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Testing the Cultural Scope of Affection Exchange Theory in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

We examined the cultural scope of affection exchange theory. Specifically, we tested the postulates that trait affection given and received covary with indicators of psychological well-being and that highly affectionate individuals are relationally advantaged. The sample consisted of 326 college-attending adult Slovaks. Correlational analyses supported the predicted associations between trait affection and depression, loneliness, stress, general mental health, and self-esteem. Additionally, results of t-tests indicated that individuals involved in a romantic relationship reported higher levels of trait affection compared to those not involved in a romantic relationship. Limitations and future directions are addressed in the discussion.

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Trait affection; Slovakia; relationship status; mental health

Since 2002, when Floyd conceptually and operationally defined trait affection given and received, scholars have devoted considerable attention to examine Americans' trait affection in reference to Floyd's (2006) affection exchange theory (AET). However, despite Floyd's (2006) claim that cultural differences may be a salient factor influencing affectionate communication and attributes, research in this area remains scant. Thus, to address this void in the literature, the purpose of this study is to test the cultural scope of AET (Floyd, 2006) by (a) examining the extent to which trait affection given and received are associated with depression, loneliness, stress, general mental health, and self-esteem among adult, college-attending Slovaks, and (b) comparing trait affection levels based on whether or not the participants were involved in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection.

Trait Affection and Affection Exchange Theory

Floyd and Morman (1998, 2000, 2001) initially focused on expressed and received affectionate communication, defined as people's use of intentional and overt communicative behaviours (i.e. verbal, nonverbal, and social support) to express feelings of closeness, care, and fondness towards others (Floyd & Morman, 1998). However, since

Floyd's (2002) seminal trait affection study, the bulk of affection research has centred on trait affection given and received (see Floyd, 2019), which refer to people's tendencies to express and receive affection, respectively (Floyd, 2002). Subsequent trait affection studies, albeit with a few exceptions (e.g. Mansson & Sigurðardóttir, 2017; Mansson et al., 2016), have been grounded in AET.

AET, which stems from the Darwinian principle of selective fitness and reproductive viability (Floyd, 2006), suggests that the needs to give and receive affection are innate. However, the theory also suggests that individual differences exist in terms of optimal levels of affection, such that people possess a lower and upper tolerance level that determine optimal affection levels. Continuing this notion, AET postulates further that affectionate communication is most beneficial when it falls within the senders' or receivers' optimal ranges. Moreover, AET postulates that received parental affection enhances individuals' likelihood of reaching reproductive maturity and attracting potential partners, as being affectionate is considered a relational resource indicating parental and reproductive suitability. Relatedly, the theory postulates that expressed and received affection covary with indicators of relational, physiological, and psychological well-being such that highly affectionate individuals are relationally, physiologically, and psychologically advantaged compared to their less affectionate counterparts (Floyd, 2006).

These postulates have been confirmed in a series of studies conducted largely within the United States (see Floyd, 2019, for a review). However, AET's utility outside the United States awaits empirical testing. To begin testing AET's cultural scope, we focus on the relationships between trait affection and indicators of psychological well-being (i.e. depression, general mental health, loneliness, self-esteem, and stress) in a sample of college-attending adults Slovaks. Additionally, we seek to test the notion that highly affectionate individuals are relationally advantaged.

Psychological Well-Being

Worldwide, it is estimated that approximately 10% (i.e. 792 million) of people suffer from mental health problems (Dattani et al., 2021). However, these statistics are even more concerning when studying college students' mental health. In 2008, Blanco et al. reported that 50% of college students had experienced mental health problems during the past year. Although a myriad of mental health concerns affect college students, depression, loneliness, and stress are among the most common problems. Others (e.g. Floyd, 2002; Mansson, 2013b) have also assessed general mental health and self-esteem as indicators of mental well-being. In line with these studies, we focus on depression, loneliness, stress, general mental health, and self-esteem in the present study to test AET's postulate that trait affection given and received covary with mental health.

