RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE IN LONG-DISTANCE DATING

RELATIONSHIPS: STAYING CLOSE

By

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Abstract

This study addressed the relational maintenance strategies and the meaning 23 to 35 year old students attributed to their long-distance dating relationships. Ten participants completed in depth interviews exploring the thoughts and feelings individuals held about their current long-distance partner and relationship. Also, commitment and quality of alternatives were addressed including the strengths and weaknesses of the respondent's relationship. Common themes of strong friendship, absolute trust, commitment to one partner, and using the technique of reminiscing were all dominant issues that emerged from the interview data. Social network approval as well as positive role models in the form of older siblings was also instrumental in lending support to the success and general positive attitude felt by participants about the geographic separation. Methods of communication included the telephone and e-mail, which was substituted or supplementary when high phone bills created financial concerns for the respondents. Variation in physical visitation was due to the intersection of academic schedule, affordable transportation, attitude towards work disruptions, geographic distance, and a general willingness to travel. Participants told a story of the geographic separation as both a temporary and necessary inconvenience, rather than a major obstacle or focal point of the relationship. Future directions for studying long-distance dating relationships include collecting couple data and examining gender differences to determine if sex has an impact on how geographic separation is viewed.

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CHAPTER ONE

In recent years long distance 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. Long-distance relationships connect with other social trends including increased educational attainment of both sexes as well as the increase of female labor force participation (Johnston & Packer, 1987). Due to job mobility, men and women's educational and occupational pursuits have created a need for many romantically involved couples to be geographically separated. The purpose of this study was to explore how individuals maintain closeness with their romantic partners when separated by geographical distance. Conducting a study on the daily maintenance strategies of long-distance couples provided important insights into relational intimacy.

The literature on long-distance relationships tends to focus on quantified topics that only bring to the surface basic ideas such as idealization (Stafford & Reske, 1990), commitment (Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997), and personal career development (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). While these issues are certainly important in understanding broad concerns of couples who are geographically separated, little in-depth information is available which describes how couples experience their relationship and maintain intimacy while geographically separated.

While many studies have been conducted on the beginning (dating) and the end (divorce) of a relationship, we know little about how couples stay close on a daily basis in terms of keeping a relationship functioning satisfactorily (Duck, 1994). This lack of information concerning relationship maintenance certainly applies to long distance

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partners. What we do know about relational maintenance tends to be based on geographically close relationships. Therefore, it was of interest to learn more about daily relational strategies in long distance relationships given their increasing frequency. Understanding how partners maintain intimacy despite physical separation provided insight regarding relationship processes.

Theoretical Framework

Staying Close: Relational Maintenance

Canary and Stafford (1994) define relational maintenance behaviors as "actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions" (p. 5). They explain that maintenance is needed in order to keep a relationship functioning successfully, and that satisfaction will fall apart without constant adjustments to these maintenance behaviors. 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 or enhanced in order for long-distance couples to stay committed and satisfied. As previously stated, there is a dearth of information about relational maintenance processes in long-distance relationships. What 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.

Commitment and Interdependence

Along with relational maintenance, interdependence and commitment are key elements of close relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1983; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Surra (1985) explains that interdependence can be defined as, "increasing degrees of overlap between partners at different stages of involvement…as the intersection between the partners widens" (p. 359). Elements included in this overlap include "knowledge partners have about each other, as well as kinds of activities the partners do together and the likelihood they will share them" (p. 359).

While interdependence tends to reflect what romantic partners might share, one's commitment to the relationship influences the nature and extent of the couple's interdependence (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). Commitment, somewhat less tangible and perhaps more subjective than interdependence, involves "the tendency to maintain a relationship and to feel psychologically 'attached' to it" (Rusbult, 1983, p. 102). Van Lange et al. (1997) extend this definition by adding notions of persistence, even through difficult times, and feelings of psychological need.

Social exchange theories have been influential in informing research on commitment in geographically close relationships. For example, The Rusbult Model (1983) conceptualizes " investment size" as a factor in the amount of commitment a person feels to his or her partner. The investment size can be in the form of material possessions, children, emotional investments or just amount of time spent in the relationship.

Extensions of social exchange theories include equity (Adams, 1965) and interdependence theories (Thibaut & Kelley, 1978) which further elaborate on the

importance of assessing the interplay between both partners in a relationship. Each individual not only evaluates their costs and benefits, but their partner's as well. These evaluations are influenced by perceptions of fairness as well as by the nature of shared tangible and intangible activities engaged in by the couple. Empirical findings examining newlywed couples (Surra, 1985) and college students (Floyd & Wasner, 1994) have suggested that interdependence impacts relationship satisfaction and stability. Interdependence is a particularly interesting notion when applied to long-distance relationships because it supercedes legal and physical structural arrangements defining relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1978).

While social exchange theory informs the present study, this study seeks to incorporate a more process-oriented perspective, or "social constructionist" (Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Gergen, 1985) viewpoint that focuses on the meaning individuals attach to relational maintenance strategies. Furthermore, the present study seeks to examine the nature of long-distance couples' shared interdependencies, as well as perceptions about their commitment to their partner and to the relationship.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine how dating couples who do not reside in the same geographic location maintain closeness when separated for periods of time. This study was descriptive in nature, and lent itself to a fresh understanding of the experience of individuals in these relationships.

The major emphasis of the study was in the form of in-depth qualitative data in order to gain insight into the emotional experiences that long distance separations generate, along with ways couples attempted to stay close. A qualitative study 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). The in-depth data yielded common themes for the participants of this study that began to answer questions about intimacy maintenance in long-distance dating relationships. Through the use of open-ended interview questions, participants had the opportunity to identify strengths and benefits of their long distance relationship.

Research Questions

Given the study's emphasis on relational maintenance, commitment, and interdependence, the main questions guiding the study were: a) How do long-distance couples stay close? What everyday "maintenance strategies" are used by study participants to keep relationships satisfactory? b) What shared interdependencies do study participants have with their romantic partner? c) Why do individuals stay in long-distance relationships?

The study examined strengths and difficulties in long-distance relationships by gathering interview data from participants which reveals not only how couples might stay close, but the meanings attached to relational maintenance strategies and shared interdependencies. For example, while some couples welcome this non-geographically close arrangement for purposes of career enhancement and personal fulfillment, others might be living in agony while counting down the days until they can once again be reunited. The study explored how meanings about the relationship may connect to commitment to the long-distance partner.

In summary, a "multi-layered" analysis was utilized in this study to derive the meanings and process individuals personally go through when examining their relationship. 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. A blending of grounded theory and analytic induction guided data analysis allowing for themes to emerge based on the participants' experiences as well as to organize the findings from the interviews. (Gilgun, 1992).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter gives an overview of empirical and theoretical issues grounding the proposed study of long-distance relationships. First, long-distance dating relationship research will be discussed. Next, a brief summary of research examining relational maintenance with an emphasis on "barrier deprivation" will be mentioned. Third, the conceptual framework for the study, briefly summarized in the previous chapter is elaborated on in more detail. Literature utilizing a social exchange perspective along with interrelated theories that conceptualize relationship processes such as commitment and interdependence is discussed.

Empirical Studies on Long-Distance Relationships

A thorough literature review supplied only three relevant quantitative articles that specifically addressed commitment in long-distance dating relationships. There were no articles that attained an in-depth analysis of the experience of individuals in long-distance relationships. An inconsistency exists between the amount of research done on long-distance relationships and the impact and prevalence they have in university settings. Unarguably this type of relationship is quite common in college campuses (Stafford, Daly, & Reske, 1987). In fact, the University of Iowa conducts workshops for students trying to cope with their long-distance relationships. Topics such as dealing with economic hardship (phone bills), setting parameters for in-town relationships with the opposite sex, developing new support systems (social networks), and keeping in mind

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positive aspects of long-term separations for future benefit (Westefeld & Liddell, 1982) are all discussed in support group sessions due to student demand.

Several issues emerged in previous empirical studies including; a) idealization, b) commitment, c) gender differences, and d) fidelity and perceived alternatives. For example, Stafford and Reske (1990) examined idealization in long-distance relationships explaining that distance actually contributed to the success of the relationship. The study compared 34 geographically close couples and 37 long-distance couples. Using a questionnaire they found that those engaged in long-distance relationships were more satisfied with their relationships and also more likely to marry their current partner. The results of this study were counterintuitive to the common assumption that distance makes couples less satisfied. Most people assume that more contact makes couples happier due to more self-disclosure and reduced uncertainty (Parks, 1982). However, this study revealed that idealization might indeed be occurring because what people do not know about their partner might actually be furthering the relationship longer than if negative information about their partner was known.

Another issue that has been addressed in the literature involves moral commitment to the relationship. Lydon, Pierce, and O'Regan (1997) studied only college students who were currently having long-distance relationships. They concluded that it was not personal dispositions (moral commitment) that made individuals stick out a relationship, but rather the personal investments that they had in the romantic relationship. The distinction between enthusiastic and moral commitment comes from a study on the two types of commitment based on Johnson's (1991) framework. Enthusiastic commitment describes a relationship where that individual truly "wants to"

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be in the relationship. The second type known as moral commitment is "the feeling that one ought to continue a relationship (p.121)." Stafford and Reske (1990) stated that moral commitment often deals more with married couples and the added societal pressures that come along such as the stigma of divorce or splitting up the children. The pre-marital relationships of college students are often not as stable and thus easier to abandon. The self-constraints people with moral commitment, such as married couples, do not apply to less committed college students going from a local to a long-distance relationship. Therefore, in this study the researcher deliberately picked a month before the geographic separation to assess the "uncertainty and ambiguity" of pre-marital couples about their relationship. The event of geographic separation will cause "one to deliberate about feelings of obligation and duty" (Stafford & Reske, 1990, p.105). Consequently, the authors hypothesized that people about to begin a long-distance relationship would report moral commitment, distinct from enthusiastic commitment. The findings for this study suggest that people in long distance relationships see geographic distance as an investment for the future, rather than a loss in the present. It can be inferred from this study that the added stress of geographic separation tests the type of commitment an individual has to the relationship. Those individuals in a relationship who are "enthusiastically" committed are more likely to see the separation as a small price to pay in order to benefit in the long run. An individual who is less committed (morally only), will see the distance as too high of a cost and be more likely discontinue the relationship due to the added immediate "stress" of the physical separation.

Helgeson (1994) specifically addressed sex differences in adjustment and dissolution in long-distance relationships. This study was conducted on 107 college

students who were administered questionnaires assessing interdependence, psychological distress and adjustment to separation and break-up (if relevant to participant). Interdependence was defined as a marker of "closeness" reflected by: a) frequency of contact and b) relationship longevity. It's worth noting that Helgeson viewed geographic distance as a "negative stressor" for the relationship. The findings of this study concluded that women adjusted better than men to physical separation and breaking-up. The author states that women have an easier time dealing with physical separation and breaking up due to their generally stronger support systems which they retain once romantically involved, whereas men generally rely solely on their significant others.

Relational Maintenance

As mentioned previously, there is a gap in research specifically conducted on the "middle" of relationships (Duck, 1994). A large void exists regarding the processes individuals go through in order to keep their relationships at a satisfactory and mutually beneficial level. More specifically, what keeps romantic dyads from drifting away from each other?

Duck (1994, p. 48) explains that "talk" and simple everyday exchanges are the essence of relational maintenance. Also, a "shared meaning system" is defined and redefined by individuals in a dyad (p.53). 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, when addressing couples that are engaged in a long-distance romance, "talk" may be significantly influenced by distance. Consequently, intimacy processes based on everyday verbal exchanges might be 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, Arnone, Nesbitt, Desilets, Sears, Giffen, & Brudi, 1997).

Relational maintenance and the long-distance couple. Much of the existing research on relational maintenance strategies focuses on geographically close couples. Attridge (1994) states that it would be interesting to test couples with differing barrier levels, such as daters, newlyweds, and married couples, since little research has been done on varying types of relationships, including the "barrier deprived" long-distance couple. Central issues appear to be "routine vs. strategic behaviors" (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Baxter, 1987), as well as developing a taxonomy for the maintenance behaviors (Canary & Stafford, 1991). For example, Canary and Stafford (1992) recently tested the five relational strategies of: a) positvity, b) openness, c) assurances, d) networks, and e) tasks. The major findings of these studies found that when these five strategies were used, the relationships were more likely to be maintained and mutually satisfying to the couples. Little difference was found with reference to gender, but women were more communicative with their partners. Overall, "sharing time together", was the single most important factor in maintaining the relationship.

The issue of shared time is interesting when applied to long distance relationships, because it is relatively unknown how couples compensate for an absence of shared time or perhaps develop strategies to enhance the time they do have together. For example, it was revealed in one study on long distance relationships that couples often take each other "less for granted" than geographically close couples (Groves & Horm-Wingerd, 1991). This finding is suggestive that couples appreciate and make greater efforts to

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cherish the time they do have together, thereby enhancing satisfaction or intimacy in their relationship.

A component of shared time identified in the empirical literature involved a shared social network, such as including relatives in activities as well as going out with common friends. Similar to the concerns mentioned above, it is unknown to what extent a shared social network is an important relational strategy for long distance couples. One might speculate that long distance couples are more likely to have separate social networks due to their geographic separation, potentially diluting the shared social network of the couple. This "dilution' may in turn connect to less closeness and possibly increase the likelihood of infidelity in the relationship. However, Westefeld and Liddell (1982), suggest that setting parameters for acceptable relationships with the opposite sex may help alleviate any potential problems associated with jealousy and curtail any problems which may be associated with friendships outside of the couples' shared social network.

Barrier deprivation. Attridge's (1994) theory of barrier deprivation is relevant when considering relational maintenance strategies and long-distance couples, because it informs our understanding of why people stay in relationships. Conceptually, Attridge's relational maintenance framework is based on a Social Exchange perspective. The "barriers" used are similar to Rusbult's (1983) "investments". Attridge's comprehensive model draws from previous frameworks such as Levinger's Model of Cohesiveness (1976), Johnson's Model of Commitment to the Relationship (1991), Rusbult's Investment Model (1983) and Lund's Barrier Model (1985) to support the view that romantic relationships are all kept together by barriers (p.142-146). The resultant

integration focuses on three main issues, "a) attractions to the relationship, b) attractions to alternatives, and c) restraints on leaving the relationship (p.145). These three barriers are then sub-classed into the form of "internal psychological barriers" such as religious morals, and "external structural barriers" such as financial pressures or social network pressures.

