Extended Communication Efforts 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 focuses on communication dynamics involved with the relationships. Results showed key communication constructs to involve learning to communicate in a distance milieu, interpreting the tone of their boyfriend's voice, compensating for their lack of contexts, working harder at communication, and committing themselves to the extra efforts involved with good communication. Generally, the women were content with their relationships. We interpret the findings to infer that it likely takes special individuals to make the communication in distance relationships work effectively. Further, we conclude that potential distance relationship couples should discuss the dynamics involved in the present findings prior to initiating distance relationships in order to best enhance the chances for distance relationship success.

Keywords: Communication; Relationships; Distance; Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Although distance relationships have always existed, their frequency is reported to be rising in recent decades with the advancement of technology, the mobility of society, and new life paradigms adopted by a younger generation. As many as a third of university students may be involved in some form a distance relationship, as defined by a 50-mile radius in McKinnel's paradigm (1994), sometime during their collegiate experience. Rhodes (2002) also reports that while long-distance relationships among dual-career couples are not common, their numbers are rising, particularly among individuals who commute long distances to their jobs. All relationships possess dynamics and these couples seemingly have particularly cogent ones.

Arditti and Kauffman (2004) reported that college dating couples who dated via distance tended to have a pre-established friendship that served as the relationship's foundation. Additionally, technology played a key role in maintaining a feeling of connectedness between the couple. Lydon, Pierce, and O'Regan (1997) reported that long distance couples in their sample often possessed a "commitment to feeling committed" with one another. As such, the individuals' shared moral values tended to be a bond that held the relationship together over time.

Long-distance dating relationships may produce a relatively unique dynamic between feeling certain of a shared commitment with the boyfriend or girlfriend—mixed with the uncertainty of whether the relationship will endure over the longer term (Sahlstein, 2006). This dynamic creates obvious tension points at times and Sahlstein (2004) advocates that couples must learn adequately to engage in relationship-negotiation in order to experience a satisfying and successful relationship. A relative consistent finding in the research literature is that couples in distance relationships tend to idealize their perceptions of the other individual (Stafford & Reske, 1990). Stafford and Merolla (2007) found that couples who learn to ground the romanticized perceptions of their dating partner, including grounding in objective facts about the other individual, tend to make the relationship more successful over time than do couples without this intentional grounding.

Teenage dating couples already are influenced by developmental psychology influences such as imaginary audience (Steinberg, 2008) where they tend to believe themselves impervious to the vulnerabilities that others face, and also to the halo effect (Feldman, 2001) where a few good qualities about an individual tend to blind a person to the individual's faults. In distance relationships, these constructs may be compounded at times. For example, Stafford, Merolla, and Castle (2006) reported that, in one research sample, about one-third of couples broke-up within three months of reuniting in geographic proximity. Again, reality-grounding seems to be a salient feature for successful distance relationships since it lays a foundation for what true realism is going to be like if the relationship becomes permanent.

Trust is another construct noted as essential to successful distance relationships (Bente, Ruggenberg, Kraner, & Eschenburg, 2008). Since each respective individual in the relationship is not able to observe the other person on a reasonably frequent basis, a level of mutual faith develops between the individuals. When apart, assumptions are made regarding the level of commitment the boyfriend or girlfriend is willing to demonstrate across wide cross-sections of daily activities. Stafford (2004) believes that pressures exerted outside of each respective person in the relationship, including family and social friends, often can be a telling variable vis-à-vis the level of trust and commitment that distant dating couples are willing to invest in the relationship.

Among the broad structure of distance relationships, we focused on one particular construct for the present study that, among others, is central to couples experiencing this phenomenon - communication. Graham, Huang, Clark, and Helgeson (2008) argue that emotional expression in the context of interpersonal dynamics is the basis of all relationships. That is, the sharing of life experiences and affect on a relatively consistent basis is the foundation on which most human relationships are built. Obviously, this dynamic can be challenging between any couple, but doing so via the telephone (Reid & Reid, 2006) or on-line (Hardey, 2004) can be even more difficult. Bryon (2008) reports that miscommunication of intended emotional messages is much higher when contact occurs via e-mail than it does when the same messages are transmitted in person.

Compounding this dynamic is the fact that men and women empirically have been shown both to send and receive emotionally-laden messages differently at times, depending on a number of mediating variables (Guerrero, Trost, & Yoshimura, 2005). Obviously, stereotyped thinking must be avoided in this vein of research, but empirical studies have born some general differences that men and women often experience relative to emotional messages' encoding and decoding. Vasyura (2008) notes that some of these factors may be innate, but many others result from the apparent socialization processes undergone by boys and girls during the key developmental years when gender roles become formed. Ojiah (2004) notes that sometimes miscommunication occurs due to miscues by either the male, the female, or both of them—in either/or the message transmission/receiving process.

