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Geographic Distance and Its Influence on Romantic Relationships: Comparing Long Distance and Geographically Close Relationships

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Abstract
This research examined Long Distance (LD) and Geographically Close (GC) relationships and focused on different levels of investment, commitment, and closeness. The effects of geographic distance and sexual activity were also examined. This research explores the question, does geographic distance or being sexually active relate to how individuals define their relationship closeness, investment, or commitment? The hypotheses predict that: (1) LD couples will display greater closeness than GC couples; (2) LD couples will have a higher investment in their relationships than GC couples; (3) there will be no difference between LD couples and GC couples for commitment; and (4) there will be a relationship between relational investment size and perception of relationship closeness. Participants consisted of psychology undergraduates attending a Historically Black College or University. Participants completed questionnaires assessing variables associated with the Investment Model, The Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS), and the Pattern of Relating Scale. Findings indicated that participants who were sexually active perceived themselves as being closer in their relationship, and there was a positive correlation between investment size and closeness. Future research could expound on the correlation between investment size and closeness.

Key Terms:
- Long Distance Relationships
- Geographically Close Relationships
- Commitment
- Investment
- Satisfaction
- Closeness
College dating is not an unusual concept, but the concept of long distance dating in the college setting has become more common in today’s society (Stafford, 2005). Compared to other college students, first-year students are more prone to be involved in long distance relationships (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010). Stafford and Reske (1990) found that long distance (LD) couples are more satisfied with their relationships and with the communication in their relationships than Geographically Close (GC) couples. Even though LD couples do not have the advantage of communicating in person, they are able to communicate in a variety of ways using technology. Technology such as online chatting, emails, and Skype (video calling) has allowed students to keep in touch with their significant other more easily and more frequently than in previous years. As a result, long distance relationships are lasting longer.

The more intimate a person is with another person, the more they will find different ways to interact (Johnson et al., 2008). Intimacy is a result of communication, which is important in a relationship. Unlike couples in GC relationships, people who are in LD relationships will try to find alternate ways to communicate with their partner. GC couples have the advantage of talking face-to-face, which limits how often they use other forms of communications. GC couples can get too comfortable with each other which can cause a lack of communication (Stafford and Reske, 1990).

Johnson et al. (2009) study examining platonic friendships found that relationship closeness (how often couples see each other, talk on the phone, and communicate) between friends did not affect their perception of closeness. Johnson et al. (2009) conclude that the difference between LD and GC friendships are the rewards received in the friendships affects their perceived closeness in the friendships. The rewards in the friendships were emotional, physical, and listening support. The GC friends supported each other physically and emotionally, and the LD friends supported each other emotionally through listening. This relates to romantic relationships as well because romantic partners have similar rewards given that they communicate in the same ways as LD and GC platonic friends, through email, Skype, phone, and text messaging. Both LD and GC couples have the same types of supports. LD couples are able to comfort on the phone and support their significant other through email, which are examples of investment and commitment to that person. If the couples are receiving these rewards, they are more satisfied with their relationship because they can see their partner has invested time into the relationship. High satisfaction and low alternatives predict high GC relationship commitment.

Commitment and investment are important to in both, long distance (LD) and geographically close (GC), relationships because they are two components that measure the interdependency of the relationship. The investment model is a scale that measures the interdependency in a relationship. Interdependency is important for relationships because the more dependent a partner is on the relationship the more the partner wants to be in the relationship (Rusbult, 1998). The investment model measures the interdependency in the relationship through four components: satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment. Satisfaction is how satisfied the person is with their significant other. Quality of alternatives is how attractive to other people is the person, the ability of the person to find another mate. Investment size is how much a person has put into their relationship being emotional, physical, or financial. Lastly commitment is how obligated a person is to their significant other. Pistol et al.’s (2010) study reported that high satisfaction contributed to...
commitment in both LD and GC relationships. Those with high investment reported more commitment in LD relationships and a low quality of alternatives in GC relationships. LD relationships function through investments because the couple is not together, so in order for partners to know they are committed, they have to put in effort to and see their partners. GC relational partners involve less effort trying to spend time with each other because they know they are able to see their significant others often, and the partners place less focus on investment (Pistol et al., 2010).

