

When long-distance dating partners become geographically close

Laura Stafford, Andy J. Merolla, & Janessa D. Castle

Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

This study explored long-distance dating relationships' (LDDRs) transition to geographic proximity. About half of LDDR partners experience this transition, whereas the other half end their relationships during separation. Among reunited relationships, one-third terminate within 3 months of reunion. Participants' open-ended responses highlight changes associated with reunion, including the loss of autonomy; increased positive and negative knowledge; time management difficulties; and heightened conflict and jealousy. Desirable features of LDDRs (e.g., autonomy and novelty) appear to be lost, and missed, upon reunion. Individuals whose relationships terminated upon reunion were more likely to report missing aspects of LDDRs. Overall, we propose reunions facilitate relational and partner knowledge acquisition, the dissipation of quixotic ideals, and increased partner interdependence.

KEY WORDS: dating relationships • dialectics • long-distance relationships • reunions • turning points

A process view of relationships entails the study of relational transformations (Conville, 1991). Such transformations vary in salience and subtlety and work to demarcate reformulations of relationships (Bolton, 1961). Bolton coined the term 'turning point' to encapsulate such dynamic, interaction-based changes. Building on Bolton's conceptualization, Baxter and Bullis (1986) defined a relational turning point as any 'event or occurrence

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2005 meeting of the International Communication Association, New York, USA. All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laura Stafford, School of Communication, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, USA [e-mail: stafford.3@osu.edu].

that is associated with change in a relationship' (p. 470). The view that relational turning points characterize important relational transformations (Surra & Hughes, 1997) serves as the basis of this investigation of the reunions of individuals in previously long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs). Such reunions have been identified as obvious, significant, and unique, turning points (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). We believe the 'turning point' concept and its emphasis on relational change and demarcation make it particularly relevant to long-distance (LD) couples' experiences throughout their transition to geographic proximity. Baxter and Bullis suggest that reunions are generally positive events associated with increased relational commitment. But no turning point is inherently positive (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Turning points sometimes entail 'a variety of tumultuous experiences' (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004, p. 795). In short, we focus on the relational changes, or relational turbulence, accompanying the transformation from an LD relationship to a geographically proximal one in college-student dating relationships.

The population of interest here is college students, as up to 75% of college students will be involved in an LDDR (Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994), yet two-thirds of college students believe an LDDR will not endure (Helgeson, 1994). Moreover, the information that exists on long-distance/geographically close reunions (LD-GC) comes primarily from research on military and civilian-commuter marriages. Hence, the sheer ubiquity of college student LDDRs, the dearth of available information on their reunion experiences, and the apparent assumption that separations are problematic, whereas reunions are generally positive relationship-enhancing experiences, highlight the need for research in this domain.

Thus, the current study has two primary goals. The first is to describe the reported relational changes associated with the turning point of the LD-GC transition among college dating partners. The second goal is to examine possible differences between those who do and do not maintain their relationship through the transition. Before turning to these goals directly, some fundamental groundwork must be laid. This includes documenting the prevalence of the LD-GC transition, questioning the assumed relational development that results from it, and testing the assumption that geographic proximity is indeed desired by LD partners.

Long-distance dating relationships

Helgeson (1994) found that most students believe LDDRs will not last. Researchers have argued that LDDRs are 'fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity' (Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997, p. 105), and LD partners experience difficulty meeting each other's needs (Le & Agnew, 2001). In short, 'a majority of both lay people and researchers believe that long-distance relationships (LDRs) usually fail' (Guldner & Swenson, 1995, p. 314).

Such fears of relational demise during separation are not necessarily unfounded, as geographical separation is a time when some students end romantic relationships (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976) and living too far apart has been reported as a reason for the termination of college dating relationships (Van Horn et al., 1997). Such information could lead to the speculation that few LDDRs would remain intact to experience the LD-GC turning point. Despite the apparent pessimism regarding the maintenance of LDDRs, they have been found to be as stable (Van Horn et al., 1997), or more stable, than GCDRs (Stafford & Merolla, in press; Stafford & Reske, 1990; Stephen, 1986).

In sum, prior research provides contrasting perspectives as physical separation is identified as promoting both relational termination and relational stability. It is therefore unclear what proportion of LDDRs are maintained through separation, thereby enabling an LD-GC transition. Thus, our first research question concerns the stability of LDDRs during separation:

- *RQ1: What proportion of LDDRs are maintained during separation?*

The dearth of research concerning LDDR partners' transition to geographic proximity might be due, at least in part, to an implicit view that reunions among dating partners are nonproblematic (Merolla, 2005). Baxter and Bullis (1986), for instance, reported increased relational commitment with the LD-GC turning point. Not all scholars, however, have been as optimistic about the reunions of people in LDDRs. Stafford and Reske (1990) found that LD partners often perceive each other in an idealized fashion and, following Bochner (1984), proposed that such idealistic distortions would be difficult to maintain with the increased face-to-face (FtF) interaction afforded by geographic proximity. Yet neither the assumption that proximity results in relational escalation nor the proposal that reunions might result in termination have been investigated directly. Therefore, the second research question asks:

- *RQ2: What proportion of LDDRs terminate following transitioning to geographic proximity?*

It is commonly assumed that LDDR partners desire geographic proximity. However, this assumption has not been tested by LDDR research. If we look outside of that particular literature, however, some evidence suggests that partners do indeed want and look forward to permanently reuniting. Long-distance married civilian and military couples, for example, have been reported to anticipate permanent reunions (Carlson & Carlson, 1984; Gerstel & Gross, 1984). Yet these wishes are not universal. A small percentage of dual-career LD married couples desire a permanent commuting arrangement (Farris, 1978). For example, Levin and Trost (1999) identified 'living-apart-together' relationships where partners desire separate residences that are often in different communities. Despite some variation in the desire for geographic proximity, we anticipate that college-aged individuals will desire and positively anticipate reunions based on what appear

to be salient cultural norms for physical presence in romantic relationships (Stafford, 2005). The following predictions are offered:

