Fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication: Implications of a naïve theory of affection

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ABSTRACT

According to Robey, Cohen, and Epstein (1988), children may hold a naïve theory of affection, whereby they believe that their parents' affection for them is a finite resource for which they must compete against their siblings. Parents, conversely, are unlikely to view their own affection in the same way. Although research on naïve theories is often conducted with youngsters, we speculated that even adult children may perceive that they compete with their siblings for their parents' affection, and we tested the naïve theory of affection in a study of 115 dyads of adult men and their adult sons. As hypothesized, the sons' numbers of brothers and sisters were associated inversely with sons' reports of how much affection they received from their fathers but were unrelated to fathers' reports. Fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affection were also linearly related to each other, but fathers reported being more affectionate with their sons than their sons reported them being. Results suggest that naïve theorizing about parental affection is not limited to young children but continues to affect familial experience in adulthood.

KEY WORDS: affection • fathers • naïve theories • sons

Few communicative behaviors may carry greater import for the development, maintenance, and satisfaction of personal relationships than the communication of affection. Indeed, it is often through the expression of

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affectionate gestures that relationship progress is gauged; for example, one often remembers the first hug, the first kiss, or the first exchange of the words 'I love you' (Booth-Butterfield & Trotta, 1994; King & Christensen, 1983; Owen, 1987). The absence of such behaviors may likewise signal relational deterioration, dissatisfaction, or distance (see Hess, 2003). Several investigations have demonstrated that the communication of affection is significantly related to closeness and satisfaction in marriages and parent–child relationships (Floyd & Morman, 2000, 2002; Morman & Floyd, 1999), sibling relationships (Floyd & Morman, 1997), and even sibling-in-law relationships (Floyd & Morr, 2003).

Despite its importance – or perhaps, because of it – individuals may orient to expressions of affection not only as denotations of love and positive regard, but also as gestures of favoritism. Children, for instance, may view their parents' expressions of affection to siblings as threats to their own status in the family or as evidence that their siblings are more loved than they are. As we discuss later, cognitive reactions of this nature, although not logically sound, are by no means uncommon in families and appear to represent what are called 'naïve' or 'implicit' theories. To the extent that individuals carry such implicit theories about their relationships, we can expect that those beliefs will guide, if not actual relational events, at least their *reports* of relational events. In the current study, we examine one such implicit theory – the naïve theory of affection – within the context of fathers' relationships with their adult sons.

Naïve theory of affection

Heider (1958) coined the term *naïve theory* to refer to implicit belief systems. Whether in children or adults, naïve theories comprise ontological commitments relative to specific phenomena that are reified through the identification of confirmatory events in day-to-day life. As articulated by Robey, Cohen, and Epstein (1988), a naïve theory of affection consists of the belief that affection is a tangible and finite substance, and that the amount of affection given to one person therefore lessens the amount that can be given to another. Children holding this implicit understanding of affection would believe that the more affection and attention their parents give to others, the less they will have to give them (see Piaget & Szeminska, 1952). Such a theory can be reinforced through selected observations of events that appear to confirm it. For instance, children may observe that when their mothers spend a good deal of time attending to other children, they may have less actual time to spend with the others.

The context in which the implications of a naïve theory of affection are perhaps most salient involves parents' affection for their children, and there is reason to conceive of parental affection as a precious resource. A number of empirical studies have attested to the mental, emotional, cognitive, social, and physical benefits of both receiving and giving affection (for a review, see Floyd, 2002). What may be less reasonable is to conceive of affection as a finite resource, such that as parents have second and third children, they somehow love or care about the first one less. For those with

this implicit view of affection, however, the consequence of seeing affection given to another (instead of to oneself) is jealousy, just as it would be with a truly finite resource such as money or space. From an evolutionary perspective, this is a strongly ingrained, adaptive response: as siblings share, on average, only 50% of their genes, it benefits them in the long run not only to cooperate with each other, but also to compete for their parents' resources, whether they so do consciously or not (see, e.g., Dawkins, 1989; Pinker, 2002).