Attridge (1994) explains that these barriers are the "walls" that keep people in relationships. As noted in the empirical studies done on relational maintenance, many of the typical strategies used by individuals to keep a well-maintained relationship are not logically possible for couples in long-distance relationships. For example, talking everyday, daily exchanges of affection, shared financial responsibilities (house), and shared social networks are often missing from long-distance relationships. In fact, Attridge terms this situation of a long-distance romance as "barrier deprivation," since these couples do not have these tangible supports to depend on as much as geographically close couples. Therefore, according to this theory couples engaging in long-distance relationships will have a more difficult experience and a weakened barrier system for maintaining the relationship. However, while considering the issue of barriers as contributing to understanding the difficulties a long distance relationship might pose, once again, a negative conceptualization may obscure other possibilities, such as alternative strategies long distance couples may devise and implement to "stay close." Evidence, however scant, of creative relational maintenance exists. For example, Westefeld and Liddell (1982) found that some long distance couples sent pre-recorded cassette tapes to each other as a way to keep connected. The present study seeks to extend

a "barrier deprivation" framework and explore the possibility of creative relational maintenance strategies.

<u>Commitment and Interdependence</u>

An analysis of the concepts of commitment and interdependence for geographically close relationships offers insight into the maintenance of long-distance relationships. Many scholars address the issues of satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986) and the development of commitment processes (Surra & Hughes, 1997). Conceptualizations and subsequent study of commitment processes in relationships have been largely influenced by Rusbult's (1983) Investment Model. According to Rusbult, committed relationships are characterized by three key elements. These elements are: satisfaction, investments, and the quality of alternatives. An analysis of these three factors provides a picture of the commitment of a couple. Consistent with a Social Exchange perspective, the first concept of satisfaction is weighed in terms of perceived costs and rewards of both individuals in the couple. Satisfaction is based on the perception that individuals in relationships perceive themselves to be gaining more rewards than costs from the relationship. However, according to Rusbult, further commitment is linked to the amount of investments that each partner puts into the relationship, so a constant re-evaluation of costs and rewards occurs. Investments can be financial, emotional, or responsibilities such as children and reflect an interdependence within the relationships. These attachments are thought to influence the level of commitment in a relationship and determine in part whether an individual is likely to continue in their relationship. Furthermore, the quality of alternatives available to the

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individuals at any given time is also believed to influence commitment levels and the continuation of an intimate relationship. Based on Rusbult's model, one could predict for example, that if an individual is unhappy with their current situation, it is likely that he will branch out to others in order to gain what he was missing. This branching out can be in the form of emotional connection, financial stability, or even sexual satisfaction.

Bui, Peplau, and Hill (1996) extend Rusbult's work by examining romantic partners' "comparison level" and applying concepts rooted in Dissonance theory. "Comparison level" refers to the evaluation of a current partner with alternatives, including any past experiences. From this perspective, one would expect that an individual who was let down in a past relationship, will not expect as much from the current partner. At the same time, if an individual was happy with the current partner he or she will automatically devalue the alternative partner (Bazzini & Shaffer, 1996; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Miller, 1997). Dissonance theory refers to one's ability to consciously consider alternatives. If an individual was not very invested emotionally to the current partner, he or she will not feel bad about dating someone else or actually cheating on the current partner. However, if an individual is committed to the current partner he or she will not be as likely to stray from the partner.

Social Exchange conceptualizations of commitment and interdependence are advantageous for they are easily tested and empirically assessable. However, they do pose certain limitations in that they presume behavior in intimate relationships is predictable and the product of rational thought. Clearly, there are instances of relational commitment that defy such simplistic explanation. Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman and Thompson (1989) refine notions of commitment and interdependence by considering

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what constitutes a "close relationship." According to this perspective, a key component of intimacy is in the form of interdependence in couples, which is defined as the degree to which they lean on or "influence" each other. This conceptualization is particularly appealing when applied to long distance couples due to its ability to transcend structural parameters like geographical separation. Drawing from Bui and Peplau (1983), Scanzoni identifies four criteria of interdependence: a)frequency of impact, b) strength or intensity of each impact, c)diversity of activities over which there will be impact, and d) duration of impact. The degree to which romantic partners are intertwined or "interdependent" is very likely linked to the nature of their commitment to the relationship (Surra, 1985; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997).

Summary

Social Exchange perspectives have historically dominated the study of relational maintenance. While conceptualizations focusing on costs, rewards, and barriers have informed the study of intimate relationships, such a framework also limits our understanding of how couples stay close. Social Exchange theorizing tends to presume a negative bias toward long distance relationships as being disadvantaged, ignoring potential strengths and creative aspects in these relationships. Furthermore, previous research fails to consider the subjective meaning individuals attach to their actions in relationships as well as their view of the long-distance experience. Commitment and interdependence provide conceptual grounding for examining how couple's sustain intimacy in the context of geographic separation.

There appears to be scant research describing qualitative aspects of the nature of long-distance dating relationships. The present study addressed this void by utilizing a

social constructionist framework that emphasizes an individual's unique perception of the reality (their relationship). In fact, 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). Simply stated, this means that what one person perceives as normal or acceptable dating practices, may be completely unacceptable to another person given their differing social contexts. Therefore, an exploration of the socially constructed meanings of these individuals conducting long distance relationships sheds light on why creative relational maintenance and personal reasons for the separation keep these individuals quite satisfied with their long distance romance.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

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. McCracken states that the long interview allows the researcher to get into the mind of participants who are being interviewed and experience the world as they see it. Furthermore, in-depth interviews are an excellent means of grasping at the meanings attached to intimacy (Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Snyder, 1992). These interview sessions were conducted using a semi-structured question format. Closed-ended questions regarding age, religion, length of relationship, and frequency of visits were initially asked. 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

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 to35. Smelser and Erikson (1980) explain that a societal expectation generalizes for individuals to begin early adulthood at approximately the age of 22. This age group was studied, as opposed to younger cohorts, due to their presumed greater maturity and independence (Smelser & Erikson, 1980). Furthermore, older young adults are more likely to have a higher level of independence from their parents in terms of financial and personal obligations, as well as more challenging academic obligations. 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).

<u>Sample Selection</u>

A purposive snowball sampling technique (Levin, 1997; McCall & Simmons, 1969; Siegel, 1995) 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 Main Campbell, the on-campus, graduate dormitory at Virginia Tech. Similar to techniques utilized by Groves and Horm-Wingerd (1991), additional participants were provided by those already in the sample. Initially, a list of prospective participants was generated totaling 20 individuals. A sample was then extracted from this group, alternating between male and female respondents, and giving consideration to variability in the different academic departments on campus.

Demographic information of the sample is summarized in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2. <u>Narrative of the Respondents</u> provides a synopsis of each participant's relationship (Table 3.3). Five males and five females between the ages of 23 and 35 were interviewed incorporating the departments of Human Development, Education Administration, Computer Science, Management Science, Mathematics, Horticulture, and Engineering. The majority of the sample was graduate students, but two were continuing education students who returned at a non-traditional age and one student was a senior undergraduate. Certain background factors that might have had bearing on relationship quality were not specifically addressed in this study. For example, the implications of religious affiliations and/or spirituality were not examined so it is unknown as to what

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kind of patterns or connections might exist. Also, it is unknown how SES could potentially contribute to the nature of the long distance relationship experience because of the student status and minimal earnings of the participants and their hesitation to provide information about their partner's earnings. However, in the interviews some of the respondents did admit to curtailing phone conversations due to exorbitant phone bills, thus using e-mail to compensate when available.

Interviews

Interview questions were developed based on the sensitizing concepts outlined in the previous chapters. Consistent with a qualitative approach, questions listed in the appendix merely served as starting points to develop a conversation around certain issues. The interviews took place in either respondent's homes or in their academic office buildings on campus during May 31-April 7, 2000. They were very informal and done in a conversational manner that facilitated honest and straightforward answers to the topics under study. A series of probes or prompts followed specific questions depending on a participant's response (Bogdon & Biklen, 1998). Based on past studies reviewed in the literature and the theoretical conceptualizations framing this study, the following areas were foci for interview questions. Social exchange concepts of investments and alternatives were explored as well as relational maintenance strategies. Areas covered included: 1) evaluation of relationship, partner, and situation- strengths and weaknesses in the relationship, 2) relational maintenance strategies, 3) shared interdependencies and communication- shared interactions and frequency of exchanges of affection, children, money, friends, house, and car, 4) commitment processes as well as attraction to alternatives.

<u>Coding and Interpretation</u>

Each interview was audio-taped and promptly transcribed. The transcription process was very helpful in solidifying the data and clarifying coding strategies. As the transcriber, I had the opportunity once again to hear the tapes after completion. I was particularly impressed by the participant's rich descriptions of their experiences. Similar to methodology employed by Arditti and Prouty (1999), I read through the transcriptions several times. After reading the transcriptions twice, I began to do a content analysis by highlighting quotes that reflected similarities across the respondents. The following five coding categories were identified: strengths of the partner/relationship, weaknesses of the partner/relationship, relational maintenance techniques, commitment processes and alternative partners, and meanings attached to the separation. With these five basic areas in mind, I used scissors to cut the highlighted quotes and sorted them into piles that corresponded to the five coded areas.

The last step in the content analysis was to further divide the sorted quotes into themes that were common to most of the respondents and to note the exceptions as well. The thematic areas that emerged were: friendship, phone and e-mail as lifelines, age and maturity as reasons for commitment, absolute trust, and meanings of the separation.

Table 3.1

<u>Respondents' Demographics</u>

Name	Age	Race	Department	Working on:
Lucy	35	African American	Education Administration	Ph.D.
Eddie	29	Caucasian	Management Science	Bachelors
Kimmy	23	African American	Electrical Engineering	Bachelors
Darren	24	Caucasian	Computer Science	Masters
Amanda	29	Caucasian	Horticulture	Bachelors
Marcus	24	Caucasian	Mathematics	Masters
Cindy	23	Caucasian	Mathematics	Masters
Skip	26	Caucasian	Education	Ph.D.
Jaime	30	Caucasian	Nutrition	Ph.D.
Sammy	24	Caucasian	Mathematics	Masters

Note: All names and some academic departments have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

Table 3.2

<u>Respondents' Relationship History</u>

Name	Total Length	Separation Time	Remainder of Separation
Lucy	2 ½ years	8 months	uncertain
Eddie	1 ½ years	4 months	3 months
Kimmy	7 months	3 months	uncertain
Darren	3 ¼ years	2 years	3 years
Amanda	1 ½ years	1 ½ years	2 months
Marcus	5 years	1 ½ years	4 month
Cindy	2 ½ years	2 ½ years	3 months
Skip	4 ½ years	11 months	1 ½ years
Jaime	2 ½ years	5 months	1 year
Sammy	2 ½ years	2 ½ years	2 months

Table 3.3

<u>Narrative of the Respondents</u>

Lucy: Lucy is a 35-year old woman who has been in the current relationship with her 34-year old boyfriend for 2 ½ years. They met while working at a middle school in Eastern Virginia and began dating after they had established a friendship. They became a geographically separated couple 8 months ago when she moved to finish her Ph.D. degree in Southwest Virginia and he moved to North Carolina to pursue a new job and finish his Ph.D. as well. Lucy speculated that they would be separated for at least another two years while they devote the required time to establish their careers. She was very positive about the relationship lasting through the separation and feels the solid foundation of love, trust, and mutual respect will be sufficient for helping them through the geographic separation.

Eddie: Eddie is a 29-year old man who has been in the current relationship with his 29-year old girlfriend for 1-½ years. They met while residing in the same co-ed residence hall at a university in Virginia. After becoming friends for a few months, they began dating. They became a geographically separated couple 4 months ago when his girlfriend graduated and took a job in Northern Virginia. Eddie will graduate this summer and move to Northern Virginia to reside with his girlfriend. He felt the distance was only a mild inconvenience compared to his past long-distance relationship when he was in the Navy and had no doubts that this short separation would not have any lasting negative effects on their relationship.

Kimmy: Kimmy is a 23 year-old woman who had been friends with her current 25-year old boyfriend for over 3 years. They began dating 7 months ago after she broke up with her last boyfriend. The couple was separated 3 months ago when he graduated and took a job in Georgia, while she finished her degree. Another geographic separation is ahead for this couple as she serves in the military for 2 years in New Jersey. She is hopeful that this relationship will last given the strong friendship they have built over the years. Although she admitted, that it will be difficult given their geographic separation and the uncertainty of when they will be able to reside in the same locale.

Darren: Darren is a 24-year old man who had been dating his 24-year old girlfriend for 3 ¼ years. They met over 4 years ago through mutual friends and began dating a year later after they had established a friendship of their own. They were separated 2 years ago when he came to graduate school in Virginia and she pursued a job in Pennsylvania. Spending school breaks and summers together, the couple has been able to successfully maintain their relationship. The couple will still be separated by a 2-hour car drive after May when Darren takes a job in New Jersey and his girlfriend goes back to school. He was positive about the future of their relationship since they will be much closer to each other when he graduates after completing his master's degree in May.

Amanda: Amanda is a 29-year old woman who has known her current 31-year old boyfriend since high school when they met through mutual friends and began dating a year later. After high school, the couple broke up and went their separate ways to pursue their education. Over the years this couple seemed to be in and out of other relationships, but their friendship stayed constant. A year and a half ago, Amanda returned to finish her degree in Virginia and the couple decided to give their relationship another try. They spent all her school breaks in Florida together and have been able to satisfactorily maintain a romantic relationship. As for the future, Amanda plans on graduating in May and cohabiting with her boyfriend in Florida where she hopes to find and job and settle down.

Marcus: Marcus is a 24-year old man who has been with his 23-year old girlfriend for 5 years. After being friends for a year, the couple eased into a romantic relationship since both had just come out of bad relationships and wanted to take things slowly. They dated as undergraduates for three years before they were separated when Marcus decided to come to Virginia for a master's degree and his girlfriend stayed in Cleveland to take a job. The couple visited as often as possible and spent school breaks and summers together. Last summer they got engaged and made plans to get married this summer when Marcus graduates in May. The couple will reside in Newport, Rhode Island after the wedding, where Marcus has already gotten a job.