Mietzner (2005) reported that a couple's communication abilities with one another can be improved or enhanced via a distance relationship. Particularly, improvements were found among numerous variables for the couples, including non-physical intimacy, independence, time management, patience, trust, and the development of better communication skills. Knee and Canevello (2006) similarly found that distance relationship couples were forced to explore the self-assumptions or implicit theories they held regarding one another. Depending on how the couple navigates through this process, the potential exists for the couple to strengthen the core of effective relationship-building structures needed in order to make a long-term relationship successful.

From this literature set, we generated research questions that would further explore this construct of how distance relationship couples are affected by communication variables. While there are many potential modes for approaching this research endeavor (Guba & Lincoln, 2004), we selected an inductive method rather than a theoretical one. Surprisingly, there were relatively few previous published research studies that addressed the specific matter of distance relationship communication. Consequently, approaching the research topic inductively seemed to be the logical first step in generating specific findings in this narrowed field. Building a base of empirical, phenomenological findings seemingly would provide an apt foundation on which future researchers could best develop this communication domain (Creswell, 2008). That is, in this reasoning, later research might introduce theoretical interpretation of our research results, developing the field's understanding and paving the way for meaningful applications to everyday distance relationships later. In Johnson and Christenson's (2005) model, qualitative research methods, such as the one employed in the present study, precedes later quantitative ones that are

theoretically grounded or test quantitative research hypotheses. In this vein, we employed a phenomenological research method in order to better understand, from the perspectives of the research participants, how they come to experience and understand the communication dynamics naturally embedded in a distance relationship context. Our lack of theoretical interpretation of the findings is not an oversight; rather, it is a consistent application of a paradigm (there are others, of course) generally accepted among qualitative researchers (Raffanti, 2006).

METHODS

Participants

All sophomore females at a selective private and comprehensive Midwest university were contacted for potential participation in the present research study. The university enrolled around 3,000 students and contacts were made via e-mail correspondence. Students were asked to self-identify if they were presently involved in a distance relationship and willing to participate in a research study that involved interviews about their respective experiences. This utilized a purposeful sampling method for qualitative research designs (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Sixteen Caucasian sophomore females self-identified themselves and expressed a willingness to participate during the fall semester. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old and all were residential dormitory students. At this university, nearly 80% of all students lived in dormitories and 94% were Caucasian. One to 2.5 years was the range of length that the participants had been involved in their respective relationships.

All 16 females agree to participate and none chose to drop out of the study. We operationalized the phrase "distance relationship" to mean current heterosexual dating relationships whereby the male lived a 5-hour driving distance from the university campus. This distance was selected since it reasonably prohibited most one-day trips to visit one another for any considerable length of time. Saturation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) began to occur after around 13 in-depth interviews. In qualitative research terms, this means that new significant information was not being shared in additional interviews to that which was related in the previous ones. We inferred, therefore, that our sample size was ample for the intended purposes of the present study in accordance with qualitative research experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Slaton and Llosa (2005).

Procedure

The present study is designed to be phenomenological (Sin, 2010) in the tradition of qualitative methods. This entails reporting the experiences of participants from their own perspectives. Semi-structured interviews (Roulston, 2011) were employed since they best provide for rich and thick descriptions of the individuals being engaged during the data collection phase of the project. The procedure affords participants to take the interviews where they believe it most helpful in sharing the cogent aspects of the related perspectives. We use pseudonyms in the present article in order to enhance readability. Firmin's (2006) procedure of interview waves was followed whereby all participants were interviewed in the first wave. After some initial tentative coding and transcript analysis, we conducted a second interview wave selecting specific participants for follow-up interviews. Rather than standard questions, we engaged the second wave participants regarding some vague answers they provided to first-wave questions, asked for clarification regarding some answers to initial questions, gave them opportunities to comment on what initially seemed to be ambiguities, and asked them to elaborate on what initially appeared to be some potential contradictions in the first interview wave. We found that using a two-wave modality produced the most clear and sharp perspectives of all the participants before we formalized the coding process.

Rather than deductive (axial) coding methods, we followed Maxwell's (2012) inductive (open) coding procedure when examining the transcripts. We assessed the records for recurrence among various key words, phrases, and constructs. Bracketing (Rafanti, 207) our own potential preconceptions, our objective was to capture the details of the interview responses summarizing them into general findings that represent all (or most all) the participants. We used a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts (Chenail, 2012a) applying a constant comparison (Grbick, 2007) protocol that helped consolidate the common codes and move toward generating the study's reported themes. Although we utilized NVIVO qualitative software to help manage the data following Lewins and Silver (2007), it was supplemental to the human intuitive and analytical process; we believe the software enhanced, but did not supplant it.

