

Philematology with Dr. Robin Dunbar

Ologies Podcast

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Oh Heey, it's yesterday's coffee that's now today's iced coffee, Alie Ward, back with a tender, sloppy, heartfelt episode of *Ologies*. Ohhhh kissing! Oh smoochin'! Suckin' face. Who? Why? For how long? How? That's right, this week we're gonna go all the way to first base. But before we toss any balls, let's say some thank yous to all the folks at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies) for supporting the show since literally day one, for being our backbone. Also, for all the folks wearing your *Ologies* hats, and backpacks, and shirts, and drinking cold coffee out of *Ologies* mugs. And for all the folks who tell friends, and tweet, and 'gram about the podcast, and hit subscribe, give it a rating on iTunes, keeping it up in the charts, and especially y'all who review. You know I creep 'em like a crush. Each week I read you a fresh one, such as this one from oldzeb22 who says:

This is the podcast I suggest to my friends and family more than any other. Dad Ward is the fun-loving, foul-mouthed, bat-defending, nerdy friend your mother warned you about, who also casually mentions that she has several dead birds in her freezer, which I hope she's using for good and not to do some terrible prank on a neighbor. Keep up the great work. Stay safe. Keep 'em coming.

I would never waste dead birds like that. But thank you, oldzeb, I appreciate it. Thank you to everyone who's spreading this show around via word of mouth. Speaking of mouths, let's jump right into them.

Philematology. It's a real word. It's the study of kissing. It comes from *philema*, meaning 'a kiss' in the Greek tongue. As soon as I saw this word years ago, I just longed to probe the topic. I searched scientific journals just for the word 'kissing' and then I found several studies done by a Professor and Anthropologist at Oxford in the UK. Hot diggity, boy howdy! This dude was legit. He got a Bachelor's and a Master's in Psychology and Philosophy from Oxford University, a PhD in Psychology on the social dynamics of gelada baboons. He's a professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford. He's been an author on over 400 articles in scientific journals, including such hits like "What's in a Kiss? The Effect of Romantic Kissing on Mate Desirability" and, "Examining the Possible Functions of Kissing in Romantic Relationships."

If you've ever heard the notion that humans can only have about 150 stable friendships - that's all him! It's called "Dunbar's Number." He explained it casually as, "the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar. Ah! I wanted to be one of his 150 and interview him. So much. So I emailed him, and he wrote back... saying no... but more politely. A quick two-sentence rejection, "I'm afraid I'm just too tied up with other commitments at the moment. My apologies." So, I wrote back, with literally a "pretty please" in the subject line. He wrote back a shimmering letter that just said, "Yes. Fine by me." I literally gasped. I screamed when I got it.

We hopped onto Skype to record, and in remote calls we speak via Skype, but I have the ologists record into their voice memos on their phone and then we cut them together for better sound quality. It's just a little pro trick I learned from *The Allusionist's* Helen Zaltzman. But we had some difficulty:

Alie: I can maybe just record you straight from my speakers and we will worry about it in post. We'll fix it in post! *[laughs]* But we gave it a good try!

I was terrified already of this interview. So much at stake. Such a well-regarded dude. Will I botch it? How does the rest of it go? Or do we bond immediately and have a jolly time talking about smooches, and first kisses, and why people kiss, and the microbiome, and social relationships? Kissing in other animals, why we fall in love with some people and not others, the notion of soulmates, and doing research in nightclubs. So, swipe on some lip balm and pucker your ears for the wit and the wisdom of Anthropologist, Scholar, and Gentleman, Oxford Philematologist, Dr. Robin Ian MacDonald Dunbar.

[Intro Music]

Dr. Robin Dunbar: Let's do it.

Alie Ward: Okay, good! Okay. First off, hi! Thanks for being here! *[laughs]*

Dr. D: My pleasure.

Alie: This is all edited, so don't worry. We'll cut out anything techy.

Dr. D: You'll cut out anything sensible and leave the rubbish.

Alie: Yes, exactly! Only the rubbish. That's what we're going for. Now, I'm not sure if this is a word that gets used often, but you are a 'Philematologist'? Would that be correct? A person who studies kissing?

Dr. D: Well... I wouldn't have said that quite. I've never heard the word before.

Alie: It's a real word! It's an actual word. A philematologist. Philematology is the study of kissing, and I don't know if you know this, but you are one of the world experts in it. I literally have been looking for an expert in this to do this ology for years! And you're the dude!

Dr. D: We have done a little bit, but it's a tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of what we spend our lives really doing. Honest, Gov... or m'lord, as they say in criminal court to the judge: It wasn't me, m'lord, I didn't do it.

Aside: Again, over 400 papers authored. Written or edited more than 20 books, including *Thinking Big: How the Evolution of Social Life Changed the Human Mind*; *The Science of Love*; and *The Science of Love and Betrayal*. Oh, the British! They all have honorary doctorates in self-deprecation.

Alie: Well, you've done it more than anyone else, so I'm going to ask you what you know about it. You're an author, you're an evolutionary biologist, you're an anthropologist. You have so many credits. How did you get interested in science and interested in behavior?

Dr. D: I guess in a way this sort of, as much as anything, goes back to the fact that I grew up in East Africa, and you're kind of immersed in many different cultures there. In the end it kind of drew me off into, initially, psychology and then I ended up studying primates - in Africa again- monkeys, mainly. And spending an awful lot of time studying them before I, 20 years or so later, ended up back again studying humans properly for the first time.

Alie: Was it at all a relief to start studying the behavior of humans because you could ask them questions? Or was it just more complicated?

Dr. D: It was complete desperation, because I would have carried on studying monkeys and antelope, which we had been studying as well, but there was no funding available for anything like that in Britain during the 1980s. I ended up studying humans because they were there on the street and you can do a lot of the kind of things... you can ask the same questions we had been asking about primate behavior, you could ask of humans too. Why do they choose this person to mate with? Why do they invest in their children the way they do? All these kinds of questions we ask of monkeys and apes when we study them, you can kind of do on the street. It was free, you didn't need a big grant to do it. People, you know, you could ask them questions because they, obviously, are people and you could give them survey questions to fill in as well. As well as observe them.

