisfaction (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2013). This measure consists of two statements (e.g., “Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days”; 0 = not at all satisfied; 10 = completely satisfied). Items were averaged to indicate overall mental well-being ($M = 7.73$, $SD = 1.51$, $\alpha = .82$ for child reports; $M = 8.01$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .86$ for mother reports).

**Results**

**Perceptions of Affectionate Communication**

We employed the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) to test our hypotheses, as mother and child reports of affectionate exchange were presumed to be interdependent (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). APIMs were evaluated using multi-level modeling, with the covariance structure identified as heterogeneous compound symmetry to allow for unequal variances for children and mothers (Kenny et al., 2006). Affection scores reported for mother-father and child-father dyads were centered for the analysis. In addition, family type (i.e., originally intact vs. step) was added as a covariate in all analyses. Please see Figure 1 for a visual depiction of the results.

The first APIM tested H1 through H4. Main effects emerged for actor reports of direct affection with the father and their perception of affection in the other family subsystem for both mothers, $F(1, 72.57) = 62.92$, $\beta = .64$, $t = 7.93$, $p < .001$, and adult children, $F(1, 70.77) = 218.65$, $\beta = .81$, $t = 14.79$, $p < .001$. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported. The model also revealed significant partner effects, wherein child reports of
child-father affection positively associated with mothers’ perceptions of child-father affection, $F(1, 75.46) = 33.43, \beta = .41, t = 5.78, p < .001$, and mother reports of mother-father affection predicted child perceptions of mother-father affection, $F(1, 70.13) = 8.36, \beta = .18, t = 2.89, p < .01$. Thus, H3 and H4 were supported.

**Affectionate Exchange and Family Satisfaction**

A second APIM tested H5 through H8. Main effects emerged for actor reports of direct affection with the father and family satisfaction for mothers, $F(1, 71.95) = 18.40, \beta = .50, t = 4.29, p < .001$, and adult children, $F(1, 73.47) = 6.05, \beta = .29, t = 2.46, p < .05$. Therefore, H5 and H6 received support. However, the model showed no significant partner effects for child reports of child-father affection on mothers’ family satisfaction, $F(1, 71.35) = 1.53, \beta = .17, t = 1.24, ns$, nor for mother reports of mother-father affection on children’s family satisfaction, $F(1, 73.52) = .28, \beta = -.05, t = .60, ns$. Therefore, H7 and H8 were not supported.
A third APIM tested H9 through H12. The model revealed significant actor effects, wherein direct affection with fathers positively related to life satisfaction for both mothers, $F(1, 70.80) = 3.87, \beta = .30, t = 1.89, p < .05$, and adult children, $F(1, 73.95) = 3.88, \beta = .38 t = 1.97, p < .05$. Thus, H9 and H10 were supported. However, the model did not reveal any significant partner effects for child reports of child-father affection on mother’s life satisfaction, $F(1, 71.83) = .21, \beta = .11, t = .47, ns$, or for mother reports of mother-father affectionate communication on child’s life satisfaction, $F(1, 73.03) = .03, \beta = .03, t = -.19, ns$. Thus, H11 and H12 were not supported.

Discussion

This study examined how affectionate communication within dyadic relationships affects the systems in which they are embedded. The models showed that all six hypothesized actor effects were significant, indicating that one’s report of affectionate communication with the father positively predicted perceptions of affectionate communication in the father’s other family relationships, as well as one’s family satisfaction, and life satisfaction. In addition, two significant partner effects emerged: children’s reports of affection with the father positively predicted mothers’ reports of child-father affection, and mothers’ reports of spousal affection positively predicted children’s perception of mother-father affection.

The first major finding of this study was that both mothers’ and children’s perceptions of affectionate communication in other subsystems were significantly related to their own reports of affection with the father (H1 and H2). For example, even when controlling for the mother’s reports of spousal affection, the child’s perception of spousal affection was linked to their reports of affection with the father. This finding suggests that children tend to perceive their fathers as exchanging similar amounts of affection within the family, a perception we propose is explained by cognitive spillover, wherein the child projects greater levels of affectionate communication on the spousal subsystem when the child perceives greater levels of affectionate communication with the father. These results add to research conducted by Sabatelli and Bartle (1995), who argue that each family member constructs their own perception of reality in the family system. In essence, spillover effects might occur because individuals construct their perception of outside subsystems (e.g., mother’s perception of child-father subsystem), based on their own experiences with each family member.

