

Investing in Affection: An Investigation of Affection Exchange Theory and Relational Qualities

Sean M. Horan & Melanie Booth-Butterfield

Affection exchange theory (AET; Floyd, 2001) argues that affectionate communication fosters long-term survival. AET specifically argues that part of this process occurs through the enhancement of close relational bonds. This study tests this proposition, specifically examining how affectionate messages relate to relational investment (satisfaction, commitment, quality of alternatives, and investment size). Analysis of 72 couples (N = 144; M = 35.58 years old) revealed that giving and receiving affection positively related to commitment and satisfaction. Receiving affection strongly predicted perceptions of satisfaction, and communicating affection better predicted commitment. Affection accounted for between 17% and 35% of the variance in perceptions of commitment and satisfaction.

Keywords: Affection; Affection Exchange Theory; Alternatives; Commitment; Investment; Satisfaction

Holding hands, kissing, and telling romantic partners you care about them are common and important affectionate messages in romantic relationships. These messages are often easily recalled and viewed as relational turning points (e.g., Booth-Butterfield & Trotta, 1994). Because such influential messages should lead to positive outcomes, researchers have attempted to understand affectionate communication. Attempts include classifying affection as a basic interpersonal need (Schutz, 1958), a communication motive (Rubin, Perse, & Barbato, 1988), and even

Sean M. Horan (Ph.D., West Virginia University, 2009) is an assistant professor in the College of Communication at DePaul University. Melanie Booth-Butterfield (Ph.D., University of Missouri–Columbia, 1985) is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. *Correspondence:* Sean M. Horan, College of Communication, DePaul University, 1 E. Jackson, Chicago, IL 60604; E-mail: seanmhoran@gmail.com

a relational maintenance behavior (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). Although these attempts at understanding affection represent varied perspectives, affection remains most pertinent to communication scholars because it is manifested through verbal and nonverbal messages.

The aforementioned efforts at understanding affection are plausible, but recent work by Floyd (2001, 2006a) provides a more comprehensive understanding of affection. Through the introduction of affection exchange theory (AET), Floyd started to illuminate the role of affection in communication. Affection is defined as “feeling warmth and fondness toward someone” (Andersen & Guerrero, 1998, p. 59), which can be manifested through affectionate communication, involving verbal and nonverbal messages that communicate “feelings of fondness, support, and love” (Floyd, 2006b, p. 47). AET adopts an evolutionary standpoint and argues that affectionate communication is a resource that fosters long-term survival through procreation. This occurs, partially, through the enhanced relational bonds that AET proposes that affection improves.

AET researchers have demonstrated that affectionate communication is associated with physiological benefits, like improved responses to stress (e.g., Floyd, 2006a) and improved cholesterol levels (Floyd, Mikkelsen, Hesse, & Pauley, 2007). These individual biological benefits should positively impact individuals in relationships and subsequent relational qualities. Consistent with this, AET proposes that affectionate communication enhances relational bonds, yet scholars have not fully examined how AET impacts relational factors. Such research is important because it will function as a test of one of AET’s key postulates. Similarly, it will help facilitate a more thorough understanding and extension of AET by providing an understanding of the implications of affectionate communication in relationships. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine how affectionate communication relates to relational bonds, namely in the form of satisfaction, investment size, quality of alternatives, and commitment.

Affection Exchange Theory

AET contends that affectionate communication fosters selective fitness (Darwin, 1859). This process is detailed through five theoretical postulates, and our study focuses on Postulate 3a (Floyd, 2006a). Overall, Postulate 3 contends that “affectionate communication is adaptive with respect to human viability and fertility” (Floyd, 2006a, p. 164). Our main focus is Postulate 3a, which details how affectionate communication is related to viability. Specifically, it argues that “affectionate communication serves the superordinate motivation for viability by promoting the establishment and maintenance of significant human pair bonds” (p. 165). Thus, affectionate messages should positively impact relationships.

Previous research supports the claim that receivers of affectionate messages in close relationships appear to have improved relational bonds. In the context of the family, parental affection, in conjunction with confirming messages (i.e., validating messages; see Ellis, 2002), negatively influenced children’s stress and positively

influenced self-esteem (Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander, and Clark (2007) also reported that the absence of affection is one of four factors characteristic of a hurtful family environment. Further, individuals from these low-affection families reported higher levels of verbal hostility and lower self-esteem (Vangelisti et al., 2007).