Alie: What led you to want to study social relationships? You're known for the Dunbar Number, you have a book *The Science of Love*, what is it about social relationships?

Dr. D: I know nothing about love.

Alie: *[laughs]* You've got to know something if you're a scientist about it!

Dr. D: I'm a boy!

Alie: *[continued laughter]* You are not! You are a world expert in this! I mean, I guess that must put a lot of pressure on you in relationships if you are an expert in them.

Dr. D: Tell me about it!

Aside: Alright, his Wikipedia page notes that he's been married at least once but we were only a few minutes in, it was too early to pry. But he's charming and affable. I imagine that, plus his research history, I bet that's a hit in social situations.

Dr. D: *[sighs]* Yes, I suppose all the way through, ever since I first studied anything in the world, even before I started my PhD, what I was interested in was social evolution. How do different animal societies come to be? Why do one species have one kind of society and other species have another kind of society? That's rather a big question because you have to study practically everything about them; their ecology, their genetics, their evolutionary history, and so on. That transfers very easily across to humans because obviously different cultures have different societies. Their culture is their society, if you like. You can ask meaningful questions about why one group living in one area has gone down one particular road, perhaps they're polygamists, and another group living somewhere else are monogamists. Those kinds of questions.

Alie: Now, you've studied monkeys and you've studied apes, including humans. Do other animals kiss on the mouth?

Dr. D: Yeah actually some of the other mammals do. I mean, it's not really common in the way it is in humans. Or even to some extent the way it happens in some of the monkeys and apes where they do a kind of lip-to-lip kissing, particularly with babies, I think. Mother monkeys mouth their babies often and frequently, and some species will feed them tidbits that they'd been eating, mouth-to-mouth as it were. So, you can kind of see where kissing came from. It's easy to see, but nobody does this stuff to the quantity and quality of humans. [*clip from A Streetcar Named Desire: Vivien Leigh, "I want to kiss you just once..."*]

Alie: Why do you think humans slobber on each other?

Dr. D: [*chuckles*] This is almost the big evolutionary question that remains unanswered. It's not very clear. There are various suggestions one can make. One is it's clearly very erotic, if you like, very arousing, and the lips have a lot of brain tissue devoted to them, sensory brain tissue, devoted to the lips. Disproportionately so. Put it this way, monkeys and apes are very tactile. They do a lot of cuddling, and stroking, and petting. All those kinds of things we do. A lot of this social grooming... Social grooming triggers the release of endorphins in the brain which make you feel very relaxed, and happy, and contented with the world. It's very 1960s hippie-ish. [*clip from Angie Tribeca: David Walton, "Endless sun, chill vibes, hot bodies,"*]

[*Alie and Dr. D laugh*] "The world is a beautiful place." Very trusting of the person you're doing this with or who's doing it to you. These involve a very special set of neurons which only respond to light, slow stroking of the skin. We have those neurons, too, they're known as the 'C tactile' neurons. They don't do anything else. They're not involved in pain, or sensing pain, or anything like that. We respond exactly the same way so that's why in our closer relationships we're very tactile. There's an awful lot of cuddling and petting and... I don't mean just in the sexual context. I mean just like when you're talking to your good friends, there's a tap on the shoulder, and the arm around the shoulder, and all this kind of thing that goes on. We're very tactile in that sense even though we don't really think about it.

But on the other hand, because it's a very intimate thing, as it is in monkeys and apes, we don't do it with everybody. This is why when you're caught in a crowded lift you feel very uncomfortable because there are all these people in very close physical contact with you. Normally you'd only allow your nearest and dearest, family and friends, to be in that close physical contact. So we're very ambivalent about it for the very reason that touch is very indicative of both close relationships and also, spilling over from that, it quickly gets exploited in courtship and sexual relationships between partners. The lips clearly play a major role in that. That said, one of the other things that happens during kissing in particular is the exchange of huge quantities of bacteria. [*Alie and Dr. D laugh*] A ten-minute kiss - I forget the exact amount - it results in the exchange of something like 10 million bacteria from one body to the next.

Aside: So, a 2014 study out of Amsterdam revealed that one, ten-second *Fronch* kiss can transfer 80 million microbes into your partner's mouth! That is the entire population of New York City cramming into your mouth every second of a kiss. That's love, baby. [*clip from Seinfeld: Elaine Benes, "If he was interested in me, he'd want my germs. He'd just crave my germs!"*]

Alie: [*laughs*] Ohhh nooo.

Dr. D: This is quite useful because it tells an awful lot about the other person. So, you've both got bacteria, the micro biotic elements from the other person, being exchanged; but also you're getting in the saliva and stuff a lot of the enzymes and other bits and pieces that the body produce, particularly the immune system. Your personal smell... I hate to raise this tricky issue at this juncture, but your personal smell and taste are directly determined by the same set of genes that determine your immune system.

Aside: So, we're using our tongues and our snoots to gather intimate intel about a person's immune system. You thought Google was sneaky. Whoop! The nose is sneakier. So is the tongue.

And now, Dr. Dunbar addresses some Western flimflam about different greetings, such as the kunik greeting of Inuit folks and the Māori greeting, the hongi, among others.

Dr. D: It's a complete myth that they're rubbing noses. What you do is, you put your nose side by side or just in front of somebody else's, and you breathe in slowly and deeply. As the Māori put it, you're breathing in their spirit. So, you're actually breathing in their smell. By the same extension, when you kiss folk, you're tasting their same immune system. You're actually checking out who they are and whether you like them or not. The people you like tend to be people who have a different set of immune genes to the ones that you have.

