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Long Distance vs. Proximal Romantic Relationships: Predicting Commitment, Investments, and Bias

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Abstract

The present study examined cognitive biases in dating partners involved in long distance (LDR) and proximal (PR) romantic relationships; specifically, we investigated whether couple members are biased to believe their relationship type is “better.” We also examined if LDRs and PRs differ in relationship variables including satisfaction, alternatives, and investments. Bias was measured using a modified version of the investment model scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Participants completed the items from three different perspectives: their current relationship, their perception of the “average” PR, and the “average” LDR. Results showed that people in LDRs and PRs have more similarities than differences.

Once one becomes a young adult it is very common to become involved in a romantic relationship. One of the prime periods of life when romantic relationships become a focus is during college, and a scenario some college students face is keeping the relationship from high school with a romantic partner who decides to attend a different university. This relationship will then become “long distance.” Long distance relationships (LDRs) have been studied throughout the years, partially because they allow for investigations regarding the various conditions in which partners choose to maintain a relationship in less than ideal conditions (e.g., Rohfing, 1995, as cited in VanHorn, Arnone, Nesbitt, Desilets, Sears, Giffin, & Brudi, 1997). Due to the economy, the issue of distance relationships is becoming increasingly important for people of all ages, because it is now common for one partner to seek employment outside his or her residential area in an effort to sustain income for the household. Partners put in situations in which they are separated by distance must then learn coping strategies for the relationship (Mattioli, 2009). One possible coping mechanism is a cognitive bias that justifies the relationship as “better” than another choice (such as breaking up or remaining in the same city); thus, the purpose of the current research was to investigate (a) whether LDRs differ in significant ways from proximal relationships (PRs), and (b) whether relationship partners maintain a biased view of their own type of relationship.

Actual Differences

While in a relationship there are some situations that may become out of a person’s control. Many young people attend college, and if they are in a relationship, if couple members split to attend different schools, they must decide whether to maintain the relationship over distance or to break up. If they choose to stay together, they may have an adjustment period. Currently there is a debate in psychological literature regarding whether LDRs and PRs have objective differences. For example, Guldner and Swenson (1995) conducted a study to see if time spent together and relationship quality differed; they compared LDRs and PRs on the variables of satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment. They also included a scale to measure relationship social desirability, which is an individual’s tendency to present
himself or herself to others in the best possible way. It was found that people in LDRs showed no difference than people in PRs in any of these variables except that people in LDRs reported higher relationship social desirability (Guldner & Swenson, 1995).

However, there are studies on the opposite side of the spectrum where differences are found in different relationship types. For example, Stafford and Merolla (2007) found that in some cases LDRs are, surprisingly, better off than PRs. They examined if romantic idealization is a key component to LDRs. Results showed that for the variables of love, idealistic distortion, positive reminiscence, perceived agreement, and communication quality, LDR partners scored significantly higher than couples in PRs. "Research on long-distance dating relationships (LDDR) reveal that LDDR partners often report higher quality relationships than those in geographically close dating relationships, despite LDDR partners' relatively limited day-to-day face to face interaction" (Stafford & Merolla, 2007, p. 3). Results showed that the longer partners in a LDR wait to see each other, the greater the communication and admiration within the relationship.

If problems in the relationship occur, an option individuals may inevitably consider is ending the relationship, especially if a viable alternative is available (Greitemeyer, Hengmith, & Fischer, 2005). One purpose of the current study is to examine whether long-distance partners will perceive more alternatives available to them than will proximal partners. It is reasonable to believe that long-distance partners, in the absence of the other member of the couple, will have more opportunities to engage in time spent with potential alternate mates, who inevitably may become threats to the current relationship.

Beyond considering possible alternatives to a current long-distance partner, there are other relationship constructs at play in the decision of whether to maintain or end a relationship. Research has shown that relationship persistence is also influenced by commitment (Rusbult, 1980). The Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) measures commitment in a relationship based on three predicting variables. The first, as mentioned above, is the quality and quantity of possible alternatives to one's current partner. However, commitment is also predicted by relationship satisfaction (defined as a balance between the benefits vs. drawbacks of a particular relationship partner) and by relationship investments (defined as the amount of resources put into a relationship which would be lost were the relationship to end, such as time and effort). It is reasonable to suggest that partners in LDRs may also have different levels of satisfaction and investments than partners in PRs, due to issues such as increased stress, logistics of travel, and so on. In the current study, a modified version of the investment model scale compared actual levels of each of the constructs making up the Investment Model, to determine whether LDRs differ in significant ways from PRs.