Within the context of established romantic relationships, some scholars have viewed affection as a form of relational maintenance, with these messages serving to sustain a relationship in a desired state (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). In a study of commitment indicative topics, O'Riordan (2007) reported that men communicated their personal commitment during discussions of affection. Further, individuals reported higher levels of satisfaction and commitment in affectionate relationships (Floyd, 2002; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005). Dissatisfaction with affection has been cited as a key reason why couples seek therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004), and satisfaction with received affection has been linked to perceptions of love and liking in marriage (Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994). This work, collectively, supports prior work identifying affection as the most influential marital interaction (Dainton, 1998). Similarly, it lends support to the argument that receivers of affectionate messages should experience enhanced relational bonds.

Rationale

According to AET, and evidenced by the robust body of physiological research (see Floyd, 2006a), affectionate communication is a valuable resource that benefits individuals. Logically then, these individual benefits *should* positively impact relational qualities, explaining why AET asserts that affection is a resource that enhances human pair bonds. Yet, are individuals cognizant of such messages in relationships? The answer to this question is less clear, as Floyd (2006a) argued that individuals may not consciously process affectionate messages. Consequently, it is unknown if individuals generate perceptions of their relational investment and bond with affectionate communication in mind. Past work indicates that we exhibit positive physiological responses to affection, yet it remains to be discovered if we exhibit positive relational responses. Accordingly, the following study examines if affectionate communication positively relates to relational investment (satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment). Studying relational investment will allow for a test of Postulate 3a. If affectionate communication does, indeed, improve relational bonds, than this should be manifested through diminished perceptions of alternatives and increased satisfaction, investment, and commitment.

Although past studies indicate there are benefits for *receivers* of affectionate messages, Floyd, Hess, et al. (2005) contended that, to fully understand affectionate communication, it is necessary to understand how communicating affection impacts the *source* of the message. Past work offers some insight into the personality correlates of affectionate sources. Highly affectionate individuals, when controlling for affection received, report less depression, have higher self-esteem, are comfortable with

closeness, have lower fears of intimacy, are happier, more satisfied in relationships, exhibit high levels of both masculinity and femininity, and have better mental health (Floyd, 2002; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005). When looking specifically at father–son relationships, affectionate communication was predicted by affective orientation (one's awareness and reliance on emotions; Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1990) and gender (Floyd & Morman, 1998).

An emerging body of research has begun to elucidate how *expressions* of affectionate messages impact sources, indicating these individuals are better able to respond to stress. In multiple studies of free cortisol, which is released in response to stress, results indicated that those who communicated affection exhibited enhanced cortisol levels and responses (Floyd, 2006b; Floyd, Mikkelson, Tafoya, Farinelli, La Valley, Judd, Davis, et al., 2007; Floyd, Mikkelson, Tafoya, Farinelli, La Valley, Judd, Haynes, et al., 2007). Cholesterol levels are also impacted by stress level. In multiple studies, individuals who wrote about a loved one three times over a 5-week period experienced significant decreases of cholesterol levels (Floyd, Mikkelson, Hesse, & Pauley, 2007). Similarly, two types of affectionate communication were inversely related to resting heart rate after participants were exposed to stressors (Floyd, Mikkelson, Tafoya, Farinelli, La Valley, Judd, Davis, et al., 2007), and trait expressed affection was negatively related to glycosylated hemoglobin (a blood sugar level impacted by stress) and resting blood pressure (Floyd, Hesse, & Haynes, 2007).

The preceding studies reveal the biological benefits are associated with actively *communicating* affection, supporting Floyd, Hess, et al.'s (2005) contention of the importance to the *source* of the affectionate message. Accordingly, this study examines both sources and receivers of affectionate messages. Because past research indicates that affectionate messages offer benefits to both sources and receivers, a secondary goal of this investigation is to examine whether communicating affection *or* receiving affection relate to greater relationship investment.

The Investment Model and AET

The investment model was adopted to explain how affection may relate to perceived relational bonds. Rooted in interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983) presents a framework of commitment that is argued to predict relationship termination or persistence. This model develops relational predictions based on four factors: satisfaction level, perceived quality of alternatives, investment, and commitment. The first three factors are dependence variables in that high levels of satisfaction, the perception of poor alternatives, and considerable investment make one dependent on their partner. The combination of high satisfaction, poor alternatives, and investment lead to commitment, ultimately predicting termination or persistence. These predictions have been repeatedly supported (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), even in longitudinal studies spanning 7 months (Rusbult, 1983), 18 months (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001), and 15 years (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996).

Postulate 3a of AET argues that affectionate communication enhances “pair bonds” and, as such, we adopted the investment model to represent pair bonds for two reasons (Floyd, 2006a, p. 165). First, AET is an evolutionary theory, and past work has successfully studied evolutionary concepts in conjunction with the investment model (e.g., Lehmilller & Agnew, 2008). Second, commitment is indicative of a pair bond. Thus, differences in commitment based on affectionate communication would represent differences in pair bonds. The investment model provides a detailed model of commitment, with three dependence variables predicting commitment. Including all four investment model components provides a more specific understanding of the relationship between affectionate messages and commitment. Thus, we briefly review the individual investment model components and AET predictions.

