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THIRD PARTY EFFECTS OF AFFECTIONATE COMMUNICATION IN FAMILY  
SUBSYSTEMS: EXAMINING INFLUENCE ON AFFECTIONATE COMMUNICATION,  
MENTAL WELL-BEING, AND FAMILY SATISFACTION

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts, 2012

Thesis

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Third Party Effects of Affectionate Communication in Family Subsystems: Examining Influence of Affectionate Communication, Mental Well-Being and Family Satisfaction

Chairperson: Stephen Yoshimura

This study examined the links between affectionate communication expressed within family dyads and affectionate communication expressed among other dyads, as well as individual reports of satisfaction with family life and mental well-being. Overall, the study showed that a child's report of affectionate communication exchanged in the child/father subsystem is associated with mother's satisfaction with family life. Additionally, mother reports of affectionate communication exchanged in the spousal relationships were positively associated with child reports of child/father affectionate communication exchanged. Finally, both perceptions of affectionate exchange in dyads outside and inside of one's direct experience correlated with satisfaction with family life and mental well-being. The results offer new insights into the nature of affectionate relationships in families.

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Families exist in a complex social network in which members are constantly influencing one another's behavior. A vital element to the happiness, satisfaction, and well-being of these networks is affectionate communication (Caparra, 2011; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Research indicates that affectionate communication is linearly related to the overall satisfaction of relationships (Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2010; Floyd & Morman, 2001). However, past research has generally examined affectionate communication in dyadic family relationships, and its effects on the parties directly communicating with one another. Empirical research has particularly focused on the interaction between parents and children to explain tensions within families (Floyd & Morman, 2001; 2005; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). This study will demonstrate that a mother's report of the amount of affectionate communication exchanged in the father/mother subsystem directly affects the child's reported amount of affectionate communication exchanged in the father/child subsystem. Additionally, this study will examine the effects of an individual's perceived affectionate exchange within subsystems outside of their direct interaction (e.g., child's perception of affectionate exchange in the spousal relationship), and its influence over their mental well-being, and satisfaction with family life. Moreover, this study will explore the third-party effects of reports of affectionate exchange from children and mothers regarding their relationship with the father.

Rather than only examining the effects of communication within the dyad communicating, this study examines the intricacies of third-party effects on communication patterns within family systems. The principles of systems theory, such as wholeness, interdependence, adaptability, and control, offer theoretical evidence that there can be significant third party impacts on one's communication (Littlejohn, 2002). Understanding the third party

effects that stem from dyadic relationships in families can increase knowledge on how these networks either flourish or fail. Additionally, the broader effects of affectionate communication on people are illustrated in this study, emphasizing its importance in society's communication patterns.

### **Family Systems Theory**

Systems theory provides a theoretical framework for investigating third party effects on dyadic communication. According to Von Bertalanffy (1968), general systems theory is essentially the study of wholeness. Systems approach makes it possible for studies to examine a phenomenon as multiple parts that constantly influence one another in a broad, complex structure. Von Bertalanffy argues that systems theory allows the researcher to take the phenomenon being studied out of narrowly restrained framework, and instead investigate this issue in a larger context. Systems consist of objects, and internal relationships between these objects (Littlejohn, 2002). For this study, the members of the family represent the objects in a system whose internal interactions exist within a specific environment. The environment, which is the specific atmosphere the system exists in, is a concept that illuminates how communication in one subsystem affects the communication in another subsystem. Attributes are the traits and characteristics of a specific system, and are an additional concept that provide evidence of third party effects in systems. Communication within subsystems has the potential to manifest positive and negative environments, and develop the traits and characteristics by which the whole family functions. Thus, examining how a dyad within a family system communicates can offer insight into the nature of communicative patterns within other subsystems and the system as a whole.

The specific qualities of families demonstrates why communication patterns in the father/mother subsystem can effect on the child or children or vice versa. As Littlejohn (2002) states, "A system then, is a set of things that affect one another within an environment and form a larger pattern that is different from any of the parts" (p. 37). In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The system has distinct characteristics, separate from any of its specific members. This indicates that larger communicative norms existing outside any specific subsystem will impact all members.

Brofenbrenner's (1979) theoretical perspective on systems theory demonstrates that an environment outside of an individual's direct experience impacts them through the environment's direct influence on their dyadic partner. Families are considered to be open systems, meaning they exist in, and interact with, environments outside their specific microsystem. They influence, and are influenced by, culture and society. Brofenbrenner's Ecological System demonstrates how larger systems interact with smaller systems, and have impacts on how individuals are directly and indirectly influenced. In Brofenbrenner's system, the microsystem consists of an individual's immediate interaction and experiences. The system directly above microsystems is the mesosystem, which are the associations among the various microsystems an individual is in.

For example, at the mesosystem level researchers study how one's family environment is affected by their environment in school, neighborhoods, and so forth. In Brofenbrenner's approach, the level higher from mesosystems is exosystems. Exosystems are settings that individuals are not directly partaking in, yet still have an influence over them. For example, an exosystem for a child would be their parents' work environment. Although a child does not directly experience this environment, Brofenbrenner argues that a parent's ability to handle

variables such as time and stress in a work environment affects their ability to perform parenting roles in the family system, therefore affecting the child's development. As Brofenbrenner (1979) states, "settings that children do not experience directly are also very influential" (p. 373).

To extend the notion that an individual is influenced by environments outside of their direct experience, this research proposes that due to interdependence in a system, in which each family member is influenced by the others, the communication between the father/mother subsystem has direct impacts on the child. As Littlejohn (2002) states, "What one family member does or says follows from another family member behaviors and leads to further behaviors" (p. 38). The principle of interdependence exhibits how family members are constantly influenced by each other. Thus, this theoretical framework provides insight into how subsystem communication patterns influence other members of that system.

Bray (1999) suggests that the most important subsystem in regards to family satisfaction is the father-child subsystem. The amount of affectionate communication subsystems engage in is directly related to prosperity (Morman & Floyd, 2002). Because the system is characterized by interdependence, the amount of affectionate communication expressed in the husband-wife subsystem will correspond to the amount of affectionate communication expressed in the father-child subsystem (Massey, 1986).