Normally, when you choose a mate, a romantic partner, you choose somebody who ticks as many boxes possible for similarities to you. He looks like you and feels like you, as it were, because what you're trying to do is to find the same set of genes so you don't lose these beautiful genes that you've been handed on by your parents. What a lot of species do is spend a lot of effort and time looking for people who have similar, not identical, but very similar genes to them. So, that means they're kind of bringing that same family set back together again.

Except for the immune system genes, because what ideally you want in your beautiful bouncing babies is as broad a set of immunities as possible. So, if you pick the same ones, they're only acquiring immunities to half the number of diseases, and bacteria, and stuff that is possible, whereas if you take somebody who's really quite different, you're giving them a much better chance in life.

Alie: So, if someone rejects you - not you, necessarily - but if someone rejects a person, it might just be that your immune systems are too similar? Is that a way to take heartbreak in stride?

Dr. D: Yes! They're family!

Alie: [laughs] Has any of this research that you've done... Is it difficult not to apply it to your own life and the lives of people that you know?

Dr. D: Oh, I think if you work on human behavior you just inevitably spend most of your time sitting at the back of the pub watching people. It's really difficult not to do that. And it's such fun! It's amazing. If you read something like Jane Austen's book, she is such an acute observer of human behavior, it is unbelievable considering she was writing from a very narrow social background, whenever it was, nearly 300 years ago. Her observations of the foibles of human behavior, particularly in the mating arena, are just electric. This is what makes the films, the costume dramas that they do of her novels, so successful. It's just such acute observations on the little things that bother people about relationships.

Alie: She was an anthropologist, I guess.

Dr. D: Before anybody even thought of the name anthropology, she has to rank as the founding mother. [clip from *Emma: Emma Woodhouse*, "I may have lost my heart, but not my self-control!"]

Alie: And now, if you're in the pub and you see people on a date, can you tell by the way they kiss whether or not they've got fireworks? Or if you're watching *Love Island* or something?

[clip from *Love Island 2019*: "I would give it an 8 out of 10, strong kiss. It was very wet and volumptuous."]

Dr. D: Oh god, not that.

Alie: [laughs] Or *The Bachelor*?

Dr. D: Yes and no. I think it's probably hard to tell. It actually is, really, very hard to tell because in many ways the two sexes behave quite differently in those sorts of contexts. Women are much more attentive when they're even just meeting a boy for the first time. And this causes a lot of problems, I think, for boys, because boys are not that great in terms of such skill.

Alie: [laughs] Oh, really?! You don't say!

Dr. D: So, they often misinterpret the signals the girls are giving them. Girls have this way of being very attentive to you and, sort of, paying close attention when they're not really interested.

Aside: Straight, cis, non-binary, LGBTQ: if you have ever been on a date and thought, "Wow, that was amazing!" and then they ghost you, well, this might be because one never knows how an ego is gonna take rejection in real time. So to play it safe, you might just pretend to be interested.

And also, more romantically and optimistically, Dr. Dunbar explains:

Dr. D: When you first meet somebody, you kind of don't know, really, whether they're the right person or not. So the last thing you want to do is put them off. You want to keep them interested a bit, or keep them interested long enough that you can assess their inner self, as it were, and figure out whether they're the right person for you or not. Do they see the world the way you do? Do they have the same moral and political views as you? Do they

have the same interests? Do they like the same music? Do they have the same sense of humor? All of these boxes that you would like to have ticked. And it takes a long time to find out all these details, so you need to invest quite a lot of time. Turns out that the more boxes you have ticked of that kind, the longer the relationship will last. You do want to make sure... You don't want to take a complete duffer.

Alie: [laughs] I don't know what that means!

Aside: Yeah, I looked it up. And 'duffer' is an incompetent or stupid person. And I'm not British, but I don't think that's a compliment or a box you wanna check in your dream date.

Dr. D: You need to check out this person and make sure that they do tick your boxes, or at least as much as possible, because there's no Mr. Right or Ms. Right. There's no such thing as perfection. Well, no, okay, maybe there is somewhere. I don't know, how many of us are on the planet now, 7 billion or something? So, that makes 3.5 billion of each sex. Somewhere in that 3.5 billion, there is Mr. or Ms. Right. Well, you're never gonna find them. That's many lifetimes of searching.

Alie: [laughs] Oh God, this is like a Morrissey song! Romantic but incredibly depressing.

Dr. D: What you do is, you do exactly as Jane Austen says. We're all there looking for Mr. Darcy because he has the chiseled features, and the cultured family background, and the big estate, and all that kind of thing, but only one person's gonna get Mr. Darcy. So, what do the rest of you do? The rest of us have to settle.

The great problem is, all of us in the end settle for a compromise, because otherwise you'll never find anybody. You'll always be rejecting them as not quite matching up to your levels of perfection. If you accept a kind of compromise, there's always a risk that it's not going to work as well as you'd hope. That's life!

Alie: What about our early evaluations can help lead us toward a partner who's right for us? Can we tell from making out with someone whether or not, like, "this could be long term"?

Dr. D: I think so, but this is the end product of a loooooong process of courtship, in effect. In other words, if you look at what happens during courtship, normally, it sort of breaks down into a series of stages, and at each stage you kind of explore the qualities of the person before you, and then you just hold off a moment and go, "Should I pull out here or should I go to the next level?"

Now, those levels tend to start with distance cues, so vision: Do they look pretty or do they look handsome according to the respective sexes? Are they attractive? And then it moves into a conversational mode, I think, where you're now close enough to talk to them, so you're now picking up on all the cultural boxes, what I call the 'seven pillars of friendship'. There are seven dimensions which are a bit like a supermarket barcode on your forehead. A verbal supermarket barcode. There's all sorts of things you like and dislike, the languages you speak, and all these kinds of things that make up this complex of cultural element that tick your boxes or don't tick your boxes according to your personal interests.

