KIN AND KILOMETERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LONG-DISTANCE
RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
TRANSGENERATIONAL THEORY

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of couples in long-distance relationships (LDRs) from the perspective of Transgenerational (TG) Theory, a foundational theory in the Marriage and Family Therapy field. Semi-structured individual and conjoint interviews were conducted via web-based communication technology with six LDR couples who were separated due to the demands of work, school, or family care giving. Genograms were constructed in the first interview and used to discuss intergenerational relational patterns in the families of origin of the LDR partners. Eligible couples were those who had been together in the same geographic location for at least one year prior to beginning the LDR, and who had been in the LDR for at least a year.

Aspects of TG Theory salient to these LDR couples were identified through analysis of the transcripts using phenomenological methods. Multigenerational patterns were found in the families of origin of participants in work-related travel and/or relocation, being independent, sharing a commitment to caring for the family of origin, and having a strong work ethic. Distance appeared to make some relational processes more overt. The majority of these LDR couples were involved in providing physical and/or financial support to members of their extended families. Families of origin were important sources of support for these LDR partners and couples. The LDR lifestyle
allowed the couples and families to give and take relational support in a mutual cycle involving both families and the intimate partners. LDRs offered a way for them to fulfill multiple commitments to each other and their families while living and working in separate locations.

Two core themes incorporating individual and relational processes also emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts. First, commitment and trust in the partnered relationship allowed participants to embark on an LDR. The recursive interaction of trust and commitment strengthened the relationship while partners were apart. Second, LDRs represented resilience for these couples, who set forth on LDRs after losses of jobs and/or dreams.
DEDICATION

To the memory of my maternal grandparents, the petroleum tanker turned corporate road warrior and the railroad conductor’s daughter, who taught me how to be independent from yet deeply connected to my loved ones.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to those who never lost faith that I would finish this dissertation, even when I was on the scenic route.
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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A long-distance relationship (LDR), in which intimate partners committed to their relationship live separately from each other due to the demands of work, education or family responsibilities, highlights the balance of the opposing needs for connectedness and independence present in a relationship (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Sahlstein, 2000). From the perspective of the core concept of systemic relational theories, couples in successful relationships of any type must balance these contradicting needs in their relationships with their families-of-origin, their social support networks, and with each other (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992). Couples in LDRs find that this balancing process becomes central in their relationship (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Sahlstein, 2000), many times even before they initiate an LDR, because the decision to commute is made as members of a couple and family, not as individuals (Anderson, 1992; Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Green, Hogarth, & Shackleton, 1999).

The existing literature on couples and families living in LDRs has not examined these relationships from a systemic perspective, although the relational dynamics of LDRs correlate with the central tenets of systemic theories. Studies of LDRs have been conducted in a wide range of fields, such as sociology, career development, and geography, but the theoretical bases for these studies have with few exceptions (e.g.,
Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Forsyth & Gramling, 1987, 1990) been individually oriented. This individually oriented perspective gives an incomplete picture of LDR relationships, because it overlooks the web of family and social relationships in which LDR couples are embedded. This individually oriented perspective also fails to focus on the interactional processes and patterns that form the basis of all relationships. It is this focus that sets the field of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) apart from other disciplines.

Studies into the reciprocal relationships between LDR couples and between LDR couples and their families and other social networks are important for a fuller understanding of the commuter relationship experience (Bergen, 2006). When studying LDRs, Sahlstein (2006b) asserted, “Researchers in this area should not assume that what takes place in one relationship is isolated from the other relationships in partners’ lives” (p. 136). Stafford (2004b) commented that having an interest in what processes help partners in “sustaining LDRs and in coping with the effects of separations…leads directly to consideration of community” (p. 38). Part of this community is the family-of-origin of the partners in LDRs, but Stafford (2004b) also noted that “little research has examined long-distance family relationships as a whole” (p. 55). In addition, Sahlstein (2000) recommended that future studies into LDRs “examine how social network members communicate to the LDR couple and how they are supportive/non-supportive of the relationship” (p. 162).

In sum, a comprehensive systems-based perspective describing the recursive interactional processes between the couples themselves and between the couples and their families-of-origin will deepen and enrich our understanding of how couples in LDRs cope with the stresses of coming together and separating in efforts to balance the
needs of both partners. This expanded perspective is a fundamental principle of a systemic view of relationships, and this vision of LDRs has not been provided by researchers trained in fields outside of Marriage and Family Therapy.

The Need for the Study

LDRs appear to be far more common than is often thought (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Levin & Trost, 1999; Rohlfing, 1995). Although it is difficult to accurately count the number of couples in LDRs due to limitations in demographic tools that are not designed to capture information on commuting couples (Govaerts, 1985; Green, Hogarth, & Shackleton, 1999b; Stafford, 2005), the numbers available indicate that individuals in LDRs are a sizable minority of the population (Guldner, 2003). As an example, in 1998, 2.4 million individuals in the US stated they were married but not living with their spouses and did not identify themselves as separated due to marital conflict (Kiefer, 2000).

Guldner (2003) noted these estimates do not include the thousands of couples separated due to military service. Nor do these numbers include individuals and couples who live outside the US, or those who might not be identified by typical demographic instruments, such as non-married cohabitating couples (Stafford, 2004b) or undocumented workers. These estimates also do not include college students, who comprise a significant amount of the LDR population (Stafford, 2005). LDRs tend to be between 25-30% of populations of college students sampled (Guldner, 1992, 1996; Guldner & Swensen, 1995). Given current economic conditions and the continued need for post-secondary training to compete in the job market, it is likely that the population
of LDR couples and families will remain steady or increase in countries around the world.

For the thousands or perhaps millions of couples and families living in LDRs, examining these relationships from a systemic perspective is vital to achieving a fuller understanding of their lived experiences. Thus, the views of LDR couples and individuals regarding their relationships with their families-of-origin and/or larger social network must be considered. In addition, interactional processes that occur between LDR partners as they make decisions, solve problems, and balance their need for individual growth while responding to the needs of their partners, family, and friends as they negotiate the LDR lifestyle must be explored for a fuller picture of the LDR experience (Bergen, 2006; Bergen, Kirby, & McBride, 2007; Forsyth & Gramling, 1987; Sahlstein, 2000; Stafford, 2005).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of LDR couples and their perceptions of their relationships with members of their families-of-origin from a systemic perspective. The conceptual foundation for this study is Transgenerational (TG) Theory (Roberto-Forman, 2002; Roberto, 1992), an integration of two systemic intergenerational models of interpersonal functioning, Contextual Theory (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Goldenthal, 1993) and Bowen Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992). TG Theory will be used to place the participants in this study within the larger context of the family relationships in which their partnership is embedded for the purpose of gaining a fuller understanding of the experiences of these LDR couples. Thus, the central research question addressed
in this study is: How are LDRs understood from the perspective of Transgenerational Theory?

The support of the social network of the couple has been said to be second only to individual temperament factors in determining how difficult LDR partners find separation to be (Guldner, 2003). However, because LDRs are outside of the norms of mainstream culture regarding cohabitation of committed romantic partners, members of the extended family and friend network of one or both partners in the LDR may have negative views of the commuter relationship lifestyle (Bergen, 2006; Bergen et al., 2007; Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984; Magnuson & Norem, 1999; Stafford, 2004b). Extended family members and friends of the LDR partners may therefore express “resistance or at least curiosity, if not suspicion” (Stafford, 2004b, p. 46) to individuals and couples in LDRs. As a result, LDR partners may limit or even eliminate contact with these persons in an effort to protect their partnered relationship (Bergen, 2006; Bergen et al., 2007; Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984).

Culturally-influenced perceptions of LDRs are not exclusive to friends and family of LDR partners. Mental health professionals, including marriage and family therapists, are not immune to having culturally-influenced negative misconceptions about LDRs and the relational processes that result due to distance and coping strategies adopted by the couple (Jesswein, 1984; Magnusen & Norem, 1999). The perceptions of mental health professionals about LDRs may be due to observing clients or other individuals in LDRs coping with stressors. LDR partners may experience attachment-related responses due to separation and reunification (Diamond et al., 2008; Guldner, 1996; Pistole, 2010; Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010; Vormbrock, 1993), or
dissatisfaction with their circumstances, not their relationship (Govaerts, 1985), issues which could be of concern to mental health professionals.

Conversely, members of the extended family-of-origin and support network of one or both partners may be supportive of the LDR, or at the minimum neutral about the decision of their loved one (Rabe, 2001; Stafford, 2005). These supportive or tolerant relatives, friends, and professionals are invaluable for the adults and children who are living the complex lifestyle of LDRs. But even when the support networks of the LDR couples are supportive, relationships with these people are impacted by the demands and pragmatic limitations on LDR couples (Bergen, 2006; Bergen et al., 2007; Erwin, 1993; Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984; Govaerts, 1985). LDR couples must find a balance between the competing drives of individuality and emotional connectedness with each other and their families while working to remain connected over the geographic distance between them (Sahlstein, 2006b).

Ironically, the commuter relationship lifestyle results in LDR partners and couples having fewer social contacts while commuting, meaning the family-of-origin and close friends of these couples and partners may take on added importance (Erwin, 1993; Stafford, 2004b). Because the social support networks of individuals in LDRs often have limited overlap (Sahlstein, 2006b), family-of-origin members are therefore the individuals most likely to be associated with both partners in the LDR. They may thus have significant impact, positive or negative, on a commuter couple or family.

The results of this study will be useful in clarifying and deepening the awareness of professionals who work with LDR partners and couples, as well as giving more information to those couples who may be contemplating or living an LDR lifestyle. This
study may provide more insight into relational processes present in any relationship, because LDRs provide a unique window to study the interplay between connectedness and autonomy, or independent interdependence, which is a cornerstone of the intergenerational systemic theories (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Roberto-Forman, 2002; Roberto, 1992). LDRs also highlight issues that are central to any relationship, such as trust and fairness, which due to limited time together and reduced interaction between partners, become overt in LDRs.

**Methodology**

To explore LDRs from a systemic point of view, phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994) was used to gather and analyze information about these complex relationships, allowing the often contradictory lived experience of the LDR lifestyle to be examined from a unified perspective. Partners who were living in LDRs at the time of the study were interviewed conjointly and individually via long-distance communications technology in order to mirror their typical communications with each other. Genograms (DeMaria, Weeks, & Hof, 1999; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985) were constructed from the information obtained in the conjoint interview, and a written analysis of the genogram was prepared as a first step in data analysis. Transcripts of each interview were prepared and analyzed through open coding identify core themes of the experience and theoretical concepts of TG Theory (Glesne, 2006; Moustakas). The data analysis process was facilitated by the use of qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 9 (Richards, 2010). Researcher accountability was established with regular check-ins with the dissertation chair and methodologist, reflexive journaling throughout the data
gathering and analysis phase, member checks, and peer review of themes. Finally, this summary report of findings and recommendations for further research was written.

**Overview of LDR Research**

Couples and families in which one partner has been absent periodically or for a specified time have been studied since the Second World War (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991), however the theoretical foundations of these studies were from an individually based perspective. Studies of topics related to separation from an intimate partner for work-related reasons first focused on specific occupational categories which require periods of separation from the family, such as commercial fisherman (Gronseth, 1959), merchant mariners (Gerstel & Gross, 1984), and offshore oil rig workers (Clark, McCann, Morrice, & Taylor, 1989; Taylor, Morrice, Clark, & McCann, 1985). When relational dynamics were discussed in these studies, they were presented and analyzed from theoretical foundations grounded in individual theories of interpersonal functioning. For example, Gronseth (1959) examined the psychosocial adjustment of wives of Norwegian commercial fishermen in comparison to a similar group of women married to men who had jobs on shore. In this qualitative study, discussion of interactions with their kith and kin networks were described by both groups of participants, however, the focus of the study was on the psycho-social adjustment of participants from an individual perspective. Similarly, studies by Clark et al. (1989) and Taylor et al. (1985) examined the psychoemotional adjustment of individual female partners of male workers on off-sea oil rigs.

The works of Forsyth and Gauthier (1991) and Forsyth and Gramling (1987; 1990) are notable exceptions to the individually based research on LDRs based in
occupational categories. These qualitative studies of families of men working in off-shore oil rigs and the merchant marine consider families as a social system, and take the systemic perspective of viewing their adaptations to LDR circumstances as a strength, not pathology. While conducted from a systemic foundation and interviews were done with partners and children of participants, this was not consistently done, and all interviews were done individually.

In 1978, Gerstel broadened the definition of commuter or long-distance relationships to include a wide variety of occupations, opening up research to examine the larger phenomenon of the process of living in a LDR. Gerstel’s qualitative dissertation, in which she interviewed both individual spouses in 43 LDRs, is based in sociological theory that examined the larger context of the social and economic pressures impacting LDR couples. Although Gerstel obtained much information on individual perceptions of relational processes between participants in her study, data was collected and analyzed as individual data.

Research in the 1980s explored commuter marriage from a feminist perspective. Commuter marriage was seen as a way to balance the scales between the genders in the workplace and to finally allow women to pursue their careers instead of follow their spouses. Much of this research drew upon the research of the 1960s and 1970s in dual-career marriage (e.g., Govaerts, 1985; Jesswein, 1984; Johnson, 1987). These studies considered the broader social context of LDR couples; however, data were gathered and analyzed individually, even when both partners were interviewed. For example, Jesswein interviewed both partners in six LDR couples and explored the perceptions of individual
participants regarding the impact of the LDR on their relational functioning, among other research questions. However, data was collected and analyzed individually.

In the 1990s, a common research theme was examining communications between participants in LDRs. A second focus of study was college students in long-distance relationships. The two threads often mingled, and numerous quantitative studies were based in individual theory for conceptualization, data collection, and analysis. Research topics from this decade include comparison of LDRs to couples living in proximity to each other on a variety of factors. At times, various factors were combined in one study, such as perceived intimacy, relational satisfaction and frequency and type of communication between LDR partners (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994); prevalence and break-up rates with perceived positives and drawbacks to LDRs (Guldner, 1992); and relational/individual uncertainty in the relationships with communication, intimacy and perceived overall quality of the relationship (McPherson, 1996). Maintenance and stabilizing strategies for LDRs in comparison to geographically close relationships were also compared (Stafford & Canary, 1991), and individual factors correlated with long-distance relationships were studied, such as gender differences in adjustment to break-ups of LDRs (Helgeson, 1994), or individual intimacy processes (Van Horn et al., 1997).

In the last 10 years, LDR studies have explored a variety of topics, such as measurement of biological responses to separation from a loved one (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2008), and jealousy in LDRs (e.g., Timmerman, 2001). An important development in recent studies has been the inclusion of studies examining multicultural issues in LDRs (e.g., Bassani, 2007; Jackson, Brown, & Patterson-Stewart, 2002;
Schvaneveldt, Young, & Schvaneveldt, 2001; Tanaka & Nakazawa, 2005), increasing our awareness that LDRs occur across a wide variety of socioeconomic strata and cultures (Ladd, 2007). This literature, however, continues to be grounded in theories that are based on individual conceptualizations of relational processes.

The literature in LDRs is moving toward an awareness of the importance of viewing these couples and families from a truly systemic perspective in order to more fully understand their experiences. Sahlstein’s 2000 qualitative study of 20 couples in LDRs began to bridge the gap between individual and more systemic conceptualizations of LDRs. Sahlstein analyzed conjoint interviews using a communications theory which examined the ways that the contradictions present in LDRs were conceptualized by these couples. Sahlstein noted that the literature in LDRs has tended to present images of LDRs as being composed of “primarily opposites” (p. 166), such as being apart or being together, or being independent or being connected, and does not investigate the “interplay” (p. 166) of these apparently opposing realities for LDR couples. The use of TG Theory to provide a systemic theoretical foundation for this proposed study will provide a conceptualization of LDRs in which these apparent contradictions may be examined from a more unified perspective.

Transgenerational Theory

The variety of fields from which the research literature on LDRs originates has resulted in no consistent theoretical model to conceptualize these relationships. Researchers have recommended the use of systemic models when examining LDRs (Guldner, 1992; McPherson, 1996; Stafford, 2005), because the complexity of relational processes and contextual variables in LDRs will benefit from a theoretical foundation
that encompasses the different and sometimes contradictory aspects of these relationships into a cohesive whole. From this perspective, a theory based in systems thinking is a logical fit, and comprises the next step of study for the literature on LDRs (Sahlstein, 2000; Stafford, 2004). The relational dynamics of LDRs highlight the theoretical components of Transgenerational (TG) Theory, a systemic model of relationships which is based upon, among others, Bowenian Family Systems Theory and Contextual Theory (Roberto-Forman, 2002). This study is built upon TG Theory.

**Key Concepts**

TG Theory is used to conceptualize relationships and treatment interventions in the MFT field, especially in couples’ therapy. It is based upon what might be termed universal principles of the MFT field, and synthesizes key concepts of systemic relational theories, object relations and attachment theory (Roberto-Forman, 2002). The foundational concepts of TG Theory represent “intergenerational (long-term, slow-changing) family processes” (Roberto-Forman, pp. 118-119) which percolate through generations (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Fishbane, 2005; Gilbert, 1992; Roberto, 1992). The concepts of TG Theory most relevant to LDRs based upon the literature reviewed will be used as the foundation for this study and are presented next.

**Multigenerational transmission process.** TG Theory considers families to be the primary emotional unit of human relationships. Family relationships are reciprocal and mutual, with members being born into positions in the emotional process of the family that are transmitted over generations. Families strive to balance the competing drives for connectedness and autonomy between individuals, and between family
groups, such as siblings or nuclear families. The struggle to balance these needs becomes a predictable cycle of relational interactions in the family which is then transmitted through the generations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Families also transmit patterns related to work ethic/career choice, gender roles, educational achievement, among many others (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Multigenerational patterns are not considered from the individual theories which shape existing LDR research. Consideration of these relational patterns will provide a greater understanding of LDRs.

**Autonomy and connectedness.** The TG model emphasizes that the core experience of being human is being connected and interdependent with others while maintaining a sense of individuality in emotionally significant relationships (Fishbane, 2005; McGoldrick & Carter, 1999). From a TG perspective, the most effective relationships are those in which “there exist two total and complete individuals, fully aware of self and the other, in open communication with each other” (Gilbert, 1992, p. 97). The process of balancing individual needs with relational connectedness in successful LDRs “tends to create two independent and separate individuals who decide they want to stay together” (Jesswein, 1984, p. 215). Thus, the definition of successful relationships from a systemic perspective mirrors the description of successful LDRs.

Partners in LDRs must also balance autonomy and connectedness with their extended social support network. Energy and time spent connecting with others reduces time and energy for building autonomy. LDR couples must attend to this balance in each set of relationships they have with both family and friends (Sahlstein, 2006). TG Theory considers the network of family and social relationships surrounding a couple (Roberto-Forman, 2002; Roberto, 1992), providing a theoretical framework for studying the
interrelationships of LDR couples with their families-of-origin and social support network.

Adaptation, not dysfunction. Systemic theories address how relationships adapt over time to changing situations and the developmental progression of both the relationship and the individuals within it. Appreciation of the need to adapt over time is a cornerstone of TG Theory (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Gilbert, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Roberto-Forman, 2002; Roberto, 1992). Changes over time are seen as efforts to adapt, not as dysfunction. Systemic theories are crucial for studying how LDR couples and families maintain and adapt their interactional patterns to meet new challenges with stability in a way that views LDRs as attempts to effectively adapt to changes.

Morphogenesis and homeostasis. Couples in LDRs must balance their drive for growth while maintaining a stable emotional relationship with their partners and families. Conceptually, these opposing forces are akin to the concepts of morphogenesis (seeking change) and homeostasis (seeking stability) as used in systemic theories (Gale & Long, 1996; Minuchin, 1974). Although these terms are not used in any research study surveyed for this dissertation, the concepts of morphogenesis and homeostasis may be inferred from such statements as, “to look at change in a relationship is also to look at how the relationship has remained the same” (Sahlstein, 2000, p. 39), or “two forces (e.g., being together and being apart) work both with and against each other by both enabling and constraining one another” (Sahlstein, 2004, p. 690). TG Theory provides a model which examines the tensions and contradictions present in LDRs as part of the
overall relational process and the interaction of the LDR couple with their larger social context. This leads to the research question of this study: How are LDRs understood from the perspective of TG Theory?

**Theoretical and Methodological Principles of the Study**

The proposed qualitative methodology for this proposed study, phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and TG Theory have principles in common regarding interrelationships between individuals and their experiences. The shared principles relevant to this study are identified below.

**Inter-relationships of parts to whole.** TG Theory asserts that individuals cannot be separated from their social and emotional contexts. A core premise of this theory is that the function of a couple in the current time and situation is influenced by their context, including family, social, developmental and historical factors (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; DeMaria et al., 1999; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Similarly, phenomenology sees human experience and behaviors as representing “an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). Thus, it is important to consider contextual variables in order to gain the most accurate and thorough understanding of the couple and family.

**Centrality of open-ended dialogue.** Phenomenological approaches to research propose that the most valid way of exploring the meaning of an experience is to obtain thorough descriptions of this experience from those who have lived it in their own words, via open-ended questions and dialogue with the researcher (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). This mirrors the approach used in TG-based therapy to obtain genogram
information, in which perceptions of individuals and families are gathered through open-ended questions in a dialogue between family members and a therapist (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

**Shared meanings.** Phenomenology states that individuals make sense of their experiences individually, and also develop shared meanings with others (Patton, 2002). This concept is fundamental to TG Theory, in which the perspective of *multi-directed partiality* is used to honor the shared perceptions of different subgroups in the family along with the distinct individual perceptions of the members (Goldenthal, 1993). Based on this principle, participants in this study will be interviewed both conjointly and individually. One partner will not be assumed to speak for the couple, in keeping with criticisms of research methodologies which have considered one member of a family or household to be representative of the entire household (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Seymour, Gill, & Eardley, 1995; Valentine, 1999).

**Seeking a holistic view of relational interactions.** The adaptive behavioral and emotional responses families make due to stressors in their immediate and larger social context are considered in TG Theory to be replicated from generation to generation. Of special interest are the emotional relationships between individuals and subgroups in families. Hence, to gain the most complete picture of the experience of any relationship, the family relational patterns made across the family life cycle, plus the perceptions of the respondent(s) about these adjustments, must be discussed with the participants (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).
Definitions

Terms used in this study are defined as follows:

1. **Long-distance relationship [LDRs]**. An LDR as defined in this study is one in which both partners in a committed intimate relationship self-identify as having limited opportunities to communicate and interact with each other face-to-face due to geographic distance, and both partners are committed to continuing the relationship (Stafford, 2005). The term *long-distance relationship* is used intentionally in place of *long-distance marriage* to include committed partners who may not be married (Rabe, 2001).

2. **Commuter relationship**. This term is used synonymously with LDR.

3. **Commuter marriage**. This term signifies information titled or reported specifically on studies about married couples in LDRs. This term will be used in quotes, titles of references, and when the researcher refers to her own LDR. In general, however, the term *commuter relationship* will be used in this study for the same reason of inclusion that long-distance relationship is used in place of long-distance marriage.

4. **Proximal relationship [PR]**. Proximal relationships are those in which partners may communicate and interact with each other face-to-face in a manner not constrained by distance.

5. **Family-of-origin**. For this study, family-of-origin is defined as “people who have a shared history and a shared future. [The family members] encompass the entire emotional system of at least three, and frequently now four or even five, generations held together by blood, legal, and/or historical ties” (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, p. 1). Also included in the conceptualization of family-of-origin used in this study are any
other family members who provide “support, regulation, nurturance, and socialization” (Minuchin, 1974, p. 14) to families or individuals in a commuter relationship. Participants will self-identify these individuals.

6. **Social support network.** These are individuals or families who provide instrumental, emotional, informational or appraisal support for individuals and/or couples in LDRs (Guldner, 2003), and who do not have a family relationship with the commuter partners. Participants will self-identify these individuals.

7. **Voluntary separation.** Voluntary is relative in the discussion and definition of LDRs (Gerstel, 1978; Stafford, 2005). In this study, the definition of voluntary separation will be based on that of Stafford: “Voluntary is subjective. These relationships are referred to here as voluntary as no higher authority, such as the government or one’s parents, dictates their separations” (2005, p. 42). Eligible participants must have initiated a voluntary separation after a minimum of one year together in geographic proximity and have been in this long-term relationship for at least one year.

8. **Separation-reunion cycle.** A separation-reunion cycle is the process of separating for an LDR, rejoining each other on a visit after a time apart, and separating again for the next phase of the LDR. Eligible couples for this study were required to have experienced at least one separation-reunion cycle.

**Eligibility Requirements**

Eligible couples for this study were those who:

- self-identified as being in an LDR for at least 1 year using the above description of an LDR;
• were in an LDR due to work, education, and/or family responsibilities, not military duty, incarceration, or relational strife;
• were in a self-described committed relationship they expected to continue;
• were actively living in an LDR at the time of the study;
• had at least 1 year of experience as a geographically close relationship prior to initiating an LDR;
• were committed to living as an LDR couple for the time they were participating in the study;
• had at least one separation and reunion cycle;
• were willing to divulge information about themselves and extended family members; and
• were willing to navigate the long-distance communication technology process with the researcher.

Exclusions

Excluded from this study are couples who are separated from each other due to incarceration, marital strife, or military service. These couples may have a relationship at a distance but do not fit the definition of commuter relationship as specified in this study for the following reasons.

Normative vs. crisis separations. Commuter relationships involve “normative separations” (Guldner, 1992, p. 12), separations that occur in the course of the expected lifecycle, as opposed to “crisis separations” (Guldner, 1992, p. 13), such as those which may occur for separations due to military duty, incarceration, or at times, marital
Conflict. Crisis separations may “produce a confound between the effect of the separation itself and the fear of permanent loss of a partner” (Guldner, 1992, p. 15), and is a situation unique in itself (Jesswein, 1984). Groups with crisis separations tend to have higher rates of relationship dissolution, which may provide an inaccurate picture of relationship stability of LDRs in general (Stafford, 2004b, 2005).

Diamond et al. (2008) noted that with “military families, it is impossible to disentangle emotional effects attributable to the separation from emotional effects attributable to fears for the partner’s safety during military deployment” (p. 386). Military families always face the prospect of combat which creates “a very special case of marital separation because of complicating factors such as the physical danger to which the absent spouse is exposed and the long duration of the separation” (Vormbrock, 1993, p. 131), although Vormbrock noted that in general results of studies conducted with military couples may be interpreted to be very similar to those of studies conducted with LDR couples.

Social support. The amount of positive institutionalized instrumental and emotional support available to military families sets them apart in the world of LDRs. Military families also benefit from having more cultural acceptance of the reason they are separated, which partners in commuter relationships and the families of incarcerated persons do not have (Stafford, 2005).

Previous research. Military families in particular have been the topic of a large amount of previous research, gathered over a long period of time (Stafford, 2004b, 2005). Military couples are often considered separately from others in this research tradition (Vormbrock, 1993), and Stafford (2004) recommended that this group not be
included in studies with other types of LDRs. This study is not built upon this research tradition.

**Summary of the Statement of the Problem**

The current body of knowledge regarding LDRs has not examined these relationships through the lens of systemic theories. This study was therefore built on Transgenerational Theory in order to examine these relationships from the perspective of LDR partners and couples within their larger social network, especially their families-of-origin.

The central research question for this study was: How are LDRs understood from the perspective of TG Theory? To explore this question, conjoint and individual interviews were conducted with LDR couples meeting eligibility requirements. Data was collected and analyzed with phenomenological methods due to the research goal of understanding the lived experience and perceptions of LDRs couples. Interviews were conducted via Internet-based technology to allow conjoint and individual interviews with partners who were separated geographically from each other and the researcher.

A review of the most salient research literature related to LDRs will be presented in the second chapter of this proposal. The research design and methods will be described in the third chapter. The TG concepts identified as themes in interviews will be presented in the fourth chapter. Core experiential themes of this study will be presented in the fifth chapter. The final chapter will discuss implications of the findings for Marriage and Family Therapists, and give suggestions for future studies.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The objective of this research study is to examine the lived experiences of couples in long-distance relationships (LDRs) from the perspective of a systemic, relationally focused model, Transgenerational (TG) Theory. Systemic theories, such as TG Theory, conceptualize all individuals and relationships as embedded in larger nets of relationships. This perspective on LDRs has been lacking in the Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) field. The body of research on LDRs is gathered from a wide range of fields and perspectives, resulting in no coherent theoretical base for the literature about LDRs (Magnuson & Norem, 1999; Pistole, 2010; Stafford, 2005). TG Theory is proposed as the theoretical model for this study to capture the relational dynamics between LDR partners, and between these partners and their extended network of family and friends.

To place this study in the context of existing literature, findings from previous studies about LDRs will be reviewed and critiqued in this chapter. Aspects of research methodology and design which may impact findings will be discussed. The chapter will end with a review of key theoretical concepts of TG theory.
Overview of Literature Review of LDRs and Theory

Content topics in this chapter will focus on the literature related to social support and family dynamics of LDR populations. These topics include: defining LDRs, examining the larger social context of LDRs, the impact of family ties on making the decision to become an LDR couple, social support as a key factor for LDR partners, and independence and connectedness in LDRs. These topics highlight the complexity of the LDR lifestyle and allow an opportunity to view the many ways that extended family may interact with a commuter couple.

Next, aspects of research design and methodology which apply to LDR research in general will be discussed. Categories discussed will be sample bias, confounding variables in the research, cultural and theoretical biases impacting research questions and subsequent interpretation of findings, and the question of what constitutes couples research. In the following section, the theoretical foundation of this study, TG Theory, will be described and related to the topic of LDRs. Finally, this study will be placed in the context of the existing research.

To prepare this dissertation, an extensive review of literature was conducted over a 4-year period of time. Electronic databases were utilized to find current and historical research articles, as well as dissertations and theses. Relevant references from materials reviewed were subsequently located, until no new sources were identified.

Defining LDRs

LDRs have been said to “defy precise definitions” (Stafford, 2005, p. 7). Definitions of LDRs in studies are usually based upon multiple criteria established by researchers which vary from study to study. It has been hypothesized that the variability
of these criteria contributes to the inconsistent findings so common in LDR studies (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

In the varied definitions of LDRs, the commitment of both partners to the relationship is not debated. In general, the rate of breakup of non-crisis LDRs in both marriages and dating relationships is comparable to that of proximal relationships (Guldner, 1992, 2003). Researchers and participants alike have noted that the effort expended by commuter couples indicates the depth of their commitment (Gerstel, 1978; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Jackson et al., 2002; Levin & Trost, 1999). Commuters tend to report that divorce is not an option when faced with the decision to undertake an LDR, such as the respondents in Govaerts’s 1985 study of marital satisfaction of 55 LDR, dual-career partners who were compared to 55 non-LDR, dual-career partners. 92% of female commuters and 96% of male commuters participating in this study reported that divorce was not considered when weighing the decision to commute.

This finding on divorce not being an option for the majority of commuter couples was also found by Driedger (1987), who interviewed 35 respondents in LDR couples, including both partners for 12 couples. Of these respondents, only one stated in the interview that they had considered divorce rather than an LDR. Because a defining characteristic of commuter couples is that both are committed to maintaining the relationship, couples who are separated primarily due to marital conflicts are excluded from all studies reviewed for this dissertation except that of Levin & Trost (1999).

**Separation of Military LDRs**

A second factor that is typically not debated in the LDR literature, although differing viewpoints are presented (e.g., Vormbrock, 1993), is that civilian and military
LDRs are treated as two separate populations. There has been a trend in the research literature to view military couples as distinctly different from the dual-career, dual-residence couples for four reasons. First, military couples are seen as having less voluntary decisions about having LDRs (Barnett, 1998; Pistole, 2010). Second, there is a significant amount of social support for military couples, which differs in both quantity and quality than that for non-military commuter couples (Stafford, 2005). Third, military couples have additional concern for the safety of their partners. This is hypothesized to create emotional dynamics which are difficult to separate from dynamics related to the separation itself (Diamond et al., 2008; Guldner, 1992; Jesswein, 1984). Fourth, there is an extensive body of research which has included only military LDR couples and, thus, may have limited generalizability for non-military LDR populations. For these reasons, research that focused on military LDRs was not reviewed for this study.

