

**Communicating affection:
Interpersonal behavior and social
context**

Kory Floyd

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Over the past decade, the name most associated with the study of affectionate communication has been Kory Floyd. His research has been so instrumental that he was recently honored with the Gerald R. Miller Early

Career Achievement Award. His latest scholarly accomplishment comes in the form of a book, which has the primary goal of delineating “why affectionate communication is often so volatile: why it can produce very positive effects and why, even when it is enacted with benevolent intentions, it can produce quite negative outcomes” (p. 3).

Much of the book focuses on previous research and provides an extensive review of research associated with affection. However, as Floyd points out, a great deal of affection research has been exploratory and atheoretical. Specifically, most of the theories were not developed to explain and predict affectionate behavior but rather some other social science phenomenon. This assertion, which is reiterated at later points in the book, serves Floyd well as he sets the stage for the eventual presentation of *his* theoretical approach.

The research review begins with a comparison of the two predominant paradigms that apply to affection research—bioevolutionary versus sociocultural. A number of the theories mentioned within the two paradigms are recognizable to the reader (e.g., Darwin’s emotion expression theory, social exchange theory, expectancy violations theory).

Two of the research review chapters are devoted to the encoding and decoding of affectionate expressions. In the encoding chapter, Floyd asserts that much of the early research was approached from a two-dimensional perspective that focused on verbal and nonverbal dimensions and failed to account for supportive behaviors. He contends that individuals engage in supportive behaviors for the purpose of expressing affection and that a tripartite model that includes verbal, nonverbal, and social-support dimensions is more appropriate.

The decoding chapter focuses on how receivers interpret affectionate messages and how they respond to them. As Floyd points out, the body of research that addresses decoding is smaller than that which addresses encoding. This is particularly true within the

affectionate social support area. However, the absence of research does not limit Floyd’s discussion. In fact, the decoding chapter seemed more extensive than the encoding chapter.

There are two chapters that address outcomes of communicating affection, namely the benefits and risks (yes, risks). The chapter that addresses benefits pursues two questions—What are the benefits? Why is affectionate communication beneficial? Although the answers to both of these questions may seem obvious, Floyd does a good job discussing a variety of studies that relate to individual and relational benefits.

The chapter that addresses risks is considerably more intriguing, perhaps because intuitively we do not associate negative outcomes with affectionate communication. Floyd recognizes this juxtaposition and notes the minimal amount of research within the risk perspective. However, the minimal research does not limit the discussion (some of which he admits is longer on speculation than evidence), which focuses on risks experienced by senders (e.g., misinterpretation, social censure, nonreciprocity) and receivers (e.g., relational boundary ambiguity, expectations of reciprocity, manipulation).

Although all of these chapters provide a thorough examination of affection research and justify the book’s existence, it is clear that the real reason for the book is Floyd’s explication of a new theory, one that he labels affection exchange theory (AET). His primary theoretical argument is that “human affectionate behavior is, in large part, adaptive; that it contributes directly to human survival and procreation; and that affectionate communication therefore produces evolutionary advantages, making affectionate individuals better adapted than nonaffectionate individuals” (pp. 159–160). Although the theory has Darwinian overtones, Floyd makes it clear that it is not intended as an extension of the theory of natural selection. Rather, AET addresses how humans are motivated by two superordinate evolutionary goals—procreation and survival—and how affectionate

behaviors serve both of these goals. Further, individuals may not be consciously aware of the relationship between the behaviors and the goals.

Explication of the theory involves five postulates and eight subpostulates, and it is clear that Floyd is attempting to further position affectionate communication research as a distinct entity and not a subsidiary of other research paradigms. His intent is to fully illuminate, “the substantial role that affectionate communication plays in the human social agenda” (p. 184). Considering the prevalence and impact of affectionate communication in daily life, his stance appears well developed and with a high degree of merit. The same can be said of the book.

Robert Lemieux
McDaniel College