

Perceptions of College Students in Long Distance Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study examined women's perceptions of a peer's traits and commitment to college, a dating relationship, and other relationships. Independent variables were the gender of the peer and relationship type: non-long, medium long, and extreme long distance. Participants perceived a woman as more intelligent. The extreme long distance relationship was perceived less favorable than the other two relationship types. Specifically a peer in an extreme long relationship was perceived as less likely to remain in the relationship, less faithful, as putting less effort into the relationship, and as having a lower overall quality of relationship.

INTRODUCTION

For most undergraduates, college provides important academic and social experiences. One key aspect of the social experience is the development of romantic dating relationships. College students place high importance on the role of romantic relationships in their lives (Roscoe, 1987). However, given that many students "go away" to college, dating relationships may assume many forms. Research on the dating behaviors of college students has distinguished between non-long distance and long distance relationships. Past investigations into the nature of these two types of college relationships have focused on defining what is meant by "long distance" (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994), investigating the prevalence of long distance relationships (Guldner, 1996; Knox, Zusman, Daniels, & Brantley, 2002; Dellman et al., 1994) and discovering predictors of long distance relationship stability (Schwebel, Dunn, Moss, & Renner, 1992).

The precise definition of what constitutes a long distance relationship has varied greatly among previous studies. The majority of studies use a "miles separated" criteria, however the exact number of miles has varied. For instance, Schwebel et al. (1992) used 50 miles or more in their study, whereas Lydon, Pierce, and O'Regan (1997) and Knox et al. (2002) used 200 miles or more to define a long distance relationship. Other studies have used less concrete definitions. For example, Guldner (1996) used the statements "my partner lives far enough away from me that it would be very difficult or impossible to see him or her every day" and "my partner lives close enough to me that I could see him or her every day if I chose to". Finally, another study allowed participants to define their relationship as either long distance or non-long distance based on their own perceptions of the relationship (Dellman-Jenkins et al., 1994). These differing definitions suggest that there are many factors that may play a role in determining if a relationship is long distance or non-long distance and that there may be more than one type of long distance relationship.

Guldner (1996) reports that about 42% of college students are involved in non-long distance dating relationships, as defined by being able to see their partner almost everyday. However, due to the variations in the definitions of long distance, the estimations of the prevalence of these types of relationships are not exact, yet studies have established approximate ranges. Researchers estimate between 20 and 40% of college students are involved in long distance relationships (Dellman-Jenkins et al., 1994). The prevalence of college students with past experience in long distance relationships also has been studied and found to be within the range of 60% to 80% (Guldner, 1996). Based on these high prevalence rates, it can be seen that many college students experience some form of long distance dating today.

Research exploring factors that are associated with continuance of long distance relationships has found that relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and level of consensus, which is how much couples agree on issues, are positively correlated with relationship stability (Schwebel et al., 1992). Schwebel et al. (1992) also found that the greater effort made by the dating partners to maintain the relationship, the longer the relationship stability. In the study, long distance couples who had stayed together and long distance couples who had broken up over the nine-week duration of the study were compared on their relationship maintaining efforts, such as the number of times the couples saw each other and number of times the couples phoned each other over a week. Overall, results suggested

that a person's commitment to the relationship, as enhanced by their maintenance efforts, promoted the endurance of long distance relationships.

Gender Differences in Commitment to Relationships

Researchers repeatedly have found that commitment to the relationship is an excellent predictor of relationship stability, regardless of the "type" of relationship. For example, Hendrick, Hendrick, and Adler (1988, as cited in Brehm, 1992) found commitment to be the best predictor of relationship stability of straight dating couples, in their two-month longitudinal study. For instance, commitment was more important than love attitudes, sexual attitudes, self-esteem, and self-disclosure at predicting which couples did stay together.

Interestingly, commitment to relationships varies by gender. Several studies have found that women exhibit and express more commitment to their relationships than their male partners express. For instance, in their study of 42 college couples, Sacher and Fine (1992) found that women report more effort in maintaining their relationships than do men. Gender differences also have been found in the amount of effort made by partners in dating relationships. When studying long distance relationships in particular, Dellman-Jenkins et al. (1994) found that women make more maintenance efforts (such as initiating phone calls etc.). Schwebel et al. (1992) found that women report more effort in long distance relationships. Overall, studies on both long distance and non-long distance relationships have found that women show more commitment to and more effort in maintaining their dating relationships than the men in the same studies.

