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Distance in Relationships as a Moderator of Relationship Characteristics on Relationship

Outcomes

A THESIS

SUBMITTE TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of requirements for

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MASTER OF ARTS IN EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY
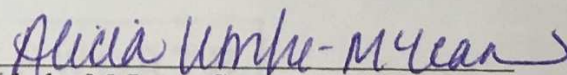
By

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DISTANCE IN RELATIONSHIPS AS A MODERATOR OF RELATIONSHIP

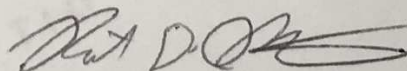CHARACTERISTICS ON RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES

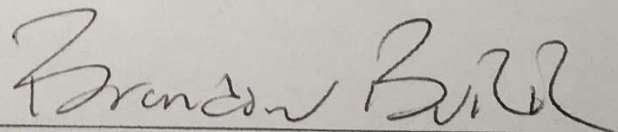A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Distance in dating relationships has become more prevalent now than ever before as people begin relationships while geographically close, but at times are forced to move for myriad reasons (e.g., school, employment, personal reasons, etc.); (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). However, little research has been conducted to address how distance may be a unique stressor in relationships and could lead to certain relationship tactics being preferred regarding how people interact in these relationships. The goals of the current research were to investigate distance as a stressor in relationships and to determine whether distance in relationships impacts conflict resolution style preferences and with relationship maintenance strategy preferences. 77 participants involved in dating relationships answered questions regarding their attachment styles, conflict resolution preferences in hypothetical situations, relationship contingent self-esteem, and other relationship-focused questions. Of the 77 participants involved, 17 were in long-distance dating relationships. Distance was not found to have any significant effect on any of the measured relationship variables. However, both attachment style and relationship contingent self-esteem impacted conflict resolution style preference and relationship strategy maintenance style preference.

   Keywords: long-distance dating relationship, attachment style, conflict resolution style, relationship contingent-self esteem

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my close friends and family who have supported me endlessly throughout the last two years.

Acknowledgements

I would like to Dr. Limke-McLean, Dr. Mather, and Dr. Burr for all of the insight and assistance throughout the completion of the project as well as for agreeing to oversee its execution.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Intimate relationships are an integral part of people's lives, and for many people, satisfy a particularly important psychological need (Chen et al., 2015). Perhaps more now than in the past, people have been forced apart geographically while choosing to remain involved in their dating relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). While research has been conducted on the effects of distance on relationships (e.g., Jiang & Hancock, 2013, Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013, among others), little work has been done regarding how those in long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs) respond to relatively routine events and generally interact with their partners in relationships while being pressured with the unique and underlying stressor of distance. Thus, the present research investigates the relationships between both attachment style and relationship contingent self-esteem (RCSE) and conflict resolution preference between those in LDDRs and geographically close relationships (GCRs) (along with the conflict resolutions for couples regardless of distance). Additionally, this research also explores the relationships between both attachment style and RCSE and relationship maintenance strategy preferences between those in LDDRs and GCRs (as well as the preferences of these strategies of all couples, regardless of distance).

Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1982) original theory of attachment states that our early relationship with our primary caregivers (typically the mother, but not always) shape both how people interact with one another, as well as give people a sense of how to expect people to interact with them. The attachment style that one develops is heavily impacted by the relationship a person has with their primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1978). This "working model" as Bowlby (1982) describes it,

originally was meant to describe the relationship between a child and their caretaker, but has since been shown to have important implications for a person's dating relationships as well. It has been demonstrated that people do not only create attachments to their parents in their infancy, but development attachment attitudes towards their romantic partners as well (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Additionally, the attachment style that a person adopts while in childhood is typically maintained throughout the course of that person's life, barring any traumatic incident (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). It is generally accepted that there are four styles of adult romantic attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991): secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. Those with secure attachments are open to both relational interdependence and autonomy, and have no issue with being intimate in their relationship, but are also comfortable with periods of relational independence. A preoccupied attachment style is manifested in constant concern with relationships, and generally, a person that has a preoccupied style of attachment is open to being intimate with others, but fears that others do not share that same desire. Additionally, those with preoccupied attachment styles are less comfortable with relational independence. People that have dismissive attachment styles have less of a desire for relational interdependence, and feel more comfortable with relational autonomy. These people are also likely to become uncomfortable in a relationship in the instance that their partner attempts to become closer than what the dismissive person is accustomed to. Finally, those with fearful styles of attachment are leery of being intimate with others, but also desire to have an intimate and close connection with another person.

The attachment profiles listed above have somewhat obvious implications for relationship success. It is not difficult to imagine that securely attached people generally have more stable relationships than those that are not securely attached, and research confirms this stance. Those

with secure attachments report higher relationship satisfaction and more satisfying self-disclosure (i.e., sharing information about oneself to another person) (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994) and higher relationship satisfaction is correlated with greater relationship stability (Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010; Van Horn et al., 1997). While secure attachments appear to be ideal, this is not to say that those that have different attachment styles cannot find success in their pursuit of a relationship, which is welcome news considering that there are a number of people with non-secure attachments. If not securely attached, men tend to be dismissively attached, while women are likely to have a preoccupied or fearful attachment style (Feeney, 1999). While being paired with a securely attached partner typically works best for a person with a non-secure attachment, couples that feature a dismissive man and a preoccupied woman are relatively stable over time (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). While their relationship satisfaction may not match that of a couple featuring two securely attached people, this illustrates that one person's attachment alone is not predictive of relationship success, and rather an interaction of both gender and attachment style are at work in determining success in dating relationships.