Deliberate elements were embedded into the research design and execution in order to enhance the study's internal validity. One was regular meetings in which the research team engaged throughout the research study (Tracy, 2010). We made independent appraisals of what we believed to be best potential codes. These were shared and consensus was developed regarding the final adopted codes. The results reported in the present article are ones on which all members of the research team agreed to be the best reflections of the research participant transcripts.

A second element we employed that enhanced the study's internal validity is member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). This involved sharing the results of our study with the research participants garnering their input about the potential representativeness of our findings. Each of the participants indicated that the findings we report in the present article are reasonable representations of their own perspectives regarding communication dynamics. A third element that strengthened the study's internal validity involved consultation with researchers who were not part of the data collection or analysis process (Silverman, 2006). The experts reviewed our data trail and provided feedback that helped to ensure the rigor and reliability of our research process. Fourth, we generated a data audit (Tracy, 2010). This involved generating an outline of the study's findings and tying each back to ample transcript data that support the results. It is a qualitative research protocol that helps ensure researchers to ground their conclusions sufficiently in the actual data collected and that they do not superimpose their own sentiments onto the reported findings. Finally, low inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012b) are used throughout the present manuscript. This is standard qualitative research practice whereby authors ground the article's findings in both broad and rich quotations from the actual participants. This helps to provide author accountability, assisting to ensure that what we report in the article is reflective of true sentiments and not our own interpretations of what we believe the participants intended to communicate.

RESULTS

Communication plays a pivotal role in the success or failure of any dating relationship. When relationships become long distance, the importance of communication escalates. In the current study, we explored the percepts of college females, who were engaged in long-distance relationships, regarding how communication affects their present relationship. Our participants explained that specific efforts must be extended as they communicate with their boyfriends from a distance. The results indicated five implications. The first was that the couple was forced to cultivate apt communication skills. Second, the females interviewed explained they had acquired the ability to "read" their boyfriend's tone of voice and to understand the connotations connected to the *way* he communicated. Third, because of the distance, our participants reported feeling a need to compensate as they often found it difficult to relate to and understand the context in which their boyfriend was living. Fourth, the females in long-distance relationships held a self-perception that they and their boyfriends work harder at communication than do the boyfriends of their peers who are not engaged in distance relationships. Last, the girlfriends reported that both they and their boyfriends were committed to good communication, sharing an overall sentiment that the work invested into communication was mutual.

Learning to Communicate

In explaining the role of communication as it unfolds in their respective distance relationships, our participants shared five perceived extended efforts that are vital to the health of their distance relationships. The first of these extended efforts is their need to develop apt communication skills. While such skills are exercised throughout numerous life-tasks, involvement in a distance relationship was reported to both intensify the need for good abilities in this particular life domain, as well as to jump-start the development of one's own skill in communicating. Particularly, the distance relationship was portrayed by our participants as central to the development of their own personal communication skills and the combined skills they and their boyfriend had developed in communicating with one another. Like many of our other participants, Jessica described the functionality of communication in her distance relationship and specifically illustrated how communication plays a key role in avoiding potential conflicts:

Um, I'd say the benefit of long distance communication is that you really learn to communicate. I mean, you can't see the person, you can't, um, you know, communicate face-to-face. So I don't know, you just learn to read each other in different ways that you might not when you're face to face with someone. My boyfriend and I just, we've

learned that we have to work things out. And being long distance, you can't really be like, "Ok, give me tomorrow, and I'll think about it." You do learn to work things out over the phone. Because we don't like to say goodbye, being on a different page; so I guess we've just really learned how to communicate with each other.

Many other students, such as Tara, concurred with the conclusion that distance relationships develop communication skills, emphasizing the vitality that good communication skills bring to a distance relationship. The participants explained that, because of the distance, "normal" dating activities were not possible. Consequently, communication (most often via the telephone) became a prominent hallmark of distance couples' interactions. Tara explained that, because of the distance, communication becomes a couple's life-line: "Um, you learn how to like talk all the time. You don't just like–you can't just like sit there and like sit on the couch and like watch a movie or something. You have to communicate." While communication skills are key to functional distance relationships, our participants described a process of developing these skills on both personal and inter-relational levels with their boyfriends. Unlike their local-relationship counterparts, couples in distance relationships face unique challenges that require the development of specific communication skills. Ashley aptly described the sentiments of most participants as she detailed ways in which she and her boyfriend could improve in their own communication:

We're learning how to respond to each other in our communication. Um, you know, when certain things come up, and we're talking through stuff, like, learning how to communicate how we're feeling effectively and, um, thinking through things before we just outright say it is really important. So that's something that we can definitely improve on, is learning how to communicate effectively in that way, and just learn how to use our time wisely and share, you know, what's really going on.