Aside: Okay, quick aside. I looked up Dr. Dunbar's seven pillars of friendship and essentially, things that make us bond with others are:

1. Growing up in the same place, especially during the core teenage years
2. Speaking the same language
3. Having the same education
4. Enjoying the same type of hobbies
5. Sharing the same moral or political point of view
6. Having a similar sense of humor
7. Sharing the same musical taste.

Just in case you need some metrics by which you can judge strangers *before* you sniff them.

Dr. D: Having decided that they meet most of your requirements, at that point you kind of move in a bit closer. Which is why old-fashioned dancing was very suitable because any sort of couple dancing, waltzing and all this kind of thing, you're now into breathing territory and you can have a good sniff, [*clip from Spring Breakers: Alien, "I smell nice."*] and check the immune system from a little distance that's, you know, close enough. Here's the interesting thing: we often think of perfumes as designed to obscure all the horrible bodily smells that you have, and in fact it's actually quite the reverse.

Alie: Really?!

Dr. D: Yep. The perfumes you like, they're very, very, very personal to you. They actually are the ones closest matched to your own personal natural bodily smell. So, what you're doing is enhancing your natural body.

Alie: So, if you tend to gravitate toward fruity ones or musky ones, that's more an amplification of your own scent?

Dr. D: Yes. That's your own natural body odor, not the kind of sweaty armpits odor that you probably do want to cover up, but the natural scent. And that's why there are so many different scents. This is why I try and tell guys they should never buy a girl perfume. You'll get it wrong because you'll buy the one *you* like and it may not be the one that *she* likes because it doesn't match her natural body scent.

Once you've got to that point, at the next point you can try a little kissing because that gives you a peer into their soul in terms of tastes. Tastes and smell are really one and the same thing, in the end, you know, and if you're happy with that, then take the brakes off.

Alie: [*laughing*] Take the brakes off! That should be someone's Tinder bio. Now, how are you studying this? Are you behind one-way glass with a clipboard and getting people drunk? Are you having people fill out surveys? How do you study this?

Dr. D: Everything we have done, by and large – on kissing, anyway – has been by surveys or offering people vignettes. You know, here's Jim, a little bit about Jim, and how good a kisser

he is, and here's Fred, with a little bit about Fred, now which one do you prefer? It's that kind of thing. But this is sort of backed off a lot of work we did on mate choice strategies which were done by looking at lonely hearts ads in the days before Tinder arrived. In those old newspaper ads where you would say a little bit about yourself and a little bit about who you're looking for. They were nice little summaries of what people actually had in mind, and sometimes also how they carefully didn't say things which they thought might be unhelpful.

Alie: Such as?

Dr. D: Where they lived, if it was kind of down-market. Let's take London ads... I suppose it's true of any big city, there are upmarket postcode, zip codes, and there are down-market zip codes, and you never, ever saw down-market ones but you often saw upmarket ones.

Alie: Really?

Dr. D: Subtle things like that, and most of the time you wouldn't even notice it. It took us a long time to realize that that was what was happening. [*clip of a taxi passenger saying "Uptown, Cabby!"*]

Alie: When you're showing people vignettes, and you're like, "Here's Jim, here's Fred, this is what kind of kissers they are," how do you determine what a good kisser is? 'Cause I think anyone who's dated more than one person has kissed a good kisser and has been subjected to a bad one. [*pained giggle*] How do you determine that?

Dr. D: We carefully try to avoid it. We just left it up to the imagination of the subjects. I guess in these kinds of things you are trying to elicit people's natural responses, so if you're too specific, often that just doesn't give them the freedom of imagination for themselves.

Alie: So you have to leave it up to them to write their own romance novel?

Dr. D: Yes, yes.

Aside: So Dr. Dunbar mentioned a wonderful Austrian anthropologist, Karl Grammer, whose career has been spent doing observational studies of courtship behavior of humans by gathering data going to a disco, if you will, and watching and taking note of how people were interacting. And I was like, "Nooo, people don't do this," and Dr. Dunbar was like, "Yeesss, they do." He's done it. He's done science in the club.

Dr. D: We've done stuff in nightclubs on dancing, and on the conversations, and those have all been done on smartphones. A smartphone is basically just a computer, isn't it, so you can upload software that you would normally have on an iPad or something like that. You can just press buttons and everything gets recorded.

Alie: So you're coding datasets but it looks like you're just texting?

Dr. D: Sending texts, yes.

Alie: Oooh, that's sneaky.

Dr. D: And you're really boring because you're just sitting in the corner sending texts, so why would you want to go and ask them for a dance?

Alie: *[laughing]* Oh my god. Now what about long-term partners? Do people kind of stop kissing after a while? Should they continue kissing, or after they've sized someone up and decided to be with them, are they still sniffing each other?

Dr. D: Yes, I think so. I think that has to be true. I suppose when you get incredibly old, maybe not, or maybe you do. I don't know, I haven't got there yet. But also, kissing and smell tell you a lot about somebody's health, and that's important too. It's one of the cues that people who worked on that side of things have really shown are quite important. It's kind of grossly obvious, you know, if somebody has got bad breath, you head for the bar as quickly as possible. You don't want to be with them, because it's kind of indicative of their general physical health as much as anything, so you tend not to want... Unless you're an angel in disguise anxious to look after the sick.

Aside: Sidenote, I'm sorry, I have to tell this story. Once, a long-term boyfriend ordered a cream of roasted garlic soup at our favorite restaurant. This was probably 15 years ago. I still remember how searingly painful it was to smell him for at least a week after. It wasn't his fault. You know what? I just looked up the restaurant. I had to. One Yelper wrote, about this soup, quote:

I thought I would be in heaven, but a demon from hell came knocking. The garlic was so intense, I literally kept wondering if I had ingested Drano.

That restaurant is now closed. RIP.

Now, other causes of halitosis, in case you're wondering, that could ruin your smooch game: dry mouth, which also causes morning breath (barf), gum infections, diseases such as some cancers, intestinal infections, acid reflux, or having a foreign body, such as a piece of food, lodged in the nostril - which is a good indicator that maybe you don't want to trust this person with your babies.