The ability to predict relationship stability and success in these relationships is not only rooted in how people with certain attachment styles differ in desire for interdependence and autonomy, but also how they perceive and react to different events that take place in the relationship. Those that are preoccupied are more salient of issues of closeness in the relationship (typically, this is the woman in heterosexual relationships, but not always), and because they have a higher need for relationship interdependency, are more likely to seek closeness than those that are dismissive (Feeney, 1999). This does not seem to stem from a large difference in perceptive ability among the attachment styles, as when one person is aware of differences in

closeness in the relationship, their partner becomes aware in the not distant future (Feeney, 1999). While differences in attachment style are not necessarily harbingers of relationship doom, they can lead to ancillary stress in a relationship, which leads to dissatisfaction, and relationship instability as a result (Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010; Van Horn et al., 1997).

Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem

While not as robustly researched as attachment theory, RCSE is important when attempting to predict the satisfaction of a relationship, and particularly the stability of that relationship. RCSE can be defined as a type of self-esteem that relies on a person's self-concept completely intertwined with the inner workings and outcomes of the relationship (Knee et al., 2008). People with high RSCE are typically more aware of signs of their partner's disapproval and dismissal, while those with low RCSE are typically more certain in the fact that their partner holds them in high esteem, and thus are able to avoid negative feelings that stem from the relationship more often (Knee et al., 2008).

Those with high RCSE are not only more cognizant of negative events in their relationship, but also more aware of their perception of the quality of the relationship at any given point (Knee et al. 2008). This perception of relationship quality crosses over into the person's evaluation of self, and can cause relationship dissatisfaction more often and quickly in those with high RCSE than those with low RCSE (Knee et al., 2008). However, this does not necessarily mean that RCSE is predictive of the quality of the relationship, but rather one person's perception of the relationship. For example, two people in a relationship may be exposed to the same relational conflict, but those two people will have unique perceptions of what happened, and may have different evaluations of the relationship after this event has taken place. Relational stressors are more impactful with those that have high RCSE than others due to

how it impacts that person's self-worth, and thus may lead to more relationship instability both more quickly, and more often depending on the nature of the relationship. In this regard, RCSE is similar to attachment style, in that people will have different reactions to identical situations depending on what their RCSE (or attachment) profile is.

Due to the way that RCSE affects relationship satisfaction differently for each person, it is important to understand how it interacts with the stressor of distance, the attachment style that a person may bring to a relationship, as well as the reaction one with a particular level of RCSE has may have to certain relational conflict. The impact of RCSE levels has not yet been tested in a manner that allows for them to be connected to any particular behavior in relationships. This study will work to give RCSE predictive validity when certain situations in relationships take place.

Dating Relationship Maintenance Strategies

Relationship maintenance strategies are behaviors employed by people in a relationship to ensure that the relationship endures, to keep relationship quality high, as well as salvage a relationship that may have been damaged (Stafford, 2010; Stafford & Canary, 1991). There are multiple relationship maintenance strategies that are regularly employed, and they differ in style depending on the type of the relationship (e.g., relationship maintenance behaviors in a friendship differ from those in a dating relationship, and those both differ from strategies used in a marriage, etc.) (Stafford & Canary, 1991). These behaviors fall under the following categories: positivity (a measure of how pleasant a partner is with the other partner in the dyad), level of understanding, self-disclosure, relationship talks (conversations about the state and quality of the relationship), assurances (i.e., confirmations of meaning between partners), tasks (an equitable

sharing of chores and responsibilities), and networks (the inclusion of family and friends of the other partner in their social circle) (Stafford, 2010).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, couples that believed that relationships require constant enactment of relationship behaviors reported higher relationship satisfaction compared to those that did not share a similar mindset (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Additionally, the usage of maintenance strategies is connected with the attachment style that a person has: those with secure attachment styles are more likely to use prosocial maintenance strategies (i.e., assurances, positivity) than those with dismissive attachment styles (Simon & Baxter, 1993). However, securely attached people are not alone in their frequent usage of maintenance strategies in a relationship; preoccupied men and women both provide high levels of assurances, and are typically more open than even securely attached people in relationships (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). Moreover, those with dismissive attachment styles do not utilize networking as a strategy as frequently as those with other styles of attachment (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). Not only do attachment styles dictate what types of maintenance strategies people use with their partners, but also what types of maintenance strategies people use with them. Those with preoccupied attachments typically receive less prosocial relationship maintenance strategies enacted towards them than those with other attachment styles (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006).

In addition to there being pronounced differences in how those with different attachment styles approach keeping their relationship sustained, there are stark gender differences as well. Females are more frequent employers of assurances and positivity than males are, and males are less frequent users of maintenance strategies in general (Simon & Baxter, 1993). Interestingly, fearfully attached men report low usage of prosocial maintenance behavior, but this is not seen among fearfully attached women (Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). It is possible that those with

dismissive and fearful attachments use these maintenance strategies less frequently due to the effort that it takes to constantly enact them, as simply employing these techniques to keep a relationship alive and functional is stressful in and of itself (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010).

Conflict Resolution in Relationships

Conflict resolution strategies in relationships are methods by which partners attempt to resolve disputes, issues, and disagreements in a manner that will benefit both the individual and the relationship (Kurdek, 1994). There are four primary styles of conflict resolution that individuals use with their partners when conflict arises within a relationship: conflict engagement (hostile engagement between partners, typically involving heated and passionate arguments that at times, stray from the original topic), withdrawal (avoiding the issue altogether, refusing to discuss the problem at any substantial amount of length), compliance (acquiescing to the demands or needs of a partner without considering one's own), or positive problem solving (working constructively with a partner to come to a compromise that both members of the relationship will agree with) (Kurdek, 1994).