**Occupational Groupings: Recognizing Social Context**

Returning to the challenge of defining LDRs, in early studies on the topic, LDRs were usually defined by occupational groupings. Seminal studies based on sociological and psychological theories examined how individuals in occupations requiring work-related absences from the primary residence or their partners functioned in comparison to those who were not in these occupations. Significant studies examined the LDR lifestyle of occupations such as fishermen (Gronseth, 1959), off-shore oilrig workers (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Forsyth & Gramling, 1987) and merchant mariners (Forsyth & Gramling, 1990). Although these studies were conducted from an individually based perspective, these researchers advocated for an expanded understanding of LDR individuals, families, and couples within their larger social contexts.
Gronseth (1959) interviewed matched pairs of Norwegian women married to sailors in Norwegian fishing fleets (N = 27) and wives of men in land-based occupations that did not require extended absences from the home (N = 23). The goal of this study was to explore the factors associated with the disproportionately high rate of admissions to mental hospitals for seawives in comparison to the land wives. He found seawives were negatively affected by social and relational stressors while raising their families as de facto single parents in an environment that did not fully understand their situation.

Gronseth’s analysis identified themes which would be echoed in later LDR research: commitment to the relationship in spite of distance and time apart; changes in relational dynamics between the couple and their family and support network due to distance; and the understanding and appreciation of the reasons why their spouse chose an occupation that would demand extended time away from home. He summarized his study by emphasizing that psychiatric symptoms typically experienced by these Norwegian seawives were more accurately attributed to psychosocial stressors associated with their experiences as LDR spouses, not the “prepsychotic personalities” (p. 1) these women were assumed to have which led them to select this challenging lifestyle.

In 1985, Taylor, Morrice, Clark, and McCann examined the basis for a reported ‘Intermittent Husband Syndrome’ hypothesized to be affecting the wives of North Atlantic offshore oilrig workers. Taylor et al. compared the self-reported psychoemotional symptoms in telephone surveys of 200 wives of offshore oilrig workers, in comparison to 145 wives of men who worked onshore and were not away from the home for extended periods of time. They reported that both the wives of oilrig workers...
workers and wives of men who worked on shore had similar rates of physician consultations, but there was a significant increase in anxiety for the offshore group only when the husband was offshore. Of these women, only a small proportion reported clinically significant symptoms. They concluded that the idea of a ‘syndrome’ was overstated, and in general, the majority of wives of offshore oilrig workers coped well, with temporary and situationally-expected responses to the absence of their spouse. These researchers advocated for an increased understanding of the psychosocial stressors of wives as they coped with the extended absence of their husbands instead of viewing their responses as pathology.

Researchers studying family adaptations among the families of offshore oilrig workers and/or merchant seamen advocated for a similar understanding of the larger social context of these families (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Forsyth & Gramling, 1987, 1990). Forsyth and Gramling (1987) commented that research into occupations which require absences by a member, usually the father/husband, “rarely view the family as a social system” (Forsyth & Gramling, 1987, p. 184), and advocated for an understanding of atypical family structure patterns which evolve in these families as adaptive responses, not dysfunction.

In their first study, Forsyth and Gramling (1987) interviewed 107 merchant seamen, 23 family members of merchant seamen, and a group of offshore oilrig workers and their spouses (N = 25). Five patterns of family functioning were identified: the replacement father pattern, in which a male member of the extended family steps in while the biological father is at sea; contingent authority, where the wife/mother steps into the husband/father role while he is at sea, but the power remains with the father;
alternate authority, in which the power alternates between parents; conflict, in which the parents cannot agree on the distribution of power when the husband/father is at home, with the wife/mother is firmly in charge while he is gone; and the periodic guest, in which the wife/mother retains all authority and responsibility whether the husband/father is at home or at sea. Forsyth and Gramling (1987) advocated viewing these changes as adaptive responses to abnormal situations, saying, “Families with unconventional work schedules could not be expected to have conventional familial-management strategies and familial roles. In fact, these families have been making a mistake if they have attempted to do so” (p. 185).

In an expanded examination of this typology, separate interviews were conducted with 111 merchant seamen, 29 wives of merchant seamen, and 23 adult children of merchant seamen, with the goal of determining the effectiveness of the patterns identified in the above typology (Forsyth & Gramling, 1990). Patterns were considered to be effective when they assisted in managing the conflict expected around separations and reunions and resulted in a minimum of boundary ambiguity, thus allowing the family to complete core responsibilities of child care and household management whether the father was in the home or not. The patterns of a replacement father and the periodic guest strategy were determined to be the most effective. Although conjoint interviews were at times conducted and holistic conceptualizations of findings in terms of systemic family functioning were presented, the studies were not based in a relational theory of the MFT field.
A Broader Conceptualization of LDRs

A move away from occupationally based definitions of LDRs was put forth by Gerstel in her 1978 dissertation and subsequent book (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). Gerstel interviewed 94 participants, 74 of which were in LDRs, with most of these individuals married to another participant in the study. Gerstel identified LDR couples as having,

a marital form in which members of a couple spend at least two nights in a week in separate residences and yet are still married and intend to remain so. The separation is a result of both the husband’s and wife’s participation in demanding careers that require commitments in different locations. (p. 357)

Gerstel noted that she was not the first to identify this group of couples, since there were numerous references to these couples in popular literature (Driedger, 1987; Erwin, 1993; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Winfield, 1985). Her definition are examined here due to its influence in shaping subsequent definitions of LDRs.

Gerstel (1977, 1978) asserted that commuter marriages are distinct from occupationally based definitions in earlier studies for four reasons. First, in occupationally based definitions of LDRs used in earlier studies, it is the male partner’s career which drives the separation of the couple. In commuter marriages, the female partner’s career commitment was significant factor in the decision to initiate a LDR. Next, in a commuter marriage, separation is voluntary, although Gerstel noted this volition is “subjective” (1978, p. 6) for each couple. Gerstel also noted that in the occupationally based separations of partners, the separation usually resulted in financial gain, whereas commuter marriages often cost money, and usually showed little, if any, financial gain for the family. This ruled out single-career families in which laborers were mobile, such as the construction trades (Green et al., 1999; Hogarth & Daniel, 1988).
Finally, a separate home was established and regularly used. This then ruled out traveling sales representatives, professional athletes, performers in the arts, and professionals in the travel industry (Bacheler, 1988), as well as those whose jobs required travel but not a fixed second residence, such as merchant mariners, truckers, railroaders, or crews on offshore oil rigs.

While Gerstel’s definition (1978) took the conceptualization of LDR couples to a larger perspective than occupational groupings and called for a view of LDRs within the bigger sociocultural context, the couples in her study were not studied from a relational perspective. Relational dynamics between LDR partners as well as between these partners and their families and support networks were identified within her themes, but not from a systemic view which considered the recursive relational interactions between individuals and relational groups. The themes she identified in her analysis, as with Gronseth’s, would be echoed in future research. These themes were: commitment to the relationship; commitment to career; socioeconomic forces impacting the decision to commute; coping strategies; emotional dynamics experienced by individuals within LDR partnerships; and changes in interactions between LDR individuals, and between LDR couples and their extended families and social support network members.

Two qualitative studies using definitions similar to Gerstel’s explored LDRs in the mid-1980s. Winfield (1985) interviewed 59 LDR spouses, including interviews with both partners in 12 couples, along with mailing self-report questionnaires to commuters. The reported findings identified interactions with the social support network and extended families of LDR partners to be vital to the quality of the LDR experience for these couples and individuals. Themes Winfield identified include commitment to the
relationship; commitment to careers; reduced social contacts for LDR partners; coping strategies; gender role issues; and interactions between LDR couples and their extended families and social support network members. Winfield’s study had limitations such as minimal information regarding her methods and theoretical foundation, not including the interview protocols and the questionnaire used, and the omission of information about sampling procedures and response rates. Thus, it cannot be ascertained how data was gathered (individually or in conjoint interviews) nor how data was analyzed. Winfield did disclose that she had been a partner in an LDR, and, in general, this was a successful experience. While her themes resonate with those of Gerstel (1978) and Gerstel and Gross (1984), the possibility exists that these works, as well as her personal experiences, may have been reflected in her conceptualization and analysis of her findings. Winfield’s work, however, is one of the few studies about LDRs in which the LDR status of the researcher is overtly stated.

In a more thoroughly documented qualitative study of commuter couples, Jesswein (1984) disclosed that at the time of the study she was also a participant in an LDR. She acknowledged her perspective that the experience of being an LDR partner caused her to realize that “lifestyles other than the traditional nuclear family can be both viable and satisfying” (p. 26).

Jesswein (1984) interviewed each partner in six LDR couples once individually for data gathering, and then once conjointly for the purpose of providing “closure to the process,” (p. 43) not data collection. She stated she selected a purposeful sample of as diverse a group of couples as possible, whom were required to have been in a relationship of at least 2 years’ duration and have been in an LDR a minimum of 6
months. In addition, both partners were required to be working in a career, be committed to the relationship, and the couple was required to have experienced at least one separation/reunion cycle.

Reported themes of Jesswien’s study included: decisional conflict about initiating an LDR; gender role issues; transitional dynamics related to the separation-reunification process; recognition of the contradictions between independence and connectedness in relationships with the spouse; reconciliation of these contradictions; and transformation of the relationship due to the LDR experience. Her study did not focus as much on interactions with extended family members and the social support network of LDR participants as did the works of Gerstel (1978), Gerstel and Gross (1984), and Winfield (1985), but did address the perceptions partners had of their relational dynamics and shared world view, albeit from the perspective of each individual.

In an effort to provide a more relational picture of LDRs, Magnuson and Norem (1999) conducted conjoint interviews with five LDR couples in which both partners had academic careers. Themes identified in this study include the challenges of managing emotional responses to separations and reunions, developing and increasing personal autonomy, and coping with disapproval expressed by family members and friends about the LDR. Although information was collected in conjoint interviews, the study was not based in a systemic, relational theory. Thus, relational interactions between partners and with the extended family were not a focus of the study.

**College students in LDRs.** In the 1990s, there were numerous studies completed on college students in LDRs. Research topics from this decade include comparison of LDRs to PRs on a variety of factors (Bernard, 1992; Dellman-Jenkins et al., 1994;
Guldner, 1992), relational maintenance and stabilizing strategies (McPherson, 1996; Stafford & Canary, 1991), and individual factors correlated with long-distance relationships (Helgeson, 1994; Van Horn et al., 1997). Limitations of this research were the confluence of developmental and life cycle issues on the phenomenon of long-distance relationships, such as the tendency of relationships both long-distance and proximal to end at this point in the lifecycle (Stafford, 2004, 2005). These studies were conducted from individually based theoretical foundations, with data collected from individual respondents, and analyzed from individual theoretical perspectives. Thus, the applicability of these findings to married LDR couples as well as to relational functioning overall is limited.

One of the first studies into LDRs of non-married college students was conducted by Gulder (1992). The importance of Guldner’s study for this project are his efforts to identify how many college students are in LDRs, and two of his hypotheses. First, he hypothesized that the social support network was vital to the adjustment of LDR couples, and second, that LDR couples experienced responses upon separation and reunion that signaled the activation of the attachment system. Guldner asserted these responses are incorrectly pathologized as symptoms of mood disorders (Guldner, 1996).

**Participant-defined LDRs.** An important innovation in defining LDRs evolved during the 1990s in the body of research conducted with college students. Arguing that the arbitrariness of criteria such as miles and/or time apart when defining LDRs imposed the perceptions of the researchers on participants, studies in the early 1990s were designed to allow participants to define their own relationship as an LDR or a proximal relationship [PR] (Bernard, 1992; Dellman-Jenkins et al., 1994; Guldner, 1992).
Researchers adopting this practice argued a strict miles or time cutoff for identifying LDRs did not consider the investment partners made in getting together due to the combination of factors such as transportation methods available, work schedules, and travel conditions faced by each traveler.

The findings from two of these studies using the self-selection process highlight the influence of the perceptions of individual partners on whether or not they have an LDR. Bernard (1992) and Dellman-Jenkins et al. (1994) had participants identify their relationships as an LDR or PR by selecting one of two options to describe their relationship: first, as one in which there was a barrier of time or distance that prevented partners from seeing each other on a regular basis, or second, as a relationship in which face-to-face contact was frequently available. The results of Bernard’s study showed that couples separated by as little as 20 miles might consider themselves to be long-distance couples, while couples separated by up to 500 miles might consider themselves to be geographically close couples.

Similarly, the undergraduate college students in Dellman-Jenkin et al.’s comparison of dating behaviors in long-distance and geographically close couples self-selected as an LDR or PR. The overwhelming majority of those who self-identified as being in a geographically close relationship lived within 50 miles of their partner, however, a small percentage of respondents who lived up to 80 miles apart stated they were geographically close. In comparison, almost 50% of the group self-identifying as LDR lived with 0-80 miles of their partner. Dellman-Jenkins et al. stated that “this finding suggests that there are other factors than ‘number of miles separated’ that
influence college students’ perceptions of their relationships being long-distance or geographically close” (p.215).

Green, Hogarth, and Shackleton (1999, 1999b) and Hogarth and Daniel (1987; 1988), who studied weekly commuters going from rural to urban areas of Britain for work also advocated that participants should self-identify as LDR. They noted, “What is feasible or tolerable as a daily journey to work for one individual may not be so for another” (Green et al., 1999b, p. 55). They emphasized that the demands of the journey, such as reliance on mass-transit schedules or the extra time demands of rural travel, are important factors in the decision to become commuters, and these contextual variables for LDR partners must be considered to fully understand the LDR experience.

**Voluntary is relative: Family ties and the LDR decision.** The voluntariness of the LDR is also considered when defining LDRs. The decision to embark on a non-military commuter relationship appears to be voluntary, and is often judged so by researchers, although Gerstel (1978) noted that the decision to commute often looked more voluntary to outsiders than it felt to the couples she interviewed. A reason cited for LDR couples perceiving they have limited choices in the decision to commute is relational ties to extended family and the social support network in the location of the primary residence for the couple.

This voluntariness of the separation for LDR couples was explored in a series of articles resulting from a study by a team of geographers examining labor-related migration patterns in the United Kingdom (Green et al., 1999; Green et al., 1999b; Hogarth, 1987; Hogarth & Daniel, 1987, 1988). Identified as a subset of individuals in a larger study, LDR participants were defined as those who spent time away from the
family home during the week due to their job and returned on weekends. From the initial sample of 115 commuters, 25 were selected for more in-depth study with questionnaires and interviews. For seven participants, their partners were also interviewed. Green, Hogarth, and Shackleton (1999) reported a key consideration in the decision of their participants to commute was that they did not want to risk losing emotional and instrumental connections to friends and extended family members. The findings from this study highlighted the importance of the social support network and extended family in the decision-making process for LDR couples, and advocated for the awareness that commuters are not the detached individuals that the commuting situation may make them appear to be.

The impact of family ties on the decision to initiate an LDR has been identified in other studies. For example, Levin and Trost (1999) identified a subsample of LDR families as part of a larger study tracking the effects of divorce on children. As they followed participants, a subgroup initiated LDRs, and the researchers examined the reasons why these families had done so. They found that one or both parents may have the responsibility of being the primary caretaker for immediate or extended family members, and an LDR eliminated a forced choice between the dependent family member(s) and the partner.

Family ties were central to the LDR couples studied by Erwin in her 1993 qualitative study of couples who had undertaken LDRs following an extended period of unemployment for the breadwinner. Using a case study format, Erwin conducted separate interviews, time-series analyses, and observations with both individual partners in two LDR couples. For these participants, the support of friends and family members
was vital for the ability of the couple to cope during the time of unemployment (Erwin, 1993). These bonds were very close, leading one partner to decide it was best they remain in the primary location with extended family members.

Second, Erwin notes that for families who have been coping with unemployment and are in difficult financial situations, the thought of relocating for a job that may not be guaranteed in the future may be less attractive or less feasible than it may appear to an observer. After a time of uncertainty, families may wish to retain what is familiar, or to remain in an area where expenses are known or equity is invested in a home or land. Third, if the non-commuter partner has a steady job, they may not wish to leave it for an uncertain future, particularly if they are established in this job. Finally, family members may feel a strong emotional connection to a their physical home (Hogarth, 1987) or geographic region and may not wish to leave (Erwin), meaning the commuter must go in order to take advantage of the long-awaited and very needed new job. Although the case study format allows little generalizability of findings, Erwin’s published study includes the interview protocols and other documents used in the study, as well as full transcripts of interviews with participants to allow reviewers to consider the credibility of findings. Her reported findings resonate with those reported by other researchers when considering the perceived voluntariness of the decision to initiate an LDR.

**Summary of factors in defining LDRs.** In early studies, LDRs were considered to be voluntary decisions resulting from the choice of the male partner to work in occupations requiring travel away from home. These studies advocated for a more comprehensive understanding of the social context of couples and families in LDRs. Gerstel’s seminal dissertation in 1978 broadened the conceptualization of LDRs to
consider factors such as being separated due to the employment of the female partner, or the establishment of a separate residence for both partners. This conceptualization included the condition that the LDR was voluntarily established, while acknowledging that the decision to relocate a family or couple for a job is not easy to make.

While the decision may appear to be financial, many non-tangible factors are considered by the couple, most importantly ties to family and friends. In contrast to the perception of LDR partners as independent, particularly the commuter, LDR partners report they are often very connected to their nuclear and extended families, as well as their social networks. Consideration of these ties from a relational perspective is important in more fully understanding the LDR lived experience.

**Social Support as a Key Factor for LDR Participants**

Social support for individuals and couples who are living the LDR lifestyle is considered to be a central component to the adjustment of these couples (Erwin, 1993; Guldner, 2003; Stafford, 2004b). However, the interactions and relational processes between the LDR partners and between the LDR couples and their extended family and other social support network members have not been studied in LDRs from a systemic perspective. The research question of this study seeks to provide insight into the multigenerational interrelationships experienced in LDR families and couples from the perspective of TG Theory.

Researchers who have reviewed the literature on LDRs (Guldner, 2003; Stafford, 2004, 2005) have stated that the social support network is crucial to the adjustment of LDR couples, regardless of the reason for commuting. Stafford (2004b) comments:
...[C]ommunity may be of greater significance to LDRs than geographically close ones. Long-distance relationships may well be sustained and individuals in these relationships better adjusted, as much if not more, through their proximal community ties than through communication with their relational counterparts. Conversely, many individuals in various types of LDRs feel stigmatized by their community and potential proximal support networks, resulting in isolation. In either situation, community plays a prominent role in these relationships. (p. 46)

The extended social support network of family and kin has been reported to provide both helpful and unhelpful interactions with LDR couples. These interactions may occur in the context of providing instrumental and emotional support to meet household and family responsibilities (Bergen et al., 2007; Driedger, 1987; Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Forsyth & Gramling, 1987, 1990). An important reason why military couples are excluded from much research about commuter relationships is that military LDR partners receive positive social support which partners who are in civilian LDRs do not (Stafford, 2005).

A Dual-edged Support

In a qualitative study examining how 50 female commuters in LDRs negotiated their identity as a commuter within their social support network of family and friends (Bergen, 2006; Bergen et al., 2007), a dual-edged aspect of the support from these individuals and groups was a central theme. Participants reported in interviews and focus groups that their network may validate the relationship and give support to individual partners, yet still question the overall relationship of the couple. Bergen’s participants reported that they had to cope with the inappropriate reactions of others while they were struggling to make the decision to commute and while coping with stressors due to the LDR. Similar findings were reported by Holmes (2004) in a qualitative study of gender
roles and intimacy in 3 commuter couples. Holmes reported these participants stated their families were often confused about the LDR situation, and usually expressed their concerns to the woman in the LDR, a finding also reported by Bergen (2006). These reactions are documented to run the gamut from sympathy to overt criticism, both verbal and nonverbal, and correlate with findings from Gerstel and Gross (1982) and Sahlstein (2000).

Bergen’s works are not typical because the research question directly involved the social support network. More commonly, themes or findings about issues related to the social support network emerge in studies examining other topics. For example, Sahlstein (2000, 2004, 2006) examined how 20 dating LDR couples managed the balance of contradictions inherent in LDRs, especially the balance between being apart and together, and how they reconciled this balance as they reunited and separated. Couples in Sahlstein’s study discussed questions from a protocol provided by the researcher and audio taped this conversation, which was then transcribed and analyzed. Sahlstein reported a core theme was the importance of the interaction between the couple and their social support network, in proximity and at a distance, in the same way the LDR couples worked to balance their own interactions with each other. Sahlstein stated that these participants enjoyed interactions with their social network when apart, and felt that when they were together, they neglected this social network. A strength of Sahlstein’s works is that she states up front her views that LDRs are more correctly viewed as similar to PRs, that is, as complex relationships which may or may not be satisfying for a couple and individuals based upon many factors. A limitation is that this
study was conducted on college students who were dating, which may make its findings less generalizable to married LDR couples who might be in a different lifecycle stage.

**Reduced Social Contacts**

LDR participants note they have fewer social contacts than those in PRs (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Gronseth, 1959; Jackson et al., 2002), because the lifestyle limits the time, energy and opportunity to make and maintain numerous social contacts (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Winfield, 1985). Both partners in an LDR may find that due to pragmatic changes in their schedules and household routines, they no longer interact with the same social groups they did before the commute, particularly other couples (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Green et al., 1999; Jackson et al.). Energy and time that might be spent socializing is spent commuting (Jesswein, 1984) or working extra hours to maximize time with their partner and family during reunions (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Green et al., 1999). This may be due to the LDR situation, not the type of work being done, considering Rabe’s 2001 study of LDRs in South Africa, in which participants from a variety of socioeconomic and occupational groups, such as college professors and live-in domestic workers, reported reduced social contacts for the same reasons.

Commuters leave behind their social support network of community services and professionals (Gerstel, 1977), such as medical care providers (Jackson et al., 2002; Jesswein, 1984). Jackson et al. reported that the loss of this larger community was an important factor for the four African-American commuting couples interviewed in their study. These respondents reported that they lost both personal and professional support.
networks when they began to commute, and were not able to fully reestablish these ties in either location.

The presence of the long-distance partner and the fact that some emotional/intimacy needs are met even at a distance may limit the wish to socialize in general (Sahlstein, 2006). Commuters may also feel they will be commuting temporarily, and thus not be motivated to spend time making friends at their commuting location (Rabe, 2001), creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that further limits social contacts. If commuters do develop separate social networks at their locations, they may feel torn between the two places and two groups (Jesswein, 1984; Sahlstein, 2006b).

**Different Social Networks for Each Partner**

Due to distance, schedule and different social settings, LDR partners tend to develop separate social support networks (Guldner, 1992; Jesswein, 1984). It makes sense that when these networks overlap during the limited times partners are together, stress results for LDR partners as they seek to balance time with each member of the network, individually and/or as a couple (Sahlstein, 2000, 2006b). However, partners in commuter relationships also face the challenge of balancing their disparate social networks while apart. For example, commuters may feel pressure to choose between spending time with proximal friends or family instead of speaking with their long-distance partner on the phone, and truthfully, it may be easier to connect with friends and family close by than it might be with the partner who is at a distance. If this balance becomes too difficult, couples and partners in commuter relationships may limit contact with members of their social network (Sahlstein, 2006b).
**Misperceptions of the Support Network**

Family members may be understandably confused about the LDR (Holmes, 2004). The influence of cultural mores on extended family and friends of the partners in LDRs may result in them expressing negative opinions about the LDR to one or both partners, resulting in LDR partners limiting or even eliminating contact with these persons in an effort to protect their partnered relationship (Bergen, 2006; Bergen, et al., 2007; Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1984; Sahlstein, 2006). Members of the social network may perceive that the commuting situation will do harm to the homebound spouse and children and voice this directly to the couple, not perceiving the benefits to the partners and family (Bergen; Bergen et al.) These questions and comments may be very personal and intrusive, and may cause partners to doubt the wisdom of their commuter relationship (Bergen).

Bergen (2006) found that her respondents categorized the responses of social network members in five groups: those who understood without explanation; those who didn’t understand at first, but did with an explanation; those who understood over time; those who did not understand, but the commuter felt no explanation was warranted; and those who were never going to understand the LDR. Overwhelmingly, most people in the final category were friends and family of the LDR couple.

**Social Contact with Extended Family Members**

How social contact with the extended family members changes or not as a result of long-distance relationships is not clear in the current literature. Erwin (1993) found that the non-commuters in her study reported they were closer to their own family of origin once their spouse became a commuter. At times, one partner may move in with
extended family members, either their own family of origin or their in-laws (Driedger, 1987; Erwin, 1993; Gerstel & Gross, 1984). On the other hand, Gerstel and Gross (1984) reported that commuters were less likely to rely on kin than were the divorced or widowed, but the significant minority that did increase contact with kin were usually geographically close to them (Gerstel, 1978). Seamen families reported relocating to be closer to kin so they may have this support nearby (Forsyth & Gramling, 1990; Gronseth, 1959).

Both the commuter and non-commuter may find they are communicating more with their extended family members than with their long-distance partner (Erwin, 1993; Govaerts, 1985). LDR partners may also increase the amount of contact they have with the extended family and friends of the other partner. These interactions with their partner’s family helps LDR partners feel connected to their partner while apart (Sahlstein, 2004). These findings may indicate that extended family members provide important instrumental and emotional support for one or both LDR partners, and as a result, become important to the couple. However, this contact may be extremely stressful to one or both partners if it is not supportive (Bergen et al., 2007).

When commuters return home for visits, partners are reported to focus on the nuclear family and partnered relationship. This means that they may choose to reduce interactions with friends and extended family because they need and want to focus on this primary attachment relationship (Jesswein, 1984; Sahlstein, 2000, 2004). Commuting partners may “jealously guard the privacy of their already limited reunions” (Gerstel & Gross, 1982, p. 86), and others may not wish to intrude, or may perceive that they are not welcome.
Independence and Connectedness in LDRs

Although partners in commuter relationships are separated, they are not disconnected. They work diligently to remain connected, spending a great deal of time and expense to do so (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). Nevertheless, partners in long-distance relationships are also very independent (Gerstel, 1977; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Gronseth, 1959; Magnuson & Norem, 1999). Personal autonomy while connected intimately with a partner is highly valued by LDR partners (Jackson et al., 2002). The balance of these contradicting needs for autonomy and connectedness is considered an important aspect of success in LDRs (Johnson, 1987; Sahlstein, 2000, 2004), as it is for healthy relationships in general from the perspective of systemic theories of couple and family relationships (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992; Goldenthal, 1993). Systemic theories view the most successful relationships as those in which partners can balance their needs for individuality with their drive to be emotionally connected with others (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992). LDR couples must attain this successful balance at a distance not only with each other, but with their families of origin as well (Sahlstein, 2006b).

Attachment-based Responses

Research and conceptualizations of LDRs based on attachment theory argue that physical and emotional symptoms of distress in LDR partners as they separate and reunite are best understood as attachment responses (Diamond et al., 2008; Guldner, 1996; Pistole, 2010; Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010; Vormbrock, 1993). Literature reviews of LDR research from the perspective of attachment theory (Pistole, 2010; Vormbrock, 1993) argue that when placed in the context of the activation of the
attachment system by the impending and then actual separation from an intimate partner, the reactions of sadness and anxiety associated with these separations reported so consistently in the literature about LDRs make sense. These are the expected reactions to being separated from a significant other, since separation from a loved one, even a voluntary one, presents a threat to the relational well-being of an adult. From an attachment theory perspective, it stands to reason that LDR partners will experience adult manifestations of attachment responses as they reunite and separate, indicating that LDR partners are indeed connected to each other.

Diamond et al. (2008) tested this hypothesis by examining the biochemical responses of the homebound spouse in 42 couples anticipating a 4- to 7-day separation. Using diaries, sleep logs and saliva samples, Diamond et al. found that the secretion of cortisol, which is associated with the stress response in humans, was elevated during separations from partners. Pistole et al. (2010) studied attachment profiles of 77 individuals in LDRs and 61 in PRs. Among other findings, they reported that there was no significant difference between attachment profiles of the two groups.

Pistole’s (2010) conceptualization of the dynamic balance between the exploratory drive of the attachment system with the caregiving need reflects a systemic relational representation of the balance between autonomy and connectedness. Pistole hypothesized that LDRs allow for the exploratory drive to be fully experienced in a satisfying way that offsets yet does not diminish the strength of the care-giving drive that the separation from the intimate partner hinders. According to Pistole, studies such as Sahlstein’s (2000, 2004) which analyze the interaction between autonomy and connectedness in LDR partners reflect the attachment-driven responses activated by the
cycle of separations and reunions experienced in LDRs. Conceptualizing distress experienced by LDR partners in the separation and reunion cycle as attachment-based responses instead of indicators that there are relational problems is advocated as an important consideration for professionals who work with LDR partners, individuals, and families (Guldner, 2003; Pistole).

Summary of Social Support for LDR Couples

Important studies in the area of examining the social support network of LDR couples include a variety of theoretical bases, content areas, and research methodologies, but have lacked a systemic theoretical orientation that considered the interactions of LDR partners and their families-of-origin and social network members from a relational perspective. These interactions between LDR partners as individuals and as couples with their social support network are vital to the experience of the commuter and homebound partner alike. This social support may be positive or negative, depending on the perceptions the extended network of friends and kin have regarding LDRs. The support given by the social network may be contradictory, validating individuals while questioning the couple relationship. The family network often expresses their opinions and perceptions verbally and non-verbally to the couple, but women may be more likely to experience these reactions than are men. LDR couples may find that their lifestyle changes their interaction patterns with their social network.

Summary of Content Themes in LDR Research

Content themes in LDR research began with LDRs being defined by occupational groupings. This definition was expanded in the late 1970s, when LDRs were characterized as two partners who were equally committed to their profession and
to their relationship such that they separated willingly in order to pursue their personal
goals while remaining bonded to their intimate relationship. These early studies called
for an understanding of the larger social context of LDR couples. The importance of this
larger understanding was raised when the practice of allowing research participants to
define their status as an LDR couple rather than requiring researcher-defined criteria was
introduced in the 1990s.

The social support of family and friends has been considered an important factor
in the experience of LDR partners, based upon findings from studies that are typically
qualitative. The lived experience of the LDR has been reported to impact relationships
with members of the extended family and social support network in a variety of ways,
both positive and negative. LDR partners report they work hard to remain connected to
each other and members of their social support networks, while valuing the autonomy of
the LDR lifestyle. The stressors of separations and reunions for LDR couples are
hypothesized to reflect the activation of the adult attachment system, which has been
identified as a representation of the connectedness LDR partners feel even while at a
distance from each other. This balance of autonomy and connectedness must be attained
with the extended family and friends, as well as the intimate partner.

**Research Issues in the Study of LDRs**

The variety of studies has created a rich body of data regarding LDRs; however,
this broad research base is not cohesive, and this has contributed to challenges in
generalizing these findings. As can be inferred, the lack of a standard definition of LDRs
creates inconsistent inclusion/exclusion criteria among studies. Cultural biases regarding
factors related to LDRs are considered to underlie research hypotheses, research design,
and/or interpretation of results. In addition, sample bias is a significant weakness in the LDR research. Finally, LDRs highlight the theoretical and methodological debate over what constitutes couples’ research.

**Influence of Cultural Assumptions**

Researchers and clinicians are not immune to societal perceptions. The impact of internalized social norms related to commuter relationships may be seen in assumptions in research questions and designs for LDR studies. This is a crucial concept when reviewing the LDR literature, due to the number of frequently cited studies which are conducted from a qualitative perspective, sometimes by researchers who are also participants in LDRs (e.g., Jesswein, 1984; Winfield, 1985). A similar concern is found in the number of influential qualitative studies in which researchers do not disclose their status as a partner in an LDR (e.g., Gerstel, 1978; Sahlstein, 2000).