Cindy: Cindy is a 23-year old woman who has been dating her 28-year old boyfriend for 2 ½ years. The couple met and became friends while working for the same academic internship. They began dating only 2 weeks before they were geographically separated to return to their respective schools and finish their degrees. Keeping constant contact by telephone and visiting each other on school breaks; the couple was able to deepen their friendship and their romantic relationship. Cindy plans on graduating in May and seeks to obtain her Ph.D. by attending a university in Maryland, where her boyfriend is currently teaching. The couple plans on cohabiting while they pursue their academic and career aspirations.

Skip: Skip is a 26-year old man who has been dating his 23-year old girlfriend for over 4½ years. They met at a university in Virginia through mutual friends while obtaining their undergraduate degrees. After establishing a friendship for a few months, the couple decided to pursue a romantic relationship. The couple became geographically separated when his girlfriend graduated and took a teaching job, while he pursued his graduate degree. Although this couple has had their share of problems while together, they see the distance as a minor issue compared to their shared history and the issues they have struggled through together. Skip plans to obtain his Ph.D. in the next 1 to 1 ½ years, after which he and his girlfriend plan on getting married and reside in place where both of them can hopefully acquire teaching jobs and start a family.

Jaime: Jaime is a 30-year old woman who has been dating her 26-year old boyfriend for 2½ years. The couple met at a university in Ohio at a gym and began dating after a few months. After Jaime obtained her master's degree and her boyfriend his undergraduate degree, the couple moved to Virginia to cohabitate while Jaime obtained her PHD and her boyfriend worked. The couple was geographically separated 5 months ago when her boyfriend moved to Colorado to pursue a good job opportunity and she stayed in Virginia to finish her education. Jaime plans on moving out to live with her boyfriend in Colorado after she obtains her Ph.D. in about a year. Although the geographic distance is an inconvenience, she is confident that the relationship will survive since she knows she has found her soul mate.

Sammy: Sammy is a 24-year old man who has been dating his 22-year old girlfriend for 2 ½ years since they met at their undergraduate university while in the juggling club. The couple began dating after a year of being acquaintances through their shared interest of juggling. Their first geographic separation came 3 months after they began dating when his girlfriend went to London to study abroad. Sammy admitted that writing letters to his girlfriend everyday was the main reason their relationship worked and the sole factor that he credited for the strong bond they share to this day. Currently, Sammy is obtaining his masters degree in Southwest Virginia, while his girlfriend is working in Northern Virginia. Sammy will graduate in May and start his new job in Northern Virginia while living close to his girlfriend. He feels positive that he will marry his girlfriend and spend the rest of his life with her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The goal of this results section was consistent with a qualitative approach described by Gilgun (1992), in which presenting dominant themes as well as exceptions from the data, is the main objective. The quotes that were chosen in this section emphasize the sensitizing concepts of the study corresponding with the relational maintenance and commitment literature. One focus of the study involved exploring ways in which couples stayed connected and dealt with any difficulties posed by the physical separation. Strengths of the relationships, alternative communication methods, views on commitment, and the meanings of the geographic separation were all examined in this chapter. The thick description attained by in-depth interviews allowed many themes to emerge that were not previously discussed in the literature on long-distance relationships.

We're Best Friends

Friendship appeared to be an important factor that helped couples stay close. In fact, the majority of the participants reported being friends with their partner before they started dating. Sprecher and Duck (1994) explain that quality of communication and realizing similarities with prospective opposite sex mates often leads to attraction first in a friendship context and may further develop into romantic attraction. Many had known their partner for over a year before they dated and had already come to gain intimate knowledge of their partners through daily conversation. This friendship attraction further intensified by time, lead some of the participants to start recognizing romantic attributes

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in their current partner as more then a friendship bond. A few participants met their

partner in an academic setting such as class or an internship, while others met their

partner through a shared hobby such as working out at the gym, or juggling. However,

one thing remained constant throughout the interviewees; they had all become best

friends during the course of the romantic relationship, many through shared interests such

as academic or leisure activities.

The following statements reflected the various ways in which some of the couples

met their partners, and revealed that they had formed a deep friendship before they even

started dating. Marcus, a 24-year old Math major, had been coming off a horrible

relationship with his ex-girlfriend when he met his current girlfriend:

> We met freshmen year in college, which would be the fall of 1994. We were both
> coming off pretty bad relationships that year. We were good friends that year,
> nothing happened that year. At the end of that year, some interest was expressed
> and we were like, we'll wait over the summer and go home and then come back
> and see what happens, and then we came back sophomore year, and uh, we just
> hit it off.

Cindy, a 23-year-old grad student, was "just friends" with her current boyfriend

during an academic internship. Becoming a couple was not on their minds as they began

to form a friendship and spend more time together, but that began to change when they

realized that they would soon be geographically separated:

> We both had an internship with AT&T together; it was a summer internship. Um,
> and we lived next door to each other in the university apartments, and road the
> bus to work every day. And uh, eventually we just started watching television
> together, hanging out together, and then the last two weeks of the internship we
> started dating.

Lucy had been dating someone else at the time she met her partner and was hesitant to begin a relationship with her current partner. She shared the following statement:

> I was very honest with him at the beginning and told him about the relationship and right now I couldn't commit because I didn't know how I felt about him. But we could be friends and take it slow. You know one thing led to another and we started spending more time together. And it is funny because I prayed to the Lord to send me a good man…I can't believe this guy had all these qualities that I am looking for. This must be a sign for me to work this thing out.

These individuals were not looking for a relationship with their current significant others. The intimate relationship evolved unexpectedly, and the friendship foundation facilitated a stronger romantic relationship in the long run since they truly felt comfortable with each other and had no false pretenses about who the person was since they had been friends with them first.

When questioned about the reason that they stayed in the relationship, several respondents remarks affirmed their partners best friends status, that they were very similar to their partners and had no reason to even consider another mate.

Darren, a computer-science graduate student, admitted that he relied on his girlfriend to be his major sounding board for anything that he needed to talk about:

> I mean the fact that she is so much like me I guess. Uh, I don't know I talk to her all the time so she is pretty much my best friend. I tell her anything.

Jaime casted away any doubt that another guy could be right for her and would not even consider that possibility:

> He is my best friend and soul mate! I couldn't imagine being with anyone else. I don't want to be!

Contrary to my expectations, study participants failed to mention physical attractiveness as an important strength of his or her partner. Previous studies conducted on reasons for attraction in relationships cite physical attractiveness (Feingold 1990; Sprecher, 1998) as a main factor for attraction in romantic relationships. The fact that physical attractiveness did not emerge in terms of reasons for staying close could be an artifact of the interview questions themselves, or perhaps, stem from the long distance experience. One might speculate that because of their inability to be physically together on a daily basis, these couples were less focused on the physical aspects of a romantic relationship and more centered on personality traits such as partner's warmth and kindness and intellectual benefits of their partners, which is also cited by (Sprecher, 1998) as important for attraction in a relationship. Consequently, outward appearance was not the reason that these couples were so bonded, rather it was being content with the person for who they were, which came out in the form of intelligence or sense of humor. It was communicated to the researcher that these individuals were really proud to be with their partner, but that the attraction was much deeper than a physical connection.

Kimmy, a 23-year old undergraduate engineering major, liked the way her boyfriend was able to make her feel good about herself. It was almost like she was a better person just having him in her life:

> His strengths are…he is very intelligent, very intelligent, um, very athletic, he never puts me down, in other relationships I have been put down. He never puts me down. He always tries to look at the positive side. Just willing to work with me.

Cindy, a 23-year-old math major thought her boyfriend was quite the comedian and someone who was just fun to be around:

He is very funny, uh, he is quite the character. And of course, he is really smart and I found that very attractive. He is just a fun person to be with.

Skip, a 26-year education major even made a comment about how looks are not what counted when you are searching for someone to spend the rest of your life with:

I strongly believe what Judge Judy says, "beauty fades, but dumb is forever" And as I said, she is a bright and witty person and I know if I want an honest answer or an honest opinion…She is a very, forthright, very open, person.

Sammy, who had been in his long distance relationship for 2 ½ years explained that he liked his girlfriend because she was not like all the other girls he had dated. His current girlfriend was a very strong person, but was still able to still make him laugh:

A good sense of humor. She laughs, she is smart, she's not a typical chick. Like she doesn't cry at the drop of a hat and get all hysterical and things like that. Some women don't have any strength of character and she has got both of those.

Several reasons were given as to why the individuals in the sample were happy with their partners, but the factor that they admitted was the most important was the solid foundation of friendship which they had built with their partners. However, after discussing the strengths of the relationship or partner, the researcher explored whether these couples had any major troubles in their relationship. Two males in the study cited minor problems such as a tendency to be stubborn as a minor difficulty in the relationship. The participants in both the following cases stated that both himself and his partner tended to be stubborn.

Darren, a 24-year-old computer science major explained that being geographically separated actually magnified the little arguments that he and his girlfriend were known to have when they were geographically close:

We are both pretty stubborn, but I don't know, that's one of the biggest things. We just have dumb arguments, because we are stubborn, so we don't want to admit the other person's right. The biggest changes (due to the distance) is probably that we get into more dumb arguments, sometimes I think that if we were closer and we would get into dumb arguments. We would look at each other and just be like, what are we doing? We are being stupid. Some petty little arguments, you know frustrations because we can't see each other, more than anything.

Skip, who had dated his girlfriend for almost 5 years, admitted while laughing to himself, that stubbornness has created some small conflicts in his relationship, but that their friendship has been strong enough to work through these difficulties.

Boy we are both stubborn people and we both know that about each other. And if you were to talk to her, she would say I am as stubborn as an ass. I say the same about her, but we had our difficulties, one of the biggest things is we are talking about getting married. She wants to stay home and raise children. And I told her that well that sounded good and all, but you have to know if you can afford to stay home and raise children because I know that in today's society it takes two incomes.

"Stubbornness" was the only complaint that was cited as a difficulty in the relationship by any participant, which really lead to any problems for these couples. In fact most respondents said that their relationship had always been pretty easy going, with very minimal difficulty. The following statement from one young man reflected this theme:

It has been pretty clear sailing…I mean I hate to say it, but there is just no reason for us to break-up. It is not like either one of us has the desire to be with anybody else. We are pretty and completely thoroughly in love. There is no bullshit. There is no fights. There is no problem. Um, we both have the same goals; we both want the same things. (Sammy)

Jaime, a 30-year old Nutrition major, sheepishly admitted that her and her boyfriend get along so well, that their other friends think they have a weird relationship:

This is a really strange thing, we have never fought ever. We don't fight. We don't like to fight; we have no reason to fight. Everyone tells me that is not normal, but I think it must be.

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It is important to realize that one of the main reasons that these couples felt their long-distance relationship had a chance was due to the maturity with which they approached their situation. The strong friendship many participants reported sharing with their partner explained in part why these couples get along so well and felt so confident in their ability to struggle through the geographic separation. Indeed, research indicates the importance of compatible personalities and quality communication as attractive factors that further the maintenance of attraction and friendship in romantic relationships (Sprecher & Duck, 1994; Sprecher 1998). The type of connection that all the participants seemed to have with their partners was quite deep in itself. The things that the individuals talked about as attractive qualities reflected this, since most individuals mentioned intelligence and sense of humor as the main reasons they wanted to be with their significant others. Also, some compared their current partners to other people they had dated in the past and had come to realize that they were with a quality individuals who made them feel good about themselves.

The solid foundation of friendship brought these couples together, while the respect they bestowed upon each other kept them together. Coupled with an ability to make each other laugh, it was easy to understand why these individuals did not feel very daunted by a geographic separation. Abel (1998) and Martin and Lefcourt (1983) both cite humor as beneficial to alleviating stress by increasing psychological well being and positive mood. Their ability to maintain the strong bond they had formed while geographically close seemed to be one of several factors connected to an ability to successfully endure the period of geographic separation. It was obvious that the

participants relied on their partners both romantically and for friendship. These significant others could be both intelligent listeners and stress-relievers they could talk to about anything, even if it was over the phone or e-mail.

Relational Maintenance

While the friendship relationship prior to the geographic separation seemed important for later success, relational maintenance strategies were also connected to satisfaction. Recall that, Attridge (1994) pointed out that couples who were geographically separated would experience "barrier deprivation" when it came to maintaining their relationship. Although the geographic separation posed some challenges for the couples, many couples compensated for the distance by using technology to keep in touch. This section summarizes common relational maintenance strategies utilized by participants in the study, including various forms of communication, attitudes and support from social networks, and basic techniques partners used when they missed each other to maintain the intimate bond they shared with their partner when they could not physically be together.

Lifelines- phone visits and e-mail. All 10 participants relied on the telephone to be the link between them and their partner as a way to feel close to them, even though they could not be there in person. Some participants had no financial concerns about running up a high bill because they just "needed" that phone visit to feel connected to their partner every day, while others tried to supplement their communication by using e-mail when available to cut down on costs. Couples varied in terms of how frequently they might talk with their partner on the phone. Certain couples could simply not afford to talk every day even though they wanted to, but were able to use e-mail to connect with each

other on a daily basis. One young woman explained that she had to talk to her boyfriend every night even though the bills were quite high. If they missed even one night of talking, they had to talk even longer the next night. Jaime and her boyfriend had cohabited prior to the separation and were extremely attached and connected to one another. Therefore, her desire to connect and "stay current" with her boyfriend every day was communicated as a need for satisfaction:

> We talk on the phone every night. It is not good on the phone bill. Even if I am at for example, a conference and we still plan on talking, but you can only talk at certain times and there is a time difference too, so we kept missing each other last weekend and so Sunday when I got home, we talked for over 2 hours and not that I minded, but we had all this catching up to do.

Sammy, 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.

Another young man, 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. She seemed just as satisfied to e-mail her boyfriend

as to use the phone. It was obvious from the frequency with which she contacted her

boyfriend the amount of times a day she thought of her partner and contacted him from

her graduate office while working on her master's thesis.

> 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.

Marcus lamented the fact that he could not e-mail his girlfriend since she did not

have access to a computer, but rationalized talking to her every night since they were

planning their wedding together for the summer.