Cameron and Ross (2007) reported that geographic distance increases interpersonal risk (relationship security and trust), stress, and certain relationship processes, such as satisfaction and stability in long-distance relationships. Geographic distance is easier with new technology, but couples still may have trust issues. LD couples have to be secure with their relationship and trust their partner in order for the relationship to work. The more comfortable the couple is about interpersonal risks the greater chance the relationship will be successful. Stability and satisfaction are also strong factors in the prediction of LD and GC relationships (Cameron & Ross, 2007). These two factors are so important for the relationship because they both affect commitment. Pistole, Roberts, and Mosko (2010) define commitment by three concepts: (1) satisfaction or happiness with the relationship; (2) perceived alternatives, such as attractiveness to other people; and (3) the investments that would be lost if the relationship ended. Commitment is part of stability; with high stability comes high satisfaction so this research tested commitment, satisfaction, and investment levels of the partner.

The present study focused on relationship distance (Long Distance versus Geographically Close), sexual activity, and the effect of relationship distance on closeness. For the purposes of this research, a LD relationship is defined as the significant other living at least 500 miles away (approximately five hours). A GC relationship is defined as the significant other living in the same dwelling or living closer than 500 miles. The following research question guided this experiment: does geographic distance or being sexually active relate to how individuals define their relationship closeness, investment, or commitment? The hypotheses were: (1) LD relationships will have a higher relating pattern of closeness than GC relationships; (2) LD couples will have higher investment in their relationships than GC couples; (3) there will be no difference in the commitment between GC and LD couples; and (4) there will be a correlation between investment size and how couples perceive their closeness. The purpose of this research is to understand if geographic distance or sexual activity affects investment, commitment, or closeness, and if it correlates with past research.

Method

Participants
The participants consisted of 60 undergraduates enrolled at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in the southeast. The sample consisted of 45 females (75%) and 15 males (25%). The mean age was 21.18 (SD= 4.91). A majority of the participants were upper classmen (67%) and classified themselves as African Americans (98%). Twenty-one participants classified themselves as being in a long distance relationship (35%), and 39 participants classified themselves as being in a geographically close relationship (65%). The mean length of the participants relationships in months was 23.36 (SD= 24.21); ranged from 3-110 months. Twenty of the participants were not sexually active with their partner (33%); 40 of the participants were sexually active with their partners (67%). See Table 1 for the number of times the couples reported interacting through different types of communication.
Materials

Demographic items assessed age, race, classification, relationship type (Long Distance or Geographically Close), relationship length, sexual activity, and communication frequency. There were three different questionnaires used in the present research: The Investment Model survey revised, the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS), and the Pattern of Relating survey revised. The Investment Model survey is a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0-8, with 0 being do not agree at all and 8 being agree completely with the statement. The survey originally had 40 questions that measured satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment (Pistole & et al., 2010). The revised survey consisted of two of the original four subscales, investment size and commitment, with 17 questions total. Examples of these items include “I have invested a great deal of time in our relationship” “my partner and I share many memories,” and “I want our relationship to last for a very long time.” The measures for the Investment Model were scored from 0-56, 0 being the lowest a person could score in each category and 56 being the highest. A score of 0-28 meant that partners are not invested or committed at all, and scores of 29-56 meant that partners are very invested or committed.

The IOS scale has seven pictures of two circles. The first pair of circles were not touching, and they gradually get closer until they almost overlap. The IOS scale was scored from 1-7. Participants that score 1-3 are classified as not being close to their significant other, and those that score 4-7 are classified as being close to their significant other (Schubert & Otten, 2002).

