

GOING THE DISTANCE:

UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF MAINTAINING A POSITIVE LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP IN GRADUATE SCHOOL


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Graduate studies, which may be one of the most demanding periods of an individual's life, and the added stress of being distanced from a significant other (SO) can complicate the issue. Ordinarily, a partner is an important source of support and understanding during high stress periods, his/her physical absence may add to this stress. This study addresses the question: What processes maintain a positive long-distance relationship (LDR) during graduate studies? Four heterosexual female graduate students engaged in an LDR were selected as participants based on homogeneous and opportunistic sampling. Semi-structured interviews were used in conjunction with a grounded theory approach to better understand the subjective experiences of maintaining an LDR despite facing personal challenges. The following three LDR phases were identified and labelled: initiation, transition, and maintenance. Recognizing how these phases influence communication techniques, couple activities, and support networks, it is important for counsellors to understand how they can help clients through an LDR period.

Keywords: graduate studies, grounded theory, long-distance relationship, mental health, stress

Les études supérieures peuvent être l'une des périodes les plus exigeantes dans la vie d'une personne. Le fait d'être physiquement éloigné de la personne aimée peut causer un stress supplémentaire, lequel s'ajoute à ceux attribuables au fait de poursuivre des études supérieures. Habituellement, la personne aimée est une source inestimable de soutien et de compréhension pendant les périodes de grand stress. Ainsi, son absence physique peut causer du stress. La présente recherche tente de répondre à la question suivante : Quels processus assurent une relation à distance positive au cours des études supérieures? Les participantes à l'étude sont des femmes hétérosexuelles inscrites aux études supérieures et vivant une relation à distance. La sélection des participantes étaient intentionnelles et fondée sur des critères d'admissibilité homogènes. Afin de mieux saisir les expériences subjectives concernant le maintien d'une relation à distance, et ce, tout en devant composer avec des défis personnels, nous avons eu recours à la théorisation ancrée associée à des entretiens semi-dirigés. L'analyse des discours des participantes nous a permis de relever les trois étapes suivantes : l'initiation, la transition, le maintien. Ces étapes influencent les techniques de communication des personnes qui vivent une relation à distance, leurs activités et leurs mécanismes de soutien. En conséquence, il est important que les conseillers apprennent de quelle façon ils peuvent venir en aide à celles et à ceux qui les consultent pendant une période de relation à distance.

Mots-clés : études supérieures, relation à distance, santé mentale, stress, théorie ancrée



Graduate studies can be one of the most demanding periods of an individual's life, and the added stress of being at a distance from a significant other (SO) can complicate this period. As a new graduate counselling student, I have had to come to terms with balancing an intensive school workload, adjusting to a new city, and being away from my SO. I came to realize that many graduate students entering a master's program were also transitioning to a long-distance relationship (LDR).

Literature Review and Rationale

According to one study, upwards of 75% of college students in the United States have been in an LDR (Stafford, 2005). This study looks the factors that help graduate students to maintain this type of relationship, and how it affects counselling health care providers. An important part of providing counselling and support to graduate students must address the transition to graduate school while maintaining an LDR as a positive experience. For example, Mietzer and Li-Wen (2005) found that couples in an LDR can enhance or improve their communication while living at a distance from each other. LDRs can also force individuals to address assumptions they hold about their partners (Knee & Canevello, 2006). Consequently, how the partners navigate the LDR can influence and strengthen effective relationship building and their foundations (Firmin, Firmin, & Lorenzen Merical, 2013).

There are numerous studies on LDRs (Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994; Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig & Wigley, 2008; Mietzer & Lin, 2005), but most of these examine only the negative effects of an LDR. For example, Guldner (1996) compared students in proximal relationships versus students in LDRs and found that the students in an LDR had significantly higher scores on the depression and phobic anxiety subscales.

