

Missing you maintains us: Missing a romantic partner, commitment, relationship maintenance, and physical infidelity

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Abstract

Working from the perspective of interdependence theory and models of relationship maintenance, this study examined the functional role of missing a romantic partner during a brief geographic separation. Eighty-eight undergraduate students involved in romantic relationships completed a measure of commitment prior to separation, and measures of missing a romantic partner, relationship maintenance, and physical infidelity during their winter break. Commitment was associated with participants' self-reports of missing their romantic partners. Further, commitment predicted participants' use of relationship maintenance strategies (i.e., positivity, openness, and assurances) and physical infidelity during the separation. These associations were mediated by how much participants missed their romantic partners. Findings are discussed in terms of interdependence theory and the growing literature on geographic distance between relationship partners.

Keywords

commitment, geographic separation, infidelity, missing, relationship maintenance

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Although psychological closeness is a hallmark of intimate romantic relationships (Mashek & Aron, 2004), inevitably there are times in a relationship when geographic closeness is not possible. Geographic separation has many causes including military deployment, business travel, incarceration, and family responsibilities; the duration of a geographic separation may range from a few minutes and hours to many months and years. Regardless of the length of time partners are apart from each other or the cause of the distance, separations offer a unique context for studying relationship processes. Such work allows researchers to examine relational mechanisms that are not possible during geographic proximity, and can provide insight into the boundaries of particular theoretical perspectives. Of interest in the current study is the experience of missing a romantic partner (Le et al., 2008) as a functional process associated with commitment, relationship maintenance, and physical infidelity in romantic relationships. Working from the perspective of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), we examined these processes in a sample of individuals geographically separated from their romantic partners over the course of their winter break between semesters.

In recent years there has been an emergence of research surrounding long-distance relationships (see review by Stafford, 2005). These studies have provided insight into a diverse set of relational processes occurring during geographic separations, including self-disclosure (Van Horn et al., 1997), communication (Dainton & Aylor, 2002), relational idealization (Stafford & Reske, 1990), commitment (Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997), intimacy (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994), as well as negotiating separation and closeness (Sahlstein, 2004). Although the literature on chronic long-distance relationships has burgeoned, very few studies have examined relationship processes during short-term, temporary geographic separations. Notable exceptions are the study by Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia (1999), which investigated infidelity and commitment during a week-long separation, and work by Diamond, Hicks, and Otter-Henderson (2008), which suggests that short-term separations of just a few days have a significant impact on partners' affect, sleeping patterns, and stress hormones. Their findings highlight the importance of temporary separations in understanding the links between relational process and physical as well as psychological well-being.

Commitment, relationship maintenance, and infidelity

An abundance of research has demonstrated the importance of commitment within romantic relationships. Commitment refers to a psychological attachment to the partner, a long-term orientation to the relationship, and an intention to persist in the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) highlights the importance of commitment for relationship functioning in that it is associated with accommodation (Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996), willingness to sacrifice (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997), fidelity (Drigotas et al., 1999), and relationship persistence (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010).

Considering the associations between commitment and relationship-enhancing behaviors, it is perhaps unsurprising that commitment serves to promote relationship maintenance, or partners' management of relationship functioning, by enhancing the continuance, quality, and improvement of a relationship (Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001).

The active efforts individuals take to sustain their relationships are typically referred to as behavioral maintenance strategies (Stafford, 2003). Stafford and Canary (1991) outlined five strategies that are enacted in the form of interpersonal communication. *Positivity* is the degree of cheerfulness, patience, and self-esteem bolstering individuals exhibit towards their partners. Using positivity involves being optimistic, polite, and romantic with one's relationship partner as well as trying to be cooperative as opposed to criticizing when addressing conflict within the dyad. *Openness* refers to the amount of self-disclosure in the romantic relationship. Individuals who use this maintenance strategy "like to have periodic talks about the relationship" (p. 228), speaking honestly about their feelings regarding their relationships and encouraging their partners to do the same. Individuals who use *assurances* as a maintenance strategy emphasize that they are committed to their partners and indicate their desire to see their relationships persist. They also assure their partners by demonstrating their love and fidelity. The fourth type of behavioral maintenance represents the extent to which partners share the same *social network*. Finally, *task sharing* involves helping equally with the joint responsibilities that couples face.

