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Staying Close When Apart: Intimacy and Meaning in Long-Distance Dating Relationships

Joyce A. Arditti
Melissa Kauffman

ABSTRACT. This qualitative study explored meaning and process in long-distance dating relationships. Based on in-depth interviews with 10 students aged 23-35, the following areas were examined: meanings connected to the relationship and separation, relational maintenance strategies, and commitment processes. Findings suggested that processes associated with intimacy were applicable to long-distance relationships—including the importance of subjective meanings around “feeling close.” Other commonalities among participants included a strong foundation of friendship as well as the importance of technology in staying connected. Many participants identified trust as a prerequisite and result of commitment. The predominantly positive view about long-distance relationships seemed to be facilitated by meanings attributed to the separation that emphasized its temporary and necessary nature. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Intimacy, interdependence, commitment, long-distance dating, subjective meaning

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, long-distance romantic relationships have become increasingly prevalent. For example, Stafford, Daly, and Reske (1987) state that approximately one third of premarital relationships in university settings may be long-distance in nature. Job mobility as well as men and women's educational and occupational pursuits have created a need for many romantically involved couples to be geographically separated (Johnston & Packer, 1987). The purpose of this study was to explore meaning and process in long-distance dating relationships.

Intimacy Processes in Long-Distance Relationships

Previous literature on long-distance relationships tends to focus on quantified outcomes such as idealization (Stafford & Reske, 1990), commitment (Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997), and personal career development (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). While these issues may be of interest in terms of understanding broad concerns of couples who are geographically separated, little in-depth information is available describing how couples experience their relationship and maintain intimacy while geographically separated (Van Horn, Arnone, Nesbitt, Desilets, Sears, Giffin, & Brudi, 1997). What little we do know is typically based on research on commuter marriage (see, for example, Gerstel & Gross, 1984) and may not be applicable to non-married romantic partners.

Similarly, theorizing and subsequent study about relational maintenance tends to be based on geographically close relationships and driven by notions of social exchange. For example, relational maintenance often focuses on the barriers and attractions that constrain individuals to stay in a relationship. From this perspective, long-distance relationships suffer from "barrier deprivation" (Attridge, 1994) due to the fact that many strategies employed by geographically close couples, such as shared social networks and daily exchanges of affection, are not possible. Therefore, other methods of maintaining intimacy and commitment must be "substituted" in order for long-distance couples to stay committed and satisfied.

Duck (1994, p. 48) explains that "talk" and simple everyday exchanges are the essence of relational maintenance and constructing a shared meaning system. Similarly, other researchers consider self-disclosure as a defining characteristic of intimacy (Van Horn et al., 1997). Intuitively, it seems that couples need to talk to maintain their status with each other as a couple by communicating their needs and preferences to each other. However, for couples that are engaged in a long-distance romance, "talk" may be significantly influenced by distance. Con-

sequently, intimacy processes based on everyday verbal exchanges typically are seen as “hindered” due to the lack of “everyday contact and simple talk” which geographically close couples are able to engage in on a regular basis (Van Horn et al., 1997).

Along with relational maintenance, interdependence and commitment are key elements of intimate relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1983; Marston, Hecht, Manke, McDaniel, & Reeder, 1998; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Drawing from Bui and Peplau (1983), Scanzoni identifies aspects of interdependence which include frequency, strength, and duration of impact as well as a diversity of activities over which there will be impact. Surra (1985) explains that interdependence can be defined as “increasing degrees of overlap between partners at different stages of involvement . . .” (p. 359). Elements included in this overlap include knowledge partners have about each other as well as the kinds of activities the partners engage in and the likelihood they will share them. Interdependence is seen as a significant part of the “bondedness” existing between couples (Marston et al., 1998), as well as empirically connected to relationship satisfaction and stability (Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Surra, 1985). The degree to which romantic partners are interdependent is very likely intertwined with the nature of their commitment to the relationship (Surra, 1985; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). Commitment involves the tendency to maintain and persist in a relationship as well as feelings of psychological attachment and need (Rusbult, 1983; Van Lange et al., 1997). As with conceptualizations of relational maintenance, social exchange theories have been influential in informing research on commitment in geographically close relationships (see for example, Rusbult, 1983). Other conceptualizations of commitment focus primarily on relationship stability and the “intent to stay” in a relationship, in addition to relationship exclusivity and an unwillingness to consider alternative relationships (Marston et al., 1998).

Meaning and Subjective Experience

While positivist social exchange conceptualizations focusing on costs, rewards, and barriers have informed the study of intimate relationships, this framework also constrains our understanding of intimacy and how couples stay close. Such theorizing tends to presume a negative bias toward long-distance relationships, suggesting they are disadvantaged, ignoring potential strengths and creative aspects in these relationships. Furthermore, positivist frameworks (such as social exchange)

often fail to consider the subjective meaning individuals attach to their actions in relationships as well as their view of the long-distance experience. Marston et al. (1987; 1998) articulate a need to ground intimacy research in the experiences of actual lovers and suggests that examining subjective meaning is necessary to provide representational or ecological validity as well as avoiding marginalizing or disqualifying romantic experiences that “don’t fit.” Such an approach, with its emphasis on self-definitions of romantic phenomena, seems particularly useful for examining intimacy in the context of geographic separation.

