
Brief Report

“I Love You, Man”: Overt Expressions of Affection in Male–Male Interaction¹

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Despite the importance of affectionate communication for relational development and maintenance, individuals expressing affection incur a number of risks, including possible misinterpretation of the expressions as sexual overtures. These risks appear to be magnified in the male-male relationship, where overt expressions of affection may be all but prohibited by normative expectancies. The present study examines expectancies for appropriate male-male affection. Although empirical research supports the idea that overt affection is considered less appropriate in male-male relationships than in relationships with women, it also suggests that three variables may moderate this expectancy: relationship type, emotional intensity of the context, and privacy level of the context. An experimental procedure with 140 men (approximately 95% caucasian) confirmed the moderating effects of these variables.

The sharing of affection has long been recognized as a fundamental human need. Schutz (1958, 1966) was one of the first theorists to recognize the legitimacy of affection needs within interpersonal relationships. According to Schutz, affection is inherent to relational situations involving love, emotional closeness, personal confidences, and intimacy. Following suit, Rotter, Chance, and Phares (1972) classified affection as one of six fundamental human needs. Similarly, Frank (1973) and Koch (1959) both emphasized

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the significance of affection within therapeutic interventions, while Bowlby (1953) and Harlow (1974) commented on the key role affection plays in developmental psychological processes.

Despite its importance, affectionate communication invites numerous risks, including the risk that the intended meaning behind affectionate expressions will be misinterpreted. Such risks may be magnified in the male-male relationship, where overt expressions of affection may be all but prohibited by normative expectancies. Of course, this was not always the case. In 19th century America, young men developed romantic friendships with each other that today would be mistaken for homosexual relationships. They wrote love letters to each other, slept in the same bed, held each other physically, and confided intimate in each other. Moreover, these romantic friendships were widely accepted by both men and women (Rوندو, 1993).

In contemporary times, however, culturally ingrained aspects of the male gender role may inhibit men from expressing affection to each other even when they feel it (Floyd, 1997b). Rabinowitz (1991) documented this inhibition in his observations of male-male embracing, noting that even within a support-group environment, men often experience marked psychological distress while hugging other men. Reports of this distress resound in interviews with men conducted by Swain (1989) and Floyd (1996b), whose respondents reported that they were usually highly cautious about expressing affection either verbally or nonverbally to their male friends, to avoid giving their friends "the wrong idea."

There is ample empirical evidence that both men and women consider the overt communication of affection to be more appropriate in relationships involving at least one woman than in male-male pairs. Less studied, however, have been the variables that moderate this proscription against male-male affection. The present experiment tests the effects of three variables on men's expectancies for appropriate overt affection in same-sex relationships: 1) the type of relationship; 2) the emotional intensity of the context; and, 3) the privacy level of the context. Below, we briefly review findings on the proscription against male-male affection and then summarize research suggesting the moderating effects of these variables.

Factors Influencing Expectations for Affectionate Communication

Numerous empirical reports have documented that men in same-sex relationships are less affectionate than men in opposite-sex relationships or women in either configuration. For example, Sprecher and Sedikides (1993) reported that women in their study communicated more total emotion than men and specifically expressed greater levels of several positive

emotions associated with affection, including love, liking, joy, and contentment (see also Shuntich & Shapiro, 1991). Others have found that women in same- and opposite-sex friendships value overt expressions of affection, such as saying "I love you," more than do men (e.g., Floyd, in press). Indeed, the relative lack of overt male-male affection in our culture appears to have fueled prototypical images of male same-sex relationships as non-intimate and emotionally lacking (Wood & Inman, 1992; cf Swain's 1989 male deficit model).

The sociocultural nature of this proscription against male-male affection poses the question as to what circumstances temper it. When is overt affection between men considered appropriate? Empirical research suggests that three variables in particular may influence the perceived appropriateness of affectionate communication between men. First, men who are related, such as brothers, may be less subject to the proscription against male-male affection than are non-related men. Swain's (1989) *covert intimacy perspective* provides a theoretic rationale: men may explicitly refrain from expressing affection to their male friends overtly, out of fear of being seen as homosexual. It is logical, however, that brothers are less bound by this rule than are non-related men, given that cultural proscriptions against intrafamilial sexual interaction should deflate suspicions of a sexual relationship between brothers.