- *H1: Individuals involved in LDDRs desire to become geographically close.*
- *H2: Individuals in LDDRs expect their relationship to improve upon becoming geographically close.*

Although a permanent reunion might be desired and expected to result in an improved relationship, such expectations may not be met. Expectations or beliefs regarding what relationships *should* be like have long served as a benchmark against which individuals judge their relationships. When expectations go unmet, relational problems generally ensue (Vangelisti, 2002). Moreover, 'some standards are more difficult to meet than others' especially those that are extreme or unrealistic (Vangelisti, 2002, p. 653). Given the probable idealization cultivated in LDDRs (Stafford & Merolla, in press), expectations may not be met following the LD-GC transition. We do not know, however, in which manner or domains relationship expectations may be met or violated following reunion. Thus, we consider individuals' global expectations for relational improvement upon the transition as well as the potential link between unmet expectations and relational demise. The following hypotheses are offered:

- *H3: Expectations for positive relational change after transitioning to proximity will be significantly greater than the positive relational change individuals perceived.*
- *H4: Unmet global expectations for relational improvement will be associated with relational termination.*

Relational termination is one change that may occur when partners reunite. Although insight into relationship stability following the transition is informative, several other changes can also occur. If the LD-GC transition is viewed by relational partners as a major relational turning point (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), we must be sensitive to smaller relational changes that accompany and follow such a major change (Bolton, 1961).

Insight into changes that reunited couples experience comes, most notably, from research on military couples (e.g., Forsyth & Gramling, 1987) and civilian dual-career couples (Gertstel & Gross, 1984). Military couples' permanent or semipermanent reunions following long separations suggest reintegration involves redefining roles, power structures, and boundary regulations (Forsyth & Gramling, 1987). Military partners often experience as much stress when the serviceperson returns from deployments as when he or she leaves (Carlson & Carlson, 1984; Hunter, 1982). Furthermore, some military and civilian couples report experiencing a period when they feel like 'strangers' (Carlson & Carlson, 1984; Gerstel & Gross, 1984).

Given that the available information about permanent reunions comes from military and civilian married populations, we cannot assume that the results of these studies will generalize to college students (Stafford, 2005). Therefore, in addition to describing partners' experience of relational changes, we examine whether the changes experienced upon reunion differ

for those who maintained versus those who terminated their relationship during the LD-GC transition.

- *RQ3: What relational changes, if any, do individuals report experiencing with the LD-GC transition?*
- *RQ4: Do individuals whose relationships terminated after the LD-GC transition encounter different relational changes than those individuals whose relationships continued after the LD-GC transition?*

As noted, LDDRs are often viewed as problematic. However, claims of distress and dysfunction may be overstated (Stafford, 2005). Though she agreed that LD relationships often involve loneliness or stress and that distance can be a difficult relational obstacle, Sahlstein (2004) argued that distance can also enhance relationships. Sahlstein found that distance fosters a greater sense of 'quality time' when partners are together. Moreover, she found that distance allows individuals to 'segment' their time in a manner that facilitates both relational and individual needs. Partners can focus on their relationship when together and focus on work or school tasks when apart. These findings are consistent with research on other LD couples (e.g., Guldner, 2001) and leads to the conclusion that LDDRs offer relational or individual benefits.

The work on the relationship-enhancing features or benefits of distance has been conducted on couples in long-distance relationships punctuated with limited, intermittent time together. Relatively permanent transitions to GCDR might lead to the loss of these benefits. Furthermore, the loss of benefits upon reunion may be associated with individuals' likelihood of relational termination following the LD-GC transition. We therefore offer the following:

- *RQ5: What, if any, benefits of LDDRs are reported as lost upon the LD-GC transition?*
- *H5: The perceived loss of benefits will be associated with termination following the LD-GC transition.*

Method

Sample

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes at a large midwestern university. We used Dellmann-Jenkins et al.'s (1994) operationalization of LDDRs and potential participants were told that a long-distance relationship is one in which 'you are separated from your partner by a physical distance that prevents you from seeing each other every day, if you wanted to.' Students must have either currently or recently been in a 'serious' LDDR to participate in the study. Individuals were offered extra credit for their participation. Our procedure generated a sample of 335 undergraduates. Classification as LDDR could have changed in two ways. They could have maintained their relationship until reunion, thus remaining together but no longer as LD couples, or they could have terminated it when long distance.

In order to address our research questions and hypotheses, three samples were created from this larger pool. The sample for the first research question consisted of individuals who had considered their relationship to be long-distance at some point, and had subsequently terminated this relationship, either while still long distance or after becoming geographically close ($n = 155$). The sample generated to answer the second research question consisted of individuals who at one time were involved in a LDDR that had subsequently become geographically proximal ($n = 180$). To address the remaining questions and hypotheses, a subset of this 'reunion' sample was generated. Of the reunited couples, 66 individuals terminated their relationships after moving to the same location, whereas 114 continued their relationships.

We needed to establish a time period in order to differentiate participants who maintained their relationship through the transition to proximity from those who had not. We established a minimum of one entire academic term, because Hill et al. (1976) found break-ups to be more likely following 'key turning points in the school year' (p. 156). Through this time period, couples experienced at least one full cycle of academic stressors. Although some couples whom we count as continuing their relationship will likely break up following data collection, we propose termination after at least one academic term would likely be less directly attributable to experiences encountered during the LD-GC transition.