The present study advances Marston’s approach by utilizing a social constructionist framework that emphasizes the individual’s unique interpretation of their relationship reality. Social constructionists assert that each individual devises their own sense of reality based on the meanings they create through conversing with others in their social atmosphere (Gergen, 1985). Beliefs that we hold about our relationships are “co-created” between people when they communicate with each other (Paré, 1995). In order for this co-creation of beliefs and ideas to occur, people use words and language in an interactive process. Gergen (1985) comments that it is possible for certain meanings to exist, other than those that are widely accepted by society or the cultural historical context in which one lives. Long-distance relationships provide a unique context in which persons can “talk” and construct meaning given the need for other means of communication besides face-to-face dialogue. In some ways, physical separation might be “risky” given the potential for individuals to mislead each other (see for example Eaglesham’s 1996 discussion of the implications of “long-distance” therapy). On the other hand, it may be liberating to operate beyond the confines of face-to-face interaction and physical proximity; long-distance relationships might provide a context whereby individuals are free to create new beliefs about themselves and their partner that they might not otherwise construct. Long-distance relationships might provide a unique context in which people can create an alternative story or set of beliefs about intimacy.

Summary and Purpose

In summary, while social exchange theory informs the present study to some extent in terms of providing a “point of departure,” this study seeks to incorporate a more process-oriented perspective or social constructionist viewpoint that focuses on the meaning individuals attach to their experience. Such an approach has the potential to generate a fresh,

ecologically-sensitive understanding of the experience of dating couples who do not reside in the same geographic location. A further implication of social constructionism is that people are experts on their own meanings . . . that is, people know their own individual meanings better than anyone else. Consistent with this assumption was the descriptive, interpretive approach of the study. Qualitative methods were utilized in order to gain insight into the emotional experiences that long-distance separations generate, along with ways couples attempted to stay close. In-depth interviews enabled participants to convey the meanings they attach to their relationship, important information given the impact that emotions and subjective experience have in intimate relationships (Richardson, 1999).

Given the study's emphasis on intimacy processes and subjective experience, the main questions guiding the study were: (a) How do long-distance couples stay close?; (b) What shared meanings do study participants have with their romantic partner?; and (c) Why do individuals stay in long-distance relationships? The in-depth data yielded common themes from the participants of this study that began to answer questions about intimacy in long-distance dating relationships.

METHOD

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

The research design used for the purposes of data collection was qualitative in nature. Some demographic information was gathered for the purpose of describing the sample. The main source of data collection was a "long-interview" (McCracken, 1988), audio-taped during each session. In-depth, open-ended interviews were utilized in order for participants to have the opportunity to speak in their own words and bring forth the important aspects of the relationships from their perspective. Furthermore, in-depth interviews are an excellent means of grasping at the meanings attached to intimacy (Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Snyder, 1992). The majority of the interview utilized a set of open-ended questions and probes designed to explore the meanings individuals attached to the geographic separation as well as evaluating their partner and the strengths of

the relationship. Also, relational maintenance and commitment processes were examined.

Sample and Procedure

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 10 students currently conducting long-distance relationships while furthering their academic education at a large southeastern state university. All participants were dating their current partners for at least 6 months prior to the interview. Similar to a study conducted by Holt and Stone (1988), this time frame was chosen to enhance the possibility of including individuals who demonstrated an overt indicator of investment in their dating relationship as well as ensure some level of shared interdependence. Only participants residing in the Blacksburg area were interviewed due to resource limitations and methodological considerations.

A great deal of text was generated as a result from the interviews and, given the exploratory nature of the study, the present study only focused on the experience of one partner. No attempt to corroborate information was made at this time, although getting couple data is certainly a logical next step for fully understanding the long-distance experience. However, it is not uncommon to study one person in the dyad to learn about relationships. Since the emphasis of the study is on subjective experience, this study is consistent with other studies interviewing one person in an intimate relationship (Holt & Stone, 1988; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).

Other delimitations on the sample include only selecting participants ranging in age from 22 to 35. This age group was studied, as opposed to younger cohorts, due to their presumed maturity and autonomy (Smelser & Erikson, 1980). Given the developmental considerations connected to participation in this study, many of the individuals included in the study were graduate students. The open-ended nature of the interview allowed for the exploration of how graduate study may influence relational strategies and the capabilities to maintain intimacy. Previous research has suggested that potentially strong academic demands inherent in graduate study may detract from relationships (Hudson & O'Regan, 1994; Rocha-Singh, 1994).

A purposive snowball sampling of participants was obtained until a saturation point of themes was attained. Saturation is typically reached when no new concepts or themes begin to appear from the interviewing process. The starting point for the sample was friends and residents of a campus, graduate dormitory at a large, land grant university. Similar to

techniques utilized by Groves and Horm-Wingerd (1991), additional participants were provided by those already in the sample.