In support of the naïve theory of affection, Robey et al. (1988) had 8–12-year-old children look at pictures that depicted, for example, two siblings playing and their father entering the room and hugging one of them. Participants were asked to describe how they thought the other sibling would feel about that situation. The children in the study attributed unhappiness to the nonrecipient of the affection depicted in the pictures, and they were particularly likely to do so if their own parents had divorced. Many other naïve theories, particularly those concerning biology, physics, and mental processing, have been tested using young children as participants (e.g., Morris, Taplin, & Gelman, 2000; Pine & Messer, 2000; Solomon, 2002).

As Heider (1958) indicated, however, adults can carry naïve theories as well. Franiuk, Cohen, and Pomerantz (2002) demonstrated the influence of naïve relationship theories on young adults in their recent study of two specific theories: the 'soulmate theory,' which suggests that individuals must find the *right person* in order to have a satisfying relationship, and the 'work-it-out theory,' which suggests that effort is more important to relationship success than is finding the right partner. More closely related to the current investigation is research demonstrating that adults can articulate feelings of resentment over the favoritism they perceive their parents to have shown to their siblings during childhood (e.g., Klagsbrun, 1992).

As such, we propose that the naïve theory of affection may be related to adults' assessments of the amount of affection they received from their parents, just as it may have in childhood. We test this proposition in the current study within the relationships of adult sons with their fathers. The father–son relationship is among the most socially significant of male–male relationships, as it can exert enormous influence not only on sons' cognitive, interpersonal, and academic development (Beatty & Dobos, 1993; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Yerby, 1981; Snarey, 1993), but also on fathers' development (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Palkovitz, 2002). Although research on the father–son relationship has tended to focus heavily on its negative aspects, such as aggression (Beatty, Zelley, Dobos, & Rudd, 1994), conflict (Comstock, 1994), and dysfunction (Lee, 1987), other studies have illuminated its more positive aspects, including relational satisfaction (Martin & Anderson, 1995), intimacy (Buerkel, 1996), and the communication of affection between fathers and sons (Floyd & Morman, 2000, 2002, 2003; Morman & Floyd, 1999, 2002). Floyd and Morman (2002), in particular, found that the amount of affection fathers communicate to their sons is associated, in a curvilinear fashion, with the amount of affection the

fathers reported having received from their own fathers while growing up, suggesting further the importance of other family members in the perception of affection.

Hypotheses

There are two direct implications of the naïve theory of affection that are relevant to hypothesizing about affectionate communication in father–son relationships. First, sons should perceive (at least, subconsciously) the amount of affection they receive from their fathers to be related inversely to the number of brothers and sisters the sons have. That is, sons who are only children should report receiving the greatest amount of affection from their fathers, and others' reports should decrease as the number of siblings increases, because each sibling should be conceived of as a competitor for fathers' affection. Although the theory does not necessarily predict that these associations will differ for numbers of brothers and numbers of sisters, we opted to test for both to ascertain whether the predicted correlations would emerge both for numbers of brothers and for numbers of sisters. This leads to our first hypothesis:

> *H1*: Sons' reports of their fathers' affectionate communication with them are inversely related to the sons' (i) number of brothers, and (ii) number of sisters.

As noted earlier, fathers' reports of their own affection should not be affected by the number of children. Whereas children should perceive their siblings to be sources of competition for their parents' affection, the parents (as providers of the affection) should perceive neither that their affection is a finite resource nor that they must be affectionate with one child to the detriment of another. Therefore, we pose the following hypothesis:

> *H2*: Fathers' reports of their affectionate communication with their sons are unrelated to their sons' (i) number of brothers, and (ii) number of sisters.