> Well she doesn't have e-mail, so that makes it more difficult, but we probably call each other normally, we touch base every night, but sometimes it is 2 or 3 days, depending on our schedule. Uh, but then after that we talk to each other, like every night for a bit. Especially with just planning the wedding.

Kimmy and Amanda, who were both planning to graduate in May, stated that they

willingly "gave their partners a little more space" and only talked about once a week

since they felt they needed to stay completely focused on academics, but spoke to their

partners just enough to stay connected.

Kimmy explained that her difficult engineering courses left her little time for

leisure and therefore planned her phone conversations with her boyfriend once a week,

but 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 previously she had put partying and relationships ahead of her academics and had learned from her mistakes. She knew that having a boyfriend living geographically close was too much of a hindrance for her in terms of academic progress. 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.

Similarly, she felt speaking to her boyfriend too often would also be distracting and offered the following statement about 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.

Amanda further explained that since she only talked to her partner about once a week on the phone, she had to let some of the smaller battles go, or she would end up having a horrible time each time she did talk to her partner:

> You have to get used to not having that contact and I don't know about, women tend to be a little bit more particular about that contact. They tend to write more, I think they phone more…You have to just let things roll off, because when you are separated, you don't want, if you talk to that person infrequently. You don't want to have an argument every time you talk to that person.

In addition to Kimmy and Amanda, Skip and Lucy, two Ph.D. students had little phone contact with their partners as well. Skip and Lucy discussed how although once a

week was the usual for them to talk, if something important came up, they bent those rules a little bit.

Skip explained that although speaking every day was not possible, just knowing his girlfriend would be there for him whenever he needed her was a source of contentment for him. He admitted being a little less content than the other members of the sample who talked to their partners more, but accepted that finances and workload inhibited more frequent contact:

> 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 he is doing alright 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 can't 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 probably try to talk on the phone, because 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 and we can catch up with each other. But we stay on the phone probably 90 minutes. Sometimes a little longer, sometimes a little less. But it probably averages about an hour to an hour and a half each time we talk. That is why our phone bills are so high.

Undoubtedly, phone calls and e-mails were the lifelines for these couples to stay connected when they were not able to physically be together. Finances and academic loads seemed to influence frequency and length of phone contact. Beyond these two factors, it is unclear as to what other factors might connect with communication patterns during separation. For example, it could be speculated that age might have affected the

contact frequency since both Amanda and Lucy were towards the older age range of the sample, while Marcus and Sammy, who were two of the youngest male respondents spoke to their girlfriends every day. There could be many factors explaining the variation in the contact, but with such a small sample it was inconclusive whether age can be named as a differentiating factor.

Regardless of frequency of communication, overall the participants seemed to be dealing quite well with the system of contact they had devised for themselves and their partner. A socially constructed view (see for example, Arditti & Proutty, 1999; Gergen, 1985) which emphasizes meaning, inherently challenges the supposed negative consequences of a geographic separation. Findings suggest these individuals actively approached their separation, as they needed to without letting it consume them. Phone calls and e-mails were looked forward to and treasured. For these participants, "phone visits" and e-mail messages were the sources of continued connection to their partners. Opening up an e-mail, or waiting by the phone each night became a source of planned enjoyment, which enabled these long-distance relationships to work so successfully and allowed them to plan much awaited reunions. However, nothing compared to actually being together again with their significant other. Weekends, school breaks and summers were favorites among the respondents for visiting their partners.

Reunited… if but for a weekend. Visits were longed for and planned with care by study participants. Visits gave important structure to times of separation and plans 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 make long road trips. Some participants were able to see each other every weekend, while others had to wait until major school breaks, such as Christmas or the summer. Both Jaime, and Amanda were over a thousand miles from their partners and thus had to fly to see their partners which was much less convenient than the average 5 hour car ride most of the more typical participants were separated from their partners. Most respondents spent school breaks together and in many cases, their summers were also spent living in close geographic proximity. Weekends were also a popular time for the couples to get together during times when school was still in session and their partner was working.

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. Such an accommodation reflected a willingness to invest in the relationship and a commitment to their partner. For example, Marcus and Sammy both demonstrated a willingness to travel quite frequently despite the geographic inconvenience. Their positive views about the distance as a minor problem seemed to help these two individuals thrive in long-distance relationships. This was a crucial factor that seemed to account for the great satisfaction these couples enjoyed despite the fact that they were actually geographically separated by about 300 miles from their partners.

Marcus 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 can do that. I don't have any Friday classes. 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.

Sammy and his girlfriend both loved road trips, therefore making the five-hour separation a minor inconvenience. Their perceptions of the distance was that it was not a major problem, or focus in their relationship and in fact seemed to not even be an issue:

> 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 inconvenience, 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.

Geographic distance combined with academic responsibilities inhibited some couples from visiting more frequently than once a month. Kimmy's boyfriend is farther away than most of the sample's partners, but she makes every effort to see him even if it means meeting him somewhere else:

> I saw him back in January. I am going to see him this weekend, and then his family is back in Northern Virginia, so I live there too. I am going to coordinate if I go home. So it is probably once a month for like a weekend or something.

Although other members of the sample had heavy academic loads that inhibited free visitation on most weekends, they actually viewed the distance as a positive aspect of their relationship for the time being. In this sense, the geographic separation was viewed as a necessary buffer that kept the respondents on their important academic schedules for completing their academic responsibilities. Lucy was working on her dissertation and her boyfriend was working as a principal in North Carolina, while he finished his dissertation as well. The responsibilities of each individual in this couple made them the least able to visit each other compared to the rest of the participants, even though geographically they

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are only separated by a 4-hour car ride. Lucy and her boyfriend had mutually agreed that

their schoolwork should be completed as soon as possible, therefore focusing all their

time and attention on school. Knowing that it will only be a short time until their

dissertations are finished allowed them to temporarily curtail visiting each other, while

focusing on the future when they envision more frequent 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-30's you know what a "good man" is, and "you hold on to him".

> Prior to the separation, we saw each other, out of seven days a week, we saw each other 5 to 6 days. Now I saw him when he first moved I went to visit him in North Carolina and spent some time down there. I saw him over Christmas holidays and I haven't seen him since then. So it is not that often that we get to see each other. But I anticipate, some time in April I will be visiting him.

In addition to Lucy, both Amanda and Jaime have 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.

> Well he left in October, and I was out there for 2 ½ weeks at Christmas and then a week at Spring break I was out there. And I will be seeing him again in May. We are going to a wedding in July. Then I will probably go there in June. He will come here for Labor Day. And that is as far as we have gotten. And I know that I am going to be there (Colorado) next Christmas Break. I am going to prepare for my prelims, but I am just going to take all my stuff out there for the whole time. (Jaime)

> Actually most semesters we have been able to see each other 2 times a semester and I am always down there for every break. Christmas Break, all summer, the Spring Break, I wasn't down there, because he came up here. We are still separated most of the time. (Amanda)

Although it might seem limited compared to geographically close couples access to each other, Amanda explained that she did not mind only seeing her boyfriend during breaks. She felt that she would have a hard time focusing on her schoolwork if her boyfriend were geographically close. Similar to her point of view, Lucy did not see the infrequent visitation as a major constraint either. She explained that finishing her dissertation was going to be a quite a challenge and that having her boyfriend around would have been more difficult and lessen both her and her partner's abilities to get their degrees done in a timely manner. In this sense, the distance acts again as a "buffer" enabling the students to stay focused on their academics.

Some couples had the luxury of flexible schedules and available transportation to see their partners every weekend. Others were not as lucky and had do deal with more restrictive situations of greater distances and less flexible academic schedules. Geographic distance alone was not a clear indicator of the frequency of visitation. Rather it was more the intersection of several factors consisting of academic schedule, affordable transportation, attitude towards work disruptions, and willingness to travel, or make long road trips frequently. However, those that had to fly to see their partners were not likely to make any weekend trips, but it was also just as likely that a willingness of one partner to make long car trips increased the frequency with which the couple got to see each other. Whether or not the participants saw the distance as a constraint, largely had to do with how they coped with the geographic distance.

Overall, the geographic separation did not seem to be the major focal problem for any of the relationships. However, of particular importance were the meanings attached to their situation, regardless of how often they talked to, or physically saw their partner.

Positive attributions included developing individual schedules of communication and visitation that were uniquely developed by each couple. Acceptance of the geographic situation was enhanced by social networks that worked both to serve as distractions for times when the partner was missed and as confidence builders in times of doubt about the relationship.

Parents, siblings and friends. Similar to processes in other types of intimate relationships, social networks seemed to influence participants' opinions of their long-distance relationship (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999). Certain negative societal pressures exist which negate the possibility of two individuals maintaining a strong and satisfactory relationship for extended amounts of time. For example, Attridge (1994) narrowly conceived that the maintenance of long-distance relationships was based on the idea that if geographically close couples use social networks to help keep them together, then consequently this "glue" would be largely lacking for geographically separated couples. However, in broader terms as identified by many participants, "shared" friends, or networks included not only those which were geographically available to both partners, but those with which they had been acquainted over the years, even if they were not physically able to be with them very frequently. Indeed, while for most of the participants in this study, shared friends in terms of frequent socializing were not possible; it did seem that the *meaning* study participants attached to their *own* social network's approval of the long-distance relationship was both important and influential.

In fact, two of the participants actually had positive role models that depicted a pleasant ending for their older siblings who conducted long-distance relationships themselves. Skip reported on his brother's advice:

> My brother, he met his wife through the Internet and they had a long-distance relationship. She was in Pennsylvania and they met and married a year later. My brother made the comment, not negatively, "it just takes a little extra work! That's all. Nothing major, but like any relationship, if you want it to succeed it will succeed, If you don't want it to succeed, its not. Regardless if it is long-distance, or somebody who is next to you in your bed every night. You know cohabitation, it is just not going to work, if you don't want it to.

Marcus explained that he was not as negative about long-distance relationships since he had seen first-hand that they could work:

> I mean my older sister went through a long-distance relationship when she was finishing graduate school, which she did for a year. She ended up getting married to the guy. So I knew it was doable, so I had positive role models. I think some of our friends didn't have any examples of things actually working out for people whose relationships were long-distance.

When questioned about whether their parents' opinions were favorable and supportive in keeping the couple together, various responses were offered. The majority of the respondents' parents approved of their significant other, although some parents were slow to warm up to the idea of a long-distance relationship. Parental concern was expressed when the respondents were making career decisions for the sole reason of being with their romantic partner.

One respondent's parents were worried that he would sacrifice his career potential by limiting himself from getting a better job since he was more concerned with being by him girlfriend than about his full career potential. They really liked his girlfriend, but were concerned that he would make poor choices in an effort to remedy the long-distance situation:

My parents think it is great! Um, they sometimes worry that I will limit myself. But I am like limit myself from what? You know like when the job search came on, there was a lot of pressure to get a job in D.C. I wasn't really worried about that I was looking for a job in general. You know they are all up there anyway and all of the jobs I applied to, every single one of them was in D.C. So it just worked out that every job, all the best jobs that I had offered to me were just in that area anyway. So my parents concerns were pretty much nil. (Sammy)

Another respondent, Jaime, admitted that her father wasn't happy that her and her boyfriend had been cohabiting, and her mother was discouraged that her boyfriend had picked up and moved to Colorado, which left her by herself in the apartment they had rented together.

My dad doesn't like the idea that we lived together. He is very catholic. And my mom didn't say much, cause that is just my mom. But I know she thinks; she is not very pleased with him since he moved.

Yet, in contrast to Attridge's prediction, in both the preceding cases, the parent's negative view seemed to do little to disturb the connection. One could speculate that the potential negative impact of lack of parental approval was overshadowed by other factors including maturity and the deep personal commitment that these individuals had with their partners. Sammy wanted to get a job in the D.C area and just considered his girlfriend being in the same area to be a bonus. Jaime admitted that she didn't care what others thought of her boyfriend's leaving for Colorado because she knew how strong their relationship was and that while the distance would be hard, it would not be detrimental to their relationship in the long run.

Most of the study participants stated that they did not retain many mutual friends from when they were a geographically close couple, and a few of the participants never had shared "local" friends at all since they had not dated very long while they were

geographically close. However, most of the sample had introduced their current friends to their significant others and had a positive response. Both Darren and Amanda had retained friends from their shared past with their significant others, while Sammy's girlfriend had formed a very strong friendship with his sister. He responded that his girlfriend's friendship network and his own had started to meld over the years despite their geographic separation:

> She pretty much had her network, and I had my network and over the years it has kind of been melding a little bit. I think that once I move up to Reston; I think a lot of the friends from her network, I will probably become closer friends with. So I mean she has got a couple of friends up there right now that like I like to go out of my way to hang out with even if she is not there. You know I will call and say, "Hey, let's go out for a beer or whatever." So already, there is a cross-friendship type thing going on there. And she has become very good friends with my sister and my brother-in law. And they are always hanging out and stuff, when I am down here. She will go over to my sister's for dinner, because they have become very good friends.

Only Skip had a girlfriend who did not get along with his friends. The following statement reflected this sentiment:

> She has had some conflicts with my friend. I have had some conflicts with her friends. Uh, it took a pretty heavy toll, I have a really good friend of mine that she does not care for at all, even back home on breaks, when he would come over to the house, and if she was there, she would pretty much leave the room, and say I will leave you two alone. And you know, it that kind of hurt for a while because I was concerned that my friends might think that she was kind of snubbing them. But it is only 1 or 2 friends of mine that she just did not care for and she has got some friends that I admit a couple of times really did not impress me either. But you know we worked through that, you know we worked through that.

Although Skip and his girlfriend have had conflicts with their friendship network, it was obvious from his responses that one thing that they do share are positive relationship with each other's parents possibly serving to buffer some of the conflict resulting from the lack of a shared friendship network. He went on to say:

My parent's view us as an old married couple. You know when she comes to my house, we will sit around and play cards with my parents and then watch movies. And we are content, we are very content… I think her parents' view our relationship; her mother and I have a good repoire. Her mother is Irish, and born in Dublin. Very open-mined person, her mother and I joke back and forth constantly every time I go into the house.