When a particular relationship meets individuals' needs they are motivated to sustain it by engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors to communicate their commitment to their partners. The use of maintenance strategies is associated with liking, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Likewise, participants who perceive that their partners frequently engage in behavioral maintenance strategies are more satisfied with their relationships (Dainton, 2000), report lower levels of relational uncertainty (Dainton, 2003), and are more involved in their relationships (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993). Furthermore, consistent with the perspective that relationship interdependence is a dynamic process, regular enactment of maintenance strategies predicts relationship persistence (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002).

If a relationship does not meet individuals' needs they may not put effort into maintaining that relationship. Further, he or she may engage in behaviors that threaten the well-being and future of the relationship, such as infidelity. In the current study we focus on physical infidelity consisting of engaging in sexual intimacy with an alternative partner that defies societal and relational norms (Hall & Fincham, 2006). Just as commitment is positively associated with relationship maintenance, it is negatively associated with willingness to engage in extradyadic sex (Buunk & Bakker, 1997). This reduced likelihood of cheating may occur because highly committed individuals protect their relationships by derogating alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Further, highly committed individuals are more likely to consider the consequences of infidelity for both their relationships and their partners (Drigotas & Barta, 2001).

Maintenance and infidelity during geographic separations

Relationship maintenance is important for dyadic partners separated by geographic distance (Aylor, 2003) and can serve to enhance partners' certainty about their relationships (Sahlstein, 2006). Furthermore, although little work has explicitly examined infidelity during geographic separations (cf. Drigotas et al., 1999), being apart from a partner is an opportunity variable that provides a context for cheating to occur (Atkins, Baucom,

& Jacobson, 2001; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). The work most directly relevant to the current study is research by Drigotas et al. (1999), which examined infidelity and commitment during the short-term geographic separation of college students' spring break. Using the framework of the investment model (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), they found that participants high in commitment were less likely to cheat on their partners during the break.

Given the past work on relationship maintenance and infidelity during short- and long-term separations (e.g., Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Drigotas et al., 1999), it is clear that geographic separation provides a valuable context for studying the basic processes at the foundation of relationship commitment, maintenance, and threat. Specifically, what is the mechanism by which commitment promotes relationship maintenance and fidelity? In the case of geographic separations, we suggest that the experience of *missing a romantic partner* serves to motivate relationship-enhancing behavior. Specifically, when individuals miss their romantic partners they engage in communicative behaviors to maintain their relationships and avoid behaviors (such as infidelity) that threaten the well-being of the relationship.

The experience of missing a romantic partner

In a set of studies on missing a romantic partner within the context of long-distance relationships, Le et al. (2008) identified the affective (e.g., feeling sad), cognitive (e.g., day-dreaming about the partner), and behavioral (e.g., talking about the partner to friends) features of the experience. In addition, they offer a reliable self-report measure (the Missing in Interpersonal Separation Scale; MISS) to assess the experience of missing a romantic partner, which is positively correlated with commitment. Considering the relationship between commitment and maintenance mechanisms (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994), it is possible that missing a romantic partner may be associated with individuals' efforts to enact relationship maintenance behaviors when they are separated from their partners in order to promote the continuance, quality, and improvement of their relationships.

From the perspective of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), partners depend on one another for preferred outcomes that cannot be obtained elsewhere (e.g., alternative relationships). A particular partner facilitates fulfillment of needs and goals via interaction within the relationship, producing a state of dependence subjectively experienced as commitment (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Thus, commitment corresponds to the extent to which partners' interactions produce a set of desired outcomes and the degree to which partners rely on each other to achieve these outcomes.

According to Berscheid (1983), partners experience emotions in their relationship as a function of the degree to which their relational goals are facilitated or hindered through interaction with their partners (Le & Agnew, 2001). From an interdependence perspective, interactions between partners result in need fulfillment, which produces emotions within a relationship. Geographic separation necessitates a change in these interactions (i.e., a partner is not available to meet one's needs), and the experience of missing a romantic partner may be the resultant emotion. In short, it is possible that the disruption of interdependent interactions between partners during a geographic separation leads to the experience of missing a partner.