We acknowledge the unorthodox nature of hypothesizing a null effect; however, we have proceeded to advance this hypothesis for three reasons, the first of which is its strong theoretical grounding. The naïve theory of affection clearly leads us to predict that fathers' reports of their affection with their sons are unaffected by the number of siblings their sons have, and the opposite prediction could not be deduced logically from this theory. Second, concerns that the predicted correlations may fail due to low statistical power (rather than for the reasons that the theory proposes) will be assuaged if the first hypothesis, which calls for significant correlations, is supported. Third, concerns that the predicted correlations may fail due to chance alone (rather than for the reasons that the theory proposes) are also assuaged by the pattern of effects we predict. Given that the first and second hypotheses call for six specific correlations to be significant (sons' reports of verbal, nonverbal, and supportive affection correlated, each,

with number of brothers and number of sisters) and six other specific correlations to be nonsignificant, and given that random effects, by definition, tend not to emerge in ordered patterns, we can have greater certainty in the meaning of our results if the correlations for *H1* emerge as significant and if the correlations for *H2* do not, because that result would follow the specific pattern hypothesized.

Of final interest in this study is the relationship between parents' and children's reports of the parents' affection. We expect that, because fathers and sons in the current sample are both reporting on the fathers' affectionate communication patterns, their reports should be directly related to each other. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication are directly related.

Despite their presumed linear relationship, however, we do not necessarily expect that fathers and sons will report the same *amount* of affection given by fathers. That is, fathers' and sons' reports may very well differ in their central tendency. Because the naïve theory of affection offers no guidance as to the probability of such a difference, or to its direction, we pose this as a question:

RQ1: Is there a mean difference in fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication?

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 230) were 115 pairs of adult American men and their adult sons. Fathers ranged in age from 37 to 74 years (M = 51.23 years, SD = 6.26), and sons ranged in age from 18 to 46 years (M = 23.47 years, SD = 5.11). Most of the fathers (84.1%) and sons (81.6%) were White, whereas 10.3% of fathers and sons were Black/African American, 4.3% of sons were Asian, 4.1% of fathers and sons were Hispanic, 3.9% of fathers and 2.6% of sons were Native American, and 1.0% of fathers and 2.0% of sons were of other ethnic origins. (These percentages sum to more than 100%, because some participants reported belonging to more than one ethnic group.) At the time of the study, 90.2% of the fathers and 19.0% of the sons were married, whereas 2.6% of fathers and 77.7% of sons were single (having never been married), and 7.2% of fathers and 3.3% of sons were divorced. The greatest percentage of the dyads (44%) represented biological father–son pairs, whereas 40% consisted of a father and stepson, and 17% consisted of a father and adopted son.

Procedure

Undergraduate research assistants at two medium-sized universities in the midwestern USA and one large university in the southwestern USA recruited father–son dyads from social organizations (clubs, churches), professional organizations (corporations, small businesses), and residential communities (neighborhoods, apartment complexes) to participate in the study. To qualify, the son in a potential dyad had to be at least 18 years of age; (we excluded sons

younger than 18 for the purpose of determining whether the naïve theory of affection applied to adult children given that research has already demonstrated its applicability to younger children; see Robey et al., 1988). Qualified dyads that agreed to participate were given questionnaires and addressed, postage-paid envelopes in which to mail the completed surveys to the researchers. The father and son in each pair were instructed to complete their questionnaires separately and not to discuss their answers with each other until both had completed and returned their questionnaires. Only data from complete dyads (in which both the father and the son completed and returned the questionnaires) were used in the study. In approximately 65% of the dyads who received questionnaires, both the father and the son completed and returned them.

Measure

Affectionate communication was assessed using the factor-based Affectionate Communication Index (ACI) developed by Floyd and Morman (1998). The ACI consists of 19 Likert-type items measuring the amount of affection communicated to a particular target using verbal expressions (e.g., saying 'I love you'), direct nonverbal gestures (e.g., kissing or hugging), and supportive behaviors (e.g., doing favors for the person). Fathers in the study completed the ACI in reference to how much affection they communicated toward the son taking part in the study (internal reliabilities, based on Cronbach's alpha, were .83 for verbal, .74 for nonverbal, and .74 for support). Sons in the study completed the ACI in reference to how much affection their fathers communicated toward them (alpha reliabilities were .86 for verbal, .88 for nonverbal, and .75 for support). The ACI has demonstrated convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity (see Floyd & Mikkelson, 2002; Floyd & Morman, 1998; Morman & Floyd, 1999).

