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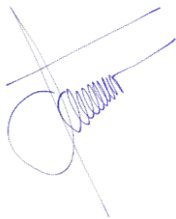Diusulkan oleh:
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GENDER DIFFERENCES AND LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP

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Gender Differences and Long-Distance Relationship

Abstract

This article seeks to answers questions concerning long-distance relationships (LDRs): whether or not they could work, the difference between LRDs and geographically close relationships (GCRs), what the current research informs about LDR, and how it can be maintained. Results from the empirical studies in the literature point out that LDR could work under certain conditions. It has some differences from GCR yet could be as effective as GCR. Gender differences may not have a significant role in LDR. Finally, not exaggerating the idealization of relationship partners, increasing relational satisfaction, and lowering uncertainty in a relationship could help in maintaining an LDR.

Keywords: long-distance relationship, gender, relational satisfaction

Introduction

"What do you want from me? My soul?" asked Jerry, played by Tom Cruise, to Dorothy, his former office mate whom he married with not long after he resigned from his position in a big sports agent firm. Dorothy responded calmly, "Why not? I deserve that much." She tried so hard not to show even just a little glimpse of sadness. Dorothy had been thinking about their relationship and it seemed to her that it was full of uncertainty. As an independent sports agent who was about to rebuild his ruined career from zero, Jerry Maguire had to frequently leave his wife for business purposes, leaving her at home thinking whether or not their marriage would work. When he finally got home, he was already too tired that he could not even talk to her. Dorothy's doubt and the lack of intimacy and communication eventually led her to break up with Jerry.

This fragment from Jerry Maguire, a 1996 box office movie, presents us with one of the widely perceived problems faced by partners involved in a long-distance relationship (LDR): viability. It is not uncommon to see many people question this type of relationship. They wonder whether or not LDR can work. Some are quite pessimistic about it, noting the popular witty remark saying that a long-distance relationship is a happy relationship of four people, which means both partners cheat on each other. Some other people, on the other hand, may see LDR more positively, referring to a functional LDR of some people they know.

Despite some people's negative assumptions about it, LDR has become such an inevitable phenomenon that can be found anywhere. Either for an educational or occupational reason, many people are engaged in this type of relationship. Stafford (2005) mentioned that a high percentage (25% - 50 %) of the total college students' dating relationship was an LDR. This did not include LDRs from non-college students' populations that could increase the total number. Given this pervasive nature of the LDR phenomenon, then it becomes important to unravel the questions related to it.

This paper aims at discussing some basic issues about LDR. Topics—such as its viability, its difference from geography close relationship (GCR), and its relations to time, gender, and satisfaction—are be covered in this paper. In particular, this paper asks the following question:

1. Does LDR work?
2. Is there any difference between LDR and GCR?
3. What current research can inform about LDR and gender differences?
4. What the literature can inform about maintaining an LDR?

Several studies (Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Maguire, 2007; Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010; Pistole, Roberts, and Mosko, 2010; Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Wiener & Hannum, 2012) on LDR will be used as the basis to provide the answer to these questions. To do this, I first start by setting a definition of LDR that would be discussed in this paper. Then, I present the excerpt of these studies and discuss their results concerning the aforementioned questions.

Defining long-distance relationship (LDR)

When it comes to defining something, usually there will be different opinions. There are two strong opinions in the field. The first one is Guldner and Swensen's (1995) definition of LDR. According to them, a relationship can be called a long-distance relationship when one's partner in a relationship lives far enough from that person so it becomes impossible for him/her to meet his/her partner daily. This definition sets up a clear limitation based on the frequency of face-to-face interaction. Also, since this definition views a relationship as dyadic in nature (by using the word partner), then, within this perspective, only a romantic relationship can fall into this category.

Stafford (2004), on the other hand, adopted a slightly different approach. According to her, an LDR is

> "when communication opportunities are restricted (in the view of the individuals involved) because of geographic parameters and the individuals within the relationship have expectations of a continued close connection. In this view, cross-residential relationships, such as those between parents and non-residential children, may be considered as a form of an LDR. Even if the physical residences are geographically close" (p.7)

With her definition, Stafford (2004) set up an open room for other types of relationships: friendship, parental relationship, etc.

Limiting an LDR to a romantic relationship will result in a more focused discussion. However, ignoring Stafford's (2004) assertion may also not seem to reflect the real situations of LDR cases that do not solely deal with romantic relationships. Therefore, in this paper, I adopt these two definitions to set up a parameter of what constitutes an LDR. In this paper, LDR covers not only romantic relationships, but also non-romantic relationships.

Previous Studies on LDR

In this section, I review several previous studies conducted in the domain of LDR. I cover the main points of the studies, such as methods, participants, and results. Whenever possible, I also briefly highlight their limitations.