Although studies indicate that healthy communication such as warmth, comfort, and affection improve relationships, research that attempts to find what sparks this type of communication is crucial (Caparra et al., 2011; Schrodt et al., 2007). Researchers have yet to explore how the communication in the mother/father subsystem can affect the communication in the father/child subsystem of the family. As Dickson, Galvin, and Marrow (2006) argue, each member of the family is so interrelated that they are dependent on each other to function



properly. The interactions in the system have patterns, indicating that if there is ample affectionate communication between the mother and the father, then the father and child relationship will also include affectionate communication.

Despite that fact that parts of a system mutually influence each other, the spousal relationship may have more impact on the well-being of other subsystems, due to the mother's central location in the family and the inherent power status the adults in the family system possess. As can be seen, past research concludes that father-child relationships are the most vital dyad in the overall satisfaction of families, however the way in which this dyad thrives may be most influenced by the spousal relationship (Bray 1999).

### **Third Party Effects on Dyadic Relationships within Families**

Communication patterns expressed within dyads can affect relationships outside of the dyad interacting. Numerous studies show the impact an individual's behavior has on people in their social networks, even when they are not directly communicating (Bastiampillai, Allison, & Chan, 2013; Howles, 1985; Milgram, 1963). For example, Larson and Richards (1994) found that one's emotional state can be influenced by family member's emotional states. Emotions experienced within the stepfamily network can influence how one acts outside of the family network in other relationships. Patterns of communication that arise in family networks are constantly being enforced and reinforced, meaning that the communication patterns taking place between the father/mother dyad can impact the communication patterns in other dyadic relationships within the family.

Larson and Richards' (1994) findings suggest that the parents in families have the most impact on the emotional contagion in a family network, because they are generally perceived to have the most power. When fathers reported negative emotions, other family members were at

an increased risk of experiencing negative emotions (Larson & Richards, 1994). Emotional contagion within families demonstrates how behaviors expressed by individuals in a family spread to its other members. Most research on third party effects within social networks is rooted in a psychological perspective. However, the principles that demonstrate how emotions and behavioral norms spread in social networks can be applied to fully understand the effects of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication generates “hyperdyadic spread,” which is the spread of behavioral effects from person to person outside of a direct interaction (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). In the context of family systems, this type of spread may be examined by looking at communication patterns in separate subsystems. For example, links between the amount of affection the spouses report exchanging when the child/father subsystem reports affectionate communication. The parental subsystem’s behavior has a trickling down effect on subsequent subsystems within the family (Minuchin, 1974). Thus, exploring the nature of affectionate communication exchange in the parental subsystem may reveal how families create “norms” within the family for positive communication, via third party effects on communication

Communicative norms are behaviors specific to a system constructed within social networks, and reflect habitual way to communicate with one another. Christakis and Fowler (2011) write that “people can reinforce particular norms so that directly and indirectly connected people share the same idea about something without realizing that they are being influenced by one another” (p. 113). If affectionate communication can be reinforced in the mother/father dyad, this behavior can then affect the affectionate communication between other dyadic relationships in the stepfamily. Thus, the amount of affectionate communication between the mother and father should be a direct reflection of the amount of affectionate communication

expressed between the father and child. Subsequently, because affectionate communication affects one's well-being, the child's perception of the amount of affectionate communication exchanged between the mother and father should correlate with the well-being of the child.

A child's perception of the affectionate communication exchanged in the father/mother relationship can influence their perception of affectionate communication with the father. When a communicative norm of high amounts of affectionate communication exchange is established within the spousal subsystem, an opportunity for expressions of affection between the father and child emerges. This means that the nature of the mother/father relationship could have a direct impact on the communication patterns within other dyadic relationships in the family. Therefore, the study hypothesizes that:

*H1: Mothers' reports of spousal affection exchange will positively associate with their own and children's reports of child/father affection exchange.*

*H2: Children's reports of spousal affection exchange will positively relate to their own and mothers' reports of child/father affection exchange.*

### **Affectionate Communication and Family Satisfaction**

Affectionate communication is conceptualized as communication that promotes love, warmth, and fondness, and is a basic need for all people that contributes to one's motivation to survive (Floyd & Morman, 2003; Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Affectionate exchanges between people in a relationship improve, or maintain relational status that keeps a relationship functioning at a high level (Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Affectionate communication is a fruitful aspect of communication to explore in families, because it provides relationships with many such benefits as improved stress levels, lower cholesterol, improved relational satisfaction,

and increased relational commitment (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2010).

Expressing affectionate communication is vital for proper family functioning, as it is positively associated with commitment and satisfaction with family life. Horan and Booth-Butterfield (2010) examined effects of affectionate communication within the investment model, which measures one's commitment to a relationship via their satisfaction, investment, and quality of alternatives. Data from 72 romantic couples indicated that receiving and expressing affection were associated with greater commitment to the relationship. These results highlight the links between affectionate exchange and relationship commitment. This is significant because commitment to the spousal relationship may increase commitment to the family as a whole.

Affectionate communication is linearly related to how close, satisfied, and involved parents are with their sons (Floyd & Morman, 2001, Morman & Floyd, 1999). Morman and Floyd (1999) gathered data from 55 father/son dyads, showing that social support was the most common form of affection expressed in these relationships. Floyd and Morman (1999) also found correlations between affectionate communication self-disclosure, closeness, and satisfaction. In a similar study, Floyd and Morman (2001) examined affectionate communication between fathers and sons and showed that affectionate communication demonstrates a father's desire for their son to be suitable relational partners and have long term prosperity in life.

In contrast, the lack of affectionate communication between spouses is detrimental in establishing a happy family unit (Caparra, 2011; Morman & Floyd, 1999). Families with low affectionate communication have greater hostility towards one another and report low self-esteem levels (Caparra, 2011; Kinniburgh-White; Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Thus, little

question exists that affectionate communication is essential to satisfying relationships: family members who are high affection communicators are more satisfied in their relationships than low affection communicators (Morman & Floyd, 1999).