Satisfaction

Defined as “positive versus negative affect experienced in a relationship” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359), satisfaction is one of the most researched relational qualities (Spanier & Lewis, 1980). The study of satisfaction is most relevant to communication researchers because a number of studies indicate that communication is a predictor of satisfaction (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Richmond, 1995; Rogge, Bradbury, Hahlweg, Egl, & Thurmaier, 2006). Some relational maintenance scholars view affection as a maintenance behavior, and satisfaction with affection levels has been linked to liking of partner and relational satisfaction (Dainton et al., 1994).

Within AET research, satisfaction is the primary investment model component addressed (Floyd, 2002; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005; Floyd & Morman, 2000, 2001; Floyd & Morr, 2003; Punyanunt-Carter, 2004). When comparing high- and low-affectionate communicators, self-report data indicate that highly affectionate communicators are more satisfied in relationships (Floyd, 2002; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005). In an examination of affectionate communication in the sibling–spouse–sibling-in-law triad, moderate correlations were found between affectionate messages and relationship satisfaction (Floyd & Morr, 2003). In the context of father–son relationships, self-report data from fathers indicated that the amount of affection adult fathers received from their own fathers was directly related to relationship satisfaction (Floyd & Morman, 2000). Similarly, the amount of affection they communicated to their sons was related to their satisfaction with their own relationship with their son. Likewise, using paired father–son data, the amount of affection communicated to sons from fathers was related to both father and son relationship satisfaction (Floyd & Morman, 2001). Clearly, even in kinship relationships, the open communication of affection is important.

This study extends prior research in two ways. First, Floyd and his colleagues (Floyd & Morman, 2000, 2001; Floyd & Morr, 2003) examined affectionate communication and satisfaction in father–son relationships and the sibling–spouse–sibling-in-law triad. This study examines romantic relationships. Because AET focuses on long-term survival and the role that affectionate messages play in fostering such survival, focusing on romantic relationships is important as they are a key precursor to procreation.

Second, individual self-report data revealed that highly affectionate communicators were more satisfied in relationships (Floyd, 2002; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005). This study differs because it collects data from both members of intact, established, romantic relationships. Therefore, the first hypothesis predicts:

H1: Affectionate communication received is positively related to romantic relationship satisfaction.

Quality of Alternatives

Quality of alternatives is a perception based “on the extent to which the individual’s most important needs could be effectively fulfilled ‘outside’ of the current relationship” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Although no known research has examined affection and alternatives, studies have revealed the importance of perceptions of alternatives. Honeycutt (1995) reported that becoming interested in a relational alternative is indicative of a belief that a breakup will occur soon, thus supporting the investment model’s prediction that high-quality alternatives negatively impact commitment. Recent research has also examined how alternatives impacted dependence power, the perception that formed when Partner A believes that Partner B is less committed to the relationship and has quality alternatives (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). Samp and Solomon (2001) reported that decisions to communicate about a problematic event were predicted partially by dependence power. Specifically, Partner A was less likely to communicate about a problematic event when he or she had high commitment, poor alternatives, and perceived Partner B to have low commitment. Together, these studies suggest that individuals are cognizant of their partner’s alternatives, and assessments of alternatives impact relational communication.

Theoretically, AET asserts that someone paired with a partner who expresses little affection is likely to hold positive perceptions of alternatives who do communicate affection. Consequently, if individuals encounter a more affectionate person, they might terminate their current relationship and pair with the more affectionate alternative. Similarly, someone paired with a highly affectionate partner is likely to be more invested, and perceive alternatives as poor in comparison. Although little is known about AET and alternatives, an empirically driven prediction can be derived. Given that quality of alternatives is negatively related to commitment, satisfaction, and investment size (e.g., Rusbult, 1980, 1983), and that received affection is positively related to satisfaction (Floyd, 2002; Floyd, Hess, et al., 2005), it is likely that received affection and perceived quality of alternatives will be inversely related. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2: Affectionate communication received is negatively related to perceived quality of alternatives.

Investment Size

Investment size “refers to the magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship—resources that would decline in value if the relationship

were to end” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Investment size positively relates to satisfaction, negatively to alternative quality, and predicts commitment (Rhatigan, Moore, & Stuart, 2005; Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Highly invested individuals are more likely to sacrifice in their relationships, leading to greater long-term relational persistence (Van Lange et al., 1997). Although relational scholars widely embrace commitment, satisfaction, and quality of alternatives, investment size is often omitted from the research equation. However, Panayiotou (2005) argued that ignoring investment size in relational research is problematic because investment size is especially important in understanding how commitment functions in relationships.