While our participants admit that facing these distance-related challenges can be difficult at times, they also were observant to perceive the bright side of the phenomenon. For example, many girlfriends emphasized the overall improvement in their ability to communicate. Further, our participants also acknowledged the improvement in the skill both they and their boyfriend shared in communicating within the context of their relationship. Because the distance forced couples to rely so heavily on communication, the improvement of these skills was viewed, not only as imperative, but also as beneficial to their overall relationship. Amanda clarified that it is not that cultivating a distance relationship has been easy, but increased communication skills is one benefit:

Well, it definitely forces you to communicate because you're not seeing them and wrapped up in the emotions of seeing them all the time. You can't rely on facial expressions, so you have to definitely talk about the way you're feeling. Um, it definitely makes it hard when you can't talk to them face-to-face. Like, we're definitely, both of us are very big into like sitting on the couch and talking or whatever, but, it's alright. It [the distance] forces us to communicate, which is a really good thing. A really good thing!

Because of increased communication skills and other appreciated benefits that resulted from the distance, our participants were able to view their temporary separation as a time of growing, both personally and as a couple. Many females we interviewed expressed genuine gratitude for the outcomes of the distance in their relationship. Mary aptly summarized the general outlooks of our participants as she described the depth in relationship that occurred as a result of good communication, as well as the necessity for enhancing these communication skills:

I would say sometimes you don't know how to say things to the person to describe what you're feeling or how your day went. Sometimes you just want them to just be there for you and you not have to say anything. But that's hard because when you're communicating with them long distance, it's through verbalizing that, your thoughts and feelings and stuff, and you can't just be together. And you can't have those actions that tell the person stuff....You can say things and if you can't... if you aren't good at saying things, then, um, your relationship's going to lack until you develop that quality of being able to verbalize things.

Additionally, our participants expressed a mind-set which equated good communication with depth-in relationship. In this light, one's ability to communicate becomes central and growth in communication abilities between couples is the pH, if you will, of a healthy relationship. Due to the very nature of distance relationships, words become key. However, the girlfriends explained that there was more to good communication than one's ability to appropriately express thoughts or feelings. In their opinion, a vital component of communication is

listening. For females involved in distance relationships, words were not enough, unless they were paired with a willingness and ability to listen. For example, as Jessica shared distinctives of a long distance relationship which she treasured, she emphasized the importance that both members in a relationship connect with one another: "Well, I think the good thing [about a distance relationship] is that it is kind of special to share things with them, like, re-hash everything that happened throughout the day. And, you definitely get good at listening. That's something that I've learned!" Furthermore, the girlfriends explained that during the rough times of a relationship, one's ability to listen as a part of communication is even more crucial. In particular, our participants shared that, in light of the distance, listening was an activity in which their boyfriends could engage as a demonstration of the affection experienced for their girlfriend. Because so many of the typical channels of affirmation are impossible for distance couples, communication, and specifically listening, are ways in which those in distance relationships can support their boyfriend or girlfriend. Elizabeth aptly summarized the sentiments of most participants vis-a-vis good communication serves as a foundational element in one's distance relationship, as well as the necessity of listening as a part of good communication:

I think one of the benefits is, um, definitely, it really tests your relationships. Like, it really, I think it builds your relationship up more because, like, you really learn how to listen to the other person. Like, you really learn what your relationship is made out of. Because, like, if your relationship is just based on like, say, physical, once you are long distance, you know, once you are a thousand miles away from each other, [then what?] So, I guess it's a benefit.

In sum, our participants reported that developing good communication skills was a valued and cardinal aspect of their distance relationships, serving as a cornerstone for its overall success.

Interpreting Tone of Voice

The females we interviewed also shared a second effort extended, which is learning to understand and read their boyfriend's voice. As previously described, words are of greatest perceived importance to distance couples, as they communicate with one another. However, our participants also shared that often they find it necessary to distinguish what their boyfriend said from *how* it was stated. When communicating at a distance, tone of voice becomes significant because these particular couples regularly cannot visually see each other as they communicate. The manner in which something was said, then, can change the entire meaning of how a statement interpreted. Sue painted a clear picture of challenges posed from the necessity of gauging emotions, based on tone of voice, as she described communicating at a distance:

One of the drawbacks is that, obviously, you can't be face to face, so you can't see their facial expressions and really kind of see how they're feeling, like on their face. So, that really poses some challenges because you have to listen to their voice and really determine what's going on inside their head based on that.

This challenge of understanding the boyfriends' tone of voice is compounded when disagreements arise. As couples seek to work through difficulties or misunderstandings, the tone of voice that the boyfriend and girlfriend use becomes cogent. To illustrate, when couples discuss anything face-to-face, their facial expressions are expected to match the occasion and type of conversation. It would seem reasonable for a boyfriend to be put-off, if amidst telling his girlfriend some grave family news, she smiles continually. Just as this response on behalf of the girlfriend seems blatantly inappropriate, so can the wrong perceived tone of voice appear inappropriate to couples communicating long distance. Sue further illustrated the complications that can arise from voice tone interpretation:

Sometimes it's really hard, and it's really funny because we have learned how to read each other by the tone of our voice. So that's kind of how we compensate. Um, but sometimes it is hard because I think body language says a lot. And so sometimes I think we both sometimes misunderstand each other because we don't have the physical/visual aid right there. So I think that sometimes stems from a miscommunication, it's because we think something or we think we know like how each other is feeling or by the tone of their voice, but sometimes it's not always right. So, it's tough sometimes.