Although this perspective accounts for the genesis of missing a romantic partner, it does not fully explain its function. Emotions are theorized to organize behavioral responses that attend to the interruption of the behavioral sequence involved (Berscheid, 1983). Therefore, missing a romantic partner may be particularly functional in motivating behavior to reestablish the interdependence threatened by geographic separation (Le et al., 2008). Committed individuals are likely to miss their partners more, thus prompting behaviors to protect and enhance the relationship when interdependence is threatened by separation. As such, we predicted that committed individuals engage in maintenance behaviors in the form of positive, open, and assuring communications with their partners. In addition, they may remain faithful to their partners during the separation. Thus, in the context of geographic separation, commitment is associated with missing a romantic partner and facilitates relationship maintenance.

Overview and goals of the current research

Using Drigotas et al. (1999) as a theoretical and methodological template, the current research focused on separation during a school vacation. We extended their work by using a longitudinal design to examine the association between commitment and missing a partner across short-term geographic separations. Based on previous findings (Le et al., 2008), we predicted that commitment prior to separation would be associated with the experience of missing a romantic partner during a geographic separation (Hypothesis 1). A second goal of this work was to examine missing a partner as a mediator of the associations between commitment and maintenance.¹ Building on work by Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999), we predicted that commitment would be associated with positivity (Hypothesis 2a), openness (Hypothesis 2b), and assurances (Hypothesis 2c), but that the associations between commitment and each of these maintenance strategies would be mediated by the experience of missing a romantic partner. Finally, extending Drigotas et al. (1999), we hypothesized that commitment would be negatively associated with physical infidelity (Hypothesis 3), and that this association would be mediated by the experience of missing a partner.

Method

Participants

The sample included 88 students (59 female, 29 male) from a small liberal arts college in the northeast United States, recruited with advertisements posted on a college-wide internet discussion board and around campus. All participants were involved in geographically proximal romantic relationships (i.e., they were involved with someone who lived nearby or attended the same college) and planned on spending the upcoming winter break away from their romantic partner (median distance from partner during the separation = 810 miles; $M = 1274.6$). The mean relationship duration was 12.63 months ($SD = 12.15$) at the first data collection, and the majority of participants described their romances as exclusive dating relationships (88.6%; 3.4% non-exclusive dating, 7.9% engaged or about to be engaged). The majority of participants were Caucasian/White (77.3%; Asian/Asian-American, 9.1%, other/multiracial, 9.1%; Hispanic/Latino, 2.3%;

African-American/Black, 1.1%; Native American, 1.1%), and their average age was 19.77 years ($SD = 1.24$). All of the participants included in these analyses completed Time 1 data collection along with at least one other wave of data in the study.

Design and procedure

Data were collected at four time periods; the first wave was approximately three weeks prior to the winter break (Time 1; early December), when partners were not geographically separated. Three data collections then occurred during the subsequent 4-week vacation: near the beginning of break (Time 2; distributed December 27; $n = 76$; median number of days since last seeing partner = 6), at the middle of break (Time 3; January 7; $n = 74$), and near the end of break (Time 4; January 17; $n = 72$; median number of days until seeing partner again = 3). The average duration between Time 1 and Time 4 was 49.47 days ($SD = 6.99$), and the total separation duration at Time 4 was between 27 and 30 days.

All data collection was conducted using internet-based surveys. To assure participants responded during the desired timeframe, all questionnaires distributed during the separation were only available for three days (i.e., participants had to respond within three days of receiving the on-line questionnaire). Participants were compensated \$5 for each survey they completed, and to discourage missing data, an additional \$5 was offered for completing all four waves of the study.

Measures

Time 1. Prior to the separation, participants completed a number of measures of relationship quality. Relevant to this study, relationship commitment was assessed with the 7-item subscale from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .90$).