The manner in which a person tries to resolve conflict in their relationship is intertwined with their attachment style: those with dismissive attachment styles tend to withdraw more often than those with other types of attachment, and those that are securely attached tend to attempt to work to find even compromises when solving problems (i.e., positive problem solving) than those that are not securely attached (Pistole, 1989; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002; Shi, 2003). Those that have preoccupied attachment styles have been shown to be compliant more often than not when working to resolve relational issues (Pistole, 1989; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002; Shi, 2003). To the knowledge of the author, there is currently no preferred style of conflict resolution used by those that have fearful styles of attachment. Additionally, those that have non-secure

attachment styles are more stressed by relational conflict than those that are securely attached (Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006). This additional stress may explain why those that have dismissive attachment styles try to avoid issues altogether, and those with preoccupied attachments choose simply to comply with whatever demands their partner may have, as this strategy would allow for minimal engagement, and could presumably be the quickest route to 'solving' the problem at hand. Additionally, conflict in and of itself affects those with different attachment styles in different ways: women with preoccupied attachment styles both showed more stress and exhibited more negative behavior (e.g., yelling, exaggerated exasperation, unwillingness to compromise, etc.), while men that were dismissively attached were rated as less warm and supportive by their partners after attempting to solve a major relational issue (Simpson et al. 1996). However, no significant results were found when couples were addressing minor issues, which provides evidence for the idea that only major conflict is taxing to the degree that it overrides the behavior that people believe is best for solving relational issues, and causes them to employ a strategy that is in line with their style of attachment instead, as that would be what is least cognitively taxing (Sillars et al., 2000).

Outside of attachment style, there are other factors that have a relationship with how these conflict resolution choices impact an intimate relationship. While dismissive husbands typically do not resolve conflict in ways that please their wives, wives that are caring and benevolent in the way they work to resolve conflict is rated highly by those same husbands (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). However, couples that forgave each other for whatever transgression may have been committed rated the resolution of the problem as more positive, regardless of the resolution style that was employed (Fincham et al., 2004).

While forgiveness is an effective strategy to mend any damage that may have been done after attempting to resolve a relational issue, dealing with the issue in the moment is difficult for a few reasons. Firstly, it is unlikely that either partner, regardless of their attachment style or gender, believes that their partner is communicating in the most effective manner possible (Sillars et al., 2000). Additionally, it is challenging for any individual that is undergoing conflict with their partner to take the perspective of their partner in the relationship, causing added difficulty to the already tenuous task of attempting to solve the issue at hand (Sillars et al., 2000). Perhaps what causes the most difficulty, however, is the tendency for couples to not remain focused on the problem at hand. Couples will frequently begin talking about one particular issue, but the initial conversation will then dissolve into both individuals talking about what they believe to be implicit problems with the relationship (Sillars et al., 2000). This is ineffective not only because it dredges up underlying issues of the relationship, but also because the initial problem may never actually be addressed at all (Sillars et al., 2000).

Though it may be difficult for an individual in a dating relationship to take the perspective of their partner, most people have an idea of what type of strategy their partner will seek to use when attempting to resolve relational issues, and this knowledge has consequences. Individuals that believe that their partner will exhibit avoidant behaviors in regards to attempting to solve conflict report higher levels of stress than individuals that believe their partner will enact any alternative conflict resolution strategy (Rusbult et al., 1996).

Relational conflicts and the manner in which couples work to solve them is important due to these conflicts being a ubiquitous stressor in essentially all relationships (Kurdek, 1994), and stressors of all sorts in relationships lead to lower satisfaction, which leads to instability, and potential relationship termination (Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010; Van Horn et al., 1997).

Distance in Dating Relationships

As time has passed, our society has become one that more readily embraces the challenges and difficulties that come with long-distance dating due to logistic issues that young couples face (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). There are many differences in the inner working of relationships that take place when partners are far away from each other, as well as how partners interact with each other when they are not in a relationship that allows for them to spend face to face contact with one another.

Perhaps the most obvious facet of a relationship that is impacted by physical distance in a relationship is relationship satisfaction. However, the impact that distance has on relationship satisfaction is not agreed upon. Some research suggests that there is greater relationship satisfaction in long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs) than there is in geographically close relationships (GCRs), potentially due to the idealization of partners that takes place in order to maintain relationship commitment and stability (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Kelmer et al., 2013). Those that are satisfied in their LDDR are more likely to remain committed to it, and less likely to seriously consider alternative mates that may be physically closer (Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010).

However, other studies provide evidence that supports the notion that LDDRs are more stressful and difficult than GCRs. The primary stressor for couples in LDDRs above all else, is distance, and is the most difficult to deal with as there is not a tenable solution that can easily be reached for this issue in most cases (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Additionally, when couples become geographically close again after spending an extended amount of time as a LDDR, they

split about 1/3 of the time (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006). There is a litany of reasons that couples that split list, such as anticipating seeing their partner less, increased conflict and jealousy, and the simultaneous discovery of negative characteristics of their partner juxtaposed with less discovery of positive characteristics (Stafford et al., 2006). It would appear as if this is the result of the idealization of a partner not being realized when couples reunite, as the termination of these LDDRs turned GCRs happens within the first three months of reunion (Stafford et al., 2006).

While LDDRs invariably provide stress to the individuals that are in that relationship, an optimistic outlook on the relationship appears to be a buffer against deleterious effects on the relationship. Couples that both understand and accept that the distance is a necessary yet impermanent phase of their relationship tend to fare better than those that are unable to externalize the reason for their current separation (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Conversely, the added stress tends to have more of an adverse impact on those that already have negative affect; men in LDDRs that are high in negative affect are more likely to terminate their relationship than men that are high in negative affect in GCRs (Cameron & Ross, 2007).