Of the terminated relationships, two-thirds ended within the first 3 months following reunion (roughly one academic term) and thus were considered as failing to maintain their relationships through the transition. Remaining participants who terminated more than 3 months post reunion were excluded from our sample. This decision rule generated 44 individuals who met our criteria of failing the transition to geographic closeness. Of these, 8 were eliminated due to missing data, leaving a total of 36 participants (15 males and 21 females). These relationships ended on average of 1.25 months after reuniting (range = 0–3 months).

We created a comparison group of 36 individuals who maintained their relationships through the transition period. The comparison pool consisted of the 114 individuals who had successfully survived the LD-GC transition for a minimum of 4 months (i.e., more than one academic term) at the time of data collection. Fifteen males and 21 females were randomly selected to create a 'continuing' group of equal size (and sex composition) as the 'terminated' group. These individuals reported being in the same location as their partner an average of 16.44 months (range = 4 to 41 months).

In sum, this investigation's primary sample (used to test all research questions and hypotheses except RQ1 and RQ2) consisted of 72 individuals, 36 whose relationship terminated within 3 months of becoming proximal and 36 whose relationship continued past 4 months of becoming proximal. The sample was 58.3% female and 87.5% Caucasian (4.3% Asian Americans, 6.4% African American, and 3% other cultural/ethnic groups). Average age at the time of the reunion was 19.91 years ($SD = 1.89$, range = 17–29). The continuing and terminated samples were nearly identical demographically.

Instrumentation

Surveys consisted of a series of open-ended questions asking about transitions to geographic proximity, with emphasis on issues such as unexpected partner or relational changes and potential desirable aspects of LDDRs. We asked,

'How did things change, if at all, when you moved to the same geographic location?'; 'In what ways, if any, was the relationship better or worse than you expected?'; 'In what ways, if any, was your partner different than you expected?'; 'Did you have any problems when you moved to the same location that you did not anticipate, and if so what were they?'; and 'Were there any aspects that you liked about living in separate locations, and if so did you find you missed or desired any of these aspects?'

A 2-item, 7-point Likert-type index was created to assess the extent to which *individuals wanted to live in the same location* ($M = 6.11, SD = 1.30, \alpha = .83$; e.g., 'Did you look forward to living in the same location'). *Global expectations for relationship improvement* were assessed with a 2-item Likert-type scale asking if a better (or worse) relationship was expected when 'you moved to the same location' ($M = 5.81, SD = 1.23, \alpha = .67$). *Perceived improvement after reunion* was assessed with a 2-item measure asking if the relationship was better (or worse) 'after you moved to the same location?' ($M = 2.75, SD = 1.76, \alpha = .75$).

Coding open-ended responses

Responses to open-ended questions were examined using analytic induction methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As outlined by Baxter and Babbie (2004), participants' responses to all questions were read in their entirety, textual units identified, and coding categories developed. A list of unique concepts was generated for participants' responses to each open-ended question. Responses to each question were used to create two separate lists. One list focused on changes associated with the LD-GC turning point, and the other concerned the desirable features of LDDRs that were missed or lost with the LD-GC transition.

One researcher derived two sets of categories, one from each list, using analytic coding by considering 'the meanings and meaning making made evident to the researcher' (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 371) based on the data and upon the researcher's theoretical sensitivity to relevant literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To formulate the categories, the constant comparative method was employed, whereby participants' responses were examined for similarities in semantics and coherence (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After one team member had developed initial categories, a second team member was trained on a sample from the larger data pool not used in the current investigation. Both sets of categories were refined, and one member of the research team coded each participant's responses for the presence or absence of each category. The second member coded a random 20% of the data. Scott's pi reliability coefficient, which controls for chance agreement among coders, was found to be adequate (Scott's $\pi = .95$). A list of categories can be found in Table 1.

In addition to categorization of the open-ended responses, a thematic analysis was undertaken. Thematic analysis offers the opportunity for deeper understanding of the transition experience that is not necessarily captured by dissection of responses into categories. That is, additional insight is often gained from reading participants' responses in their entirety and examining participants' use of similar phrases across questions indicating the salience of certain ideas (e.g., Wood, Dendy, Dordek, Germany, & Varallo, 1994). In this manner, an entire text (i.e., each participant's complete responses to the aforementioned questions) is considered the unit of analysis as opposed to smaller 'chunks' of information originating from participants' responses (Baxter, 1992).

TABLE 1
Postreunion relational changes and desirable aspects of LDDRs

Postreunion changes	% participants (N = 72)	% continuing (n = 36)	% terminated (n = 36)	χ^2
More Face-to-face (FtF) Time	52.8	63.9	41.7	3.6
Realization of Partner	43.1	25.0	61.1	9.6*
Negative Characteristics				
Loss of Autonomy	40.3	50.0	30.6	2.8
Relational Escalation	34.7	52.8	16.7	10.3***
Time and Scheduling	27.8	44.4	11.1	9.9**
Difficulties				
Increase in Conflict	27.8	25.0	30.6	.3
Relational Deescalation	23.6	2.8	44.4	17.3***
Relational Adjustment	20.8	16.7	25.0	.8
Jealousy	13.9	8.3	19.4	1.9
Realization of Partner				
Positive Characteristics	9.7	16.7	2.8	4.0*
No Change	2.8	0.0	5.6	2.1

Desirable aspects of LDDRs	% participants (N = 72)	% continuing (n = 36)	% terminated (n = 36)	χ^2
Closeness Via Distance	33.3	50.0	50.0	0.0
Quality Time	26.3	16.7	38.9	4.4*
Anticipation/Novelty	25.0	13.9	36.1	3.9*
Autonomy	44.4	33.3	55.6	3.9*
Time Management Ease	11.1	11.1	11.1	.00
Missed Nothing	15.3	16.7	13.9	.12