Times 2–4. The questionnaires participants completed while geographically separated from their partners were identical. At these three time points participants completed a 20-item measure of the extent to which they missed their romantic partners (MISS; Le et al., 2008; e.g., “I thought about my partner,” “I wanted to be with my partner”; Time 2 $\alpha = .93$; Time 3 $\alpha = .90$; Time 4 $\alpha = .94$). Relationship maintenance was assessed using Stafford and Canary’s (1991) measures of positivity, openness, and assurances. At each data collection, positivity was assessed with 10 items (e.g., “I attempted to make our interactions very enjoyable”; Time 2 $\alpha = .70$; Time 3 $\alpha = .85$; Time 4 $\alpha = .85$), openness with six items (e.g., “I encouraged him/her to disclose thoughts and feelings to me”; Time 2 $\alpha = .81$; Time 3 $\alpha = .86$; Time 4 $\alpha = .88$), and assurances with four items (e.g., “I showed my love for him/her”; Time 2 $\alpha = .80$; Time 3 $\alpha = .80$; Time 4 $\alpha = .81$; all items used the following response scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Infidelity was assessed using the approach developed by Drigotas et al. (1999). At Times 2, 3, and 4, participants were asked to “think of a person over the past week that you were most attracted to besides your partner” and complete 11 items assessing levels of increasing intimacy during interactions with that person (i.e., a “foot-in-the-door” process increasing the likelihood that participants would admit to engaging in physical

Table 1. Descriptives and correlations between study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Time 1 Commitment	—					
2. Missing	.46**	—				
3. Positivity	.27*	.37**	—			
4. Openness	.37**	.58**	.21*	—		
5. Assurances	.57**	.62**	.42**	.71**	—	
6. Infidelity	-.27*	-.39**	-.12	-.17	-.43**	—
Mean	6.86	5.44	5.50	4.06	5.34	1.58
SD	1.73	.88	.63	1.20	1.21	1.35

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Note. Commitment was assessed prior to geographic separation; other variables were assessed during the separation.

infidelity). Following the measurement strategy recommended by Drigotas et al., we used the last item as our measure of physical infidelity (“How physically intimate were you with this person?”; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*).

Finally, at Times 2, 3, and 4 participants completed a shortened 2-item measure of commitment from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998; “I want our relationship to last a very long time” and “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”; 1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*; correlation between the two items at Time 2: $r = .86$; Time 3: $r = .85$; Time 4: $r = .82$).

To maximize the sample (i.e., not exclude participants with data missing during one or two of the final three waves of the study), as well as take advantage of the reliability of data aggregated across multiple time points, data from Times 2, 3, and 4 were averaged into composite measures of the variables of interest: missing a romantic partner, positivity, openness, assurances, infidelity, and commitment during the separation (used as a control variable in these analyses). The analyses reported below are based on the sample of 88 participants completing the Time 1 assessment and at least one of the Time 2–4 measures.

Results

Analytic strategy

First, we calculated all descriptive statistics for, and intercorrelations between, study variables (see Table 1). We then followed the requirements for mediation outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test our hypotheses. Mediation occurs when (1) variable A (i.e., commitment) is associated with variable C (i.e., relationship maintenance or infidelity), (2) the hypothesized mediator (i.e., missing a partner), variable B, is significantly associated with C controlling for A, and (3) the association between A and C is reduced when B is added to the model. Given the predicted association between Time 1 commitment and missing a romantic partner, we controlled for commitment levels during the geographic separation. Thus, these analyses identify the effects of missing a partner on maintenance and infidelity, independent of commitment.

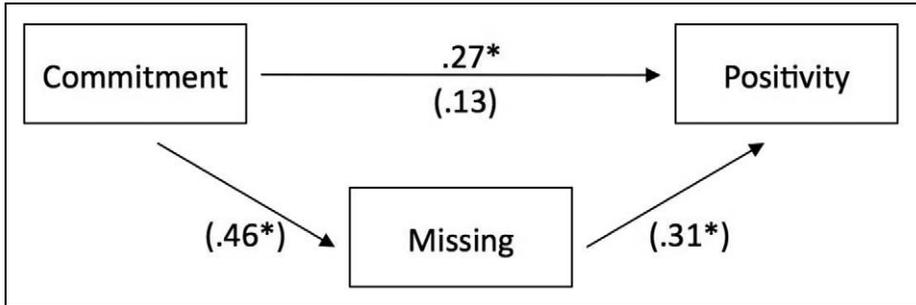


Figure 1. Commitment predicting positivity, mediated by missing a romantic partner. * $p < .01$

Testing hypothesis 1: Commitment and missing a romantic partner

To test Hypothesis 1, Time 1 commitment was regressed on participants' experiences of missing their romantic partners during the separation. As predicted, there was a significant positive association between commitment and missing a partner; $F(1,86) = 23.12, p < .01; R^2 = .21, \beta = .46$.