**Relationship Bias**

Objectively, there may be advantages to PRs or LDRs in terms of satisfaction, investments, and alternatives. However, while in a relationship partners may view things subjectively rather than objectively. Very few people want to openly admit that they may have problems in their relationship; they are more likely to spot the challenges other relationships may face. When a relationship is perceived in a biased manner,
it is often referred to in psychological literature as positive illusions (Murray & Holmes, 1997). When having positive illusions one will see one’s relationship in an overly positive manner, which shapes how one thinks about the relationship. The authors of one study hypothesized that relationships will be more satisfying for those who have positive illusions regarding the relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1997). In this study the authors looked at impressions of the relationship, optimism about the relationship, and perceived relationship efficiency. They concluded that couples saw their relationship as not susceptible to bad experiences that other relationships would have, and that people were very optimistic about the future of their relationship. They found that the more positive illusions people in the relationship had, the longer the relationship lasted (1997).

Previous research has found that positive illusions are often associated with coping with close relationships. For example, some people see their relationships as being superior to others (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). This study found that people in close relationships have high perceived superiority over other relationships. In other words people have more positive thoughts about their own relationship and place more negative thoughts around other relationships (1995). In doing this it is more likely that people will be blind to the negative things in their relationship and see their relationship as still being better than the next person’s.

In the present study, to measure relationship bias participants completed all the items from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) in terms of their perceptions of the “average” LDR and, again, on perceptions of the “average” PR. If participants perceive their own type of relationship as better than the other type, this indicates motivation to justify the positives of one’s relationship type.

Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1:** Participants will have a biased perception regarding their own relationship type (LDR or PR), such that they will rate the “average” LDR and “average” PR differently and in favor of their own relationship type. People in LDRs will be biased to think that the average LDR has higher investments, satisfaction, alternatives, and commitment than the average PR, and vice versa. Research has shown that people in romantic relationships will show a relationship bias with respect to their close relationship and have a tendency to see their own relationship as being better than other relationships (Bunnk & van der Eijnden, 1997). The authors believe that people will respond in a way that puts their relationship in the most favorable light.

**Hypothesis 2:** People in LDRs will have more perceived alternatives than people in PRs. The authors suggest that partners in a long distance relationship spend more time with other possible alternatives, compared to partners in PRs, due to their increased amount of time away from each other.

**Hypothesis 3:** People in PRs will have higher satisfaction levels than those in LDRs. While previous research (Guldner & Swensen, 1995) found no differences in satisfaction between relationship types, the current study wished to avoid hypothesizing a null result and therefore expected that people in PRs would be more satisfied.

**Hypothesis 4:** Previous research (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008) has established that relationship duration is positively correlated with the amount of investments in a relationship. It is likely that this is true
because of the time physically spent together in the relationship; in other words, “time in the relationship” in this context could be relationship duration, or it could be relationship proximity. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is that people in PRs will have more investments than people in LDRs, due to the greater amount of time spent together.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited from a small private university in Northwest Iowa, and were all involved in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited through Psychology classes at the university and received extra credit for participating or were entered into a drawing for $25. There were 44 participants (16 men, 28 women), with a mean age of 21.09 years (SD = 5.22). The ethnic breakdown was as follows: 61.36% Caucasian, 20.45% African American, 13.64% Latino, and 4.55% other. Participants indicated how many miles apart they lived from their partner; long distance was defined as more than fifty miles. As a result, 50% of participants were classified as being in an LDR, while 50% were in a PR. The average relationship duration was 7.14 months (SD = 3.54) for LDRs and 6.64 months (SD = 3.61) for PRs; this difference was not significant, \( t(42) = -.464, p = .645 \).

Investment Model Variables

Commitment. Items for the commitment variable were taken from the investment model scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Seven items measure commitment (e.g., I want our relationship to last for a very long time), with participants rating their agreement to each item on a 9-point Likert scale (where 0 = do not agree at all, 4 = agree somewhat, and 8 = agree completely). The scores for commitment were averaged to form a composite variable; the mean of this sample was 6.79 (SD = 1.66). Internal consistency for this scale was good, \( \alpha = .92 \).

Satisfaction, alternatives, and investments. Each of these variables was measured with five items (Rusbult et al., 1998). Each item has the same 9-point Likert scale, where 0 = do not agree at all, 4 = agree somewhat, and 8 = agree completely. For each variable, items are averaged to form a composite score. An example satisfaction item is “My relationship is close to ideal.” Mean satisfaction for the overall sample was 6.47 (SD = 1.23), and internal consistency for this scale was good, \( \alpha = .90 \). An example alternatives item is “The people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing.” Mean alternatives for the overall sample was 3.69 (SD = 1.59), and internal consistency for this scale was good, \( \alpha = .79 \). An example investment item is, “Many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner (recreational activities, etc.), and I would lose all of this if we were to break up.” Mean investments for the overall sample was 5.18 (SD = 1.61), and internal consistency was good, \( \alpha = .80 \).