Additionally, our participants shared the uncertainty that this "interpretation" of voice-tone can bring as they communicate with their boyfriends. The females we interviewed reported two situations to be especially difficult when seeking correctly to interoperate tone of voice. The first, arises when conflict exists. These situations often are delicate inherently, and compounding variables such as lack of facial expressions significantly complicate disagreements and the like. Our participants related that their goal is to avoid misunderstandings, without placing too much weight on the way they perceive particular words are spoken. Bethany described the tension most of our participants reported experiencing as they sought to determine the meaning behind their boyfriend's tone of voice:

Um, it's kind of hard to tell when he's mad. Like, did what I said just offend him? Like, is he hanging up early because, like, he got annoyed at me? So it's a little harder. It definitely puts some guess work into the relationship. But we have pretty good communication, where I can tell what he's thinking and how he's feeling usually by the tone of his voice.

The second set of situations our participants reported as being difficult, relative to determining the meaning of what had been said, is when sarcasm was used in conversations. Joking and sarcasm seemed to be especially difficult to perceive appropriately over the telephone, as all facial expression and other enhancing gestures are lost. For example, as Anna described sarcasm, she portrayed the importance of learning to identify the intention behind the humor so that misunderstandings can be avoided. Kati further described the need our participants felt to adapt to the challenge of picking-up on sarcasm, without facial cues, and the potential sarcasm sometimes holds for misunderstandings if left un-clarified:

I think you learn to just kind of adapt to it. Um, at first, it can be a little hard, especially online. Because we're, um, we're very sarcastic people, so sometimes I have to wonder. Or I'll have to ask him if he's being serious or if he's joking because we just joke around a lot. Sarcasm is hard to tell.

Additionally, our participants shared that a key component to properly understanding the way words are spoken is clarity. This is a two-fold process, in which the person talking must make every effort to speak with clarity, but then the person on the listening end must ask for clarification as needed. When comparing her long distance communication with that of proximal couples, Sarah voiced an opinion similar to most of our participants, as she described the need for clarification when evaluating the content of what was stated as well as the tone of voice:

It definitely means that you have to clarify with the person. Like you can't, you can't use those cues. Like, maybe if they say something, when sitting face to face you might be able to tell, "Well, they're not really sure about that." [Instead,] you have to go by tone of voice, and ask them more questions to figure out what they're really thinking.

Our participants further shared that clarifying the intended meaning of statements is important, as it helps couples to alleviate and prevent misunderstandings. Disagreements naturally arise between all couples in relationships. Consequently, the need for clarity is even more important in distance relationships. Laura aptly summarized the experiences of most females we interviewed, as she described the additional complications that arise from misunderstandings or times when the boyfriend's tone of voice does not clearly relay his intended meaning:

It's hard because sometimes in long distance you can't see them face-to-face, so all the body language is lost. So you can't tell if someone's joking or like how serious they are sometimes. It's all just voice. And so sometimes that's really hard....I feel that it takes more time because on the phone you have to be really specific about everything....I think it's really hard.

Compensating for Lack of Context

Our participants explained a third challenge they must face as a distance couple—the lack of shared context. First, the girlfriends explained that because of the distance, relating to the context in which their boyfriend lived was often challenging. Elisa, for example, referred to this difficulty as "bridging the culture gap" between her boyfriend's life and her own. Females further shared that these dynamics of low-context communication increase the

need for clarity in communication. Shandra aptly captured the sentiments of most participants as she described ways in which she and her boyfriend must compensate for the lack of shared context:

I think you talk about things that you normally wouldn't. Like, if I had a boyfriend here, like, a lot of things we would have in common anyway and we would understand the culture of the university. But since we're in two different places, you have to kind of explain lot more, share a lot more, to give that background experience. And I think that you talk about things that you normally wouldn't if you were with someone anyway, just because it's assumed. But when you're apart you have to elaborate on everything.

An additional challenge our participants relayed was explaining events from their daily lives with their boyfriends. Because couples lacked shared contexts, further detail had to be given when describing situations and events that otherwise are assumed to be self-explanatory. Furthermore, accounts of daily-life shared by boyfriends often became difficult to understand because of missing information. Christina clearly explained what many of our participants agreed to be challenging as they communicated from different contexts:

There are a lot of things that I just missed because I'm not there, and so he kind of just assumes it. So, later he'll tell a story, like with some connection to something, like, he never even told me. Because, you know, I wasn't there. Like, if I was there, I would have known it. I think that sometimes there are little holes in the other person's life, because you can't tell them everything. There isn't time.