A second concern regarding cultural assumptions in research studies has been hypothesized to be internalized social norms which may lead researchers to have a negative view of LDRs (Sahlstein, 2006b). These assumptions may lead to a negative perception of LDRs in research questions, hypotheses, and/or discussion of findings. Internalized cultural norms may lead to researchers pathologizing what are expected responses to an unusual living situation (Forsyth & Gramling, 1987; Sahlstein, 2000; Stafford, 2004b).

Another result of these internalized cultural norms influencing research design for LDR studies is that LDRs may be evaluated with the same standards as PRs when long-distance relationships may function very differently from PRs (Pistole et al., 2010). According to Sahlstein (2000), “long-distance scholars have assumed proximity to be the
standard for relating in their studies when they attempt to compare LDRs and PRs, searching for differences in order to prescribe strategies for LDRs to work more like PRs” (p. 169). Sahlstein (2004) argues that the assumption “that time apart is negative for relationships” (p. 709) leads researchers to look for negative occurrences in LDRs (Sahlstein, 2000), or question findings of relational satisfaction as suspect due to ineffective relational processes, such as excessive idealization of the LDR partner (e.g., Stafford & Reske, 1990).

Internalized cultural norms impacting research on LDRs are related to the assumptions that underlie the definitions of family and residence used in our culture. These assumptions often view partners living apart from a nuclear family as not being ‘a family’ due to their separation from these loved ones (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Stafford, 2005; Winfield, 1985). Another assumption found in LDR research is that the relationship and the individuals in it exist in a vacuum, separate from other relationships and functioning in isolation (Sahlstein, 2000, 2004, 2006b; Stafford, 2005). When LDRs are conceptualized as existing in isolation, then the hypotheses, questions investigated, research designs, and interpretations of results may not fully consider a wider view of the social supports and stressors confronted by LDR couples.

Limitations to Generalizability of Findings

Commuter couples are a varied group united by their unconventional lifestyle, which makes challenges for interpreting the findings of research studies with this population (Sahlstein, 2000). Variations in the LDR population has led to the assertion that all LDRs should not be considered to be the same (Sahlstein, 2000, 2006b; Stafford, 2004). At the same time, it is argued that individual circumstances of each couple and
type of separation may vary, but there appears to be a “striking” (Vormbrock, 1993, p. 137) pattern to the responses and interrelational dynamics in LDRs due to the universality of the human attachment. However, this universality should not be assumed without examining the larger cultural context of the LDR couple and extended family (Pistole, 2010). Other factors impacting generalizability are a variety of sample biases and the different developmental and situational contexts of populations in studies.

Sample Bias

Sample bias has been a concern of LDR research since first documented by Gerstel in 1978. Populations sampled are overwhelmingly Caucasian, middle to upper-middle class couples (Gerstel & Gross, 1982, 1983, 1984; Govaerts, 1985; Green et al., 1999, 1999b; Stafford 2005). This may lead to the erroneous conclusion that LDRs are a lifestyle in only this demographic group (Govaerts). It is hypothesized that the frequent use of snowball sampling (e.g., Holmes, 2004; Johnson, 1987; Magnuson & Norem, 1999) may contribute to sample bias in that participants may know others who are similar to them demographically and socioeconomically (Gerstel & Gross, 1982).

Other than Jackson, et al. (2002), which recruited only African-American couples in LDRs, efforts to sample participants from more diverse racial and ethnic groups have not created more diverse samples (e.g., Bercaw, 2001; Magnuson & Norem, 1999). Bercaw comments in his study of college students in LDRs that due to the lack of demographic diversity in the LDR research, it is not possible to determine if the absence of minority couples in samples of LDR populations signifies that these populations have a lower incidence of LDRs, or are not identified and recruited through the methods used. Conversely, a recent study which did not specify efforts to recruit a more culturally and
ethnically diverse population resulted in a majority-minority population (Gomilion, 2009) perhaps due to the geographic area of the study. This study is unique in the LDR literature because ethnicity was controlled for as a variable.

Pistole (2010) states the importance of examining racial and ethnically diverse participants in LDR studies, and in considering relevant cultural norms that may impact attachment behaviors and expectations of LDR partners and families. Pistole recommends examining culturally relevant values related to proximity in family relationships and how different cultures view the importance of attachment behaviors for partners and families of origin.

**Higher education.** Individuals and couples who work in colleges and universities are common in samples of LDR studies. This is attributed to the preponderance of LDRs in academia due to hiring practices make LDRs a necessary choice (Holmes, 2004). It is also hypothesized that individuals in a university environment are familiar with research studies, and thus are more willing to volunteer, or they may be more accessible to researchers for recruiting purposes (Gerstel, 1978).

**Samples of college students.** Much research conducted on LDRs has been done with college students (Stafford, 2005). This leads to the question of the generalizability of the results from studies conducted with unmarried college students, who are in different lifecycle and relational stages than married couples. College students in LDRs may also experience less social stigma as these relationships are less socially deviant than are LDRs for couples who are not separated for academic study. College students may also experience less guilt because they may have limited choices for the location of their training or the duration of their studies, unlike commuters who may feel they had
more choice and may remain at their distant job as long as it suits them and their family (Guldner, 1992).

**Successful couples only need apply.** Magnusen and Norem (1999) hypothesized that that the continued findings of high relational satisfaction in LDRs might be due to only those who already have satisfying relationships being willing to put them to the test of an LDR. This is reinforced by Dreidger’s (1987) observation that a strong marriage is necessary prior to embarking on a commuter relationship.

“Marriage” vs. couples. The majority of research into LDRs has been conducted on heterosexual couples. The delimiter ‘commuter marriage’ in recruitment materials which may unintentionally limit the sample to married couples only (Rabe, 2001). Rabe advocated for the use of commuter couples when considering LDRs as “a more inclusive term than commuter marriages, since unmarried people (who would have lived together if they could find suitable places of work closer together)” (p. 277) also are participants in LDRs. By extension, given the social unacceptability of same-sex marriage, the recruitment of couples for a study on ‘commuter marriage’ may unintentionally rule out same-sex couples.

Developmental and situational factors. Stafford (2004, 2005) notes that much research into the dissolution of LDRs has been conducted on demographic groups with higher than typical rates of relationship breakups, such as incarcerated populations, military personnel, and college students. Another lifecycle situation that impacts findings of LDRs, especially in the satisfaction outcomes, is the presence of young children in the home. Parents who commute with young children tend to report they feel more stressed in the commuter family lifestyle than those without children (Gerstel &
Gross, 1982, 1984, 1987; Hogarth & Daniel, 1988; Stafford, 2005). This is attributed to the increased stress of caring for children of this age, as well as the guilt experienced by parents who leave their younger children behind (Gerstel & Gross, 1982; Green et al., 1999; Rabe, 2001).

**Commuting partner vs. non-commuting partner.** Findings are consistent that those who commute have lessened responses to the separation than those who stay behind (Diamond et al., 2008; Pistole, 2010; Vormbrock, 1993). Due to the tendency until more recent times for commuters to be men, what appear to be gender-related findings of more distress in women may reflect commuter vs. homebound spouse responses (Vormbrock).

**What Constitutes Couples Research?**

Research into commuter relationships highlights the theoretical difference between relational and individual research. In general, research on LDR couples and families examines individual issues of partners related to adjustment to this lifestyle and do not view the family as a systemic whole (Forsyth & Gramling, 1987). Studies of long-distance couples are sometimes presented as relational data because both responses from both partners were obtained even though data was obtained and analyzed separately, (e.g., Bercaw, 2001). Even when data is gathered from only one partner, this research might be labeled as being ‘couples’ research (e.g., Bercaw). This reflects a long-standing practice in sociological research in which information about a couple or household is gathered from only one person as the informant for the couple or entire family (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). Opponents of this perspective argue this obscures the
perspectives of individual members of the family (Seymour et al., 1995; Valentine, 1999).

Conjoint interviews and/or data from both partners have been used to present a more relational perspective of the commuter relationship experience (e.g., Green, Hogarth, & Shackleton, 1999; Jackson, et al., 2002; Magnuson & Norem, 1999). Researchers have included children of parents in commuter relationships in interviews and data gathering (e.g., Barnett, 1998; Forsyth & Gramling, 1990; Jackson et al., 2002), but have done so in mostly individual interviews. In general, it is rare to find a study that specifically addresses the reasons why data was gathered from individuals or conjointly. Notable exceptions are Gerstel (1978), McPherson (1996) and Bergen (2006), all of which specify the reasons why data was gathered individually or conjointly in relation to the research questions.

Summary of Research Issues with LDR Studies

The variety of studies about LDRs has contributed to limitations in generalizability of findings, due to imprecise definitions, sample biases, and the impact of developmental and situational variables and cultural biases that undergird research questions and interpretations of results. LDR research is also lacking a coherent theoretical base for studies, and draws from a number of theoretical models, among them attachment theory, communications theories, and relational maintenance theories. Sample and gender bias has been noted in the LDR literature conducted since the late 1970s. Finally, research into LDRs raises questions of what is relational research.

This proposed study will add to the research base on LDRs by utilizing a qualitative approach to examine LDRs from the perspective of Transgenerational...
Theory. This theoretical base will bring together the various contextual, situational, and developmental variables that impact LDR couples and families. Families will be considered from a perspective that will include consideration of extended family members and the impact of family and cultural values on the LDR couple. This theoretical base will now be presented.

**Transgenerational Theory**

Researchers have recommended the use of systemic models when examining LDRs (Guldner, 1992; McPherson, 1996; Stafford, 2005), seeing this as the next step of study for the literature on LDRs (Sahlstein, 2000; Stafford, 2004). The complexity of relational processes and contextual variables in LDRs calls for a theoretical foundation that will encompass the varied aspects of these relationships into a cohesive whole. The relational dynamics of LDRs highlight the components of Transgenerational (TG) Theory, a systemic model of relationships (Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Forman, 2002). This study is based upon TG Theory.

TG Theory is used to conceptualize relationships and subsequent treatment interventions in the marriage and family therapy (MFT) field. It is based upon core principles of the MFT field, especially the intergenerational transmission of relational processes through generations (Boszormenyi-Nagi & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Fishbane, 2005; Gilbert, 1992; Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Forman, 2002), synthesized with object relations and attachment theory (Roberto-Forman, 2002). The TG model emphasizes that connection and interdependence in
emotionally significant relationships are the core experiences of being human (Fishbane; McGoldrick & Carter, 1999). From this perspective, TG Theory is very applicable to LDRs.

**Background**

The schools of thought in the MFT field on which TG Theory is based emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including Bowen Family Systems Theory, developed by Murray Bowen, and Contextual Theory, proposed by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (Gale & Long, 1996; Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Forman, 2002). These theories emphasize working with more than one generation in a family, believing relational issues in the present have their roots in a person’s family of origin. This is not to say that the family of origin is to blame for the relational difficulties of its members (Wechtler & Piercy, 1996). Families are not faulted for these emotional processes, because these drives are considered to be biologically and socially driven, and are simply a fact of life (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Instead, the family of origin is recognized as the primary emotional unit through which patterns of interaction in intimate and family relationships are learned and passed on through the generations. Because these patterns are forged in family relationships, the healing of present relational difficulties, even those that do not directly involve the family of origin, may be done through addressing this emotional legacy that our family, for better or worse, has given us (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992; Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Forman; Wechtler & Piercy). This is not done at the expense of individual needs, because healthy family relationships create healthy individuals.
In the late 1970s, feminist scholars criticized the TG theories as not recognizing the social and cultural influences which impact women and persons of color (Gale & Long, 1996; McGoldrick & Carter, 2002). Feminists argued that TG theories reinforced traditional norms of family life and relationships which were seen as oppressive and ethnocentric, pathologizing family structures that did not meet the ideal of the White, middle-class nuclear family (Ault-Riche, 1986; Avis, 1988; Boss & Thorne, 1989; Hare-Mustin, 1978; McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989).

The criticism of the MFT field by the feminist scholars is especially relevant to LDR couples. The espousal of traditional values in family therapy means that women’s careers are undervalued by clinicians (Avis, 1988). The importance of the woman’s career is central to modern LDR couples (Gerstel, 1978; Gerstel & Gross, 1984). In addition, adherence to traditional values means that women are expected to give up their places of residence in deference to their male partners, and marriages in which this does not happen are viewed as “deviant” in the field (Hare-Mustin, 1978, p. 182). The feminist criticism of the MFT field challenges all marriage and family clinicians to examine their values regarding sex roles, family configuration, and the role of individualism within relationships (Avis; Boss & Thorne, 1989; Hare-Mustin, 1978; McGoldrick et al., 1989; McGoldrick & Carter, 1999, 2002; Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989).

**Multigenerational Transmission**

In TG Theory, families are viewed to pass on a legacy of emotional functioning in intimate relationships to its members over the course of generations. This is done in “an orderly and predictable relationship process that connects the functioning of family
members across generations” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 224). Families must balance togetherness and individuality along with its own share of unresolved interpersonal conflicts from previous generations. The more unresolved conflicts a family must cope with, the less effectively it can problem-solve here-and-now stressors. Family members will become more reactive to the emotional process itself, and initial issues may become lost and remain unresolved (Gilbert, 1992).

This process repeats over generations as adults work to manage the build-up of anxiety by attempting to resolve these long-standing and often unconscious intergenerational issues in their present-day families (Bowen, 1985; Fishbane, 2005; Gilbert, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In addition to transmitting emotional processes through generations of a family, patterns are passed down in work ethic/career choice, political beliefs, religious affiliation, educational achievement, and attitudes toward physical illness, among many others (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagi & Spark, 1973; Bowen; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Kerr & Bowen; McGoldrick et al., 1989; McGoldrick & Carter, 2002; Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Forman, 2002).

**Triangles**

A core relational process which is transmitted across generations is *triangulation*, the involvement of a third party or force to manage anxiety in relationships. For TG theorists, the triangle is the basic unit of human relationships, and triangulation is a natural and inevitable process. Triangles are formed when two parties in a relationship experience more anxiety than they can cope with on their own. When this happens, they involve a third person, such as a child or sibling, or put their energy into something
external to the relationship, such as work or friends (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Roberto-Forman, 2002; Roberto, 1992). Once the anxiety of the relationship has an outlet, the stress on the original dyad is reduced, until stressors inevitably reoccur. When this happens, the alliances in the triangle shift and realign, creating stress until they are settled again. Triangles then expand through the family unit, both reducing and creating relational anxiety (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Roberto, 1992). Because triangles are always present, the question becomes “not how to get out of them, however, but rather how to manage oneself in and through them” (Gilbert, 1992, p. 77). Healthy relationships recognize the need for triangles, and use them in ways that help the relationship (Roberto-Forman, 2002).

**Differentiation: Balancing Autonomy and Connectedness**

TG Theory proposes that humans have two conflicting and equally powerful core needs: *connectedness*, the need to be intimately connected with others in emotional relationships, and *autonomy*, the need to develop a self independent from the approval and emotions of others. The balance of these two needs, known as *differentiation*, is the cornerstone for healthy relational functioning in the Bowenian Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert, 1992; McGoldrick & Carter, 2002; Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Forman, 2002). Emotions and thoughts are balanced when making decisions and responding to other humans and to situational and developmental stressors (Bowen; Gilbert, 1992; McGoldrick & Carter, 2002; Roberto-Forman, 2002). Individuals at a higher level of differentiation are considered more autonomous, flexible, able to tolerate to intimacy with minimal anxiety, and are able to tolerate conflict better than those who are at lower levels of differentiation (Roberto, 1992).
Differentiation is often misunderstood to incorrectly portray a ‘healthy’ person as one distanced from their emotions and not needing others for emotional or social relationships (McGoldrick & Carter, 1999). In contrast, true differentiation is only achieved when one is able to maintain intimate emotional relationships with others while sustaining “a state of self-knowledge and self definition that does not rely on others’ acceptance” (McGoldrick & Carter, p. 35). In other words, a solid sense of self can only be gained in the context of emotionally intimate and sustained relationships over time (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; McGoldrick & Carter, 1999).

Those who are most differentiated appreciate healthy relationships as key to their healthy development as individuals. Differentiation allows a person to identify and accommodate the needs of others in the relationship while taking responsibility for meeting one’s own needs in a way that is healthy for the relationship. This process is called relational autonomy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973).

**Differentiation and physical distance.** There is disagreement in the TG literature about the link between differentiation and physical distance. When considering LDRs, it is important to explore distinctions between differentiation and distance from those with whom one has emotional ties. Bowen maintained that, “a person must be self-sustaining and living independently of his family of origin to be successful at modifying his basic level of differentiation in relationship to the family” (Kerr & Bowen, p. 98). In contrast, contextual theorists criticize the notion that physical separation from family of origin members is necessary to achieve differentiation as romanticizing the myth of the
rugged individualist. Contextual theory challenges the “confusion of separation with
differentiation as a means of maturation” (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973, p. 182).

Feminist scholars also criticize Bowen’s requirement for physical separation
from family of origin members in order to gain more individuality within these
relationships. The feminists state this perspective overlooks the social and cultural mores
which require that women remain in close contact physically and emotionally with their
family due to their role as nurturers (McGoldrick & Carter, 1999), and thus are viewed
as less autonomous in relationships from a TG perspective (Hare-Mustin, 1978).

**Emotional cutoff vs. physical separation.** When anxiety becomes unbearable in
a relationship, TG Theory proposes that one or more parties may limit contact with
others in the relational unit. This does not resolve the distress, although it may appear
calmer on the surface due to the reduction in conflict or turmoil (Bowen, 1985; Gilbert,
1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This unresolved distress continues to impact the relational
processes of family units, impairing the functioning of both individuals and the larger
family unit.

It is important to remember that physical distance is not the same as emotional
distance, nor is physical distance necessary for an emotional cutoff to occur (Bowen;
Gilbert; Kerr & Bowen). In a cutoff, the importance of or even the existence of the
emotional relationship is minimized or denied (Roberto-Forman, 2002). In the context of
LDRs, the separation between partners is not an emotional cutoff, because both partners
as well as important members of their social support network acknowledge the central
nature of this committed relationship to the LDR couple and/or family (Gerstel & Gross,
1982; Levin & Trost, 1999).
Feminist theorists argue that TG Theory places women in a double-bind between social mores and the theoretical concept of differentiation. They assert that TG Theory views women as having less effective individual and relational functioning by overlooking the powerful social mores dictating that women are the nurturers of the family. Therefore, women are acculturated to be less autonomous in relationships than men. The feminists maintain this relational focus is then pathologized by TG Theory as being too involved in the relationships of others in the family (Ault-Riche, 1986; Avis, 1988; Boss & Thorne, 1989; McGoldrick et al., 1989; Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989).

An argument especially salient for LDR couples made by the feminists is that social mores expect women to be the ones who nurture connections between family members and family subgroups (Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989). This has been corroborated by recent research into Bowen’s model, in which women paid higher attention to more relationships within the families of origin than did men, demonstrating that “females’ concerns for connection rather than separation between people extends beyond their affection directly toward individuals to caring about how other family members get along with each other” (Gubbins, Perosa, & Bartle-Haring, in press, p. 15). The concern of females with the relationships of the entire family correlates with the reports by female LDR partners that they were the ones to receive negative comments from family members regarding LDRs, not their male partners (Bergen, 2006; Holmes, 2004; Winfield, 1985).

**Adaptation, Not Dysfunction**

The TG perspective of the family is that it flows and evolves over time in response to situational and developmental stressors (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner,
Carter and McGoldrick (1999) conceptualized the stressors on families as being horizontal, along a timeline of developmental stressors, such as births and deaths, and vertical, or situational stressors of historical events and other external forces, such as moves, job losses, wartime, socioeconomic factors, or natural disasters. Contextual theory identifies these forces and stressors as existential facts (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Goldenthal, 1993).

TG Theory anticipates and normalizes relational difficulties during transitions and when coping with existential facts, regardless of the type or combination of stressors. “Given enough stress on the horizontal, developmental axis, any individual family will appear extremely dysfunctional. Even a small horizontal stress on a family in which the vertical axis is full of intense stress will create great disruption in the system” (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, p. 7). Families who are in distress are not viewed as ‘bad’ families, but as families who are coping with numerous stressors and are facing understandable challenges in meeting the needs of both individuals and the family. Once the family meets these challenges and accommodates to its new reality, members must carry on with the work of balancing relationships. “Adjustment does not mean a final resolution, a closing of the previous phase but a continuing tension to balance old but surviving expectations with new ones” (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973, p. 51). This
is especially relevant for LDR couples, who may face turbulence as they make a significant situational transition, which may be impacted further by developmental and lifecycle transitions.

**Relational Ethics**

Adaptation over time highlights the TG concept of *relational ethics*, defined as “the equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of all partners to a given situation” (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 173). Relational ethics hypothesizes that due to the bonds of loyalty in a family, regardless of whether they are of blood, legal commitments, shared history, and/or social definition, family members have expectations that they are entitled to care and consideration in these relationships. They also hold the expectation that they will give to others because of their shared bond (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987; Boszormenyi-Hagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Goldenthal, 1993; Roberto-Forman, 2002).

Given these bonds of loyalty and trust, families may tolerate and even encourage arrangements which appear to be unbalanced, but have an understanding, voiced or unvoiced, that this will even out over time (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Roberto-Forman, 2002). From this perspective, partners and family members in LDRs may be very accepting of the LDR over years and even decades because they understand the reasons for and meaning behind the commuter’s choice. They trust that this choice is made for the good of the relationship, and that the situation will balance out over time.
Summary of TG Theory

TG Theory is proposed as a theoretical foundation of this study and is well suited to the study of LDRs. First, this school of thought examines a wide variety of family relationships within couples, nuclear families, and extended families. The social network of extended family relationships has been identified in the literature on LDRs as an important facet of these relationships, and one that is recommended for further study. Second, TG Theory values the balance between connection and independence that LDR relationships make overt due to the separation/reunion cycle and the maintenance of intimate relationships at a distance. Third, TG Theory views family and couple relationships from a broad perspective that considers the contextual, developmental, and situation variables that impact family relationships. The literature surveyed indicates that LDR families and couples exist in a complex context where many different factors have a bearing on their relational functioning. Finally, TG Theory provides a framework of relational functioning within which the varied and often contradictory findings regarding relational satisfaction in LDRs may be fully considered.

Summary of Review of Literature

LDRs are complex relationships embedded in a broad array of social, cultural, situational, and developmental variables, which would benefit from examination with a systemic theoretical model which will allow a broad perspective for considering the complexity of the lifestyle. The research literature of LDRs presents a varied and complex picture of this lifestyle but these studies have not been conceptualized from a relational perspective. This perspective is crucial to fully understanding the lived
experience of LDR couples, due to the importance of interrelationships with their extended families and social support network.

Research into LDRs has been conducted since the late 1970s, following earlier studies based on occupational groupings in which LDRs resulted from the demands of the job. Research findings reflect the complexity of the LDR lifestyle, and highlight that the social support of family and friends is a vital component to the lived experience of LDR partners. Findings also indicate that LDR partners work hard to remain connected to their intimate partner and to family and friends, although the lifestyle itself presents many challenges in balancing these connections.

Limitations of the research on LDRs include sample bias, resulting from both sampling methods and cultural influences on researchers that are reflected in study design and interpretation of results. A significant limitation of the research on LDRs is that it has not been conducted from the framework of a coherent theoretical model. Thus, Transgenerational (TG) Theory, a core model of the field of couples and family therapy, was proposed as a theoretical foundation for this study due to the ability of TG Theory to bring together the many facets of LDR relationships into a more cohesive view.

The research question of this study was: How are LDRs understood in terms of TG Theory? Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the perspectives of couples currently in LDRs regarding their relationships with their families-of-origin and family patterns related to LDRs, as reflects the foundation of TG Theory. Participants were interviewed via long-distance Internet-based communications technology. Transcripts of these interviews were analyzed using the phenomenological methods presented by
Moustakas (1994). The specific methodology and data analysis processes used for this study will be presented in detail in the next chapter.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

The methodology of this study will be presented in this section. Following a review of the purpose of the study and a general overview of the research design, participant recruitment and selection will be discussed. Next, procedures for the interview process will be described, and the genogram as a data collection tool will be presented. Steps taken to address risks and ethical concerns in the study will be described in the discussion of the informed consent process. The description of the data analysis procedures for interview data will complete this chapter on methodology.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of couples in long-distance relationships (LDRs) from a systemic perspective. This perspective has been lacking in the research, resulting in a disjointed body of literature conducted with individually-oriented theories, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods. A logical next step for this body of knowledge is to collect and analyze data gathered in studies of LDR participants using systemic theory from the Marriage and Family Therapy field. With this goal in mind, Transgenerational (TG) Theory was selected as the theoretical basis for this investigation. TG Theory incorporates foundational systemic concepts of the Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) field, centered on the view that
humans are embedded in a network of recursive relationships with family and friends. Thus, the research question for this study was: How are LDRs understood from the perspective of Transgenerational (TG) Theory?

**General Overview of Methods**

In order to gain a holistic picture of the LDR experience, a qualitative phenomenal research design presented by Moustakas (1994) was followed. A purposefully identified sample (Patton, 2002) of LDR couples was selected to allow for “information-rich” (Patton, p. 46) cases to be studied in depth in order to fully understand the experiences of these participants. Participants were interviewed first conjointly and then individually from their respective locations using long-distance computer-mediated communication technology. This long-distance arrangement mirrored the way these couples used technology to communicate with each other while apart.

In the first interview, genograms of the families of origin of both LDR partners were constructed to illustrate and develop understanding of the perceptions participants had about interactions with their network of family and close friends. In the second interview, the genogram was reviewed with both partners and the perceptions individual participants had of their relationships with their social network were discussed. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded for themes using phenomenological methods. Finally, a report detailing these findings was written.

**Participants**

LDRs were defined in this study using Stafford’s (2005) definition: “Relationships are considered to be long distance when communication opportunities are
restricted (in the view of the individuals involved) because of geographic parameters and the individuals within the relationship have expectations of a continued close connection” (p. 7). The term *long-distance relationship* was used intentionally in the eligibility criteria in order to be more inclusive than the term *long-distance marriage* (Rabe, 2001), which may have unintentionally excluded unmarried LDR couples who wished to participate. Participants volunteering for this study self-identified as LDR couples rather than being identified by researcher-defined criteria of miles apart or amount of time spent separately (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994).

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify and select couples eligible for this study. Patton described purposeful sampling as “selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 230). Thus, recruiting of participants focused on identifying “excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, p. 234) to allow for thorough descriptions of the LDR relational dynamics. No attempt was made nor intended to find a random sample.

A minimum sample size (Patton) of five LDR couples meeting eligibility requirements was targeted for this study to allow for sufficient engagement with the data to obtain rich descriptions that would capture the depth and essence of the lived experiences of the participants. Eligible couples were those who:

- self-identified as being in an LDR for at least 1 year using the above description of an LDR;

- were in an LDR due to work, education, and/or family responsibilities, not military duty, incarceration, or relational strife;
- were in a self-described committed relationship they expected to continue;
- were actively living in an LDR at the time of the study;
- had at least 1 year of experience as a geographically close relationship prior to initiating an LDR;
- were committed to living as an LDR couple for the time they were participating in the study;
- had at least one separation and reunion cycle;
- were willing to divulge information about themselves and extended family members;
- were willing to navigate the long-distance communication technology process for interviews.

Couples in blue-collar trades and those in which only one partner worked outside of the home were considered for this study if they met eligibility requirements. This was in keeping with the findings in the literature that relational processes in blue-collar LDR families and/or those in which one partner is a stay-at-home parent due to the demands of the commuting partner’s job appear to be very similar to those which occur in dual-career LDR partnerships (Clark et al., 1989; Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Forsyth & Gramling, 1987, 1990; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Gronseth, 1959; Taylor et al., 1985).

**Recruitment of Participants**

Calls for participants were requested and submitted with permission to the LDR-specific social network sites of *Living Apart Together* (www.livingapart.org), *Loving From a Distance* (www.lovingfromadistance.com), and *Long-Distance Life*
Calls for participants were also submitted to listservs hypothesized to be utilized by graduate students, such as the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (www.cesnet-l.net), due to graduate students being a population in which LDRs are fairly common (Guldner, 1992). See Appendix A for an example of the wording of calls for participants. Flyers were shared in person and/or by email with individuals who might have contact with LDR couples, such as acquaintances who volunteer at a large, international airport. See Appendix B for an example. Friends, family members and professional colleagues assisted by sending blast emails to their contacts, directly referring potential participants, and by posting flyers about the study in their workplaces. Some participants and potential participants referred other LDR couples to the study. See Appendix C for an example of a sample email sent to potential participants who were referred to the study by a third party.

Over the course of nine months, I had contact with 31 LDR couples who were referred by others or self-referred for this study. Ten of these couples met eligibility criteria and agreed to participate, although four of the ten who agreed to participate dropped out before the first interview, all citing a lack of time to complete the two interviews. Thus, six couples completed both interviews. No couples dropped out once the interview process had begun. Couples who were interviewed participated eagerly, scheduling interviews promptly and with little difficulty, in spite the different time zones and tight schedules that most couples had.

**Overview of Participating Couples**

All six LDR couples interviewed were Caucasian and heterosexual. Of the two non-Caucasian couples referred for the study, one did not complete the informed consent
process and the second unexpectedly ended the LDR prior to the start of the interviews. A mixed-race lesbian couple did contact the researcher and partners were very willing to participate, but they did not meet the eligibility requirement of living in the same location for a minimum of one year prior to initiating the LDR. An LDR gay couple was known to a referral source, but this referral was not completed and thus not pursued.

The ages of participants ranged from the mid-20s to mid-60s. Two couples were in long-term committed relationships and the remaining four couples were married. The length of the relationships ranged from four years to 44 years, and time as an LDR couple ranged from almost two years to over 20 years. The distance between LDR varied from 180 miles to more than 7000 miles, and from two and a half to approximately 20 hours of travel time. Three couples had previous LDR experiences prior to their current stints during which they were interviewed. Only one couple had a firm date for the end of their current LDR at the time of the study, however, due to the nature of the commuter’s profession and industry, future LDR placements for him are very likely. More information about the specific situations of each couple will be presented in Chapter IV.

**Informed Consent**

Ethical issues related to confidentiality were very important to the informed consent process with participants and will be discussed in this section. First, limits to confidentiality in place due to me being a licensed mental health professional conducting research were identified. Second, protection of the identity of individuals in the larger family context of participants was addressed. Third, confidentiality issues related to the
use of Internet-based technology for the interviews were discussed with participants. See Appendix D for the complete informed consent document.

First, because the researcher is also a licensed mental health provider, the distinct roles and subsequent legal and ethical limits to confidentiality were clearly delineated in informed consent document (AAMFT). For example, ethical limits clearly prohibited the provision of therapy while in the role of researcher (AAMFT, 2001). Moreover, legal limits prohibited providing therapy in a state other than the one in which the researcher is licensed (Greenwood, 2009). Due to the population sampled, it was very likely that one or both participants would be in different states than the researcher. Thus, the informed consent document stated these interviews were not therapeutic interviews, and that no therapy would be provided for participants as part of this research process. (See Appendix D.)

In keeping with ethical requirements to facilitate the referral process for those individuals for whom the researcher would be unable for appropriate reasons to provide therapy (AAMFT), referral sources for locating qualified marriage and family therapists and other mental health providers in a variety of locations was provided in the informed consent process. (See Appendix E.) No referrals for therapy were requested or deemed necessary during the course of data collection.

Next, participants were informed that the researcher was a licensed mental health provider and thus:

(a) was a mandated reporter of known or suspected child/elder/vulnerable adult abuse in the state in which the researcher was licensed (Reporting Abuse,
Neglect or Exploitation of an Adult, 2009; Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect, 2009);

(b) had duty-to-warn of imminent harm responsibilities according to the laws of the state in which the researcher was licensed (Reporting Abuse, Neglect and Other Major Unusual Incidents, 2009);

(c) would be using a No-Secrets Policy (Leslie, 2002).