Dr. D: Whatever, when you're looking for a romantic partner, bad breath's not ideal for them.

Alie: Right. Now, why do you think we're not utterly repulsed by kissing, given how dangerous it could be from, like, a viral or bacterial standpoint?

Dr. D: That's because, I think, in the relatively close historical past, you didn't do these kinds of things very often with people outside your community. So it's part of the courtship and sexual activities that you engage in with people in general, and most of that is confined to your communities, so you all share the same diseases and have the immunities to them, right? You tend not to get kissing, probably, being anything like as common between people from different communities because usually that means they just killed all of your males and carried you off as war booty.

Aside: Yah, no thanks.

Dr. D: This is not an ideal relationship.

Alie: *[laughing]* No.

Dr. D: So given that kissing is part of the process of courtship leading up to sex, it's probably not the ideal situation for you. That means that most of your expectations, really, in your psyche, are built around the fact that this is all part of your little local community. And I think that's probably so hardwired in us now because we've lived with that for literally millions of years.

Alie: Yeah. Have people been kissing for millions of years or is it relatively recent?

Dr. D: That is a complete unknown, we will never know, because it's not the sort of thing that gets fossilized. It's very hard to say. I think most of these behaviors we have, you can trace back to their primate origins in some form. Primates will do these things, things like laughter. We share laughter with Great Apes, but its slightly different the way we do it, and in turn that vocalization, the pant-like vocalization we give when we laugh, is really the Old World monkey play invitation. [*clip of vocalization that sounds like heavy panting*] And it's just been exaggerated and ritualized progressively, leading to the way we use it now. Most of our behaviors have those obvious origins in something primates are doing. And that's true of something like kissing. It's done much more extensively by us. Even the bonobos, the so-called pygmy chimpanzees in the Congo, who are the less aggressive and more friendly chimpanzees, if you like...

Aside: Bonobos, by the way, are the sexay hornt-up free-spirited monkeys, kinda like your friend who comes to brunch in a loose sundress and no bra, and you're like, "Good for you, girl, that's inspiring."

Dr. D: ... and are the only species of any monkey and apes – of all mammals, even – that copulate face to face rather than front to back in the way that all other animals do. Even they don't engage in huge amounts of kissing. They do a little bit, but it's not in the human league.

Alie: Wow. Because bonobos are known as the most amorous, really, of the monkey.

Dr. D: Yes, that's right. It's for that reason, because they have face to face copulation and that's really very rare. Then their behavior is really weird – they have sex with everybody.

Alie: Yeah, I've heard! It's like Burning Man, over in Camp Bonobo.

Dr. D: Well it's worse, because it's Burning Man with children.

Alie: [*laughing*] That's a good point.

Dr. D: It's terrible [*laughs*].

Alie: I have some questions from listeners, can I ask you?

Dr. D: Yes.

Aside: Okay, but before we get to your questions, Ologies Patrons from Patreon.com/Ologies - a dollar a month gets you in the club - a few quick words from sponsors of the show who make it possible for us to donate to a charity of the Ologist's choosing each week. And Dr. Dunbar's grandmother was a Los Angelino, and he asked that we find and donate to a charity locally that helps seniors. So a donation this week went to

ALA, which is Affordable Living for the Aging, which provides affordable housing, and supportive services, and alternative housing options for low income and formerly unsheltered seniors. They even help match senior roommates! How amazing is that? ALA gives seniors in Los Angeles secure home environments and the affordable housing they need and deserve. So that donation was made in Dr. Dunbar's honor, and it was made possible by sponsors who you may hear about now.

[Ad Break]

Okay, your questions. Open wide for some answers.

Alie: Renee Jennings, who's a first-time question-asker, asked: We usually associate kissing with romance, but what is going on with the European way of greeting people with a kiss on each cheek? Do we know where that came from?

Dr. D: Oh, that just standard Māori nose-rubbing, right? You're just sniffing, really. A lot of the Europeans don't even do a sort of smacky kiss sound, it's just a head on one side then head on the other side. If you're really cool, it's three times, minimum. It really is just getting close enough to be able to breathe in the spirit of the other person, see who they really are. People do it with babies, women especially do it with babies, they pick babies up and bring them up to their face. And I've heard women say, "I just love the smell of newborn babies," and you go, [*in realization*] "Oh yeah, you're just checking out who this is. Come on."

Alie: I guess dogs do it on the other end and humans do it on the face.

Dr. D: Yes, and that's very primatey. Monkeys, particularly Old World monkey and apes, are fascinated by each other's babies and are forever picking them up, and nuzzling them, and sniffing them, and checking out who they are. Basically, that's just checking out, "Are you in my family or the other family?"

Aside: Oh and side note, Swedish researchers found that the scent of dirty baby hats released dopamine in study participants, kind of like drugs would, and now they're looking into making baby head nasal spray to treat depression. But what is the smell that we're huffing off of a baby? Is it old milk? Is it new skin? Is it promise? Hope? Nope. It's something called 'preti', and according to the internet it comes from the 'vernix caseosa', which is the white-ish, cheese-like substance which coats a newborn's skin at birth. Okay. So it is a little cheesy to want to smell a newborn.

Also, patron Alyssa asked about kissing newborns and giving them diseases. I looked this up and an article on babyology said that if you have a cold sore, don't kiss a baby! Also, probably just don't kiss any babies if they're not your babies because you could be asymptomatic of *so many things*. Also, wash your hands before you touch a baby! Now, if it's your own baby, I don't know what to tell you. It's your baby, you do what you like. I kiss my dog's face constantly and I love her disgusting, musky bouillon breath, it's like a drug. So gross; so precious.

Alie: Jess Swann asked: Is it more common to close eyes when kissing, or is it different in different cultures?

Dr. D: That, I have no experience with.

Alie: *[laughing]* I don't know.