Our participants also explained that connecting with their boyfriends through communication can be even more challenging when they do not fully understand, let alone appreciate, the context from which stories are being retold. Andrea further described the tension many of the females reported experiencing as they sought to understand their boyfriend's "culture," but never felt fully able to compensate:

I think some of the disadvantages: it's kind of hard to like really connect with him from his life, like, so far away from me—especially since it's like, pretty much, all I know about it is from what he tells me. So, it's kind of hard to, you know, we don't have like stuff we can talk about, like, stuff that we did earlier that day. You know, be like, "Oh, remember that weird waiter we had?!" So it's kind of hard.

Despite the challenges these women reported facing as they seek to compensate for lack of context, they emphasized their desire to better understand this unfamiliar context. Further, when the boyfriends deliberately sought to better understand the culture of our participants through listening and asking questions, these women took note and genuinely appreciated this extended effort. Gracia aptly illustrated the meaningful nature of her boyfriend's efforts to better understand her "world," capturing the sentiments of most participants, as she explained the most important thing he regularly communicates to her:

That he cares. Like, it's hard because like he's not like here walking between classes with me I guess. So, when he asks questions about those kind of things, like, just like those little things that let me know he does care about my day. Since he's not a part of my day, per say, that's what is important.

Self-Perception: We Work Harder

Our participants further revealed an interesting self-perception. They viewed couples engaged in distance relationships as those who work harder at communication than their local counterparts. Girlfriends explained that not only must distance couples work through separation-related complications, but they also must work through the "normal" issues which inevitably arise in dating relationships. As a result, distance couples we not only forced to work harder at their communication, but they consequently placed higher value on the time spent communicating.

The first challenge distance couples face in regards to their extra efforts communicating is setting aside the time. Anna further explained the difficulties involved in coordinating schedules when couples are living "separate lives," as well as the importance of their efforts to plan time for communication:

I think it's really hard to make an effort to try and communicate sometimes because you have to establish that. Well, we always have to establish that the day before and kind of work it out. So, you really have to make time into your schedule and it is usually like a good chunk of your time. So that's kind of a drawback, it takes effort to keep it going.

Additionally, women interviewed shared that consistent communication required being purposeful. Distance-related dynamics often required extra effort be made in setting aside time for communication. Summarizing many of our participants, Kimberly explained the negative effects failing to make communication a priority can have on distance relationships:

Drawbacks are that our schedules don't mesh very well. Like, it's hard to find time to communicate. And then, like, on my side I'd get frustrated at that, so I get grumpy and I "pounce" on little things more I guess when we are communicating. On my side that's a big thing, so I guess the drawback would be the time limitations and schedule conflicts….I don't know, it's just finding the time when we're both, like, there's always one of us that has a big project due the next day or is in class or something. Like, it's finding the right appropriate time.

Our participants also shared that distance couples must work harder at communication because both of their lives are so separate. As a result, communication was the primary source of interaction reported by our participants. However, because of the distance, many girlfriends continued to express the importance of this communication. As Julie compared the work she and her boyfriend put into communication with that of non-distance couples, she aptly summarized the sentiments of most participants when emphasizing both the difficulties in scheduling communication, but also the key impact this communication had on their relationship:

Um, I guess it would be different in that I can't always get a hold of him. I mean, there are times when I'll call and he'll be busy or I'll be busy, and so we just kind of have to put talking on a hold for a little while, as opposed to him just being on campus and I can just see him or talk to him kind of whenever I want to, kind of thing. Um, yea, the difference too is that you're not face-to-face. And that maybe, we have to make the time to communicate and to make the time to talk to each other. That's why we make it a point to set aside, a time where we can talk for like 1 or 2 hours and really just find out about how we're doing and what' s going on in our life. So I guess making the time, it's harder to kind of fit the time in because we're kind of both two separate lives in two separate states. So we just have to learn how to set aside the time and make it happen.

The females interviewed also described feeling limited in the ways they were able to communicate with their boyfriends. Especially compared to "normal" couples, our participants generally concluded they were limited, almost entirely, to verbal communication. Because of this limitation, as girlfriends described it, much more work had to be invested into communication to express affection for their boyfriends. To further explain, Jennifer compared her own communication with her boyfriend, to that of couples around campus:

Well, I think everything again is through expression of like what you say. So, um, like my roommate has her boyfriend on campus and they can just sit next to each other and like, you know, maybe put her, she could put her hand in his. Let that say, "I'm thinking of you," or whatever. But I have to call [my boyfriend] and be like, "Hey, I'm thinking of you." What else can you say, you know? So I think that's sometimes hard. It just kind of limits you. I think a lot.