Demographic information pertaining to characteristics of the participants and their relationships at the time of the interview is summarized in Table 1.

Interviews

Theory advancing notions around the construction of meaning and intimacy processes in long-distance relationships guided the development of a semi-structured interview. Consistent with a qualitative approach, questions merely served as starting points to develop a conversation around certain issues. A series of probes or prompts followed specific questions depending on a participant's response (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interviews took place in either respondents' homes or in their academic office buildings on campus during the spring of 2000. Based on past studies reviewed in the literature and the theoretical conceptualizations framing this study, the following areas were foci for interview questions: (1) meanings connected to the relationship, partner, and separation strengths and weaknesses in the relationship, (2) relational maintenance strategies, and (3) commitment processes. These foci also served as basic coding categories for a content analysis.

TABLE 1. Demographic/Relationship Information

<i>Name(Race)</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Degree Pending</i>	<i>Length of Relationship</i>	<i>Length of Separation</i>	<i>Time Left</i>
Lucy *	35	Ph.D.	2 Years	8 Months	Uncertain
Ed	29	Bachelors	1 Year	4 Months	3 Months
Kim *	23	Bachelors	7 Months	3 Months	Uncertain
Darren	24	Masters	3 Years	2 Years	3 Years
Amanda	29	Bachelors	1 Year	1 Year	2 Months
Marcus	24	Masters	5 Years	1 Year	4 Months
Cindy	23	Masters	2 Years	2 Years	3 Months
Skip	26	Ph.D.	4 Years	11 Months	1 Year
Jaime	30	Ph.D.	2 Years	5 Months	1 Year
Sam	24	Masters	2 Years	2 Years	2 Months

* = African American

[all names and some academic departments have been changed to protect participants' anonymity]

Coding and Interpretation

A blending of grounded theory and analytic induction guided data analysis allowing for themes to emerge based on the participants' experiences as well as the use of sensitizing concepts to organize the findings from the interviews (Gilgun, 1992). Each interview was audio-taped and promptly transcribed. Similar to methodology employed by most qualitative researchers (see, for example, Arditti & Prouty, 1999), the transcriptions were read through several times. Subsequent to these readings, text from the interviews was coded into foci specified above. After coding, a content analysis was conducted by identifying thematic similarities across the respondents within the coded categories of text.

RESULTS

How We Stay Close: Phone Calls, E-Mail, and Visits

One foci of the study was an exploration of how couples "stay close" within the context of geographic separation as well as how individuals perceived these efforts relative to the relationship. It was our assumption, based on previous literature and theory, that perceptions of relational maintenance strategies were connected to satisfaction, and that relational maintenance activities were a form of interdependence for couples. We were not surprised by the fact that every study participant reported relying on the telephone as the primary link with their partner as a way to feel close to them. However, individuals varied in terms of the frequency of and the constraints around phone use as well as the need to "talk." For example, for some participants, the need to "talk" took precedence over financial concerns about running up a high bill. One young woman explained that she had to talk with her boyfriend every night even though the bills were quite high. If they missed even one night of talking, they compensated by talking even longer the next night. She and her boyfriend had cohabited prior to the separation, and her desire to connect and "stay current" with her boyfriend every day was communicated as necessary in order for the relationship to be satisfying.

Sam, a math graduate student, credited the fact that he had extra money to spend since he had a graduate teaching assistantship position

as a reason he and his girlfriend called each other as much as they wanted. He talked to his girlfriend every single day, which he says explained why he did not miss his girlfriend too much:

Whenever I want to call her, I can call her. Whenever she wants to call me, she calls me. No policies and I really don't get crazy missing her. . . . We talk every single night. Every single night.

Other couples had "rules" oftentimes resulting from the consequences of too much time on the phone. Having a sense of control over the choice to talk or not talk influenced satisfaction. For example, Skip, a male graduate student whose girlfriend was several hours away, admitted to being dissatisfied with the level of contact, imposed on him largely by financial constraints. He states:

I would say once a week, maybe twice a week, definitely, at the beginning of last semester, we were probably calling each other, I would say, about every other day, and that lasted until we each got our phone bills, and then you know even though she is making, well she is doing all right for herself, but being a poor grad student that I am I was like, no, no, I can't. I just can't afford to rack these up.

Lucy knows that she cannot talk for short amounts of time when she gets on the phone with her boyfriend, so calling once a week for an hour and a half is the plan she and her boyfriend had mutually devised:

We talk for such long periods of time . . . once a week, but we e-mail each other probably 3-4 times a week. Even if it is some juicy gossip we have heard about something back home where he used to work and where I used to work, we can catch up with each other. But we stay on the phone probably 90 minutes . . . that is why our phone bills are so high.

Most romantic partners tried to meet their need for connection by supplementing their communication with e-mail or Internet technology to cut down on costs. Darren and his girlfriend had gotten creative by using the free Internet program which allows you to make calls for free, helping to cut down on phone bills:

We talk a lot on the phone, especially recently because, on the Internet you can make free phone calls, so we usually talk to each other at least every other day.