Investments in relationships can be intrinsic or extrinsic and include things like shared finances, children, self-disclosure, shared friends, and intimacy. Given that AET views affection as a valuable and significant resource, affection can be viewed as an investment. Theoretically, if partners are paired with a mate who is highly affectionate, they may view their mate as more invested and, therefore, feel more satisfied and committed. These greater levels of satisfaction and commitment should lead to their own greater investment size. In contrast, if partners are paired with a low-affectionate mate, they may view their partner as having little investment and, hence, report less satisfaction and commitment. Again, if individuals feel less satisfied and committed, they should have a smaller investment size. Based on these predictions grounded in AET and the investment model, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Affectionate communication received is positively related to investment size.

Commitment

Commitment is “an intent to persist in a relationship, including long-term orientation toward the involvement as well as feelings of psychological attachment” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives predict commitment. Research indicates that commitment is predicted by certain relational and communication factors, including past relational solidarity (i.e., closeness; Merolla, Weber, Myers, & Booth-Butterfield, 2004) and trust (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Rompel, 1989).

Although previous research has not simultaneously examined AET and commitment, there is an implicit link. Pistole and Clark (1995) reported that securely attached individuals had the greatest commitment and satisfaction. Conversely, avoidant individuals reported the lowest investments. In addition, Bachman and Guerrero (2006) reported that secure individuals used more romantic affection compared to avoidant individuals, and Floyd (2002) found that highly affectionate communicators were more likely to have a secure attachment style. Given that secure individuals report greater commitment than other attachment styles, and that secure individuals communicate more affection, it is probable that affection and commitment are also related.

Despite the implicit link, prior research does not provide a clear understanding of how commitment and AET relate. AET suggests that being an affectionate mate may result in a higher mate value (Buss & Barnes, 1986). If this is the case, both the evolutionary concepts of mate value and AET would suggest that receiving affection should result in greater commitment. This is important to understand for two reasons: (a) It will offer support for AET, presenting both a better understanding of this theory and adding to its predictive power; and (b) it will allow for a better understanding of relational communication. If receiving affectionate messages is related to commitment, perhaps this can be used as an intervention strategy for distressed couples, or as a way to renew tired relationships. Hypothesis four predicts the following:

H4: Affectionate communication received is positively related to commitment.

Is It Better To Give or Receive?

Thus far, the focus of this investigation has been on understanding how receiving affection is associated with relational investment. The host of benefits associated with affectionate communication cannot solely be accounted for by receiving affection, and expressing affection should have a positive impact. Indeed, the work of Floyd and colleagues (e.g. Floyd, 2006a) has demonstrated that communicating affection benefits the source, in much the same way that others have demonstrated that communicating humor benefits the source (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 2005). However, prior research has not examined whether communicating affection relates to greater investments. Based on the positive benefits associated with communicating affection, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H5: Communicating affection negatively relates to quality of alternatives and positively relates to satisfaction, investment size, and commitment.

Because AET research consistently demonstrates that both sending and receiving affectionate messages is related to biological benefits, an important question arises: In the context of romantic relationships, is it the communication of affection or receiving affection that leads to greater investment? Could it be that, in the end, it is the level of partner's affection communicated that leads to investment? Or, is it one's own communication of affection that leads to greater feelings of investment? Theoretically, AET asserts that affection helps maintain relationships. Understanding whether giving versus receiving affection is the superior predictor of investment will provide scholars a more precise theoretical understanding, as well as heighten the predictive value of AET. The following research questions addressed giving and receiving affection with relational characteristics:

RQ1: To what extent does affection received versus affection communicated predict satisfaction?

RQ2: To what extent does affection received versus affection communicated predict commitment?

Method

Sampling

To gain a more mature sample, student recruiters from a mid-Atlantic university were given two copies of survey materials and instructed to administer them to individuals involved in a romantic relationship with two criteria for inclusion: Participants had to be at least 25 years old and, to ensure measurement of established relationships, individuals had to be involved in their relationship for at least 3 months. Respondents were instructed to complete their survey materials in a separate room from their partner, and were given multiple options to return their survey materials. Participants could return materials to the student recruiter directly, the researchers directly, or through mail. Contact information, including the mailing address of the research team, was printed on a cover letter.