One of the most potentially stressful components of LDDRs is communication. Not only do dyads in LDDRs communicate less often than those in GCRs, they do it in different manners as well (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Those in LDDRs and GCRs email at comparable frequencies, but LDDRs text, video chat, phone chat, and instant message more frequently than those that are geographically close, in addition to having longer FTF interactions when they do converge (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Additionally, there is evidence that suggests that the method of communication that is used has an impact on the quality of the relationship. Phone calls have been shown to be positively associated with both relationship satisfaction and commitment,

while communication via the internet has been shown to be positively associated with trust (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). Furthermore, those in LDDRs were intimate in their interactions, and believed their partners to be more self-disclosing, while being more self-disclosing themselves than couples in GCRs (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Research suggests increased self-disclosure is a result of perceived responsiveness from one's partner, which is higher in those in LDDRs than those in GCRs (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). While those that are close may see each other more often, the distance between those in LDDRs does seem to provide some relationship benefits.

While physical distance is clearly not impossible to overcome, the distance in LDDRs is undoubtedly corrosive over time, as partners may go extended periods of time without any physical face-to-face (FTF) contact. This contact is crucial for keeping LDDRs afloat over the course of time in which partners are separated. Couples that have more frequent FTF contact report higher amounts of trust, and regularly report feeling recharged after spending physical time with their partner (Dainton & Aylor, 2004; Sahlstein, 2004). Increased distance is associated with less frequent relationship maintenance behaviors, and less FTF contact in LDDRs is associated with an even more pronounced decrease in maintenance behaviors (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Mok, Wellman, & Carrasco, 2009). It would seem logical that because a partner is far away, one would use more behaviors to attempt to keep the relationship intact. However, as the enactment of relationship maintenance behaviors are both draining and stressful, it appears that constantly maintaining a relationship with someone that a partner is not able to spend any FTF time with is difficult to do over extensive periods of time.

The lack of FTF that accompanies distance in LDDRs is difficult for any individual in a LDDR, and the effects of this distance impact in ways that create stark differences from GCRs.

Particularly, there is a significant difference in a desire for closeness in LDDRs between those that have preoccupied attachment styles, and those with other types of attachment: preoccupied attachment style lead to a higher desire for closeness in LDDRs, as well as to being more aware of when there is a difference in relationship closeness between partners (as was stated earlier) (Feeney, 1999). Additionally, self-disclosure in LDDRs is significantly less descriptive and detailed than it is in GCRs (Van Horn et al., 1997).

Though there are definitive differences between LDDRs and GCRs, there are also important similarities. The most important among them may be that there are typically no differences in trust or intimate self-disclosure (i.e., affection, enhancement of each other's worth, nurturance, and perspective taking), jealousy, and as stated earlier in some cases, relationship satisfaction (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Van Horn et al., 1997; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Kelmer et al., 2013). Additionally, when predicting relationship success, greater relationship investment and satisfaction predicts relationship longevity in LDDRs, which is not dissimilar from GCRs (Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010). Also, similar to GCRs, those with secure attachments are still more likely to use prosocial maintenance behaviors than those that have non-secure attachments (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010).

Hypotheses

The current study held the following hypotheses: **1**: that attachment styles have a marked effect on conflict resolution preferences and relationship maintenance behaviors, **2**: levels of relationship contingent self-esteem would impact conflict resolution style choice and relationship maintenance behavior preference, and **3**: distance is a unique and particularly potent stressor in relationships that would lead to preferred conflict resolution styles and relationship maintenance

behavior preference based on attachment style and level of relationship contingent self-esteem. Specifically, it is predicted that the following phenomena will occur:

1a: preference for withdrawal as a conflict resolution strategy will increase as avoidant attachment level increases among participants.

1b: preference for compliance will increase as anxious attachment level increases.

1c: lower levels of both anxious and avoidant attachment (i.e., a secure attachment style) will be manifested in increased positive problem solving.

1d: those in LDDRs will show stronger conflict resolution style preferences in the conflict vignettes associated with their attachment style than those that are in GCRs due to the moderating impact of distance.

1e: those in LDDRs will show stronger conflict resolution style preferences in the conflict vignettes associated with their attachment style than those that are in GCRs due to the moderating impact of distance.

2a: those that have increased anxious attachment or increased anxious and avoidant attachment (but not increased avoidant attachment exclusively) will exhibit a preference for prosocial behaviors will increase more for those participants than they will for those that have higher avoidant attachment scores.

2b: as avoidant and anxious attachment levels decrease, those in LDDRs will show a preference for using prosocial behaviors (i.e., positivity, assurances) more often than those with similar attachment scores that are in GCRs, as they will feel the need to be more active to maintain the stability of their relationship.

3a: higher levels of RSCE will result in more frequent ratings of termination than those with low RCSE, as distance is a stressor in relationships, and it is plausible that this additional

stress, combined with high RCSE and hypothetical stressors, will lead to a preference to termination as opposed to any resolution strategy that may salvage the relationship.

3b: participants in LDDRs with higher RCSE will look to terminate relationships in a hypothetical context more frequently than those with higher RCSE in GCRs.

Attachment style and RCSE have shown to be instrumental in how people approach and interact in relationships, and conflict in relationships is unavoidable. With the increased prevalence of significant distance in relationships, it is imperative that there is a strong foundation of knowledge to draw upon for both psychologists and those that wish to know how best to approach disputes in their own relationships. Thus, investigating the relationships that these variables have with each other is not only beneficial to the field of psychology, but also to any person that wishes to better understand (and potentially improve) their relationship.