Support for the hypothesis that mother reports of mother-father affection likewise predict child perceptions of mother-father affection (H3) buttresses this idea. However, the generational stake hypothesis might provide additional, novel insight here. Specifically, Noller and Callan (1988) argue that parents are conscious of how the family system functions because they feel responsible for the happiness and well-being of each family member. As such, mothers may be more
likely to notice affectionate communication expressed in the child-father subsystem because it promotes a happy and warm family environment. However, the findings for H4 also suggest that children might be particularly attuned to affectionate communication in the marital couple, and might learn social behaviors by observing their parents (Bandura, 1977). In this case, spillover from parental relationships to parent/child relationships could be explained by the fact that children learn about the constituency of affectionate relationships from their parents.

Either way, these results provide a sense of largesse to the observed exchange of affection in family contexts. The fact that mothers and children orient toward affection exchanged in other subsystems hints that family-level affection represents either evolutionary or socially meaningful states. One speculation is that observed affection aligns with affective perceptions associated with the attachment system of mothers and children. In the case of mothers, for example, a perceivably warm and happy family environment might represent stability in the pair-bond effort of raising offspring. Conversely, children might be primed to notice affection exchanged by their parents because it represents social comfort and parental responsiveness. Although we did not discover partner effects of such observations in terms of family or life satisfaction (H11 and H12), there is reason to believe that some effects might exist at the neurological level (e.g., Siegel, 2001).

Family satisfaction (H5 and H6) and life satisfaction (H9 and H10) were predicted by how much affection one perceives in her/his immediate experience with the fathers. These findings are consistent with research showing that affectionate communication is linearly related to how satisfied individuals feel in their intimate relationships (Floyd & Morman, 2001), and specify that affectionate communication with fathers relates to family and life satisfaction for both mothers and children. Although affectionate communication from both parents affects the psychological well-being of children (Amato, 1994; Jiménez-Iglesias, Moreno, Ramos, & Rivera, 2015; Schrodt et al., 2007), research also shows that affectionate messages from mothers and fathers can have independent effects separate from each other (Amato, 1994; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Although these findings do not directly support the idea that family or life satisfaction spill over between family subsystems, they are nonetheless noteworthy for the implications that reported affection with fathers relates to reports of family and life satisfaction for both mothers and children. Practically speaking, these findings highlight the need to find ways of helping fathers learn various methods of expressing overt affection with their spouses and children. Given past research showing that men are often socialized to inhibit overt displays of affection (Floyd & Morman, 2003), programs could be developed to help fathers overcome such inhibitions and find ways to communicate recognizable codes of affection to their family members.

Some aspects of the study warrant consideration while interpreting the results. First, we did not distinguish between daughters and sons in the analyses, opting to examine our current predictions in sex-nonspecific contexts. However, it is possible that research on just one child sex might yield slightly different results. An important
consideration, for example, is that adult sons are sometimes perceived as having less affectionate relationships with their fathers, despite evidence suggesting that such relationships are not necessarily more or less affectionate than relationships between fathers and daughters, just different in the ways in which affection is expressed (Floyd & Morman, 2003; Wood & Inman, 1993). Second, the sample was generally satisfied with their life, which might differ from the general population in various ways. A difference in recruitment strategies may lead to a more representative sample, as mothers filled out online surveys voluntarily upon the request from their child. Finally, gathering data from fathers would have allowed us to examine affectionate communication in families directly from the fathers’ perspectives.

Despite these limitations, the results highlight the impact of communicative behaviors within dyads on individuals outside of their direct experience. In essence, the interdependencies between family members provide the structure by which spillover in perceptions of affection are linked to positive communicative environments. Moreover, those who perceive affection in their relationships with fathers also tend to report being more satisfied in their family and life.

References