A No-Secrets Policy was incorporated into this study due to the researcher’s ethical responsibilities as a credentialed marriage and family therapist. Under the No-Secrets Policy, participants were informed that confidentiality would be maintained in individual conversations or sessions that occurred during the study. However, if one or both partners divulged information during individual interviews that in the professional judgment of the researcher might impact the couple as a unit, the researcher would first encourage the participant making the disclosure to share this with their partner. In the event this occurred, the researcher might make the decision to discuss this information with both partners individually and/or conjointly, and would discuss this with the person disclosing this information prior to divulging this content to others in the relational unit (Leslie, 2002). Finally, to minimize the risk that hurt feelings or conflict might occur between partners during or following the interviews (LaRossa, Bennett, & Gelles, 1985; Valentine, 1999), checkpoints were built into the interviews to allow the researcher to inquire about how participants were feeling regarding disclosures and interview content.

Informed consent was obtained separately for each partner (Margolin et al., 2005). Both partners were told in the informed consent process that they might terminate participation in the study at any time (AAMFT, 2001), and could refuse to participate
even if their partner wished to continue. If one partner chose to not be interviewed, the referral process was terminated with both partners.

**Protecting the identity of the larger family system.** The identity of individuals in the extended families of participants was safeguarded. Identifying information about extended family and friends of the participants other than basic demographic information related to this study was not solicited. Any such information disclosed was disguised with pseudonyms and/or changed locations as needed in the initial transcription process and only disguised information was used in genograms and subsequent analysis. However, these provisions did not guarantee 100% success in disguising locations and families, due to the unique facets of each family, couple, and community that might be divulged. Therefore, participants were told in the informed consent process that there existed the possibility that readers of any reports resulting from this study might recognize the family, couple, and/or community (LaRossa et al., 1985). To provide all reasonable efforts to prevent this occurrence, the general description of the couple and family as written in the summary report was be shared with the couple for their review prior to the second interview. Participants were told in the informed consent process that in the same way that they might be recognized by “outsiders,” they might also recognize each other’s statements in written reports. Thus, they do not have a guarantee of complete confidentiality (LaRossa et al., 1985).

**Ethical Issues Related to Technology**

Finally, ethical issues related to conducting interviews via Elluminate, the web-based communication platform proposed for this study, were disclosed as part of the informed consent process. These issues included the limited confidentiality of e-mailed
links to participants who may share e-mail accounts with other family members, password protection of interview sessions, security measures present in Elluminate, and confidentiality of communications between the Elluminate administrator at the university and myself as researcher. Security measures that potential participants might take to protect their privacy on their own computers were also identified as part of the informed consent process (Hicks, 2010). Specific security features of the Elluminate platform used for interviews and storage of interview recordings, and the steps taken to set up interview rooms with the Elluminate administrator at my university are explained in detail in Appendix F.

Specific technology requirements needed for the study were identified at this time (Salmons, 2010). If a microphone headset or web camera was needed by participants to complete these interviews, one of these items was offered by the researcher prior to the interviews. No couples requested this equipment. One couple chose to not have video contact with me, completing the interviews via audio channels only.

**Summary of Benefits and Risks**

Although there were limits to confidentiality for participants, there were benefits for them as well. Benefits included the potential for an increased understanding of their LDR and family relational processes. Participants could gain an opportunity to speak openly with their partner about issues related to their LDR. Their participation could contribute to a greater understanding of family processes in LDRs for them as a couple and for others by adding to the literature on LDRs. Potential risks included hurt feelings or conflict that may arise during or after the interview, limits to confidentiality, and the
need to take specific steps to maintain the privacy of participants within Elluminate. The above provisions were put in place to reduce potential risks to participants and to allow them to make a fully informed decision about participating in this study. Once participants completed the informed consent process, the conjoint interview was scheduled and the data collection process was begun.

**Data Collection**

The data collection process will be presented in this section. First, genograms and the process used to construct them in interviews will be described. Next, the data collection process, which used semi-structured genogram interviews, will be presented.

**Genograms**

A genogram is a visual depiction of the biological, social, and emotional relationships of a family over at least three generations, and is a fundamental tool in the MFT field (DeMaria et al., 1999; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). There are two interwoven steps to creating a genogram. First, information is gathered through open-ended questions about family demographics, history, and multigenerational patterns in relationships. As information is gathered, a visual depiction of the emotional quality of these relationships, the genogram, is constructed (DeMaria et al., 1999; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Next, the overall patterns of the family relationships over the generations are viewed holistically with attention given to repetitive patterns of family structure and emotional interactions, coincidence of dates and significant events, and the impact of changes and subsequent adaptations on the family (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). These observations are typically shared with the family for a member check and are often summarized in written form in assessment documentation.
Genograms are commonly conducted in conjoint interviews. Conjoint interviews increase the reliability of the genogram (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985) and allow information to be gathered from relational units, in this case the LDR partners. Conjoint interviews for genograms allow broader and richer information to be gathered, because both partners report information and perceptions about both families (Allen, 1980; Bennett & McAvity, 1985; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985; Valentine, 1999). Conjoint interviews also allow partners to identify areas of agreement and specify areas of disagreement (Bennett & McAvity, 1985), which enriches the information given and the understanding of individual perspectives.

**Advantages of the genogram.** The genogram as a data-collection tool provides a concise structure for organizing information regarding family interactions and relationships (DeMaria et al., 1999; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). The format allows researchers and/or clinicians to get an overview of the family of both partners quickly and is flexible enough to accommodate new information throughout the interview. Genograms put individuals in context of the systemic whole that is their family and social context (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). This enriches the overall perspective of the relational units for the interviewer and family members, especially the relational patterns over generations. Genograms allow the inclusion of friends and other individuals who are important social supports to the family (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985), allowing the family to identify and evaluate their support network.

**Limitations of the genogram.** First, the format of the genogram enables a large amount of information to be gathered, and may become unwieldy for both clinician and client. Second, the information deemed important and the interpretations thereof are
influenced strongly by the perspectives and objectives of the informants and interviewer. The historical reality of a family story may be very different from the narrative told and believed by the informant, however, this is the perceived reality on which the genogram is based (DeMaria et al., 1999). Thus, each person involved in the process of generating a genogram may have a very different interpretation of the genogram. Within the perspectives of both phenomenology and TG Theory, the presence of multiple perspectives in relationships is inevitable and is therefore neither a strength nor a limitation. It is incumbent on the interviewer to hold each perspective equally valid in order to gain the fullest picture possible.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured genogram interviews were selected to guide the data collection process by ensuring important concepts were addressed, while allowing flexibility to respond to the unique combination of factors present for each couple (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Protocols for these interviews are in Appendices G and H.

Interviews were approximately one and a half to two hours long for the first interview, and one to one and a half hours long for the second. All partners participated actively in the interviews and appeared to be enthusiastic to speak about their relationships with their families-of-origin and their perceptions of LDRs. All couples except one agreed to use video for the interviews. For most couples, the internet connection and Elluminate platform were trouble-free. The first couple interviewed said it was the first time that they had ever used a webcam, and they had no difficulty setting it up through Elluminate.
Some anticipated technological challenges occurred in the interview process. One couple experienced challenges downloading Elluminate but once the application was initiated, lag was minimal. However, for two couples, one partner experienced crashes and lag during their interviews. Text chat in Elluminate was an important adjunct to clarifying questions and responses during these interviews.

Two unanticipated challenges occurred during interviews. First, one participant disclosed he had a hearing loss which made it hard for him to hear the questions. His partner repeated most questions to him until they revealed that he was hard-of-hearing, and the researcher knew to speak more clearly. Second, there was an echo on the researcher’s end of the interview that was not noticeable during the interview but gave some challenges in the transcription process.

All couples except one completed the first interview during a time they were visiting each other. At the close of the first interview, individual interviews were scheduled with participants, for approximately one to two weeks after the conjoint interview. All six couples scheduled their interviews in back-to-back time slots. Four of six couples chose to schedule the second interviews during a visit. One couple scheduled their second interviews during a time they were both at their respective locations due to scheduling needs, and a second was interviewed from their different locations because they did not have the opportunity for a visit during the time that interviews were being completed.

**Genogram construction and summaries.** Following the conjoint interview for each couple, the genogram was finalized using Genopro (www.genopro.com). Relational patterns and family beliefs which were hypothesized to be present in the narratives about
their families of origin were identified for participant review as a member check. A
summary report for the researcher’s use to synthesize information gathered and identify
questions and areas for follow-up in the second interview was written. See Appendix I
for this protocol.

The genograms with the identified patterns and beliefs were emailed to both
partners for their review prior to the second interviews, which took place approximately
one to two weeks later. The second interviews opened with a conjoint review of the
genogram and themes, for accuracy, feedback, and clarification. A disguised description
of the couple for use in written reports about this study was also reviewed at this time
and approved by the participants.

Following this opening session, participants were allowed to determine if they
wished to be interviewed separately or to remain with their partner while interviewed. It
was hypothesized that partners might speak more freely regarding the family of their
partner in individual interviews, especially if there was conflict or disapproval had been
expressed by family members, a common experience for LDR partners, especially
women (Bergen et al., 2007; Holmes, 2004; Winfield, 1985). One-on-one interviews
were also hypothesized to be beneficial in allowing participants to more freely discuss
their perceptions of their personal identity in the relationship (Valentine, 1999). In
contrast to these expectations, three couples chose to complete the individual interviews
while their partner was nearby in the residence and often in the same room. One couple
completed the second interviews conjointly. Two couples completed these interviews
separately due to scheduling needs.
Following the second interview, revisions to the genogram and the written summary were made. The final copy of the genogram was mailed to the couple along with a $20 gas card for each participant and a thank you note. One couple refused to accept the gas cards, saying they were glad to participate.

**Data Analysis Process**

The data analysis process used with genogram and interview data will be explained in this section. The reflective analysis process for this study was based on that of Moustakas (1994), with a conceptual framework for the genogram analysis adapted from that of McGoldrick and Gerson (1985) and DeMaria et al. (1999). Transcribed interviews and researcher notes were reviewed to determine core themes (Moustakas), using the analysis process of coding (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data analysis process was facilitated by the use of qualitative data analysis software, NVivo (Richards, 2010). Measures to monitor the researcher’s stance as a participant-observer throughout the data analysis process included member checks, reflexive journals, and an audit trail. Finally, this summary report of findings and recommendations for further research was written and presented to the dissertation committee.

**Genogram Analysis**

The genogram analysis process began after the first interview. The researcher listened to the entire interview and prepared the genogram. Completed genograms were viewed holistically to determine apparent patterns of relationships and beliefs, and a written summary of the genogram was completed. (See Appendix I.) All notes and observations of the researcher during the actual interview and the initial listening of the
recording were included in this summary. The genogram summary was a useful way to organize the large amount of information gleaned in each interview. These summaries also began the data analysis process by allowing me to be immersed in the story of each couple yet remain objective as I prepared and summarized the genogram.

**Interview Transcript Analysis**

As soon as possible following each interview, overall impressions of the process were described in writing on a contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These notes on the researcher’s personal reflections on the process of the interview were used in the data analysis process and to monitor researcher stance. Next, the entire interview was listened to again and a summary of the topics discussed was completed for each interview (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The researcher then transcribed each interview, using this experience to immerse herself in the data. While transcribing, thoughts and reflections about the process and the content of the interviews were written in a note-taking program available on the researcher’s computer. Each couple brought a different aspect of the LDR experience to the researcher’s awareness. Throughout the transcribing process, similarities and unique experiences for each couple were identified and linked to those of other couples through these notes.

Verbatim transcriptions were then analyzed using the method detailed by Moustakas (1994). First, the statements in the transcribed interviews were horizontalized, meaning that each statement was considered to be equally valid. To begin this process, completed transcripts were placed onto the Researcher Notes Template, found in Appendix J. This is a three-column table in which the transcript was
in the central column. In the left-hand column, termed Reflexive Notes, personal reflections on the transcription were written opposite the segment of the interview that sparked this reflection. The right-hand column, termed Analytic Notes, contained statements regarding themes and issues which represented my thinking about the data, data themes, and theoretical or methodological concepts (Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Next, transcripts were more closely examined for themes. This qualitative data analysis process is termed coding (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In coding, each meaningful statement of the participant must be examined to determine how it fits into the total experience. As statements are examined, those that represent distinct aspects of the experience are identified, grouped together, and labeled by the researcher. These initial summaries of interviews along with completed transcriptions were made available to the dissertation chair and methodologist for review throughout the data collection and analysis process.

To facilitate the mechanical aspects of the coding process, transcribed interviews were entered into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Richards, 2010). Verbatim examples of the themes were identified and compiled into what Moustakas terms “a description of the textures of the experience” (1994, p. 122). Once initial coding of content themes occurred, the transcriptions, the compiled verbatim examples and notations were read and reread. At this stage of the immersion phase of the data analysis process (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), the core experience of each couple was written about in-depth. Themes of core experiences of the LDR lifestyle were named in the researcher’s own words or the words of the participants. The decisions made in selecting
themes were written as these decisions were made (Glesne; Strauss & Corbin) through the use of NVivo, the reflexive journal and early writings about the core experiences.

The data-gathering and initial analysis phase for this project was determined to reach saturation when no new themes were identified in the analysis of all interviews, and no new interviews or genograms yielded new themes (Glesne, 2006; Morse, 1994). Next, transcripts were then reviewed completely again for theoretical concepts of TG Theory that were present in the LDR experience. These were named as identified in TG Theory and will be presented in Chapter IV of this report.

The analysis process was determined to have reached saturation when thematic categories and the connections between them were thoroughly fleshed out (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this stage, the overall core essences of the LDR experience were identified. Themes were reviewed by the methodologist and the chair of the dissertation committee. An MFT professional who was not on the dissertation committee also started to review these themes for soundness; however, she passed away unexpectedly before completing this process. The themes were also submitted to participants for their review as a member check.

The final stage of the phenomenological data analysis process for this project was to write the summary report of the findings linking them to the literature (Moustakas, 1994) reviewed in Chapter II. This summary report will be found in the next chapters of this dissertation. Chapter IV will discuss the theoretical concepts represented in the stories of the participants. Chapter V will discuss the overall core experiences of the participants. Chapter VI will present implications of these findings for the field of Marriage and Family Therapy and discuss suggestions for future research.
Secure Data Storage

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, measures were in place to ensure confidential storage of any identifying information and interview transcripts. Identifying information needed to make contact with the potential participants was stored in a locked off-site storage location. Once consent was given, participants were given pseudonyms. Email contacts were deleted and not stored in email contact lists. All computer-mediated contact with participants took place from a password-protected computer in my personal office. Phone calls were made from a private office. At the end of this dissertation process, all contact information for all participants was destroyed. Original recordings will be stored on the password-protected server for Elluminate until the completion of the dissertation process.

Transcriptions of Elluminate interviews were done on a password-protected computer which was accessed only by the researcher. Separate backups of transcriptions, other written documents such as researcher notes, and backups of drafts of the analysis documents were stored on an external hard drive in a locked off-site storage compartment. All transcripts will be kept for 5 years, and were available to committee members as part of the audit trail.

Establishing Trustworthiness or Credibility

The tradition of qualitative research considers the concept of validity to be more accurately termed trustworthiness (Glesne, 2006). One aspect leading to trustworthiness is for the researcher to identify experiences that may impact their perspective on the topic investigated (Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Thus, it is
important to state that the researcher’s perspective on LDRs has been influenced by my personal and professional experiences with LDRs.

The researcher undertook this study as a participant-observer (Glesne, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher has been in an LDR for 18 years after growing up in a family where work-related travel was the norm, so much so that the parents and both sets of grandparents in the researcher’s family of origin would have qualified for this study at different times in their histories. Over the course of a career as a mental health provider with children and families, the researcher worked regularly with children and non-commuter parents, and with families in which one caregiver regularly attended session via telephone due to work-related travel. These experiences have shaped the researcher’s view that LDRs may be feasible for some couples and families, with challenges due to distance that can be surmounted by family members committed to their relationships. Self-reflection has made the researcher sensitive to the need to really listen to and focus on the descriptions of the participants rather than to rapidly impose the researcher’s own beliefs and perceptions on their stories.

Next, credibility in qualitative studies is established through rigorous descriptions of methods, thorough documentation of the process of analysis, and transparency of this process with readily accessible documentation of the coding process in the audit trail (Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1994; Patton, 2002). The completed genogram for each couple and a summary of the central principles identified in it was shared with that specific couple for a member check during the data collection and analysis stage (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).
When themes coalesced in the latter coding process, they were summarized and shared with participants as a follow-up member check. An experienced MFT clinician and supervisor who was not on the dissertation committee initiated but did not complete the review of themes. Colleagues who were also MFTs provided a peer review (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002) of the summary reports of theoretical concepts and themes. Finally, it has been incumbent on the researcher to obtain and present to the reader of this study what is termed “rich, thick description” (Glesne, 2006, p. 38) of themes, providing descriptions that are both broad and deep. This will give the reader sufficient information to judge the researcher’s success in maintaining a stance of balanced neutrality.

Summary of Research Design and Procedures

This chapter has presented the research design of a qualitative study with the goal of exploring LDRs from the perspective of TG Theory in the field of couple and family therapy. A phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis has been put forth as an appropriate fit with both my research goals and the theoretical foundation of the study. The use of interviews and genograms as data collection tools reflect the phenomenological and theoretical foundation of the study by using open-ended individual and conjoint interviews with partners in LDRs. The reflective analysis process for this study was based on that of Moustakas (1994), with a conceptual framework for the genogram analysis adapted from that of McGoldrick and Gerson (1985) and DeMaria et al. (1999).

Ethical issues related to relational research and internet-mediated research have been identified and measures have been designed to protect the privacy of participants.
and their family members. A written summary of the genogram, transcribed interviews, and researcher notes were reviewed to determine core themes (Moustakas, 1994), using the analysis process of coding (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data analysis process was facilitated by the use of qualitative data analysis software, NVivo (Richards, 2010). Measures to monitor the researcher’s stance as a participant-observer throughout the data analysis process included member checks, reflexive journals, and an audit trail. Finally, this summary report of findings and recommendations for further research was written and presented to the dissertation committee.
CHAPTER IV

ASPECTS OF TRANSGENERATIONAL THEORY IN THESE
LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

The purpose for this study was to examine relational aspects of long-distance relationships (LDRs) from the perspective of Transgenerational (TG) Theory, a foundational theory in the Marriage and Family Therapy field. TG Theory hypothesizes that multigenerational relational patterns and beliefs will be present in any human relationship, but how these patterns are represented and interact in each family and couple will be distinct. A phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis allowed exploration of TG concepts in the interviews with participants while leaving how these patterns might be experienced open for discovery.

In this chapter, following a brief description of the participating couples and a concept of the LDR lifestyle that they brought to my awareness, the constructs of TG Theory present in the narratives of the six couples interviewed will be presented. These concepts of TG Theory are multigenerationally transmitted patterns, differentiation, triangles, and relational give-and-take. Examples of how these experiences link with or are separate from those of the other couples will be discussed and linked to existing literature. Finally, the findings related to TG Theory will be summarized and reviewed as a whole.
Quotes presented in this report have been edited for clarity. Most minimal encouragers the researcher made, which were embedded in the transcription, have been removed when warranted for clarity or to reduce redundancy. Words repeated by speakers were transcribed verbatim, but removed in this report for clarity and space if this did not affect meaning. In quotes, the researcher’s comments made are indicated by the letter R. Words inserted in quotes to clarify referents and silences of more than two seconds that occurred in the interview are noted in square brackets. Minimal encouragers or comments made by one partner while another was speaking are placed in curly brackets.

Protection of participant identity in this written report has been a significant concern because this was a snowball sample. Pseudonyms were not used in this dissertation due to the potential for these pseudonyms to more easily link participants to identifying information. In writing this dissertation, each couple was randomly given a number between 1 and 6 and individuals were identified in narratives by this number followed by either an ‘F’ for female participants or ‘M’ for male participants. This of course does not prevent linking the quotes with specific couples, but adds a small challenge to the process. A summary of demographic information for participants may be found in Tables 1 and 2.

The Couples

The six couples interviewed are introduced in this section, and a central experience that their unique story brought to the researcher’s awareness will be identified. These central experiences became apparent in one of two ways, depending on the couple’s story. First, the couple may have emphatically identified a relational
Table 1 *Demographic Summary of Couples 1, 2, and 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Couple 1</th>
<th>Couple 2</th>
<th>Couple 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years together</strong></td>
<td>Married 33 years</td>
<td>Committed relationship 7 years</td>
<td>Married 44 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years LDR</strong></td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ages</strong></td>
<td>Both early 50s</td>
<td>Male early 30s, Female late 20s</td>
<td>Both mid 60s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupations</strong></td>
<td>Male, engineer Female, homemaker</td>
<td>Male, Student and translator Female, Architect</td>
<td>Both educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reason(s) for LDR</strong></td>
<td>Economy Stay close to family</td>
<td>Naturalization process Studies</td>
<td>Economy Stay close to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries of Origin</strong></td>
<td>Midwest US</td>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>NE US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location(s)</strong></td>
<td>Europe, Midwest US Male, western US</td>
<td>Male, Western US</td>
<td>NE US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female, Middle East</td>
<td>Female, Middle East</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hours Apart</strong></td>
<td>14 hours flying</td>
<td>18-20 hours flying</td>
<td>3 hours driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Miles Apart</strong></td>
<td>7000</td>
<td>7500</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td>2 adult children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 adult children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family histories of</strong></td>
<td>Male yes Female no</td>
<td>Both partners yes Male yes Female no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>work-related travel</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>and/or LDRs?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Demographic Summary of Couples 4, 5, and 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Couple 4</th>
<th>Couple 5</th>
<th>Couple 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years together</td>
<td>Committed relationship 4 years</td>
<td>Married 13 years</td>
<td>Married 33 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years LDR</td>
<td>Almost 2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages</td>
<td>Both mid 20s</td>
<td>Male early 60s</td>
<td>Both mid 60s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female late 40s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupations</td>
<td>Male, Advertising</td>
<td>Male, Sales Representative</td>
<td>Male, Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female, Student</td>
<td>Female, Educator</td>
<td>Female, Property Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason(s) for LDR</td>
<td>Studies</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Stay close to family</td>
<td>Stay close to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries of Origin</td>
<td>Northeastern US</td>
<td>Western US</td>
<td>Male, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female, western US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location(s)</td>
<td>Northeastern US</td>
<td>Western US</td>
<td>Male, Middle East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female, western US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours Apart</td>
<td>5 hours driving</td>
<td>2.5 hours driving</td>
<td>17 hours flying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles Apart</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 adult children</td>
<td>3 adult children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family histories of</td>
<td>Both partners no</td>
<td>Both partners yes</td>
<td>Male yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work-related travel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and/or LDRs?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

strength early in the interview (Couples 3, 5 and 6). Second, the couple might have disclosed their struggles with an aspect of the LDR lifestyle that had been a stressor and/or a learning experience for them (Couples 1, 2 and 4). Additionally, the central
experience was one that the couple revisited numerous times in their set of interviews as they related their stories of relating with their families of origin and each other as LDR couples.

While aspects of these experiences were present in multiple couples, the story of each particular couple seemed to be oriented around one central experience over the others. Reflecting on their words first while generating the genograms and then in preparing transcripts, the researcher realized that each couple had given a distinct viewpoint of being in an LDR. These central experiences for each couple sent the researcher back into the transcripts of the other participants with an expanded perspective on each different experience as the data analysis process unfolded. These experiences though, often linked with the words of other participants in previous interviews, and became concepts about which initial writings began to coalesce. These distinct views became the starting points for initial writings during the first stages of the data analysis process.

As the data analysis process continued, these central experiences for each couple became unified into the larger concepts of TG Theory, as reflected in the research question of this study. Upon continued reflection upon the transcripts from the lens of TG Theory, the central experience that each couple showed me became the theoretical and experiential themes presented in this chapter and in Chapter V.

**Couple 1**

This couple was in their mid 50s and had been married 33 years. They had two adult children and one grandchild. They had been in LDRs of varying lengths for the past 10-12 years, with the current LDR situation being one and a half years. At the time
of the study, the male partner was working in Europe, while his wife was a homemaker in their primary residence in the mid-western United States and was a primary caregiver for their grandchild and her elderly father. They were separated by approximately 7,000 miles and 14 hours’ flying time. The LDR allowed the male partner to build seniority and thus job security in an industry which is vulnerable to sudden boom-and-bust cycles, while his wife could remain close to immediate and extended family. They tried to visit each other every 6 to 8 weeks, but family needs and health concerns had limited their visits to every 4 months or so during this particular LDR assignment. These partners openly shared their struggles to communicate effectively with their adult children at a distance, while sharing their success at learning to communicate well with each other as long-term LDR partners. Their story helped the researcher better understand the process of communication for LDR couples, with each other and with family members, especially the process of triangulation due to limited opportunities for conjoint conversations with multiple family members while communicating over great distances.

**Couple 2**

These participants had been in a committed long-term relationship for 7 years, with the last 3 years as an LDR couple. They had plans to marry but no date yet set. The female partner lived in a Middle Eastern city with her parents, siblings, and an elderly member of her extended family. She had recently completed her graduate degree and worked as an architect. The male partner lived in the western United States, where he immigrated with his family approximately 9 years ago. He was a graduate student and worked as a translator. The couple was separated due to the demands of the US naturalization process for the male partner and for their graduate studies. They were
approximately 7,500 miles and 18-20 hours’ flying time apart, and saw each other approximately once a year for 2 weeks or so at a time. This couple emphasized that it is vital to keep sight of the individuals within the larger family system, and the importance of having an individual understanding of each family member who is important to the couple as they navigate the LDR experience. Their story highlighted the concept of differentiation, especially in accepting the different and sometimes opposing views of other family members while remaining true to one’s chosen course of action and intimate partnered relationship.

**Couple 3**

Both partners in this LDR were educators in their early 60s, living in the northeastern region of the United States. Married 44 years, they were in their fifth year as an LDR couple. They had three adult children who all lived in their own residences with their spouses and a total of eight grandchildren. The husband was the commuter, and drove approximately 3 hours one way (about 180 miles) each week to a small city in an adjacent state. He returned to the primary residence where his wife resided each weekend and on holidays during the academic year. They were in an LDR due to the male partner pursuing advanced training to change career fields following an unexpected layoff. His wife remained in the primary residence so that she could continue working and be close to adult children and grandchildren who lived in the area. This couple brought to my attention the importance of personal and relational independence as a multigenerationally transmitted pattern, as well as some of the plusses and minuses of this pattern. Their story also laid the groundwork for consideration of how partners in
LDR relationships who did not have a history of LDRs learned to adapt to this lifestyle that was so different from what they had experienced growing up.

**Couple 4**

This LDR couple was in their mid 20s and in a long-term committed relationship with plans to marry, but no date yet set. The female partner was a graduate student and the male partner worked in the advertising industry. They resided in adjacent states in the northeastern US, and had no children. They had been a couple for over four years, with almost two years of this time as an LDR couple. They became an LDR couple due to the male partner being unable to find work in the location where the female partner is pursuing a graduate degree. The female partner resided near her university, and the male partner resided in his hometown in the home of his family-of-origin. They were separated by about five hours’ driving time, and tried to visit each other about once a month for three or four days. This couple openly shared their struggles and successes as they worked to balance individuality and connectedness with their families of origin and with each other. Their story highlighted how personal and relational growth intertwine in a recursive cycle over the course of the LDR experience.

**Couple 5**

This couple lived in adjacent states in the western US and had been married 13 years, with the last nine and a half years as an LDR couple. The husband was in his early 60s and was a sales professional, and his wife was an educator in her late 40s. They lived approximately two and a half hours of driving time and 100 miles apart due to work and family responsibilities. They had no children of their own, but the husband had three adult children from a previous marriage and a number of grandchildren. One of these
children lived in the same community as the wife, and one resided in the same area as the husband. This couple began an LDR after a job transition initiated a move for the male partner, allowing him to work toward his dreams for a post-retirement career in a different field. His wife lived in her childhood home with elderly family members to whom she provides instrumental and financial support. The couple strove to see each other every weekend, but visits were determined by work schedules, time and money available for travel, and the health needs of the wife’s family members. Through the interviews with this couple, the researcher gained an awareness of how important faith and having a positive outlook on their relationship and LDR situation were to helping LDR couples cope with the relational and personal strains of this lifestyle.

Couple 6

These participants were in their mid 60s, and had been married a total of 33 years. They had been in LDRs for extended periods for most of the past 20 years, with their current stint being just over two years. The wife resided in the western United States, where she managed the couple’s investment properties. The commuter resided in the Middle East, where he worked in the construction industry. They had three adult children who lived in their own homes, and seven grandchildren. Two of these adult children and all grandchildren lived in close proximity to the wife. The couple was separated by about 17 hours’ flying time and approximately 7,500 miles, and they visited each other approximately every 6 weeks. They were in an LDR at the time of the study so that the male partner could continue to work at his stable job, and the female partner could remain close to her adult children and grandchildren. These partners openly shared their divided and often conflicting loyalties as LDR partners, parents, and grandparents.
The interviews with this couple presented the importance of strong commitment and loyalty to partners and family in the LDR experience.

**Summary of Introduction of Couples**

The six couples presented in this study each represented a facet of the LDR experience as a unifying concept in their interviews. These central concepts resonated more strongly for one couple than the others; however, these experiences were not unique to any one couple. Awareness of these experiences expanded the researcher’s perspective during the phenomenological analysis process, linking the stories of the couples together while highlighting the unique viewpoints and histories of each separate couple. These central experiences will be reflected in the TG concepts presented in this chapter, beginning with multigenerational transmission of relational patterns.

**TG Concept 1: Multigenerational Transmission**

Multigenerational transmission of patterns in beliefs and behavior is a cornerstone of TG Theory. Intergenerationally transmitted patterns were identified by participants in work-related travel/relocation, independence, commitment to their family of origin, and work ethic. Each of these patterns will be discussed in the next section. Differences between the multigenerationally transmitted values of the families of origin for participants and their awareness of how these differing values impacted them will be presented.

**Family Histories of Work-related Travel/Relocation**

As can be noted in Tables 1 and 2, three of the six couples interviewed for this study had one partner with a history of work-related travel but no LDRs in his or her family. A fourth couple had one partner with a history of work-related travel in the male
partner and a history of LDRs due to genocide and war for the female partner. In a fifth couple, both partners had family histories of LDRs and work-related travel on both sides of their families. In this fifth couple, the male partner also had a family history involving relocations due to genocide and war. A sixth couple had no history of LDRs nor work-related travel in their family history.

**Preparing for LDRs.** Four male partners had family histories of relocations for work-related reasons without LDRs; each is the traveler in their LDR. They saw these experiences in their family of origin as helping prepare them individually to cope with an LDR.

R: What strengths in your own family of origin helped you cope with this long-distance relationship?

6M: What strengths helped me develop it?

R: Yes, and helped you cope, you know, the things you learned in your family as a kid and a young man.