Results

The first hypothesis predicted significant inverse relationships between sons' reports of their fathers' affectionate communication with them and the sons' numbers of siblings. We conducted our analyses separately for each of the three forms of affectionate communication (verbal, nonverbal, and supportive affection) and with sons' numbers of brothers and sisters, so as to be certain that any identified effects were not specific to the type of affection or the sex of the sibling. The hypothesis was tested using one-tailed Pearson correlations against an effect-wise Bonferroni-corrected alpha of .016. As predicted, the number of brothers that sons had was associated inversely with the amount of affection they reported that their fathers gave them through verbal statements, $r(113) = -.19$, $p = .003$, through direct nonverbal gestures, $r(113) = -.26$, $p < .001$, and through supportive behaviors, $r(113) = -.27$, $p < .001$. Likewise, the number of sisters that sons had was inversely related to reports of fathers' supportive affection, $r(113) = -.24$, $p < .001$. Number of sisters had inverse but nonsignificant associations with reports of fathers' verbal affection, $r(113) = -.12$, $p = .04$, and nonverbal affection, $r(113) = -.08$, $p = .14$. The first hypothesis is supported, except for the association between reports of fathers' verbal and nonverbal affection and sons' numbers of sisters.

The second hypothesis called for nonsignificant associations between sons'

numbers of siblings and fathers' reports of their own affectionate communication with their sons. We again tested the prediction separately for the numbers of brothers and sisters and for the three different forms of affectionate communication. Because the hypothesis called for null effects and was therefore nondirectional, we used two-tailed probability levels. As expected, the number of brothers that sons had was unrelated to fathers' reports of their own verbal affection, $r(113) = -.09$, $p = .36$, nonverbal affection, $r(113) = -.17$, $p = .04$, and supportive affection, $r(113) = -.004$, $p = .96$. The number of sisters that sons had was unrelated to fathers' reports of their own verbal affection, $r(113) = .09$, $p = .34$, nonverbal affection, $r(113) = -.10$, $p = .28$, and supportive affection, $r(113) = -.01$, $p = .92$. The second hypothesis is supported. (Although two-tailed probability values were used to test the second hypothesis, a conversion to one-tailed probability values would not have changed any of the results.)

The third hypothesis predicted that fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affection are directly related. We tested the prediction using one-tailed Pearson correlations against an effect-wise Bonferroni-corrected alpha of .017. As predicted, fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affection were significantly correlated for verbal affection, $r(113) = .39$, $p < .001$, for nonverbal affection, $r(113) = .35$, $p < .001$, and for supportive affection, $r(113) = .32$, $p < .001$. Examinations of the scatterplots did not suggest any curvilinear associations. The third hypothesis is supported.

The research question asked whether fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication would differ in their central tendencies. Despite their linear associations, fathers' reports (as a group) of their affection exceeded sons' reports for verbal affection, $t(114) = 3.17$, $p = .002$, and for support affection, $t(114) = 4.33$, $p < .001$, using two-tailed pairwise *t*-tests. Fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' nonverbal affection were not significantly different, $t(114) = 1.85$, $p = .067$. Means and standard deviations for fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication appear in Table 1.