Understanding how affectionate communication functions as a communicative norm within family systems may offer alternative explanations as to how affectionate communication manifests in family relationships. For example, Floyd and Morman (2001) investigated whether or not men communicate affection more towards their biological sons or stepsons. The empirical evidence displayed that, in fact, men express more affectionate communication to their biological sons than to stepsons. Floyd and Morman (2001) stated that because adoption is more recent development by comparison to step-parenting, there has been no evolutionary influence on how fathers behave as parents. This bears significance because the study shows that if the only motivation to act out affectionate behavior was to pass genes along to generations, adopted children would receive the same amounts of affectionate behavior as stepchildren. Thus, a systematic theoretical approach may highlight alternative explanations as to the nature of highly affectionate families, and families who exchange low amounts of affectionate communication. Based on this past research, the study further hypothesizes that:

*H3: Mothers' reports of spousal affection exchange will positively associate with their own and children's family satisfaction.*

*H4: Children's reports of spousal affection exchange will positively associate with their own and their mother's family satisfaction.*

*H5: Mother's reports of child/father affection exchange will positively associate with their own and children's family satisfaction.*

*H6: Children's reports of child/father affection exchange will positively associate with their own and mothers' family satisfaction.*

### **The Effects of Affectionate Communication on Subjective Well-Being in Families**

Subjective well-being reflects an individual's life satisfaction, happiness, and lack of negative emotions (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Diener et al. (2003) argue that subjective well-being is a necessary element to a good life and well-functioning society. Because affectionate communication is essential to one's well-being and displays warmth, love, and fondness, exchanging affectionate communication is a gateway into immersing one's self in a family system and therefore increasing subjective well-being. Diener et al. (2003) also claim that the more an individual is socialized in their environment, the higher their subjective well-being will be. In fact, cultures that experience more positive emotions also report higher levels of subjective well-being. Since affection has been shown to increase physical and mental health, and increase positive emotional experiences, it might also increase the subjective well-being of large groups of people (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Morman & Floyd, 1999).

Affectionate communication in families is a key factor to the health and well-being of its members (Coyne, Thompson & Palmer, 2002; Floyd & Mikkelsen, 2007; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Schrod, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Previous research has demonstrated the impact affection type has on senders and receivers. For example, married couples are less likely to show signs of depression and stress when affectionate communication is prevalent (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008). Moreover, children have reported higher levels of mental well-being when their parents displayed affectionate behaviors (Schrod et al., 2007).

The health benefits of affectionate communication have been shown to be correlated with a normal resting heart rate and resting cortisol levels, as well as the heart rate and cortisol level.

increase in response to heightened stress (Floyd et al., 2007). Furthermore, people who do not receive and express affection can suffer from increased physical and mental health effects such as depression and stress. For example, Hesse and Floyd (2008) showed that people suffering from alexithymia, a personality trait that hinders one's ability to understand and process emotions, are at higher risk for decreased mental and relational well-being

Communication patterns created by parents also have a direct effect of the mental well-being of children in the family. For example, children who feel supported and are shown ample amounts of affection report high self-esteem and low levels of stress (Schrodt et al. 2007). Because the connection between parental affection and positive health effects on children is widely recognized, exploring the health effects of affectionate communication between other dyads of a family, and how they connect to a third party's mental state could help families become healthier and happier (Schrodt et al., 2007). Moreover, if affectionate communication within dyads affects the mental health status of third parties within their system as the research reviewed below shows, it may offer additional strategies for individuals to increase the health of their family members.

**Health effects of affection in marital couples.** Marital couples that display affectionate communication benefit from higher levels of physical and mental health (Floyd et al., 2007; Hesse & Floyd, 2008). For example, Floyd and Riforgiate (2008) show that affectionate communication received from spouse's impacts how one manages stress. In their study, married couples were asked to separately complete a questionnaire measuring the amount of affectionate communication present in the relationship. To measure health effects, one random participant from each couple provided four saliva samples in a normal work day, without the consumption of caffeine or food for an hour previous to taking the sample. The saliva was used to measure

cortisol levels in the participants, a direct indicator of stress levels. Results indicated that received affectionate communication correlated with healthy stress hormone levels. Floyd and Riforgiate (2008) point out that behavior interventions that lead to affectionate communication could increase the health levels of married couples because receiving affectionate communication in marriages leads greater physical well-being.

Not only does affectionate communication lead to high levels of health and well-being for married couples, it also has been shown to buffer against partner depression and marital distress (Coyne, Thompson & Palmer, 2002). Coyne et al. (2002) recruited women from the University of Michigan Depression Program along with a control group of women from the local community to complete a questionnaire measuring marital distress, conflict coping strategies, expressions of affection, complaints and regrets about marriage, and childhood adversity. Both groups were asked to give a questionnaire to their spouses to complete as well. Results showed that depressed women were less likely to express affection through support, comfort, or playful behavior. In addition, they were less likely than the control group to express affection by giving instrumental support to their partners. Depressed wives also reported more marital complaints and reported higher levels of marital distress. Additionally, husbands in the control group reported more expression of affection than did husbands with depressed wives (Coyne, et al., 2002).

These results indicate the possible relationship and patterns that emerge in affectionate communication from one member of a family to another, and its effects on health and well-being. When affectionate communication is at low levels, mental health risks are high. Women in the Coyne, et al. (2002) study who reported higher levels of affectionate communication with their spouse also reported low levels of depression. Clearly, once a pattern of inadequate



affectionate communication is established between married couples, it leads to negative mental health effects such as marital dissatisfaction, depression, and increased stress (Coyne, et al., 2002; Floyd et al. 2007). As discussed below, it is possible that these mental health effects suffered by married couples also impact the children in their families. If one assumes family members are interdependent, the lack of affectionate communication between one subsystem would have ill effects on the well-being of other family members.