Pistole, Roberts, and Mosko (2010) tried to bring the Investment Model developed by Rusbultz, Martz, Agnew (1998) to find out the differences between LDR and GCR in terms of attachment and commitment. One hundred twenty-two women and sixteen men involved in a serious LDR participated as the subjects. The findings indicated that there was no significant difference between attachment orientation in LDRs and attachment orientation in GCR. However, factors contributing to commitment in LDR and GCR were contrastive. In LDR, high satisfaction and high investment predicted commitment, while in GCR commitment was predicted by low avoidance, high satisfaction, low alternatives, and low cooperative caregiving. These results showed that LDRs and GCRs work differently but also share something in common. One particular limitation of this study is that it relied only on self-report so it may be subjectively biased to some extent.

Cameron and Ross (2007) examined one individual difference factor (negative affectivity) in relation the relational security and relational stability in LDRs and GCRs. Ninety-one undergraduate students—and their partners, too—majoring in psychology participated as the subjects in this year-long study. The findings indicated that relational security was positively associated with relational stability for both men and women. Men with higher negative affectivity (NA) would more likely to end LDR, but this was not true for women. In a similar vein, men's NA would significantly predict the stability of the relationship in LDR, but not in GCR. The results implied that men with high NA that are involved in LDR should find other ways to get social support. Some limitations from this study were that this study did not bring the issue of actual geographical distance separating the couples. This issue is important because actual distance may affect the frequency of contacts (meet-ups, visitations, etc.)—which was not addressed either in this study—and may eventually influence relational stability in the long run.

Guldner and Swansen (1995) compared the effect of time spent with a partner on intimacy, relationship satisfaction, trust, and commitment of 384 undergraduate students involved in LDRs and GCRs. The data were collected using a set of anonymous, self-report questionnaires. The results revealed that participants engaged in LDRs and GCRs reported a similar level of intimacy, relationship satisfaction, trust, and commitment, implying that the time spent together by romantic partners was not a major factor influencing the satisfaction in LDRs. The researchers asserted that these findings showed that some people may be able to maintain a high level of satisfaction in an LDR which was usually characterized by less frequent face-to-face interaction. The author mentioned one limitation in this study: since only roughly a third of the total samples were male, then the results may not give a balanced view.

Stafford, Merolla, and Castle (2006) examined the effect of transition from LDR to GCR on relationship stability. A sample of 335 undergraduate students with a median age of 19 years participated as the subject of this study. The findings indicated that people tended to cease the relationship after meeting their partners at some point during the separation period and 36% of those who continued the relationship and shifted it from LDR to GCR eventually broke up after reuniting with their partners. The researchers noted two important points from their findings:

transitioning from LDR to GCR could either be very good or very bad and this transition would likely lead people to a realization of the real version of their partners. A sampling method in this study was noted by the researchers as one of the main limitations. To find out who continued the relationship and who terminated the relationship upon reunion, the researchers had to divide them to separate groups, which eventually made only some part of the total participants, only 180 out of 335 participants, could qualify in responding to certain questions. Combined with the homogenous status as college students, this small size of participants may not be very helpful in making the result more generalizable in a different context.

Wiener and Hannum (2012) investigated the effect of distance (long-distance and geographically close) on social supports in friendships. The participants were 142 undergraduate students whose median age was around 19 years old. The results revealed that there was no difference in the level of perceived social support provided by both LD and GC. This indicated that LD and GC friends were equally able to give perceived social support. It was found that LD friends tended to provide a slightly more amount of perceived social support than GC friends. GC friends were considered to be able to provide more received social support, but this result was questionable because there was no indication that the support was asked by the participants or voluntarily given by their GC friends, leaving the difference in the ability of GC and LD friends to provide received social support inconclusive. From this finding, the researcher concluded that "distance does not affect on how supportive we expect our best friends to be when they are needed, which may be indicative of the efficacy of modern communication options in allowing these friendships to be maintained" (p.669).

Stafford and Merolla's (2007) investigated LDR and its relation to romantic idealization and non-face-to-face interaction (non-FtF). One hundred twenty-two heterosexual dyads participated as the subject in this study. The findings indicated both participants in LDR and GCR have the same frequency in utilizing emails, cards, etc. to communicate with their partners. It was also found that idealization was more pervasive among couples in LDR than dyads in GCR and this romantic idealization negatively predicted relational stability upon reunion. LDR partners, therefore, tend to dismiss the relationship when they moved from LDR to GCR.

Maguire (2007) investigated LDR and its relation to uncertainty, relationship satisfaction, and stress from a sample of 186 undergraduate students. The findings indicated that individuals who were certain that in the future they would stay with their partner in the same city tended to have higher relational satisfaction, and lower stress levels. Those who were certain about their same residential area in the future also reported that maintenance strategies like openness and assurances more helpful. These findings demonstrated that lower uncertainty about the nature of the relationship would lead to a more satisfying relationship. This, however, should be interpreted with care, because LDRs are not identical. Some people may choose to remain in LDRs than moving to GCR for some reasons. Along with the homogeneity of the participants (all of them were college students), this could be an obvious limitation.

Discussion

In the previous section, we see that many studies have been conducted to investigate LDR and its relation to various issues, such as time, satisfaction, etc., and provided some information about the topic. In this section, I try to answer the questions introduced in the beginning section of this paper by using the information from the previous studies.

Q1: Does LDR work?