Study

Method

Participants

69 participants took part in this experiment. Specific demographic information about participants can be viewed in Table 1. All participants were students at the University of Central Oklahoma. Participants were at least 18 years of age at the time of participation. All students that completed the survey were compensated with course credit. Participants were not provided any information about the study prior to being administered the assessments other than that they were required to be in a relationship to participate, the study would be taking place online, and it may take up to an hour to complete each of the assessments.

Table 1
Basic Demographic Information

Variable	*n*	Percent	Total
Gender			
Male	31	44.9%	69
Female	37	53.6%	69
Other	1	1.5%	69
Attachment Style			
Securely Attached	25	37.3%	67
Fearfully Attached	12	18%	67
Sexual Orientation			
Exclusively homosexual	12	17.4%	69
Primarily homosexual	4	5.8%	69
Bisexual	1	1.5%	69
Primarily heterosexual	7	10.1%	69
Exclusively heterosexual	45	65.2%	69
Race/Ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	49	71%	69
Black/African-American	6	8.8%	69
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	4.3%	69
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Asian	3	4.3%	69
Hispanic/Latino(a)	8	11.6%	69
Long-Distance Relationship			
Yes	17	24.6%	69
No	52	75.4%	69
	Mean		SD
Mean Age	20.14		2.29

Materials

Participants completed the following assessments: the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), the Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008), the Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure (Stafford, 2010), basic demographic information, the Conflict Styles Resolution Inventory (Kurdek, 1994), the Integration of Thoughts About Partners Scale-Revised (Graham & Clark, 2006), the Implicit Theory of Relationships Scale (Knee, 1998), and the Hypothetical Conflict Resolution Strategy Inventory (Bratcher & Limke-McLean, 2016), as the included vignettes proved to be successful in eliciting predicted responses in regards to particular attachment styles and resolution preferences in a pilot study. To determine whether or not participants were in long-distance relationships or not, participants simply answered yes or no to the following question: "Would you consider your relationship to be a long-distance relationship?". This method was used due to the results of a previous factor analysis conducted (Pistole & Roberts, 2011) showing that the largest determinant for people in whether the distance is long-distance or geographically close is their own perception of whether or not the relationship is one, or the other. Furthermore, distance was measured both on a continuum (i.e., partners will provide the distance in miles between them and their partner) and as a categorical variable (i.e., participants will be asked if they characterize their dating relationship as a LDDR or a GCR). Participants also provided basic demographic information such as age, gender, race, and other similar pieces of information.

Attachment

The ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000) is a measure that measures levels of both avoidant and anxious romantic attachment. The assessment contains two 18-item subscales that measure levels of avoidant romantic attachment and anxious romantic attachment. Participants answered statements that reflected a certain level of comfort (or discomfort) with certain relationship based activities and scenarios. A sample question from the ECR-R reads as follows: "I tell my partner just about everything.". Participants would answer similar questions on a 7-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Internal consistency for the subscales of both avoidance and anxiety are approximately .9 (Fraley et al., 2000).

The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is a measure of attachment that consists of four 7-point Likert scale questions and one forced-response question with four choices, both with the intent to measure attachment style level and categorize attachment style. An example Likert scale question is as follows: "I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships but I find it difficult to trust others completely or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.". An example of one of the forced-response choices is as follows: "I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important for me to feel independent and self-sufficient and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.". Internal consistency for each of the attachment style assignment of the Relationship Questionnaire range from .87 to .95 (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem

The Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Knee et al., 2008) is an 11-question assessment that measures how integrated an individual's self-esteem is with the state of their

romantic relationship. Participants respond to questions on a five-point Likert scale regarding self-esteem fluctuations based on events in their dating relationships. An example question from the RCSE scale is as follows: "When my partner and I fight, I feel bad about myself in general.". Internal consistency of the items in the RCSE scale is .88 (Knee et al., 2008).

Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

The Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure (Stafford, 2010) is a 28-question assessment that measures a participant's likelihood to execute certain behaviors that are beneficial to the preservation of a relationship. Participants respond on a seven-point Likert scale to reflect their level of agreement with the statement of the assessment. There are seven subscales that measure different types of behaviors that are essential to both the general well-being and repair of relationships. An example question from the RMBM is as follows: "I am apologetic when I am wrong.". Internal consistency for the items within the subscales of the RMBM are as follows for women: Positivity: .94, Understanding: .93; Self-Disclosure: .92; Relationship Talks: .90; Assurances: .91; Tasks: .94; Networks: .83; internal consistency for the items within the subscales of the RMBM are as follows for men: Positivity: .95, Understanding: .90; Self-Disclosure: .89; Relationship Talks: .93; Assurances: .88; Tasks: .92; Networks: .82 (Stafford, 2010).

Conflict Resolution

The Conflict Styles Resolution Inventory (Kurdek, 1994) is a 32-question assessment that measures an individual's responses to conflicts that may arise in a relationship. Participants respond to statements on a five-point Likert scale to reflect their level of agreement with the statement presented to them on the assessment. There are four subscales that measure the

different possible categories of response: Conflict Engagement, Positive Problem Solving, Withdrawal, and Compliance. An example question from the CRSI is as follows: "Getting carried away and saying things that aren't really meant.". The original version of the assessment requires that both members of the relationship respond the assessment. However, for the purposes of this study, only the participating member of the relationship was required to respond to the assessment and responded both for themselves and how they believed their partner would respond to the statements in the assessment. Internal consistency for the items within the subscales of the CRSI are as follows for self-reporting non parent-wives: Conflict Engagement: .8; Positive Problem Solving: .77; Withdrawal: .79; Compliance: .86; for self-reporting non parent-husbands: Conflict Engagement: .85; Positive Problem Solving: .87; Withdrawal: .85; Compliance: .83 (Kurdek, 1994).