Some empirical evidence supports this idea. In a study of adult fraternal relationships, Floyd (1996c, 1997a) found that men considered it more appropriate to express affection verbally and nonverbally to their brothers than to men to whom they were not related. Similarly, in a comparison of same-sex friends and same-sex siblings, Floyd (1995) reported that siblings considered it more appropriate to hug, to say they like each other, and to say they love each other, than did friends (see also Floyd, 1997c).

Second, men may find it more appropriate to be affectionate with same-sex others in situations that are emotionally charged in some way. Rabinowitz (1991) suggested that in emotionally charged contexts, such as a wedding, a graduation, or a funeral, it may be more appropriate for men to hug or say they love each other, even though they may consider these behaviors to be inappropriate in other, more emotionally neutral contexts (see also Doyle, 1989). This effect may result from the ability to attribute such affectionate behaviors to the demands of the situation, further insulating relational partners from the risky attributions their affectionate behaviors might otherwise invite.

Finally, it may also make a difference whether the context is private or public. According to Ekman and Friesen's (1969) principle of cultural display rules, for example, culturally prescribed mandates dictate that certain emotional displays are more acceptable in one context or another. Al-

though the effect of this variable on affectionate communication has not yet been studied empirically, it may be that for nonromantic relationships, affectionate communication will be considered more appropriate in public contexts than in private ones. This may seem counterintuitive because, as Burgoon (1993) noted, displays of affection among romantic couples are sometimes considered to be less appropriate in public than in private. However, it may be that because affection is so heavily associated with romance, nonromantic relational partners must work harder to arrive at attributions for each others' affectionate behaviors. Favorable, non-threatening attributions may be more easily drawn from public than private behavior. In the case of a man receiving a hug from his male friend, for example, the recipient may be less likely to question the meaning behind the gesture if he knows the friend is aware that the behavior is also being seen by others. The same behavior in a private context may cause a greater attributional crisis for the recipient because the visibility of the behavior cannot be used to mitigate against unfavorable attributions.

In summary, it appears that, although affection is less common in male-male dyads than in relationships involving at least one female, a number of variables moderate this effect. Specifically, the type of relationship and elements of the context may individually or collectively influence how appropriate men perceive affectionate behaviors to be in their same-sex relationships. The present study employs an experimental methodology to isolate these effects. Our specific hypotheses are as follows:

- H1: Relationship type affects expectancies for affectionate communication, such that affection is considered more appropriate among brothers than among male friends.
- H2: The emotional intensity of an interaction affects expectancies, such that affectionate communication is considered less appropriate in emotionally neutral contexts than in emotionally charged contexts.
- H3: The privacy level of an interaction affects expectancies, such that affectionate communication is considered more appropriate in public than in private contexts.

In addition, we predict that emotional intensity and privacy level interact to affect expectancies for affectionate communication. Specifically, since we predict a wider bandwidth of appropriate affectionate behaviors in public contexts, we expect that emotional intensity has a greater effect on perceived appropriateness in the private contexts. Therefore:

- H4: Emotional intensity and privacy level interact such that the difference between emotionally charged and neutral contexts is greater in private than in public situations.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 140 male undergraduates, approximately 95% caucasian, recruited from a large Southwest university and a large Midwest community college. Their ages ranged from 17 to 42, with an average of 21.01 ($SD = 3.90$). Approximately half reported on a same-sex friend and the other half on a brother. Those assigned to the friend condition selected someone they considered a close friend, excluding relatives. Those reporting on a brother were asked to consider only full biological, non-twin brothers.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (friend v. sibling) \times 3 (emotional valence: negative, neutral, or positive) \times 2 (public v. private) completely crossed factorial design. Subjects completed a questionnaire in reference to their target relationship and returned it anonymously to the investigators.

Manipulations

Contextual privacy and intensity were manipulated by presenting each subject with one of six situational descriptions, representing three emotional valences and two levels of privacy, and asking subjects to report their perceptions of appropriate affectionate behavior as if they were interacting with their target in the situation described. Instructions read: "Imagine that this person and you are in the situation described below. We are interested in what forms of expressing affection you would find appropriate or inappropriate in that situation. [Situation is presented.] With this setting in mind, how appropriate do you think each of the following behaviors would be as a way for you to express affection to this person?"

Those in the emotionally negative conditions were asked to imagine interacting with their target at a funeral for someone close to the target (public), or alone with the target at the subject's home when the subject has just been informed of the death (private). Those in the emotionally neutral conditions were asked to imagine interacting with their target while attending a class together (public), or while studying alone together at the subject's home (private). Finally, those in the emotionally positive conditions imagined interacting with their target at the target's wedding (public), or alone with the target in the subject's home when the subject has just been informed of the target's impending marriage (private). Exact wording

for each of the six conditions is found in the appendix. This method of manipulating situational characteristics by introducing contextual descriptions has been used successfully by researchers in other content areas, as well (e.g., Bullis & Horn, 1995).