Participants

The sample consisted of 144 participants comprising 72 heterosexual couples. The average age of respondents was 35.58 ($SD = 11.15$). A number of relationship types were assessed by the individuals involved in them: Three were casually dating, 68 seriously dating, 11 engaged, and 62 married. It should be noted that two couples described their relationship types differently, explaining the odd numbers. One couple (survey numbers 62A and 62B) had Partner A describe their relationship as “casually dating,” whereas Partner B described their relationship as “seriously dating.” Likewise, another couple (survey numbers 150A and 150B) had Partner A describe their relationship as “seriously dating,” whereas Partner B described their relationship as “engaged.”

Measures

Participants were given six measures to assess the variables under investigation. Prior to completing these measures, respondents were given a brief description of affectionate communication. These descriptions were based on a synthesis on AET work and read the following:

Affection consists of verbal and nonverbal messages that communicate positive regard, liking, fondness, and love. Examples of affectionate messages include, but are not limited to, the following: Holding hands, kissing, massages, hugging, putting your arm around your partner, winking at each other, saying “I like you,” saying “I love you,” telling your partner how important the relationship is, complimenting your partner, sitting close to your partner, and deeply staring into your partner’s eyes.

To capture affectionate communication, we chose to modify the Trait Affection Given (TAS-G) and Trait Affection Received (TAS-R) measures (Floyd, 2002) for two reasons. First, the other prominent AET-based measure of affectionate

communication, the affectionate communication index (ACI; Floyd & Morman, 1998), would not allow us to test our hypotheses or answer our research questions. This measure was designed to assess, largely, affection communicated, not affection received. The goal of our study is to understand both sending and receiving affectionate messages. Also, the ACI measures expressed affection along three dimensions: verbal, nonverbal, and supportive. Given that the supportive dimension shares overlap with existing conceptions of social support (see Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002; Sarason & Sarason, 2006), this may be an area that warrants further study to elucidate the unique characteristics between social support and supportive affection—an effort that falls outside the scope of this investigation.

The second reason we chose the TAS–G and TAS–R is because we believed that modifying the items allowed for a valid assessment of romantic affection. These scales were originally designed to capture a trait—that is, to measure one’s propensity to be affectionate in general, across a variety of situations and people. Consistent with trait arguments, if an individual is high or low on this trait, these behaviors would be manifested toward one’s romantic partner, and these scales would capture such behaviors. We adopted these existing valid and reliable stems as examples of romantic partner affection—that is, rather than asking how often you were hugged, in general, we measured how often a respondent was hugged by their romantic partner. Consequently, we used these trait measures to create romantic partner affection measures.

Thus, two measures assessed affection communicated and received. For *affection communicated*, the modified TAS–G (Floyd, 2002) measure was used. This 10-item, 7-point Likert-type scale assesses an individual’s propensity to communicate affection. Items were modified to reflect the frequency of affection communicated to a respondent’s partner. For example, instead of reading, “I am always telling my loved ones how much I care about them,” the item read, “I am always telling my romantic partner how much I care about him/her.” Previous research reports strong reliability ($\alpha = .92$; Floyd, 2002), with our study obtaining a Cronbach’s alpha of .89 ($M = 59.06$, $SD = 8.42$).

To assess *affection received*, the modified TAS–R (Floyd, 2002) measure was used. This six-item, 7-point Likert-type measure taps into respondents’ propensity to receive affection. Again, items were modified to reflect the frequency of affection received from the respondent’s partner (e.g., an item reading, “People hug me a lot,” was adapted to, “My partner hugs me a lot”). Previous research reports an alpha reliability of .86 (Floyd, 2002), with our study obtaining a Cronbach’s alpha of .93 ($M = 35.04$, $SD = 6.07$).

The Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) was used to assess the four variables. This scale contains four subscales representing each part of the model. Participants respond to items using a 9-point Likert-type scale. *Satisfaction* level was measured using the five global items. An example item read, “My relationship is close to ideal.” Previous research reports acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .86$; Etcheverry & Le, 2005), with our study reporting an alpha of .85 ($M = 34.56$, $SD = 5.01$).

Quality of alternatives was measured using five global items. An example item read, “If I weren’t dating my partner I would do fine; I would find another appealing person to date.” Previous research reports acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .91$; Rhatigan et al., 2005), with our study reporting an alpha of .75 ($M = 12.93$, $SD = 7.32$).

Investment size was measured using five global items. An example item read, “Many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner (recreational activities, etc.), and I would lose all of this if we were to break up.” Previous research reports acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .85$; Rhatigan et al., 2005), with our study reporting an alpha of .65 ($M = 23.40$, $SD = 5.34$).