Perceived Bias

Participants completed the investment model scale three times. The first time, participants responded regarding their current relationship; these responses were used as measures of the variables described above to test for actual differences. Next, participants were asked to complete all items again, based on their perception of an “average” long distance relationship. Finally, participants completed items a third time based on their perception of the “average” proximal relationship. Bias was measured as
the difference between ratings of the two “average” sets of responses; in other words, if a participant in a LDR is biased, he or she should perceive that the average LDR is significantly better off than the average PR.

Procedure

All surveys were administered in a classroom setting. Prior to receiving the surveys, participants were asked to complete a consent form. Participants then completed demographics, the surveys as described above, and were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Testing Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 was that participants will have a biased perception regarding their own relationship type (LDR or PR) such that they will rate the “average” LDR and “average” PR differently and in favor of their own relationship type. In other words, it was expected that people in LDRs will be biased to think that the average LDR has higher investments, satisfaction, alternatives, and commitment than the average PR; it was expected that people in PRs would have the opposite reaction. A series of repeated measures ANOVAs compared perceptions of each relationship type (see the Table for all means, SDs, F-values and p-values).

For the investment variable, participants in LDRs believed people in PRs had marginally more investments \( (M = 5.45, SD = 1.42) \) than those in LDRs \( (M = 4.91, SD = 1.43) \), \( F(1, 21) = 3.05, p = .092 \). However, participants in PRs also believed people in “average” PRs had more investments \( (M = 5.52, SD = 1.59) \) than those in LDRs \( (M = 5.21, SD = 1.44) \), \( F(1, 21) = 2.65, p = .119 \). Neither of these tests was statistically significant.

For satisfaction, participants in PRs believed people in PRs had higher levels of satisfaction \( (M = 5.85, SD = 1.21) \) than those in LDRs \( (M = 4.01, SD = 1.44) \), \( F(1, 20) = 47.47, p < .001 \). This result is highly significant and in the expected direction of Hypothesis 1. However, participants in LDRs also believed people in PRs had higher levels of satisfaction \( (M = 6.13, SD = 1.32) \) than those in LDRs \( (M = 4.99, SD = 1.58) \), \( F(1, 21) = 16.02, p < .001 \), a result which is also strongly significant. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported in that people in PRs believed an “average” PR is better in terms of satisfaction than is the “average” LDR, which may show bias. This interpretation is somewhat questionable, however, because people in LDRs essentially agreed.

For perceived alternatives, participants in LDRs believed people in LDRs had more perceived alternatives \( (M = 4.55, SD = 1.64) \) than people in PRs \( (M = 4.08, SD = 1.47) \), \( F(1, 21) = 3.11, p = .092 \). This was marginally significant and in the expected direction of Hypothesis 1. However, in a similar pattern to that found in satisfaction, people in PRs agreed. PR participants also perceived that an “average” LDR couple member had significantly more perceived alternatives \( (M = 5.07, SD = 1.55) \) than people in PRs \( (M = 4.16, SD = 1.39) \), \( F(1, 20) = 7.49, p = .013 \), and this result was statistically significant. In short, the majority of participants believed that people in LDRs had higher alternatives than people in PRs, which provided partial support for Hypothesis 1.

Finally, for commitment, participants in PRs believed that people in PRs have higher levels of commitment \( (M = 5.59, SD = 1.25) \) than those in LDRs \( (M = 5.37, SD = 1.34) \), \( F(1, 20) = 0.99, p = .332 \). This was the expected direction of means, but was not statistically significant. In addition, we again
found agreement in our sample: Participants in LDRs also believed people in PRs have higher levels of commitment ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.25$) than those in LDRs ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.57$), $F(1, 21) = 0.13$, $p = .717$. However, neither of these results was statistically significant.

In sum, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Participants in PRs believed that the “average” PR has higher satisfaction levels, and participants in LDRs believed (marginally) that the “average” LDR has higher alternatives. However, these results may not show a particular bias because both of these perceptions were shared by individuals who currently were living with the other relationship type.

**Testing Hypothesis 2**

Hypothesis 2 stated that people in LDRs will have more perceived alternatives than people in PRs. This hypothesis becomes even more interesting considering the results of Hypothesis 1, in which most participants held this same perception. A t-test was used to compare perceived alternatives for both groups. Surprisingly, the opposite was found: PRs had more perceived alternatives ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.24$) than LDRs ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(42) = 1.89$, $p = .065$. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported and was surprisingly in the opposite direction of expectations.