Measure

Expectancies for affectionate communication were assessed using a 13-item instrument developed by Floyd (1997b, 1997c). Following presentation of the appropriate situational description, subjects were presented with 13 verbal and nonverbal affectionate behaviors and asked to indicate, on a seven-point scale, how appropriate they perceive it would be to perform each of the behaviors in the given situation as a means of communicating affection to their target. Higher scores indicate higher perceived appropriateness. Although both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are presented, there is no hypothesized difference between expectancies for each. Therefore, a total expectancy score is calculated by summing responses to all 13 items (coefficient $\alpha = .82$). The resulting score has a theoretic range of 13 to 91. Content validity was assessed and confirmed by Floyd (1997b).

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Subjects were asked to rate the emotional valence of the situation described to them, on a seven-point scale anchored at -3 with "highly negative" and at +3 with "highly positive." They were also asked to rate the privacy level of the situation, on a seven-point scale anchored at -3 with "very private" and at +3 with "very public." Scores on both scales were converted to a range of 1 to 7 to test the manipulations. Both manipulations were checked using planned 1 *df* contrasts.

Those in the emotionally negative condition saw their situation as significantly less positive ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .77$) than did those in the emotionally neutral condition ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .96$), $t(365) = -18.40$, $p < .001$. Likewise, those in the neutral condition saw their situation as significantly less positive than those in the positive condition ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(365) = -16.24$, $p < .001$. Finally, those in the public condition saw their situation as significantly more public ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.25$) than those in the private condition ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(359) = 24.53$, $p < .001$. Therefore, both manipulations operated as intended.

Omnibus Analysis

Scores for perceived appropriateness of affectionate communication were analyzed using a 2 (relational type) \times 3 (emotional valence) \times 2 (privacy level) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the three-way interaction suppressed due to the small sample size per cell and the absence of an hypothesized higher-order interaction. Hypothesized relationships were tested with planned 1 *df* contrasts. As detailed below, all hypothesized effects emerged as significant.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis was that affectionate communication would be considered to be more appropriate among brothers than among male friends. Relational type significantly affected scores for perceived appropriateness of affectionate communication, $F(1, 141) = 15.32, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$. As hypothesized, mean scores were higher for siblings ($M = 49.00, SD = 19.81$) than for friends ($M = 38.48, SD = 13.46$). Hypothesis one is supported.

The second hypothesis was that affection would be considered more appropriate in emotionally charged contexts than emotionally neutral ones. The emotional intensity of the context affected the perceived appropriateness of affectionate communication, $F(2, 141) = 4.16, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$. It was predicted that the significant difference would be between the neutral group and the two emotionally charged groups collectively; this difference was probed using a 1 *df* contrast. (Contrast coefficients were 1, -2, 1 for the negative, neutral, and positive conditions, respectively.) The contrast was significant, $t(124) = 2.62, p = .01$. As hypothesized, mean scores were lower for the neutral condition ($M = 34.54, SD = 15.92$) than for the combined positive and negative conditions ($M = 41.77, SD = 12.91$). Hypothesis two is supported.

Our third hypothesis was that affection would be considered more appropriate in public situations than in private ones. The privacy level of interactive contexts affected the perceived appropriateness of affectionate behavior, $F(1, 141) = 6.50, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$. As predicted, mean scores were higher for those in the public conditions ($M = 42.42, SD = 14.38$) than for those in the private conditions ($M = 36.11, SD = 13.65$). Hypothesis three is supported.

An ordinal interaction was proposed in our fourth hypothesis between privacy and emotional intensity, such that the difference between emotionally charged and emotionally neutral contexts would be greater in private situations than in public situations. The omnibus interaction effect was significant, $F(2, 141) = 3.40, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Planned contrasts revealed that, in the public condition, there was no significant difference between the

charged and neutral valence conditions (contrast coefficients were 1, -2, 1 for the negative, neutral, and positive conditions, respectively), $t(70) = .12$, $p > .05$. In private situations, however, affectionate communication was considered significantly less appropriate in the neutral condition ($M = 27.70$, $SD = 8.03$) than in the positive and negative conditions combined ($M = 42.55$, $SD = 16.06$), $t(66) = -3.63$, $p = .001$. Hypothesis four is supported.