The current study explored respondents' perceptions of relationship effort and quality by having them read relationship scenarios where the level of the distance of relationship was varied. The current study defined the level of distance by drawing off the realities of college relationships. First, a non-long distance relationship was defined as one where it is easy for the couple to be together, physically, almost every day. Second, two types of long distance relationships were examined. First, medium long distance was defined as relationships in which the couple is together almost every weekend. Second, extreme long distance was defined as relationships in which the couple is only able to be together during university breaks.

I expected that respondents would perceive students in these relationships differently based on the distance length. More specifically, I expected that respondents would view the quality of relationships in long distance situations more negatively than non-long distance situations. For instance, I expected participants would make the assumption that people in long distance relationships have less free time available for campus involvements and other social activities due to their time spent in maintaining their relationships. I also expected that respondents would perceive the women in the long distance relationships as making more effort in the maintenance of their relationships than the men. Finally, I expected respondents would perceive men in long distance relationships as less committed than women in any of the other relationship types.

METHODS

Participants

One hundred and seven undergraduate women from a mid-sized Midwestern university participated in the current research. The ages of the women ranged from 17 to 29 years ($M = 19.48$, $SD = 1.87$). The sample comprised 52 freshmen (49%), 26 sophomores (25%), 23 juniors (21%), and 5 seniors (5%). Most participants were Caucasian (95%), while a minority of participants were African American (3%), and Asian or Hispanic (2%). All but one of the participants reported a straight sexual orientation. Finally, the sample consisted of 45 single participants (43%) and 60 participants in a dating relationship (57%) (see Table 1).

Procedure

The participants read one of six short scenarios (see the Appendix for a sample) describing a typical college student with descriptors and distances that make sense to students at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. The scenarios varied by the gender of the character and the type of dating relationship (non-long distance, medium long distance, or extreme long distance). Participants then reported their perceptions of the character by answering a short questionnaire. First, participants responded to seven bipolar adjectives to assess the personal characteristics of the student in the scenario (e.g. intelligent versus unintelligent and attractive versus unattractive). The next eight items assessed participant perceptions of the character's commitment to his/her college life (e.g. how committed is John to his academic career). Seven items assessed participants' perceptions of the character's commitment to his/her dating relationship (e.g. how committed is Jenny to her boyfriend). Finally, the last six items measured participants' perceptions of the character's commitment to his/her other relationships (i.e. family and friends) (e.g. how committed is John to his relationship with his family). All items were rated on a five point Likert-type scale. The students acknowledged their informed consent by completing the survey and were provided with debriefing information as they left the session.

Data Analysis

I used a 2 X 3 factorial ANOVA to analyze the results. The two independent variables were gender (male or female) and relationship type (non-long distance, medium long distance, or extreme long distance) both of which were manipulated within the scenario. The dependent variables were participants' perceptions of the character of the scenario along personality characteristics, commitment to academics, a dating relationship, and other relationships (i.e. family and friends).

RESULTS

The female character was rated more intelligent than the male character [female $M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.60$; male $M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.70$; $F(1, 106) = 9.35$, $p = .00$]. No other significant trait differences were found between the male and female characters. Participants perceived the extreme long distance relationship to be less favorable ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.60$) on effort and overall relationship quality than the other two relationship types [in town $M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.40$; medium long $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.46$] (see Table 2). The participants' ratings of commitment to college and other relationships did not differ dependent upon gender or type of relationship.

DISCUSSION

The percentages of the college student participants who were either single or in a dating relationship were consistent with previous research, which suggests that the sample used was representative of the population. With the participants who were dating, it is interesting to note the 66.7% who were involved in a relationship that lasted more than one year considering the high number of freshmen participants (49%).

Contradictory to previous research (Schwebel, Dunn, Moss, & Renner, 1992), the level of commitment was not perceived differently dependent upon relationship type. This may be due to the exclusion of men as participants because women are more often the partner who displays the commitment. The women may thus have perceived the commitment as equal across the relationship types.