Testing hypothesis 2: Predicting relationship maintenance

We predicted that Time 1 commitment would be positively associated with the relationship maintenance strategies of positivity, openness, and assurances assessed while partners were separated; however, we hypothesized that these associations would be mediated by the extent to which participants missed their romantic partners during the separation.

Hypothesis 2a: Positivity. In order to test the prediction that missing a partner mediated the association between commitment and positivity, Time 1 commitment was regressed on positivity during the separation; $F(1,86) = 6.88, p < .01; R^2 = .07, \beta = .27$. Next we ran a regression with Time 1 commitment and missing a romantic partner during the separation predicting positivity during the separation. The overall model was significant; $F(2,85) = 7.56, p < .01; R^2 = .15$, and missing a partner was a significant predictor of positivity; $\beta = .31, p < .01$. The effect of commitment on positivity, however, was no longer significant when missing a romantic partner was included in the model; $\beta = .13, p = .26$. The Sobel test was significant, indicating that missing a partner fully mediated the association between commitment and positivity ($z = 2.37, p < .05$; see Figure 1).

An additional regression analysis added commitment assessed during the separation to the model described above. In these analyses, missing a partner remained a significant predictor of positivity ($\beta = .24, p < .05$).

Hypothesis 2b: Openness. In order to test the prediction that missing a romantic partner mediated the association between commitment and openness, Time 1 commitment was regressed on openness during the separation; $F(1,86) = 13.79, p < .01; R^2 = .14, \beta = .37$. Next we ran a regression with Time 1 commitment and missing a partner during the

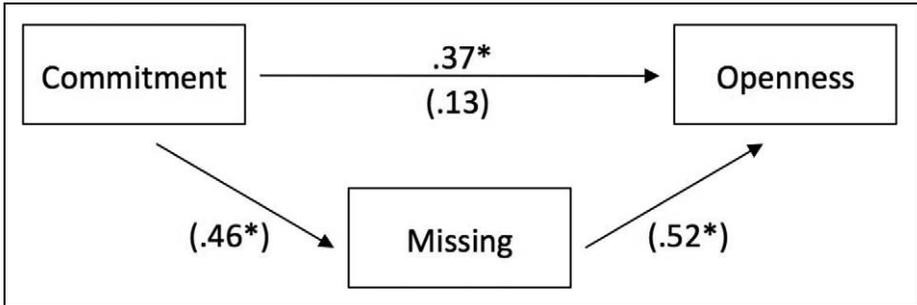


Figure 2. Commitment predicting openness, mediated by missing a romantic partner. * $p < .01$

separation predicting openness during the separation. The overall model was significant; $F(2,85) = 23.00, p < .01; R^2 = .35$, and missing a romantic partner was a significant predictor of openness; $\beta = .52, p < .01$. The effect of commitment on openness, however, was no longer significant when missing a partner was included in the model; $\beta = .13, p = .18$. The Sobel test was significant, indicating that missing a partner fully mediated the association between commitment and openness ($z = 3.52, p < .01$; see Figure 2).

An additional regression analysis added commitment assessed during the separation to the model described above. In these analyses, missing a romantic partner remained a significant predictor of openness ($\beta = .48, p < .01$).

Hypothesis 2c: Assurances. In order to test the prediction that missing a romantic partner mediated the association between commitment and assurances, Time 1 commitment was regressed on openness during the separation; $F(1,86) = 42.19, p < .01; R^2 = .33, \beta = .57$. Next we ran a regression with Time 1 commitment and missing a partner during the separation predicting assurances during the separation. The overall model was significant; $F(2,85) = 40.52, p < .01; R^2 = .49$, and missing a partner was a significant predictor of assurances; $\beta = .45, p < .01$. Commitment remained a significant predictor of assurances ($\beta = .37, p < .01$) when missing a romantic partner was included in the model; however, its effect was reduced compared to the model without missing a partner included. The Sobel test was significant, indicating that missing a partner partially mediated the association between commitment and assurances ($z = 3.47, p < .01$; see Figure 3).

An additional regression analysis added commitment assessed during the separation to the model described above. In these analyses, missing a romantic partner remained a significant predictor of assurances ($\beta = .33, p < .01$).