Friends and family of some of the participants were potentially helpful in providing encouragement to maintain a long-distance relationship. Overall, the two participants, Skip and Marcus, who previously mentioned having older siblings with long-distance relationship success felt very secure that the relationships could work. Whereas, Kimmy, who had a best friend that was negative about long-distance relationship, felt a bit less assured about her situation working out in the long run. In addition to the geographic separation, Kimmy had the added challenge of being in a bi-racial relationship with her partner. Her mother did however, step in and support her daughter in pursuing this long-distance relationship.

Well, my good friend. She is not very supportive. He is African, so they say that they are very over-protective and they don't give you any room. Um, but I told them that I was dating him, she was just like you know I can't believe this and plus he is going to Atlanta. He is going to have a job in Atlanta. You are up here. There is really no use. You know she was just very negative about it. And then I ended up telling my mom, and she was like, she couldn't believe it, she was like what? So, um, but she, I mean I guess she realized how I really felt, so she tried to turn the conversation around to be more positive. She was just like if you really want it to work, um, then it will work, you know don't worry about what other people say. And uh, just try to do what you want to do.

Ultimately, some of the respondents dealt with negative remarks from their families and friends, while others had families members which were really instrumental in convincing the individuals that they had a fighting chance if they were willing to put in a little extra work. Darren added that his buddies at school sometimes chided him by

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questioning why he would want a girlfriend only part of the time, when he could have one at school with him all the time. Darren explained this in the following statement:

> I think most people are supportive. Some guys just being guys sometimes will be like, you know, she is that far away. You know you can go out and have fun, but I think they are more joking around than anything.

Despite the lack of support from friends, Darren did not seem concerned with the other guys around him because he was totally committed to his girlfriend and would never consider alternatives or cheating on his partner.

Overall, it can be concluded that the geographic separation created a situation where constant socializing and frequent activities between "shared social networks" were not possible. However, in an intangible sense these individuals did "share" friends and family members with their partners on both emotional and social approval levels. While some participants never had common "local" friends before being geographically separated, in every case, a "melding" of social networks nevertheless began to occur, which solidified both commitment and interdependence of the respondent with their significant other.

Commitment and Trust

"Been there, done that": Maturity and previous experience. Some of the respondents cited their age and maturity as major factors as to why they were so committed to their current partner. They felt they had dated a sufficient amount of potential mates and were quite confident that they had found the best partner for themselves. Common themes included the idea that the dating scene no longer appealed to them, 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

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invest in a relationship with their current partner, while also serving to keep individuals out of circumstances with other potential partners that could threaten the primary long-distance relationship. According to Sanderson and Cantor (1997) the individuals in this study would be classified as "intimacy daters" as opposed to less committed "identity daters". Sanderson and Cantor explain that individuals who want to have steady relationships with one person are intimacy daters, and individuals who want to date around are identity daters. Similarly, "intimacy daters" (Winefield & Harvey, 1996), had already achieved a sense of self, and a sense of their vocational calling, and therefore were able to fully immerse themselves in a romantic relationship. Age certainly seemed to be an indicator of the stage of dating that these respondents had attained. Winefield and Harvey (1996) explained that around the mid-20's 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 speaking, and what they were seeking in a lifetime partner. Amanda, Eddie, and Lucy 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".

Amanda and her boyfriend had met and dated in high school, but had broken up years ago only to keep running into each other:

> We dated other people and keep coming back to each other. After so many years, you figure, well you know, if no one else has worked out and this person has, then you might as well continue to keep going with it.

Eddie, who was 29, responded similarly with the notion that after a certain age

you just get tired of playing around and want to invest in a relationship for the future.

> We are older and you know, 30 years old. I mean our priorities are different, it's not, I mean I am not the type of personality. I mean like I find someone just so I can just settle down. I mean, I hate the dating scene. The competitiveness of it all.

Lucy agreed that committing to one person is the only way to date. She explained:

> One of the things that really made me say this guy is for me and I really love him is he told me early on, that he is the type of man that once he meets a woman., it is just that woman…I mean I am the same way, once you have stolen my heart, that's it!

Similarly, Darren admitted that he and his girlfriend never dated more than one

person at a time either:

> I think that both of us are kind of, you know under the impression that if you feel that way, then why even go out in the first place if you wanted to date other people?

Sammy 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 Sammy's belief about "absolute love" when

questioned about whether dating other people due to the frequent separation was

permissible. For example, Cindy, Amanda, Kimmy and Marcus responded that it would

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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. However, all four of them admitted that they neither had the time, nor the desire to date other people, because they were implicitly committed to their current partner in their minds even though the words were not verbally spoken to their partners. Strauss (1978) termed this "silent arrangement" or shift as an "implicit" commitment. Strauss explains that even though there was no "explicit or verbal exchanges", this did not weaken the exclusive commitment that they shared with their partners. The distance really did not change their opinion on the matter of alternative partners. Although, it can be speculated that there was some doubt at the earlier stages of these relationships that stopped these individuals from explicitly committing to their current partner, at the time of the interview only Amanda still had the option of dating other people. In this instance the distance was cited as the reason no explicit commitment had been addressed. Strauss (1978) would term Amanda's arrangement as a "tacit" understanding whereby her and her partner had a "shared nonverbal understanding" not to discuss their dating habits when they were geographically separated. However, Amanda was confident that her partner would not find anyone better then her anyway. It had been 11 years since her and boyfriend had dated in high school and either one of them had yet to find a more perfect match. Amanda offered the following reflection on the topic of 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. Perhaps a fear of committing to one partner may have had an influence on either her or her boyfriend's' decision about exclusivity. It seemed to be a mutual agreement between the couple to allow dating other people as an acceptable practice, but had they discussed this topic more directly, a better sense of their true feelings about exclusively may have emerged.

Overall, the respondents were articulate about their strong commitments to their partners and the relationship, despite the geographic separation. All the respondents intertwined the idea of trust as a main reason they felt their relationships would work. In fact, without even questioning the participants about infidelity, many offered the idea that without absolute trust in the relationship, a long-distance relationship would never work.

Trust or Bust…   A major issue that came forth in many of the interviews was the topic of trust. While trust is an issue in all romantic relationships, it seemed to have particular significance for long-distance partners due to the constraints posed by the geographic separation. Trust was one attribute which individuals carried with them as they progressed from one romantic relationship to the next. Attribution theory explains that individuals attitudes about trust come from their own romantic past and from observing their parent's relationships when they are young (Ruble, 1996). Several of the participants responded that without a complete sense of trust, a long-distance relationship

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would never work. The respondents knew from past experiences that trust was a non-negotiable trait that must be totally stable for the maintenance of a strong and healthy relationship, especially given the geographic constraints imposed by the distance.

Lucy spoke about all the attractive female options that her boyfriend had at his school in Charlotte and admitted that sometimes her mind could play tricks on her, but that she thought she know him better than that, while Amanda advised that one has to be flexible in a long-distance relationship or it will be a difficult battle:

> 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. (Lucy)

> I will say that you have to be flexible in a separation like this. I see other people who come to college and just be separated in general and if you are not flexible, you are in for a long haul, because with the distance you just have to let it roll-off. You have to be really flexible. If somebody doesn't call you right at 11:00 on Sunday when they normally do, you just have to say well maybe that person slept in that day. (Amanda)

Marcus responded with a similar view on trust in reference to possible reasons for a partner's unavailability. He explained that in the past he and his girlfriend had always been honest with each other about opposite sex friendships and this diffused anxiety concerning the other's activities:

> Whether she had too much to drink and if she felt a line might have been crossed it was up front so you know right away. That is why this was able to work, because we are both weren't thinking in the backs of our minds, "Well is he really seeing someone down there, or what is she doing if I call and she is not there on a Friday night." I know she is with her friends. I am not worried that she is hanging out with a guy or anything. It wouldn't work!

Commitment then seemed to be a reflection of one's investment in the relationship as evidenced by staying in touch and visiting, as well as maintaining trust and fidelity. Many participants had simply arrived at a more mature point in their lives

where dating more than one person at a time was no longer desirable, as well as the knowledge that their current significant others could quite possibly become their lifetime partners. Therefore, alternative mates were of as little consequence as were the supposed "challenges" which were often associated with a geographic separation. In contrast to literature that paints a negative picture of long-distance relationships, participants in this study described many strengths of their relationships and seemed dedicated to making them work. Admittedly, the geographic distance had both beneficial and negative aspects, but how the separation was viewed, determined the success of the long-distance couples.

Meanings of Separation

As previously discussed, respondents perceptions concerning various aspects of the geographic separation seemed crucial in terms of influencing the nature of the relationship, and perhaps were 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. Meanings attributed to the purpose of the separation and the impact it had in the relationship were most important in terms of how one dealt with the separation as well as the extent one continued to remain committed.

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 helped solidify deep emotional

connection to their partner, for others the lack of physical intimacy was cited as a negative aspect of the geographic separation. Reminiscing, as well as using work or social networks as distractions were strategies employed by the participants to lessen the impact of feeling lonely without their romantic partner.

Separation as Necessary and Temporary. All 10 of the respondents were currently seeking educational degrees, while their partner's worked or studied in a non-geographically close location. When questioned about whether they discussed curtailing their education or forgoing further education to remain geographically close to their partner, most of the respondents felt it was not a feasible option since the current plans were deemed necessary or essential to either their own or their partner's professional growth. While Darren and Sammy looked at universities geographically close to their girlfriends, they knew that professionally they needed to go to a school that was best for them. Amanda, Jaime, Lucy, and Kimmy felt that they were too far along in their programs of study to consider transferring universities to be near their partners.

Amanda admitted that changing schools and sacrificing her education was not an option since she was only 2 years from graduating. She felt it was best that she be away from her boyfriend to finish her studies and knew that the relationship would last if it were "meant to be":

> I was already in school when we started dating, and I would not compromise my education that way. If I hadn't of started school here and if I hadn't already applied, then I might have thought about going to school where he lives now. But I think for me, with my personality, I wouldn't sacrifice anything like that and he has such a good job down at home and he has been there foe 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.

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Most of the respondents just focused on the temporary nature of the separation as an investment for the future. Having an "end date" for the geographic separation in sight 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:

> Well we knew it would only be temporary and I am already hunting for jobs out there., having informational meetings with people. So 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 decided to come to a school in Virginia because the school itself had a great reputation for the engineering degree he was seeking even though he got into another school closer to his girlfriend. Realizing that a temporary two-year separation would also create greater career potential in the future for both him and his girlfriend helped him focus 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.

Eddie drew on a past experience when he was geographically separated without any contact from a romantic partner during his Navy years. Therefore, Eddie viewed his current long distance separation as "not a major problem". He was able to focus on the short separation necessary for him to finish his degree, while also having the benefit this time of using a phone, or e-mail whenever he wanted to contact his girlfriend. When questioned about whether he thought the relationship would last through the separation he offered the following statement:

> 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

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ship. You know just early 90's. Late 80's, 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.

Through Eddie, it could be assumed that past experiences might allow one to put the current situation in perspective and actually decrease the anxiety about a current situation.

It was apparent through the previous examples, that hoping for a bright future ahead enabled the respondents to feel better about the geographic separation. These individuals deemed personal academic achievement as quite important and necessary for personal fulfillment. Combined with the belief that the separation was only temporary, helped give respondent's perspective. In fact, several of the respondents actually perceived unexpected benefits to their relationships due to the separation. As the following section describes, for many respondents, having some time and distance away from a partner proved to be a nurturing experience for romantic partners and helped put the situation in proper perspective.

Distance as a benefit-crystallized experience. As the previous section suggests, meanings attached to the separation seemed to be important in terms of justifying the geographic separation. 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

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further enhance their relationships despite the geographic constraint (Benson, Arditti, Reguero De Atiles, & Smith, 1992).

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

Sammy 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. And that's, we have never broken up. We have never even had a major fight. We never have broken up.

Both Cindy and Sammy felt they knew their partner's better than most geographically close couples since they got to know them through letters and over the phone instead of in person, heightening the importance of communication:

> You know at first I wasn't quite sure where this thing was going and I wasn't even sure that I wanted a long-distance relationship to start with, but we talked on the phone a lot and he visited me in school whenever possible. I visited him over breaks. So I just think the fact that we spent so much time in the beginning talking over the phone, helped us to get to know each other very well. (Cindy)

> The physical intimacy might over-ride a lot of the true connecting and it is really interesting because you can connect to somebody through talking, but I think if everybody just sat down and did what we did when she went to London for the first. I think that is really what made the relationship right there, boom! That 3 months of letter writing. It was every single day I wrote her a letter, put a 60-cent stamp on it and through it in the mail. And just about every single day she wrote back. And it was like, really amazing, like what it did. I think we became closer through that than anything. And pretty much that was just it, I mean we were pretty much completely locked right there. (Sammy)

Couples like Cindy and Sammy that virtually got to know their partners through non-physical communication had an easier time than some of the other respondents who had been together for a while before being geographically separated. Cindy and Sammy who had less time together before the onset of the relationship seemed to be able to cope better with the separation. Therefore, being reunited physically was a bonus for them, but they had already felt extremely connected to their partners from quality phone conversations and letters. Other respondents, such as Jaime, had a more difficult time with the geographic separation since her and her boyfriend got to know each other by living together in an apartment before they became geographically separated. In any case, it seemed that geographic separation made communication processes quite salient in terms of relationship satisfaction and the ability to maintain the relationship. Realizing the benefits of geographic separation seemed to be connected to perceptions about its necessity, an ability to focus on its temporary nature and the experience of feeling "cherished" by the partner.

The Dark Side of Distance

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 impact, 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

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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. Hopefully not, I think if the relationship were to come to an end, it would affect me pretty hard, and I think it would take some time for me to get adjusted and this kind of thing. You know, it is funny, you think when you are younger and fall in love with people, and people say it is puppy love and I think that is what it was or infatuation, but then you become an adult and you find someone that is on your level that treats you like you are a queen, that's hard. You know it just gets your heart, my heart is kind of pattering right now, but um anyway, it is kind of nice, it really is. Very nice.

Kimmy viewed the distance negatively as well. While she initially stated that the distance did not really hurt that much, deeper probing revealed that the separation was "not a good thing", because it stopped the relationship from progressing and being able to get closer to her partner. Kimmy admitted that she wished she had dated her boyfriend for longer before they were separated. While for other participants such as Cindy and Sammy, who virtually got to know their partners through verbal communication, Kimmy was not personally convinced that she would be able to connect as well with her partner from a distance. Her view of the separation was the following:

> 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.