The Hypothetical Conflict Resolution Strategy Inventory (Bratcher & Limke-McLean, 2016) is a 21-question assessment that measures conflict resolution choices in response to hypothetical conflicts that arise in dating relationships. Participants are presented with a vignette of a specific conflict situation, and are presented with five statements, to which one of them they must choose as the response as they would mostly enact themselves. An example question from this assessment is as follows: "Recently, your partner has begun acting cold towards you when you attempt to show them intimate affection (e.g., holding hands, kissing, etc.). They seem somewhat disinterested, and at times it seems they give in out of pity instead of interest. How would you respond?". An example response from this assessment is as follows: "Focusing on the problems at hand." A full list of the vignettes and associated responses can be viewed in Appendix A.

Other Assessments

The Integration of Thoughts About Partners Scale, or I-TAPS-R (Graham & Clark, 2006) is a five-question assessment that measures how an individual perceives their partner in a variety of situations. Participants respond with their level of agreement with presented statements on a five-point Likert scale. An example question from this assessment is as follows: "Sometimes my partner seems like a saint, sometimes my partner seems rotten.". Internal consistency between the items on the I-TAPS-R is .85 (Graham & Clark, 2007).

The Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (Knee, 1998) is a 22-question assessment that measures an individual's belief in whether relationship success is a result of hard work or is predetermined by factors outside of their control. There are two separate subscales that measure these separate beliefs. Participants used a seven-point Likert scale to express their level of agreement with the statements of the assessment. An example statement from the assessment is as follows: "Challenges and obstacles in a relationship can make love even stronger.". Internal consistency for the subscales of the assessment are as follows: Destiny: .71; Growth, .80.

Procedure

Participants completed the assessments on surveymonkey.com, and were recruited through SONA (the university's system for recruiting potential participants for psychological studies). They were allowed to complete the assessments at their own pace, but were allowed to participate only once. Surveymonkey.com notified the participants when all of the assessments were completed, and thanked them for their participation. Aside from the demographic questionnaire (which appeared last for each participant), assessments were presented in a random order that was different for each participant. Course credit in their specific psychology course was administered upon completion of the assessments.

ECR-R scores were used to determine which participants had secure attachments and fearful attachments. Participants that had scores in the top possible halves of both anxious and avoidant attachment were characterized as having fearful attachments for the purposes of this experiment. Those that had scores in the bottom possible halves of both anxious and avoidant attachments were characterized as having secure attachments. This method of attachment style characterization was done to include secure and fearful attachments in the analysis, as the ECR-R only directly measures continuous levels of anxiety and avoidance. The decision to create categorical variables for these two attachment styles was made so that a complete analysis of each of the four attachment styles could be conducted. By this metric, 25 participants were characterized as securely attached, while 12 were characterized as fearfully attached.

Results

A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to determine if preferred conflict resolution styles could be predicted by both attachment style and RCSE, both with and without distance as a moderating variable (i.e., analyses took place with both distance being accounted for and without distance being accounted for). Each of the dependent variables were entered simultaneously for each regression (i.e., the enter method of variable extraction was used). Regression analyses were also conducted to investigate if the relationships between relationship maintenance strategies could be predicted by both attachment style and RCSE (again, with analyses being conducted that included distance, and that did not include distance as a moderating variable). The results specific to the each of the hypotheses will be listed in the order that they are presented in the hypothesis section with corresponding indicators. Relevant

findings that were not originally hypothesized will be presented afterwards and will be organized in a similar fashion.

Regarding the hypothesized happenings concerning attachment, conflict resolution preference, distance, and conflict resolution preference, the following was observed:

1a: Levels of avoidant attachment were found to significantly predict a negative relationship (the opposite direction of what was originally hypothesized) with choosing withdrawal as a conflict resolution choice (β = -.505, t = -3.408, p = .001). Additionally, levels of avoidant attachment explained a significant amount of variance in conflict resolution choice preference (r = .603, F [5, 57] = 6.51, p = 0).

1b: Levels of anxious attachment did contribute significantly as a predictor of conflict resolution (r = .423, F [5, 59] = 2.57, p = .036), but did not significantly predict compliance as a preferred conflict resolution style (β = -.103, t = -.774, p =.442).

1c: Low levels of both avoidance and anxiety (i.e., secure attachment) were predictive of conflict resolution style preference (r = .456, F = [5, 59] = 3.101, p < .015). However, there was no significant preference for positive problem solving as a conflict resolution choice among those that were characterized as securely attached (β = .096, t = .799, p = .428).

1d: High scores of both anxiety and avoidance (i.e., fearful attachment) did not explain a significant amount of variance in regards to specific conflict resolution style (r^2 = .149, F = [5, 57] = 2.002, p = .092).

1e: Distance did not prove to be a significantly predictive moderator when included in the regression analysis that investigated the relationships between attachment style and conflict resolution style preference for any of the four attachment styles (anxious attachment levels as a predictor: r = .447, F [5, 9] = .45, p = .803, avoidant attachment levels as a predictor: r = .789, F

[5, 8] = 2.642, p = .107, fearful attachment as a predictor: r = .456675, F [5, 8] = 1.339, p = .339,

secure attachment as a predictor: r = .519, F [5, 9] = .664, p = .660). RCSE level was not found

to significantly predict termination as a preferred conflict resolution style choice (β = .08, t =

.602, p = .550).