Cindy and her boyfriend contacted each other several times a day by e-mail in addition to telephoning one another. It appears that her communications with her partner were more than just a means to stay close, but also a source of help for her graduate work:

Yeah we e-mail several times a day. We talk on the phone close to every day, maybe 5-7 times a week . . . I think about him quite a bit at school just because he knows a lot more than I do about technical stuff, especially now that I am writing my paper. He knows more of that kind of thing. I e-mail him questions a lot.

Not all study participants, however, were interested in talking with their partners daily, regardless of finances. For some, it seemed that given the emphasis on academic study, the long-distance relationship met their needs for connection while giving them enough “space” to do their work. It is unclear as to whether these meanings emerged over time as a result of the long-distance experience or preceded, and even facilitated, the geographic separation. For example, Kim and Amanda, who were both planning to graduate in May, talked by phone to their partners about once a week stating they felt they needed to stay completely focused on academics.

Kim explained that her difficult engineering courses left her little time for leisure and therefore planned her phone conversations with her boyfriend once a week, indicating a short e-mail was sufficient on a daily level. She seemed satisfied with this mutually agreed upon schedule since she placed academics first on her priority list:

We e-mail each other everyday. And then we will talk once a week, or whatever, like every Sunday. He will call me or I will call him like every other Sunday.

Amanda also needed to spend numerous hours working on her horticulture projects and said she lacked the free time to get “distracted” by calling her boyfriend very often. She explained that she was actually more satisfied with having less contact with her boyfriend while she finished her degree:

I almost don't want him up here. I would be too distracted, I wouldn't be able to concentrate as much on my school work. . . .

Yeah, in a warped sort of way it is kind of good that he is not here.

She goes on to comment on the contact they engaged in when separated:

We stay close when we are apart by uh, calling a lot, sending a lot of e-mails, um, just reinforcing that we are thinking about each other even though we are separated and things are a little bit different, but it is not really. You can still talk to each other and communicate about things when you need to.

In addition to technological means of connecting, visits gave important structure to times of separation. Planning visits, a shared activity, provided comfort and some level of certainty during the physical absence of one's partner. Similar to phone contact, there were various constraints concerning how often the couples were able to visit each other such as financial concerns, academic schedule, geographical distance from partner, and each person's willingness/ability to travel. Some participants were able to see each other every weekend, while others, separated by greater distances, had to wait until major school breaks. Some individuals in the study were able to set up their academic schedules so that they could take an extra day off each weekend and visit their partner. For example, Marcus, who lived approximately 300 miles from his partner, was lucky enough to have control over his class schedule as a 4th-semester masters student, allowing him to see his girlfriend quite frequently:

Well this year, well this spring, we have been seeing each other every two weeks . . . I set up my schedule so that I don't have anything on Friday at all. So I leave Thursday and I get back late Monday. Um, before that the other semesters, it was a lot more difficult. It is a long trip and when it is just the weekend, leaving Friday and getting back Sunday. We were probably just seeing each other once a month.

Such an accommodation reflected a willingness to invest in the relationship and a commitment to their partner.

Sam and his girlfriend both loved road trips, therefore viewing the five-hour separation as an "inconvenience," but not a defining feature of the relationship:

We have seen each other every single weekend over the last . . . I really don't feel like, I mean some of my friends here at graduate school; they never see their girlfriends at all. It doesn't really feel like a long-distance relationship to me. It is a distance inconve-

nience, not a time inconvenience. We don't go long periods of time without seeing each other, because we are both willing to travel. I got an assistantship, so I am able to travel. I have the resources to do it.

Both of these men demonstrated a willingness to travel quite frequently despite the geographic distance. Having some control over one's time and resources were connected with the ability to travel frequently. A positive view about the situation—minimizing the importance of geographic separation—seemed to facilitate visiting and relationship satisfaction.

For others, the logistics of “getting together” was more daunting given great distances or heavy academic loads which received top priority. Similar to explanations regarding the rules of phone contact, for some participants, distance was viewed as a positive aspect of the relationship which supported graduate work. One participant, Lucy, who had the most infrequent visits with her partner of all the study participants, was only separated from her partner by a 4-hour car ride. Both she (a full-time graduate student) and her boyfriend were working on dissertations—her partner was also working as a principal in North Carolina as well. This couple established explicit rules about their visiting, mutually agreeing that schoolwork should be completed as soon as possible, therefore focusing most of their time and attention on academics, and inhibiting visits. Lucy stated that perhaps their greater maturity and the older ages of 34 and 35 helped guide them through the difficulties of being separated so much. For example, she explained that by the time you reach your mid-30s you know what a “good man” is, and “you hold on to him.”

Two study participants, Amanda and Jaime, had to fly to see their partners since they live over 1000 miles away, thus making school breaks the only time they get to see their partners. Similar to her comments concerning phone contact, Amanda explained that she did not mind the infrequency of visits with her boyfriend. She felt that she would have a hard time focusing on her schoolwork if her boyfriend were geographically close, a useful construction given her situation.