**Testing Hypothesis 3**

Hypothesis 3 stated that people in PRs will have higher satisfaction levels than those in LDRs; a t-test was used to compare satisfaction levels. Again, these results are even more interesting considering the highly significant perception of all participants that this is true. Also surprisingly, the means were in the opposite direction. LDRs had higher levels of satisfaction ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 1.15$) than PRs ($M = 6.31$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(42) = -.88$, $p = .385$. However, these means were not significantly different, and Hypothesis 3 was not supported (nor was the perception of participants). Individuals in PRs and LDRs have similar levels of satisfaction, at least in this sample.

**Testing Hypothesis 4**

Finally, it was hypothesized that people in PRs will have more investments due to the greater amount of time spent together compared to people in LDRs. In testing Hypothesis 1, participants did not perceive a difference between relationship types. As our participants suggested, there was no difference in levels of investment. People in LDRs reported having slightly more investments ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.45$) than people in PRs ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(42) = -.56$, $p = .581$, but again, this difference was not significant.

**Discussion**

The results from this study were interesting in many different areas. First, with Hypothesis 1, we wanted to investigate if participants in each relationship type would have a biased opinion such that they would perceive their type as significantly better than an alternative. While there were some significant differences found, it is unclear how these might be interpreted. Both individuals in PRs and in LDRs believe that an “average” PR has higher satisfaction while an “average” LDR has higher alternatives. These results may be less the result of personal bias and more the result of either (a) stereotypes about how relationships work or (b) awareness of actual differences. The latter option was tested in Hypotheses 2 and 3, however, and both of these perceptions were found to be incorrect. Results for Hypothesis
2 showed that in fact, people in PRs perceive more alternatives, and results for Hypothesis 3 showed that satisfaction levels are similar in both relationship types. Because most of our participants agreed with each other about the state of different relationships, it is difficult to say that personal bias or motivation to have positive illusions was found in the present study. Other research has shown that people in romantic relationships will show a relationship bias with respect to their close relationship and have a tendency to see their own relationship as being better than other relationships (Bunnk & van der Eijnden, 1997), but our results did not replicate this effect.

It is interesting to speculate why there is an equal level of satisfaction in these two groups, despite the apparent lack of ideal circumstances for partners in LDRs. One possibility for how LDR partners can maintain a higher level of satisfaction is communication options that are increasingly available for LDRs, such as email, instant messaging, phone texting, video chatting software (e.g., Skype), and websites like Facebook (Sorensen, 2010). Many people in LDRs may rely on technology to keep them connected with their mate while being physically apart from one another.

The final hypothesis was that people in proximal relationships will have more investments due to the greater amount of time spent together compared to people in long distance relationships, but no significant differences were found. It is possible that investment levels in general are equal between these two types of relationship, and that the difference is actually what specific types of investment are found in each. For example, Goodfriend & Agnew (1998) explored "tangible" vs. "intangible" investments, where tangible are items that physically exist (e.g., a shared pet or furniture) while intangible investments are concepts such as sacrifices or effort. Perhaps proximal relationships focus more on tangible investments, while LDRs have more intangible. This possibility could be explored in future research.

One limitation to this study was the sample size. Some of the results were marginally significant; a larger sample size would likely have made these significant due to greater statistical power. In addition, if the sample were larger the authors could have had a more diverse sample and explored other types of relationships such as homosexual or bisexual. If the sample were more geographically diverse, one could possibly look into differences in location of the partners in the relationships. The majority of the participants in this study were from small towns in Iowa and very few were from larger cities.

This research has laid a foundation upon which other investigations of LDRs vs. PRs can be laid. For example, all relationships have conflict during some time in the relationship. The way one deals with conflict or manages it can have an effect on the duration of the relationship (Cramer, 2000). Future research could explore whether relationship type influences methods of conflict management or conflict resolution. One could also look into infidelity rates of both relationship types. During this study researchers hypothesized that LDRs would have more perceived alternatives, but it was revealed that PRs actually had more alternatives. This is intriguing and may spark questions regarding opportunities for infidelity.

Conclusion

There is debate in psychological literature regarding the differences in PRs and LDRs
and if one is better than the other [e.g. Guldner and Swenson (1995)]. The current research showed that there are few differences between these two relationship types, at least in terms of the variables studied here. However, it is important for researchers in the social sciences to continue research studying differences and even similarities within both PRs and LDRs to better understand the nuances involved. Given the state of the economy and job market, LDRs continue to increase around the world. Continuing this research may be beneficial for people in all relationships.

References


Table

Perceptions of Relationship Variables, Based on Current Type of Relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>“Average”</th>
<th>“Average”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LDR</td>
<td>PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDR Participants</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Participants</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDR Participants</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Participants</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDR Participants</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Participants</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDR Participants</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Participants</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sample size was 22 for each relationship type, and all scales range from 0-8, with higher scores indicating more of that variable.