**Health effects in the family network.** One's overall well-being has been shown to be affected by members of their social network (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). The mental and physical states of people in a social network constantly impact those around them. When applied to family networks, this means the mental and physical health of a child can be impacted based on the health and well-being of the father and mother. For example, when a member of a family is unhappy, the other members of that family are more likely to experience feelings of sadness or depression (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). Christakis and Fowler write "the reality is that our own anxiety makes us sick, but so does the anxiety of others" (p. 43). Positive emotions that affect health and well-being are also contagious in a social network. If a family member is experiencing happiness, people in the family network are 15% more likely to experience happiness (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). This research indicates that dyadic relationships within a family affect all members of the family, making each relationship crucial to the health and well-being of all family members.

In one experiment on emotional contagion, participants listened to positive and negative emotions, with instructions not to react to what they heard. Even with these instructions, fMRI data showed that the emotions they heard paralleled brain activity cueing the matching facial

expression (Warren, 2006). As Christakis and Fowler state, "It seems we are always poised to feel what others feel and do what others do" ( p. 40).

Affectionate communication has been shown to be one of the most influential types of communication parents' show to children. Affectionate expressions from parents to children reduce symptoms of stress and depression (Jorm, Rogers, Dear, & Christensen, 2008). Jorm et al. (2008) concluded that children are at a higher risk for mental health problems when fathers express more affection than mothers in families. Fathers' showing more affection than mothers was also correlated with more parental separation and emotional problems in the family unit (Jorm et al. 2008). As the authors suggest, a possible interpretation of these correlations is that fathers show increased affection to children as a reaction to the low amounts of affection being displayed by the mother in the family.

Clearly, members of a family cannot make up for the lack of affectionate behavior from another member. Neglecting any subsystem in a family can have negative impacts on all members, and developing all dyadic relationships in a family for the good of all its members. According to Jorm, et al. (2008), when mothers report low levels of affectionate communication to their children and spouse, they are more likely to report high levels of stress, depression, and emotional issues. Thus, health effects of affectionate communication could benefit all members of a family, even if they are not directly involved in the interaction because the members of a family are highly interdependent with one another.

In sum, research consistently shows that the well-being and health of individuals' increases when affectionate communication is present in that family relationship. Researching third party effects on health and well-being should show the true health impact of affectionate communication, or the lack of affection, in the context of families. Overall, research indicates

that affectionate communication is one of, if not the, most important aspect to a healthy family system. The health and well-being of family members may be dependent on the communicative patterns in other family dyadic relationships, and thus the study hypothesizes:

*H7: Mothers' and children's reported levels of spousal affection exchange will positively relate to both members' mental well-being.*

*H8: Mothers' and children's reported levels of child/father affection exchange will positively relate to both members' mental well-being.*

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Undergraduate students at a Northwestern university in the United States were invited to participate in exchange for extra credit. Undergraduates were eligible to participate if their biological mother was married. Students who wished to participate were sent two emails, each with links to the child and mother surveys. Mother's participation was based on students forwarding the email sent to them to their mothers; their participation was completely voluntary. Children's average age was 21.12 years old ( $SD = 3.468$ ), and parents' average age was 50.16 ( $SD = 6.316$ ). Of the 77 dyads who participated, 29 were mother/son dyads and 48 were mother/daughter dyads. Participants' report of ethnicity showed a some variance (White/Caucasian 86.5%, Black 1.2%, Hispanic/Latino 2.7%, Asian 2.0%, Native American 2.0%, Other 2.0%).

### **Procedures**

In order to test the hypotheses posed, both mothers and children completed online surveys sent to them via email. Children were asked to report their perceptions of affectionate exchange in the mother/father relationship and the child/father relationship. Moreover, they

were asked to fill out questions regarding their satisfaction with family life and overall mental well-being. Mothers were asked to report their perceptions of affectionate exchange in the mother/father relationship and the child/father relationship. They also reported their feelings of satisfaction with family life and their overall mental well-being.

## Measures

**Affectionate exchange.** To measure affectionate communication, Floyd and Morman's Affectionate Communication Index (ACI, 1998) was employed. The index consists of 19 items measuring nonverbal, verbal, and social supportive affection on a 7-point Likert-type. An example item measuring social supportive affection is "My spouse and I praise each other's accomplishments."

Reliability tests were performed for the ACI in respect to children's perceptions of total affectionate exchange between mothers and their spouses, and children's perceptions of total affectionate exchange between children and fathers. Results indicated high reliabilities with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being .94 and .93 respectively. Children's perception of nonverbal, verbal, and social support affection in the mother/spouse relationship were also tested for internal reliability. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  were .89, .90, .86, respectively. Children's perception of nonverbal, verbal, and social supportive affection in the child/father relationship showed internal consistencies of  $\alpha = .84, .87, .88$ , respectively.

The reliability for the measure of mothers' perceptions of aggregate affectionate exchange in respect to the mother/spouse relationship was Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ , and for the measure of child/father affectionate exchange,  $\alpha = .94$ . Mothers' perceptions of nonverbal, verbal, and social supportive affectionate exchange within the mother/spouse relationship showed consistencies of Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89, .87, .82$  respectively. Mother's perceptions of

nonverbal, verbal, and social supportive affectionate exchange within the child/father relationship showed reliability scores of  $\alpha = .84, .87, .88$ , respectively.

Child and mother reports of affectionate exchange in the mother/father relationship were averaged to form a scale for *total mother/father affectionate exchange* ( $M = 4.80, SD = 0.99$ ). Child and mother reports of affectionate exchange in the child/father relationship were averaged to form a scale for *total child/father affectionate exchange* ( $M = 3.32, SD = 1.05$ ). Additionally, child and mother reports of the verbal, nonverbal, and social supportive affection subscales in the mother/father relationship were averaged to form the scales of *mother/father verbal affection*, *mother/father nonverbal*, and *mother/father social supportive affection* ( $M = 3.87, 2.58, 6.04, SD = 1.52, 1.00, 0.89$ ). Lastly, child and mother reports of verbal, nonverbal, and social supportive affection in the child/father relationship were averaged to form the scales of *child/father verbal affection*, *child father nonverbal affection*, and *child/father social supportive affection* ( $M = 2.87, 2.60, 5.06, SD = 1.41, 1.00, 1.22$ ).