To summarize, undoubtedly, phone calls and e-mails were the lifelines for these couples to stay connected when they were not able to physically be together. Geographic distance alone was not a clear indicator of the nature of relational maintenance. Rather, it was more the intersection of several factors consisting of academic schedule, priority of academic work, attitude towards work disruptions, and the willingness and/or

ability to travel. Of particular importance were the meanings attached to their situation, regardless of how often they talked to or physically saw their partner. A socially constructed view (see, for example, Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Gergen, 1985) which emphasizes meaning, focuses on the use of phone calls, e-mail and visits as ways to construct a "shared meaning system." Findings suggest that study participants actively approached their separation, devised ways to stay connected, and attached meanings (such as the need to not be "distracted" from academic work or the importance of "staying current" despite costs) to the level of contact which were consistent with the "rules" of relational maintenance. These "rules" were either explicitly and intentionally established by the couple or evolved more implicitly during the course of the geographic separation.

Commitment and Trust

Although it is difficult to disentangle commitment processes from other elements of intimacy such as relational maintenance and interdependence, the description was fairly "thick" with regard to explicit comments regarding commitment to the relationship and the trustworthiness of the partner. It seems noteworthy that these two issues were connected for many respondents. Some of the respondents cited their age and maturity as major factors as to why they were so committed to their current partner. Common themes included the lack of appeal of the "dating scene" in conjunction with a desire to settle down and get married in the near future. These perceptions seemed to connect with commitment processes and a desire to fully invest in a relationship with the current partner while also serving to keep individuals out of circumstances with other potential partners that could threaten the primary long-distance relationship. Age seemed to be an indicator of the stage of dating that these respondents had attained. Winefield and Harvey (1996) explained that around the mid-20s an individual has already achieved a sense of identity. Since the mean age of this sample was 27, it seemed likely that these participants had indeed psychologically attained this "intimate adult stage" of social relationships. The respondents in the study all took their relationships very seriously and were somewhat solidified in their ideas about who they were professionally and academically and what they were seeking in a lifetime partner. Several respondents answered quite frankly when responding to a question about dating possible alternatives that they had explored what was out there and had decided they had found "the one."

Sam also emphasized his belief in committing to only one person and his lack of interest in casual dating:

I don't believe in dating other people. I believe in a very Wagnerian kind of love, absolute love. Love that transcends death. There is no dating other people. People who date other people, they deserve to be shot. That is my personal philosophy. If you date other people, you are obviously not in love and you are just kind of looking for some relationship of convenience. Somebody to have sex with, somebody to hold your hand, or have some bullshit kind of affection. And that is not what I believe in. No dating other people!

Not all study participants shared Sam's belief about "absolute love" when questioned about whether dating other people due to the frequent separation was permissible. For example, Cindy, Amanda, Kim and Marcus responded that it would have been acceptable at the beginning of their relationship to date other people since they had not explicitly committed themselves to their partner. These individuals depicted an evolving sense of commitment as their relationships progressed. All four of them admitted that they neither had the time nor the desire to date other people and were committed to their current partner even though the words were not "verbally spoken." Strauss (1978) terms this as a "silent arrangement" or "implicit" commitment.

At the time of the interview, only one respondent still had the option of dating other people. Interestingly, in this instance, the distance was cited as the reason no explicit commitment had been addressed. Amanda offered the following comments regarding her boyfriend dating other women:

We talked about it a little bit, and we just both decided that since we are both separated so much, it would be better if we did date other people, if we wanted to. I haven't and I didn't really ask him if he has. We did talk about it, but it is not something that we discuss all the time. But that is, you know, we date other people if either one of us wants to, but it is definitely more of a casual thing dating. It is not as if I think he would go out and find somebody that he would prefer over me. Because since we have known each other for so long, we have gone in full circle five times and still come back to each other. So it is not something that is really a big deal. Not for us anyway.

Whether this cavalier attitude is really representative of Amanda's true feelings about her nonexclusive commitment to her boyfriend remains to be discovered. During the interview, she seemed rather confident about her relationship, but an explicit commitment based on exclusivity had not been communicated.

Overall, the respondents were articulate about their strong commitments to their partners and the relationship, despite the geographic separation. With the exception of Amanda, all the respondents intertwined the idea of trust and exclusivity as central to their relationship. Furthermore, the issue of trust seemed to have particular significance for long-distance partners due to the constraints posed by the geographic separation. Several of the participants responded that without a complete sense of trust, a long-distance relationship would never work.

For example, Lucy spoke about attractive female options that her boyfriend had at his school in Charlotte:

I trust him. I mean that is the bottom line. I trust him and I know he trusts me. I mean there is not even a question. We have established that.

Despite her professions of absolute trust, she admitted that sometimes "her mind played tricks on her," and she felt insecure because of the distance.

Overall, based on the previous section on relational maintenance as well as more explicit comments contained in this section, commitment seemed multifaceted—a reflection of one's interdependence with the partner and investment in the relationship as evidenced by staying in touch and visiting. Commitment also reflected a more intangible aspect, similar to Marston et al.'s (1998) conceptualization, in terms of participants' beliefs about the necessity of trust and maintaining exclusivity.

