Idealization, Maintenance Behaviors, and Infidelity Among Couples in Long Distance Relationships

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BACKGROUND

- Long distance relationships (LDR) are becoming more common, even though romantic partners are typically characterized as being closer in proximity (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

- There are other reasons couples are in LDR other than separation or divorce, these include: attaining an educational degree, pursuing careers, military deployment, and emigration (Stafford, 2005).

- Relational Maintenance Behaviors are used to preserve and improve the relationship (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010).

- Idealization is unrealistically focusing on the positive aspects of the partner and relationship, remembering less disagreements or areas of contention (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

- LDR couples tend to idealize each other more because of geographical distance and lack of physical proximity (Stafford & Reske, 1990).

- Physical and/or emotional infidelity can be due to: sexuality, emotional satisfaction, social context, attitudes-norms, and revenge-hostility (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999).

- From an evolutionary perspective, men have the opportunity to have a LDR with a partner but are also afforded the opportunity to cheat and “get away” with it, potentially having more chances at having viable offspring.

- Previous research has examined the relationship between maintenance behaviors and idealization (Jiang & Hancock, 2013) but infidelity in relation to both has yet to be explored.

CURRENT STUDY

- The present study is a moderated-mediation model that examines how idealization mediates maintenance behaviors and infidelity in LDR, and how gender moderates the relationship between idealization and cheating.

- Idealization is one component of maintenance behaviors, but in LDR, it is especially emphasized since there is no frequent physical proximity so couples do not readily see or acknowledge each other’s actual behaviors as often as their geographically close counterparts, and thus have created a false sense of their romantic partner which can lead to relationship dissatisfaction (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010).

- Previous research has shown men are more likely to be unfaithful to their partner overall. This may be true regardless of how much they idealize and engage in other maintenance behaviors (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999).

Hypothesis:

- The relationship between maintenance behaviors and cheating will be mediated by idealization, with gender moderating the path between idealization and cheating. More specifically, we predict the negative association between idealization and cheating to be either weaker or non-significant for males.

METHODS

- Questionnaires will be administered to undergraduate students to assess their current or past LDR. The first measure will be used to assess maintenance behaviors, the second will measure relationship satisfaction and idealization, and the last one will assess infidelity.

Measures:

- Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure looks at what behaviors couples engage in to maintain or bolster relational satisfaction. There are 7 categories with 31 items each on scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree; Stafford, 2011).

- The Idealistic Distortion measure is a subscale of the EMS scale comprised of 5 items, each on scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scales examines to what extent couples idealize each other and their relationship (Flowers & Olson, 1993).

- The Infidelity Scale has 13 items with a scale ranging from (1 = not important at all, 5 = very important) that asks if a partner is cheating on a current partner. (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999)

Relational partners who are cheated on experience more distress and more are likely to have health issues. This study will contribute to the literature by determining to what extent idealization is a useful or harmful maintenance behavior, and to understand further sex differences in infidelity. Particularly, why someone would engage in maintenance behaviors but still cheat on their partner.