Aside: So Dr. Dunbar said, in his observation, women tend to close their eyes more, and some research suggests this is because of input overload. In order to concentrate on tactile senses, you might have to just throw visuals offline. Eyes, gonna put you on pause for a minute, mouth is driving this boat.

Dr. D: If you close your eyes, you won't know, will you? Boys tend not to.

Alie: Really? That's interesting.

Dr. D: I have no idea whether that's peculiar to Western European cultures or whether that's true for other cultures elsewhere in the world.

Alie: There are a ton of people who asked if there is a scientific term for French kissing and why is it the French that kiss this way. *[clip from film Bull Durham: "I believe in long slow deep soft wet kisses that last three days."]*

Dr. D: I don't know whether the same term is used in any language other than English. It may have just been the English being rude about the French.

Alie: *[laughs]*

Aside: I thought that might leave some of you horny for answers, so on behalf of patrons Anna Elizabeth, Ruby Johnstone, Vic Rea-Wilson, Vince Alasha, Anna Vallery, Hannah Black, Elle McCall, Heather Densmore, Caitlin Berger, Audrey Weber, Bennett Gerber, Rachel Ames, Hayley Everson, Robert O'Neill and Kristine Huynh, I looked up kissing *à la française*, and slopping tongue kissing, AKA tonsil hockey. It came to be known as 'frenching' from World War I soldiers who returned from Europe and they were kissing on their spouses in a way that they though mirrored the lusty ways of the sexually liberated French. And the French are like, "What are we going to call it? *Us kissing?* No!" After decades of calling it a 'lover's kiss' or 'to kiss with the tongues' – clunky at best – finally in 2014 they have an official, included in the dictionary, term. It's *galocher*, which takes its name from an ice-skate cause it's all slippery. Hopefully it's not that cold. Escargot is also slippery, but that name is already taken.

Dr. D: Although most cultures, kind of, kiss on the lips, I don't know if all cultures around the world necessarily engage in 'tongue kissing'.

Alie: Yeah. Hmm! I feel like the French have kind of *made out* well with it, I feel like it's ended up being a boon. Some people asked why they might not like kissing. Are there people who just aren't really into it?

Dr. D: I think it probably depends on how tactile you are. People differ on a, kind of, dimensional attachment. It's known as the attachment scale. They have several dimensions to the attachment scale, but essentially, they're measuring your warmth and coolness in your personal relationships with other people. So, the hot end is all very kind of Italianate; people that are always putting their arms around you and giving you big hugs all the time. Then, at

the cool end, this is the, “Don’t touch me. I’m British.” Dimension distinguishes between people who have a high density of endorphin receptors in the brain or a low density. It’s like, people who have a low density of endorphin receptors fill those up very quickly with a small amount of physical contact.

Aside: Oh, side note, April is National Autism Awareness month and some folks on the autism spectrum have varied sensory sensitivities. For example, some researchers think a light touch might feel uncomfortable because different nerve fibers carry different types of touch. Touch with pressure is carried really fast via type A nerve fibers, whereas light stroking types of touch moves more slowly across those C tactile fibers Dr. Dunbar mentioned earlier and it registers in emotional centers of the brain. Some folks on the autism spectrum report that kissing feels like sensory overload, others say that light touch is uncomfortable, others are perfectly fine with both and enjoy both. It’s very individual and the research is ongoing. But Dr. Dunbar notes that a partner’s sensitivity is always something to consider.

Dr. D: One of the common features of autism is that you really don’t like physical contact, it’s really disturbing for you. This is not a difference between the sexes, per say, it’s just different styles of sociality. At the end of the day, the question I’m inclined to ask is, how many people have you kissed? Most of us have not kissed vast numbers of people, so the likelihood of kissing somebody who doesn’t match your style and requirements is pretty high. I think you’d have to get through an inordinate number of them in order to kind of go, “No, no, this one is a good one.” Statistically speaking, you know? There’s a fair chance that the first, I don’t know, 30 or whatever, let’s say, turn out to be unsuitable from your point of view. They may be perfectly suitable to other people. That’s just bad luck, I’m afraid!

Aside: Bad luck, but good germs? Now, a ton of patrons, including Heather Densmore, Aly Smith, Kristin Dawn Urban, and first-time question-askers, Gina Viado, Hannah C, Charlotte and Vespa Clercx asked, in Vespa’s words: Is it true that kissing might have originated to share immunities between partners? Or was I lied to?

They wanted to know about microscopic make out exchanges.

Alie: If you kiss more people, would you have a stronger microbiome?

Dr. D: You’re certainly exchanging microbiome constantly with every time you physically touch somebody, and obviously much more is being exchanged through kissing. So, the answer is yes. And people who live together, and from the same family, tend to have much more similar microbiomes. Now, your microbiome has turned out to be much more important for you than anybody ever imagined. It affects your health, it affects how you develop psychologically, as a child, cognitively. It affects your psychological balance as an adult.

Aside: For more on this, see the microbiology episode from November 2018 with Dr. Elain Shao, wherein we learned that 90% of our serotonin is made in our sloshy, squishy, poo-ey guts. So if you’re in a bad mood, and have a bug up your butt, it might just be because you don’t have the right bugs up your butt.

Alie: Yeah, so your partner can literally rub off on you?

Dr. D: Yes! Your friends do terrible things to you in this respect! *[both laugh]* There is some very nice research that was done by some guys at Harvard, showing that your likelihood of becoming depressed, becoming happy, giving up smoking, becoming obese, et cetera, et cetera; almost anything you care to look at was determined by whether your friends - the people you spent most time with - were in that state or not. If your three nearest, closest, friends were happy, you are much more likely to become happy in a year's time. If they got depressed, then you were going to get depressed. It's not just your microbiota that you're spreading around the place, it's your psyche as well.