6M: Well my dad was in the Army and we traveled a lot, lived overseas. Uh, I was apart from them for a while I was in high school….and so, I had an early introduction to being apart….It wasn’t too difficult when I came over here. Once you get through the initial two or three months of what the heck am I doing here? After that initial period, it’s, uh, kinda flattens out and things are on a good plane. (TSBB2, 265)

5M: My family, we’re spread out all over the place. And we were raised to be very independent, all of us. And, so, to me, there’s no big challenge in that, because, I mean, this is my 39th move in my lifetime….So, as a youngster, we moved a lot. And, so I got used to moving and living in different places, so, and my family accepted that as part of life, so it was no big thing for me. But I know in my family, you know, wherever you are is home. (TSKK1, 430)

Although they had a family history of work-related travel and relocating for work-related reasons, LDRs were seen as distinct lifestyles in the family history by two of these four participants:
1M: Within our family, there really hasn’t been anything like [LDRs] that I’m aware of. My father did travel some for his work, but he was always…home every weekend, uh, and very rarely gone more than 3 or 4 days at a time. So…to me, that’s a whole different scenario than what we’re having to do here. Or what we have been doing. (TSEE3, 138)

5M: Well, my family has never—I’m the first one to really, other than my younger sister to an extent, but nothing like this—I’m really the first one that’s done this. (TSKK2, 370)

The comments by these participants that a family might have a history of work-related travel, yet individuals in that family could see LDRs as something distinct in their family history highlight how important it is to explore the perceptions of individuals and couples when discussing patterns in their family of origin. On the surface, it appeared that these individuals fit very well into their family histories, but at least two respondents saw themselves on a distinct path within their family of origin. The significance of LDRs being seen as different from other work-related travel was underscored when these comments are compared to those of the couple in which both partners had histories of LDRs and work-related travel in their families of origin.

2F: I think in both of our families, the concept of being long distance is not a new one. I mean, with 2M’s mom and his step-father, at some point in their relationship they were also apart, geographically separated. And I know that with my parents, in the first years of their marriage, spent an amount of time apart, due to unavoidable events. And so, uh, it doesn’t…it’s not a new concept.

R: So, in your family, it’s just part of {shrugs} life, sometimes, and it’s part of your family. Okay. {2F nods.} 2M, how about you?

2M: Just as 2F pointed out, it seems we are lucky enough that both of our families actually went through this, and it actually gives them perspective on what we’re going through. (TSGG2&3, 281)
2M returned to this topic and commented that this history placed the couple in the context of their family history in a way that the other respondents with work-related travel but no LDRs did not perceive in their families.

2M: I think we, this relationship and us individually, fit normally into our families.

R: Part of your family history.

2M: Not as much history as present. {Chuckles.} (TSGG2&3, 305)

These comments in comparison to those of the participants who see LDRs as unique in their families highlight that relational patterns need to be explored beyond the surface of the family history. The responses of the participants regarding how they felt they were unique in their family histories emphasize the significance of the meaning that individuals and couples give to these relational patterns, and how their perceptions of the way in which their circumstances mesh or stand out from family histories might be very different from that of an observer. It would be easy to assume, as did the researcher until told otherwise by two respondents, that work-related travel in the family history correlated with LDRs. This was not the case for the two participants who saw themselves as being on a distinct path within their family of origin, in spite of sharing in the family history of traveling for work.

To summarize, a multigenerational pattern of work-related travel, relocation and/or LDRs was present for at least one partner in five of the six couples interviewed. Those who had this history viewed it as preparing them to cope with an LDR by preparing them to adjust to relocations or by teaching them how to remain connected with family while separated physically. Sharing this family history of work-related travel
and/or relocation was not viewed by all participants who had it as correlating with the LDR lifestyle they were in at the time of the study.

**Independence as a Multigenerational Pattern**

Thinking relationally, the other side of the partnership for male participants who had family histories of work-related travel and relocations without LDRs are their partners, who did not have this family history. This raises the question of how these spouses adapted to a relational pattern that was very different from that of their own families of origin. A multigenerationally transmitted pattern of self-sufficiency which participants called *independence* was identified by all six couples as a factor that helped them adjust to the LDR. This independence will be explored next.

Comments about personal independence in the sense of self-sufficiency appeared in the words of five of the six female participants. In addition, four of six male partners identified their awareness that their partner was an independent woman was an important aspect of the adjustment of both partners to the LDR. Independence has been noted in the prior literature on LDRs, notably by Stafford’s (2004) observation that it is unclear whether individuals in LDRs are more independent people to begin with, or if they become more independent due to the LDR. The women in this study appeared to have been both independent before the LDR and to have become even more self-sufficient as the LDR continued, learning to handle many situations on their own.

An insight into this process of independence facilitating adaptation to LDRs for participants who did not have experience with work-related travel in their family of origin was given by a female participant who stated that in her family of origin, she was “the only one that moved away” (TSUU1, 401) from her home town. She described how
the different family histories regarding relocation between her and her husband had impacted the couple long before they were an LDR couple.

3F: [My husband’s] perspective was that he had to move from company to company to grow at a faster pace than he could have coming up through a company. So he would seek out the job and we would just go where he needed to be. I don’t necessarily agree with that in hindsight….See, my family was stuck-to-it. You didn’t bop around, even if it was beneficial. You stuck to it. So it was real hard for me to adjust to that. But then…that was just our way, and I just accepted it. (TSUU2, 61)

When asked how she became “the only one that moved away,” and learned to adapt to an LDR, she stated that she had learned at an early age to be independent from her family of origin.

3F: Well, even when I was little, I had to separate myself, I think, because my brothers were like the stars. My older sister had [a health condition] and my other sister had [a health condition]. And although it was painful to grow up with being seen as someone who didn’t have many needs, then, I think it helped me stronger. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. That’s my motto. (TSUU2, 71)

She added that this relational history in her family of origin helped her now cope with the LDR.

R: How does this family history that you have, those strengths help you now? How do you view that?

3F: You mean the strengths, by being independent and so forth?

R: [nods] Uh hmm. The way you see it.

3F: I think it’s extremely beneficial. I don’t know if my sisters could separate from the family…I don’t know if they could have separated as much as I did or as easily. It wasn’t easy. (TSUU2, 48)

Other female participants also commented about their independence beginning before they were partners in LDRs and linked this independence to aspects or events in
their family of origin. This participant talked about being “gutsy” prior to her marriage to her current spouse, with whom she was in an LDR.

6F: I’m pretty gutsy…and I have always been independent. One of the things is getting a divorce when I was 30, 31. That takes a lot of guts to do that. And to be able to support myself. And be able to support and raise my kids—by myself. And move, and get a career….And I got my college degree. And supported myself and my kids on my own. I just had to do it and so I did. So those kinds of things have made me…stronger. (TSBB3, 76)

A short time later in the interview, she links this “gutsiness” to her experiences within her family of origin.

R: What strengths do you see in your own family of origin…siblings, parents, et cetera, um that’s helped you cope with the LDR—the long-distance relationship?

6F: Well, my parents had a divorce, and so that made Mother strong. And she always told me that, you know, that she would be behind me no matter what I decided. That helped me get my divorce, because of her attitude, and with her helping me financially for a while until I could get a job on my own. She would always stand behind me. (TSBB3, 125)

Additional female participants who did not have a history of LDRs or work-related travel also identified independence as an important trait that helped them adjust to the LDRs.

1F: I’m kind of an independent person, so [the LDR] wasn’t as—probably as hard as [for] some people, to be able---because before this, 1M worked second shift. So I was pretty much taking care of the kids during the day, you know, school activities and that kind of thing….Then…I quit my job and then just stayed home. So [I’m] pretty much used to taking care of little things on my own, and that kind of thing. Just being, being the oldest child, I’m a little more independent. So it’s not, it wasn’t as hard for me…. (TSEE1, 174)

Independence gained in the family of origin was also credited by this female participant who did have a family history of LDRs.

R: What are the things that your family taught you when you were younger that help you now with this long-distance relationship? [Silence, about 5 seconds.]
5F: My parents have always both worked. And so we spent a lot of time alone, or with my grandmother. And so from an early age, we’ve kind of had to learn to manage…you know whatever happened, we had to find a way to deal with it. Help is on the way, but we can’t always depend on it.…

R: Help yourselves while help gets here.

5F: Yes. Exactly. And, so, these are a lot of the things that helped me…helped me mature, first, and be able to deal with whatever comes up. (TSGG2&3,174)

**Male perspectives on the independence of their partners.** Three male LDR partners in this study commented on their awareness of their partner’s self-sufficiency.

1M: Well, I think one thing. 1F mentioned she’s very independent, which she is. I hear guys talk, that they—whenever they leave, their—they have to—it seems like they have to talk to their wife like 10 or 12 times a day, every day when they’re gone, and we’ve never really had that type of—to 1F where you had to call me and I had to call you like 15 times every day. (TSEE1, 199)

Similar to male partners in LDRs in previous studies (Erwin, 1993; Forsyth & Gramling, 1990; Gerstel, 1978; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Gross, 1980b), male participants in this study reported that a significant source of worry for them was the safety and well-being of their partner while they were away from the primary residence. But it appeared that the self-sufficiency of their wives prior to the LDR, coupled with their increasing self-reliance as the LDR progressed, helped them know that their partner was indeed coping well with the LDR. For example, this couple discussed their concerns when their LDRs first started, and how the growing self-sufficiency of the female partner helped both partners not worry so much as the LDR continued.

6M: Concerns? Um…Just the sheer volume of turning over the, uh, running the house over to 6F, just the everyday things, like…checking the tires on the car every Saturday, checking the oil, checking the radiator, seeing that it was okay every weekend ….just making sure everything is secure and…just simple stuff like that. Everyday, mundane stuff….

R: And all those little things really add up to worries. How relevant do you guys think those worries are now, after doing this for…years?....
6M: Uh, as far as we’re concerned those things aren’t relevant anymore because I know 6F can take care of things, and if she’s unable to, she knows where to go to get it done, and that comes down to experience, to facing everything. If you don’t know where to go, to get help—it’s developed to the situation where she can handle most anything now.…

6F: You get strong….You learn to handle things by yourself and I really don’t have any qualms about it at all. You know, people say, “How do you do this?” and I just say, “Why not do it?” It—what’s the big deal, you know? (TSBB1, 240)

The awareness of the partner’s self-reliance also applied to being able to handle the emotional stressors of an LDR.

3M: I think it’s harder for 3F emotionally. [I] think that’s the main difference, and I appreciate the fact that she’s able to handle that—I don’t think, and I was thinking about this earlier with some of the questions you were asking, I don’t think everybody can do what we do. I don’t think—there’s people that are not as self-reliant and can handle things on their own, uh, you know, even for several days, let alone weeks and months, and 3F’s able to do that, so, I value that greatly. (TSUU1, 495)

**Independence as a liability.** Independence in any relationship must be effectively balanced with dependence, creating interdependence. When one individual is too independent, the balance can shift and lead to stress in relationship or individuals.

For two female non-commuters, independence became excessive when it led them to take on too much while their spouse was gone. It then created a hurdle when they realized they needed to ask for help.

2F: But as far as being apart, my biggest thing is trying to take—do everything myself….Sometimes I have to ask for my son to help, but I know he’s very busy having his family, and it’s hard to ask for help. I’m a real proud person, and didn’t realize how much I was, but I am, and I hate to ask for help, although there’s neighbors and friends that would be glad to help, and my grandsons that were helping me at times, but now they’ve both [relocated] and so, I don’t have that support. Um, and then I take care of the yards, I do the lawns and the plants and whatever needs to be done. And you know, every once in a while my son
will come over and he’ll spend a day and help me take care of it because it gets to be overwhelming at times. (TSBB1, 286)

1F: It is hard. Like this summer, we redid…the outside of the house, and I don’t know, I’d just had…surgery and I have no idea what I’m doing, and…we had to have a guy come in, and he walked off the job with our money and not finishing the house, and I had to find someone [to] finish it. I had to find a new painter.

1M: Of course, I told her we could do it after I get back, and it was, Oh no, I can take care of it! I want to do it! {1M rubs 1F’s shoulder.}

1F: Well, I didn’t think it’d be that hard! (TSEE1, 195)

Too much emotional independence can create relational stress because it can leave individuals, partners, or family members feeling isolated or left out. A participant who greatly valued her independence from her family of origin also pointed out that it has a drawback because “I think that [my family of origin] thinks…I’m so independent I don’t have needs” (TSUU2, 89). Other participants commented on how independence contributes to relational stress.

5M: Well, again. I was raised to be very independent, so…it’s a good thing, but I know 5F gets very frustrated with that, because, you know, I just do things on my own, and don’t necessarily involve everybody else in it. (TSKK1, 504)

3F: Well, uh, I think I might have shot myself in the foot when I taught this, but when my girls were growing up, I taught ’em that their husband and family comes first, and then us. And they really took that to heart! {Laughs} And I really see that as their strength, their family is their focus. And I…shouldn’t be their focus. I should be a part of it, but I shouldn’t be the focus, it’s their families. So I guess I see that as a strength, although it’s kinda hard on me sometimes, but I know I did it, you know, I can’t be mad at them for it, you know. But sometimes it’s kinda hard to take. (TSUU1, 369)

One couple was in a transitional phase of their relationship where they have realized that their current roles of the male partner working independently as the breadwinner and the female partner working independently on household issues had become stressful for both of them. They recognized that they needed to make some
changes in how they structured this independence, so they could become more interdependent. They provided insight into how a couple might begin to negotiate these changes, even at a distance.

1M: I guess, kinda looking at it from a different way, strengths again, our ability to kinda separate, where I take care of all the working and the earning money {1F begins to chuckle} and she {points to 1F} takes care of basically everything else….But that also causes some problems….I am very disengaged with a lot that goes on in the household, and that isn’t probably the best scenario, and isn’t the way we really should do it. That’s actually one of our goals for the coming year, is to find a better way to communicate and work together on just everything from general finances to paying the bills to planning for the future. Instead of me just being the guy out making money {1F begins to chuckle} and her doing everything else, we’re gonna try to work on a little bit of that together. (TSEE1, 295)

Although the commuter will continue to be away from the household, the couple would be able to increase their teamwork by making a focused joint effort to do. Their shared awareness and goal of addressing the issue together may reduce stress for both partners.

**Summary of independence.** A multigenerational pattern of independence in the sense of self-sufficiency was identified by all six couples interviewed. Five of the six female partners commented that they had experiences in their family of origin which helped them be self-sufficient. They attributed this independence with helping them cope with the challenges of the LDR lifestyle, especially when it is considered that three of the five female respondents did not have family histories of work-related travel, relocation and/or LDRs.

Being self-sufficient does not mean a person is detached from relationships. A second, equally prevalent multigenerationally transmitted pattern for these six couples
was commitment to caring for their families of origin. This concept will be explored next.

**Commitment to Caring for Family of Origin**

A strong commitment to their families of origin, both children and elders, was spoken of by these LDR couples. Couples with adult children and grandchildren spoke of their ties to them.

6F: Our relationship is really, really important…I worry about each of them individually, like all mothers and grandmothers do, and try do all that I can to keep that relationship strong. That’s really important to me…and uh, yes they have problems and yes we don’t agree with some of the things, but we’re always there for them and we will love them no matter what happens. Same with the grandkids…. (TSBB2, 111)

Commitment may be seen in the reported behaviors of the participants interviewed as well as their comments on their relationships with their families. Three of these LDR couples were or had been providing extensive instrumental, financial and/or emotional support to a least one of their adult children during the LDR. For two couples, the salary earned by the commuter was important in providing financial assistance to one or more of their children.

6M: They saw [the LDR] as an opportunity for us to get ahead, and to help them a little bit. We’ve helped them financially quite a bit, and uh, they’ve appreciated that. (TSBB1, 367)

1F: We were financially helping her where she was, and we’re actually looking for um, buying another house. We have a couple rentals, but buying another house for her to rent, you know, just so it’s financially easier for her than where she was. (TSEE1, 359)

This commitment to family included elderly parents. Two of the female participants, 1F and 5F, were caregivers of elderly family members, with 5F returning to the home of her family of origin when her LDR began. For these two women, the
commitment they had to caring for family members was an important factor in the decision they made with their spouses to have LDRs. In addition, the desire to remain in an area where one has family roots was an important part of the decision these couples made to become LDR couples, something found in previous literature (Erwin, 1993; Green et al., 1999; Hogarth, 1987; Hogarth & Daniel, 1987, 1988; Levin & Trost, 1999).

1F: One of our big issues is—especially with my dad being older and when 1M’s dad was alive, we didn’t want to move away. We wanted to still be with our parents. We’re real, I want to say, family-oriented as far as…I would be the one if something happened to my dad, who would take care of him. I used to help a lot with my grandmother when she was here…so moving away—because we could have moved to [Headquarters City], but really didn’t want to, because we didn’t want to when the kids were little, we didn’t want to be away from parents, you know, and everything, and now our kids are grown and we’ve got grandkids and we really don’t want to move away and miss out on that…. (TSEE1, 252)

5M: Definitely—a big part of 5F staying there, I mean, other than the work, and that area, is helping her family survive, because they have some health issues and some other problems, and so, the vast majority of her income goes to support her family. (TSKK1, 228)

These comments show the reciprocity of the decision-making process for the participating couples who were separated due to family care-giving responsibilities that conflicted with the needs of the partner’s employment situation. Part of the LDR decision that might be overlooked with these couples is that while one partner left the residence, one partner elected to stay and care for family members. For LDR couples faced with these situations, “Care and responsibility for others are…much more important than care and responsibility for oneself” (Levin & Trost, p. 285). When viewed within this broader context, the decision to separate then becomes a mutual one, and thus more balanced.
Younger partners in LDRs interviewed for this study were also linked to their families of origin through caregiving. Three of the four unmarried participants in this study were living in the homes of family members, a finding which correlates with previous literature (Driedger, 1987; Erwin, 1993; Gerstel & Gross, 1984). This interdependence of both commuters and non-commuters contrasts with the image of the LDR partners, especially the commuter, as a lone wolf, independent of both their partner and larger family. These LDR partners were embedded within a web of family and geographic connections that paradoxically led them to spend time apart from the people and areas they love. They embodied the words of Hogarth (1987) who described LDR commuters as “a very different social animal, with a well developed sense of ‘roots’ and local identity. The familial and social ties to the home area are very strong” (p. 36).

Connecting with and maintaining these social ties with family members were noted as important by respondents. Participants who had children commented in their interviews that they had regular phone and/or email communication with their children each week, and sometimes daily. Three couples interviewed spoke of the importance of family gatherings and events when the commuter was home for visits as a way of staying connected with family members.

6M: We get together a lot for family dinners, so we try to get everyone. But my trips home, last what, eleven days? Two…11-day periods and one 24-day period, so the short ones, the 11-day period, we get together for dinners and movies, and we go visit my youngest son…for a few days. So we cram as much in as we can. (TSBB1, 324)

3F: We try to make sure that we know what we’re gonna do, if we’re gonna go see the grandkids or the kids, and then make sure we have some allotted work time…it’s a balancing act…but we usually go to all the events together.
3M: Hm-hmm, yeah… We try to make sure that we’re… seeing everybody regularly {gestures in a circular motion with hand} you know, we can’t—it’s not a formalized list but we know we’ve seen this [grandchild] or gone to visit one place or another, because we have a routine that we like to follow to keep a balance of the time that we spend with each of the families and each of the grandkids, you know, as best we can. (TSUU1, 443)

1F: I do Sunday dinner every Sunday, and we used to have 1M’s dad [and] my grandmother… and then our kids come. Just so I can still see my parents, and they like to get out, you know, gives them some social—socialization… My dad comes—1M’s dad passed away, um, so, there’s only my dad, as far as parents….And we always do—we always make sure we do quite a bit of stuff when 1M’s back to get, you know, with my dad…. (TSEE1, 111)

The importance to these participants of gathering with the immediate and extended family during the times the LDR couple was together contrasted with what has been reported in existing literature. Previous findings have been that LDR couples might choose to reduce interactions with friends and extended family during visits because they needed and wanted to focus on their intimate relationship (Farrell, 2004; Jesswein, 1984; Sahlstein, 2000, 2004). In contrast, both an unmarried participant and a married participant commented that during visits, their families understood that the couple would like some alone time with just each other and the couple did not have to choose to reduce time with them.

4M: When 4F comes and visits, they’re good at giving us space while—they’re not—it’s not 4F and I trying to hang out together and hang out with them at the same time—we actually have time to ourselves. (TSMM3, 104)

6F: When 6M came home in September, my kids kinda stayed away, didn’t call as much, and didn’t come over all the time like they used to, and they just said, you guys need the time together, so they’re understanding of that too. (TSBBB3, 395)

Summary of commitment to family-of-origin. Participants commented on the importance of their families of origin to them. The couples with children were or had
been providing emotional and/or financial support to one of more of their adult children. Caring for elderly family members and grandchildren was also an aspect of providing support to family members. For couples faced with these care-giving responsibilities at the primary residence, part of the decision to become an LDR couple was to allow one partner to remain with family members while the other partner earned an income. In this way, the LDR could be seen as “an expression of giving, a contribution to the well-being of relatives…instead of a selfish act” (Krasner & Joyce, 1995, p. 27). Younger LDR partners interviewed were also linked to their families of origin through support for housing while they were away from their partner. The sum of these factors for these LDR couples was a strong commitment to caring for and being cared for by one’s family of origin.

The commitment LDR partners showed toward their families of origin was mirrored in their commitment to their professions. This, too, was a multigenerational pattern, and will be presented next.

**Commitment to Employers: Work Ethic**

A sense of effort for one’s employer or course of study was present in the narratives of these couples, which male participants spoke of as, “always trying to do the best you can for the employer” (TSEE1, 191), or simply, “I’m the provider” (TSBB2, 349). Participants labeled their commitment to their employers, profession or course of study as *work ethic*. Two participants, 1M and 4F, linked their work ethic directly to their family of origin. First, the comments of 1M show his perspective that work was part of his identity in his family.
R: Then looking at your—what’s called your family of origin, which is parents, grandparents, siblings, all of that, what strengths do you see that you got from that family that are helping you now deal with this long-distance relationship?

1M: Uh, probably more just work ethic. Earn what ya—you don’t get anything given to you. You got to earn everything. Uh, pretty—I wouldn’t say strict—upbringing, but no hand-out of any kind. You had to go earn it. That’s probably the biggest thing I think I got from my family.

R: That work ethic. [1M: Uh hmm.] Yeah, that’s just in neon for your family, to see it.
1M: Yes. I believe so.

R: Yeah. Where do you think the work ethic came from for your family?

1M: Uh…my dad. I think his parents came over from Germany, and I think they were very poor. And I think my grandfather was a taxi cab driver. Worked for the railroads some and then a taxi cab driver. Going through the Depression, I think, just made the work ethic—work—mandatory. (TSEE3, 52)

1M returned to this topic a short time later, reiterating how important the role of provider was for him in connection with his family of origin, and how it tied in with his decision to work in an LDR.

1M: Looking back on the family that you uh, that you grew up with, what do you think that family would understand about that long-distance relationship? What do you think that they get that 1F’s doesn’t?

1M: Uh, just that it was, I guess, not necessary, but a decent vehicle to make a decent living and have a good job, and provide well for the family…. 

R: What do you see that 1F’s family might understand about this long-distance that your family might not?

1M: Uhh, oh, probably a lot of the same, you know, doing whatever it takes to ensure we have—to ensure I’m doing a decent job as a provider. (TSEE3, 104)

The participant 4F presented a female perspective of how she learned what she identified as work ethic from her mother.

4F: My mom was the head of our household. So she taught us as women, if something needs to be done, we do it….We know how to do all kinds of different
things to provide for ourselves, we’ve all earned everything we had growing up. If I wanted a car, I had to pay for it, insurance, gas, everything. And I did. I worked very hard. Not that they didn’t provide for me. But they wanted me to be responsible, and not to have everything handed to me. Which, now I have a very good work ethic. I’m a very good employee. I’m very dedicated to things. I think some of that’s personality. [4M: Uh huh.] But some of that I did learn because we’re all like that. All four of us! (TSMM1, 594)

The commitment that LDR partners showed to each other and their families, combined with being very loyal to their profession or studies, created conflicting loyalties for these couples. The feeling of being caught between two different loyalties is simply called guilt in TG Theory. From a systemic perspective of relationships, guilt is to be expected when separations from loved ones occur, due to questioning if one is meeting the relational obligations when not with the loved one, be it spouse, child, or other family member (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Even though it was apparent that their partners supported their dedication to their families and/or careers, some participants felt “torn between two worlds” (TSBB1, 313).

4F: Even though both my degree and my relationship are really important, I’m feeling like I’m choosing one over the other. And I am. {Chuckles} The strength there is that I think we both have agreed and given permission to each other to be where we are. You know, I’ve told him, I don’t want you to quit your job to come over here, and not have enough money. {Turns to 4M, who is looking at her.} And he’s told me, you know—

4M: How many times? You’re not quitting school!—

4F: He’s told me, that’s where you need to be…. (TSMM1, 295)

These conflicting feelings can also arise due to individuals feeling they are not measuring up adequately as parents, spouses, individuals, or a couple (Bergen et al., 2007; Winfield, 1985). This participant commented that he felt like he was avoiding
family responsibilities, even though the job he had obtained was vital to his family’s financial stability after a period of unemployment and financial strain.

6M: Sometimes I think, uh, in the early days, I thought I was kinda escaping from the family problems by being overseas, because you’re totally isolated from the family problems and everyday things. Sometimes I’d feel I’d escaped from it and it was unfair that I was leaving everything to 6F….Historically, I wonder if the family will think I copped out on them all because I went overseas….

(TSBB1, 401)

One couple shared that they at times wondered if they were spending time apart in LDRs that they might later regret. This feeling was also echoed by an individual participant.

1F: I feel like, now that we’re getting older, you think more of your mortality. You know, I think you think about that more. And I’m thinking--what if we only have 10 years left, and he’s spending it long-distance? And we could have spent it together. Sometimes I think, oh, is it…not wasting time, but is it taking time away from what we have left? And I’ve thought about that a lot more in the last couple years.

1M: I definitely have. Is it—that’s more in the, is it really worth it, type [of concern about the LDR].

1F: And I think it’s more, a lot due to our age, you know, because when you’re 20, your 30s, you think you’ll live forever…and now we’re in our 50s and it—I think you think more about mortality [1M: Uh hmm], or retirement, you know.

1M: Without a doubt. (TSEE1, 616)

6F: I feel like sometimes it’s uh, we’re crazy because uh we don’t know how long we’re gonna live—nobody knows. And I think, uh, or we are wasting time that we could be together when it’s just about money. Is that more important than our spending time together? (TSBB3, 391)

**Summary of work ethic.** Participants identified a commitment to employer or their course of studies, which they labeled *work ethic*. For two male participants, the concept of work ethic was tied to their role as provider for their families. Work ethic was also identified as a family pattern for two participants, and this perception appears to
have played a role in their decisions these individuals made with their partners to embark on an LDR.

**Summary of Multigenerationally Transmitted Patterns**

Patterns in work-related patterns and/or relocation, along with LDRs for some couples, were identified in the family histories of five out of six male participants. For the female partners who did not have these histories, a multigenerationally transmitted pattern of independence was identified as a significant factor that helped them cope with a lifestyle unknown to them prior to the LDR with their current partner. A third multigenerational pattern of commitment to family of origin was evidenced by the importance placed on caring for both elderly and younger family members by LDR couples, or for younger LDR partners who were being assisted with housing by their families and/or lived with family members. Work ethic was a fourth identified multigenerationally transmitted pattern in the histories of individual partners of three of the six couples.

The overall picture of the LDR couples when viewed from the perspective of these family patterns in travel, relocation, care-giving and work ethic was one of individuals and families who were focused on caring and providing for family members, and working to be the best provider and employee they could be. LDRs were undertaken by some couples within this context of providing for family members. From this perspective, the decision to undertake an LDR became one more motivated by relational reasons, not purely individual wants and needs.

Building on the relational reasons participants described as part of their decision to have an LDR, the next foundational concept of TG Theory explored in this chapter is
differentiation. In this section, the more personal and emotional relationships with family members and each other that these six couples had will be discussed.

**TG Concept 2: Differentiation**

Differentiation is the ability to have a sense of self that is not affected by nor is absorbed by the emotions of others, while still remaining in close emotional connection with family, friends, and other important individuals. It is a multilayered concept, and may be observed in relational behaviors between couples, family members, and other loved ones. McGoldrick and Carter (1999) identify “skills in human interdependence” (p. 34) which may be seen in interactions and comments of individuals and relational groups that have achieved an effectively differentiated relationship.

Two of McGoldrick and Carter’s (1999) interdependence skills are especially visible in the interview data of this study. First, couples interviewed expressed differences of belief without becoming defensive or overly anxious. Second, they were able to understand the perspective of others who differed in opinion from them, and to use this understanding to maintain an emotional balance in themselves and their partnered relationship. A third facet of differentiation, relational autonomy, was also evident in the interviews, and will conclude this section on differentiation.

**Expressing and Accepting Differences of Opinion and Beliefs**

In TG Theory, an aspect of relational health is considered to be I-statements. I-statements are those in which partners identify their individual thoughts and feelings by speaking about their own perceptions and not attributing these to others. I-statements help partners state opinions and beliefs with minimal blame or defensiveness, and contribute to more effective and open communication. Participants stated during
interviews that they were voicing their perceptions only, and were not speaking for their partner. When topics touched on issues where there were differences of opinion, they voiced their understanding that their partner and/or family members “might have a different perspective” (TSEE2, 456).

I-statements leave the door open for the partner to state different opinions and for the speaker to accept that the other person might disagree. For example, this participant’s use of an I-statement in his individual interview shows how an I-statement can open the door to a discussion the different aspects of a controversial topic that partners might agree upon, building a path toward compromise or ‘agreeing to disagree.’

R: What do you think 1F might say are some of the strengths about your family?

3M: {Laughs out loud for about 5 seconds.} That’s a very hard question to answer!....Well, I do think that, you know, um, I’m not going to try to convince you or myself that it’s the same perspective, because it’s not. But I think that…I think 3F would agree there is some support there…. (TSUU3, 79)

When partners have reached an agreement on an issue, I-statements indicate that individuals are voicing their own perceptions and opinions even though they may be aware of the spouse’s views. When this participant spoke about a topic that he and his partner had discussed and reached agreement on, he did not speak for her. He revised his comment to an I-statement about his own perceptions.

2M: It’s—I think we—I think on my end, and I’m certain, because we’ve talked about this before, but I will leave it to 2F to word how she wishes…. (TSGG1, 415)

A tolerance for different viewpoints allows any partners to be honest with each other. Honesty and open communication even about topics where partners disagree is
considered part of relational health in TG Theory. I-statements lead the way for honesty, as this comment by 4F shows.

   4F: Our plans did change, you know, initially, he was gonna stay here and we were gonna get married. And then it turned out that he wasn’t going to stay here, we weren’t ready to get married. There were things that we needed to work through. And it was kinda a hard year, that year….I was pretty upset. {4F smiles.} I’m still kinda upset about it. I’m ready to get married and he’s not. {Turns to 4M.} Well, I won’t speak for you. I’m ready to get married. (TSMM1, 224)

Owning one’s feelings as this participant did when speaking of a difficult topic allows viewing and accepting the same emotions in others. This leads to an understanding of the different perspectives of others with whom one has a relationship.

Understanding the different perspectives of other is the next interrelational skill identified by McGoldrick and Carter (1999), which was apparent in the narratives of the couples interviewed.

**Understanding the Perspective of Others**

Participants spoke of different perceptions of relationships and roles that sometimes challenged them to balance the different beliefs of their families. They were understanding and at times compassionate toward individuals and subsystems of one or both families who did not have the same perspective on the LDR that they did.

   R: How do you see, then, this long-distance history and what-not fitting into 1F’s family history?

   1M: Again, to the best of my knowledge that isn’t anything that has happened or that anyone has done in her family, uh, so I think there are probably some that are a little skeptical and that don’t understand how we could do that and how we could function like that…. I think [there’s] a little more skepticism on her side of the family than mine.

   R: How so, if you don’t mind me asking?
1M: I think they wouldn’t—on her side of the family, they actually value family and being physically together [as] probably more important than jobs or careers or providing for the family. (TSEE3, 146)

Another participant understood that because his wife’s family was of a different ethnic background than his and were fairly recent immigrants to the United States, they had different cultural views which made it harder for them to accept the LDR.

5M: They are very close-knit, more than, you know, families who have been in this country for generations, like mine. You know, in this country, we tend to spread out, and there, they hang together, because each generation takes care of the prior generation. We’re not good at that in this country. (TSKK2, 206)

The couple then discussed how these differences between the beliefs in their families about physical proximity with family members contributed to the hesitation of the wife’s family to fully accept their LDR.