Meanings of Separation

As previously discussed, respondents' perceptions concerning relational maintenance seemed connected to and perhaps even more important than structural aspects (such as the frequency of visiting and level of contact) of the relationship itself. Several themes emerged with respect to the meanings that were attached to the geographic separation. It is intriguing to consider how perceptions about the separation might connect with one's experience in a long-distance relationship.

The most predominant view of the separation was as an *investment for the future*. Focusing on the temporary, yet necessary, nature of the separation was quite common for the participants in explaining how they dealt with the long-distance relationship. Both benefits and deficits to the relationship were derived as a consequence of the geographic separation. While for some individuals the distance was seen as a means of solidifying a deep emotional connection to their partner, for others the lack of physical intimacy was cited as a negative aspect of the geographic separation.

All 10 of the respondents were currently seeking educational degrees while their partners worked or studied in a non-geographically close location. Most of the respondents felt that forgoing or changing their academic plans in order to be geographically close to their partners was not feasible. Academic and career plans were pretty much “sacred cows” in the relationship and deemed essential to either their own or their partner’s professional growth.

Amanda’s comments reflect her unwillingness to accommodate her academic study for the sake of the relationship, once again emphasizing her “distractibility”:

I would not compromise my education . . . I wouldn’t sacrifice anything . . . and he has such a good job down at home and he has been there for a while, so I don’t think he would move back up, just until I finish school. Plus I almost don’t want him to come up here. I would be too distracted. I wouldn’t be able to concentrate as much on my schoolwork.

Most of the respondents focused on the temporary nature of the separation. Having an “end date” in sight for the geographic separation made it easier for couples to deal with the long-distance status of their relationship. Jaime’s statement reflected this importance of the temporal nature of the separation:

. . . we realized that it would be a temporary situation and it is okay as long as I know we are going to be together after I do this. It is like a Christmas present, you know it is there, you are just waiting to open it.

Similarly, Darren, realizing that a temporary two-year separation would also create greater career potential in the future for both him and his girlfriend, focused on the slight inconvenience of the distance:

I look at it as a positive thing in the future, because we are both going to school for reasons, I guess to have better careers in the future, so in that way it would be better.

Ed's past experience with geographic separation during his Navy years gave him much needed perspective about his current situation. Stating that his current geographic separation was "not a major problem," he seemed able to focus on the necessity of the short separation in order to finish his degree. When questioned about whether he thought the relationship would last through the separation, he explained:

Oh, definitely, I mean the separation isn't long, it is 6-7 months, um plus I go up there on some weekends. . . . The worst separation I ever went through was with my ex-wife in the Navy. It was 6 months where you were in the Mediterranean on a ship . . . there really wasn't e-mail like there is now and that would have made a big difference, but I mean, to me this isn't a bad separation.

Study participants' value on academic achievement contributed to the belief that the separation was necessary. It seems that this could be a critical part of the shared meaning system the couple constructs. In addition, past experience and the often temporary nature of these separations with an "end date" in sight helped give respondents perspective.

In addition to defining the separation as *necessary* (i.e., to complete educational endeavors) and *temporary*, beliefs about distance as a factor that facilitated emotional closeness seemed connected to a positive long-distance experience. Specifically, "not taking their partner for granted" and "developing a stronger connection through non-physical communication" were two issues which emerged from the interview data for virtually all of the study participants. This commonality suggests the importance of connecting positive attributions to a situation and may serve to actually further enhance their relationships despite the geographic constraint (Benson, Arditti, Reguero De Atilas, & Smith, 1992).

Marcus explained that after coming down to school in Virginia he realized how "great his girlfriend was." He explained, "It's just the more I was down here, the more I realized what I missed."

Sam also mentioned that being away from his girlfriend had made him cherish her more:

It has made us stronger. When you are constantly around somebody, you tend to take them for granted. I see a lot of that among my friends. I see a lot of my friends breaking up left and right, going out with different people.

Despite the potential benefits of the long-distance experience and the positive meanings attached to the results of separation, several participants did identify difficulties they had in their relationships that they attributed to the geographic separation. Difficulties encompassed fear and uncertainty about the separation and its potential for causing romantic partners to “grow apart” as well as feelings of longing for one’s partner.

Lucy feared that the geographic separation might affect the relationship connection she had with her partner if the separation was for a much longer period of time. Therefore, she was unable to focus on the separation as temporary since she was not certain about when the geographic separation would end, thus making her situation more difficult than the other respondents:

As I start looking at this more closely, the longer we stay separated, um, that may cause a strain if we don’t see one another. Cause there is a chance that we may grow apart.

Jaime admitted that the separation had negatively impacted both her and her boyfriend’s general overall happiness:

I am not as secure in our relationship because he is so far away, but I don’t think either one of us are really as happy overall, in life, in general.

Jaime further revealed that she “was upset about the distance because she was unhappy about her boyfriend’s decision to move away and a get a job,” suggesting the lack of a “shared” understanding of the geographic separation.