Aside: Oof! Not only can your invisible critters be contagious, but your Big Moods are too! How? Why? I checked this out and found a paper by UC San Diego and Harvard Researchers titled *Dynamic spread of happiness in a large social network: Longitudinal analysis over 20 years in the Framingham Heart Study*, which read:

Emotional states can be transferred directly from one individual to another by mimicry and emotional contagion, perhaps by the copying of emotionally relevant bodily actions, particularly facial expressions. People can "catch" emotional states they observe in others over time frames ranging from seconds to weeks.

So for example, the study continued:

Students randomly assigned to a mildly depressed roommate became increasingly depressed over a three-month period.

Although – silver lining – happiness is more contagious than sadness. The study goes on to say that the relationship between people's happiness extends up to three degrees of separation (for example, to the friends of one friends' friends). That's halfway to Kevin Bacon! Other studies on friendship and happiness report that loneliness can be toxic, so in this weird, unprecedented time of self-isolation, just try to take time to chat with friends online, or Facetime, or Zoom them, or scream at your neighbor from over a fence 40 feet away. Talk to the birds or your cat. If you're feeling lonely, just know, you're not alone in any way.

Alie: A few people, Rachel Weiss and Zoe Jane, wanted to know if you had a good first kiss story.

Dr. D: My God, that was before the dinosaurs went extinct. *[Alie laughs]* I can't even remember what it was like!

Alie: Mine was very slobbery. I remember being like, "Mmm, *[smacks lips]* I don't think that's how that's supposed to go." *[laughing]*

Aside: *[in a hushed voice]* I was sixteen, black hair, combat boots, fully goth, and very unaware of technique. Also, I was so nervous that I kept gulping air and then I burped in his face. Sorry, high school boyfriend!

Dr. D: I'm sure that's all our first experiences. *[both laughing]*

Alie: Jessica Janssen wants to know: Because you're an expert at behavior, and courtship, and kissing, does everyone think you're an expert at kissing? Is that expected of you?

Dr. D: Well, I'm still waiting to be asked!

Alie: *[laughing]* One day, Dr. Dunbar, one day.

Aside: Despite his wealth of published papers on the subject, this man *will not* kiss and tell. He is a fortress of make-outery. It's admirable. It's frustrating, but it is admirable.

Alie: Any movies or TV shows that have had really spot-on, or really terrible courtship or kissing scenes?

Dr. D: Oh, off the top of my head, that's kind of hard to answer. I still think, in the end, probably the most brilliant piece of relationship stuff ever written was *Friends*. I mean, that's soooooo, so acute. It's in the Jane Austen level of observation of people's foibles and stuff like that. In a funny sort of way, even... Oh crikey, I can't think of the program now... It's the science one...

Alie: Oh! *Big Bang Theory*?

Dr. D: *Big Bang Theory*, right. Even just the dynamics of how the guys work together in that is so acute. The writing of that, and the observation of human behavior is as good as the script writers' understanding and writing on the science. And they do some of the most extraordinarily good science popularization, it is probably the cream of the cream. At the same time, their human dynamics... It's just beautiful to watch, you know. It's marvelous.

Aside: I just want to say hello to *Big Bang Theory* show runner and *Young Sheldon* co-creator, Steve Molaro, who is, himself, an Ologite. Hey Steve. What's up. Haaaay. Also for folks who have seen both *Friends* and the *Big Bang Theory*, does anyone feel like those two apartments connected by a landing kinda share a vibe? I always did, and out of curiosity (and poor time management) I just looked it up, and *Friends* and the *Big Bang Theory* – are you ready for this? – had the same production designer! A guy by the name of John Shaffner. He was also responsible for the iconic rattan sofa and Floridian ease of the *Golden Girls* set. He had a great job, and he did a great job. Anyway, moving on.

Alie: The last questions I always ask are: What do you hate about your work the most? What's the most annoying thing about your job, or about research? What's just the worst?

Dr. D: Well, research is always hard work, right? Collecting data is extremely tedious, goes on for... You have to do it for hours and hours and hours. That's one of the downsides of it. It's a kind of benefit that what you're watching is something that, itself, is entertaining. But I think the real irritating side of it is just trying to get stuff published, because you are having to deal with people who seem not to live on this planet when you try to publish your beautiful new data. And often it is because it's left field for them. In a way, because of where we work – which is on human behavior and social evolution in mammals in particular – you just sometimes wonder whether these people have relationships! *[both laugh]*

Alie: What about your favorite thing about it?

Dr. D: Oh, it's just such fun! You know, it really is. And also, it's a curiosity thing about how other people behave, but on the other hand, it's like sitting in front of an enormous jigsaw puzzle, because we're dealing with social evolution. You're not just dealing with some tiny little gene that, when it works, does this, and when it doesn't work, doesn't do this. You're dealing with these complex interactions between genetics, physiology, behavior, ecology, history, relationships of the moment, the brain doing stuff up there. It's all this massive, great jigsaw puzzle going on in front of you! You sort of fiddle away down in this corner, then you do a bit in that corner, and then gradually the whole picture suddenly appears in front of you. Perhaps, literally, one day everything suddenly seems to fall into place, and you just go, "Wow, that is amazing."

Alie: So you get to have these real breakthroughs when all the data fits?

Dr. D: Yeah! Especially when there's no obvious reason why two bits of data should fit together, but when you actually look at them from the right angle, as it were, suddenly you go, "Oh, actually they do!"

Alie: *[laughing]* That aha moment, finally, at last! It's almost like when you find someone that you actually fall in love with, I'm sure.

Dr. D: Absolutely! Us scientists are just in love with our data. That's all.

Alie: What about the work that you've done on social relationships? Do you think that it's made your relationships better in your life? Or do you look too closely at them?