Note. For each χ^2 test, *df* = 1. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

Results

Equivalence of terminated and continuing groups

The length of time individuals dated before separation, the length of the separation, or the age of participants at the reunion may influence the success of the transition. If this is the case, these variables should be controlled for in subsequent analyses. The groups were comparable on length of time dating before the separation (terminated *M* = 8.56 months; continuing *M* = 6.42 months), *t*(68) = 1.05, *ns*. Groups were also of similar age at the reunion (terminated *M* = 19.80; continuing *M* = 20.05), *t*(66) = .60, *ns*. Finally, the groups did not differ in length of separation (terminated *M* = 8.61 months; continuing *M* = 9.98 months), *t*(68) = .79, *ns*.

Differences between groups could also be a function of the desire to move to the same location and/or global expectations about that reunion. Individuals who continued their relationships (*M* = 5.81, *SD* = 1.38) did not differ from individuals who ended their relationships (*M* = 6.37, *SD* = 1.54) in the degree to which they looked forward to coming together, *t*(69) = 1.81, *ns*. Moreover, those who remained together upon reunion (*M* = 5.72, *SD* = 1.30) and those

who did not ($M = 5.89, SD = 1.57$) were not significantly different in their expectations for a better relationship following the transition, $t(69) = .56, ns$. The groups were also comparable in reasons for separation and reunion as approximately 95% of the participants from each group initially moved apart and subsequently moved together due to school- or college-related reasons.

Research questions and hypotheses

Our first research question asked whether LDDRs were more likely to terminate during separation or reunion. Of reports from the 155 college students who had ended 'serious' LDDRs, 57.7% ended the relationship while long-distance, and the remaining 43.3% ended the relationship after becoming geographically close, $\chi^2(1) = 1.09, ns$. Individuals are equally likely to dissolve an LDDR following their transition to proximity as during their separation.

Our second research question asked what proportion of LDDRs terminate after becoming proximal. Of the 180 individuals who reported being in LDDRs that became proximal, 66 reported that they had terminated their relationships after moving to the same location. Although we do not know how many of the continuing relationships terminated following the data collection, we can say that at least 36.6% of those who transitioned to proximity terminated after the reunion.

The remaining research questions and hypotheses utilized the reduced sample of 72 (i.e., 36 continuing and 36 who terminated).

Desire and expectation

Hypothesis 1 predicted that individuals in LDDRs desire to become geographically close. Using the 2-item scale developed to assess the desire for proximity, the sample mean was 6.15, substantially higher than the scale's theoretic midpoint, $t(70) = 14.53, p < .01, d = 3.47$. This result is consistent with H1. In addition, we examined the 2-item index of global expectations to test the second hypothesis, that participants would have a general expectation for a better postreunion relationship. The mean score for this measure was 5.78, which is also substantially higher than the scale's theoretic midpoint, $t(70) = 12.39, p < .01, d = 2.96$. Thus, H2 was also supported. Individuals reported that they desired to live in the same location and that they expected their relationship to improve as a result of the reunion.

The third hypothesis posited that the perceived positive change individuals experienced after transitioning to proximity would be significantly less than what they expected. To test this prediction, we compared the global expectations index to the actual positive change individuals reported upon reunion. Paired sample t -tests revealed that expectations scores ($M = 6.03, SD = 1.36$) were significantly higher than actual improvement ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.94$), $t(70) = 12.78, p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 3.05$). Thus, the third hypothesis was supported.

H4 predicted that individuals experiencing termination following reunion would report greater unmet expectations for relational improvement, when compared with those who continued their relationships. To test this hypothesis, the index of actual relational change following reunion was subtracted from the index of expected change to create a discrepancy score. The more positive this discrepancy score, the less the reality of the reunion met the initial expectations. Contrary to H4, results revealed that the expectations for those who transitioned successfully ($M = 3.57, SD = 1.83$) were not met as well as those who terminated ($M = 2.49, SD = 2.00$), $t(68) = 2.36, p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 1.54$.

Changes accompanying geographic proximity

Our third research question concerned the qualitative changes accompanying the LD-GC turning point. Based on inductive analysis of the open-ended responses (see Table 1), 97% of respondents noted some type of relationship change associated with the LD-GC transition. The remaining participants offered phrases such as 'nothing changed' and 'no changes.' Descriptions and examples of these categories follow.

More face-to-face time. This category references individuals' positively valenced ability to spend more time with their partner when GC, and the enjoyment of the increased time. Some comments were explicit references to an increase in FtF time: 'We get to spend more time together.' Other participants did not reference time together explicitly but rather mentioned various FtF activities they could participate in after the reunion. One respondent, for example, stated, 'We finally got to do all the "little" things we'd been wanting to do for so long; we get to hold each other, wake up next to each other, eat together, etc.'

Realization of partner's negative characteristics. The second category represents the discovery of negative partner attributes. Two general types of responses comprised this category: (i) Noting that one's partner displayed general negative qualities such as laziness, sloppiness, or immaturity, and (ii) perceiving that one's partner did not put forth much effort into the relationship or was emotionally distant. The first type of remark is typified by comments such as 'I didn't realize how immature she was.' The second is illustrated by comments such as 'He was distant with me, which hadn't been the case while we were long distance.'