R: 5F, how did your family respond when they learned about this long-distance relationship? 5M said his was like, okay, it’s just the next move. But what about for your family?

5F: Oh, they thought it was horrible when I moved in with 5M in [Suburb], and we were like 45 minutes away! They just think the whole thing is awful, so, uh, yeah, they don’t like this distance thing, so, yeah, if all the money in the world were to fall down from the sky, I mean, their thought is we should all move over there and find a house next to them.

R: Right. Which is, as you said, completely opposite of what 5M would like.

5F: Sure! And his family too. They don’t all think we should be living right next to each other. Whereas my whole family would be—I mean even when my siblings and I were younger, my brother who’s just younger than me, his dream was that we would all have houses on the same block. So that was, you know, I mean, this is not—it’s not just my parents, it’s even my siblings. I mean, it’s just our mindset. Because it’s the way we grew up. (TSKK1, 453)

The two male partners who were not yet married to their participants voiced an understanding the perspective of their partners’ families to the LDRs, even when these
views put them in a less-than-positive light with their in-laws. First, 4F and 4M discuss the concerns of her parents that he was not able to help her more due to distance.

4F: I’m kind of upset because I need a new car, and 4M’s not here to go look with me. Then [my parents] kinda get mad. Well, he should be there! And then, you know, his role, what he should be doing, he’s not doing it. According to them.

4M: I can’t really say that I blame them. Probably I’d have a similar reaction to your dad if you were my daughter, to be quite honest. (TSMM1, 559)

4M returned to this topic in his individual interview.

4M: When she’s upset, obviously I look bad to them because I’m making their little girl upset. Which, as a guy, I can understand. If my daughter was coming to me all upset, that guy would be…. (voice trails off)

R: You’d be Papa Bear and all over him.

4M: It doesn’t matter if he’s the greatest guy ever. It’s not good enough. It’s no longer a good thing. (TSMM3, 152)

Even though there was some tension between him and 4F’s family of origin, 4M was able to see positives in the relationship of her parents.

R: What do you think 4F’s family might understand well about the long-distance relationship?

4M: I think they get the—4F’s parents don’t have the easiest go of a marriage, so I would say they understand the…staying committed to each other part and trying to work through. Uh, I would say they understand—they would understand to a certain extent.

R: Sticking to it even when it’s not a bed of roses.

4M: Right. (TSMM3, 166)

Similar understanding of the less-than-favorable perceptions of him by his partner’s family of origin was also voiced by the other unmarried male participant.

R: What were the hurdles that the two of you had to cross when you started this long-distance relationship?
{Both 2F and 2M laugh out loud.}

2M: Her father! {All three laugh out loud.} No, no, God bless him. I would say the same thing. If she were my daughter, I would have done the same thing. (TSGG1, 520)

Later in the interview, 2M commented again on his understanding and acceptance of the concerns that 2F’s father had about the LDR.

2M: If your child is not happy and the reason for that is this long-distance relationship, if it were—if it were my children, I would tell them, “To Hell with this! Just stop! What are you doing? Why are you torturing yourself? For somebody…7,000 miles away?” (TSGG1, 728)

According to TG Theory, being able to accept different viewpoints allows a more objective view of disagreements. A more objective view reduces the likelihood that something might be “taken personally.” 2M showed this objectivity when he commented that he understood the concerns other family members might have about the LDR, and was able to objectively see that some of their concerns related more to the circumstances surrounding the LDR than the relationship itself.

2M: Although they’ve had hard times and good times, and they just don’t want those hard times…to trickle down to us. I’m sure they always think, Oh, the time zone difference! Oh, the effort that goes into this! Oh! They view only the negative aspects of it, I think, because that’s what parents care about! They don’t want us to be negatively affected by it. But at the same time they realize that there is a positive aspect to it. They’re not as vocal about it. Fine. That’s just the way people—human beings—are. (TSGG1, 301)

According to TG Theory, the ability to see and accept the differing perceptions of other family members helped participants maintain their emotional calm when faced with family members who did not understand the LDR. For example, in the above quote, 2M was able to reframe the comments made by both sets of parents as motivated by concern, not opposition to the LDR. Having this more objective view is seen in TG
Theory as helping individuals to recognize and understand the concerns and feelings of family members, but not be drawn into these emotions. Sometimes, conflict can help individuals become aware of competing emotional fields in family relationships, as 2M related happened for him in his family of origin.

2M: Since my mother and my father…had a falling apart…I think there was a bit of, not animosity, but a bit of bad blood between them in the sense that, oh no, your father did this, did that. Oh no, your mother did this, did that. So I sort of realized that I’m a ping pong ball in between those two people. Now, each one wanted me to avoid their mistake, that’s how they wanted it. Oh no, don’t make the mistake that I did. Oh no, don’t rush into relationships….. So what they taught me, what they gave me for advice was not always what I learned, but I would like to think that I made my own opinions at times. And until this day, I never really take advice for what it is. I always think it through and see how it affects me and how it affects what I want in life, whether it’s being with 2F, or {sighs} anything. (TSGG2, 330)

When 2M became aware of the emotional tugs in his family of origin surrounding his parent’s divorce, he was better able to remain attached to them while striving to remain autonomous in his decisions.

This ability to maintain some personal distance from the emotions while remaining compassionate toward others even when they might disagree helped partners and couples separate their own thoughts and feelings from those of family members. In TG Theory, being able to recognize one’s self and relationships as distinct from those of other family members is a third facet of differentiated behavior, known as boundaries (Roberto, 1992). This concept will be discussed next.

**Boundaries with Family Members**

From the perspective of TG Theory, boundaries are used to determine who is ‘in’ a relationship and who is not. This awareness allows individuals and relational partners to decide what information is shared and with whom, and what behaviors are acceptable
between relational partners (Roberto, 1992). A factor that assisted four of the six couples interviewed for this study was their conceptualization of boundaries around their relationship within the context of their families of origin. These boundaries allowed the LDR couples to hear the concerns of their family members but not be unduly influenced by the emotions and sometimes negative comments of others as they embarked upon and continued on with their LDR.

Statements of boundaries tended to be overt. Couples drew emotional lines around which family members might be close enough to impact the couple.

R: What advice do you have for other LDR couples when you’re handling all these family dynamics?

3F: Well, it’s my philosophy that your immediate family is your main family, and the rest…are like spokes, you know, out spokes. And they don’t have the—I don’t think you should give them enough power to impact your relationship. So I guess my advice would be to focus on your relationship and your family, and your immediate family, and hopefully, that you can build other relationships with others, but it isn’t your primary—it shouldn’t be your primary focus. (TSUU2, 189)

Two couples reported discussing their decision with immediate family members prior to the LDR. This correlated with the findings Anderson (1992) and Anderson & Sprull (1993), who studied the decision-making process of LDR couples. They found that LDR couples discussed the situation with family members as they weighed their options prior to embarking on an LDR, as did Couples 1 and 3 in this study.

3M: For a year or more…we knew this was a real possibility. It was discussed with my—our kids, so everybody pretty much knew about it and that it was the best option we had.

3F: Yeah, yeah, pretty much, it wasn’t a surprise, so it wasn’t a shock or something too out-out-of-the-blue. They had time to adjust to the thinking….And I think it was discussed enough. They’re all married and adults so it didn’t impact them so much directly. (TSUU1, 336)
R: [How] did you present this long-distance…situation to your family?...

1M: Uh, well, internally to the family, I just usually come home and say, hey, I got an opportunity to go do this, what do you think? We talk about it. Usually within a matter of hours [we] can make a decision. External, to the rest of the family, we just tell ’em. [1F: {laughs} Yeah!] We don’t really give a—usually it’s just 1F and I sit down and talk about it, figure out where we are, what feels like the risks are, what the opportunities are, make a decision based on the data we have. (TSEE1, 469)

Boundaries could also be set in a more reactive fashion, responding to hurt or perceived past failings of individuals and/or family groups. These same two couples drew distinct boundaries around themselves as a couple within their families that might be shaped by reactions in the present toward past family dynamics.

1M: Both 1F and I have been very independent and always been on our own. Uh, external family, again, we really don’t give a whole lot of—we don’t ask a whole lot of advice of them. We pretty well tell them what we’re doing. Internally, we again, usually sit down and make our—make our decisions. We are—we don’t feel we owe anybody anything. We are totally on our own. So we usually just sit down, go through the data, do what we think is best for us, and our internal family. (TSEE1, 489)

3F: I think we both, we both tend to be independent of our families. We just, we couldn’t count on them for things so we counted on each other. And that’s kinda established our pattern, I think, for our marriage. (TSUU1, 468)

In TG Theory, having boundaries is not an either/or concept. Boundaries are most effective when they are consistent yet flexible and allow give-and-take with other persons in a relationship (Roberto, 1992). Doing this requires, again, that couples and individuals understand the perspective of family members. The two younger couples spoke of their awareness that for them and their families, involving others was very important. They made no distinctions between immediate and extended family members.
But they also spoke of making their own decisions after considering the input of family members, maintaining personal boundaries.

2M: I would say to actually get out of your way to make [family members] feel that they’re part of the decision, of your life, of the decision-making process, in the sense that ask them what they think about the other person. Get involved as much as you can, take as much advice as you can from them. But at the end of the day, make your own decisions. Don’t leave them out of it, and don’t let yourself be influenced by them…. So, take every bit of advice you can. Let them do that. The good, the bad, and the ugly, but then just make up your own mind. Don’t follow anyone. Especially family! {Both 2M and 2F laugh.} (TSGG2&3, 372)

R: [W]hat…advice would you have about these larger family dynamics for couples in long-distance relationships, moms and dads and the crowd?

4F: I’m a strong believer that our family-of-origin helps shape who we are, so recognizing, like you said, the positive things and maybe less positive things that have been passed down generationally, how that might be impacting the relationship. As well as encouraging couples to include their families as much as possible while realizing that they’re in the relationship with each other, not their families. (TSMM2, 288)

It is interesting that the two couples who spoke of including families as much as possible were not yet married, and that one partner for each couple was living with their family of origin. It might be that the couples who had been married for some years had developed different boundaries around ‘internal’ and ‘external’ family members as their relationship evolved prior to the LDR. On the other hand, perhaps proximity of family members and the relative ease with which family members might discuss the LDR with the younger partners created a perceived need to have different boundaries which involved family members more in their decisions about the LDR.

The consideration of proximity and boundaries leads to consideration of the distinction between independence, differentiation, boundaries, and physical space. This
is a distinction is debated in TG Theory and was represented in the comments of participants. This will be discussed next in light of the responses of participants.

**Differentiation, Independence, and Physical Space**

A misconception about differentiation is that it is physical and/or emotional withdrawal from family members. Instead, differentiation is being personally autonomous in actions, thoughts, and feelings while still being connected emotionally to loved ones. It can only truly be achieved when people are involved in emotionally significant relationships and willing to come together within these relationships while being emotionally independent (McGoldrick & Carter, 1999). One participant described this experience in his family of origin as being “raised to be independent yet to be a family” (TSKK2, 257).

The story of the couple identified as 4M and 4F shed some light on the interaction of independence, physical space, and differentiation. They were at a point in their personal and relational life cycles where these relational processes had to be addressed in order to grow as individuals and as a couple. Their story gave insight into how a couple might negotiate the balance of autonomy and connectedness with each other and with the family of origin, and how physical distance might interact with this process in the context of the LDR.

4F reported that she had worked as a young adult to gain her physical and emotional independence from her family of origin. She moved some hours away from her family to help her separate from them and find her own identity. But she found she was still putting the dynamics from her family of origin into her relationship with 4M.
4F: I grew up in an enmeshed family…. And I think I was carrying that over with 4M, wanting him to have that same dynamic with me. And he wouldn’t do it! {Laughs} Which I really love about him, but also it made me really angry. Because I kept fighting him, you know. Why won’t you do this for me? If you really loved me, you would move here. If you really wanted to be with me, you’d do whatever it took to make it happen. And then, after a long time of working through that, you know, I came to the realization that first of all, I don’t want that kind of relationship with anyone. (TSMM1, 407)

Her experience of separating from her family of origin is a good example of how physical distance alone is not sufficient for differentiation (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). 4F’s story also highlights how differentiation is both a relational and an individual process. She ‘did the work’ to differentiate herself more on an individual basis, but had to maintain this differentiation in the context of her intimate relationship for it to truly be effective. As hypothesized in TG Theory, her increased differentiation carried over into her relationship with 4M, in part due to gaining more personal self-sufficiency in the LDR. Her comments linked independence in LDRs to the TG concept of differentiation.

4F: In the past, when we were together [in the same location], if we weren’t together, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I didn’t really have a lot of other things going on, because I wanted to spend all my time with him. And then as I’ve grown and been more independent…I’m okay by myself. I don’t wanna be by myself, but even if…like if God forbid that we don’t get married, I don’t need him, I don’t rely on him, for anything other than—

4M: Me! (TSMM1, 389)

4F’s story showed how this process played out when physical distance is first assumed to be equivalent to independence and differentiation. Her partner had the opposite experience, learning with his family how to be differentiated when physical space between them disappeared after he moved back into his childhood home as an
LDR partner. 4M described how boundaries and differentiation might play out with individuals who are living in the same space.

4M: [My family members are] able to recognize when I need space and I don’t really want to talk about [the LDR]. Talking about things over and over again doesn’t really help me deal with anything. I’ve always been pretty good at processing things, whether it’s by myself or talking through it once and then thinking about it myself. I don’t process things by talking it over and over and over….

R: It sounds like your family [has] really got a gift of knowing—balancing that together with that space that you have to have—

4M: They really do. They’ve figured out a good balance. It has to do with having two grown kids living at home, so they’ve had to figure that out because when I first moved home, my mom and I got into it a few times. Next my dad and I got into it a few times as well. It’s—more or less trying to figure out where boundaries were. And once we did, there, it’s been fine. I haven’t had problems with my family. So, I think they’re pretty good at seeing when…when we need space and when they should kinda step back. (TSMM3, 99)

From the perspective of TG Theory, conflict is expected when families and individuals are making transitions that require changes in behaviors and boundaries. At these times, the anxiety in the family system run high, and creates strong and often contradictory emotional fields. Conflict and ‘undifferentiated moments’ in families occur as members work to find a new balance of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Thus, differentiation is not remaining conflict-free. It is using both thoughts and emotions to address conflicts, and remaining true to self in this process.

**Summary of Interrelational Skills of Differentiation**

Interrelational skills indicative of differentiation were evident in the interviews with these LDR couples. Specific aspects of differentiation that were apparent were expressing one’s own perceptions with I-statements, accepting differing viewpoints and
perspectives, and maintaining personal boundaries while remaining open to input from immediate and extended family members. The ability to use these interrelational skills to responsibly meet one’s own needs in a way that is helpful to relationships with others is known as *relational autonomy*. This was another aspect of TG Theory that was present in the narratives of the LDR couples interviewed, and will be discussed in the next section.

**Relational autonomy.** The ability to identify and accommodate the needs of others in the relationship while taking responsibility for meeting one’s own needs in a way that is healthy for the relationship is called *relational autonomy* (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Relational autonomy may be inferred from statements and observations of interactions in which partners and/or family members take responsibility for their own feelings and needs, and seek to meet these needs in ways that are healthy for the relationship.

Relational autonomy is often conceptualized with individuals in relationships. For this participant, the LDR created a situation where she had to develop a more autonomous stance in her committed relationship.

4F: We were brought up by my mom saying, don’t settle for a man who’s not going to treat you right. Don’t settle for a man who isn’t going to give you everything you want. Marriage will make you happy. You know, if you only marry the right man, then your life will be good. Which is just not true. {Laughs} So I’ve expected 4M to be my happiness for a long time. And when you’re long-distance, it’s impossible. So…I really had to reevaluate my reliance on him for my happiness. (TSMM2, 210)

Relational autonomy also means that partners accept the other person’s efforts to meet their needs in relationally healthy ways. This process often involves negotiation between partners or family members.
4F: I think I’ve realized that I had a tendency to put everything on hold when he’s here, and kind of forget about my life when he’s here, and then I’d tend to be more stressed when he left because I didn’t do what I needed to do. So this weekend, I said, “We can watch the movie together, but I need to clean my room and organize my paperwork while we do it.” So it was fine. He understands I need to get things done, and that I would be stressed if I didn’t. So I got that done, and we spent time together. (TSMM1, 339)

Open, honest communication and I-statements are key to relational autonomy.

This same couple discussed how they learned to arrange their phone conversations while in the LDR so that they were more helpful for them as individuals, and thus, as a couple.

4F: After I’m driving home from class, I have kind of an hour-long drive, at night, so it’s like 9:30, and it’s after some of these really hard classes—

4M: After classes and you don’t wanna talk—

4F: And I don’t wanna talk! And that’s okay. [4M: Yup!] And even if we start talking, and I realize that I’m just not in a condition to say anything helpful, I can say that. And say, like I can just don’t have anything good to say right now. I don’t want to talk to you just for the sake of talking. If I’m gonna say hurtful things, say things I don’t mean, or just wanna cry the whole time—

4M: I think that we both…at the beginning, we both just said, “Well, we need to talk because we need to talk.” [4F: Yeah.] But now we realize, well, there are some times that we really would like to talk, but it’s probably not the best.

4F: It’s not about the quantity anymore, it’s more all about quality. (TSMM1, 647)

Summary of Differentiation

Differentiation is a work-in-progress for all people, and these participants were no exception. Partners and couples spoke of thoughts and feelings in the context of the LDR which were indicators of differentiation between them and their families of origin and their partners. Skills which were seen to be indicative of differentiated behavior were understanding the perspective of others, accepting these different perspectives without becoming defensive, and expressing one’s own perspective from the stance of an
I-statement. Participants also shared perceptions of family situations in the context of the LDR which challenged them to grow as individuals and partners. Growth through differentiation helped participants separate their individual thoughts, feelings, and needs from those of family members. When relational partners had this awareness of their own needs, they approached meeting needs which arose in the LDR from a relationally autonomous stance. An area where three couples noted there were relational needs to be addressed were with triangular communication patterns. This is a third foundational principle of TG Theory that was relevant to participants in this study, and will be examined next.

**TG Concept 3: Triangles**

Triangles are the basic units of human relationships in TG Theory. They may involve individuals, family subsystems, such as grandparents or children, or external factors, such as work, substance abuse, or illness. Triangles become problematic only when they block or impair direct communication between all three parties, siphon energy away from the relationship, or become something that contributes toward conflict. Relational health from a TG perspective involves the recognition of triangles and using them to help interactions be more effective.

Four of the six couples mentioned communication patterns that would be considered triangles under TG Theory, although no couple used that term to describe these relational patterns. For three of the four couples, the triangle was evident to them due to the frustration it was causing for one partner. For the couples in this study who discussed triangular communication patterns, distance interacted in triangles in two ways. First, distance highlighted existing triangles in these couples and families. Second,
the distance itself sometimes contributed to triangles between partners and family members by channeling communication through only one partner.

**Distance Highlighting Triangles Already Present**

Three couples spoke of stressful triangular communication patterns with families of origin. What makes triangles stand out for the LDR couples who identified these patterns in their families is that the distance emphasized a triangle that was already present. The LDR itself did not appear to create a new triangle, but distance added to the frustration of one or both partners.

For most participating couples, each individual communicated with their own parents and siblings rather than their partner. This is a typical pattern, but when combined with distance, it appeared to reduce even further the opportunities for partners to interact with their in-laws. This was especially apparent for the two couples who are not yet married, Couples 2 and 4. Each of these two couples discussed how distance added to this triangle in their relationships with the parents of their partner.

4M had limited communication with 4F’s family because the expense and time involved to visit them reduced opportunities for interaction. Communication with her family was typically done only by his partner. 4M stated that this communication pattern:

…can end up getting one-sided sometimes, because they end up hearing her perspective and not—not that her perspective is wrong but it can sometimes—I mean everybody’s perspective can be biased given your emotional state at that moment…..so, I mean, when she’s upset, obviously I look bad to them because I’m making their little girl upset…. (TSMM3, 151)

One-sided communication is a hallmark of triangular relational patterns. So is the accompanying frustration of the person who feels ‘out’ of the triangle.
4M: I realize at some point, [4F’s] parents have been really ticked off at me because she’s upset and she’s hurting. And…I…understand that. While at the same time, I wanna like, get on a plane and go out there and scream at them: You don’t understand. You don’t know what’s going on. You don’t see both sides of the story. (TSMM3, 235)

Family members of LDR couples, too, face challenges with being ‘out’ of a communication triangle due to the circumstances of the LDR. Couple 2 discusses how the combination of distance and commuting schedules that channels communication with the female partner’s family through 2F have impacted the perceptions of key individuals in both families.

2M: 2F’s mother, I believe, her opinion on…or her understanding of this, might just stem from what 2F tells her, or the feedback, as opposed to knowing, and having first person experience with the relationship…whereas the time we shared or spent together, whether it was at [2F’s grandmother’s] house where they used to be in the north, or their house now, her mother…would leave very early and come back rather late, so we never really—

2F: Had the time—

2M: Had the time to sit and talk together. I would say that’s the only—it’s not what she sees different—it’s that she doesn’t have, say, all the facts, let’s put it this way, because her perspective is slightly different. It’s the same on my side of the family with my step-father. (TSGG2, 240)

The experience of the unmarried couples regarding the one-sided by default communication with the family of their partners was not noted by the married couples. This raised the question of whether this communication pattern was more about where the couple is in the family life cycle than about distance. Given that these couples were not yet ‘officially’ couples in the eyes of some family members, it might be that perhaps both sides of the interaction, the partner and the partner’s family, were sensing hesitation about the relationship that might stem from this ‘not yet married’ status that is in turn complicated by distance. It could also be that the distance had limited the amount of time
both families of origin had to see the couple as a unit, and this perhaps led to them having less of a sense of the couple as a fully committed pair. It might also be that the married partners had grown accustomed to these patterns, since they had each been together for more years than the two unmarried couples. They might no longer be overtly aware these triangles existed, or these communication patterns were not in and of themselves stressful for the married couples at this point in their relational life cycle.

**Communicating with Adult Children**

While the married couples in this study did not report frustration related to one-sided communication with families of origin, one married couple with children reported challenges communicating with them. The distance in the LDR meant that they had limited communication with their children as well as their partner. Distance in the LDR highlighted triangles that existed between parents and their adult children.

A common triangle in families is that one parent becomes the link to communication between the children and the other parent. For one couple such a triangle had become very evident to them. After working effectively for many years, a triangle of the mother facilitating communication between the children and their father, a long-distance commuter for many years, had become a stressor due to changes in their family lifecycle stage and the increased distance of the current LDR. The couple discussed this triangle in their conjoint interview.

1F: We’re really good about communicating every day, but 1M’s really bad about not calling the girls or emailing them or anything. But I try to, um {Silence, about 3 seconds} relate, you know, things he’s said or what’s going on. I try to share with them and, so they still have some kind of connection. And 1M is just…so busy…so I try to keep the kids connected, you know, lots of times I’ll tell 1M hey, you need to email them, you need to call them if you haven’t talked to them in a month…. So that helps, I think that helps…keep us all connected
even though like I’m the middle man between 1M and the kids lots of times…. (TSEE1, 500)

This pattern of 1M as ‘the middle man’ was an effective way for the children to stay connected when they were younger and their father was returning to the home every weekend. But in the LDR at the time of the study, the children were adults and the distance and time differences were so great, 1M identified this triangle as a significant stressor for him.

1M: I’ll probably get myself in trouble here, again, I do it all the time, but my wife is very independent. {Puts his hand on the arm of her chair and appears to be touching her back. She leans toward him.} My youngest daughter is also, very independent….Every now and then they clash pretty hard and for me not being there, it’s very difficult. That’s the hardest part, is when my wife and any…of our daughters are having issues amongst themselves…me not being there is very difficult. At least it is for me.

R: It could be because you see it from both sides—

1M: Oh, exactly!....That’s definitely—for me, that is my number one issue, is when there’s any issues internally within our own family, that we’re not able to all truly sit down and talk about it. And not able to all be there and help each other. I—it’s very much one-sided. That’s just very difficult. (TSEE1, 343)

This pattern is one that it would be easy to pathologized, however, what is important to keep in mind is that if 1M were in an area where there was less of a time difference so that communication was more timely, or in a location that would allow him to be home more frequently to discuss family conflicts in person, this role might not create the stress for him that it does at a distance. It was the distance which highlighted this triangle and added the amount of stress that was weighing on 1M at the time of the study.

Adaptation of communication roles. With distance, triangles might adapt to schedules and other logistical issues. When triangles adapt to family changes, they
continue to be of use to the family. It’s helpful to look at how this process might unfold for an LDR couple. For example, Couple 3 found that after years of 3F ‘holding down the fort’ as a primary caregiver while 3M was on the road as a business traveler, now that he is an LDR partner, his role in verbal communication with their children has increased due to the opportunity traveling gives him for phone conversations with their children.

3M: I’ll talk a lot of times when I’m traveling back and forth to my daughters… I may talk with them once a week going back and forth, driving back and forth, I have the time, it’s all interstate, so it’s easy to call and chat and catch up on what’s—I like to find out what’s going on for the weekend, uh because our grandkids are involved in a lot of activities—sports activities so, you know, if we’re gonna go see them play on the weekends, when’re they gonna play, how’s it goin’ and that sort of thing.

3F: You probably should know that he’s a phone person and I’m not. I’m a phone-phobe, so my girls know to call me but they know he’ll call them.

(3SU1, 354)

This quote presents an example of how a couple and family might effectively adapt their communication habits to reflect their new schedule as both an LDR couple and grandparents eager to attend the sporting events of their grandchildren. It also highlights the TG concept that triangles may be helpful when they are overt and allow for open, if not always direct, communication between all parties.

**Summary of Triangles**

Distance impacted triangular communication patterns in LDR couples and families by highlighting triangles that were expected and/or already present. It’s important to note that the presence of triangles is inevitable, and that from the stance of TG Theory, triangles are problematic only when the communication process becomes covert, blocked, or stressful. The challenging triangles identified by the couples in this
study were overt and were discussed in conjoint interviews. More importantly, the male participants in this study who were experiencing frustration or concerns with one-sided communication patterns could recognize and accept the impact of these interaction patterns on their relationship, and use a differentiated stance to discuss this with their partners. Changes and adaptations to triangles, as well as other relational processes, helped create an equitable balance of effort and concessions in relationships. This is known as relational ethics, and will be discussed in the next section.

**TG Concept 4: Relational Ethics—Give and Take**

Relational ethics is the concept in TG Theory of addressing the effort and emotion that partners give to and take from relationships. This balance is unique to each relationship and cannot be evaluated by an onlooker who is not familiar with the family and social context of the relational system.

Relationships can endure a great deal of imbalance for shorter periods of time, or smaller imbalances over long periods of time. LDRs appear to be both significantly asymmetrical and to remain so over long periods of time, yet the relationships of the couples interviewed appeared to be thriving in spite of these stressors. How then do these LDR partners perceive this balance of give and take in their relationships with their families and with each other?

**Give and Take with the Family**

Relational ethics holds that each participant in a relationship must have the opportunity to give to the relationship, and to have their contributions recognized by themselves and/or others. From the outside, it appears that the commuter in the LDR is mostly taking, although their salary is an important contribution to the family. For the
non-commuting LDR partners who are away from their children and grandchildren during extended visits with the commuter, it appears they are taking time away from the younger family to spend time with their spouse. But participants in this study spoke of ways that perceived they gave back to the family through aspects of the LDR. These chances to give back to their family appeared to help offset the perceptions of the LDR couples about the apparent imbalance in the lifestyle.

Krasner and Joyce (1995) identify four ways in the TG model that individuals may give to a family relationship to balance what they take from the relationship. Three of these were apparent in the descriptions of the relationships LDR couples reported with their family of origin. They were (a) direct repayment to parents, (b) investing in the next generation’s well-being, and (c) investing in the future through contributing to society and the world (p. 40).

**Direct repayment to parents.** Instances in which participants undertook LDRs in order to allow their partner to care for elderly parents and relatives in families of origin have been identified in previous sections of this chapter. Under TG Theory, these acts are considered direct repayment for the relational responsibility incurred by virtue of their position as their parents’ child. A second way that a family member can repay their parents is symbolic, emulating them in behavior, career, or lifestyle. Again, previous mention has been made of sharing work patterns that resemble those of the family of origin, for five of the six male participants. An example of giving back to one’s parents by emulating lifestyle would be the couple identified as 1M and 1F, who were able to keep their children in proximity to their grandparents through the LDR, thus
giving their children the upbringing that they experienced and greatly valued with their own families of origin.

**Investing in the next generation.** As noted previously, four of the six couples interviewed have assisted adult children financially and/or instrumentally, with the salary of the LDR commuter giving the family resources to pass on to their children. Participants also commented as couples and as individuals that the LDR had given them non-tangible legacies to pass on, in the shape of perspectives and experiences that they are giving to the next generation. These gifts to future generations were in two areas. First, participants felt their LDR lifestyle had opened up a larger world for their children and grandchildren to explore.

R: How do you see yourself, you know, fitting into the family history with this long-distance relationship? …

3M: That’s interesting! Well, I think, you know, our daughter in [different state]…maybe wouldn’t have been so…comfortable to go that far, if she hadn’t had some of the exposure to…3F and I moving around….Now the grandkids, it’ll be interesting…how that affects the grandkids….at least one of the kids, I think, will seek out an independent relationship further away rather than being, just staying close to mom and dad. And my other daughter, her kids…it’s too early to tell how that impacts them. But I think that’s the type of impact it’s going to have, it builds a sense of a comfort level, to raise the sense of the norm, that—well, you can’t do what you want to do here, you go somewhere else to do it. (TSUU1, 168)

6F: [The grandchildren have] heard us talk about it so much, what a wonderful experience it is, and it makes them want to travel, and want to go out and explore the world….they see me as being very independent, and uh, I think that that’s a really good example to them, especially the girls. You can do it! You can do whatever you want to do! (TSBB1, 384)

This participant also commented on how her experiences overseas on extended visits with her spouse had helped her create a more tolerant family.
6F: And I just tried to explain to them how neat it is...to get to know people from all over the world. It’s made me more tolerant and therefore, my children are more tolerant of others, and my grandchildren more tolerant...I think it’s very good for the future generations to see that to broaden their horizons. (TSBB1, 410)

A second area where it was noted that the LDR allowed giving forward to the next generation was in setting examples of lasting relationships that transcended challenges.

5F: I just think that 5M isn’t perceiving maybe the effect that he’s having on his children the same way that I am. Because I think that maybe his daughter’s influenced by our relationship more than he sees.

R: What do you think? What have you seen, you think?

5F: Just that she was with her current partner, um, maybe more...forgiving, maybe more loyal, uh, regardless of obstacles. I think there’s a more stick-to-it attitude that maybe he doesn’t recognize that we’re the example of. And I think that that may even be affecting his sons to some degree, too.

R: So you see your experience of loyal and distance...playing out with them.

5F: To some extent, yes. I don’t think that that means that they want to have a long-distance relationship. But I think that they...because...of the bond being important, or the expectation that you don’t discard someone because of obstacles, I think that that possibly hit home to them.

R: And you see that moving forward in the family?

5F: Uh hmm. I do. (TSKK3, 24)

**Investing in future society.** Individuals stated that their experiences in the LDR help them help others who might be in LDRs or experiencing other relational challenges.

4F: We can tell other couples, you know, we’ve been there...help mentor other people. Be more accepting of others, be more empathetic, just in all kinds of relational difficulties, not just long-distance. (TSMM2, 297)

These ways of giving seem small, but appeared to be very satisfying to participants. They became animated and introspective when talking about these topics.
For example, the taciturn participant identified as 6M spoke at length and with much feeling when he talked about how he advised colleagues new to the LDR experience.