Dr. D: In some ways, maybe, because you kind of have to think about relationships and why people are behaving or responding in a certain way, but also, there is a sense in which the less you know the better. If you know too much, you try and force it, and then it doesn't work. The most important thing about relationships, in the end, is just going with the flow and letting it take its own course, and it'll work naturally. This is why I get very irritated with, mostly, guys who come to me with, "I've got a new app for improving people's relationships!" Usually it's just reminding you when their birthdays are and things like that. They ask if I would be involved, and I go, "No way!" This is a completely pointless exercise, because if you try and put in all those artificial memory things it's just going to screw the whole thing up. In the end, a relationship with somebody is about your wanting to be there with them, not, "Oh God, it's Monday and I haven't said hello yet."

Alie: Ooooh, so true. Well, thank you so much for all of the work that you've done. It's nice to know that people can just sniff each other, slobber, and then relax and see what happens.
[laughing]

Dr. D: Exactly. But don't do it with strangers! *[laughing]*

Alie: Thank you so, so much for doing this. I hope it wasn't too painful. I so appreciate your time. I know you're so busy, and I realize that I fully begged you, so thank you for doing this!

Dr. D: You did! No, it was my pleasure.

Alie: Well, get some sleep, thank you for staying up late.

Dr. D: That's alright. Okay! Very good, see you.

Alie: [*British accent*] Tata! [*laughing*]

Dr. D: Bye!

So, find smart people, and gently beg them to hang out on Skype, and ask them stupid questions for the greater good of relationships everywhere, including, mostly, right now, in your homes. Thank you to everyone who is sheltering in place right now; you are literally saving lives. Thank you.

Links to Dr. Dunbar's [TED Talk](#) and [books](#) are up on my website at AlieWard.com/Ologies/Philemetology, I'll put a link to that in the show notes. We are @Ologies on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), and I'm [@AlieWard](#) on [both](#). Let's be internet friends, shall we?

Bleeped episodes for kids are free on my website, AlieWard.com, and thank you to former intern, now employee, Caleb Patton for working on those. Also, free transcripts including of super recent episodes are up on my site, thank you so much to professional transcriber Emily White for heading up a volunteer army of transcribers to work on those. I'm going to shout out a few of them right now because they so deserve it: Thank you transcribers, Lauren Fenton, Deb Ward, Katie Kost, Mickey McGrath, Hannah Dent, Emily Dahn, Aska Djikia, Rika Eringa, to Lisa Zhan and Florence Yuan for working on the transcribing guide, and of course OGs, old timers, Mike Melchior and Wendy Fick, y'all have been doing it since the beginning. So, thank you all for making those episodes accessible to deaf and hard of hearing ologites and for people who want to look up what we may have said. Y'all are amazing.

Thank you to Erin Talbert for adminning the [Ologies Podcast Facebook](#) group and being a pal since we were 4, I love you. Thanks Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch of the comedy podcast *You Are That* for managing OlogiesMerch.com, they are sisters they are hilarious. Thank you to assistant editor Jarrett Sleeper, of the mental health podcast *My Good Bad Brain*, he also does quarantine calisthenics on Instagram Live at noon Pacific every day, sometimes in full character of gold prospectors or leprechauns. He's a delight. Thank you to lead editor and host of the kitty themed *Purrrrcast* and the dino pod *See Jurassic Right*, Steven Ray Morris for stitching these episodes together and keeping the *Ologies* trains running on time. You are among the finest of audio engineers (toot toot!) and I'm lucky to have ya.

Nick Thorburn of the band *Islands* wrote and performed the theme music, and if you listen to the very end you know I tell you a secret or twoooooo...

And this week, I wasn't sure where to pop this in an aside, but I need to get it off my chest, and I need someone to do us all a solid. Hop on Wikipedia and change the entry for something that rhymes with Schmeskimo Schmiss because, number one, that E-word is considered a slur by a lot of indigenous circumpolar people and Inuit folk, and also because the Wikipedia image of the people doing it are two white folks and it was uploaded from Texas. So, can we get that changed?

Okay, second secret: I have made out with two semi-celebrities and they were the worst kissers of my life ever. Ever. This was years apart, just a tongue in your mouth like a woodpecker. Like bee-bee-bee-beep, and you're like, "Woah, WHAT?! How has no one told you that's not good?"

Anyway, obviously, short-lived. One of them put his tongue in my ear in a restaurant. That was the last time I saw him. Let me tell you, no bueno. So, before you get all moony eyed on Harry Styles or Brad pit, just know, number one: neither of... Those weren't the guys! But you never know, man. Just because someone is a total fox does not mean they know how to use their mouth. Oof. Yikes. Wow. I am kissing and I'm telling, but I'm not telling all of the information, so I feel like it doesn't count as a kiss and tell. Anyway, if you're in lockdown and you're missing people and smooches, just think about the 80 million bacteria that you're not getting in your mouth. Also, think of all the people who are breaking up because they have to live together so much. Going to be a lot of single people after this, and then there's going to be a lot of smooching. Just saying!

Okay, berbye.

Transcribed by

Victoria Desjardins.

Mara Spensieri, Toronto, ON, Canada

Elinor Austin.

Rika Eringa, who is currently slow cooking bolognaise AND chicken soup right now. Treat yo'self.

More links which may be helpful:

["What's in a Kiss? The Effect of Romantic Kissing on Mate Desirability"](#)

[Here are some bonobos laughing](#)

[Dunbar's Number: how many friends is a good number of friends](#)

[TED Talk on Dunbar's Number](#)

[Perfume selections reflect our immune system?](#)

[Harvard findings on adult relationships](#)

[Autism Spectrum Disorder and light touch](#)

[You're happy, your friend's friends are happy](#)

[Dating on the autism spectrum](#)

[Galocher, a French way to say "sloppy mouth kissing"](#)

["Bull Durham" clip](#)

[Sniff a baby, lift your mood](#)

[Babyology says: don't kiss newborns if you have HSV 1](#)

["Love Island" clip](#)

[Wow, this garlic soup](#)

[7 Pillars of Friendship](#)

[John Shaffner](#): “Friends” and “Big Bang Theory” production designer

[Was Monica Gellar related to the Golden Girls?](#)

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Theme song by Nick Thorburn

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