Running head: CAAP FINAL PROJECT

Letter of Intent

Long Distance Relationships:

Communication Strategies to Facilitate Success

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Final Project

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Introduction and Rationale

A review of the literature shows that it is highly unusual to find a couple who are never separated and the reasons for this are as diverse and varied as the people themselves (Aylor, 2003; Edwards, 2001; Guldner, 2003; Knox, 2002; Maines, 1993; Marris, 1995; Milan & Peters, 2003; Netemeyer, Boles & McMurrian, 1996). For instance, dual career marriages can become conflicted due to tempting job offers, corporate relocations, and shifting job markets (Marris, 1995). Knox (2002) suggested that educational pursuits and taking care of elderly parents also contribute to the separation of couples. Milan and Peters (2003) inform our understanding of distance relationships by looking at "living apart together" (LAT) relationships. A LAT is defined as "…unmarried couples who live in separate residences while maintaining an intimate relationship" (Milan & Peters, 2003, p. 2). These authors state that due to increases in separation and divorce, changes in family responsibilities, and higher standards of living and life expectancies, many choose to be in a LAT. Furthermore, LATs serve many varied purposes for people at different ages and stages in their lives. For example, younger people are choosing to get married at older ages due to uncertainty in job prospects and pursuit of higher education (Milan & Peters, 2003). Also, deciding whether or not to bring another adult into a household where there are children could be a compelling reason to engage in a LAT. In contrast, older people may not wish to marry their dating partners for different reasons. Examples could include a preference for maintaining their own homes, financial benefits, and cultural and familial expectations about remarrying after divorce or widowhood (Milan & Peters, 2003). Given the great variety of possible distance relationships, just how common are they?

In 1993, there were approximately 1.0 million couples in America involved in long-distance relationships (LDRs)—the majority of which were professional, affluent, and had fewer children than other dual-career couples (Maines, 1993). By 2001, the American Census Bureau estimated that approximately 2.4 million married couples had a spouse who was either living or working in a different city (Edwards, 2001). It is interesting to note that this figure did not include couples separated because of schooling, military duty, or for business purposes. In 1998, the American Employee Relocation Council showed that approximately 10% of all job relocations resulted in LDRs and that 52% of employers anticipated an increase in job transfers (Aylor, 2003). Similarly, in 2003, Guldner stated that there were "…somewhere between 700,000 and one million…[people in] geographically separated marriages and an additional one to one-and-a-half million…[people involved] in long-distance dating relationships" (p. 1). Lastly, Canadian researchers Milan and Peters (2003) reported that 8% of the population over 20 years of age (or 1 in 12) were involved in LAT relationships. While these are but a few of the most common types of distance relationships, new ones keep popping up. Cyber romance is one example. Hence, there is no doubt that our relationships will continue to change as our world continues to change. Given the great variety and numbers of distance relationships, just how "normal" are they?

In the largest (and most detailed) study completed to date on LDRs, Guldner (2003) compared couples in LDRs with those in geographically close relationships (GCRs) on four distinct measures: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and trust. The results showed no significant difference between the two groups and, in fact, illustrated that "…LDRs have as much chance of making it as any other relationship" (p. 7). Not surprisingly, other researchers concurred with these findings (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Stafford & Reske, 1990). On the other

hand, research shows "…that [while] women tend to find fault within the relationship …men are more likely to try to place the blame on something outside of the relationship" (Guldner, 2003, p. 6). When it comes to LDRs, a "…tendency to blame the distance usually ends up in a more amicable breakup" (Guldner, 2003, p. 7) but it also leads many people to the firm (albeit faulty) belief that LDRs simply do not work (Guldner, 2003). In the same way, research also shows that separated couples do not have more affairs than their geographically closer counterparts. They do, however, tend to be somewhat more suspicious (Guldner, 2003). As a result, one of the best ways to prevent this specific concern is to keep the lines of communication open (Aylor, 2003; Guldner, 2003).

While the aforementioned statistics and myths may not be surprising for some, the dearth of information and assistance for people involved in LDRs might be (Guldner, 2003; Van Horn et al., 1997). Given the numbers of people involved in LDRs, further understanding of both coping strategies and processes that foster the success of LDRs would seem warranted. Therefore, supporting people through LDRs would be a worthy endeavour. Any work toward enhancing the understanding of these relationships would "…offer a more complete and potentially predictive view [of them]" (Scott, 2002, ix). As a result, a manual will be developed as part of this project. The manual will focus on issues that people in LDRs face and will make four primary contributions: 1) it will highlight the fact that the continuance and success of a LDR is inherently an individual phenomenon, (in other words, this type of relationship has every bit as much of a chance of being successful as do other relationships and is more a function of the level of commitment and communication of the people involved than the distance); 2) it will contribute to a growing public awareness of this type of relationship; and 3) it will debunk the myth that "…this type of relationship is largely unstable (i.e., unsuccessful, divorce- and

infidelity-ridden, and abnormal)" (Gerstel & Gross, 1982; 1984 as cited in Scott, 2002, p. 5) and 4) it will provide practical coping strategies and processes to foster success for couples in LDR relationships.

According to Guldner (2003) the current societal norm is geographically close relationships with the consequential effect being that there are few role models for those involved in LDRs to follow. "A complete lack of norms to guide expectations can lead to trouble. Therapists routinely see couples whose difficulties stem from one or both partners failing to meet the expectations of the other. This is hard enough when in a relationship with relatively clear expectations, let alone in an LDR" (Guldner, 2003, p. 96). Furthermore, the shared expectations unique to LDRs are strongly rooted in personal value judgements about the "…importance of intimacy versus autonomy" (Guldner, 2003, p. 56). As a result, simply knowing what it is that others are doing can provide a framework for supporting those involved in LDRs (Guldner, 2003).