Graduate studies may exert additional stress on the individuals undertaking their studies, however this stress may not be experienced in the same way by all graduate students. It may be important to study more positive aspects of a graduate student LDR as a way of providing additional support to the individuals in this situation. My individual experience, and my colleagues' anecdotal experiences of entering graduate studies and subsequently deciding to engage in an LDR contradicts the narrative presented in the current literature. This study seeks to fill in the missing link between explaining how people can transition into graduate studies while engaging in a positive LDR.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The primary purpose of this study is to understand how graduate students maintain a positive LDR when entering and while attending graduate school. My central research question asks: What processes maintain a positive LDR during graduate studies?

Assumptions, Interpretive Framework, and Researcher Positionality

This study uses a grounded theory approach. Themes and theories will be inductively discovered during the collection, analysis and iterative comparison of the data (Straus & Corbin, 1994). In this study I draw from a social constructivist interpretive framework, which recognizes the fact that an individual's perspective is constructed through language and wider societal experiences (Glesne, 2015). Specifically, the social constructivist approach examines a "process" between interacting individuals (Creswell, 2013). In my worldview, there is only one reality and through interviews, one can obtain information on each participant's perspective and find common themes among

the participants to construct that single reality. The interpreted reality expressed in this study is provisional and is limited to this brief period (Straus & Corbin, 1994).

Data Collection and Participants

The subjective experiences narrated within this study are those of Jennifer, Beverly, Rebecca, and Erin (pseudonyms). The analysis reflects a single interpretation of the participant's experiences. Each of the participants volunteered and consented to the study, and the study was deemed a minimal risk study by the University of Ottawa. Recruitment was opportunistic and involved homogenous group sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). For the purposes of this study, an LDR is defined as "a romantic relationship between two people who live far apart and so are unable to meet on a frequent basis" (MacMillian Dictionary, 2016). The participants had to meet the criteria of this definition, that is, be participating in an LDR during their graduate studies, have moved to a new city for the purposes of graduate studies, and have entered graduate studies within the last two years. The participants include four heterosexual females, aged 24-25, who had been dating their SO between one to four years. The amount of time spent traveling to be with their SO ranged from a four-and-a-half-hour drive to a five-hour flight one way. Due to the homogeneous nature of the group, the experiences represented in this paper are limited, and are not necessarily representative of all cultures, genders, sexual orientations, or economic status.

Semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each interview was conducted over Skype to accommodate the busy schedules of each participant. The length of an interview ranged from 20-45 minutes.

Additional questions were added to the original interview script during data collection to provide more context.

