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Loneliness Dynamics Involved with College Long-Distance Relationships

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## Abstract

The present phenomenological, qualitative research study involved in-depth interviews of all 16 female, sophomore students involved in respective distance relationships at a private, selective, comprehensive, Midwest university. Among other results found in the study, the present article specifically addressed the loneliness dynamics involved with the distance relationships. Four, themes relating to loneliness were found in the data analysis. First, loneliness tends to be acute after seeing the boyfriend, around holidays, when their friends go on dates, on “bad” days, when seeing other happy couples on campus, and during “lull” times. Second, loneliness tends to decrease when students are busy and when doing activities with local friends. Third, coping strategies include calling to talk and having other friends as their support-base. And finally, distance relationships tend to generate “needy” tensions and give the relationship a highly perceived value.

Key words: *Distance relationships, loneliness, qualitative research*

Long distance relationships among college age students have become a more common occurrence than they have been in previous decades (Sahlstein, 2004). With the advances in technology, geographical distances between couples no longer necessitate ending of a relationship. However, this physical separation often does pose unique obstacles for a couple to overcome. One third of students during their college experience will be involved in some form of a long distance relationship, as defined by a 50 mile radius (McKinnels, 1994). While students most often experience long distance relationships as a result of choosing different colleges, commuter couples also sometimes experience the challenges of long distance relationships due to their differing job locations. According to Rhodes (2002), while long distance relationships between dual-career couples are still a minority, the numbers continue to rise, especially when considering individuals with long commutes to their job locations.

Knox, Zusman, Daniels, and Brantley (2002) administered a 25-item questionnaire to over 150 never-married, undergraduate college students who previously had been involved with distance relationships and over 80 students who were involved with such relationships at the time of the study. Results of the survey showed that 20% of those currently involved in distance relationships indicated that the challenges involved made their relationship worse. Further, 20% of those who previously had been involved in distance relationships indicated that the stress of being physically apart was the reason they ended their relationship. Those still involved in a distance relationship indicated that, hypothetically, they would make the same decision again, whereas those who had ended a distance relationship indicated that they likely would not involve themselves with a future one.

Although long distance relationships can be comparable to geographically close relationships, the distance often creates an additional set of challenges to overcome. As with any

relationship, an apt foundation is necessary for the success and longevity of the couple, but this foundation alone is not sufficient for the continued success of the couple (Le & Agnew, 2001). For some, a strong friendship previous to the romantic relationship creates a foundation before the separation, but continued, meaningful connection is needed to overcome the distance challenges that dating couples most often face when apart for significant periods of time (Arditti & Kaufmann, 2004). Lydon, Pierce, and O'Regan (1997) advocate that a couple in a long distance relationship often shares a feeling of commitment to being committed, and their moral values often may strengthen the bond between the couple. While the couple in a long distance relationship often shares feelings of strong commitment, Sahlstein (2006) believes those feelings are contrasted with a degree of potential uncertainty experienced regarding the future of the relationship. This phenomenon may create stress within the relationship, and in order to sustain a healthy relationship, the couple must learn to manage these dynamics through negotiation (Sahlstein, 2004).

## Methods

### *Participants*

We enlisted the participation of all known sophomore females who were involved in a distance relationship at a selected university of around 3,000 students by sending a campus-wide e-mail to all sophomores, asking individuals to self-identify. Particularly, using standard, purposeful sampling techniques in qualitative research methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), we identified all 16 sophomore females who were involved in a long-distance relationship during the Fall semester at a selective, private, comprehensive, Midwestern university. The ages of the students ranged from 18-21 years old and all were residential, dormitory students (roughly 80% of all students at this university live in university dormitory housing) and all were Caucasian (the

student body at the university is 94% Caucasian). The length of the participants' distance relationships ranged from one year to 2.5 years.

Each of the 16 students who self-identified as being in a long distance relationship agreed to participation and there was no attrition. For purposes of the present research study, the phrase "distance relationship" was operationalized to mean a heterosexual, dating relationship that currently was in progress where the male lived more than a 5 hour driving distance from the university campus where the female was matriculated. After around 13 or so interviews, saturation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) generally began occurring. That is, new interviews were not providing significant additional information from the participants, suggesting that by using models of qualitative experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Slayton and Llosa (2005), our sample size was sufficient for the intended purpose of the present research study.

### *Procedure*

We crafted the inquiry to be a phenomenological, qualitative research study (Berg, 2001), employing semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) when engaging each of the research participants. This provided them with freedom to move into areas that the participants expressed as being salient to understanding their perspectives regarding distance relationships. The names used in the article for reading clarity are pseudonyms, modified from the tape recorded transcripts. Firmin (2006) established a protocol of interview waves that we utilized for this study. Particularly, all participants were interviewed initially. After reading the transcripts of these interviews, giving due deliberation to potential, initial codes, we targeted specific participants for a second wave of interviews. These helped to clarify initial constructs and to draw more rich quotes from individuals who initially were relatively vague in how they

described their experiences in distance relationships. We believe that using two interview waves provided the best means for eliciting the critical perceptions that the participants possessed regarding communication dynamics in their relationships.