Commitment was measured using the seven global items. An example item read, “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.” Previous research reports acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .94$; Etcheverry & Le, 2005), with our study reporting an alpha of .87 ($M = 49.81$, $SD = 7.95$).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

To ensure that the affection received and affection communicated measures were coordinated in the relationship, a Pearson correlation was conducted to discover if female partner self-reported affectionate communication received related to male partner self-report affection communicated. The correlation was significant ($r = .70$, $p < .01$). Similarly, a significant Pearson correlation ($r = .54$, $p < .01$) between male partner self-reported affectionate communication received and female partner affection communicated was obtained. Thus, results suggest that partners reported fairly congruent assessments of affection exchanged, speaking to the validity of these measures. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for these measures.

Given that this study examined couples, measurement data provided details on how invested each member of the couple was. To discover if couples were similar in their investment, correlations were conducted between female self-reported satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment with male self-reported satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment. All correlations were significant. Table 2 reports the descriptive data and correlation values for these measures.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Affectionate Communication

Variable	Male partner		Female partner	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-reported affection received	35.07	6.08	35.01	6.10
Self-reported affection communicated	57.25	9.68	60.90	6.49

Note. Self-reported affection received is correlated with partner-reported communicated affection at $p < .01$ for both men and women.

Table 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and *r* Values for Partner Investments

Variable	Partner sex				<i>r</i>
	Female		Male		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Satisfaction	34.11	5.11	35.00	4.90	.38*
Quality of alternatives	12.29	6.76	13.57	8.20	.45*
Investment size	23.48	5.53	23.31	5.19	.30*
Commitment	49.72	7.40	49.89	8.52	.44*

p < .01.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

H1 through *H4* predicted that *received* affection would positively relate to satisfaction, investment size, and commitment and negatively relate to quality of alternatives. Correlations indicated significant positive relationships between *received* affection, commitment, and satisfaction for both men and women. Tables 3 and 4 report all correlation values between investment and affection. To obtain a more precise picture of the relationship between the significant correlations of received affection, commitment, and satisfaction, partial correlations were conducted controlling for affection communicated. Affection received related positively to female commitment ($r = .24, p = .04$) and male ($r = .41, p = .000$) and female ($r = .34, p = .004$) satisfaction. Therefore, *H1* and *H4* were supported, but not *H2* and *H3*, which related to investment size and perceived alternatives.

H5 predicted that communicating affection would relate to investment model variables. Correlations indicated that communicating affection positively relates to both male and female commitment and satisfaction, but did not significantly relate to investment size or quality of alternatives. Tables 5 and 6 report all investment and affection communicated correlations. To obtain a more precise picture of the significant correlations, partial correlations were conducted controlling for affection received. Communicating affection positively related to male satisfaction ($r = .38,$

Table 3 Pearson Correlations Among Variables for Female Partners' Affection Received

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Affection received	—				
2. Satisfaction	.44 (.000)	—			
3. Quality of alternatives	-.09 (.467)	-.50 (.000)	—		
4. Investment size	.22 (.067)	.44 (.000)	-.42 (.000)	—	
5. Commitment	.34 (.003)	.74 (.000)	-.57 (.000)	.51 (.000)	—

Note. *p* values appear in parentheses ($df = 71$).

Table 4 Pearson Correlations Among Variables for Male Partners' Affection Received

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Affection received	—				
2. Satisfaction	.49 (.000)	—			
3. Quality of alternatives	-.14 (.258)	-.38 (.001)	—		
4. Investment size	-.01 (.933)	.43 (.000)	-.19 (.106)	—	
5. Commitment	.25 (.035)	.69 (.000)	-.53 (.258)	.50 (.933)	—

Note. *p* values appear in parentheses (*df*=71).

$p = .001$) and male ($r = .34, p = .003$) and female ($r = .31, p = .009$) commitment. *H5* was partially supported.¹

RQ1 asked whether giving or receiving affection was a better predictor of relationship satisfaction. To obtain a more precise picture of those involved in the relationship, data were broken down by partner sex in two linear regressions. For female partners, the overall model was significant, $F(2, 70) = 8.90, p = .000$; and accounted for 21% ($R^2 = .207$) of the variance in satisfaction (observed power = .98). It appears that, for women, received affection ($\beta = .33, p = .004$) is a stronger, and only significant, predictor of satisfaction compared to communicating affection ($\beta = .23, p = .051$). For male partners, the overall model was significant, $F(2, 70) = 18.32, p = .000$; and accounted for 35% ($R^2 = .347$) of the variance in satisfaction (observed power = .97). Although both variables emerged as significant predictors of satisfaction, it appears that, for men, receiving affection is a stronger predictor of satisfaction ($\beta = .38, p = .000$) compared to communicating affection ($\beta = .35, p = .001$). In response to *RQ1*, receiving affection is a more significant predictor of satisfaction for both men and women.