The Pattern of Relating scale originally had 48 questions and was modified to 21 questions. Of the 21 questions asked, 13 were filler questions, and 8 were analyzed to measure the participant’s pattern of relationship closeness. Filler questions were used so the participants would not have biased answers about their relating pattern with their partner. The questions were measured on a 9-point scale, 1 being “not at all likely” and 9 being “extremely likely” to demonstrate a relationship closeness behavior. Examples of these questions are: “If I am in trouble, my significant other will help me,” and “if I need my significant other, she or he will be there for me” (Johnson et al, 2009). The questions chosen for the revised questionnaire have been found to be significant in predicting relationship closeness for platonic friendships, and were used in this study to examine if romantic relationships have the same relationship closeness based on distance as platonic friendships.

Procedure

The research was advertised in the Department of Psychology via posters and small announcements in classrooms. The research was conducted in different classrooms around the school, and participants reported to these specific classrooms at a designated time. Participants were provided written informed consent. The research survey took about 20-30 minutes to complete. When the participants were finished with the survey, they were given extra credit as compensation. The participants were also given a debriefing form, which informed them that the participant’s confidentiality was maintained.

Analysis and Results

Three analyses were used for the hypotheses: ANOVA, independent samples t-test, and a Pearson’s correlation. For the first hypothesis (LD relationships will have a higher relating pattern of closeness than GC relationships), an ANOVA compared relationship type and sexual activity to how partners define relationship closeness, investment, or commitment. Being sexually active \( F(1,56) =0.5, p<0.05 \) did not affect geographic distance \( F(1,56) = 2.47, p<0.05 \) and how couples defined their relationship commitment \( p<0.05 \). There was a significant disordinal interaction between
geographic distance and sexual activity $F(1, 56) = 3.60, p<0.05$. The interaction is represented in Figure 1. Participants in LD couples who were sexually active ($M=37.54, SD= 7.85$) reported lower mean scores for commitment than LD couples who were not sexually active ($M= 46.13, SD= 30.82$). GC couples who were sexually active ($M= 38.85, SD= 9.65$) had higher mean scores than GC couples who were not sexually active ($M= 32.17, SD= 11.52$).

There was no significant effects for geographic distance and sexual activity on the couples investment size ($p>0.05$). For closeness there was a main effect for being sexually active $F(2, 54) = 5.095$, but not for geographic distance with the $p< 0.05$. The means for the ANOVA examining the geographic distance and sexual activity of the participants are presented in Table 2.

For hypothesis 2 (LD couples will have higher investment in their relationships than GC couples), according to the t-test, there were no significant results for the pattern of relating score and relationship type ($p> 0.05$). However, the mean scores for the LD relationships were slightly higher than the GC scores for most of the questions. Refer to Table 3. According to the ANOVA for hypotheses 3 (there will be no difference in the commitment between GC and LD couples) and 4 (there will be a correlation between investment size and how couples perceive their closeness), the means showed there was no main effect for investment or commitment. The mean scores for LD couples were slightly higher than GC couples for both investment and commitment, as shown in Table 4. The table shows that the pattern of relation questions were not significant for the LD and GC couples, but the LD means are slightly larger than the GC couples. This explains why there are differences between the two couple. According to the Pearson’s Correlation, the investment score and the IOS score were positively correlated $[r(56) = 0.482, p< 0.05]$.

Figure 2 presents the scatter plot of this correlation.

**Discussion**

This study measured the difference between relationship types (LD vs. GC), sexual activity and how it affects investment size, commitment, and closeness. The hypotheses were partially supported based on the tests that were used. In terms of the first hypothesis, there were no significant results for investment size and sexual activity or geographic distance. There were significant results for commitment and closeness. There was a main affect for closeness and sexual activity. Participants who were sexually active perceived themselves as being closer to their partner than participants who were not sexually active, regardless of the distance in the relationship. For commitment, there was a significant disordinal interaction. Participants in LD relationships that did not report sexual activity had a higher mean score of commitment than participants who did report sexual activity. GC relationships that reported being sexually active had a higher mean score for commitment than participants that did not report being sexually active with their partner. These results explain that relationship distance and a couple’s sexual relationship has an effect on how they will perceive their relationship commitment, but it does not affect their perception on investment and closeness.