Open coding (Maxwell, 2005) was used when analyzing the transcripts. This is an inductive method that examines the repetition of key words, phrases, and constructs. Attempting to remain free from potential pre-conceived biases as humanly possible, we utilized induction to move from the specifics of the data provided to the general themes found among all the participant's perspectives. We continually compared (Grbick, 2007) the various transcripts, assessing for commonalities among each of the participants. This produced initial codes that eventually fed-into our engendered themes. NVIVO-8 qualitative software assisted with the thematic analysis and helped to identify texts that applied most directly to the study's themes and conclusions. Per Lewin and Silver (2007), the software was utilized in order to assist with the human reasoning and intuition contribution of the study and not to substitute for it.

Internal validity for the study was enhanced by a number of deliberate facets built-into the study's design. Regular meetings were held among the research team in order to discuss independent assessment of initial codes and potential themes. Final results were reported in the present article only when all members of the research team agreed that a clear theme existed. Additionally, themes represent the consensus of all the research participants in the study. Member checks (Merriam, 2002) and consultations with researchers who were independent of the study (Silverman, 2006) helped to enhance the study's internal validity. Consequently, affirmation of the study's conclusions were obtained both by individuals within the study and apart from it. Generating a data-trail (Daytner, 2006) also enhanced the internal validity of the qualitative study. That is, each of the reported findings in the study systematically is tied back to

participants' specific quotes and citations. This accomplishes the aims of holding the authors accountable for the reported findings, since they can be checked and verified, and also to assist future researchers who may wish to further explore this topic, using qualitative methodology.

## Results

Previously, we presented findings on the extended efforts involved in distance relationships (Firmin, Lorenzen, & Firmin, 2008). Females shared five key communication-centered dynamics pertaining to their distance relationship, which included: learning to communicate, the need to interpret their boyfriend's tone of voice, compensating for a lack of context, a self-perception that they work harder at communication than their peers who date proximally, and an overall commitment to quality communication. Here, we focus on the loneliness our participants described, highlighting reported times of increased and decreased loneliness, coping strategies, and the impact loneliness has on a dating relationship.

Loneliness is an emotion that virtually everyone has experienced at some point and to varying degrees. Yet, it is also a construct that is difficult to systematically quantify. If asked to draw a picture or sculpt a portrait of loneliness, most individuals might be able to reflect the emotion in a person's face, but materializing the non-concrete is a difficult task. We encountered this phenomenon when querying participants about the loneliness they experienced in their respective distant relationships. Although each participant's story was unique, this common thread of loneliness was present in all our participants' stories, and the topic re-surfaced frequently throughout each female's interview.

### *Overall Increased loneliness*

Participants identified five specific times when the loneliness they experience generally tends to increase. First, females in our sample explained that after spending time with their

boyfriends they usually struggled with increased loneliness. Women described the “boyfriend-withdrawal” they experienced in terms of something good being “snatched away” before they were ready to say goodbye. Additionally, participants explained that seeing their boyfriends, as much as they cherished these opportunities for interaction, often reminded them of what they were missing.

Furthermore, women shared the difficult adjustment of returning back to campus and their need to virtually adapt their mindsets from seeing their boyfriend to “separation mode.” Most recounted these periods of increased loneliness as relatively normal facets of distance relationships, and participants emphasized the necessity to not “hang on” to these periods of time with their boyfriend once they were over.

The second time of heightened loneliness centers around holidays. Participants explained that were they not separated by distance, these occasions likely would involve meaningful time spent with their boyfriends. Couples in our sample seemed especially sensitive to loneliness when spending Christmas or Valentine’s Day apart from their boyfriend.

Females explained that, although they did not have malicious intentions, often feelings of jealousy resulted serendipitously from their increased loneliness when observing couples who were free to interact on campus. Participants also seemed to be particularly sensitive to the presence around them of dating couples on campus. In fact, females almost reacted to the absence of their own boyfriend by noticing the females with boyfriends all around them.

Further, women shared their perceptions that couples who attend the same college often take time with each other for granted. To our participants, the value of face-to-face interaction is monumental and these occasions are highly cherished because of their contrast to typical distance interactions via telephone. In addition, women shared that their struggles with feeling

lonely especially were difficult if close friends were dating someone on campus. Wanting to be good friends, participants recounted often listening to details of friends' dates while trying to suppress their own inevitable envy.