RQ2 asked whether giving or receiving affection was a better predictor of relational commitment. Two linear regressions were conducted for male and female partners. For female partners, the overall model was significant, $F(2, 70) = 8.24, p = .001$; and accounted for 20% ($R^2 = .195$) of the variance in commitment (observed power = .99). Communicating affection ($\beta = .31, p = .009$) is a stronger predictor

Table 5 Pearson Correlations Among Variables for Female Partners' Affection Communicated

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Affection communicated	—				
2. Satisfaction	.33 (.006)	—			
3. Quality of alternatives	-.21 (.082)	-.50 (.000)	—		
4. Investment size	.22 (.064)	.44 (.000)	-.42 (.000)	—	
5. Commitment	.38 (.003)	.74 (.000)	-.57 (.000)	.51 (.000)	—

Note. *p* values appear in parentheses (*df*=70).

Table 6 Pearson Correlations Among Variables for Male Partners' Affection Communicated

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Affection communicated	—				
2. Satisfaction	.46 (.000)	—			
3. Quality of alternatives	-.05 (.671)	-.38 (.001)	—		
4. Investment size	.04 (.735)	.43 (.000)	-.19 (.106)	—	
5. Commitment	.39 (.001)	.69 (.000)	-.57 (.000)	.51 (.001)	—

Note. *p* values appear in parentheses (*df*=71).

of commitment for female partners compared to receiving affection ($\beta = .24$, $p = .042$). For male partners, the overall model was significant, $F(2, 70) = 7.20$, $p = .001$; and accounted for 17% ($R^2 = .173$) of the variance in commitment (observed power = .94). Communicating affection emerged as a stronger, and the only significant, predictor ($\beta = .349$, $p = .003$) compared to receiving affection ($\beta = .143$, $p = .218$). In response to RQ2, communicating affection is a more significant predictor of commitment for both men and women.

Discussion

Affectionate communication, when appropriately enacted, has been widely demonstrated to be productive for human functioning and interpersonal relationships. Our work extends that analysis to ongoing adult relationships, as well as investigating potential outcomes depending on whether a communicator is primarily the provider of the affection or the recipient. Both roles are positive, but appear to relate to relational commitment and satisfaction differently.

Collectively, our analyses indicated that both giving and receiving affection are associated with greater commitment and satisfaction. These results provide direct support for Postulate 3a of AET because affectionate messages did positively relate to relationship qualities. This supports AET and helps inform how affectionate messages operate within the theory's postulates and the procreation process. In particular, with individuals feeling more committed to and satisfied with an affectionate partner, they are more likely to have an opportunity to procreate because they have probably met the mate selection criteria. Similarly, if individuals are affectionate, receive affection, have a positive relationship (our results in support of AET), and do procreate, then these individuals should communicate an appropriate amount of affection to their children, making their children better partner choices for subsequent procreation as well. Consistent with AET, these enhanced bonds should promote selective fitness and result in long-term survival.

Although AET theorists contend that both giving and receiving affection are important, it has not been established how these modes of affection function in relationships. Results of this study reinforce the importance of both giving and receiving

affection. In addition, and of most value, results specify that giving and receiving affection may perform different functions—that is, *receiving affection* predicted perceptions of satisfaction, and *giving affection* predicted perceptions of commitment. These results suggest that people may become even happier with their partner as a result of receiving affectionate messages. Similarly, partners may express affection as a manifestation of their commitment. Given that satisfaction predicts commitment (e.g., Rusbult, 1980), perhaps individuals receive affection and develop feelings of satisfaction as a result, thus fostering feelings of commitment and ultimately resulting in their own expression of affection.

Considered together, results of this study suggest that affectionate messages may be viewed as a relational thermometer. For counselors, researchers, and romantic partners, affectionate messages may indicate the temperature of a relationship. For those individuals who communicate few affectionate messages, this could be an indicator that this individual is dissatisfied in their relationship. For those individuals who receive few affectionate messages from their partner, this could be a sign that their partners are not very committed to the relationship. This could be important information for counselors and individuals who design relational interventions.