The second hypothesis had no significant results between LD and GC relationships and their relationship pattern, but LD relationships and GC relationships had slightly different means. Couples in LD relationships had slightly higher means than couples in GC relationships, which may mean that LD couples feel closer to their partner than GC couples. This pattern of higher LD mean scores was also shown in the past research with Johnson et. al, 2009. This may correlate with why LD relationships had higher means for investment and
commitment. The third and fourth hypotheses were not supported, as there was no significant difference between the mean scores for investment and commitment. Based on the results found, geographic distance does not have an effect on how committed a person is or how invested a person is in their relationship.

The last hypothesis was supported with a significant correlation between investment size and how much a person perceives their closeness. The more a person has invested into a relationship the more he/she thought of the relationship as being close. This correlation has a small relationship with an effect size of 1%, and this may be because of the small sample size.

One limitation for this experiment was that the participants were not asked if they were reflecting on a past relationship or a current relationship, making the experiment less sensitive. With the experiment being less sensitive, the results, in turn, were less reliable. Another limitation was the size of the survey instrument. Because the survey consisted of 66 questions and took approximately 30 minutes to complete, possible answer fabrications, guessing, and participant fatigue may have taken place. If any of these occurred, the internal validity would have been affected, making the information less reliable. Lastly, a number of participants asked for clarification about the IOS survey. The ambiguity of the directions may have also affected the internal validity of the experiment.

For future research, a different population or a larger sample is suggested. Exploration of why LD relationships have slightly higher means for most of the components in the experiment than GC relationships which should be studied. Additional research should explore relationship closeness and how investment plays a role in the closeness of couples. Since there was a significant correlation between relationship investment and closeness, research should be done to understand why this correlation exists, and if there is a correlation between commitment and relationship closeness. Continuing the research on LD and GC relationships will help relationship counselors better understand the differences between the two types of relationships and may help couples to determine which relationship works best for them or predict their relationship longevity.

References


Table 1: Percentage of interactions through different types of communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Write Letters</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Social Networks</th>
<th>Video Chat</th>
<th>Talk on the Phone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than once a day</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>80% (48)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>18% (11)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
<td>70% (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once a day</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>8% (5)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>8% (5)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>12% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once every two days</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>10% (6)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once a week</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>12% (7)</td>
<td>13% (8)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once every two weeks</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>7% (4)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>8% (5)</td>
<td>5% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>once a month</td>
<td>10% (6)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>8% (5)</td>
<td>20% (12)</td>
<td>12% (7)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not at all</td>
<td>82% (49)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>72% (43)</td>
<td>27% (16)</td>
<td>52% (31)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the number of participants that answered the question out of the total number of participants (60).

Figure 1: Interaction between Geographic Distance and Sexual Activity

Note: This graph is the disordinal interaction between couples who are/are not sexually active.
Table 2: Mean Scores for Geographic Distance and Sexual Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Distance</th>
<th>LD (M)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>GC (M)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Activity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5.2500</td>
<td>1.48477</td>
<td>5.4231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4.0000</td>
<td>1.85164</td>
<td>3.9091</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Mean Score of Pattern of Relating for LD and GC romantic relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LC Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>GC Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I am in trouble, my significant other will help me.</td>
<td>8.14</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>7.90</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I need my significant other, she or he will be there for me.</td>
<td>8.38</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I need to borrow something, my significant other will lend it.</td>
<td>8.14</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I need a favor, my significant other will do it.</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I need practical help (e.g., moving, a ride, studying), my significant other will provide it.</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>.656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I need money, my significant other will lend it to me.</td>
<td>7.24</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>7.20</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I need a hug, my significant other will hug me.</td>
<td>8.52</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I am sick, my significant other will take care of me.</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>7.85</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>.388</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Mean Scores of Investment and Commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LD (M)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>GC (M)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investment Score</td>
<td>58.90</td>
<td>14.54</td>
<td>55.92</td>
<td>17.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment Score</td>
<td>40.81</td>
<td>19.69</td>
<td>36.79</td>
<td>10.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to thank those who made this possible, my peers, for proofreading my paper. I would also like to give a special thanks to my professor, Dr. Lisa Schulte, for making this possible and for her guidance and support.

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