Another woman, Kim, clearly viewed the distance negatively. While she initially stated that the distance did not really hurt that much, deeper probing revealed that she defined the separation as a constraint rather than a benefit and believed it stopped the relationship from progressing. Kim admitted that she wished she had dated her boyfriend for longer before they were separated and was not convinced that she would be able to connect as well with her partner from a distance. She explained:

I don’t think it is a good thing, just because I mean I have known him for three years. If we had started out earlier in the relationship, before he left, it would have been better off. I would know more about him, things like that, now he is far away and it’s kind of hard, you know.

It seems likely that the timing of the separation relative to the “life course” of the relationship is an issue worthy of further exploration.

The above respondents expressed misgivings about the geographic distance for different reasons. Both Lucy and Kim were uncertain about

the length of their separation from their boyfriends and had no “end date.” It is also worth noting that Jaime was the only participant whose significant other *left her* to go to a geographically distant location. The other nine participants were the ones who *left their partners* to move to a new location. The issue of who leaves and why has bearing on the construction of a shared understanding of the separation which, as mentioned previously, seems to connect with relationship satisfaction and how one might navigate the separation experience. If both members of a couple do not view the separation in the same manner and develop shared meaning around the experience, it seems more likely that the long-distance experience would contribute to either or both partners’ unhappiness. Differing perspectives may connect with differing levels of attachment in that the leaver is “less attached” than the leaved. The literature on relationship dissolution explains that the more attached an individual is to their romantic partner, the more emotional distress they will feel when separated (Simpson, 1987). Further examination of this issue should be addressed in future long-distance studies. It also seemed that ambiguity regarding the length of the separation and the absence of an “end date” contributed to uncertainty around future plans and difficulty with the long-distance experience. What is not known from the interview data is how an individual’s personality and temperament (i.e., the ability to tolerate ambiguity) might mitigate uncertain conditions.

As a group, all the respondents, regardless of whether they were certain about the ending of the separation, expressed a need to sometimes deal with feelings of loneliness—especially the lack of physical intimacy—caused by separation from their partner. Missing one’s partner was a unifying experience for the study participants, regardless of whether one had other positive attributions regarding the relationships. Although beyond the scope of this particular article, participants discussed varied ways of dealing with feelings of longing for their partner, including reminiscing about the partner or refocusing by engaging in some other activity. Dealing with the “down side” of the separation appeared to be idiosyncratic with some participants actively refocusing and others reminiscing about their partners for comfort. Of particular interest was the use of “long-distance philosophies” as a means of processing the experience of being separated from a romantic partner. A philosophy can be loosely defined as a “positive psychology” or “a positive subjective experience” which potentially improves the quality of life by creating “purpose” with regard to life circumstances (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Indeed, several respondents developed a “positive personal philosophy” about long-distance relationships in general as well as a view

about the geographic separation and its effect on their romantic relationship.

Such a philosophy could serve to provide meaning and help individuals better understand and deal with their relationships (Rokach & Brock, 1998). While Skip jokingly refuted the old adage "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" by saying, "That is just a crock in my opinion!", his philosophy of *it's just one of those things* put distance in the same category as any other "minor inconvenience." He explained that other problems that had come up in his relationship had been more difficult than dealing with the geographic separation:

You know the distance is like anything else. Just another thing. It is nothing, a long-distance relationship is a cakewalk.

Skip's philosophy or view of distance as a "cakewalk" helped him not only deal with the separation, but put his past difficulties and the ability to overcome them in perspective.

Lucy's philosophy about good relationships emphasized *compatibility and trust*—both of which she believed to share with her current long-distance boyfriend. This philosophy helped her to remain focused on those particular aspects in her own long-distance romance. In doing so, she was able to minimize the difficulties associated with the separation and reinforce her commitment.

She explains:

I mean, I am not trying to sit here and offer a pretty picture because you know it is hard and it is a strain, but I think when you both trust each other and you both love each other when you have a solid foundation you know we have that foundation. It is a relief for me because so many of my friends are struggling with relationships or trying to find a good man, per se . . . they are still having difficulties, 'cause of the commitment, the trust. But like I said it is a great relationship. He is a good man, a good man, so I think I will keep him.

Passionately explaining his personal philosophy on long-distance relationships, Sam stated:

If they fail, I think it is due to lack of effort, laziness, lack of character. I mean it is just, if you decide, if 2 people decide that they want something, then the only way it is not going to happen, is if they let it not happen. So if we broke up there is nobody to blame but ourselves. You can't blame the distance, you can't blame the

time, you can't blame any of that shit, because if you truly love somebody, it is not an issue . . .