It is necessary to address findings relevant to the investment model. It is surprising that only two of the four investment model factors were related to affection, since Rusbult's (1980, 1983) predictions among the four investment variables have been repeatedly and longitudinally supported (i.e., Bui et al., 1996). Given that the measure for investment size exhibited only moderate reliability (.65), affection and investment size results are less surprising. However, affection and quality of alternatives were not related either. Based on AET, individuals paired with a highly affectionate mate should perceive quality of alternatives poorly. Conversely, those paired with a low-affectionate partner would be receptive to alternative partners. However, no significant relationship was found, which is inconsistent with the investment model based on our prior findings. This may be a function of relatively committed sample. Recall that the average age of participants was slightly over 35, and 47.2% of participants identified themselves as seriously dating, and 50% of participants identified as engaged or married. Quality of alternatives may be more salient and important to newer, less established relationships.²

Limitations

Findings of this inquiry should be considered with limitations in mind. Results of these analyses suggest that receiving affection is driving satisfaction perceptions and communicating affection is driving commitment perceptions; but, this survey design and correlational analyses do not allow for a causal interpretation. A second, and commonly mentioned, limitation is the use of self-report data. However, Floyd, Hesse, and Haynes (2007) asserted that “affectionate behavior often occurs so sporadically and/or so privately that researchers may have difficulty measuring it any other way” (p. 91). Keep in mind that self-reported affection received correlated

with partner-reported affection communicated. This indicates that self-reports of received affection may, in fact, be quite accurate indicators of partners' expressed affection.

Finally, the measurement of affection was cross-sectional in nature—that is, individuals completed measures of affection communicated and received based on the current state of their relationship. It is likely that their own, and their partners', recent affectionate messages impacted scores, which could skew the global assessment of affection because a current relational state may not provide a representative affection assessment of the entire relational time. Perhaps couples were going through a troubled time in their relationship, resulting in decreased affection, and subsequently impacting results. However, this may be less of a concern since Floyd and Morman (1998) found that received affection levels did not significantly change over a 2-week period.

Certainly, a strength of this research worth noting was the sample. Although cross-sectional, the results are based on couple data. These involve 72 adult couples in ongoing romantic relationships and, therefore, avoids the ubiquitous concern about overuse of college undergraduate samples in relational research.

Future Research

Affectionate messages accounted for considerable variance in relationship satisfaction and commitment and, hence, relational scholars should continue to examine how affectionate messages impact relationships. For example, future research could investigate how communicating affection mediates relational difficulties and transgressions. Because conversational *faux pas*, miscommunication, and conflict all have the potential to negatively impact a relationship, it would be intriguing to see how affectionate communication mediates perceptions of and conversations about these transgressions. Often, these transgressions can lead to a chilling effect, which occurs when a low-power partner withholds communication (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). However, could affection have the power to warm the chilly climate?

A second avenue for future research involves examining the remaining postulates of AET. Although this study offered support for Postulate 3a, there are four other postulates that warrant attention. Postulates 4 and 5, for example, argue that individuals have differing tolerances for affection, and there are implications for violating one's tolerance for affection (Floyd, 2006a). As communication is the key component in expressing one's needs, and reactions to violating needs, this area is ripe for communication researchers to study. How do individuals convey their high or low needs for affection to their romantic partners? What are the implications of having, or avoiding, such a conversation? How are relational qualities impacted by differing partners' ranges of tolerance for affection? Future work should address these questions.

A final area of future research involves transitioning the study of affection toward a more "dark side" context (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), as Floyd (2006a) repeatedly called for researchers to examine times when affection is "risky." AET argues that "Affectionate feelings and affectionate expressions are distinct experiences that often,

but need not, covary” (Floyd, 2006a, p. 163). Yet, DePaulo and Kashy (1998) revealed that deceptive messages frequently occur in close relationships, suggesting that feelings of affection and communication of affection may not be consistent as “often” as AET argues. Indeed, in a sample of 1,032 people, 86% of participants could recall a time they expressed affection that was not consistent with their internal feelings, and over one half of the respondents had communicated such a message in the past 30 days (Floyd, Erbert, Davis, & Haynes, 2005, as cited in Floyd, 2006a). Thus, future research should examine this under-researched area to discover the relational implications of communicating deceptive affection.

Conclusion

From this study, we know that both expressing and receiving affection are important in heightened relationship commitment and satisfaction. However, we discovered that these modes of affection perform different functions (i.e., receiving affection is associated with satisfaction in the relationship, but commitment is more strongly associated with expressed affection). With the added knowledge discovered in this study, scholars, counselors, trainers, and even romantic partners may approach the study and expression of affectionate communication in a more informed way. Based on these findings, holding hands and expressing love appear not only to be important relational messages shared between partners, they appear to be indicators of one’s affect and attachment to a partner.

Notes

- [1] To examine the possibility that our correlations may significantly differ based on sex, the Pearson values were transformed into Fisher z scores and analyzed. None of the correlations significantly differed from each other. Specific values are available from the first author.
- [2] To further understand how quality of alternatives may have differed in this sample, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted to discover group differences among the relationship types (casually dating, seriously dating, engaged, and married). However, with the small number of self-identified casually dating couples, it was not interpretable.

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