**Family satisfaction.** The four question version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) was utilized to measure satisfaction with family life (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The measures were edited to ask participants to report answers based on their family life. For example, participants were asked "Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your family life." The four items were averaged to form the scale *Family Satisfaction* ( $\alpha = .81; M = 4.84, SD = 0.97$ ).

**Mental well-being.** To measure mental well-being, the core measures of subjective well-being developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was employed. This measure, used in the OECD's World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs 2013) is designed to measure well-being along three dimensions: Life evaluation (i.e.,

one's overall assessment of their life), eudaimonia (i.e., a sense of meaningfulness in one's life), and affect (i.e., feelings and emotional states). The measure consists of two statements asking respondents to indicate, "Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days" (0 = Not at all satisfied; 10 = Completely satisfied), and "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile" (0 = Not at all worthwhile, 10 = Completely worthwhile). Items were averaged to indicate overall mental well-being ( $\alpha = .84$ ;  $M = 7.875$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ).

## Results

### Mother/Father and Child/Father Reports of Affectionate Exchange

The first two hypotheses were that (H1) mothers' reports of spousal affection exchange will positively associate with their own and children's reports of child/father affection exchange, and (H2) children's reports of spousal affection exchange will positively relate to their own and mothers' reports of child/father affection exchange. To test these hypotheses, an actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) was employed, as mother's and children were presumed to be interdependent (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). APIMs were evaluated using multi-level modeling, with the covariance structure identified as heterogeneous compound symmetry to allow for unequal variances for children and mothers (Kenny et al., 2006). Total affectionate exchange scores reported for mother/father and child/father dyads were centered for the analysis.

As described in Table 2, the results indicate support for both H1 and H2. Specifically, main effects emerged for both actor reports,  $F(1, 71.36) = 7.04$ ,  $B = 0.36$ ,  $t = 2.65$ ,  $p < .01$ , and partner reports  $F(1, 71.30) = 17.86$ ,  $B = 0.49$ ,  $t = 4.23$ ,  $p < .01$  of spousal affection, indicating positive associations between both mothers' and children's perceptions of affection exchanged in the spousal relationship and the degree of affection exchanged in the child/father relationship.

The results further indicate significant interaction effects between the family role (i.e., mother or child) and the amount of reported spousal affection on the reported degree of child/father affection. As displayed in Figure 1, actors' reports of child/father affection were highest when mothers (as partners) reported higher levels of spousal affection, and lowest when they reported low spousal affection. Likewise, Figure 2 shows that children (as actors) reported higher levels of affection with fathers when actor reports of spousal affection were high, and were lowest when actor reports of spousal affection were low. However, the figure also shows that actor reports of child/father affection were higher when both mothers and children (as actors) reported high degrees of spousal affection, and lower when they reported low degrees of spousal affection.

#### **Affectionate exchange and satisfaction with family life.**

Hypotheses three – six tested the associations between family satisfaction and reported levels of spousal affection exchange and child/father affection exchange. The results indicate partial support for these hypotheses. As can be seen in Table 3, the main effects indicate a positive association between actor perceptions of spousal affection and family satisfaction (H3 and H4). However, no interpersonal (i.e., partner) or interaction effects emerged, suggesting that one's family satisfaction is associated with one's own perceptions of affection exchange between spouses, regardless of whether the reporter is the mother or the child.

A similar finding emerged for the associations between perceptions of child/father affection exchange and family satisfaction (H5 and H6). As in Table 4, a significant main effect emerged for actor perceptions of child/father affection exchange, indicating that one's own perceptions of child/father affection exchange are related to one's family satisfaction. However, an interaction effect also emerged between role and partner reports of child/father affection

exchange, indicating a difference between mothers and children in family satisfaction according to perceived child/father affection exchange. As Figure 3 shows, children's family satisfaction was slightly higher than mothers' when mothers (as partners) reported higher levels of child/father affection exchange.

### **Affectionate exchange and mental well-being.**

Hypotheses seven and eight, which predicted that mothers' and children's perceptions of spousal affection exchange (H7) and their perceptions of child/father affection exchange (H8) will positively relate to their mental well-being, both received partial support. For H7, a positive main effect emerged for actors' reports of child/father affection exchange on actors' mental well-being, regardless of role. In other words, both mothers and children reported higher degrees of mental well-being when they perceived greater degrees of spousal affection exchange (see Table 5).

Likewise, for H8, we found a main effect for actors' perceptions of child/father affection exchange on actors' reported mental well-being, regardless of role (see Table 6). This finding adds to the above by showing that both mothers' and children's own perceptions of child/father affection exchange associate with greater mental well-being.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this research was to examine how affectionate communication exchanged in one's own family relationships and the relationship of other subsystems within that family effect perceptions of affection, family satisfaction, and mental well-being in the family system. The research was aimed at understanding how communication outside of an individual's dyadic interactions impacts their communication, thoughts, and feelings within their family relationships. The results highlight the ways in which affectionate exchange expressed in certain subsystems influences how a family system functions, and illustrate that affectionate



communication exchanged within certain subsystems of a family impact family members' satisfaction affectionate communication exchange, mental well-being, and perceptions of affectionate communication exchange within other family subsystems. As predicted, mother's reports of affectionate exchange with the father affected the amount of affectionate the child perceived exchanging with the father. Additionally, the child's perception of affectionate exchanged with the father predicted mother's reports of satisfaction with family life. These findings provide fruitful insight into how communication within dyadic relationships affects the systems in which they are embedded.

Results generally indicated that when mothers and children perceive a high amount of affectionate exchange between the mother/father relationship, they also perceive a high amount of affection in the child/father relationship. These results are in line with the principle of interdependence, indicating that members of a system mutually influence one another. Essentially, affection in one subsystem is related to perceptions of affection in another subsystem because the individuals may recognize affection as a communicative norm. That is, when one subsystem is highly affectionate, other subsystems appear to follow these communicative patterns.