Methods and Procedures

A comprehensive literature review will be carried out to explore which elements in LDRs contribute to the success of a LDR, which elements contribute to the maintenance of a LDR, and which elements contribute to the demise of a LDR. A systematic electronic search will include references from a wide variety of sources including databases such as PsycINFO, ERIC, Questia, EBSCO and Infotrac as well as current books by well-known "experts" in the fields of LDRs and communication.

Key words will include: long distance relationships, distance relationships, dual career couples, geographically close relationships, intimate relationships, interpersonal communication, interpersonal interaction, interpersonal processes, trust, jealousy, unmarried couples, commuter

marriage, dating, commitment/psychology, dating/social customs, theories (social exchange, relationship dialectics, relational maintenance), emotion, interdependence, need fulfilment, and so on. The parameter of dates will be open-ended to facilitate all areas.

The manual will be designed to highlight the various aspects of LDRs and the supportive framework will include (but not be limited to) the following areas: 1) prevalence and reasons for LDRs, 2) advantages and disadvantages, 3) variety and defining characteristics, 4) debunking of current myths, 5) gender differences in both relational satisfaction and communication, 6) relationship and communication theories, and 7) known strategies for successful maintenance—particularly communication. An emphasis will be placed on communication as Guldner (2003) stated that "…communication style plays a more important role in LDRs than in other relationships" (pp. 54-55). Having mentioned the supportive framework of the manual I will now identify some of the resources and helpful guides.

The manual will be psycho-educational in nature and will include current statistics to aid in the recognition and prevalence of LDRs. Guldner (2003) stated, "…numbers should simply help…[couples] understand the social context in which…[their] own relationship takes place" (p. 97). Additionally, true/false sheets and/or multiple-choice questionnaires containing some of the most common myths surrounding LDRs drawing out any incongruence based upon the data gathered from the literature review would be included in the manual. This would include information that would point out the importance of gender differences and communication in LDRs. Couples would be invited to complete a "Relationship Vision" as well as exercises to help them identify their personal needs, beliefs, values and communication styles. The manual will contain a list of helpful resources aimed at assisting those in LDRs to succeed. Any resources integrated into the project will be supported by research. Any resources included externally (such

as websites) would be incorporated for interest's sake and prefaced with a cautionary note to use a reasonable amount of prudence. Lastly, a tear out, mail-in evaluation form will be included at the end of the manual to help assess the utility of the project. This form will not, however, be utilized as part of this current project.

Conclusion

Due to rapid changes in the workforce, technology, and peoples' changing wants and needs in intimate relationships, distance relationships are becoming more and more common. LDRs are a fairly recent area of study and there is not as great an abundance of empirical evidence for this particular population as there is with more traditional relationships. For instance, Van Horn et al., (1997) were only able to identify 15 studies on distance relationships. And, these same researchers inform us that there is a "…lack of a comprehensive theoretical model for the impact of distance on romantic relationships" (p. 26). In the same way, Guldner (2003) stated that over the last 10 years he found "…[only] a few dozen articles, a couple of books meant for psychologists, and very few books meant for those in LDRs" (p. 2). Couples looking for guidance would benefit from a self-help manual targeting this population. As such, the existing material will provide the foundation and direction for this manual. Although the manual is primarily intended for couples in LDR relationships it might prove to be useful for counsellors dealing with these couples.

Effective communication will lead to improved relationships among LDR couples. Therefore, a literature review carried out on communication will supplement the LDR literature available because LDR studies emphasize the importance of communication and relationship variables such as satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment and trust (Edwards, 2001; Guldner, 2003; Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Holt & Stone, 1988; Knox, 2002). The review will be carried

out specific to communication in intimate relationships with an eye to using this information as a springboard for communication over distance mediums in LDRs.

Unsatisfying LDRs can cause stress both in the home and in the workplace (Netemeyer, Boles & McMurrian, 1996). Malec et al., (2000) inform us that stress is associated with 90% of all diseases and is the number one health worry for most Canadians. Satisfying relationships are cost effective personally and globally: "Numerous studies have shown that intimate and satisfying romantic relationships help buffer us from the usual stresses that the world hurls at us every day" (Guldner, 2003, p. 78). As the literature bears out, people tend to be more stable and have less sick time and be less accident prone if they are happier in all areas of their lives (Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996).

Implications

This project will make an effort to inform couples about the multifaceted workings of distance relationships. After examination of existing literature and a summarisation of key points and themes, it is this author's intention to develop a manual directed at those involved in LDRs. The purpose of the manual will be to serve as a beneficial resource on how to successfully navigate through a LDR. Additionally, it will debunk some of the most common myths surrounding LDRs and, in this way, "normalize" them to some extent.

The provision of information is an inexpensive way of increasing awareness of LDRs. The hope is that increased awareness will: 1) increase harmony in relationships, 2) decrease potential divorces, 3) prevent broken homes, and 4) decrease physical and emotional health concerns. In this way, society as a whole would benefit.

The most obvious end user of this project are persons involved in the LDR lifestyle. Relationships are about communication. Without awareness it can break down. Unquestionably,

communication in LDRs takes on added significance (Guldner, 2003; Scott, 2002); therefore, quality resources can help alleviate that break down. This project and manual are one step toward understanding the pivotal role that effective communication plays in LDRs.

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