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.

Only a few of the respondents, Lucy, Kimmy, and Jaime expressed misgivings about the geographic distance and admitted to being a bit plagued by the separation. Lack of time together before the separation as a couple, as cited by Kimmy seemed to be her cause for concern, while Jaime was upset about the distance because she was unhappy about her boyfriend's decision to move away and a get a job. 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 moved to a new location. Since I only had the opportunity to interview one person from each couple, this might be an important finding which might show that both members of a couple might not view the separation in the same manner. There may be a difference for the person who leaves, versus the person who is left behind. 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 uncertainty/ ambiguity regarding the length of the separation and a lack of future plans made the long distance experience more difficult. 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 caused by separation from their partner. Personality and coping style were responsible for varying emotional and tangible strategies used to maintain an emotional connection to the partner.

<u>Missing one's partner: Refocusing and reminiscing:</u>

Missing one's partner was a unifying experience for the study participants, regardless of whether one had other positive attributions regarding the relationships. Participants discussed varied ways of dealing with feelings of longing for their partner. One specific disadvantage of being geographically separated identified by several respondents was that they missed the physical intimacy of being close to their partner. Darren admitted that the frustration of not being around his girlfriend to give her a hug sometimes lead him and his girlfriend to argue about stupid, trivial things when they were on the phone with each other:

> One thing I think especially sometimes when we are talking, it would just be nice to be close to her. You know give her a hug. I think sometimes.

Marcus missed being physically close to his girlfriend as well:

> Just hanging around, little things, yeah, not the activities or anything, just um, falling asleep on the couch with her, you know.

When asked the same question about what he missed most about not seeing his girlfriend all the time, Skip kind of laughed and inferred that it was the sexual intimacy he missed with the statement, "Well, there is one extra-curricular activity I miss!"

Lucy also stated that there were certain physical and sexual needs that weren't satisfied when she was not with her boyfriend. She reminisced about times that her and her boyfriend were just hanging out as his house:

> But really the best part is staying at home on his nice sofa, just cuddled and watching the 60-inch TV with four remotes. I really don't even know how to work them all, but just being laid back and lying in his arms is kind of nice…So I

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really miss that. I am a 35-year old American–blooded woman and certain needs are there and you know they can't be fulfilled when he is there and I am here.

In addition to missing physical contact with one's partner, study participants said that there were times when they just simply missed their partner in a more general sense. Interview probes allowed for further exploration of the nature of missing the partner in terms of assessing the frequency, common times when the participants missed their partners, and how they dealt with the feelings of loneliness they had when they couldn't be with their partner.

Evenings and holidays were common times when the respondents felt the added strain of being separated. Cindy, Skip and Sammy all responded that they missed their partners during the evenings after a busy day at school. Since the evenings were often less hectic and other distractions were not around, their partners' absence was more salient. Also, holidays seemed to highlight the absence of a partner, given expectations of family togetherness and/or romance. Lucy explained:

> I always think about the distance. I will tell you it is so funny because when certain things happen, you know like Valentine's Day, New Year's, those kinds of things and you are so used to being together. And to be apart kind of dotes on your brain cells.

Most of the participants agreed that the only way to get through the separation was to stop dwelling on it. For many study participants, one of the best remedies for getting out of a lonely slump was to distract oneself with friends, co-workers, or refocus on academics. It also seemed that having a strong support network was helpful in terms of providing the necessary distraction to fill the void felt by the partner's absence. For

example, Sammy explained why he usually didn't have time to miss his girlfriend and

why he believed his girlfriend had a more difficult time with the separation:

> There is pretty much no point in my day when I am just sitting down alone,
> saying, "I am alone!" I mean it just doesn't happen. It just doesn't exist. But
> when she (his girlfriend) first moved to D.C., she was very lonely and then she
> was very missing me. And she called me up all sad. I would be like, well why
> don't you call so and so and go out? So she eventually went out with my sister
> because my sister and brother-in law were the only people she knew in D.C.

For others, work or academic study provided the necessary distraction preventing

loneliness. Marcus, Amanda and Lucy all admitted that work was their distraction

technique of choice:

> Well it has been a little bit easier now because I have had a lot of work, right now,
> but when you are not real busy, it is tough! (Marcus)

Amanda explained that there are times when she missed her boyfriend more than

others, but it depended on what she had going on academically at the time and how long

it had been since she had seen him:

> I think it depends on where the semester is. Like right now I have a month left
> until I graduate. My mind is completely down in Florida with my partner. During
> the beginning of the semester, I think about him a lot because I just left him and I
> thinking about how the rest of the semester is going to go. During the middle of
> the semester, I think about him every day but I am not as distracted because I
> know I still have a few more months until I can see him so I just dig my heels in
> and concentrate more on school work, but right now it also depends, what is going
> on, right now we are looking for an apartment, which makes me think about him
> more often.

The above excerpts suggest that for most participants, simply refocusing their energies on

something else helped stop them from dwelling on that fact that they missed their partner,

which would only make them feel worse. Refocusing not only encompassed distracting

oneself with activity, but also thinking about the future. For example, one respondent

found that focusing on the next visit was helpful in alleviating feelings of longing for his girlfriend:

> I mean I don't sit there and dwell on what I don't have or what I can have. Instead I think about the times we have spent together, instead of saying oh, "I wish she was up today so I could give her a hug." It is, "Oh, okay I will be seeing her in a couple of weeks and you know May is around the corner." (Skip)

Two participants focused on upcoming special events in the future and their anticipation of sharing them with their partner.

Marcus reflected on the stress his upcoming wedding had on the communication him and his girlfriend had during their phone conversations.

> Basically out of necessity we have to talk to each other, which is causing stress because a lot of the time we do talk has to be about stuff, instead of just what's been going on with you, instead it's we have got to make this decision on this, this and this… We gotta make reservations, we gotta do this, stuff like that.

Amanda and her boyfriend were planning on moving in together after she graduated the next month, therefore giving her a reason to talk to her boyfriend more frequently. She explained, " Right now we are looking for an apartment, which makes me think of him more often…". The fact that she had major plans with her boyfriend in the near future kept her mind on her relationship and her future. Discussing apartment related issues served as a connector which "gave her an excuse" to call her partner more often. The additional contact provided comfort during lonely times.

However, other participants, rather then refocusing themselves, engaged in reminiscing which provided comfort for some, and created more distress for others.

For example, Lucy admitted that when she missed her boyfriend she "sits down" with some of the fond memories she had of times she spent with her boyfriend:

I constantly think about it, well not constantly, but I think about it a lot. I think because I am working on this dissertation, which is a pain. Then, that sort of takes my mind, shifts my thought a little bit. But every now and then especially when I am feeling down I think about him. I kind of reminisce about some of the things we have done together, and you know what would he do for me. What would he do? I mean some times I call him, and then you know share that with him, but I try not to. I mean this dissertation is just such a non-ending saga, I try not to burden him with that because he is going through the same thing so we each try to support one another with that.

While for Lucy reminiscing was problematic, for others, reminiscing provided comfort during lonely times. Many of the respondents coped with the separation by thinking about the better times they had spent together. Some of the respondents had pictures or letters from their past which helped get them through a rough patch when they missed their partner. Eddie thought of the good times him and his girlfriend had:

I think about her all the time and it is just when you are apart, you have fonder memories of those fun things, when you were together you are still making them. So, you know, it's kind of good to remember those things.

Two of the other respondents had tangible items that they brought out when they felt sad:

I have a picture of her right over my desk and when I am working and when I am getting tired, I will maybe look at the picture. (Skip)

Every once in a while, I will leaf through the London letters. Those are pretty good. (Sammy)

Sammy referred to letters his girlfriend and him wrote to each other as undergraduates when she went abroad to study in London. He stated that he had hundreds of pages of letters from when they really started to get to know each other. The technique of reminiscing was very valuable to the respondents when they were having a sad moment and could not reach their partner.

Several other tangible items were cited including music, books, clothes, and stuffed animals that comforted the individuals when their partners could not be with them:

> She might have a sweatshirt of mine, I have a sweatshirt of hers, or something like that, not too much. (Darren)

> We exchange books and things like that regularly, but since we have not really, since we are living so far apart and have been all the time. It has been really hard to share all other kinds of property. (Cindy)

> I went to a conference and I gave her a stuffed animal and she adores that stuffed animal. I know that she loves that stuffed dog. You know she has often said that, "I have my dog here in bed to warm the bed for me." I know that is one thing she uses. (Skip)

Dealing with the "down side" of the separation then appeared to be idiosyncratic with some participants actively refocusing and others reminiscing about their partners for comfort. Several factors seemed to influence the ways in which the partners viewed the separation and their efforts to remedy their loneliness. The coping literature is a useful framework of interpretation in terms of its focus on the distinct ways in which individuals deal with stressful or unpleasant situations. For example, some coping techniques are termed "problem-focused", which is a more action-oriented plan of action, while others are termed "emotion-focused" and consist of altering the thought processes associated with a stressful situation (Whatley, Foreman & Richards, 1998). Individuals who distracted themselves by working or hanging out with friends used the problem-focused technique to rid themselves of feeling lonely. The individuals who reminisced about their partners decided to use the emotion-focused technique of accepting their current separation and looking back to past pleasant experiences and forward to the future with their partners. One reason for so much variation in the coping activities used by the

respondents can be explained in part by differences in personality (Suls, David & Harvey, 1996). Some respondents wanted to be around others when they missed their partners and were more likely to go out with friends. Others just wanted to be alone with the memories of their partner and dream about the next time that they will be with their significant other. In both cases, the techniques used allowed the participants to stay positive about the separation and realize that they can not change their situation in the immediate future. Acceptance of this fact is half the battle according to Rokach and Brock (1998) who explain that accepting one's state of loneliness and struggling through it will help an individual become stronger as a person and in the future even when the loneliness goes away.

Long Distance Philosophies: Advice from the Experts

Similar to the idea of action or emotionally oriented techniques, is the idea of developing a cognitive strategy in order to process the experience of being separated from a romantic partner. Such a strategy can be in the form of a philosophy which can be loosely defined as a "positive psychology", or "a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5)." Indeed, several respondents developed a "positive personal philosophy" about long-distance relationships in general, as well as a view about the geographic separation and it's effect on their romantic relationship.

Such a philosophy could serve to provide meaning and help them understand their situation to better deal with it (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 real focus was on the distance as a "minor inconvenience". He

explained that other problems that had come up in his relationship had been more

difficult than dealing with the geographic separation.

> It is just one of those things, distance you know it's like if you are dating someone and they chop all their hair off. They want a new look and to be bald. It is just one of those things, you just got to, you love the person and you can't control your situations all the time. They might do something silly or go out and spend all their money. It is just one of those things. I don't really capitalize on it. It is just. You know the distance is like anything else. Just another thing. Do I see the distance as valuable as when, that one semester that we had when she, we almost broke up? That one semester when I started my graduate work and she wasn't doing anything. That was tough that was extremely difficult trying period. I don't see our distance at all compared to that semester when I was working as she wasn't and compared to now when we are in a long-distance relationship. It is nothing, a long-distance relationship, is cakewalk.

His philosophy or view of distance as a "cakewalk" helped him not only to deal with the

separation, but put his past difficulties and the ability to overcome them in perspective.

Although Lucy felt very content with her relationship with her boyfriend, she

ended her interview with the following statement:

> 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 one thing with couples who break up and get back together and break up and get back together and we haven't had that, knock on wood. We haven't had that, so that is good. It is a relief for me because so many of my friends are struggling with relationship or trying to find a good man, per se. They lack that long list of qualities that he has to have and 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.

Lucy's philosophy about good relationships involved finding someone who had all the

wonderful qualities her current boyfriend possessed including a solid foundation of trust.

This philosophy grounded in commitment and trust helped her to keep focused on those

positive aspects in her own long distance romance. In doing this, she was able to minimize the difficulties associated with the separation and reinforce her commitment.

Sammy's friends had a lot to say in support of long-distance relationships. His friend Greg stated, "If you guys are in love, then you will find a way! And his friend "Cable Guy: added, " If you are in love, you will make it work!" Passionately explaining his personal philosophy on long-distance relationships, Sammy stated:

> Just my personal philosophy on long-distance relationships. 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. If you truly love somebody, there is no reason to date other people. That makes absolutely no sense to me. So, and I am sure it makes no sense to her. And if it does we are going to have a big fight about it. I am pretty sure it doesn't. I pretty much know her now. I think you really get to know somebody better through a long-distance relationship. There is a big difference in the way you interact when you are with each other every day and when you are writing letters. Especially writing letter, you would be surprised what comes out, when you are writing something down. It's really weird.

Sammy's personal philosophy, which emphasized working hard on the relationship and "not giving up", served to keep him invested and committed to his girlfriend. Developing and focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship enabled many participants to stay content with the geographic situation. Compartmentalizing the separation as "just another aspect" of the relationship diminished any overwhelmingly negative aspects of the distance. Subjectively creating a personal philosophy as a way of dealing with the separation allowed individuals to feel they had intellectually conquered the negative aspects (generally assumed by "outsiders" of a long-distance relationship) and made them truly feels like "experts" at these romantic relationships.

Summary of the Results

This chapter covered many different issues associated with long-distance relationships including relationship strengths. Many themes were discussed and evidence of strategies and techniques used by the participants to stay both committed and satisfied were presented. Commonalties among the participants included a strong foundation of friendship, as well as using the phone and e-mail as technological lifelines of connection. Also, the many statements made about the readiness to commit to a lifetime partner brought about a general attitude of maturity and shared investment to their relationships. Absolute trust was cited as a prerequisite for any long distance relationship to work, which many of the respondents expressed as a strength of their committed relationship. The predominantly positive view about the long distance relationship seemed to be facilitated by the meanings they attributed to the separation that rested in both its *temporary* and *necessary* nature. A few concerns were expressed about the distance as a hindrance to the furthering of the relationship, but only by the participants who were uncertain about when the geographic separation would end.

Many of the participants had ways of dealing with the distance such as distracting themselves with friends or work, while some preferred to reminisce about the past with their partners. Some had adapted rather well to the distance and saw it as a minor inconvenience, while others had a little more trouble managing the geographic separation. Personal philosophies or "positive psychologies" were shared by several of the participants who described their unique perspectives on why their long-distance relationship was likely to be successful.