Regarding the hypothesized happenings concerning attachment, RCSE, and relationship

maintenance strategy preference, the following was observed:

2a: Anxious attachment levels (r = .635, F [7, 8] = .772, p = .627), avoidant attachment

levels (r = .773, F [7, 7] = 1.481, p = .309) and fearful attachment (r = .731, F [7, 7] = 1.145, p =

.431) did not contribute significant variance when attempting to predict relationship maintenance

strategies with relationship distance as a moderator. Furthermore, when distance was not

included as a moderating variable (i.e., participants of both LDDRs and GCRs were included),

anxious attachment level did not predict any preference for any particular relationship

maintenance strategy (r = .192, F [7, 60] = .329, p = .938). However, avoidant attachment level

was a statistically significant predictor of relationship maintenance strategy choice (r = .617, F

[7, 59] = 5.173, p = 0), as was fearful attachment (r = .534, F [7, 59] = 3.359, p = .004).

However, neither of the predicted relationship maintenance strategies (i.e., positivity and

assurances) had a significant relationship with fearful or avoidant styles of attachment.

2b: When distance included as a moderating variable, secure attachment was not a

significant contributor of variance when predicting relationship maintenance strategies (r = .436,

F [7, 8] = .269, p = .95).

3a: RCSE level was not a significant contributor of variance when predicting termination

with distance in the relationship as a moderating variable (r = .466, F [5, 10] = .555, p = .732).

3b: The hypothesis that those that in LDDRs with high RCSE will look to terminate relationships in a hypothetical context more frequently than those with high RCSE in GCRs was not able to be tested, as there were nearly no participants that qualified as having low RCSE.

Regarding statistically significant happenings that were not originally hypothesized concerning attachment, RCSE, and conflict resolution preference, the following was observed:

4a: Anxious attachment levels were a statistically significant predictor of conflict resolution preference without distance as a moderating variable ($r = .423$, $F [5, 57] = 2.51$, $p = .036$). A positive correlation between levels of anxious attachment and relationship termination was uncovered ($\beta = .413$, $t = 3.067$, $p = .003$).

4b: Levels of avoidant attachment were a statistically significant predictor of conflict resolution preference without distance as a moderating variable ($r = .603$, $F [5, 57] = 6.51$, $p = 0$). The following relationships between levels of avoidant attachment and conflict resolution preference were found: a negative correlation between avoidant attachment and positive problem solving ($\beta = -.229$, $t = -2.059$, $p = .044$), a negative correlation with withdrawal ($\beta = -.505$, $t = -3.408$, $p = .001$), and a positive correlation with termination ($\beta = .458$, $t = 3.791$, $p = 0$).

4c: Secure attachment was a significant predictor of conflict resolution preference without distance as a moderating variable ($r = .456$, $F = [5, 59] = 3.101$, $p = .015$). Specifically, there was a negative correlation between secure attachment and termination ($\beta = -.42$, $t = -3.175$, $p = .002$.

4d: When not accounting for distance, RCSE level was found to be a significant predictor of conflict resolution preference ($r = .448$, $F = [5, 60] = 3.018$, $p = .017$), and a positive relationship between RCSE level and positive problem solving as a conflict resolution choice emerged ($\beta = .256$, $t = 2.146$, $p = .036$).

Regarding statistically significant happenings that were not originally hypothesized concerning attachment and relationship maintenance strategy preference, the following was observed:

5a: When evaluating participants in all relationships (i.e., with distance not included as a moderating variable), levels of avoidant attachment were shown to be a significant predictor of relationship maintenance strategy preference ($r = .617$, $F[7, 59] = 5.173$, $p = 0$). No particular relationship strategy had a statistically significant relationship with levels of avoidant attachment, though levels of avoidance and understanding trended towards having a positive relationship ($\beta = .356$, $t = 1.858$, $p = .068$).

5b: Fearful attachment was also a significant predictor of relationship maintenance strategies ($r = .534$, $F[7, 59] = 3.359$, $p = .004$).

Discussion

Perhaps most notably, none of the hypotheses regarding distance and their moderating impact on the relationships between attachment and conflict resolution choice preference, attachment and relationship maintenance strategy preference, RCSE level and conflict resolution choice, and RCSE and relationship maintenance strategy preference proved to be accurate. There are a few reasons as to why this was the case. Firstly, the number of participants that were in LDDRs, while not negligible, certainly could have been higher. This would have led to a sample more representative of people in LDDRs, and perhaps the results of the analyses would have been different. Secondly, it is possible that distance as an isolated stressor is not particularly unique in how it affects those in a dating relationship. Perhaps it is indistinguishable from any other issue that a pair of people in relationships face, and thus did not produce the expected

results. Lastly, perhaps those that choose to be in LDDRs are simply different from those that are in GCRs. That is, there may be a quality about people that participate in LDDRs that nullifies the deleterious effects that distance may have on their relationships. Those that choose to enter LDDRs may be more capable of understanding that the distance is only temporary and situational, and thus are more capable of not allowing the distance to push the relationship to its breaking point than those that choose not to enter LDDRs. Arditti & Kaufmann (2004) suggest that a positive outlook on the future of LDDRs, as well as being able to appropriately assign the purpose of distance in the first place resulted in higher relationship satisfaction. Regardless of the reason, distance was not found to have any significant effects on conflict resolution preference or relationship maintenance strategy preference.