Loss of autonomy. Many individuals reported experiencing a loss of autonomy following reunion. Some responses were stated in one word; individuals liked and missed the 'freedom' or 'privacy' the distance allowed. The loss of autonomy category contained three types of comments. The first referenced a loss of time and space for the self, a lack of 'me-time.' An example is, 'I did lose personal freedoms and it bothered me at first, a lot!' The second type of statement referenced a loss of time for friends and family. One woman, following reunion with her boyfriend, 'lost other friendships.' The third type of statement reflected perceptions of the partner's control or monitoring. Individuals reported feeling they could not do things without the partner keeping 'close tabs' on them. This is exemplified by the comment, '[now that we live in the same city] I have to check everything I do with her.' Reports of 'nagging', demanding, or expecting 'too much' were also frequent.

Relational escalation. Another category reflects partners' relationships becoming deeper, more personal, or more serious after reunion. These responses tended to be global in nature. The phrase 'Overall, our relationship grew incredibly,' exemplifies this category.

Time and scheduling difficulties. Many participants indicated difficulties seeing their partners as much as they might have liked because of outside responsibilities or commitments that competed for their time and attention. As one woman wrote, 'I had to figure out how to balance my time all over again.'

Increased conflict. Several individuals reported more conflict and ‘fighting’ in their relationship after it became geographically close. Many said they felt the conflict in their relationship was not only more frequent but also more difficult to resolve. For example, one individual stated that, when his relationship was long distance, he and his partner ‘fought less and if we did fight, problems were solved in a shorter amount of time.’

Relational deescalation. In contrast to the relational escalation category, this category represents relationships becoming less close, or worse, after the LD-GC transition. Responses illustrating this include the following: ‘It seemed like both of us grew apart because we became different.’

Relational adjustment. Some respondents mentioned an adjustment, or another ‘getting-to-know-you,’ phase. Many said the increased proximity led to feelings of nervousness or awkwardness. For example, one respondent offered, ‘I felt like I was meeting him for the first time.’

Jealousy. For some, living in the same location led to increased feelings of jealousy and suspicion. After witnessing their partners’ behavior, some participants said that they became increasingly concerned that their partners were currently ‘cheating’ on them or had ‘cheated on them in the past.’ One respondent said his partner’s ‘cell phone always rang with dudes calling and she didn’t see it as a problem.’

Realization of partner’s positive characteristics. This category represents participants’ discovery of partners’ positive traits. One respondent, for example, said of her partner, ‘He was a lot more sensitive than I thought.’

Relational changes experienced by continuing versus terminating groups

The fourth research question asked if the changes experienced upon reunion differed depending on whether partners terminated or continued their relationships. Terminated and continuing individuals were found to differ significantly with respect to their reported experience of five of the 11 change categories (with phi values ranging from .03 to .05; see Table 1). Individuals whose relationships terminated, compared to those whose relationships continued, were more likely to report the *discovery of negative characteristics* and less likely to mention the *discovery of positive characteristics* about their partners. Also, individuals from terminated relationships were more likely to report *relational deescalation*, whereas individuals from continuing relationships were more likely to report *relational escalation*. Results further revealed that individuals who continued their relationships said that they *experienced more time and scheduling difficulties* than individuals whose relationship terminated. The two groups were not significantly different, however, in their reports of experiencing more FtF time, increased conflict, jealousy, adjustment, or a loss of autonomy.

The loss of desirable features of LDDRs

The next research question concerned desirable aspects of LDDRs that might be lost upon reunion. The vast majority (85%) of participants reported missing at least one aspect of their LDDR. Five categories of desirable features emerged: Closeness via distance, quality time, anticipation/novelty, autonomy, and time management ease.

Distance facilitated feelings of closeness and/or strengthened the relationship for some participants (*closeness via distance*). For example, one respondent noted that he missed how 'our relationship grew stronger from being apart.' Some participants reported valuing or enjoying the FtF time more before, rather than after, the reunion (*quality time*). One respondent indicated that when her relationship was long distance, '[We] cherished time together, whereas at home we took it for granted.' *Anticipation/novelty* captures the idea that, during their separation, partners experienced a sense of novelty and excitement when temporarily united that was no longer present with permanent reunification. Moreover, some noted that they 'missed missing;' some level of newness, excitement, or wistful yearning is lost once partners are able to see each other on a daily basis. Representing this category were the statements, 'If there is one thing I miss, it might be that excited, anticipated feeling of seeing each other since we didn't see each other often.'

As indicated in the discussion of changes, reunion may result in a loss of autonomy. It is therefore not surprising that *autonomy* also emerged as a desirable yet missed aspect of LDDRs. Individuals reported, due to their partners' presence, a loss of personal independence as well as restrictions on how often they could engage in activities with friends and family members.

Some respondents referenced the difficulties of proximity involved in balancing both partners' schedules. These individuals enjoyed the *time-management ease* separation had offered. Unlike the autonomy category, which represents a lack of time for self, friends, or family, this category references individuals' difficulties *making time for each other*. As one respondent put it, 'Finding time to get together is harder.'

Lost desirable features of continuing groups versus terminating groups

To test the fourth hypothesis, that the perceived loss of benefits will be associated with the outcome of the transition (i.e., termination versus continuation), a series of chi-square tests were again conducted (see Table 1). The two groups differed in three of the five categories. Specifically, the terminated group was significantly more likely to report a *loss of autonomy*, a decrease in the *quality of time spent together*, and a *longing for the anticipation or novelty* of the prior long-distance arrangement (with phi values of .03).

Thematic analysis

Two overarching conclusions emerged when consideration was given to each participant's entire responses. The first is that moving to the same location is neither a completely positive nor a negative experience. Only 7% of the individuals offered entirely negative comments, and only 11% offered all positive stories about the transition experience. The remaining 82% described both pros and cons. Among these mixed feelings was the apparent presence of a dialectical tension between autonomy and connection (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Participants reported enjoying their increased time together and simultaneously missing their previous independence. For example, one respondent commented, '[Our relationship was] better because we spent more time together and it was worse because we spent too much time together.'