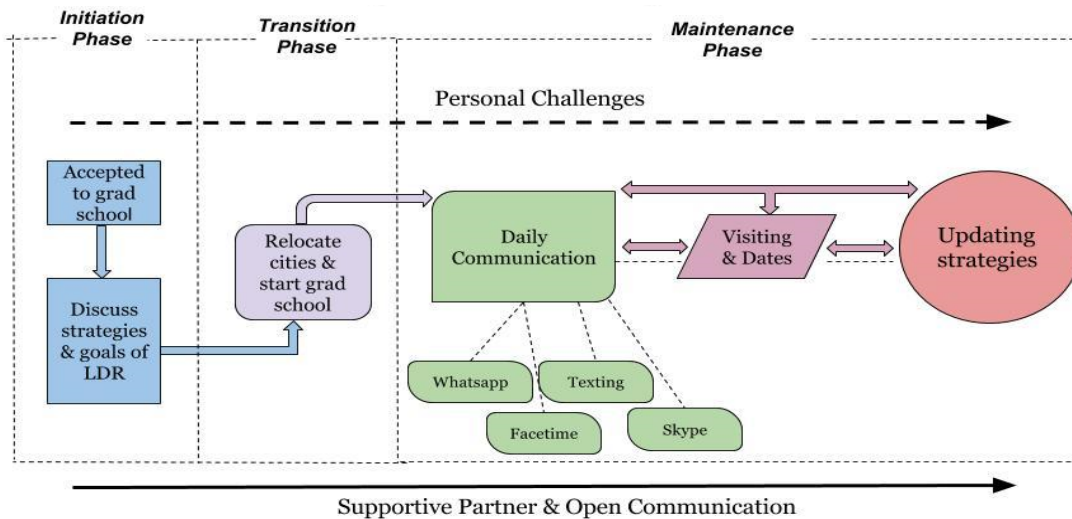
Data Analysis

The analysis focuses on the communication techniques couples used to maintain their LDR, and how the students' partners assisted the students in their transition process to graduate studies. The grounded theory approach focused on the LDR, rather than the experiences and feelings of transitioning into graduate studies (Straus & Corbin, 1994). Specifically, the approach focused on patterns of action and interaction, among and between social units (Straus & Corbin, 1994). Through open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2013), I analyzed the conditions that enable an LDR and how it is maintained as one half of a partnership transitions into graduate studies.

Open coding is used to label one or multiple general themes that occurred in participant responses (Creswell, 2013). This allows for a wider understanding of contextual factors. Next, axial coding is used to uncover relationships between categories (Thériault & Gazzola, 2010). I examined which conditions enabled the category to arise in the context where it appeared (Thériault & Gazzola, 2010). For example, there were certain actions, such as planning for the move to a new city, which had to occur before the partners could engage in the strategies to maintain their relationship at a distance. Through selective coding I identify themes and strategies that occur most often throughout the process for either all or most participants. Subsequently, I create a summary for the Transition and Maintenance of an LDR into Graduate Studies to represent their experiences (Figure 1). The dotted lines in the model

represent items that either did not apply to all participants or did not consistently occur continuously throughout the process.

FIGURE 1: TRANSITION AND MAINTENANCE OF AN LDR INTO GRADUATE STUDIES




Initiation Phase. The Initiation Phase is characterized by the couples first discussing graduate school applications, including where they were going to apply. Inevitably all the participants accepted a graduate school’s offer. Beverly stated that “it was obviously not ideal to do long distance,” but she knew it was better for her personal growth and that “he would ultimately support me.” When preparing to move, all the participants discussed how they were going to lay the groundwork for their transition into graduate studies. Jennifer and Erin emphasized spending as much time as possible with their SO to prepare for the transition of being apart, and both participants planned to talk with their partners as often as possible, even if it was just an occasional text. Beverly did not enact a plan, but mentally prepared and communicated her concerns; whereas, Rebecca and her partner agreed to see each other every two weeks, and Skype every Wednesday. Both Beverly and Erin’s partners mentioned that it

was much easier to have an LDR now compared to 10 plus years ago because of the newer technologies available.

Transition Phase. The Transition Phase involves the actual move and adjustment to living in a new city for the participants. Jennifer, Beverly, and Erin emphasize the significance of having their partners help them physically move. It gave them the opportunity to explore a new city and make new memories together. Jennifer appreciated that her partner had “made it easy” to transition apart, and that she “knows how much he cares” thanks to the support he provided. One of the partners even helped provide financial support to assist with the expenses of the new apartment. Beverly highlighted how helpful it was to find support from new friends and peers who were going through a similar transition.

Maintenance Phase. This phase is characterized by the technology that the participants used to stay connected with their partners. All the participants relied on either calling or at a minimum texting their SO daily. Beverly used the application WhatsApp to call her partner every night before she went to bed, his dinner time, and they rarely used Skype. Jennifer on the other hand used texting, Snapchat, and Facetime to communicate with her partners every day. Jennifer explained that when she was unable to speak with her SO due to graduate work, she used her time to “really focus” and when they were “both home, we could focus on each other.” Erin texted her partner continuously, sent pictures via WhatsApp or Instagram, and used Skype to see her SO. Erin explained that “we reinforced habits that we already had with each other,” for example “saying ‘good morning,’ ‘good night,’ and ‘I love you’ regularly.” Since Rebecca and her partner worked part and full-time jobs they emailed each other when possible and relied on weekly Wednesday and Sunday Skype date nights. On




Wednesdays, they would buy the same bottle of wine and watch the food network together, and Sunday nights allow them to catch-up on their weeks.