Depression, which is the most prominent mental health disorder, is a psychological condition characterized by decreased motivation and self-worth coupled with heightened, enduring feelings of guilt and sadness. (APA, 2022a). It should be noted, however, that the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (profiled in the methods section below) assessed the presence of depressive symptoms as opposed to degree of depression. *Loneliness*, which is detrimental to psychological and physiological well-being (Heinric & Gullone, 2006), stems from perceived deficiencies in important areas of a person's social network (Perlman &

Peplau, 1981). *Stress* is a common psychological and physiological reaction to perceived pressures. However, when an individual lacks the ability to manage stress, it may disrupt daily activities and cause additional psychological and physiological health concerns (APA, 2022b).

Nonetheless, AET postulates that these mental health concerns can be mitigated through expressed and received affection. This AET postulate was partly based on Floyd's (2002) study in which trait affection given and received were associated negatively with symptoms of depression, loneliness, and stress in a U.S. sample. Thus, to begin testing AET's cultural scope, we hypothesized that:

H1: Slovaks' trait affection given and received covary negatively with depressive symptoms, loneliness, and stress.

General mental health refers to an individual's global mental (non-psychotic) well-being (Banks, 1983) with an emphasis on (a) one's (in)ability to handle daily activities and (b) feelings of distress (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). As such, people in good general mental health tend to be happy, have high self-esteem, and be socially active while also reporting limited feelings of stress and depression (Floyd, 2002). *Self-esteem* is simply a person's perceived worth or value, which stems from the person's self-concept (i.e. favourable and unfavourable characteristics and qualities) such that the more favourable characteristics and qualities people possess, the greater their self-esteem will be (Rosenberg, 1979). In line with AET's postulate that those who give and receive high levels of affection are psychologically advantaged, Floyd (2002) reported that both trait affection given and received covaried positively with self-esteem and general mental health in a U.S. sample. Thus, to test AET's cultural scope further, we hypothesized that:

H2: Slovaks' trait affection given and received covary positively with general mental health and self-esteem.

The second aspect of AET tested in this study is the postulate that highly affectionate individuals are relationally advantaged (Floyd, 2006). This postulate also was based, in part, on Floyd's (2002) study in which both trait affection given and received were related positively to relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Mansson (2013a) reported that grandchildren who receive high levels of grandparent affection are relationally satisfied; they also had favourable perceptions of their grandparents (e.g. liking, trust) and their grandparent-grandchild relationship (e.g. commitment, control mutuality). Thus, in accordance with we AET, we hypothesize that:

H3: Slovaks involved in a romantic relationship will report higher levels of trait affection given and received compared to their counterparts who are not involved in a romantic relationship.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

The participants ($N = 326$; 79.8% women) were college-attending Slovaks ranging in age from 18 to 54 years ($M = 24.25$, $SD = 6.80$). Consistent with the general Slovak population, the sample was homogeneous in that only nine participants were non-Slovaks and all but six participants self-identified as white. The participants also self-identified as undergraduates ($n = 306$), master's students ($n = 17$), and doctoral students ($n = 3$). Of the participants, 156 indicated that they were involved in a romantic relationship, whereas 170 stated that they were single at the time of the study. No additional demographic data were collected.

The questionnaire was first translated from English to Slovak by a bilingual person unassociated with the study. Next, a different bilingual person unassociated with the study translated the Slovak questionnaire back into English. Third, one of the authors, who is bilingual, reviewed the back-translated questionnaire in reference to the original item wordings for all measures and demographic items. Finally, minor corrections were made to the Slovak questionnaire in consultation with one of the two translators.

Once the study received approval from the Slovak author's home institution, the Slovak translation was used to develop an online survey using SurveyMonkey. Recruitment emails detailing the purpose of the study, the researchers' contact information, informed consent, and a hyperlink to the online questionnaire were sent to students at the University of Trnava, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, and Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava. The questionnaire included the demographic items detailed above along with the Trait Affection Scale-Given and the Trait Affection Scale-Received (Floyd, 2002); the short version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (Kohout et al., 1993), the short version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8; Hays & DiMatteo, 1987), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983), the General Health Questionnaire (Banks, 1983), the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), and the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). All measures are profiled below, along with descriptive statistics.

Instruments

Trait Affection Scale – Given (TAS-G)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of 10 items that assess the participants' general tendencies to express affection for others. Sample items are "I consider myself a very affectionate person" and "I am always telling my loved ones how much I care about them." A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .88 ($M = 55.58$, $SD = 17.05$).