More specifically, the results most notably revealed significant partner effects on actor reports of child/father affection, such that mothers' increased reports of spousal affectionate exchange associated with an increase in children's (actors') reports of child/father affection (See Figure 1). Just as Larson and Richards (1994) found that one's emotional state can be influenced by other family member's emotional states, this finding shows that communication in one subsystem of the family can influence other family members' communicative patterns. Children may be influenced directly or indirectly by affection being exchanged within the mother/father

dyad, making them more affectionate communicators with their fathers. Given these findings, one might surmise that fathers in highly affectionate marriages might also be influenced by the communication patterns within their marriage, and communicate higher degrees of affection with their children as a result. Practically, a possible interpretation of these results is that if mothers wish for more affectionate communication between fathers and children, they might attempt to increase the level of overt affection with their husband.

The study further predicted that spousal affection and child/father affection would each impact family satisfaction. Indeed, we found actor effects on family satisfaction for both reported spousal affection and child/father affection. However, we also found an interaction effect for child/father affection by partner role, such that children were more satisfied with their family life when mothers reported high degrees of child/father affection exchange. These findings are consistent with other research showing that affectionate communication is linearly related to how satisfied individuals feel in their intimate relationships (Floyd & Morman, 2001), but add to the literature by demonstrating third-party effects of interaction, essentially showing that children's family satisfaction is predicted by third-party observations (mothers' perceptions) of how much affection they exchange with their father. Future research might choose to explore this finding further, examining, for example, the possibility that mothers also tend to increase affectionate communication with children who they believe to have greater affection exchange with their fathers. An important caveat to note, however, would be our finding that mothers' family satisfaction was actually slightly higher when children's (partner) reports of child/father affection were low. On one hand, this finding could speak to some possible tension between mothers and children in regard to affection exchanged with fathers/spouses. On the other hand, we the participants in this study tended to report rather high levels of family satisfaction on

average. Thus, it is difficult to know the true extent to which partner reports of child/father affection impact family satisfaction by role. Future studies might consider also including family members who have somewhat lower levels of family satisfaction to further test such hypotheses.

In addition to affectionate exchange being related to family satisfaction levels, results showed that actor perceptions (both mother and child) of spousal affection and child/father affection affected their reports of mental well-being. Specifically, mothers reported higher degrees of mental well-being when they also reported higher degrees of affection in their marriage. Additionally, children reported higher levels of mental well-being when they also reported higher degrees of perceived spousal affectionate. These findings concur with previous research showing connections between affectionate communication and mental well-being (Coyne et al., 2002; Jorm et al., 2008), and provide additional evidence for the theoretical notion that communication exchanged between dyads directly affects the mental well-being of other individuals within the system. Again, the findings speak to the importance of knowing more about the possible third-party effects of dyadic interactions. Practically speaking, our findings suggest possible therapeutic benefits for mothers and children as a function of increased affection exchanged with spouses and fathers.

### **Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research**

The findings of this study contribute to current research by showing that not only does child/father affection change as a function of perceived spousal affection, but also that family satisfaction and mental well-being are partly determined by is a unique contribution due to the fact that shows the effect that communication patterns within a dyad can have on the communication patters, thoughts, and feelings of people entrenched in that system. While past research provides evidence that affectionate communication is expressed from fathers to children

for evolutionary purposes, these findings indicate that affectionate communication may be a behavior that is reinforced through various subsystems within a family, and a father may be influenced to express higher degrees of affection towards their children if they experience high amounts of affectionate communication exchanges in their marriage.

That said, there are some aspects of the study that warrant consideration while interpreting the results. First, more than half of the dyads studied were mother/daughter dyads (62.3%). Research indicates that sons may be less likely to have affectionate relationships with their fathers. Therefore a higher representation of mother/son dyads (38.7%) may have yielded different results. Second, the sample consisted of generally well-adjusted and mentally healthy individuals. A difference in recruitment strategies may lead to a more representative sample, as mothers filled out online surveys voluntarily upon the request from their child. A random sample would be necessary to further generalize the effects of affectionate communication exchanged within certain dyads and its effects on mental well-being.

Overall, this study provides a new way of understanding the effects of affectionate communication in family systems. Additionally, it highlighted the impact of communicative behaviors within dyads on individuals outside of their direct experience, and provided a nuanced explanation for the nature of affectionate communication exchanged in the child/father relationship. Future research should continue to explore the effects of communication within interpersonal relationships on the people embedded in their social networks and specific systems. While most research in interpersonal communication focuses on the effects of communicative behaviors on the individuals within that relationship, studying the effects of a dyad's communication on the people within their social network will provide a broader understanding of the implications of interpersonal communication.

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Figure 1

*Interaction between role and partner perceptions of spousal affection on actor perceptions of Child/Father Affection*