Testing Hypothesis 3: Predicting physical infidelity

Physical infidelity. We predicted that Time 1 commitment would be negatively associated with reports of physical infidelity during the separation and that this association would be mediated by the extent to which participants missed their romantic partners while separated. In order to test this prediction, Time 1 commitment was regressed on physical

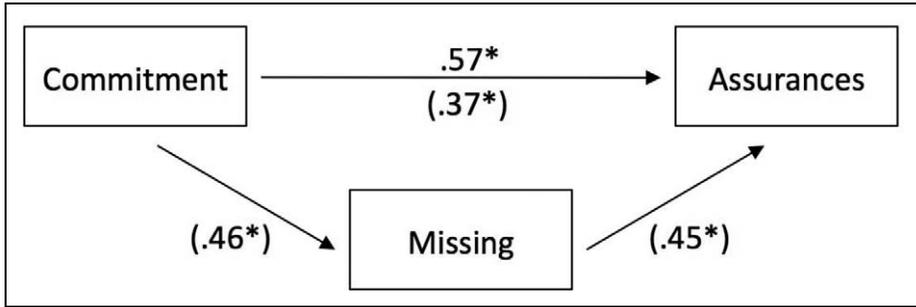


Figure 3. Commitment predicting assurances, mediated by missing a romantic partner. * $p < .01$

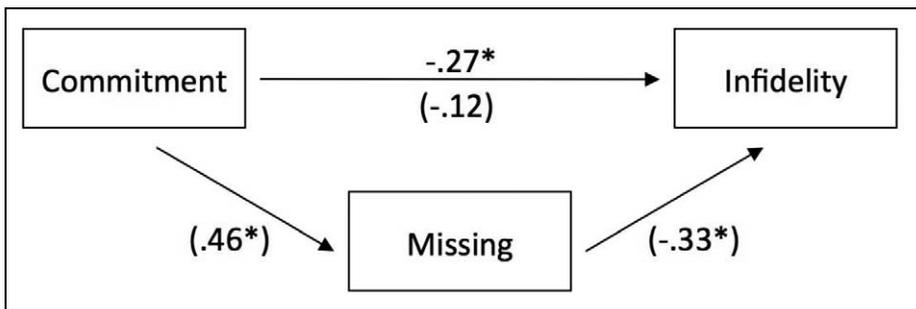


Figure 4. Commitment predicting infidelity, mediated by missing a romantic partner. * $p < .01$

infidelity during the separation; $F(1,85) = 6.89, p < .01; R^2 = .08, \beta = -.27$. Next we ran a regression with Time 1 commitment and missing a partner during the separation predicting infidelity during the separation. The overall model was significant; $F(2,84) = 8.11, p < .01; R^2 = .16$, and missing a romantic partner was a significant predictor of infidelity; $\beta = -.33, p < .01$; however, the effect of commitment on physical infidelity was no longer significant when missing a partner was included in the model; $\beta = -.12, p = .28$. The Sobel test was significant, indicating that missing a partner fully mediated the association between commitment and physical infidelity ($z = -2.47, p < .05$; see Figure 4).

An additional regression analysis added commitment assessed during the separation to the model described above. In these analyses, missing a romantic partner remained a significant predictor of physical infidelity ($\beta = -.22, p < .05$).²

Discussion

This research was grounded in interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and examined relationship maintenance (Stafford & Canary, 1991) within the context of a short-term geographic separation. We focused on the experience of missing a romantic partner (Le et al., 2008) as a mediating process in the association between commitment

and maintenance as well as commitment and infidelity. Using a longitudinal design encompassing the naturally occurring geographic separation of college students' winter break, three hypotheses were supported. First, we found that commitment assessed prior to the separation was associated with the experience of missing a romantic partner while partners were apart. Additionally, commitment predicted participants' use of positivity, openness, and assurances during the separation; however, these associations were mediated by the degree to which participants missed their partners. Finally, commitment predicted participants' physical infidelity during the separation, and this association was similarly mediated by the experience of missing a partner. These findings build on past research by providing insight into the function of missing a romantic partner. Previous work (Le et al., 2008) speculated that geographic separation disrupts the interaction patterns that characterize interdependent relationships, and this disruption may be experienced as missing a partner. The current findings suggest that missing a partner is associated with individuals' efforts to attend to their relationships and reestablish interdependence.