Trait Affection Scale – Received (TAS-R)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of six items that assess the participants' general tendencies to receive affection from others. Sample items are "I get quite a bit of affection from others" and "Many people I know are quite affectionate with me."

A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .84 ($M = 29.68$, $SD = 9.98$).

Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of 20 items that assess the participants' depressive symptoms during a specified time. In this study, the 10-item short version was used, and the participants completed the items in reference to how they had felt during the last month. Sample items are "I felt depressed" and "I felt like everything I did was an effort." A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .89 ($M = 44.57$, $SD = 18.78$).

Short-Form UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of eight items that assess the participants' perceived companionship deficiencies. Sample items are "I lack companionship" and "I feel isolated from others." A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .81 ($M = 31.33$, $SD = 13.11$).

Perceived Stress Scale (PPS-10)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of 10 items that assess the participants' stress-related symptoms. The participants completed the items in reference to how they had felt during the last month. Sample items are "I feel I cannot cope with all the things I have to do" and "I think about things I have to accomplish." A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .88 ($M = 44.29$, $SD = 16.69$).

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of 12 items that assess the participants' emotional and mental well-being. Sample items are "I feel that I cannot overcome my difficulties" and "I think of myself as a worthless person." A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .92 ($M = 68.60$, $SD = 22.45$).

Self-Esteem Scale (SES)

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of 10 items that assess the participants' self-worth. Sample items are "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." A 9-point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .90 ($M = 54.75$, $SD = 17.97$).

Relationship Assessment Scale

This is a unidimensional instrument composed of 7 items that assess the participants' degree of contempt with their target relationship. Sample items are "How well does your partner meet your needs?" and "How good is your relationship compared to most?" A 9-

Table 1. Correlations among study variables ($N = 326$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Trait affection given	–						
2. Trait affection received	.57	–					
3. Depression	–.25	–.24					
4. Loneliness	–.32	–.44	.57				
5. Stress	–.19	–.18	.77	.51			
6. General mental health	.22	.28	–.81	–.67	–.72	–	
7. Self-esteem	.23	.30	–.64	–.67	–.63	.79	–

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

point Likert scale anchored in 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*) was used to solicit responses. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .90 ($M = 37.72$, $SD = 5.33$).

Results

A correlation matrix of all relevant variables included in this study appears in Table 1. The first hypothesis posited that Slovaks' trait affection given and received covary negatively with depression symptoms, loneliness, and stress. This hypothesis was supported (see Table 1). The second hypothesis posited that Slovaks' trait affection given and received covary positively with general mental health and self-esteem. This hypothesis was supported (see Table 1).

The third hypothesis posited that Slovaks involved in a romantic relationship report higher levels of trait affection given and received compared to their counterparts who are not involved in a romantic relationship. Two independent samples t-tests were conducted to test this hypothesis. Relationship status (i.e. involved in a romantic relationship or not involved in a romantic relationship) was entered as the grouping variable and trait affection given and received were entered as the dependent variables, respectively.

The first t-test, which compared levels of trait affection given, was significant, $t(324) = 1.97$, $p = .03$, with participants involved in a romantic relationship ($M = 57.29$, $SD = 16.48$) reporting higher levels of trait affection given compared to participants who were not involved in a romantic relationship ($M = 53.55$, $SD = 17.71$), Cohen's $d = .22$. The second t-test, which compared levels of trait affection received, was also significant, $t(324) = 1.80$, $p = .04$, with participants involved in a romantic relationship ($M = 30.62$, $SD = 9.46$) reporting higher levels of trait affection received compared to participants who were not involved in a romantic relationship ($M = 28.63$, $SD = 10.39$), Cohen's $d = .20$. Thus, the third hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

In 2002, Knapp et al. criticized interpersonal communication theory and research for lacking adequate cultural scope. Yet two decades later, little progress has been made to assess the utility of prominent U.S.-developed communication theories outside the United States. To address this criticism, the purpose of this study was to test the cultural scope of AET, which postulates that highly affectionate individuals are psychologically and relationally advantaged compared to less affectionate individuals. Specifically, we replicated parts of Floyd's (2002) study by examining trait affection given and received in

reference to depression, loneliness, stress, general mental health, and self-esteem in a sample of adult, college-attending Slovaks. Additionally, we assessed differences in trait affection levels depending on the participants' current involvement in romantic relationships.