DISCUSSION

Predictions about the influence of relational and contextual variables on men's expectancies for affectionate communication were substantially supported. As hypothesized, affection between men was considered to be more appropriate: 1) among brothers than among male friends; 2) in emotionally charged situations than emotionally neutral situations; and, 3) in public contexts than in private contexts. Moreover, emotional intensity and privacy interacted, such that the difference between emotionally charged and neutral situations was greater in private than in public contexts. Research implications of these findings are offered subsequently.

Despite evidence that overt affectionate behavior is generally considered to be less appropriate in male-male relationships than in relationships involving at least one woman, extant research suggested that the proscription against male-male affection may be somewhat attenuated in familial relationships. Brothers in the present study did report significantly greater perceived appropriateness of affectionate behavior than did male friends, supporting the moderating effect of relationship type. As suggested above, this may reflect the fact that potential sexual messages associated with affectionate expressions are simply not as plausible among kin as they are among platonic friends, given cultural proscriptions against intrafamilial sexual involvement. It would be worthwhile to attempt to replicate this finding with other male-male familial relationships, such as between fathers and sons.

The present study also demonstrated that the proscription against male-male affection is relaxed in particular situations. First, respondents in our study perceived affection to be more appropriate in contexts that were emotionally charged in some way (such as a wedding, a graduation, or a funeral). As we suggested earlier, we suspect that this effect results from the ability to attribute affectionate behaviors to the demand characteristics of these situations. Here again, it would be worthwhile to replicate this test using other emotionally charged contexts.

Second, male-male affection was perceived to be more appropriate in public than in private, ostensibly because the risky attributions it may engender are more easily dismissed if the behavior is not being hidden from others.

An ordinal interaction also emerged between emotional intensity and privacy. Presumably because there is already a greater theoretic bandwidth of appropriate affectionate behaviors in public situations, the level of emotional intensity had a greater effect on expectancies for private contexts.

Considered in concert, these findings add to the body of knowledge on affectionate communication in general and on male-male relationships in particular through the identification of variables that moderate the prescription against overt male-male affectionate behavior. Although there is almost unanimous empirical agreement that affection is less appropriate between men than in relationships involving a female, exceptions to the rule were offered and empirically confirmed. Whether these variables exert the same effect on actual behavior is a question that must be deferred to future studies; however, their influence on expectations raises the question of how apparent contradictions in expectancies are negotiated. For example, when there is an expectancy that affection is appropriate between siblings but inappropriate between men, how do brothers negotiate that tension? According to the present findings, the familial connection tempers the gender role expectancy; other variables, however, may not. Future research efforts should be directed at understanding those variables that shape expectancies for interpersonal behavior, and the influences they have.

The study is limited in terms of its use of college-aged subjects. However, many suggest that respondents in this age group are ideal for the study of platonic friendships, given the heightened importance often placed on friendship at that stage of life (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). Further, while college students may be somewhat overrepresented in research on friendship, they are seriously underrepresented in research on sibling relationships. Rather, most studies of siblings focus either on children (e.g., Stocker & Dunn, 1990) or on older adults (e.g., Connidis, 1989). Nevertheless, comparable measures with different age groups may be fruitful. Although extant research on affection does not suggest differential effects due to age, it may still be informative to test predictions regarding expectancies for affection using respondents from varying age groups.

APPENDIX

Situational Descriptions

1. *Private Context/Positive Intensity*

Imagine that this person comes over to your home and tells you that he or she has just gotten engaged to be married. Both of you are alone in your living room when you receive this news. You are also asked to be in the wedding party.

2. *Public Context/Positive Intensity*
Imagine that you are in the wedding party at this person's wedding. The ceremony is taking place at a large local church and there are over 300 people in attendance. After the wedding, the two of you are talking.
3. *Private Context/Negative Intensity*
Imagine that this person comes over to your home and tells you that a close friend has just died of a sudden, massive heart attack. Both of you are alone in your living room when you receive this news.
4. *Public Context/Negative Intensity*
Imagine that you are at the funeral of a friend close to this person, who has suddenly died of a massive heart attack. The funeral is taking place at a large local church and there are over 300 people in attendance. After the funeral, the two of you are talking.
5. *Private Context/Emotionally Neutral*
Imagine that the two of you are alone in your home talking as you both study together for an upcoming exam.
6. *Public Context/Emotionally Neutral*
Imagine that the two of you are talking in a classroom at school. Several other students are in the room.

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