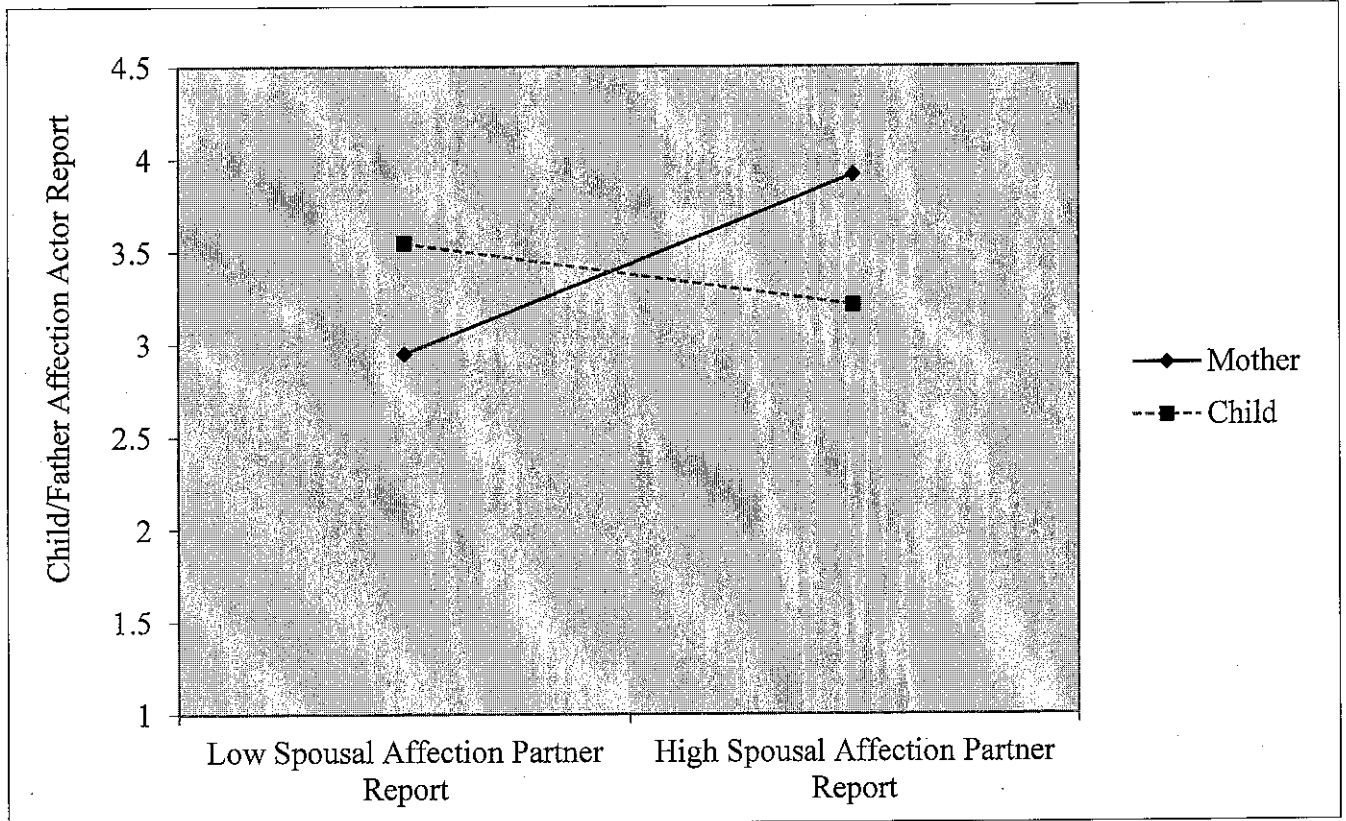


Figure 2

*The interaction between actor role and reports of spousal affection exchange on actor perceptions of child/father affection exchange.*

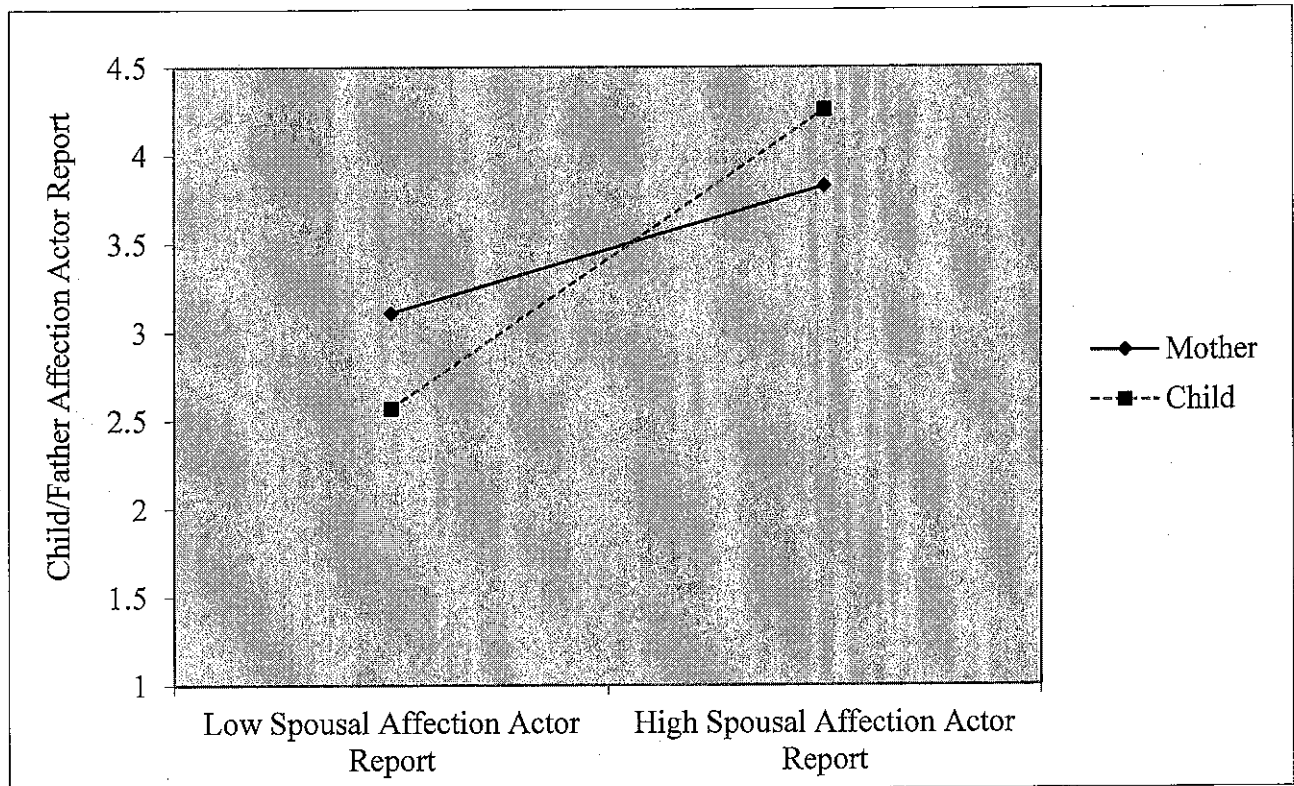


Figure 3

*The interaction between role and partner's reports of child/father exchange, on actor reports of family satisfaction.*