The second overarching theme was the discovery, or rediscovery, of knowledge. A full 20% of the participants used the word 'realized' in their responses, and an additional 20% stated explicitly that they 'learned' new things about themselves, their partners, or the relationship upon becoming proximal. A

pervasive comment referenced a revelation that the respondents did not 'really know' their partners as well as they thought. Sometimes this knowledge resulted in the discovery that their partners were 'not right for them.' Representative of these feelings is the comment, 'We weren't as close as I thought; I realized he had a different personality after we were together more.'

Discussion

The primary goal of the current investigation was to examine the turning point of reunion that occurs when LDDRs transition to GCDRs. In this study, approximately half of LDDRs ended during physical separation. In these cases this turning point could not occur. Although the remainder of LDDRs survived separation, this does not preclude relational turbulence upon the relationship's transition to proximity. At least one-third of LDDRs that were maintained during separation were terminated within 3 months of the reunion. Even with relationships that continued, many individuals experienced the perceived loss of some benefits of a long-distance arrangement.

Rather than reiterate our findings, we offer speculations based on our overall pattern of results. These speculations center on four intertwined features of reunions: An increase in relational knowledge, the dissipation of quixotic ideals, an increase in interdependence, and the incorporation of multiple turning points within the transition.

Relational knowledge facilitation

A pervasive finding was that individuals reported gaining new knowledge about their partners, the relationship, or themselves following the reunion. There is little debate that interaction is necessary to acquire knowledge about one's partner, and 'depth of acquaintance' has remained a consistent predictor of later marital quality and stability (Larson & Holman, 1994). Westefeld and Liddell (1982) noted that college students involved in LDDRs often have difficulty 'evaluating the relationship while at a distance' (p. 550). Perhaps this inability to evaluate their relationship is altered suddenly upon reunion due to a rapid increase in time spent together and the garnering of new relational insight.

Newfound knowledge is apparently obtained upon reunion both by those whose relationship terminated and those whose relationship continued after reunion. Reunion allowed the discovery of positive *as well as* negative characteristics about their partner, feeling that the partner had changed in some way since the relationship was long distance. Overall, increased knowledge accompanies the transition to proximity, and this knowledge does not necessarily promote increased commitment, as prior turning-point literature might suggest (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Rather, as Holmes (1991) points out, the reduction of uncertainty may uncover imperfections and negative aspects. In some instances, 'partners may be confronted by the unpleasant possibility that their relationship may ultimately fail' (Boon, 1994, p. 92).

Dissipation of quixotic ideals

Proximity seems to afford an altered image of one's partner. Often, early in relationships, emotional involvement is intense and yet relatively superficial (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). In theory, these relatively superficial and intense feelings give way as partners interact repeatedly over time (Sprecher, 1999). Yet, it has been argued that limited interaction might allow the continuation, or reinstatement, of earlier idealized images. Idealization may be fostered in part by LDDR partners' selective positive self-presentations (Stafford & Merolla, in press). We propose that romanticized ideals dissipate with permanent proximity, given that three of the five lost benefits of separation found in our data reflect romanticized beliefs, including feelings of increased relational fortitude, experiencing comparatively 'high quality' interactions, and enjoying novelty and longing. These reports comport with Wendel's (1975) observation that some long-distance high school and college dating partners believed that separation strengthened their relationship. Similarly, Hill et al. (1976) reported that for some, 'separation may, if anything, intensify interest in the relationship' (p. 158). Sahlstein (2004) also found that, when the relationship was long distance, many individuals reported the distance facilitated closeness and that their limited time together was special.

Although distance might increase feelings of closeness or relational strength during cycles of frequent separation and reunion (Sahlstein, 2004), the extent to which these 'benefits' indeed facilitate long-term relationship maintenance after a permanent reunion is unknown. The belief that the distance facilitated feelings of relational strength and closeness was no more prevalent among those who terminated their relationship upon reunion than those who continued. This suggests that perceptions and effects of idealization or romanticism in relationships may function differently across relational forms and stages. Idealization, for instance, may be critical during geographic separation to buffer partners from the strains of distance relating whereas upon reunion the experience of idealization may be altered, and thus differentially affect relational maintenance processes (Stafford & Merolla, in press).

Increases in interdependence

Interdependence likely increases with reunions. Baxter (1988) contends that one of the fundamental features of close relationships – and their maintenance – is the inherent dialectical tension between autonomy and connection. Although we did not set out to examine dialectical tensions, the autonomy–connection dialectic became readily apparent. As Baxter and Erbert (1999) stated, 'turning points are envisioned as occasions of heightened intensity in which pressures of dialectical interplay change the relationship in some way' (p. 551). Our data support this view.

Moreover, both partners who maintained their relationships and those who terminated it upon reunion reported a loss of autonomy upon reunion; however, those who terminated were more likely to report *missing* their previous relative independence. Thus, rather than portraying relationships

solely in terms of escalation or deescalation following the transition, individuals may be torn between missing aspects of their LDDR such as their recollections of prior 'high quality' interactions and enjoying aspects of their GCDR such as the ability to 'just hang out' together.