Although attachment style did prove to be a significant predictor of conflict resolution preference, the relationships that proved to be statistically significant were either in opposite directions than those that were hypothesized, or different entirely from the conflict resolution styles that were predicted. Particularly, the relationships between attachment style and termination proved to be consistently significant (although fearful attachment did not prove to be a statistically significant predictor of conflict resolution choice, it weakly trended towards statistical significance [$p = .092$], and the relationship between fearful attachment and termination would have been positive and significant [$\beta = .328$, $p = .022$]). However, the positive relationship between termination and attachment style is only true for those with increased levels of anxiety, avoidance, or for those with fearful attachments. For those with secure attachments, a negative relationship with was found. This finding has several implications. For those that do not have secure attachments, one reasonable explanation for this phenomenon is that perhaps termination of a relationship *is* the most reasonable form of solving relationship problems. If

there is no relationship to cause problems, then those problems have effectively been removed, or "solved". This could explain how termination of a relationship superseded what may have been a more natural response that a person's attachment style would lead to if they were absolutely determined to keep the relationship intact for those with insecure attachments. Conversely, for those that are securely attached, perhaps positive problem solving was not the optimal choice, but rather the salvaging of the relationship was. Although there was not a preferred method of keeping the relationship together among the participants, keeping the relationship going was of the utmost importance, regardless of the methods of conflict resolution used to keep the relationship in place.

The relationship between RCSE and conflict resolution preference was another that was incorrectly predicted by the hypothesis. Rather than looking to terminate the relationship, as RCSE level increased, so did the preference for using positive problem solving as a conflict resolution tactic. This seems to be directly counterintuitive to the expected finding, but perhaps is explainable by how the relationship affects one with high RCSE's psychological health (Knee et al., 2008). As people with high RCSE's self-esteem is difficult to separate from their relationship, it is possible that this leads them to whatever it takes to salvage their relationship, as it is an extension of their self-esteem, and is inextricably linked to their own well-being. Terminating the relationship may be the best course of action when considering long term psychological health, but when faced with an immediate choice of risking immense damage to self-esteem and self-image or trying to do whatever is possible to keep it intact, choosing to calmly work through one's problems may be the most attractive option.

Conflict resolution preferences were not the only area in which the original predictions strayed from what was actually found; certain attachment styles were shown to be predictive of

relationship maintenance strategy preference, but in different ways than what were originally hypothesized. Though it was hypothesized fearful attachment would manifest itself in preferences for assurances and positivity, a positive relationship with understanding and a negative relationship with self-disclosure instead. This is somewhat intuitive on the surface: one that is fearfully attached may very well be in tune with their partners' problems, as those that are high in anxiety are typically very aware of the state of the relationship, and thus could have a very keen understanding of what their partners' needs are. Additionally, the lack of willingness to self-disclose can be explained by the high levels of avoidance that drive those with fearful attachment to be leery of becoming invested in relationships, as people that are avoidant use prosocial maintenance strategies less than those with other attachment styles (Simon & Baxter, 1993). Self-disclosure involves the divulgence of sensitive information, which could be potentially damaging if either the person that you use as a confidant (in this case, the romantic partner) were to eventually leave, or if that person decides to use that information to harm the fearfully attached person. In both instances, the relationships between fearful attachment and these maintenance strategies have logical, reasonable explanations.

As far as logical explanations are concerned, the same is only partially true when assessing the relationship between levels of avoidant attachment and relationship maintenance strategy preference. The negative relationship between level of avoidant attachment and assurances makes intuitive sense. Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) suggest that those high in avoidant attachment do not have an overwhelming desire to have close relationships, and it follows that they would not look to provide assurance to their partner that their relationship is stable or that their partner is meaningful to them as relationship maintenance tactics. However, as simple as it may be to explain the lack of assurances that those high in attachment provide to

their partner, the positive relationship between levels of avoidant attachment and working to understand their partner as a relationship maintenance strategy is conversely perplexing. It is possible that those that are high in avoidance still wish to keep the relationship together, and may work to understand their partners' issues and needs as a bit of a last resort. That is, when they are absolutely forced to maintain the state of their relationship, working to understand their partner is the strategy that feels most comfortable to them. It is arguable that is less engaging than being actively positive with a partner, intently talking to and listening to their partner (i.e., self-disclosure), providing assurances of importance with their partner, or talking about the state of the relationship with their partner. Working to simply understand their partner may involve the lowest amount of effort, and thus is the preference for those that are high in avoidance.

Limitations

The most noticeable limitation of the study was the relatively small number of participants. Though the overall number of participants was not small, more participants may have contributed to a larger number of participants in important subgroups (e.g., those in LDDRs, those with particularly low RCSE, etc.). Specifically, the small number of participants that were actively in a LDDR was particularly limiting. In an experiment that was looking to specifically investigate the effects of distance, having a low number of participants in LDDRs is a noticeable limitation.

Additionally, the data from this study is strictly observational. An experimental design could be employed by priming participant's styles of attachment to ascertain whether these results would hold weight in an experimental setting. Such a design may employ the use of priming participants with statements that may alter their attachment (while not priming other participants), followed by assessing their preferred conflict resolution choice. An alternate design

may include giving participants the opportunity to observe the interactions of other couples (both a neutral control, and situations similar to those found in the Hypothetical Conflict Strategy Inventory), and measuring the responses of the control group against that those that witnessed the unpleasant couple interactions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine if distance was a particularly unique stressor that would impact how people in LDDRs responded to conflict, and worked to maintain their relationships. Although the hypotheses of this experiment were not proven to be correct, significant and interesting trends were found regarding attachment style and both conflict resolution preference and relationship maintenance strategy preference, as well as RCSE and conflict resolution preference for those in all relationships. The results of this study suggest that when provided with an option to terminate a relationship, people will either do whatever they believe is necessary to salvage the relationship, or end the relationship as a method to "solve" all of the problems that are being engendered by the relationship. Future studies should work to further determine if distance is truly not a distinct and unique stressor in relationships, and work to determine why termination is such a significant impactor on relationship conflict resolution choice, to the point that all conflict resolution methods revolve around it in one way or another. This experiment has provided a decent foundation on which to build upon to answer further questions regarding attachment, RCSE, distance, relationship maintenance strategies, and conflict resolution choices in relationships.

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