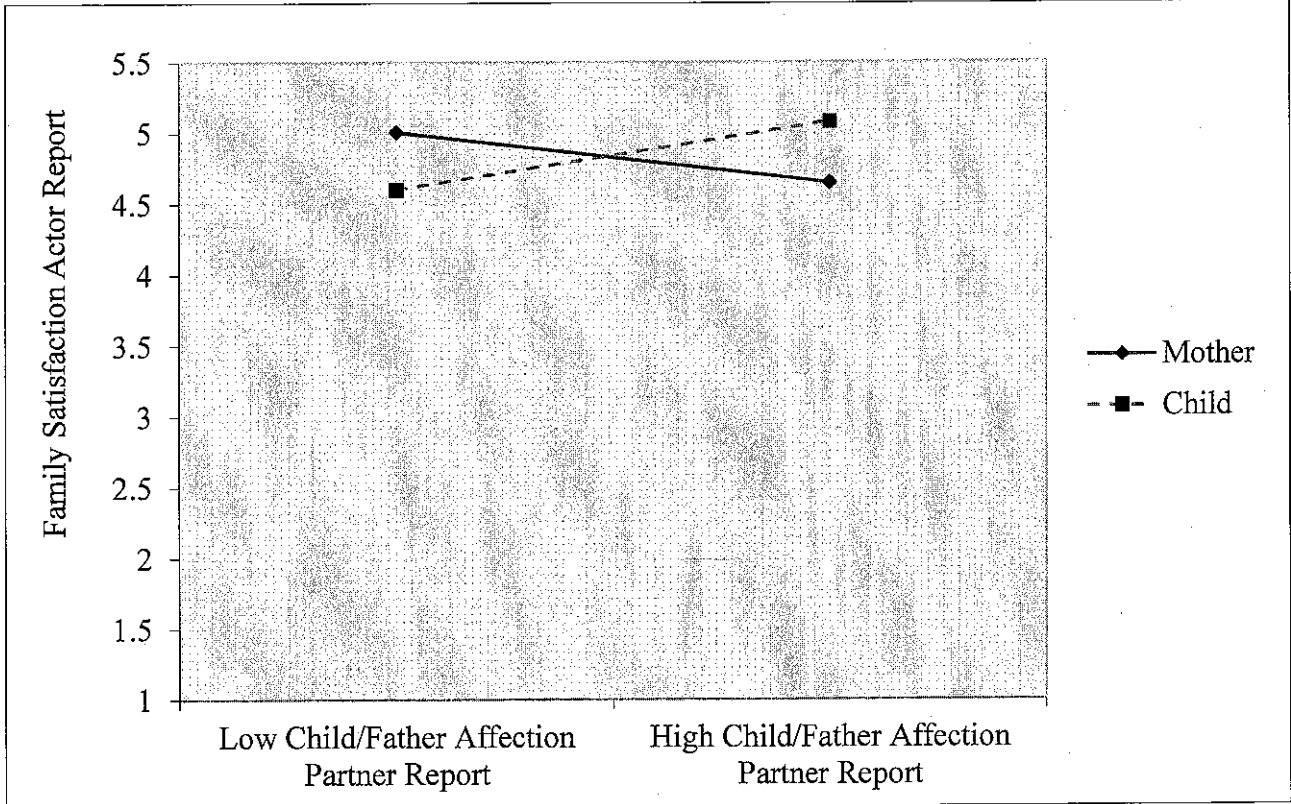


Table 1

*Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Affectionate Communication Exchanged, Mental Well-Being, and Family Satisfaction.*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>
1 Mother/Father Affection	.68**	.50**	.29**	4.88 (0.99)	.93
2 Child/Father Affection		.37**	.26**	3.32 (1.05)	.93
3 Mental Well-Being			.50**	7.88 (1.50)	.84
4 Family Satisfaction				4.38 (0.97)	.81

\*\* =  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

Table 2

*The effects of reported spousal affection and family role on reports of child/father affection exchange.*

<b>Effects</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
					(one tailed)
Mother/father affection (actor)	.36	.14	71.36	2.65	.01
Mother/father affection (partner)	.49	.11	71.30	4.23	.01
Mother/father affection (actor) * role	.49	.21	77.16	2.34	.01
Mother/father affection (partner) * role	-.65	.20	77.31	-3.21	.01

Table 3

*The effects of reported spousal affection exchange on family satisfaction.*

<b>Main effect</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
					(one tailed)
Mother/Father Affection (actor)	.37	.14	69.68	2.73	.01
Mother/Father Affection (partner)	.03	.12	69.67	.233	.41
Mother/Father Affection (actor)* role	.21	.20	91.12	1.03	.15
Mother/Father Affection (partner)* role	-.19	.20	88.61	-.92	.18

Table 4

*The effects of reported child/father affectionate exchange and family satisfaction.*

<b>Main effect</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
					(one tailed)
Child/father affection (actor)	.39	.14	69.10	2.68	.01
Child/father affection (partner)	-.17	.15	69.14	-1.18	.12
Child/father affection (actor) * role	-.18	.24	81.00	-.77	.22
Child/father affection (partner) * role	.40	.24	81.36	1.70	.01

Table 5

*The effects of reported mother/father affectionate exchange on mental well-being.*

<b>Main effect</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
					(one tailed)
Mother/father affection (actor)	.42	.25	69.03	1.66	.05
Mother/father affection (partner)	-.05	.21	69.00	-.23	.41
Mother/father affection (actor) * role	-.04	.36	90.72	-.011	.49
Mother/father affection (partner) * role	.04	.36	90.48	.10	.46

Table 6

*The effects of reported child/father affection exchange on mental well-being.*

<b>Main effect</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
					(one tailed)
Child/father affection (actor)	.42	.26	68.43	1.62	.05
Child/father affection (partner)	-.24	.26	68.46	-.93	.18
Child/father affection (actor) * role	-.27	.40	80.36	-.67	.25
Child/father affection (partner) * role	.53	.40	80.97	1.33	.09