Perhaps, then, partners' difficulty with increased 'togetherness' might be related to the renegotiating the segmentation of their relational and nonrelational lives. One of our respondents stated, 'It was nice having my life and my girlfriend [separate], now they're kind of the same thing.' Indeed, Sahlstein (2004) and Gerstel and Gross (1984) found that individuals felt that distance required partners to segment their lives such that when apart, schoolwork and other relationships were at the forefront and then, when together, couples focused almost solely on each other. When couples are no longer cycling in and out of proximity, the ability to segment may be shattered. Interestingly, however, those individuals who continued their relationships reported more difficulty managing their time and tasks than did those who terminated their relationships. Perhaps those who maintained their relationships after coming together did so, in part, because they became aware of the need to engage in such co-ordination. Moreover, this awareness might have allowed them to better manage dialectical tensions during their transition.

Reunions and multiple turning points

The LD-GC turning point might itself be the catalyst for subsequent turning points, akin to what other scholars have termed '*transition-linked turning points*' (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996, p. 769). That is, major turning points, like the LD-GC transition, might be viewed as a number of smaller turning points that 'gradually pile up' (Bolton, 1961, p. 237) as individuals develop shared and contextualized communication experience (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In other words, turning points are comprised of and act as catalysts for other turning points.

Although we did not ask participants to recall turning points after their reunions, many of the changes reported (e.g., relational adjustment, partner realizations) share commonality with previously identified turning points among romantically involved college students (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999). For example, the 'get-to-know time' turning point may be present as couples significantly increase their FtF after reunions. Furthermore, the turning points of 'external competition' and 'network interaction' (Baxter & Erbert, 1999) appear implicit in our participants' accounts, particularly as reflected in the 'time and scheduling difficulties' category. Moreover, although not every conflict situation is a turning point, given the increased conflict and jealousy reported by our participants, the possibility for a conflictual turning point (Baxter & Pittman, 2001) might be elevated upon reunion.

Limitations and theoretical implications

Limitations of the current study must be noted. Tracing couples longitudinally as they confront the challenges of proximity may yield a different

picture than this retrospective endeavor. As with any retrospective investigation, recall bias is a concern. It is plausible, however, that individuals may be more insightful about their transition experiences upon reflection (e.g., Lloyd & Cate, 1985), especially in regards to desirable features of LDDRs lost upon reunion.

Given that our interest here is in college LDDRs, the use of college students is appropriate. Nonetheless, our participants attended an extremely large university in a metropolitan area. Thus, the pool of available dating partners might be much greater than at smaller institutions. It is unknown if such factors influence relational processes during separation and/or reunion. Future LDDR research should closely consider the roles played by external factors (e.g., communities) to the enactment of the relationship (Stafford, 2004). Other limitations include a small sample size, small effect sizes, and an inability to generalize to noncollege student LDDRs. Also, the demarcation of one academic term as the 'transition period', though partly based upon ecological factors, is problematic since available research provides no evidence of the extent early transition adjustments influence the course of the relationship.

To conclude, we offer a theoretical perspective that may facilitate the continued exploration of the LD-GC transition. Our results suggest that reunion experiences are characterized by a host of competing feelings, consistent with elements of relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Dialectics focuses on relational parties' experience and management of competing needs and feelings in relationships. Our findings suggest, for instance, that whereas reunions foster feelings of connectedness due to increased face-to-face time, such connectedness may infringe upon individuals' feelings of personal autonomy, and perhaps increase relational turbulence.

Similarly, our results demonstrate how reunions provide relational realizations regarding individuals' partner and relationship. Such realizations can either enable and constrain relational experience as newly acquired knowledge can challenge individuals' existing understanding of their partner and/or relationship. This is consistent with Afifi and Metts's (1998) claim that partner behavior that deviates from existing relational conceptualizations could be 'particularly informative about an individual's "true" self' (p. 387). Such revelations can either enhance or detract from relational quality, as well as increase or decrease relational uncertainty, depending on the interpretation of the behavior.

Furthermore, consistent with relational dialectics theory, tensions pervading reunions occur both between partners and involve couples' larger networks (see Baxter, Dun, & Sahlstein, 2001). For example, after reunion, couples have to negotiate their time between their newly proximal partner, friends and family. Geographic separation, it would seem, often precludes simultaneous, day-to-day management of these issues as distance offers clear distinctions between life with and life without the romantic partner. Indeed, in line with Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) focus on *totality* in the study of dialectics, reunited partners appear to experience a

'knot of contradictions' in several domains. Partners grapple with issues of autonomy and independence or novelty and routine both within the relationship and their network. Illustrative of this, Baxter et al. (2001) reported that 'in an interesting way, friendships and romantic relationships compete with one another for time and attention' (p. 187).

The recognition of dialectical tensions leads to questions of their management. Indeed, the (in)effective management of internal and external tensions during reunion may be an especially critical factor in determining relational success (Baxter, 1990). Providing insight into tension management, as well as direction for continued investigation of the LD-GC transition, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have created a typology of coping strategies (i.e., praxis responses). Thus, scholars can further research on relational reunions not only through the continued exploration of the presence of dialectical tensions, but also by examining how such tensions are jointly negotiated by relational parties, and to what extent negotiation patterns effectively address the exigencies of the LD-GC transition.