Also, the finding that perceptions of commitment seemed to be unrelated to the perceived overall quality of the relationship contradicts Schwebel et al. (1992), who found that the maintenance of a relationship depends upon commitment. Specifically, this study found that the characters in the extreme long distance relationship were perceived to be less likely to remain together and faithful to each other, while commitment was not seen to significantly differ dependent on the type of relationship. Also, the overall quality of the extreme long distance relationship was perceived to be lower than the quality of the other two types of relationships. The amount of effort, which has previously been found to be important in maintaining long distance relationships, was perceived to be lower in the extreme long distance relationship for both the character and the character's partner, suggesting that the non-long and medium long relationships require more effort for the relationship.

Finally, it is interesting that there were no perceived gender differences dependent upon the type of relationship on such factors as the amount of commitment and effort, which disputes the hypothesis that gender differences would be found. Also, this study proposed the hypothesis that the type of long distance relationship of the character would influence the amount of commitment to academics and other relationships; however this was not the case. No significant differences were found in these variables as factors of neither gender nor relationship type.

Limitations

One great limitation to this study was the exclusion of men, which was done for size purposes as inclusion would have required a sample size two times greater. Another possible limitation was that the scenario may not have been descriptive enough to allow the participant to make in depth characterizations and judgments of the student in the scenario. Also, the survey questions may have been too broad and may not have accurately targeted the participants' perceptions of the student in the scenario.

Future Research

Future research into this topic may specifically target men's perceptions and look at the differences between men and women's perceptions of characters in these three types of dating relationships. It also would be advantageous to examine the differences in commitment to their college career, dating relationships, and other relationships among college students who are in relationships of various types.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Dating Participants

		n	%
Length of Dating	Less than one month	4	6.7
	One to six months	4	6.7
	Six months to one year	12	20.0
	More than one year	40	66.7
Frequency of seeing partner	Every day	22	38.6
	Every Weekend	18	31.6
	Only during school breaks (i.e. winter, summer)	17	29.8
Frequency of talking to partner	Every Day	55	91.7
	Every Other Day	5	8.3
	Once a Week	0	0
	Once a Month	0	0

Table 2. Perceptions of the dating relationship as a function of distance

	In town	Medium distance	Extreme distance	F	p
How committed to relationship?	4.53	4.56	4.34	1.55	0.22
How committed is partner to relationship?	4.25	4.44	4.11	1.92	0.15
How likely to remain together throughout college?	3.69 _a	3.83 _a	3.06 _b	11.99	0.00
How likely to remain faithful to relationship?	4.06 _a	3.94 _a	3.51 _b	4.81	0.01
How much effort put into relationship?	4.03 _a	4.17 _a	3.63 _b	4.77	0.01
How much effort is partner putting into relationship?	3.83 _{a,b}	4.14 _a	3.51 _b	5.45	0.01
Overall, how good is the relationship?	4.28 _a	4.06 _a	3.57 _b	14.26	0.00

Notes. Means in the same row with different subscripts are significantly different. Items answered on a scale anchored at 1 and 5.

APPENDIX

Jenny is twenty-one years old. She is a junior communications major at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. Jenny lives in an off campus apartment with two other female roommates. She has good study habits and as a result receives decent grades in all her classes. Jenny currently has a job in food service and works about fifteen hours a week.

Jenny enjoys hanging out with her friends and watching movies during her free time. Jenny has an older brother, who attends the University of Wisconsin – Stout, and a younger sister, who is still in high school. Jenny has a good relationship with her family and tries to talk to her siblings and parents at least once a week, through either e-mail or phone calls.

Jenny also has a boyfriend who lives in La Crosse and goes to UW - L. Jenny's boyfriend is also twenty-one years old and a junior. He is majoring in psychology and receives decent grades. Jenny's boyfriend works in a retail-clothing store about fifteen hours a week. Also, Jenny's boyfriend enjoys hanging out with his friends during his free time. Jenny's boyfriend has one younger brother, who is still in high school and lives with their parents.

Jenny and her boyfriend are able to see each other just about every day. They also talk to each other every day through phone calls and e-mail. Jenny and her boyfriend have been dating for about one year and have made a commitment to each other that they will not see other people. Jenny and her boyfriend are currently sexually active.