This question derives from the common perception in society that LDR is fragile and tends to not last long. People may justify this view from the lack of face-to-face interaction and the limited amount of time spent together, making them question the viability of this type of relationship. Dainton and Aylor (2001) noticed that uncertainty in LDR could be detrimental since it is negatively correlated with trust and positively related to jealousy. However, Guldner and Swansen (1995) have shown us already that the lack of face-to-face interaction and time spent together were not major concerns in LDR. This kind of relationship may survive with limited sources. LDR was also proven to be effective in providing perceived social support in a relationship (Weiner and Hannum, 2012). Therefore, it is safe to say that LDR could work.

However, the extent to which LDR can work may depend on many factors. As noted by Maguire (2007), there might be differences among LDRs, so we should not easily generalize. Nonetheless, the finding from the study conducted by Pistole et al. (2010) at least could serve as the basis to predict the viability of LDR. In their study, high satisfaction and high investment were found to be strong predictors of commitment in LDRs. Therefore, by maintaining a high level of satisfaction, LDR could probably survive.

Q2: Is there any difference between LDR and GCR?

Compared to GCR, LDR may offer a more limited amount of time spent together and a lower frequency of face-to-face interaction. Some studies, however, showed that LDR may be as effective as GCR (Guldner and Swansen, 1995; Weiner and Hannum, 2012). In fact, there are some sides of LDR that are equal to and even slightly better than GCR. Therefore, it has the chance to continue or even to escalate.

Q3: What current research can inform about LDR and gender differences?

From the studies mentioned previously, only Cameron and Ross (2007) paid specific attention to gender difference issues. In their study, they found that men with higher NA in LDR would be more likely to feel dissatisfied and eventually end the relationship, while women with higher NA had no such tendency. This high NA among men involved in LDRs may come from a significant reduction of social support (Leary, et al, 1995). Within this view, men would depend largely on their partner for social support, while women could find social support from their friends. Although it may be true, this is not in line with Weiner and Hannum's (2012) finding that revealed that distance did not affect social support. Further, with the availability of sophisticated communication tools, we may assume that social support may be given adequately through communication and, therefore, may not lead partners to develop NA.

Cameron and Ross (2007) did not discuss this issue in their discussion and instead, they noted that there was a possible statistical problem that gave rise to this result:

> "One possible explanation for the lack of association between women's NA and relational stability is that the women's NA scores may have a truncated range (i.e., reduced variance) or may be generally higher than are men's. However, we tested for and did not find any gender differences in means, variances, or distributions on any of the NA variables. Another possibility is women's assessments may be less reliable than men's, again reducing the possibility of finding significant associations between variables for women. Importantly, however, women's NA was not less reliable than men's NA" (p. 598).

Considering all these points, it may be wise to conclude that gender difference may not have a significant role in LDR.

Q4: What the literature can inform about maintaining an LDR?

Several points can be drawn from previous studies to answer this. The first is that satisfaction and investment are important elements in maintaining a strong commitment in LDR (Pistole et al., 2010). Therefore, to make sure that an LDR could last long, it is important to maintain high satisfaction in the relationship. Positive ruminations (Honeycutt, 2003) and a low level of uncertainty about the future (Maguire, 2007) may contribute to a higher level of relational satisfaction, so working on these two aspects may eventually help couples to have a more committed relationship in the long run.

As for the investment, its importance concerning commitment was described by Pistole et al. (2010) as follows:

> "LRDs partners may be more attuned to investments, because they "ruled out" alternatives before they began the LDR. Once in the LDR, the investment may diminish their considering alternatives" (p.151).

The second important point from the literature is that people engaged in LDRs should not exaggerate their idealization of their partners. Stafford et al. (2006) noted that rediscovering the real side of partners is an inevitable experience among those who transitioned from LDR to GCR and this experience, in many cases, led them to the end of the relationship because their ideal version of their partner that they had in mind was different from the actual person they met. To avoid this, one must realize that his/her partner is a human being who is far from perfection. Realizing that love is a multidimensional construct, as proposed by Laswell and Laswell (1985), would also help since it would lead one to have a realistic expectation from the way one's partner showing his/her love.

The final point from the literature that would perhaps help partners in LDR is particularly related to uncertainty. As mentioned previously, lower uncertainty would lead to higher relational satisfaction, which in return would strengthen commitment. Thus, lowering uncertainty in an LDR

becomes pivotal. Maguire (2007) pointed out the positive correlation between relational satisfaction with maintenance strategies, such as openness and assurance. Therefore, partners engaged in LDR should try to apply these strategies to make sure that both parties are satisfied with the relationship.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This paper briefly discussed the issues related to LDR. From the discussion, it can be concluded that under certain conditions LDR may work as effectively as GCR. Gender differences in LDR may not also be a significant issue, and, finally, having a realistic expectation, lowing uncertainty, and using maintenance strategies might be effective to help people in an LDR.

The studies discussed in this paper also suggested that further studies are necessary to investigate maintenance strategies as well as expectations from both parties in LDR. A daily-diary approach is also suggested to be used in investigating LDR and its relation maintenance strategies. Applying this approach may inform thorough information on this topic since it can reflect the dynamic of strategies used daily.

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