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The Mediating Role of Idealization in the Association between Couples’ Geographical Separation and Infidelity
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BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

- Although romantic partners are typically characterized as being closer in proximity, long-distance relationships (LDR) are becoming more common (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).
- There are a multitude of reasons couples are in LDR, including educational degree attainment, military deployment, and emigration (Stafford, 2005).
- Relational Maintenance Behaviors (RMB) are used to continue and enhance the relationship (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010).
- One such RMB is idealization. Idealization is unrealistically focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship and remembering less disagreements or areas of contention (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).
- LDR couples have a tendency to idealize each other more due to geographical distance and lack of physical proximity (Stafford & Reske, 1990).
- There are many facets to physical and emotional infidelity, such as sexuality, emotional satisfaction, attitudes-norms, and revenge-hostility (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999).
- The relationship between maintenance behaviors and idealization has been documented by previous research (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), but infidelity in relation to both has yet to be explored.
- The purpose of this study is to determine the extent of which idealization is a useful of harmful RMB. Specifically, the study examines why someone would engage in RMB but still cheat on their partner.

CURRENT STUDY

- The present study is a mediation model that examines how maintenance behaviors mediate geographical separation and infidelity in LDR.
- The original intent of the study was to analyze idealization; however, once we reached the stage of analysis, we realized that a methodological error prohibited us from measuring idealization. However, we were able to measure the broader concept that idealization is nested in—relational maintenance behavior. Thus, we tested the following hypothesis:
  - Maintenance behaviors will mediate the relationship between geographical separation and infidelity. Specifically, we predict that those who are in long-distance relationships will utilize more RMB than those who are in geographically close relationships, and that higher levels of RMB will, in turn, predict lower levels of infidelity.

METHODS

Participants
- We recruited 154 students who reported being heterosexual from the undergraduate participant pool. The mean sample age was 19.29 years (SD = 2.81). The majority of participants (89.6%) were Caucasian/White.

Procedure
- Questionnaires were administered to students to assess their current or past LDR.

Measures
- The Infidelity Scale (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999) is an 11-item scale that measures emotional and physical infidelity (e.g. “How emotionally [physically] intimate were you with this person?”).
- The Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure (RMBM; Stafford, 2010) is a 55-item scale. For the purpose of this study, only 23 items were utilized. The RMBM ranges on a seven-interval Likert scale (“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- Bootstrapping mediation analysis was used to determine the mediating role of RMB in the relationship between geographical separation and infidelity. The results found no support for the hypothesis, such that the indirect effect of RMB through geographical separation and infidelity was found to be not significant.
- There was no difference in RMB for couples in short or long distance relationships. It’s possible that when dating, but not cohabitating, RMB are more similar to LDR maintenance behaviors than those behaviors are to the behaviors of cohabitating couples. This might explain the lack of support for the hypothesis.
- Future research might benefit from comparing RMB of cohabiting partners to RMB of couples in LDR.