Another part of the process was visiting each other and having face-to-face dates. Due to the distance and the expense, Beverly did not see her SO until she returned home for the holiday break. Rebecca saw her SO every two weeks, and they took turns who traveling back and forth. Erin and her partner had originally planned to see each other every three weeks, but they had to become more flexible to adjust to their busy schedules. Similarly, Jennifer had to be flexible about when she could see her SO. Rebecca, Erin, and Jennifer also tried to make sure that they had dates or did something just for the two of them while their SOs were visiting them.

Out of the four participants, Rebecca was the only one who had to intentionally update her maintenance strategies with her partner. She commented:

...we committed to Skyping once a week. And it was my input that asked for a second Skype night a week, just because I found that at the end of the week, the end of the weekend, when we're both busy with friends or whatever the case is, it's nice to have another call in.

Rebecca also asked to implement more regular phone calls because she began feeling a bit disconnected from her SO. Out of the four participants, Rebecca had been engaged in a LDR for the longest time (three school terms), and the amount of time spent apart may have influenced the need to update strategies to remain connected.



Beverly described the challenge of being apart as a “vague and lingering sense of missing something in your daily life—the sense of being alone is more salient.” Rebecca described a major challenge that she and her SO faced was the change “in the way we communicate with one another, and more importantly how to show affection and love for one another when apart.” Emotional support provided by an SO was cited by participants as essential. Open communication was also cited as very important for understanding how their SO was feeling and was the biggest factor in the recommendations that the participants suggested for other couples engaging in an LDR.

Discussion

This study explores how couples can maintain their LDR while one individual attends graduate studies. Although not applicable to all people entering graduate school, many students in an LDR may relate to the experiences presented here. My analysis summarizes how the participants in my study maintained their positive and loving LDRs through specialized technological communication techniques and activities while at graduate school. It is important that school counsellors who assist graduate students in an LDR recognize that engaging in an LDR does not necessarily represent a negative stress impact (Pistole & Roberts, 2011) on their clients.

The data identified conditions that help with the transition to and the maintenance of an LDR, and an appreciation of these conditions can be used to help future students with their LDR. In her recommendation, Beverly recognized that all couples and individuals have their own methods to deal with issues, and therefore she could only emphasize how important it was for couples in an LDR to openly communicate with each other. This recommendation was echoed by the other participants. According to Dainton

and Aylor (2002), the quantity “of face-to-face interaction could successfully distinguish between LDR types, with individuals who have periodic face-to-face interaction using more maintenance and experiencing greater satisfaction and commitment than individuals in LDRs with no face-to-face interaction” (p. 118). However, communication trends have changed over time, and new forms of communicating over distance can include face-to-face conversations (through Skype or FaceTime applications, for example). The quality and impact of these interactions can vary depending on the couple, and their communication behaviours. Maguire and Kinney (2010) explore problem-focused communication, seeking social support, and relationship maintenance communication behaviours, and their findings suggest that each behaviour may be more predictive than the other for relationship satisfaction. For example, perceived helpfulness of joint problem-solving communication was predictive of higher satisfaction amongst individuals in low distress LDRs (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). It is important for health care professionals to know which type of communication behaviour is being implemented because it can inform coping behaviours used by clients who are indeed in distress (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Consequently, certain types of communication behaviours may be more beneficial for couples who are undergoing the transitional period into an LDR.

Limitations

This study is limited by the small number and homogenous group of participants represented for a grounded theory approach. Additionally, only one half of the partnership is represented in this description. Lastly, a single coder reviewed the data, therefore, the study is lacking analysis validation.


Conclusion

Overall, this study highlights the significance of researching the transitional period into graduate studies as a contributing factor in maintaining a positive LDR. The analysis provided graduate students' perspective, whom are typically the researchers, and not the research subjects. The insights provided by the participants are not only relevant to fellow students engaging in LDRs but are also informative for health care professionals who aid students during this transitional period. Future research can address the effectiveness of the communication techniques explored in this study, in addition to the behaviours required during the maintenance phase for engaging in an LDR over an extended period.

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