Overall, participants believed they had a firm sense of commitment and interdependence in their relationships. Many participants perceived their relational maintenance efforts as evidence of their commitment and the means to stay close to their partners. However, this highly positive viewpoint about the "success" of these relationships is subjective and may resemble idealization processes referred to in the long-distance literature. Idealizing the long-distance situation and the geographically distant partner may serve as an emotional defense mechanism which facilitates not only the endurance of the relationship, but also allows one to focus on his or her "first love" (i.e. academics). 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. This "youthful naivete" may connect with the beliefs espoused by many of the people in this study regarding the strengths of their relationships and their partners' "soul-mate" status, despite the fact that most of these couples have yet to share a residence and test their relationship in a more mundane day to day context.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This study examined the accounts of 10 students who were currently conducting long-distance dating relationships to explore the meanings they attached to their relationship experiences and to the ways in which they stayed close to their partners when geographically separated. The main question guiding the study was how the individuals were able to stay close to their partners and maintain a healthy and satisfactory relationship from a geographic distance. Commitment and interdependence were explored in order to understand the nature of the intimate bond the couple shared.

Literature discussed in the introduction consisting of commitment, relational maintenance, and past studies on long-distance relationships provide an important context for the discussion of the results of this study as well as informing suggestions for future research. Most notable is the absence of research that examines processes in long distance relationships despite estimates made by previous researchers regarding the prevalence of long-distance relationship on college campuses. For example, one study found that long distance relationships account for approximately one-third of all romantic relationships on college campuses (Stafford, Daly, & Reske, 1987). Given this increasing phenomenon, it would seem a valid and necessary topic to examine in an academic setting. What little research which has been conducted superficially identifies broad issues of a long-distance relationships such as idealization, or differential gender adjustments to break-up, without addressing the in-depth experiences of an individual. However, the long interview format lends itself to achieving both emotional intensity and articulation of issues that may not be known by the researcher previously to the

investigation process. An in-depth understanding of intimacy implies that relational maintenance, or everyday strategies used by these geographically separated couples, which have been previously ignored by researchers, should be investigated. Therefore, this study incorporated in-depth interviews to better understand the strategies and experiences of long-distance dating individuals.

The discussion focuses on the reasons these long-distance relationships were believed to work for study participants, which reflected both "socially constructing" personal meanings about the separation and naming the "essential qualities" that these individuals possessed enabling them to more comfortably move through the more difficult times. Also, age and maturity linked with feelings of finding "the one" life-long soul mate and being "enthusiastically committed" will help solidify the main motivations these individuals expressed as to why they were able to be so positive about their relationship allowing them to stay completely focused. Finally, the results identified in the last chapter will be considered relative to the current literature on the geographically close couples' satisfaction models --challenging influential theoretical approaches such as social exchange approach and Attridge's "barrier deprivation" model.

Limitations of the Study

Before discussing in-depth the implications of the study's findings, certain caveats must be noted. Due to economic and geographic restraints on the part of the researcher, only one partner from each long-distance romantic couple was interviewed. Different issues may have emerged if both partners from the couples had been interviewed and within-couple differences might have been addressed. During each interview, every effort was made to assess if the participant felt their partner held the

same views on the main important issues, such as commitment and fidelity and whether the distance held equal meaning for both partners. However, corroboration was not the goal of this study and therefore did not really affect the data collected during these interviews. Instead, thick description was supplied by the respondents which enabled a deeper understanding of the relationship experience from their unique individual perspective.

A second important issue that should be noted was the fact that these participants were all highly educated. Even their partners had at least completed a bachelor's degree. At the very least, one can assume that educational attainment was highly valued by this sample and contributed to the perspective that academic and professional pursuits were necessary. It would be interesting to sample more educationally diverse populations and explore how educational background might connect with reasons deemed as "legitimate" for separation.

Also, since an age range of 23-35 was purposely chosen for the sample, it was hoped that these individuals would be in a more serious level of a committed relationship than a typical college freshman or sophomore who just left home for the first time. The mere fact that these participants were socially more mature probably lent itself to respondents who had dated quite a bit and were chronologically (age/maturation) ready to settle down with a life time partner. Therefore, the geographic distance did not affect them as much as it might have at a younger, less experienced time in their lives.

Despite the preponderance of data describing relationship strengths, for some respondents, the geographic separation was problematic. It is important to point out that nine out of ten members in the sample were the "ones who left" , only one respondent

was the "one who was left behind" . However, the researcher noted that this one female individual who was left behind was the least happy about the geographic separation and had the hardest time dealing with the separation. Also, two of the other male respondents mentioned that they felt their partner had a harder time dealing with the separation as well. While being left behind might create more distress than leaving, Simpson's (1987) perspective might prove another viewpoint. It could be that the more time spent together, including cohabiting, prior to the separation, might be connected to greater distress. Simpson explained that the higher the degree of attachment, or interdependence of a couple, the higher the degree of emotional distress when a break-up or a separation occurs. Viewed from this perspective, Jaime and the two male respondent's whose girlfriends had a more difficult time with the separation, may simply have been more attached to their boyfriends, thus creating a more intense emotional distress when separated (Simpson, 1987).

Therefore, it is not clear from the study's results whether greater distress was a factor of "being left behind", the degree of attachment or interdependence, or simply a gender difference, leaning towards females having a more difficult time. With such a small sample of ten participants, five of each sex, it was difficult to make any conclusive statements about any of the factors.

Overview of Findings

According to the respondents, there are three main reasons that these long-distance relationships worked: a) a deep bond of friendship, b) mutually agreed upon relational maintenance techniques, and c) seriously committed mature individuals. Most

respondents were highly committed to their long distance partners---someone they considered their "best friend" and to whom they had the utmost respect and absolute trust. Intelligence, open communication, and a sense of humor were named as reasons these couples felt they were so successful and were so "in love" with their partners. Many mentioned that they felt they had found "the one" or their "soul-mates". Although admitting that the geographic separation would be difficult, respondents believed that there simply was not a substitute for their current partner. Furthermore, creative relational maintenance techniques had to be implemented in order to maintain closeness with the partner, when they could not be together.

Both tangible (technology) and emotional techniques (reminiscing) were used to feel closer to their romantic partner. Maintaining communication through the telephone and e-mail helped them through the rough spots. When technology was not a viable option, a more emotional connection in the form of reminiscing was the favored form of pro-actively dealing with the lack of physical intimacy. Focusing on the future, instead of dwelling on what they could not have at that moment, was another point that was identified by the participants. Distracting oneself with work or friends worked just as well for other individuals. It is important to point out that there was some variation in the sample in terms of how difficult each individual found the separation. Common reasons explaining the variation included frequency of communication and visitation, social network support (including amount of local friendships and support), and the length of time until the geographic separation would end (including whether the end of the separation was known).

Overall, the respondents seemed satisfied and accepted their situation, but a few did express concern if the separation would be much longer than a year or two after the interviews were conducted. Intertwined with the ability to use adequate relational maintenance techniques were developmental processes including relationship history, past experiences and the individual's own perceived level of maturity. Interview data suggested that mature, committed individuals who have complete trust with their partner could conduct successful long-distance relationships. However, extra effort must be made to keep in contact with the partner since the distance can inhibit communication. The participants identified no major problems with their partners, which signified that these individuals felt their relationships were quite solid in themselves. The only thing wrong with these relationships as expressed by the respondents was "the distance" itself.

Open Communication Processes

Past studies have brought forth several ideas that might affect long-distance couples including idealization and moral commitment. Undoubtedly, idealization might have been a problem to couples who are not physically together very frequently and may be able to focus on only the "better aspects" of their partners when they are together. However, instead of idealization problems, it was obvious just how well the couples knew each other. Most participants believed that the distance did not affect how well they knew their partners. Indeed, almost the entire sample had been friends with their partners for at least a year before they dated. Participants who only knew their partners for a short period before being separated stated that they got to know their partners even better from a distance due to the letters or phone calls they made to each other. The non-physical

nature of communicating for these couples was cited as a major benefit, instead of a negative consequence of the geographic separation. Several praised the virtues of the separation since they were able to disclose information about themselves in a variety of ways, such as one respondent who wrote letters to his girlfriend every single day. He explained that instead of avoiding topics, a written form of communication encouraged him to approach difficult subjects and feelings. He stated that he actually was able to tell his girlfriend things that even surprised him.

Furthermore, it was the opinion of the respondents that "talk" was the essence of their continued connection with their partner which lent itself to incredibly strong emotional connections and intellectual bonds. Evidence of this can be seen from the roles named by the participants' describing their current partner. For example, "sounding board", "personal comedian", "sense of humor" and "intelligence, were all articulated as important qualities possessed by their partners. These descriptions add strength to the idea that these individuals really communicated with their partners and were happy to be able to rely on them in various situations whether it was compassion, wit, or intelligence that was needed at the time. The open communication processes used by the respondents reaffirmed their commitment and interdependence to the relationship that helped explain why the geographic separation did little to deter the romantic relationship.

"Enthusiastically" Committed

Johnson's (1991) notion of enthusiastic commitment is applicable to the experiences of several respondents in this study. He explained that while some people are bound to relationships due to strong religious beliefs, or personal obligations termed

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"moral commitment". "Personal" or "enthusiastic commitment" encompasses "genuine feelings of wanting to be in a relationship. (p. 119)" Interview data suggested that individuals were enthusiastically committed and felt very strongly about their partner. They seemed to be in the relationship because they wanted to, and not because of any "moral commitment" feeling based on obligations that they "ought to" just stay in the relationship (p.119). None of the individuals were married or had children binding them together. Rather it was simply a strong emotional and intellectual bond that these couples felt that kept them with their partners. Furthermore, most of the respondents planned on marrying their current romantic partner.

Recall that many named their partner as their best friend or soul mate for life. In fact, these individuals did not see the geographic separation as a largely "negative problem". It can be said, and in fact was discussed by both Skip and Sammy, that the distance was just like any other issue to be dealt with in a relationship, and not something to be focused on. While many "static" model researchers had previously assumed that individuals assess their relationships using the Rusbult Model, this study challenges that with it's in-depth data showing quite a different approach. Instead of seeing the distance as a factor to be labeled in the "costs" column, many of the participants actually explained why for them the separation could be put into the "rewards" column. Also, recall in the Results section how participants saw distance as a benefit and as a means by which individuals crystallized their relationship experience. Furthermore, it should be noted that these individuals went through a much more complex process of evaluation for their relationships, than that of a simple cost/reward scorecard. In actuality, the participants evaluated the weights of importance by also taking into account the

"meanings" they attached to both the costs and rewards. A balance seemed to be kept actively offsetting the costs, by keeping in mind the quality individual they felt they had found in their romantic partner. Thus, the issue may not really be one of "geography", but rather one of "meaning" attached to the separation and the seriousness of the commitment between two romantic individuals. Little emphasis was placed on the geographic separation between the couples. Instead, the better aspects of the relationships were capitalized on, again alluding to the possibility that maybe the perceptions of the participants' relationships were actually better than the reality (see Results summary). It seemed that the "socially constructed" viewpoint from which these individuals perched also allowed them to cherish their "alone time" they had for themselves to finish their academic responsibilities. In actuality, both relational and personal benefits were derived as a result of the separation.

Distance as a Benefit

As previously cited in Chapter 4, the distance can be conceptualized as a means of crystallizing one's experience about their romantic partner. Some respondents felt they better appreciated both their partner and the time they did spend with them as a result of being geographically separated. In fact, the relational maintenance techniques used by the respondents offered an enhanced way of connecting on an intellectual and emotional level since the physical aspects were not possible. Thus, geographic separation can be viewed as both sources of crystallization, and a beneficial tool actually bringing the individuals closer to their partners.

Additionally, the *temporary* and *necessary* nature of the separation added a lot to the legitimacy of the distance, and negated many negative 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. While they could attain a higher level of education for a more promising professional future, they could focus on their graduation date as a double bonus getting both their degree and remedying the geographic separation from their romantic partner. Therefore, these individuals had a vested interest in their romantic relationship since they allowed more time to focus on academics; something viewed as extremely important to all 10 respondents.

Developmental Issues- Age and Maturity

Age and maturity factored into the picture by aiding the individual's experience level in knowing what they wanted out of a life-time partner. Once they had found this person, they were reluctant to dismiss them just because a geographic separation would temporarily make things more difficult. It is quite possible that the maturity level of the participants, which were mostly graduate students, was an important indicator in why these couples were so focused on making their relationships work. The respondents aged 23 to 35, felt they had sufficiently dated and were ready to make a lifetime commitment to their current partner. Many of the participants stated that their personality and that of their partner's entailed dating only one person at a time. Elaborating that if they could not imagine spending the rest of their life with this person, then there was no reason to be in that relationship, regardless of the long-distance factor.

Overall, these individuals were very secure with themselves and knew that their academic and professional life needed to take preference over a desire to stay geographically close to their partner. This fact alone showed a certain degree of maturity or a valuing of academic pursuits and a need for personal pride. A few participants even admitted that they had let a relationship take preference over academics before which only left them in despair. This time they were going to focus on the temporary nature of the separation and get through their degrees, while still confident that if their relationship were meant to be, it would last.

Relational Maintenance and Barrier Deprivation

As previously discussed the participants in this study maintained closeness via various communication avenues and visits. Each couple had certain constraints that affected how often they could communicate or visit. For example, work obligations or financial restrictions factored into the "talk time" of the couple. Incorporating theories from the relational maintenance literature in which Duck (1994) explains that "everyday talk" and affectionate exchanges are the essence of relational maintenance, it would seem that long-distance couples would be at a disadvantage. However, evidence of creative maintenance techniques were implemented which helped compensated for the lack of physical intimacy and talk often used by geographically close couples.

Some respondents were lucky enough to be able to talk or e-mail every single day. However, all the individuals were able to talk to their partners as often as they deemed necessary to maintain a satisfactorily functioning relationship with their partner. Although some couples had constraints on talking everyday, they were able to cope by

reminiscing and in their own way, to remain connected to their partners on an emotional level, even if not physically "talking" to their partners every day. Pictures, stuffed animals, and articles of clothing were all exchanged in order to have "a piece" of their partner with them. For many, thinking about fun times had in the past, and exciting plans for the future helped maintain a connection even greater than simply talking on the phone. For others, reminiscing kind of made them miss their partners more, in which case they tended to use work or friends as distractions.