The results lend initial support to AET's utility in the Slovak culture. Specifically, trait affection given and received were related negatively to depression symptoms, loneliness, and stress. Similarly, both trait affection given and received were related positively to general mental health and self-esteem. Additionally, the results indicated that Slovaks involved in a romantic relationship reported higher levels of trait affection given and received compared to those not involved in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection. These findings are not limited to theoretical advancements, but also suggest that Slovak college students, like U.S. American college students, can benefit from involvement in affectionate dyadic relationships. Although this idea has merit throughout the lifespan, it may be of particular value to college students given the prevalence of mental health concerns students face as they navigate the challenges of higher education. Specifically, one third of U.S. college students experience severe depression and anxiety whereas 44% report some degree of depression (Mayo Clinic Health Services, 2022). Recent Slovak data indicate similar problems with 34.3% experiencing moderately severe to severe depression and one in five report similar degrees of anxiety (Hajduk et al., 2022), and the reports indicate that the onset of COVID-19 worsened the situation in the respective cultures.

The negative impacts of students' mental health concerns are not limited to their academic achievements; they also affect the students personally as well as the entire academic community (Kitzrow, 2003). Thus, faculty and student support staff have a unique responsibility to convey care, compassion, and support to students, all of which are considered affectionate communication (Floyd, 2006; Mansson, 2013a). From an instructional perspective, the work based on Teven and McCroskey's (1997) source credibility indicates that instructor caring, which is a type of affection (Mansson, 2013a), has tremendous favourable impacts on students, such as their affect towards the course content and the instructor (Ledbetter & Finn, 2018), and student-instructor communication satisfaction (Sidelinger & Bolen, 2016). Thus, we encourage instructors to emphasize student caring both in and outside the classroom in an effort to mitigate the mental health concerns experienced by many students.

Although this – and other studies (e.g. Floyd, 2002; Mansson, 2013b) – suggests that expressed and received affection can be psychologically and relationally advantageous to people, it stands to reason that individual differences exist. Floyd (2006) argued that people have upper and lower limits of what they consider optimal amounts of affection. Thus, the positive outcomes associated with expressed and received affection are likely most impactful for individuals whose expressed and received affection fall within their optimal ranges. In fact, it is possible that the connection between psychological health and affection is curvilinear in nature such that people who have to express or receive more affection than they desire may experience less favourable – or even negative – effects of affection. Therefore, future research assessing expressed and received affection should also consider the participants' optimal ranges of affection to create discrepancy scores to determine how over- and under-benefitted individuals perceive their psychological well-being.

Limitations

Despite successful application of AET in a novel cultural context in this study, its limitations should not be omitted. First, this study only tested two of AET's postulates, namely the connection between trait affection and psychological well-being and the notion that highly affectionate individuals are relationally advantaged. However, the theory also postulates that expressed and received affection are physiologically beneficial (Floyd, 2006). This postulate has been supported in a host of studies conducted by Floyd and his colleagues using largely U.S. samples (see Floyd, 2019 for a review). Second, in line with AET's postulate, this study design only confirmed that trait affection covaries with indicators of psychological well-being. Thus, we cannot claim causality. Third, the short version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (Kohout et al., 1993) used in this study assess the prevalence of depressive symptoms indicative of mental health, but this measure does not assess depression as a psychological condition. Lastly, we only studied Slovaks; thus, additional tests of AET should be conducted in other cultures. Such studies also would continue to test the notion that affection is a superordinate human need. AET is an evolutionary theory in which humans have an innate need to give and receive affection. By testing (and confirming) various postulates of AET in novel cultural contexts, we also implicitly test the evolutionary basis of AET.

Conclusion

Interpersonal theory and research have a long history of lacking adequate cultural scope (Knapp et al., 2002). Thus, the purpose of this study was to begin testing AET's utility outside the United States. These initial findings from Slovakia expand AET's cultural scope. Additionally, this study lends support to the notion that giving and receiving affection are superordinate human needs that, based on evolutionary principals, should remain consistent across cultures. However, the current study focused only on two of AET's prominent postulates in a single culture. Therefore, we encourage researchers to continue this line of inquiry in other cultural contexts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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