Sam's personal philosophy, which emphasized *working hard on the relationship* and "not giving up," served to keep him invested and committed to his girlfriend. Personal philosophies about what constituted "good relationships" helped individuals focus on positive aspects of their relationships. Philosophies which compartmentalized the separation as "just another aspect" of the relationship minimized its importance in relationship satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine processes associated with long-distance relationships, including relational maintenance, commitment, and subjective meanings around relationship strengths and difficulties. Commonalities among the participants included a strong foundation of friendship as well as the importance of technology (i.e., phone and e-mail) in staying connected. Trust was cited as an essential aspect of satisfying long-distance relationships, which many of the respondents identified as both a prerequisite and result of commitment. The predominantly positive view about long-distance relationships seemed to be facilitated by meanings attributed to the separation that emphasized its *temporary* and *necessary* nature. Additionally, the *temporary* and *necessary* nature of the separation contributed to the perceived legitimacy of distance as an element of the relationship. This legitimacy minimized difficult aspects of the separation. When viewed in a "finite" unit (in most cases, 1-2 years), the separation took on a very positive meaning for the respondents. Overall, respondents seemed satisfied and accepted their situation, although concerns expressed about the distance as a *constraint* seemed more salient for participants who had been "left behind" or who were uncertain about when the geographic separation would end.

Our findings suggest that, similar to Van Horn et al.'s (1997) contention, processes associated with intimacy are applicable to long-distance relationships—including the importance of subjective meanings around "feeling close." Most participants believed that the distance did not affect how well they knew their partners. Indeed, almost the entire sample reported a solid foundation of shared friendship prior to their romantic involvement and attributed this to the success of their relationships. One could speculate that friendship gave individuals *confidence* in their relationships . . . confidence being theoretically and empirically

connected to satisfying intimate relationships (Van Horn et al., 1997). Beyond relational maintenance activities, the interdependence existing between long-distance partners was largely intangible—based more on elements like friendship and “knowing the other” and less on sharing diverse activities. The sense of bondedness emerging from their interdependence was intertwined with commitment processes. Most respondents reported being highly committed to their long-distance partners—someone most considered their “best friend.” Others mentioned that they felt they had found “the one” or their “soul-mate.” Although admitting that the geographic separation could be difficult, respondents believed that there was simply no substitute for their current partner, and this belief helped support sexual exclusivity—a manifestation of commitment that characterized the majority of study participants. What is unknown is whether the absence of everyday companionship made processes pertaining to relational maintenance and commitment unusually salient.

Everyday “talk” seemed to be evident in these relationships and, as with geographically close couples, was the essence of continued connection and interdependence with the partner. Creative relational maintenance techniques had to be implemented in order to maintain closeness with the partner. Many participants perceived their relational maintenance efforts as evidence of their commitment and the means to stay close to their partners. Nonphysical aspects of communication were cited by several participants as a benefit, rather than a negative consequence, of the geographic separation. For example, one respondent praised the virtues of separation and considered it a vehicle for more intentional self-disclosure via letter writing whereby difficult subjects and feelings could be more easily approached.

While social exchange researchers had previously assumed that distance would be perceived as a “cost,” this study provides evidence of an alternative meaning system. Instead of defining distance as a cost, many of the participants interpreted the separation as a reward of sorts and a lens by which they crystallized their relationship experience. Furthermore, it should be noted that study participants went through a much more complex process of evaluation for their relationships than that of a simple cost/reward scorecard. Participants evaluated their situation via the *meanings* they attached to costs and rewards as well as by utilizing personal frameworks, referred to as “philosophies” by several of the participants, which served as a kind of template to consider the long-distance situation. Thus, satisfaction does not seem to be based on geographic closeness or distance, but rather on subjective experience. Relationship strengths were emphasized, especially those aspects of the relationship that fit within one’s overall philosophy about relationships.

Undoubtedly, the idealization process might have contributed to participants' focus on the "better aspects" of their partners. Idealizing the long-distance situation and the geographically distant partner may serve as an emotional defense mechanism which facilitates not only the continuation of the relationship, but also the pursuit of academic and professional endeavors. Some level of distortion in one's long-distance relationship may also serve to minimize the possibility of meeting other potential mates as well, and justify the long-distance experience as valid. Furthermore, the developmental status of the participants in this study and the absence of legal, financial and other significant shared interdependencies (such as children) may also contribute to the seemingly content state of the study's participants. A "youthful naiveté" may connect with the beliefs espoused by many of the people in this study regarding the strengths of their relationships and their partner's "soul-mate" status, given the fact that most of these couples had yet to share a residence and test their relationship in a more mundane day to day context.

Overall, study participants conveyed a strong sense of *independence* and *motivation*. Educational achievement was a top priority for these individuals, so it is unclear how our findings would apply to individuals who did not share this value or have academic opportunities. Participants in this study showed a strong sense of commitment in both their personal and professional lives. While some individuals may not be able to maintain a long-distance relationship due to its lessened physical intimacy and greater autonomy demands, study participants seemed well-suited to the arrangement. It could be that individuals in satisfying long-distance relationships may even be termed "ambiguity" tolerant. The "ambiguity" which long-distance relationships present is a situation where the loved one is "physically absent," but "psychologically present" (Boss, 1999). In sum, our findings suggest that viable long-distance relationships might depend on individual personality and developmental qualities (such as the ability to tolerate ambiguity), a shared meaning system that emphasizes the necessity of the separation and the importance of staying committed, and interdependence via relational maintenance and friendship.

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