Social Networks

The literature also cited shared social networks as important to a couple's relational maintenance, another area that puts long-distance couples at a disadvantage. An interesting finding for all the individuals in the sample was that few had shared "local" social networks. In fact, many of the participants had formed entirely new social scenes for themselves. They seemed quite happy with their new friends who were very useful for times when the participant was missing their romantic partner. However, it is noteworthy that all of the participants had introduced their partners to both their closest friends and their family members. In effect, although they could not "socialize" as regularly as geographically close couples may have with their social networks, a "shared social network" nevertheless began to form in a broader sense. On an emotional level, approval of friends and family seemed to be very beneficial to the respondents' confidence about their long-distance relationship, especially in the two cases where older siblings have successfully made it through long-distance relationships and had since gotten married. The literature explains that siblings are in fact the most influential family members when dealing with emotional support and acting as sounding boards (Campbell,

Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999). In fact, Campbell et al., (1999) found that although siblings often are not companions, they often provide emotional support and act as confidants to their siblings, citing shared family history as a reason this type of support seems to work so well. The two male participants admitted to having faith in their older siblings past success. In fact, one of the male respondent's whole-heartedly believed his relationship could work "with a little extra effort", which was deemed necessary by the respondent's older brother.

Based on study findings, little evidence supported a "barrier deprivation" framework. This suggests that ideas and theory based on studies of geographically close couples may not be applicable to long distance relationships and that long-distance relationship processes may be qualitatively different. For example, it seemed that each couple devised a unique plan of maintenance reflecting their individual needs allowing for communication and connection. More importantly, one factor that really stands out from the data is that the distance actually was viewed positively by many of the participants, leading some to put forth the extra effort to cherish their partners by not "taking them for granted".

Conclusions: Why did these long-distance relationships work?

One main problem characteristic of previous long-distance literature is a deficit-based approach that depicts long-distance relationships as inherently stressful situations, but in depth examination of these relationships allowed for strengths to emerge as well. Relationship strengths as they are articulated by the individuals' themselves give insight regarding the meanings attached to the separation experience. It seems that long-distance

relationships are not used as a means to "casually date", but rather as a "means to an end (namely, marriage) while getting through a period of separation which was created by further career and academic needs of the couple. Even the participants who had the option of dating others responded that they had no need to because they were already with the best person life had to offer them. The mere fact that a geographic distance necessitated extra effort in itself, may contribute to a fresh commitment and confidence about their relationship.

Four main themes emerged which contribute to the understanding of the meanings these individuals attributed to the geographic separation: a) The "finality" factor, b) The theory of "relativity", c) The personal philosophy, d) The individual's "essential qualities".

The "Finality" Factor

One major finding of this study that explains why these couples seemed to be successful might be the fact that a dominant majority of the respondents could focus on the separation as "temporary" and "necessary". Knowing that they were bettering themselves and their shared future with their partners enabled them to view distance as less daunting. Only one participant seemed very unhappy about the separation, but she was "forced" into accepting the distance separation. A few others worried that they would slide apart from their partners if they did not have a end to the geographic separation in a timely manner. Therefore, evidence of "finality" to the separation can be identified as an important parameter of long-distance separations.

<u>The Theory of "Relativity" and The "Personal Philosophy"</u>

Another important conclusion that can be helpful in understanding why certain individuals have an easier time with a geographic separation can be termed "relativity". In this sense, "relativity" incorporates past relationships with others, as well as past experiences with the current partner. What might seem difficult for one person (someone who has never been separated from a romantic partner), might not seem difficult to a Navy wife. Some individuals spent very little time with their partners prior to the geographic separation, therefore every weekend rendezvous seemed like a gift. While others, spent every day together before being separated, therefore, being separated was very distressing and felt like a loss (see for ex. Simpson, 1997). The individuals who thrived in these relationships had generally spent little time with their partners beforehand, and the ones who felt it was difficult seemed to dwell more and maintain a higher level of phone communication. However, regardless of the visitation and communication practices implemented by the participants, each individual had their own way of constructing meaning around the separation. These personal frameworks were referred to as "philosophies" by several of the participants and provided insight as to why these relationships seemed to work so well. A positive attitude was depicted from the respondents when they shared their enthusiasm about future plans together, or seeing the distance as a "necessary" academic buffer, but ultimately led to the fact that they "truly believed they could make it work".

By socially constructing their own relational meanings, "relative" benefits of their current relationship emerged in the form of little idiosyncrasies which aided the participant's view about their relationship success. While a geographically close couple

might cherish their Friday night bowling trip, a long distance couple might cherish spending Friday night reciting poetry to each other over the phone. Both couples derive a certain level of contentment through their "dates" with their romantic partners. Who is to say that the long-distance couple is not actually more satisfied than the geographically close?

The "Essential Qualities"

Although some difficulties were admitted by the participants, the troubles all focused on minor frustrations felt when they missed their partners as a consequence of the distance. The individuals did not have any complaints about their partners, only about the lack of time they could spend with them. Certain "essential qualities" of the participants could possibly be named as important factors in why these relationships were so successful. In fact, it may even be speculated that the high commitment these individuals had for their work further aided the participants in staying in their current relationship since they could devote more time to their studies and less time focusing on a local "social life". As a whole these highly educated individuals conveyed a sense of *independence* and *motivation* beyond what might be considered the norm for geographically close dating couples. Educational achievement was the top priority for these individuals, but it was quite obvious from the intensity of the words used in the interview just how important the romantic relationship was as well. Therefore, these individuals showed *a strong sense of commitment in both their personal and professional lives*. While some individuals may simply not be able to handle a long-distance relationship due to its lessened physical intimacy and greater independence, these individuals learned how to thrive on it. In fact, these individuals 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, p.8). For these long-distance individuals who have successful relationships, the answers quite possibly might rest on the personal make-up of the individuals (i.e. the ability to tolerate ambiguity), and not really on the separation itself.

<div align="center">Implications for Practice</div>

Findings from this study also suggest various implications for family practice. For example, long-distance support groups were found to be an excellent source of support for individuals in these relationships (Westefeld & Liddell, 1982). Given the prevalence of long distance relationships and their unique challenges and strengths, support groups could have important benefits for long distance couples enhancing their viability. Several important tasks can be accomplished in a support group setting such as solidifying that these relationships can work. In fact, support groups serve the dual function of being both supportive and productive to the self-esteem of its members (Roberts, Salem, Rappaport, Toro, Luke, & Seidman, 1999; Winek, Shephard, Slavich, Warren & Meissen, 2000). Given the role model theme that emerged in this study evidence of knowing the relationships of others were so successful, heightened confidence about one's own relationship. Sharing stories of creative maintenance strategies between participants could be quite beneficial in aiding individuals in tough times when they might be doubting their long-distance relationship. Also, having older, perhaps graduate students talk about their experiences may be influential in the minds of the romantic couples as they question

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whether they are with the person they want to marry, or simply not ready to commit to one partner. Since most of this respondents were graduate students who were ready to make a lifetime commitment, it was obvious that "the distance" was just an aspect of the relationship to work through, not the major focus or problem. Focusing on making the relationship work, instead of the negative aspect of lack of physical intimacy was a key element to success. Support groups can serve as both supportive role models and as a distraction when missing a partner becomes overwhelming at times. Given the dual role as member and helper to others would create a beneficial environment for long-distance individuals. Shared experiences and commonalties felt by the members can be addressed in a support group setting enabling these individuals to feel better about themselves and about their long-distance relationship.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

I.   Purpose of this Research

You are invited to participate in a study examining the ways in which romantically involved couples stay close and committed, even when living in geographically separated locations. This study will allow you to explain your relationship experiences in your own words. Approximately 10 individuals will participate in this study.

II.   Procedures

This study involves a one-hour interview session consisting of 10 demographic questions and 8 open-ended semi-structured questions. The location for these interviews will be held in an academic study lounge in Main Campbell Hall on the Virginia Tech campus.

III.   Risks

This study most likely involves no greater risk of discomfort than everyday conversation. However, should an unpleasant topic come up during the course of an interview that causes distress, you may stop or discontinue at any time. You may also refuse to answer any question that is asked.

IV.   Benefits of the Project

This study seeks to tap into the ways couples stay close when given the unique challenge of being geographically separated. Your participation in this study will give you an opportunity to discuss issues that are specifically relevant to maintaining closeness with your partner. Little in-depth research has been done on long-distance

relationships, especially from the participant's perspective. Since these relationships are increasing in prevalence, it is beneficial at a societal level to learn about the strategies couples use to stay close even when so frequently geographically separated. However, no promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Due to the large volume of dialogue anticipated using these data collection techniques, the interviews will be audio-taped. The tapes will be labeled with a code number to insure anonymity. After each interview, the tapes will be transcribed and promptly erased. Only the investigator and her faculty chair will have access to the tapes. At no time will the researcher release the results of the study to anyone other than her faculty supervisor without your written consent.

VI. Compensation

There is no monetary compensation for volunteering to be a study participant. However, a copy of the findings will be supplied to participants upon request after the completion of the study.

Freedom to Withdraw

You are free you withdraw at any time during the interview should you become distressed. You may also refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Approval of Research

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Human Development.

Subject's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: A one-hour interview session answering questions about the ways my partner and I stay close even when we are geographically separated for long periods of time.

X. Subject's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

Signature   Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct; I may contact:

Melissa Kauffman   232-1422

Investigator

Joyce Arditti   231-5758

Faculty Advisor

H.T. Hurd   231-5281

Chair, IRB

Research Division

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Background Information

1) Age: Partner's age:

2) Religion a.)Catholic   b.) Protestant   c.) Jewish   d.)Buddhist   e.)Other

Partner's Religion: a.)Catholic   b.) Protestant   c.) Jewish   d.)Buddhist   e.)Other

3) Gender: a.)Male   b.)Female

Partner's Gender: a.) Male   b.) Female

4) RACE: a.) African American b.) Caucasian   c.) Hispanic d.) Asian e.) other

Partner's Race: a.) African American b.) Caucasian   c.) Hispanic d.) Asian e.) other

5) Educational Level Completed: a.) High school or less b.) College –Associate, or

bachelor degree c.) Master's degree   d.) Doctoral degree

Partner's Educational Level Completed: a.) High school or less b.) College –Associate,

or bachelor degree c.) Master's degree   d.) Doctoral degree

6) Income: Separate and shared (if applicable)

Couple Data

7) How long have you been in the current relationship?

8) How long have you been a geographically separated couple?

9) How much longer do you plan on being geographically separated?

10) What is the reason for the geographic separation? (Forced/Voluntary)

Proposed Interview Protocol:

1) Tell me about your relationship with _____. (Probe: What are the strengths of your relationship? What are the difficulties you have in your relationship?)

2) What changes (if any) would you attribute to the separation? (Probes: Has the long distance experience improved/ weakened your relationship?)

3) What do you do to stay close in your relationship? What does your partner do? (Probe: What modes of communication do you and your partner use on a regular basis? Visiting? Affection?)

4) Do you ever think about doing something different? (Probes: Such as finding another partner, or trying to end this period of geographic separation? If so, why do you think you do this? What do you think about? Have you discussed this issue with your partner?)

5) What kinds of activities/things did you and your partner share before the separation? What kinds of things do you share now? (Probe: What other tangible things do you share? -kids, social network)

6) How do you think others view your relationship? (parents, friends, social network)

7) What do you think makes you stay in the relationship? (Probes: What would cause you to want to break up or end the relationship?)

8) Do you think this relationship will last through the separation?

APPENDIX C

Final Coding Categories

100 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Partner / Relationship

    101 Best Friends
    102 Intelligence and Sense of Humor: Attractive Qualities
    103 Stubbornness
    104 Clear sailing, no complaints

200 Relational Maintenance and Shared Interdependencies

    201 Lifelines-Phone Visits and E-mail
    202 Reunited…Physical Visitation

300 Social Networks

    301 Positive Role Models
    302 Parental Approval
    303 Shared Friendship Network

400 Commitment and Trust

    401 Been there, done that- Past Experience and Maturity
    402 Trust vs. Doubt

500 The Meanings of Separation

    501 Separation as Necessary and Temporary
    502 Distance as a Benefit-Crystallized Experience
    503 The Dark Side of Distance
    504 Missing One's Partner: Refocusing and Reminiscing
    505 Long-Distance Philosophies: Advice from the Experts

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Roanoke Juvenile Justice System, Roanoke Virginia
- Entered client data files into SPSS statistical program
- Ran analyses for evaluation purposes
- Compiled success rates for data collection methods
- Suggested improvements for future program evaluations

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA
Graduate Assistant, **Adult Day Care Center,** 8/98-12/99
- Worked with participants in various stimulating
- Lead daily exercises and other group activities
- Helped plan facility activities

Child Development Labs, Preschool Teacher, 8/98-12/98
- Taught 3-5 year old preschoolers
- Helped plan daily activities
- Documented the learning process of preschooler

Graduate Assistant, Child Development Labs, 1/98-12/98
Infant/Toddler Co-Head Teacher
- Planned daily activities for infants and toddlers
- Held parent/teacher conferences twice per semester
- Documented growth and mobility and cognitive skills
- Supervised and evaluated undergraduate student teachers

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Sociology Department, 8/97-12/97
- Assisted professor in classroom duties
- Helped to develop exam questions
- Kept attendance and exam grades

Penn State, State College, PA
Undergraduate Teaching Assistant, Human Development and Family Studies
Department, 8/96-12/96
- Held weekly office hours for student questions
- Developed exam questions
- Graded course exams and papers

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant, Sociology Department, 8/95-5/96
- Assisted professor in a **Research Methods Class**
- Helped create exam questions
- Graded course exams and papers

COMPUTER SKILLS

Microsoft Word and Excel, Proficient E-mail and Internet skills, Statistical
Programs: SPSS and Minitab

ACTIVITIES   Residence Hall Federation-Graduate Officer, 8/98-5/2000
Phi Mu Sorority, 8/92-12/96
Morale Chair, Greek Sing Chair

REFERENCES   Available upon request