6M: The initial feeling when you go overseas to a new location and leave the family, the first couple of weeks, it’s just in a haze. You’re traveling, and trying to get all the information you need, getting visas done and travel documents, meeting new people, work procedures, et cetera, et cetera. Uh, after a couple of months, you get to the point where you kinda hit the wall. Everyone goes through this, families as well, and you think, “What the heck am I doin’ here? Why did I do this?” You get—there’s a tendency to get depressed. You kinda feel isolated from your family, from your home. Then you get through that period and then it’s tolera—it flattens out to the point where you kinda start enjoying your time, enjoying your work, and uh, it’s that wall that everybody hits. And…I have to advise guys that come and work in my group, and tell them that. You’ll go through that phase. (TSBB2, 355)

**Summary of giving back.** LDR participants interviewed identified three categories of ways that they give back to their family via the LDR. As was noted in an earlier section of this chapter, direct repayment to parents by providing care to them or following in family patterns of work-related travel was a way that giving back might be accomplished. Other ways that participants stated they contributed to their families were in investing in the next generation, and investing in the future by providing support for individuals and couples coping with LDRs. These ways of giving back to the family and society appeared to provide some balance in the LDR dynamics with families.

**The Family Giving: Social Support**

A less straightforward topic in the LDR research literature is how the families of LDR couples give to the individual partners and to the LDR couple. This support of the LDR couple has been conceptualized as a one-way relationship, with the family giving support and the LDR partners taking. Consideration of relational ethics, however, puts the social support that family members might give to LDR couples and/or individual
partners in the context of mutual relationships, where family members give support and are appreciated by LDR couples.

For all couples interviewed, the strongest source of social support came from immediate and extended family members. Support came primarily from adult children, parents of LDR partners, grandchildren, and adult siblings. The type and amount of support from each relational subgroup and individuals in the family varied with each couple. As with so many relational dynamics, the give and take between family members and LDR partners was complex and at times contradictory.

**Support from family members.** Participants commented on ways that their family contributed to the overall relationship within the context of the LDR. This could be emotional understanding or instrumental support.

R: What do you appreciate about your family, the extended family, and your [children] too, in relation to this whole long-distance lifestyle?

1M: Just the willingness to understand, and cope with it, and deal with it, because it is not always easy. It’s not the same as everyone else that they know. (TSEE1, 599)

5F: My parents, you know, they’re very uh, looking out for 5M in some ways….[they] make sure, you know, what do you want before you go on this road trip? Do you want a soda, do you want this? I mean, little things, you know, are just there, and then…And then my oldest step-son, let us stay in he and his wife’s home a few times when I had to do things in [City] or 5M had to be there for something, or we just didn’t think we were going to get back and forth to [5M’s Town]…. (TSKK1, 482)

Couples found that social support from their family members was something to be evaluated on an individual basis because each person in their support system might have a different view of their situation.

2M: I think, on both sides, each one has like a slightly different perspective, and it very much depends on who is…who we’re talking about…. It’s very much up
to them individually…. I’m sure there’s something different about each person and how they perceive this relationship. (TSGG2, 263)

The experiences that participants reported correlated with findings in the literature about support from the family as a whole having a dual-edge quality. Those participants who commented on family support in this study reported that they felt supported as individuals, but at times had to cope with comments from individual family members who were critical of the LDR or certain aspects of it. These comments mirrored those reported in previous literature (Bergen, 2006; Bergen et al., 2007; Sahlstein, 2000).

4F: My mom still is like, “Well, you know, he’s in [State], 4F. You know, you’re gonna have to get married and move there and have kids, and I’m never gonna see them. And you’re never gonna come home. And, you know, we don’t get to see him. We don’t really know him that well. You know, his family gets to see you all the time.” And I definitely have spent more time with his family than he has with mine. And that’s kinda rough on our relationship.

4M: Yeah.

4F: 4M doesn’t really like spending a lot of time with my family.…. 

4M: I, uh, well….Well, I like your sisters.

4F: Yeah. My sisters are all supportive.

4M: And I like your— and your dad by himself.

4F: My dad really likes 4M. (TSMM1, 433)

For another participant, spending time with her immediate female family members was an important source of support for her, but had the drawback that male family members were critical of the LDR.

6F: My stepfather, would just—he’d just sit, kinda make fun of us, (voice deepens) Well, when are you—you should be saving your money instead of going on all these trips and stuff. But he didn’t understand that the reason we are
able to travel was because of the company my husband works for, and we’re saving so much money…. (TSBB3, 89)

6F: My sister’s husband just looks at me like, “Why in the heck would you want to do that?” …He says, “You wouldn’t catch me dead going over there! You don’t know what could happen!” (TSBB3, 133)

**siblings.** Adult siblings of some of the LDR participants provided support to individual partners in a variety of ways. Individuals in four couples had support from siblings that ranged from casual support and companionship to emotional support that was very important to individual partners. It’s interesting that when discussing relationships with siblings that were supportive, the majority of participants mentioned sisters providing support, even though most had brothers.

3M: My sister has a much better understanding of what I do…at [employer] there, not just in terms of classes, but you know, what I’m working on in terms of committees, and you know, we’re more likely to talk about those things, and she’ll ask about it…. (TSUU3, 141)

6F: [My sister and I] have a great relationship. I guess we’re the only two left in our family. My parents have died and, uh, our two brothers have passed away. So my sister and I cling together. We’re just best friends. (TSBB2, 52)

5F: My sister is very supportive of me, in making sure that I have support even with the smallest things. Like I said before, the little things are important. Helping me pack, um, you know, helping me get organized. (TSKK3, 127)

4F: I feel like my sisters especially really acknowledge the hard things and kinda support me in those. Like, they’ll pray for me, and encourage me. Um, you know, and say how much they love 4M, you know, they know how much I need that support, that affirmation. That yes, you can do this. That yes, it’s a good thing. (TSMM2, 194)

Adult siblings of both genders were seen to understand aspects of the LDR lifestyle that other family members might not. This perspective was voiced by male partners who had family histories of work related travel.
6M: My brother and two sisters were raised with me and they traveled as well when my father was overseas, to the different parts—so they understand uh, that I’ve got itchy feet [chuckles], do a lot of moving around. They understand. (TSBB2, 326)

3M: The whole migration and moving, you know, an hour or two west, in generations {chuckles}…transpired, I think, out of—I think, going back to what we were talking about, is, we were…all of us kids are comfortable with—me and my siblings are comfortable moving around….(TSUU3, 51)

Two couples did not have a great deal of support from siblings, and in both couples, one or both partners were estranged from one or more siblings. Those who had lost siblings due to death or estrangement commented that having the support of siblings might be helpful, for themselves or their partner.

3M: I talk to my sisters a lot, but I—you know, one I probably talk to every month or two, the other one, once or twice a year. My older brother passed away, and my younger brother and I, we’re…estranged….But I think communication with my two sisters and my older brother for that matter, when he was alive would be, I would say…make the LDR easier. (TSUU3, 66)

6F: And I wonder sometimes how I came out of that family. I seem like an odd duck in a way. Except my brother was—could have been a lot like me if he would have lived. (TSBB3, 182)

3M: If [my siblings] were closer, in proximity, distance, and we had a closer relationship, that is to say, 3F to my sisters, that could be advantageous for her, but we don’t have that, so that’s a disadvantage. (TSUU3, 102)

**Family providing safety.** In existing literature, the concerns of male LDR partners regarding the safety of their female partners and children have been documented (Forsyth & Gramling, 1987; 1990). A successful strategy to manage these concerns identified in the studies of Forsyth & Gramling was to take comfort in the fact that extended family was close by to look after the safety and well-being of their family while they are away. The awareness of extended family providing a safety net for female partners was noted by two male participants.
2M: I appreciate that her family is close to her, so I know that if she needs something, there is somebody there. Uh, I know this can be very—it’s very material in a sense that—it all boils down to whether or not the other person is doing okay. I know that emotionally it must be difficult, because she would like to be here. But then again, I feel okay, because all her family is next to her. She has her mother, her father, her grandmother, her sister, so I—just the fact that her family is there. (TSGG1, 828)

5M: I think that in my family if something happened and 5F needs—needed help with something, my family would be right there, on the doorstep to help her. And I think that’s an important thing for me, because it makes it easier to understand and realize, you know, that I’m not, the sole person that has to, you know, do those types of things, but the family’s always there for back up. Even my kids, which I know you think are sometimes kinda flaky, [5F laughs] they would be there, because they are very caring people, and offer 5F whatever support she would need in something, whatever it would be, to the best of their ability. (TSKK1, 682)

As 5M noted, a group that stepped in to provide support for when there might be concerns about safety were the adult children of the LDR partners. This support could be checking in to see how their parents were doing emotionally or direct oversight of physical safety.

3F: My youngest daughter is the furthest away and she calls and she tries to read my mood through my emails {laughs}….So I think she worries more than she says. And my oldest daughter that lives an hour away calls pretty regular to check, so I think they do have concerns because they know I’m alone or he’s alone…. (TSUU1, 343)

The importance of family members checking in on LDR participants when they are alone in their locations was seen when put in the perspective of the couples who worried about the physical safety of one or both partners because of limited family support in the immediate physical vicinity. Three of the six couples discussed their concerns about each other’s physical safety and health while they were apart.

5F: My biggest concern is that at some point, that one of us will become um, maybe in a position like my parents are, where there’s some medical problems where we’re not self-sufficient completely…and I’m hoping, and I have faith in
God, that by the time that happens, you know, that we’ll be together somewhere, and/or have, you know, um, some way to help each other. But I think that’s my biggest concern. And 5M is facing some medical issues now, which at one point caused him to go to the hospital and have surgery, so…that could reoccur. And so that makes me nervous. (TSKK1, 412)

3M: 3F and I have been very fortunate, that our health has been good. That is one of our concerns, you know [if] 3F broke her leg slipping on ice, or a hip or something like that, that would be a real challenge for a while until we figured out how to, you know, get that sorted out. (TSUU3, 236)

It makes sense that older couples may have concerns about health, but 2M and 2F, a couple much younger than Couples 3 and 5, shared this concern. They discussed their feelings of “helplessness” (TSGG1, 663) when faced with health and safety concerns for each other while they were apart. The lack of family support nearby for 2M added to 2F’s worries.

2F: And the fact that he’s now by himself there is very hard to think about, so I try not to think about it, like it’s not there, because it’s very disturbing. (TSGG1, 663)

The social support provided by families became yet more important when considered in the context of those who did not have the support of a family nearby. As is seen in the literature on LDRs (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Gronseth, 1959; Jackson et al., 2002; Jesswein, 1984; Rabe, 2001), one or both partners in some couples had limited social support, either due to the LDR lifestyle or family dynamics. For three male commuters, their social network focused on their partner and immediate family members, with social interactions at their locations limited to professional contact with their colleagues.

6M: I have very, very few long-distance or short-distance friends, because I’m so used to moving when I was growing up, and I didn’t make close friends because I knew that I would be moving pretty soon, and so I didn’t get deep into relationships. And uh, my good friends I can count on one hand, because I just
don’t—haven’t kept in contact with uh, people because of moving around. (TSBB2, 274)

3M: When I’m away, working, I’m pretty much there working. I have an apartment so I don’t have any—I don’t have any pets there, I don’t even have cable, so uh I work until usually around 7 or 8 in the evening, go to my apartment, settle in, get up ‘n do it the next day, I go in about 8 or 9 and stay until 7 or 8. I do that, so, there’s probably not any, maybe, about once a year, I’ve had some sort of social interaction with an individual, one of my colleagues. (TSUU1, 155)

R: Are there other individuals that are important to your family, that may not be necessarily relatives?

1M: [Silence, about 3 seconds] Not really, not that I can think of…mainly just family is all that we really—well is all that I really [turns to 1F] deal with….

Together [they look at each other] we don’t have too many mutual friends.

1F: [points to 1M] He’s always working—

1M: I’m always working—

1F: Or gone!

1M: Or away. (TSEE1, 150)

Two female participants commented that they did not have an extensive social support system in their current location, and noted that they were on their own when their partner was not there. One of these women noted that her partner was embedded in his social support system, in contrast to her. In keeping with the literature, she noted that due to the LDR, she did not have the social support network of community services and professionals (Gerstel, 1977), such as medical care providers (Jackson et al., 2002; Jesswein, 1984), that her partner does.

4F: Bringing in the family piece, 4M is with his family. He’s in his hometown where he grew up. He knows the area, he has a dentist and a doctor and all of that’s right there. [4M: Yeah.] You know, and I’m here, by choice! I mean, I’m happy here. But I’m here alone. I mean, I have friends, I have a support system
for me, I’m not isolated, but I definitely don’t have the support system that he has. (TSMM1, 367)

Although participants talked about how they valued family support when they had it, participants commented that they did not share with their families the negative times and the sadness that they experienced being apart from their partner and/or immediate families.

6M: What things haven’t I told [my family]?... {Silence, about 10 seconds} About being on my own, I guess that’d be the only thing I haven’t talked about. I manage pretty well on my own, I don’t uh need a lot of support…There’s time when you live overseas and you’ve got down times as well as up times. When I have a down time, when I feel it coming on I get up and do something, and it passes pretty quickly. I haven’t really expressed that to the family. (TSBB2, 299)

R: What information might you have not told to your family about dealing with this long-distance relationship you’ve been doing for so long?

1M: Oh, probably just how difficult it is…from time to time. Uh, I really get lonely and depressed every now and then, and really wanna be home…. (TSEE3, 92)

6F: I don’t tell them how lonely I am. I don’t tell them that I cry. Once in a while, I’ll break down with my daughter…when I’ve just had a really bad day and uh, I’m just having trouble dealing with it. {Silence, about 4 seconds.} I haven’t told them how hard it is to uh, do everything by myself. And not have 6M there to help me make decisions and to help me deal with them. (TSBB3, 185)

A reason why LDR partners may not speak with their family members about their sadness and other feelings which are generally considered negative may be because commenting about these emotions and the LDR situation itself might make the LDR partner feel worse.

3F: With our girls…they used to keep asking, “How do you feel about it?” and I didn’t want to talk about it because I didn’t want to focus on it so I don’t talk to them much about it either, I guess. (TSUU1, 395)
This comment of concerned family members asking questions about the LDR which may not be welcomed by LDR participants could set the stage in some families for what relational therapists will recognize as a potential pursuit/withdrawal cycle. From a systemic perspective, when one relational partner withholds information and the other partner senses this, the partner who seeks the information will ask questions out of concern and anxiety for the second person. These questions create anxiety for the partner who prefers to not speak about the issue.

This anxiety could be seen in 2M’s comments about responding to family questions about the LDR. He recommended that parents and other family members inquire about how things might be going in the LDR regularly, but not daily.

2M: Ask from time to time, but not like every other day—how’s she doing? How’s she doing? I don’t know! It’s 6 pm here, it’s 1 am there! I have no idea how she is! At times it can be bothersome, because they really want to know… (TSGG1, 421)

His partner also commented that it was more helpful for members in the social support network to ask fewer questions about the LDR, because this couple faced many unknowns. Awareness of these unknowns was anxiety-provoking for her.

2F: [My friend was] giving a little bit of advice on how to deal with the time difference and communication and things like that. And so she showed a lot of support. And actually then didn’t end up asking too many questions, which I really appreciated from her part. Because questions of when is this going to end, what are you going to do, when you don’t have the answers can be a little bit troubling! (TSGG2, 86)

Aside from seeking to reduce anxiety, it could be that LDR partners do not share these negative emotions with family members at times because the bottom line for family members in supporting the LDR appeared to be that they saw the couple happy and prospering in the relationship. Distance and time constraints mean that the
immediate and extended family had limited opportunities “to see us together. They don’t get to see us happy, enjoying ourselves.” (TSMM1, 542) The importance of the family seeing the couple together and enjoying a happy, successful relationship was apparent when 2F discussed the chance to see the couple doing well together during a visit helped her family, especially her father, be more accepting of the LDR.

2F: Actually after the first visit, there was a lot of change, because um, their relationship between 2M and my whole family changed. We got a lot closer. We spent time a lot of together as a family, and he fit right in. And, uh, I think the most difficult change was with uh, my father, during that first visit. The fact that we were both so—we fit naturally together, there was no awkwardness, there was no—it was like nothing had changed, like we had never been separated. And that first separation was for 11 months, so it was quite a long one. (TSGG2, 86)

Her comments underscore the perception that it is important for the family to see the LDR couple as happy and working well together, in spite of the distance.

2F: If you’re consistent in how you interact with your family and how you interact with your partner, eventually everybody will come to realize that, this is a system that works. And that you’re actually getting support, that you are as a couple nurturing each other. And so that will help a lot. Because ultimately, like 2M said before, parents always want what’s best for their children, and they want them to be happy. So, better to show them that you truly are happy, than to try to accuse every single little item and have a fight about…how the distance makes things stressful. (TSGG2, 391)

2M: I believe that both of us are happy enough when we communicate with one another that our family sees—the members who get to see this—are glad that we are making this work for us. (TSGG1, 730)

It is interesting that the two couples who spoke of the importance of their family seeing that they are happy in the relationship are the two unmarried couples. It stands to reason that the married couples have had time to establish themselves as a successful, happy couple with their family of origin, and perhaps this reduced the importance of them showing their family that they are a successful relationship.
Married or not, the couples interviewed clearly valued their families of origin. It appears that family members simply ‘being there’ was much appreciated by the participants interviewed.

R: What do you appreciate most about your families, immediate and distant, in this relationship, this long-distance relationship?

3M: I think, you know, the fact that our daughters, to varying degrees…keep in touch regularly, I would say normally it’s at least once if not twice each week with 3F or I or both of us, and that’s very helpful and keeps us connected to what they are doing and them connected to what’s going on in our lives, our plans, and so on.

3F: Yeah, I like that they keep connected with me, they don’t let me feel like I’m out of sight out of mind, you know. They keep me involved in what’s happening in their families and so forth. (TSUU1, 516)

2F: I think, the unconditional support that we’re getting [from our families], is a major strength for us. And the ability to go to them for advice, without being judged, is comforting. (TSGG1, 688)

4M: I think my parents aren’t really…trying to tell me what to do, because they trust my judgment, so they’re not trying to butt themselves into it, more or less. And when they do give me advice it’s normally either things I haven’t thought about or just like…it’s not like saying you should or shouldn’t do this. It’s ‘here’s something to think about.’ (TSMM3, 126)

2M: I would say just be parents in the sense that let your child, or let your son or your daughter…fly by himself, into this relationship…Be supportive, but not proactive. Just be passive supportive, in the sense that, don’t go out of your way to make this relationship easier or harder, or, don’t overtly be—try to be understanding, oh, I know what you’re going through. No, you have no idea what your children are going through….You don’t have this relationship with the other person, so just stay out of it, but when you’re needed, be there….Because they will need you! We need them! Everybody, everybody—we don’t like to admit it, yes, that’s true.... They just have to be parents! It’s good for us to make a mistake, like we always do, whether it’s a big one or a small one. {2F laughs.} Just help us through! (TSGG2, 407)
Summary of Give and Take with the Family

In the interviews with these six LDR couples, ways they balanced the relational give and take with their family of origin were identified. These were direct repayment to parents, and investing in future generations and in society in general. Ways the family gave to the couple were identified as emotional and instrumental support, including providing for the safety of an LDR partner while they were in a location without their partner due to the LDR. Participants interviewed at times reported they did not tell their family members their more difficult emotions, but valued the ability of their families to support them non-judgmentally and to not dwell on the LDR situation.

Although family of origin was important for all couples interviewed, there was a sense that the relationship with their partner was their primary source of support, especially when separated. Paradoxically they need support from this partnered relationship at the same time that they are straining this relationship with the stresses of the LDR. The dynamics of how they gave while taking will be explored and discussed next.

Give and take in the couple relationship. Spouses gave to each other when they were apart in ways that helped give each other the support that they needed. These six LDR couples identified many ways in their interviews that they give back to each other even while at great distances from each other and with very limited amounts of time to communicate. Contributions were both to each other on an individual basis and toward the overall relationship. The awareness partners had of what they had given to each other appeared to help balance what seems on the surface to be inherently unbalanced relational dynamics.
**Investing in one’s life.** Krasner and Joyce (1995) identify investing in one’s life as a fourth way that individuals might give back to their family. Participants interviewed did not comment on this as a way that they gave to their families, but instead identified this as a way that they gave to each other. The LDRs gave opportunities for individual partners to develop aspects of themselves that they might not have if they had a more traditional relationship. LDRs allow individual growth for partners, and although it is not their preference, partners see this growth as ultimately contributing to the relationship.

4F: We both decided that, if we’re looking at the big picture, it’s better for us to be preparing this way. I’m getting the degree that I need. He’s getting work experience he needs and he’s saving up finances. You know, I could give up grad school, but then I wouldn’t be happy. Then I would be bitter about going there and getting a job and if he’d stay here, he wouldn’t find a job…. (TSMM1, 197)

4M: I think it’s one of those situations where we know it’s the best for both of us, individually and somewhat as a couple, because we’re both doing things that could benefit the other in the long term. (TSMM1, 359)

2M: If this [LDR] leads to a more, uh, more mature version of myself, or a more mature version of her, in order to help this relationship mature even further, that’s wonderful. It’s a hurdle that we need to go through, but this hurdle will make us, as individuals and as a couple, I think, a lot stronger. (TSGG1, 509)

Personal experiences due to being in the LDR were also viewed as opportunities for growth by participants. Travel is the most easily seen opportunity for growth in LDRs.

6F: I feel very, very lucky and blessed to have had this opportunity to uh, broaden my horizons and uh, like I said, I’m just a little country girl from [state], from a small town….I don’t know many people who’ve had the opportunity to travel and do all of this, uh, and I, uh, {silence, about 5 seconds} and I just feel really like it’s a wonderful experience. (TSBB2, 31)

**Giving to the partner.** LDRs created opportunities for partners to give to each other in ways that might not have been so apparent if they were in proximity.
6M: [The LDR]…helped build 6F into an independent person, helped her to do things she didn’t want to herself, she’s had to do it when—it’s broadened her tremendously. She came from a little town in the mountains, uh, she’s an international ex-pat now, which is a big, big thing. And uh, I think I helped in that regard. (TSBB1, 404)

1F sees the LDR as something her partner has done to give her the chance to balance responsibilities to multiple generations of her family.

1F: [The LDR] allows us to stay here where we’re at, and instead of moving around. Because the other thing is we could have…gotten up and moved, and [the LDR] allows the girls and I to stay here, and you know, I’m close to my dad…. (TSEE1, 414)

In spite of the distance, partners were still able to support each other through difficult times in meaningful ways. This interchange occurred after a participant related in the interview that she had just been through a very trying year.

2F: His patience and help has been priceless. I—he knows how much I—I’m trying to find the right word, and I can’t find it in English!

2M: Say it in [native language]. I’ll translate it. {Laughs.}

2F: {Chuckles and speaks in a different language.}

2M: You don’t owe me anything!

2F: It’s not a question of—it’s not owing, it’s {Silence, about 10 seconds} I’m thinking, thinking. I’m not finding the right word.

R: That’s okay. Sometimes, it’s too much for words, in a good way. {Silence, about 5 seconds.}

2F: It is. (TSGG1, 800)

Partners were aware that the commuter had given up a great deal due to the LDR. They knew that their partner was affected by the LDR in much the same way they themselves were.
1F: I appreciate—he really does give up a lot, too, by not being, you know, in his house, in his home, with family… and I really appreciate that. (TSEE1, 579)

6F: I don’t think he complains to me about how hard it is sometimes. Like he told me recently about the [many] days apart, how hard it was, he’d never said a word, everything’s, “Fine.”….He’s never really, he’s not a complainer. (TSBB3, 208)

Above all, the spouse shared the loneliness with them. This participant could be speaking for all when he simply said, “I think [my partner] understands it’s difficult” (TSEE3, 100).

**Giving to the relationship.** A way that partners gave to the relationship in spite of distance is to pay attention to what one participant called the “little things” both during visits and when separated. Little things may be physical care-taking, or may be less tangible, such as remembering important dates.

5F: I think one thing that’s really important is that, like 5F said, that we take care of—I mean, even menial things, like 5M had buttons that need to be sewn on, and a shirt that needed to be mended, and a sweater that needed to be—you know! {Laughs} This and that, these little things. We’re trying to take care of those things too.... (TSKK1, 349)

6F: This is really, really important: that you keep in touch, that you’re aware of what’s going on, you recognize the birthdays, the holidays, all these types of things. They need to know that…and just stay in touch. And kids remember that. Uh, and spouses do too. (TSBB3, 307)

Partners commented that they valued the extra effort the other made to communicate with them openly and regularly.

R: What do you appreciate the most about each other in relationship to this long-distance relationship?

5F: Being able to talk. I just, you know, I know that he’s going to be…telling me how things are, how he’s doing, you know, what’s going on, and just—I don’t know, I think we’re learning things about each other over the phone that maybe we wouldn’t have learned about each other in person. (TSKK1, 653)
1M: One of the things that gets us through it is every day, close to the same time, uh, basically my drive home from work is about a 20 to 30-minute drive every day, we’ll just talk the whole time, the way home, and that helps. (TSEE1, 392)

Given the tight schedules that these individuals had, which were complicated by time zone differences, it sometimes took extra effort and patience to communicate with each other and to arrange schedules to allow for the most time together as possible.

Partners greatly appreciated each other’s efforts.

2M: [The]…aspect I most appreciate from 2F, is being able to, um, not be selfish, in the sense of, oh no, I want to speak to you now, so speak to me now. She is…very understanding that I may be driving on the [freeway], and stuck in traffic, or have a police officer right next to me so I cannot answer her message…. If I’m in school, I will not take the cell phone and start texting…. I would not do that, because I think it’s disrespectful. I really appreciate her understanding. Because sometimes all I say to her is, “A plus.” Which in French means, “Later.” [typing sounds, text chat appears]: A+ And two characters? I don’t think a lot of people would take two characters very nicely on the cell phone. So I really appreciate that from her—in her. (TSGG1, 810)

4F: I really appreciate that I know I can call 4M any time, night or day. Even though he’s at work. Even if he can’t pick up right away, he’ll text me and say, “I’m in a meeting,” or “I can’t talk right now. I love you. Talk to you later.” But pretty much he picks up every time. Pretty accessible. So I know that if I needed him, he’d be there. I really appreciate that. (TSMM1, 643)

3F: I think he knows that it’s, it is important to me that he’s here as much as he can be, and I think that he does a lot to be here the maximum amount of time that he can. And, uh, it’s taken a lot of ingenuity and planning on his part to make it happen, and I really appreciate that he’s been considerate enough to make that happen. I think that’s very special. (TSUU1, 510)

Overall, communication with the spouse becomes even more important when a partner feels alone (Jesswein, 1984).

3F: We’ve only lived here 5 years and I’m not connected with friendships and stuff and that makes me more isolated and more dependent on that communication [with 3M]. (TSUU1, 138)
In this context, even short conversations with the partner that could be counted on to occur could be very valued and valuable to the relationship.

**Summary of Relational Ethics**

LDR partners identified aspects of their relationship that they gave back to each other and to their families of origin. The giving back helped balance what being away from each other and their family members might take away from the relationship. The LDR created aspects of the relationship that commuters and non-commuters alike could give to both current and future generations of the family. There was a sense in the statements of the participants that they were aware of what their partners were giving to the relationship, and were aware that their personal contributions to the relationship were valued.

Social support for LDR couples may come from family, friends, and other individuals in their social network. For all couples, their strongest source of social support came from immediate and extended family members. Support came from primarily from adult children, parents of LDR partners, grandchildren, and siblings. The type and amount of support from each relational subgroup and individuals varied for each couple.

**Discussion of TG Concepts**

The relational processes presented in this chapter are not unique to LDR couples and families. What makes these processes stand out for the participants is how distance and the pragmatic and emotional challenges that the LDR created made these relational processes more overt. Distance did not disrupt relational processes, but did create a need for LDR partners and their families of origin to adapt relational processes to
accommodate and cope with the distance. This took effort at using interrelational skills individually, with partners, and with the families.

From a systemic perspective, the LDR is not said to have ‘caused’ any relational processes, but was an important part of the context for these couples. The first part of this context was multigenerational patterns. From a TG perspective it was not surprising that there was a pattern in the family histories of some participants related to work-related travel and/or relocation. What was surprising was how many had this pattern—five of the six couples interviewed had at least one partner that had this history. This history was credited by those who shared it with helping them cope with the LDR, giving them experiences in their families of origin with remaining connected with loved ones over many miles and adjusting to new environments.

Although multigenerational patterns were expected from the view of TG Theory, what these patterns might be and how they would be manifested in the current relational dynamics were open to discovery. The strong shared theme of independence in the families of origin for those partners who did not have a history of work-related travel or LDRs in their families of origin was surprising. Although this correlated with the literature on LDR partners, who were reported to be independent (Gerstel, 1977; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Gronseth, 1959; Magnuson & Norem, 1999), and to value this independence highly (Jackson et al., 2002), it was unexpected how readily participants in this study credited this independence as a resource that came from their family of origin.

Another surprise related to the multigenerational pattern of independence was the recursive interaction between LDR partners, with the awareness of the self-sufficiency of their female partners being an important factor in helping male commuters rest
assured that their partner back home was indeed coping well with the separation. From a systemic viewpoint, the adjustment of one partner helped the adjustment of the other partner, facilitating the overall adjustment of the couple to the LDR. This appeared so simple on the surface, but it seemed to be something powerful for the couples.

Coping effectively does not mean that participants were not affected by the distance. Both commuters and the partners who remained in the home commented equally on the emotions they experienced while separated in their interviews. Contrary to the findings by Diamond et al. (2008), no difference was observed between the reported emotional experiences of the commuters in this study in comparison to the non-commuters. What was of concern from the perspective of TG Theory to the relational functioning of the LDR partners with their families of origin was that participants commented that they tended to not share these emotions with their family of origin. This could be because participants didn’t want to discuss the LDR because it created anxiety for them or because they didn’t want family members to see them unhappy. The concern from a relational perspective would be that this dynamic has the potential to create a double-bind for family members who seek to help their relative in the LDR cope with this unhappiness. If they approach the LDR partner or couple about the relationship and separation, this could create anxiety. However, if family members withdraw from the LDR partner or couples, this too, could create anxiety. Herein lays a challenge for family members of the LDR couple, who may feel that no matter what they do to help, it may be ‘wrong’. This overall dynamic was surprising, because during analysis of the transcripts, the researcher began to realize that these participants were fairly adept at using relational autonomy and negotiating issues related to support and emotional
expression with their partners, although often done with much trial and error. This same sense of negotiation was not seen in the transcripts when participants spoke about their families of origin, except with Couple 4, who spoke at length about this negotiation process with each other and their families.

LDR couples and partners in this study appear to be very committed to their families of origin. Their separations had little to do with the need to create ‘distance’ in their relationships with family members and partners, as might be hypothesized by someone unfamiliar with the concepts of TG Theory. In contrast, these couples were separated as a way to balance the competing realities of socioeconomic factors with family and relational needs. Separations might look like they were due to financial reasons only, but underneath that economic need were relationally based needs which drove these decisions. Relational factors were central to the decision to take on an LDR, such as the need for steady income to support a family following the loss of a job or other unexpected financial stressors (6M, 3M, 5M, 4M), the drive to create as much job security as possible to ensure financial stability for the family (1M), to allow partners to remain in their jobs where they had seniority and security (5F, 3F), or to allow partners to gain training and/or job experience which they believed would benefit them in their future careers (2M, 2F, 4F). These decisions to be apart were made with the full awareness of the partner and other family members the couples deemed close enough to have a say in the decision. However, for all couples, their committed partnered relationship remained their immediate focus, and they created boundaries around this relationship which helped them cope with the sometimes unhelpful responses of family members to the LDR.
Couples showed many indications of what TG Theory calls differentiation. They were able to be self-sufficient yet remain connected to partners and families. It was apparent to me that these couples allowed each other to have differing viewpoints, especially in regards to relationships with each other’s family of origin. They accepted that there were different perspectives from each of them and the different families, but they also were able to come together as a couple and have a couple's perspective, without letting go of the individual perspectives. It was not one or the other. Their vision of the LDR within the family was big enough to hold an individual view for each of them and a couple’s view that encompassed two different individual perspectives. They could also accept and acknowledge the differing and sometimes not positive views of family members. This is very much what differentiation is theorized to be.