Many women also shared that meeting basic relational needs is more challenging at a distance. Expressing affirmation to one's boyfriend also took more effort, specifically because the means for doing so are limited when at a distance. To illustrate what many of our participants shared, Joy aptly described difficulties she and her boyfriend face as they seek to demonstrate their affection for each other and her perception that communication was limited to verbal affirmation:

Everything you say is through your words and, um, his love language is not like, is not words at all. It's definitely like quality time. And so that's really hard because when I'm not spending time with him it's hard for him to feel love. And mine is words of affirmation, but his isn't. So he has a hard time speaking that, you know, sometimes when it's just quiet. Or, like, I love writing letters. I love it! Like, I send letters a lot, but, um, if don't get any back,

then I feel like I'm not loved. Whereas if he was on campus, we could spend time together, which would give me my words of affirmation and would give him his quality time and it would just help us feel loved a lot easier.

However, the girlfriends interviewed shared that although communication took additional effort, they perceived that both their boyfriends and themselves held a greater appreciation for the communication shared. Treasuring their communication, our participants shared, was a direct result of the separation. Rita further explained the perception of most girlfriends interviewed as she described the esteemed appreciation she and her boyfriend have for their times of conversation:

Your communication becomes everything. Not everything, but your communication becomes a major part of your relationship that has to go on a whole different level of strength and developing. And those who don't have to experience a long distance relationship really take for granted the other person, I think. And I think it's good for people that can make it through long distance relationships. But, um, those who can't or don't have to, don't get to realize how much we take, we take that quality time for granted.

In sum, females involved in long distance relationships, perceived their efforts at communication with their boyfriends as more work than that of non-distance couples, but they also appreciated this communication more because of the extra effort involved, and the effects quality communication had on their relationships.

Mutual Commitment to Good Communication

Our participants additionally perceived their boyfriends to be just as, if not more, committed than they themselves were to developing healthy communication in their relationship. Often, the females described their boyfriends as "mutually committed" to communication, emphasizing their appreciation for this dynamic of the relationship. As Abby explained, efforts made to develop good communication are ones that both people involved should *want* to extend:

We do try and keep it kind of equal....it's not like a ping-pong ball where like you called me, I have to call you next. But if it is consistent where one person is kind of calling the other one, it's like, "Hey—you need to talk to me so you have to call me." So we try and take turns.

While the general sentiment remained that effort and commitment were mutual, many females shared that their boyfriends actually put in slightly more effort. For example, Jenna aptly reflected many of our participants' stories as she shared the extra efforts her boyfriend initially invested, because of her original hesitancy to initiate distance communication:

Well, since the beginning I didn't want to be the one necessarily calling him. So, even then, I guess you could say he was putting in more effort. But I would say that it is definitely 50/50. We both put in the time, and we both talk and listen about the same.

Our participants also shared that because distance communication became their main connection, it was important that as a couple they both dedicate specific time to communication. Further, this time was generally viewed as an investment for the quality of their distance relationship. As Ashley aptly described the sentiments of most participants, she explained the importance that she set aside distractions and engage in focused communication with her boyfriend:

Sometimes it's hard to put aside the things that I'm doing, or if he calls while I'm studying or something, just being able to put that aside. Um, so I would say that's one way we could improve, just completely putting aside what we're doing and focusing on talking. Because it's really easy if you're talking on the phone to just be typing on the computer or something like that at the same time.

The perception of mutual commitment to communication was also revealed as our participants shared their expectations that communication within each phone conversation be shared relatively equally. In other words, these women did not consider one person talking on the phone the entire time to be good communication—conversation

needed to go back and forth. Stephanie aptly summarized what most participants shared by describing typical communication between her and her boyfriend:

We both have a really good effort I think. We both call each other. Like it's not just like he calls me or I call him. We both call each other. And, we're both… Like it's not just one of us talking on the phone like at one time, you know. We both tell each other about our days.

Additionally, the females interviewed shared that the quality of communication with their boyfriends became important in light of the distance. Because they could not deepen their relationship through "typical" dating activities, these couples reported communication to be the key element which strengthened their relationship. Non-distance couples share in life events on a regular basis, but for those engage in distance relationships, communicating must fill the role that time spent together normally would. Crystal summarized the experiences of most participants as she described her boyfriend's deliberate effort to communicate on a deeper level:

He's a really good guy (smiles). He's really good at like pursuing what I'm thinking. Like, if I don't really share, or if I'm kind of dancing around the push or whatever, he'll kind of push and be like, "Well, what are you thinking? How are you feeling? Talk to me. What's going on?" Like he's really good about stuff like that.

In sum, our participants shared their perception that both they and their boyfriends are committed to communication—both regularly communicating, and doing so on meaningful levels.