Although participants' initial reactions were seasoned with jealousy, overall, females in our distance relationship sample worked to overcome these emotions and accept the realities of their current separation. That is, women in our sample were not individuals who constantly sulked or threw themselves pity parties. Loneliness and the associated jealousy were described by our participants to occur in phases, with some intervals being more difficult than others. Women explained that, although internalizing positive outlooks regarding the distance element of their relationship was difficult, it also was necessary to accept reality and work against negative mindsets.

Next, participants shared that the loneliness they experience often intensifies when they have "bad days." For many females in our sample, their boyfriend also is their closest friend, meaning that being apart on especially difficult days increased the loneliness they experienced. Finally, participants also shared that loneliness tends to intensify during a period of time during the semester labeled the "lull." Students interviewed explained that particular segments of the semester were more difficult than others in regards to experiencing loneliness, depending on the amount of time since last seeing their boyfriends and the amount of time left before a break or before they would be able to spend time together. Women seemingly "paced" themselves throughout the semester, looking forward to times of reunion with their boyfriend. However, when these stretches of time apart were longer, loneliness seemed to increase.

### *Times When Loneliness Decreases*

Although participants generally struggled with feeling lonely, there are times when the experienced intensity of loneliness decreases. These usually result from diverted attention. Most commonly, participants reported decreased loneliness to occur during points in the semester when students were exceptionally busy. When participants are required to designate significant amounts of time to school work and other such demands, their focus often turns from missing their boyfriend to meeting class deadlines and other responsibilities. Participants further emphasized the importance of being involved in campus activities and in enjoying one's overall college experience. That is, girlfriends were vigilant about the tendency to assume that, because their boyfriends were not on campus, they could not enjoy themselves. These females also explained that campus involvement as well as hanging out with friends often created needed distractions to the loneliness they experienced.

### *Coping Strategies for Handling Loneliness*

As participants accepted the accompanying difficulties of their distance relationships, they learned to deal with negative dynamics such as loneliness through various coping strategies. One included having a local friend support-base. The females described the importance of friends, and being able to confide in someone when the loneliness becomes intense. Moreover, participants found they were able to empathize with other students on campus who also were in distance relationships. These students shared mutual understandings, which often resulted in an ability to console one another during times of increased loneliness.

In addition to the encouragement participants received from talking with friends, females also knew that their boyfriends were experiencing similar emotions relating to loneliness. That is, women chose to look at the distance as an obstacle against which both they and their

boyfriend struggled and, in this regard, as a way in which they could relate even better to one another. Often, distance couples found ways to encourage each other when times of loneliness intensified. However, participants explained that, as a result, loneliness easily could spread from one individual to the other vicariously. Consequently, girlfriends purposefully worked to handle loneliness in healthy manners.

Participants in the study also described their tendency to deliberately refocus when tempted to let loneliness become overwhelming. Often this took place through conversations with friends or family. Girlfriends in our sample explained the need regularly to adopt optimistic outlooks regarding the distance element of their relationship. Additionally, many participants were able to cope with the loneliness they experienced by looking at their relationship within a bigger picture. That is, the females often put the few years they were spending apart against a larger context, and chose to view the separation as a unique instrument that was positively shaping their character and also shaping their relationship.

#### *Impact on Relationship*

First, participants identified a “sponging” tendency when around others about which they were guarded. The females in our study described this tendency as a negative trait, and one they hoped not to portray to their boyfriends, despite the ease of doing so in light of the distance. Most participants also admitted their tendency to over-calling their boyfriends when feeling lonely. While desiring frequent interactions, participants simultaneously described the balance between healthy communication and that which would have a negative effect on their relationship.

Further, women explained that frequently many dynamics of a relationship which provide fulfillment naturally are gratified through regular interaction with one’s boyfriend. That is, most

couples are able to spend time together or interact physically when together, and these are seen as natural dynamics of most relationships. However, taking the face-to-face element of a relationship away leaves couples with communication alone. Participants explained that, when lonely, the temptation to become dissatisfied within the context of their relationship is greater.

The second effect that loneliness has on couples in distance relationships pertains to the value individuals hold regarding interactions with their boyfriends. Participants explained that because their opportunities for interaction are few and far between, moments together are “cherished.” Additionally, females in our study described the experienced anticipation associated with rare face-to-face interactions, and the increased levels of meaningfulness seemingly mundane activities held for distance couples.

Finally, participants shared that the loneliness experienced, to some degree, was a telling gauge regarding the health of their dating relationships. Girlfriends explained that people care about things that are meaningful. If something meaningful is taken away, then its loss is accentuated. To state it negatively, not feeling lonely would indicate a dysfunctional relationship. Therefore, most participants reasoned that loneliness, although momentarily unpleasant, was not an indicator of problems with their relationship. Conversely, feeling lonely arise from a desire to interact with a person about whom they very much care.

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