REFERENCES

- Affi, W. A., & Metts, S. (1998). Characteristics and consequences of expectation violations in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *15*, pp. 365–392.
- Baxter, L. A. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relationship development. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 257–274). London: Wiley.
- Baxter, L. A. (1990). Dialectical contradictions in relational development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *7*, 69–88.
- Baxter, L. A. (1992). Root metaphors in accounts of developing romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *9*, 253–275.
- Baxter, L. A., & Babbie, E. (2004). *The basics of communication research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Baxter, L. A., & Bullis, C. (1986). Turning points in developing romantic relationships. *Human Communication Research*, *12*, 469–493.
- Baxter, L. A., Dun, T., & Sahlstein, E. (2001). Rules for relating communicated among social network members. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *18*, 173–200.
- Baxter, L. A., & Erbert, L. A. (1999). Perceptions of dialectical contradictions in turning points of development in heterosexual romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *16*, 547–569.
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialects*. New York: Guilford.
- Baxter, L. A., & Pittman, G. (2001). Communicatively remembering turning points of relational development in heterosexual romantic relationships. *Communication Reports*, *14*, 1–17.
- Bochner, A. P. (1984). The functions of human communication in interpersonal bonding. In C. C. Arnold & J. W. Bowers (Eds.), *Handbook of rhetorical and communication theory* (pp. 544–621). Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bolton, C. D. (1961). Mate selection as the development of a relationship. *Marriage and Family Living*, *23*, 234–240.
- Boon, S. D. (1994). Dispelling doubt and uncertainty: Trust in romantic relationships. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), *Dynamics of relationships* (pp. 86–111). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Braiker, H., & Kelley, H. H. (1979). Conflict in the development of close relationships. In R. L.

- Burgess & T. L. Huston (Eds.), *Social exchange in developing relationships* (pp. 135–168). New York: Academic.
- Carlson, E., & Carlson, R. (1984). *Navy marriages and deployments* (Rev. ed.). New York: University of American Press.
- Conville, R. L. (1991). *Relational transitions: The evolution of personal relationships*. New York: Praeger.
- Dellmann-Jenkins, M., Bernard-Paolucci, T. S., & Rushing, B. (1994). Does distance make the heart grow fonder?: A comparison of college students in long-distance and geographically close dating relationships. *College Student Journal*, 28, 212–219.
- Farris, A. (1978). Commuting. In R. Rapoport, R. N. Rapoport, & J. M. Bumstead (Eds.), *Working couples* (pp. 100–107). New York: Harper and Row.
- Forsyth, C. J., & Gramling, R. (1987). Feast or famine: Alternative management techniques among periodic father absence in single career families. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 17, 183–196.
- Gerstel, N., & Gross, H. (1984). *Commuter marriage: A study of work and family*. New York: Guilford.
- Graber, J. A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1996). Transitions and turning points: Navigating the passage from childhood through adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, 32, 768–776.
- Guldner, G. T. (2001). Long-distance relationships and emergency medicine residency. *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, 37, 103–106.
- Guldner, G. T., & Swenson, C. H. (1995). Time spent together and relationship quality: Long-distance relationships as a test case. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 12, 313–320.
- Helgeson, V. S. (1994). Long-distance romantic relationships: Sex differences in adjustment and breakup. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 254–265.
- Hill, C. T., Rubin, Z., & Peplau, L. (1976). Breakups before marriage: The end of 103 affairs. *Journal of Social Issues*, 32, 147–168.
- Holmes, J. G. (1991). Trust and the appraisal process in close relationships. In W. H. Jones & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships* (Vol. 2, pp. 57–104). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Hunter, E. J. (1982). *Families under the flag: A review of military family literature*. New York: Praeger.
- Larson, J. H., & Holman, T. B. (1994). Premarital predictors of marital quality and stability: An applied literature review. *Family Relations*, 43, 1–10.
- Le, B., & Agnew, C. R. (2001). Need fulfillment and emotional experience in interdependent romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 18, 423–440.
- Levin, I., & Trost, J. (1999). Living together apart. *Community, Work, and Family*, 2, 279–292.
- Lloyd, S. A., & Cate, R. M. (1985). Attributions associated with significant turning points in premarital relationship development and dissolution. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2, 419–436.
- Lydon, J., Pierce, T., & O'Regan, S. (1997). Coping with moral commitment to long-distance dating relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 104–113.
- Merolla, A. J. (2005, November). *Long-distance dating partners' reunions and the experience of dialectical tensions*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, Boston, MA.
- Sahlstein, E. (2004). Relating at a distance: Negotiating being together and being apart in long-distance relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 689–702.
- Solomon D. H., & Knobloch, L. K. (2004). A model of relational turbulence: The role of intimacy, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners in appraisal of irritations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 795–816.
- Sprecher, S. (1999). 'I love you more today than yesterday': Romantic partners' perceptions of changes in love and related affect over time. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 46–53.
- Stafford, L. (2004). Romantic and parent-child relationships at a distance. In P. J. Kalbfleisch (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (pp. 37–86). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Stafford, L. (2005). *Maintaining long-distance and cross-residential relationships*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stafford, L., & Merolla, A. J. (in press). Idealization, reunions, and stability in long-distance dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.
- Stafford, L., & Reske, J. R. (1990). Idealization and communication in long-distance premarital relationships. *Family Relations*, 39, 274–279.
- Stephen, T. (1986). Communication and interdependence in geographically separated relationships. *Human Communication Research*, 13, 191–210.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Surra, C. A., & Hughes, D. K. (1997). Commitment processes in accounts of the development of premarital relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 59, 5–21.
- Vangelisti, A. (2002). Interpersonal processes in romantic relationships. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 643–679). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Van Horn, K. R., Arnone, A., Nesbitt, K., Desilets, L., Sears, T., Griffin, M., et al. (1997). Physical distance and interpersonal characteristics in college students' romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 4, 25–34.
- Wendel, W. C. (1975). High school sweethearts: A study in separation and commitment. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 4, 45–46.
- Westefeld, J. S., & Liddell, D. (1982). Coping with long-distance relationships. *Journal of College Student Development*, 23, 550–551.
- Wood, J. T., Dendy, L. L., Dordek, E., Germany, M., & Varallo, S. M. (1994). Dialectic for difference: A thematic analysis of intimates' meaning for differences. In K. Carter & M. Presnell (Eds.), *Interpretive approaches to interpersonal communication* (pp. 115–136). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.