DISCUSSION

Numerous challenges that were identified previously in article's the literature review surfaced among the participants in the present study. For example, Reid and Reid's (2006) notations that telephone communication is fraught with difficulties were noted by the participants in our study. Particularly, the study's participants helped to elucidate and flesh-out some of the general findings noted by Reid and Reid. Part of qualitative research's objectives involve providing a more rich description of previous studies and to more thickly detail findings noted in quantitative contexts. Similarly, Graham, Huang, Clark, and Helgeson (2008) noted that emotional expression in the context of interpersonal dynamics is the basis of all relationships. This assertion was born true by the data from the present study. That is, our participants described emotional connection to be a very salient force in keeping their respective distant relationships connected. They found it necessary to work harder than the work invested by their cohorts who presently were in proximal relationships. Sharing life experiences via the telephone or e-mail became an essential component to the relationship for the females in our present study—since they did not have other facets enjoyed by their peers, such as touch, sight, and non-verbal cues.

Byron (2008) reported that miscommunication of intended messages is much higher when contact occurs via e-mail than it does when the same messages are transmitted in person. This general principle was enlightened by the findings of our present study. Our participants indicated that lacking the nuances of communication details often presented challenges, perhaps strains at times, to their relationships. The facial expressions, emphasis of key words, voice pitch, eye movements, and similar communication hints were not available to our females in their distance relationships. Consistent with Byron, these challenges required overcompensation in order to the relationships to progress and for the participants to find continued fulfillment.

Mietzner (2005) posited that it is possible for a couple's communication abilities to improve as a result of distant relationships. The findings of the present research study bear this to be true. Our participants indicated that they worked hard at cultivating additional communication skills and that they believed the positive development enhanced their relationships in general. Moreover, Knee and Canevello's (2006) findings were supported regarding distance relationship individuals being forced to explore their self-assumptions. Our participants helped to further enlighten this dynamic as we now better understand some specifics involved in the required commitments for distance relationships.

In addition to elucidating the previous results in the research literature, the present findings also pointed to an important conclusion from the study. Namely, each of the individuals interviewed generally was happy in their

respective distance relationship. This is not to say, obviously, that they experience exhilaration 24/7. But, overall, these were a group of young women who were satisfied with their distance relationships, found contentment despite the challenges, and were committed to making the relationships work. When beginning the study, we were unsure as to what to expect from the women—perhaps some frustrated individuals, longing for a better life (?!). However, this was not the case but, rather, quite the opposite—these individuals consistently portrayed being at overall peace with their present relationship circumstances.

An examination of the findings also led us to conclude that it likely takes a special type of individual to make a distance relationship work. That is, this arrangement might not be recommendable for everyone—or even for most people. Rather, there may be a segment of the general college population for whom a distant relationship can work successfully. From the data collected, we might conclude that these individuals may be more willing to put in extra efforts than does the average woman in order to see her dating objectives accomplished. Additionally successful distance relationship females may be more self-aware, having abilities to analyze people or situations more clearly or accurately than the average woman. They seemingly develop apparent skills at reading situations and can keep themselves focused on accomplishing the relationship goals.

Finally, we conclude from the present study that couples who contemplate having distant relationships should thoroughly discuss the prospect prior to making the decision to proceed with this type of affiliation. Obviously, this is easier for us to state than likely it is for most couples to apply—since love relationships may be more directed by the heart than the head. Nonetheless, we believe that the results from the present study suggest that directed communication which addresses the couple's commitment at working at communication, their willingness to let compensations override the challenges, and weighing the costs/benefits mentioned in the findings of the present study bear apt consideration by potential distance couples. Seriously assessing the respective individuals' understanding of the likely dynamics that a distance relationship will entail may help them to pre-gauge whether they are setting themselves up for eventual fulfillment or potential frustration and disillusionment. In short, a review of the findings from the present study might help potential distance relationship couples eventually experience more enhanced relationships with their prospective distance relationship partners.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Good practice for all research publications is to identify and report the study's limitations (Price & Murnan, 2004). Future researchers should compare the results from the present study with results from minority individuals since the participants in the present study were Caucasian. Similarly, future research should explore dynamics with freshman, juniors, and seniors who are involved with distant relationships. We selected sophomores for the present study since seniors may be more likely to be engaged and freshmen may be more likely to be dating high school sweethearts. Sophomores were most likely to be in college dating distant relationships—but not yet engaged. Future researchers should systematically compare these groups for both similarities and differences. Comparing these studies with the dynamics that men experience in distance relationships also would be interesting.

As previously noted, the participants in the present study attended a private, selective, comprehensive university. Future studies should replicate the present one in varying type of institutions, such as community colleges, liberal arts colleges, research universities, and specialized colleges/institutes. Finally, we believe that quantitative researchers can use the findings of the present qualitative research study to develop quantitative hypotheses as well as national survey questions. Sarafino (2005) notes that exploratory qualitiative research studies, such as the present one, often provide valuable grounding for the follow-up by quantitative researchers to extend the findings and add additional external validity to the findings.

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