Theoretical considerations and applications

The current research extends the findings of interdependence theory to the context of geographic separations. Very little research on geographic separations has been grounded in interdependence theory (cf. Drigotas et al., 1999; Le & Agnew, 2001), and yet this perspective has much to offer when studying such separations. The current study proposes a mechanism by which interdependence is bolstered during periods of geographic separation. Specifically, commitment is associated with the experience of missing a romantic partner, which in turn is associated with relationship maintenance and fidelity. Thus, the current work extends interdependence theory by providing an affective and motivational component in understanding relationship commitment.

The present study also complements research on relationship maintenance within geographic separations. While past studies have focused on maintenance in long-distance relationships (Aylor, 2003; Stafford, 2005), this study investigates maintenance during temporary separations. The degree to which the processes operating in short- and long-term separations are similar remains an empirical question that can only be answered if future work considers the diversity of types of distance in relationships. Taken together, studies on differing types of geographic separations highlight the fact that relational contexts are not static. Instead, they ebb and flow through periods of physical proximity and distance. Considering these transitions provides a more complete picture of interpersonal dynamics across contexts (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006).

Along with these theoretical contributions, this work may have utility for counselors working with individuals in relationships. In a therapeutic context, the experience of missing a romantic partner may be a marker of an individual's commitment; the lack of missing a partner may be a sign that the relationship is at risk. Thus, missing a romantic partner may serve as a simple gauge of individuals' motivation to continue their relationships. Understanding the experience of missing a partner also has the potential to enhance therapeutic processes in order to better understand individuals' beliefs about their romantic relationships.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the important implications of this research, it is necessary to acknowledge its limitations. First, future work should replicate these findings in other types of samples to determine if they generalize beyond students during a school vacation. This research could be extended to couples separated by work, military deployment, or other similar situations. Also, the mean level of commitment was relatively high in this sample, which may be a function of self-selection to the study, and it may be fruitful to examine these processes in samples lower in commitment. Additionally, future work collecting data from larger samples with an equal proportion of males and females would increase external validity. Second, although this work is longitudinal, it is not experimental; any causal conclusions should be considered cautiously. Future research attempting to address this topic experimentally would be valuable.

Furthermore, the present research collected responses from only one partner rather than both members of the dyad. For example, it would be beneficial to examine one's experience of missing a partner and how it influences his or her partner's perceptions of maintenance. Such dyadic-level studies would allow for a more sophisticated analysis of the processes at the heart of relationship dynamics.

Finally, interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) could be more fully considered to gain insight into why the experience of missing a romantic partner arises during separations. How exactly does an interruption of interdependent interactions within the dyad lead to missing a romantic partner? Are certain forms of need fulfillment in a relationship (Le & Agnew, 2001) more strongly associated with missing a partner when the dyad is geographically separated? Can missing a romantic partner be experienced without geographic separation? These are empirical questions, and a deeper investigation into the process of interdependence within dyads would further illuminate these processes.

Conclusions

In the current study we investigated romantic partners' use of maintenance strategies and the experience of missing a romantic partner during a temporary geographic separation. We replicated and extended past findings that missing a partner is associated with commitment (Le et al., 2008), and supported previous research on communication and relationship maintenance during geographic separations. In particular, this work highlighted the role of missing a romantic partner as a mediating process involved in commitment and relational maintenance (Stafford & Canary, 1991). The experience of missing a partner is theorized to be functional in relationships by motivating pro-relational behavior for individuals who are committed to their relationships and provides a potential explanation for why some geographically separated relationships are maintained, while others are threatened.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Notes

1. Although Stafford and Canary (1991) offer five relationship maintenance strategies, we assessed only three of these in the current work (positivity, openness, and assurances). We made an a priori decision to not include social network and task sharing because they are largely contingent on geographic proximity. Sharing a social network implies that the couple will spend time together around mutual friends, but this is likely a rare occurrence when partners are separated during a school vacation. Similarly, engaging in joint tasks may depend on physical proximity to one's partner.
2. Analyses were also conducted with maintenance (positivity, openness, and assurances) and infidelity, respectively, as the mediating variable between commitment and missing a romantic partner. In these cases, the Sobel tests were not significant, indicating that maintenance and infidelity do not mediate the association between commitment and missing a partner.

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