Discussion

The naïve theory of affection, which holds that children may believe their parents' affection to be a finite resource for which they must compete with their siblings, led us to predict that sons' numbers of brothers and sisters

TABLE 1
Means and standard deviations for fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affectionate communication

Form of affection	Fathers' report	Sons' report
Verbal	4.41 (1.40)	3.93 (1.44)
Nonverbal	3.02 (0.99)	2.82 (1.10)
Supportive	5.65 (0.84)	5.22 (0.96)

Note. Means are on a 1–7 scale wherein higher scores indicate more affectionate behavior. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

are inversely related to their reports of their fathers' affection with them but unrelated to their fathers' reports. We tested these predictions using fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' verbal, nonverbal, and supportive affection, and 10 of the 12 correlations emerged as hypothesized. The overall pattern was one in which sons reported that their fathers communicated less affection to them if they had more brothers and sisters rather than fewer, whereas fathers' reports of their affection with their sons did not vary as a function of the sons' numbers of siblings. Notably, the mean coefficient for the significant correlations predicted in *H1* (mean $r = .19$) is more than twice the magnitude of the mean coefficient for the nonsignificant correlations predicted in *H2* (mean $r = .07$). Although the significant correlations for the first hypothesis represent only moderate effect sizes, this pattern of findings is consistent with the logic behind the naïve theory of affection and demonstrates its applicability with adult children.

Two correlations out of the 12 did not emerge as predicted; instead, for these comparisons, fathers' and sons' reports coincided. Specifically, sons' reports of their fathers' verbal and nonverbal affection were not significantly related to the sons' numbers of sisters. These results matched the hypothesized nonsignificant relationships between the number of sisters and fathers' reports of their own verbal and nonverbal affection. These findings are clearly contrary to the theory and we can only speculate as to their meaning. The fact that both involved the sons' numbers of sisters could be meaningful, as this may suggest that sons view their brothers (at least, subconsciously) as being stronger competitors for their fathers' affection than their sisters. (Indeed, this finding attests to the importance of testing the theory separately for numbers of brothers and sisters, as this distinction would likely have been missed otherwise.) We recommend replication of these results before any conclusions are warranted.

The findings also indicated that fathers' and sons' reports of fathers' affection were linearly correlated within relationships. However, the reports differed in their central tendencies, such that fathers reported communicating more affection to their sons than their sons reported receiving. This pattern occurred for two of three forms of affectionate communication and replicates the finding reported by Morman and Floyd (2002), who speculated that it may reflect cyclical shifts in the social and cultural construction of fatherhood, whereby men endeavor to be more affectionate with their children than their own fathers were with them.

Considered collectively, however, the present findings provide support for the naïve theory of affection within the context of men's relationships with their sons by indicating that sons perceive their fathers' affection to be inversely related to their numbers of siblings (who, according to the naïve theory, are perceived to be competitors for that affection). Conversely, fathers' reports (with one exception) were to the contrary, as the theory predicts. Importantly, this latter finding does not mean that fathers, or parents in general, distribute their resources equally among their children. Rather, several investigations have shown that parents (both inside and outside of North American) tend to distribute their resources

discriminatively, based on their children's probabilities of reproduction, despite conscientious attempts to treat all of their children equally (e.g., Anderson, Kaplan, Lam, & Lancaster, 1999; Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1987; Floyd, 2001; Floyd & Morman, 2002, 2003; Floyd, Sargent, & Di Corcia, 2004). The findings from *H2* suggest that, at least for affectionate communication, the *number* of children is not a significant predictor of how affectionate men report being with their sons.

Two particular aspects of the method have implications for external validity. First, although the current sample was relatively diverse with respect to age, it was less diverse with respect to ethnic background. The naïve theory of affection provides no reason to predict that either of these demographic variables would be related to the expected differences in parents' and children's reports. However, the relative lack of ethnic diversity in the sample curtails the probability of external validity. Second, all of the data were collected via self- or other-reports. We chose this method because our focus in the current study was on differences between fathers' and sons' *perceptions* of fathers' affectionate communication, not on differences in actual communicative behavior. In addition, Floyd and Mikkelson (2002) argued strongly for the efficacy of using self/other-report measures of affectionate communication, given that expressions of affection may occur so sporadically within relationships that it would be difficult for researchers to observe them by other means. It is therefore important to interpret the results in context, such that they represent perceived communication behavior, whose relationship to the actual amount of affection communicated from these fathers to their sons is unknown.

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