Thinking relationally, social support for these couples from the family appeared to be better conceptualized as a recursive relational process between family members and the LDR couple. The level of instrumental care the LDR partners were giving and receiving was noteworthy. Based on the researcher’s experiences along with Bergen’s 2006 findings, the researcher assumed that the support family members gave LDR couples would be along a continuum of none to a great deal. The researcher also assumed, based on personal experience, that the family members of LDR couples and partners might provide mostly emotional support for individual partners. What was not expected was how much financial and other instrumental support the participants in this study gave to and received from their families of origin. This support was given and received openly and gladly, and was vital in the effective coping of these individuals and couples.
For each couple, however, there were estrangements and sometimes cut-offs in their family histories. The purpose of this study was not to examine those aspects beyond the immediate LDR. But those who did speak of these estrangements identified this as a potential area where support for the LDR couple and/or individual partners might have been if these relationships had existed.

Overall, there was a sense of these six couples being aware of multiple ties to multiple relational systems. If one is not looking at these LDRs from a relational perspective the tugs of the family ties that are below the surface are overlooked. This would be like only seeing the tufts in a carpet, and ignoring the backing that holds them all together. But, if an ideal balance between these relational tugs is sought, it does not occur for these LDR couples.

R: So how do you balance that—uh, because you’ve got the family tugs and then the couple tugs there. How do you balance these pulls, tugs?

5M: I don’t know that there is a balance. You know, it goes up and down. Sometimes one pulls more than the other. It just depends on the time and the situation. (TSKK1, 354)

This dynamic interaction between individual and relational needs is considered by TG Theory to be simply a fact of life, the way that humans operate in relationships. In many ways, LDRs highlight the central challenge of human relationships—to be deeply connected in meaningful emotional relationships while maintaining an autonomous self.

Summary of TG Concepts

For the six couples interviewed, TG concepts identified in the phenomenological analysis of their transcripts were multigenerational patterns in work-related travel/relocations for at least one partner in five of the six couples. A strong pattern of
independence gained in the family of origin was credited with helping the adjustment of partners to the LDR. This adjustment helped their partners cope with the LDR.

Individuals in LDRs were very committed to their families of origin, giving and receiving instrumental and emotional support in a recursive cycle. Triangular communication patterns were identified by some participants as stressful for them due to distance, which complicated communication for unmarried participants in the study with the families of their partners. Differentiation was noted in how individuals used I-statements and accepted the different and sometimes unfavorable perceptions of family members regarding aspects of the LDR. Finally, social support was more relationally framed as give and take between family members and LDR partners. This captured the recursive nature of these interactions, in which LDR partners and family members both gave to and took from their relationships through the context of the LDR. The LDR was also seen as a way to give to the family of origin.

Their decision to become LDR might have been made between them as a couple, but family factors were key parts of their decision. Whether it was to stay close to elderly parents, adult children and grandchildren, or to give stability to their own children, these couples gave up time with each other to give to other generations. This is the epitome of paying relational debts. They are fulfilling debts incurred in a way that is different than the norm, but what seemed to matter for these couples was that the relational debt was honored and repaid. But for some, there still remained the question of, “Is it worth it?”

In this chapter, the interactions with families and partners have been examined from the perspective of TG Theory, highlighting theoretical concepts identified in the
analysis of the transcripts with the six participating LDR couples. In the next section, two themes that permeated the narratives of these couples will be discussed. These themes encompass the theoretical concepts of TG Theory to become greater than the sum of the parts. First, the foundation of trust and commitment these couples had with each other will be presented, and the interaction between this trust and commitment through the LDR will be examined. Next, the theme of resilience for these couples will be discussed, with the LDR representing a way for them to move forward with relational and individual goals in spite of setbacks.
CHAPTER V
RESULTS: CORE LIVED EXPERIENCES

In this chapter, two core experiences of the six LDR couples will be presented and discussed. Two central themes of the LDR experience for these couples were identified through the phenomenological analysis process (Moustakas, 1994) described in Chapter III. Core themes were determined to be those which wove together aspects of the individual and relational processes described in Chapter IV, focused on the overall experience of the couples interviewed, and were present in the stories of all couples.

Two themes permeated the narratives of all couples. The first was a recursive relational process of strong trust and commitment between these partners prior to the LDR, which was strengthened by the relational challenges met and mastered during the LDR. The second core experience was a sense of resilience, persevering through difficulties before and during the LDR with an eye toward what the future might bring.

In this chapter, each section will open with a broad overview of the theme and then move to specific aspects of the experience. Concepts related to Transgenerational (TG) Theory (Roberto-Foreman, 2002; Roberto, 1992) will be discussed as they relate to the different facets of the LDR experience reported by study participants. Following the discussion of the two core experiences, the findings will be summarized and discussed as a whole.
Core Experience 1: Commitment and Trust in Partner and Relationship

Broadly speaking, the core experience of trust and commitment in each other as partners and individuals was established in these couples before they began their LDRs. Their solid trust of each other and commitment to the relationship were key components in the decision to undertake an LDR. Once in the LDR, trust and commitment were identified as important strengths in their continued relationships.

TG Theory postulates that trust and commitment are recursively linked (Krasner & Joyce, 1995). As trust grows, so does commitment. Commitment to the relationship then heightens trust. It appears this relational process was a central experience for these six LDR couples. This recursive interaction then provided a safe relational harbor for them when the LDR and other stressors impinged on their partnership.

A number of different aspects of trust and commitment will be discussed in this section. First, multigenerational patterns of relational commitment for these couples will be summarized. Next, the self-identified strengths of trust and commitment to the relationship and each other and the role of these strengths in the process of deciding to have an LDR will be presented. This section on the trust and commitment cycle will close with a discussion of the role this cycle played in coping with the LDR, and the importance of open and predictable communication between partners in maintaining and building mutual trust and commitment.

Rooted in Relational Commitment

TG Theory hypothesizes that a relational pattern of commitment to long-term relationships may be found over the course of generations in families (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Bowen, 1985; Fishbane,
2005; Gilbert, 1992; Roberto, 1992; Roberto-Foreman, 2002). This pattern was present in the genograms of the couples, in which only three of the twelve individuals interviewed reported their parents had been divorced. Two of these three sets of divorced parents of participants were subsequently in long-term second marriages. A third participant disclosed that the marriage of their parents was strained, but they had chosen to remain together due to their level of commitment to the relationship. This same participant disclosed a multigenerational pattern of unhappy marriages on one side of her family of origin. For one couple interviewed, the current LDR relationship was the second marriage for both partners, and they had been married to each other for over 30 years at the time of the study. Finally, both unmarried couples participating stated they have plans to marry in the future.

In addition to the patterns of committed marital relationships in the family histories of participants, some participants specifically linked these patterns of relational commitments learned in their families of origin to their own LDRs.

4F: I was just thinking that probably the reason why I’m willing to be in a long-distance relationship is because of how I was brought up. The commitment piece, like commitment over everything…and I probably wouldn’t do it, if I hadn’t been taught that….I really care about 4M, and I love him, but I don’t think that would be enough on the phone. I mean—I think, I’m really stubborn and I’m very, like, determined.

R: ….So that commitment piece for you…came from your family.

4F: Exactly. (TSMM2, 115)

R: What strengths do you find in your family of origin that are helping you right now in that long-distance relationship?

5F: Just that the core beliefs are that you care for your family! It doesn’t matter where they are, or what’s going on around you. No matter what’s going on, you are there for each other. (TSKK3, 38)
Relational Strengths of Commitment and Trust

Trust and commitment were important relational strengths for these participants. Couples commented directly on their commitment to each other and to remaining in the relationship without hesitation when faced with the prospect of an LDR. For some couples, their deep level of commitment was a significant strength in their relationship that helped them decide that their intimate partnership could endure the strains of an LDR.

R: What strengths do you think as a couple you have that helped you when you made that decision to go overseas?...

6F: Well I think that uh, the one thing because of our faith, and our beliefs and our church…that has helped us to know that we’re together. There’s not going to be a divorce. So that has made us very committed toward each other. (TSBB1, 174)

A commitment to a meaningful intimate relationship may be made by individuals, but to foster the relationship, it cannot remain in isolation. It must be a mutual commitment recognized by both partners (Krasner & Joyce, 1995).

5F: 5M and I are very committed to each other. And I think recognizing that your spouse is committed to you, and recognizing that the expectation is that the commitment is solid. I think if people doubt the relationship, then it will fall apart. I think that if you don’t doubt your relationship, then you’ll be able to stay together no matter what. (TSKK3, 168)

Commitment to the relationship and partner must also be communicated to family, friends, and other members of the social network. Two couples commented on the importance of commitment as something that was crucial for not only partners but for others who are viewing the relationship from ‘the outside.’ These participants stated one of the best pieces of advice they had for LDR couples in the area of handling family dynamics related to the distance was to establish a solid commitment with your partner.
It appeared to be important that their commitment to the partner and then the relationship, including the LDR, was visible to the families of origin.

R: What advice do you have for folks in long-distance relationships when they’ve got to deal with these family dynamics, Ma and Pa, in-laws, sisters, etc.?

4M: I think first, I—you really have to pray about it and think about it, like, is this something that… I really wanna do? Do I really wanna do a long-distance relationship? And I think you need to decide that first. And not only for yourself, but to… just have a direction and just know what you wanna do. But also for the other person, so it’s not… it’s not a back-and-forth, yes I wanna do this, no I don’t wanna do it the next week. I think it helps to say, yes, we’re doing this, now we can move forward….So I would say, do that right away, and decide. I mean, it’ll take some time to decide, but to do that as soon as you can, so it’s upfront, like yes, this is something we wanna do. (TSMM3, 225)

Notice how the speaker first discusses making the commitment individually to the relationship, but then takes it to the next step by identifying the commitment as something “we” want to do. In this way, the commitment moves from the individual to the couple, which would let the family know that their relative was not in the relationship alone. A second participant also discussed making the commitment as a couple as a way to handle family dynamics around the LDR.

R: What advice do you have for handling family dynamics for couples that are in these long-distance relationships?

5M: ….You have to have the foundation, you know, of love and respect, and that you are a couple. And the times that you are apart, you have to still treat it like you are a couple. So it’s a lifetime relationship that you are in, and you have to treat it that way. And it’s going to go on forever. Till Death do us part. (TSKK2, 420)

5M further commented on the importance of this commitment to the partner and the relationship as being visible, “to the world as a whole. Because people like to bring you temptations but you have to ignore those. And actually, sometimes, you have to tell people to go away!” (TSKK2, 429). TG Theory postulates that the commitment between
partners that is visible to outside observers then strengthens the commitment between partners. This commitment fosters increased trust, which builds more commitment in a recursive cycle.

Like commitment, trust is “a bilateral bonding process” (Roberto, 1992, p. 45). built between individuals in a relationship. It is this trust and trustworthiness that allows partners to willingly give up their personal freedom and commit fully to a relationship. Trust cannot be built in isolation, because “…trustworthiness evolves from a mutuality of commitment. It also evolves from a multilateral stance…It is always a byproduct of at least two people, and can never be reduced to the psychological universe of either one of them” (Krasner & Joyce, 1995, p. 13). The words of Couple 5 showed this mutual awareness of trust as a relational strength that helped them decide they could go forward with an LDR.

R: What strengths in your relationship do you think helped you to make that decision to commute?

5F: Well, I think trust. Because…neither one of us are like you know—I mean, I jokingly say things to him…(laughs) Neither one of us is like, oh my goodness, what is that person up to?! (laughs)

5M: Yeah, we’re not the jealous types and the suspicious types.

5F: And I think you have to be—you have to be trusting. If you can’t trust the person you’re with, and you’re in a long-distance relationship where you’re not seeing that person all the time, you know. For some, there’s a problem. (TSKK1, 231)

5M: Well, I think the same thing, is the—I mean you have to have a great deal of trust. As I mentioned to 5F when we were first starting into this…we wouldn’t see each other every day all the time and there’d be some stretches where it may be for some lengths of time. Not by choice but that was just the way it was gonna work out. And so, you know, we needed to have that trust in each other, and not to, you know, have jealousies or worry about things. (TSKK1, 257)
The ability to recognize and use the relational resource of trust requires the use of autonomous self, the differentiated self that is independent yet relationally connected as discussed in Chapter IV. This autonomous self allows one to recognize relational and individual needs within the partnership, and to negotiate with one’s partner to meet these needs in ways that will not harm the relationship (Krasner & Joyce, 1995).

From the perspective of these LDR couples, the level of trust and commitment they shared allowed them the freedom within the bounds of their relationships to pursue LDRs. The trust and commitment these couples had with each other led to a collaborative decision to initiate an LDR in order to meet personal and familial goals.

**Mutuality of Choice in the LDR Decision**

For the onlooker, the decision to embark on an LDR may look one-sided. But the six couples interviewed spoke of their decision to have an LDR as a mutual decision, made with the best interests of the most vulnerable individuals in their family system in mind, and with thought to the potential consequences for all parties involved (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Partners commented that because they were already trusting and committed to each other, they were able to mutually decide they could risk an LDR.

2F: When 2M and I met, we were at a certain point in our lives when changes were happening, and we were more or less discovering ourselves as a person. And having him by my side and all the support that he gave, and all the insight that he gave, helped a lot into making me into what I am today…And so when the time came and we had to decide whether—how we were going to deal with this new—I’m not going to say bump in the road, because it’s not a bump, it’s like an adventure…the only choices we had were to try and find a way to make it happen or stop right there. And stopping right there wouldn’t have been an option that worked for either one of us….I think the faith that we have in one another made considering a long-distance relationship very easy. (TSGG1, 445)
This snapshot of the decision-making process for this couple highlights how, “choices may be dutiful or sacrificial—but for all of that are choices rather than collusion or capitulation” (Krasner & Joyce, 1995, p. 11). Couples spoke of the decision-making process as being collaborative. There was no sense of either partner being forced into the LDR decision.

3M: Well, 3F was established here [at employer], and the best position for me...was to go to [3M’s location]....It was best for her to stay here. And I need to go, at least for part of the week…. we talked about the possibility, for I would say for a couple years because we knew that I was getting [credential] and we knew that I would have to go where I could find a good position….So we knew that that would be, could be almost anywhere. And that it would be unlikely—nice but unlikely—that it would be in the immediate area. I would probably end up somewhere...further away, and have to travel and do this for a while.... (TSUU1, 90)

4F: We were in school together at [college] and then I graduated a year before he did. So I stayed in the area and worked full-time for a year before I went to grad school. And he was planning to stay in the area and also go to grad school when he was done. Then, somewhere along the line, the plans changed. I was accepted to [school], ended up staying here, and he couldn’t find a job here. So, he went back home to save money {4M nods and 4F chuckles} and I started school here. And so we both decided that I needed to be here….I looked in [4M’s location]. I looked for schools. I looked at programs. I interviewed at jobs. It’s—just nothing was the right fit. I felt that I just needed to be here, and he couldn’t find a job here and be employed. {4F chuckles} And so we just decided that to meet our goal that this is just the way it has to be. (TSMM1, 185)

6F: …it’s a little hard, but you know, we made this choice. {Silence, about 3 seconds}. It’s our choice, it happened this way. We could be sitting home and without a job like everybody else. {Laughs} (TSBB3, 337)

If the couples did feel pressured in the choice, the pressure was in the larger context around the couple, such as economic conditions, the needs of family members, or limited locations for programs of study. The pressure to initiate the LDR did not appear to come from partners.
1M: We just always—I always felt—we’ve said it a hundred times, it’s making my position very secure. Not near as many people would be willing to do what I do. And that gives me a lot of job security, which is something that’s very important I think to both of us.

1F: Well yeah, especially now, with the way [1M’s] industry is and everything.

1M: You say ‘now’ but we’ve said that same thing for the last 10 years—

1F: We have, we have—

1M: It’s our lives.

1F: Sometimes, when you know this may be your only option, it’s a lot easier to look at when you think—I don’t want to say our only option, but better option. That this is his option to travel and be away. We still, I think, being able to have close connections, you know, um, communication, that’s a better option than…having to move…. And you know what? And so, when you look at these are the options, you know, which is the better of the two, it isn’t stress, it doesn’t make it hard, I don’t think. {1M is nodding.} We just try to make it the best of what it is. (TSEE1, 242)

The context of trust these couples had also allowed the partner who might be ‘left behind’ to understand that the decision of the commuter to go to a different location for work was not a rejection of the partner. This may occur even when the LDR is based on a decision that is more individually made by one partner, as happened with 5M and 5F.

5M: Before we got married, I told 5F—we were living in [5F City] and I’d been there at that point in time 9 years, and I told her that I didn’t want to live in [5F City] anymore, because it was too big and nasty....So, my plan was to get out of [5F City] at some point, and not too far in the distant future. So, we were trying to figure out where we might go, and we looked into maybe moving up to [state].... We investigated that but we couldn’t make the numbers work. And so kinda my second choice was moving here to [5M Town] because I liked the area. I’d been doing business here for a long time. And, so that’s how that kinda developed, coming down here. (TSSK1, 202)

The trust that the couple had in each other at the time they were making the decision allowed 5F to “differentiate a person’s limits from his or her intentions to reject” (Krasner & Joyce, p. 14). She understood her husband’s concerns, just as he
understood she would not accompany him due to her commitments to her job and caring for her family. In this context, the decision to have an LDR was not a rejection of each other’s decisions or lifestyle preferences. Because they could tap into the resources of trust and commitment they had already built as a couple meant that, for them, “‘Autonomy’ is redefined…as personal growth of goal-directed behavior when it exists side by side with trustworthiness. The trustworthiness…allows continued relating” (Roberto, 1992, p. 46). The personal goal-directed behavior which drove the LDR was exercised within the context of commitment and trust the couple had with each other.

**Trust and Commitment as a Coping Mechanism**

Trust and commitment with their partners helped ease the decision to become an LDR couple. These linked processes were also identified as resources which helped couples be at ease once they were in the LDR. For example, participants 6M and 1M both worked in industries where there are many LDRs. They commented on the “peace of mind” that the trust and commitment they had built with their partners back home helped them adjust and cope with the LDR.

6M: …just the loyalty. I never worry about it, her wandering off with somebody else. Which is a good peace of mind, a lot of guys have that worry over here. That’s never worried me at all (TSBB1, 211).

6M: Um, I think the most important thing about a long-distance relationship—I think we’ve mentioned this before, but it the most important thing, is trust. Uh, if you cannot trust your spouse, being apart becomes a nightmare, worrying all the time about what’s she doing, who she seeing, all that sort of stuff. If you have a trust like we do, it’s not a concern, I don’t even think about it. I could imagine someone that is a little bit insecure in the relationship, it would eventually worry them to death. To the point where they would go nuts. And that’s the biggest factor, I think. (TSBB2, 373)
R: What do you guys appreciate the most about that partner in this long-distance process?

1M: Oh, probably what I appreciate the most is the level of trust that we have had to develop and maintain over the years. Uh, to maintain some kind of sanity and normal relationship, I think without the trust and the communication there’s no way that we could’ve worked the way we did for so many years. You know, I’ve known lots of other guys that have done similar type work, and very few of them ever stay married, and most of them have money trouble.

1F: But I think trust too, which we never have an issue, but some people do, as far as um, infidelity and stuff. Some people don’t, you know—1M has got a lot of…I hear from him at work and stuff some of the guys don’t trust their wife and vice versa, which I guess—

1M: Yeah, that hasn’t even come into our discussions or thought processes, even remotely.

1F: Yeah. I just don’t even—yeah, I don’t even know how to explain it, how, why I trust him. I would never even think of him having an affair, you know, or somebody on the side, or anything. And I don’t even know where to explain it, that I don’t feel that way, but maybe it’s just because we have such a good relationship. (TSEE1, 563)

Trust is built through “demonstrated reliability” (Krasner & Joyce, 1995, p. 11) over time. Couples spoke of their awareness that their partner was trustworthy in the LDR because of their actions. Trust involved more than being faithful to each other.

Partners had mutual trust that both were ‘taking care of business.’

3M: I do believe that 3F has that trust for me, in me, in that I’ll do what needs to be done down there, you know, to keep my career going, and not get distracted by too many things, that keep me on track. So that’s what I was referring to in terms of trust.

…

3F: I think I agree with trust, again being so busy, I don’t worry that he’s gonna go get silly {3M laughs} you know, like when he was younger, go out drinking and go crazy or something. So yeah, the place where he’s at now…I trust that he’s gonna be doing what he’s supposed to be doing, taking care of business and not getting crazy or something.

3M: {Laughs and takes her hand} Not getting into trouble!
3F: Not getting into trouble! {Laughs} Yeah, he’s gotta stay out of trouble! (TSUU1, 479)

1F: [1M] left for 3 months while we built the house, so I pretty much had to take care of everything, and the house being built and making all the decisions while he was gone. It was almost kinda—it’s either gonna make you or break you if you can get through that, so, I think that’s probably helped a lot. [1M: Uh hmm.] …I think…where we are at now, it’s evolved over what we’ve experienced in the past, as far as being able to get through…building a house and he wasn’t here, or doing it long distance. But I think probably one of our strengths is…I think 1M pretty much trusts me on a lot of decisions, I mean, if I have to make a decision. Because we don’t have to {Silence, about 5 seconds} you know, important decisions that he—I don’t have to ask him. I’m pretty comfortable that if I make a decision that he’s gonna be okay with it on a lot of things.

1M: I think there is a lot of trust involved there…[it] takes some additional communications too, for a lot of the, even medium decisions. I’m just relegated to I’m not there, she’s there, she has to make the decision, she does the best she can with the information she has, and we both go with it. I mean, do each of us always think the other makes the right decision? Probably not. But we both understand that the other one isn’t there all the time and these [decisions] have to be made and you go on. (TSEE1, 208)

**Testing of Trust and Commitment**

Trust and commitment grow through testing (Krasner & Joyce, 1995). In the course of any relationship, tests occur. Minor breaches of trust happen, and partners have doubts about their commitment or that of their partner. What matters is that partners repair these wounds. In this repairing, the couple builds more trust as they see the partner making efforts to repair. As they build trust, their commitment deepens. The participant known as 6F commented on her awareness of this trust and commitment issue in the beginning of the LDR.

6F: Well, uh, you know, it was really hard to let go of him that first time, because everything goes through your mind, the safety, the unknown. Because, you know, I didn’t know what it was like, over here, and that’s what’s you’re always afraid of, is the unknown. And is he gonna find somebody else? And, you know, yet he’s a loyal person, but it can happen to anybody at any time, just in the right circumstances. So that’s a concern. And I heard—I’ve had people say to me,
“How do you know he’s loyal?” And I say, “I just know.” And that was a concern. (TSBB1, 228)

6F’s comment “but it can happen to anybody at any time” seems to communicate her awareness that worries about infidelity are not necessarily part of the LDR situation, but are part of being in a committed relationship. The separation, though, brought this concern into the open for her. The trust in the relationship that 6F and 6M were able to access through their autonomous selves gave them relational resources to openly discuss this concern.

6F: I will always take time to talk to him and, I can’t help it, that’s just how I am, very honest and open and like 6M said, the trust is always there. Uh, because we made that commitment years ago, because I had had a divorce and so had he...he asks if there’s anything going on, then let’s let each other know. We had decided to do that right away, and that’s—like I said, we’re both very committed and part of that’s because we’ve both had divorces, I think, and we’re determined not to do this again… (TSBB3, 350)

The solution that 6M and 6F derived to address their worries when trust and commitment were tested through the LDR highlighted the importance of openness and honesty in the trust and commitment process. Other couples spoke of the importance of open, honest communication with each other in the LDR.

4M: I think I appreciate...just your honesty about what you’re thinking and feeling. Because—{sighs} I know her really well, especially when we’re together. If she’s talking to me and she’s in front of me, she can’t lie to me. {4F smiles.} It’s not possible. {4F’s smile widens.} But over the phone, it’s a little easier for her to be able to kinda say, “I’m okay. Nothing’s bothering me.” And just move on. But for the most part, that doesn’t happen. So that’s something I appreciate especially, verbally being 100% honest, because I can’t directly see what she’s saying on her face. (TSMM1, 647)

3F: I think that I know that I can rely on him for a straight answer most of the time, you know, nobody’s perfect, but whether he’s near or far, I think I can reach out to him, and I can—he’s still my partner, and we still can work things through together. I like the support. (TSUU1, 513)
Communication was also a way to build and maintain trust in each other by following through on scheduled conversations. This predictability helped build trust that the partner is still committed to making efforts to keep the relationship and is accountable to their partner and the relationship.

6M: I get up at 5 o’clock every morning, and I’m showered and shaved, and I sit down to eat breakfast at 6, and I’m on Skype from 6 to 6:30, talking with 6F and then 6:30 I go to work. (TSBB1, 203)

6F: He’ll call me every night at 8 pm. Well sometimes, I want to be out to the movies or something, but I really try to make it a point to be home when I know he’s gonna call. Because that’s important. That should be my priority over anything else. And once in a while when I have to miss I feel guilty about that. But I just feel so much that you’ve got to make that the priority, that relationship, you can’t just keep them out of your mind and just go on with things, because then you’ll just—you’ll grow apart. (TSBB3, 342)

Having regular times to talk also allows partners to nurture each other with verbal support, and to also reduce anxiety because they know the other one is safe.

1M: One of the things that gets us through it is every day, close to the same time, uh, basically my drive home from work is about a 20 to 30-minute drive every day, we’ll just talk the whole time, the way home, and that helps. (TSEE1, 392)

3M: We usually talk around lunch time, or after—between 5 and 6 is one of our regular times since we are both available then, and usually around lunch time.

3F: Sometimes at lunch time.

3M: Sometimes at lunch time, but almost always between 5 and 6 then a quick call later in the evening, just to let her know that everything’s all right and to say good night….

3F: That he’s in his apartment and safe. (TSUU1, 267)

These times of connection through honest communication at a distance with each other appeared to provide comfort and a sense of accountability that both partners were
still committed to the relationship. As partners sensed that both were connected and trustworthy in the partnership, they were able to maintain trust and commitment.

**Summary of Trust and Commitment with Partner**

The process of embarking on an LDR was facilitated for these couples by a strong trust and commitment in each other prior to the LDR. For these couples, trust in each other was “a palpable reality that, when known, emboldens, sustains, liberates and redeems” (Krasner & Joyce, 1995, p. 11). They were emboldened by this trust with the knowledge that they were committed to each other, and were able to use this trust to sustain their commitment as they decided to take on the LDR. Then, as they gained confidence in the LDR and met more of the challenges the LDR presented, their trust in each other grew. This fostered their continued commitment to the relationship. The relational process of the interaction between commitment and trust between them appeared to offset some the strains that distance put on their relationships.

Paradoxically, their mutual commitment and trust in each other is a significant reason these couples had faith that their relationships could survive the test of living separately in an LDR. The strains of the LDR then created conditions where the trust and commitment of these couples was further strengthened.

2F: I think one of the essential aspects that keep us going, the way we’re going on it, is the level of trust and faith that we have in each other that has, I think, exponentially grown, through the time that we’ve been apart. (TSGG1, 490)

2M: This [trust] is an aspect of our relationship and of our character, I would say, that we would not have been able to develop if we were living together, if we had spent time together. An aspect that I feel we would have been woefully unprepared in case it would happen. (TSGG1, 504)
The ability of the LDR to be a growth experience for couples and individuals contributes to the emergence of the second core experience of the narratives of these six couples, that of resilience. This will be discussed in the next section.

**Core Experience 2: Resilience**

The LDR experiences these couples related showed ways that they had overcome losses prior to the LDR, losses that had set in motion events which eventually led to the LDR. None of these couples planned on having an LDR, and they were clearly not separated because they wanted to be. As one participant commented, “Nobody likes being in a long-distance relationship!” (TSMM1, 361). Instead, they had arrived at an LDR because a series of events in their immediate relational context and their larger social context intersected in the inevitable collision identified by TG Theory (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Couples then mastered the relational challenges and general stressors of the LDR itself. Through these experiences, they emerged as stronger individuals and stronger couples. From the researcher’s perspective, their shared experiences of perseverance, hope in the future, and their appreciation of what the LDR had brought to their relationships in spite of the losses and stressors were best captured in the concept of resilience.

Facets of the resilience experience will be presented next. First will be how these couples set out on the path of an LDR as a way to cope with losses and setbacks, and their subsequent work to keep their relationship healthy at a distance. Next, their overall flexibility and their faith in the LDR as something that had bigger meaning for them as a couple will be discussed. This section will end with a discussion of the overall ways that couples reported the LDR had helped their relationships grow stronger.
Overcoming Loss or Setbacks

For five of the six couples, the LDR became a way to go on after the futures they had planned together changed unexpectedly and sometimes drastically. For three couples the LDR was a way for the primary breadwinners to work again after they had unexpectedly lost their jobs and had faced much difficulty due to economic conditions. The LDR thus offered an opportunity to recoup financially, gaining much-needed steady incomes after financial stress for these families.

3F: 3M was working in [industry] for a number of years and the company downsized. Then he had to change gears and change his educational goals…and then the whole process took a number of years. So when he got a job we were just glad he got a job. (TSUU1, 104)

5F: But my not being with him was sort of, not necessarily a planned event….And that’s because he had anticipated getting his full retirement. And I thought that I would get vested in my plan at that time…but I wasn’t vested when he found out he wasn’t going to get his full retirement. So then he was in a job transition. (TSKK1, 210)

6F: Job conditions for [6M’s] industry…were, just there wasn’t any, nonexistent almost….My husband…did different types of work, just to try and get a job…anything he could, and there was nothing. We were on the point of financial problems…and so he had to go to work. A friend of ours…he used to work with, kept telling him to come to work for this company [overseas], and, and he finally did. (TSBB1, 138)

Job losses for these primary wage earners who carried the family pattern of being in the provider role would be deep losses. Equally deep losses could be the loss of dreams experienced by the two younger couples who lost their dreams of marriage and settling down together due to economic and geopolitical realities. For all of these couples, the LDR was a way to go forward after setbacks. For them, the committed relationship they had with their partner had been vital to overcoming the obstacles and losses they had faced, because these relationships gave them resources to cope. Their
relationship was a facet of their lives over which they could exercise some control while struggling economies, poor job markets and volatile political situations continued around them. In that context, the LDR became a step forward together into a life rebuilt on an alternative path.

“**You Gotta Do What You Gotta Do**”

A factor that helped these couples rebound after losses was their sense of perseverance. The work ethic that they applied to their professional paths was also applied to their relationship and working through the LDR. Couples discussed how they took a matter-of-fact approach to facing the reality of an LDR. It was simply accepted as a situation in which, “You gotta do what you gotta do” (TSEE1, 184).

5M: The goal wasn’t to be in a long-distance relationship. It was for us to be together. It was one of those things where this is going to happen, and so you just have to accept that and work with it. (TSKK1, 377)

6F: Like I said, the financial thing, that was a big thing that just drove us, but we knew we had to do it. You just suck it up, and cowboy up, and do it. {Laughs} …You just gotta do what you have to do for your survival. (TSBB1, 235)

3F: I think we just see [the LDR] as something we need, to survive right now. [3M: Yeah.] So when there’s a need like that, we, like I said, we just go for it and do it. Ya just do what ya gotta do. (TSUU1, 280)

1F: For the most part, it’s never really been planned, and then when it was planned, it’s kinda like well, what are our options, you know? (TSEE1, 456)

Once the decision was made to start an LDR, their energy then focused on keeping their relationship healthy. For one participant, this effort was identified as working to, “…over-communicate. Call every day. Talk as long as you can” (TSEE3, 165). Two other participants spoke of their awareness of the need to work at the relationship.
5M: …we would make our very best efforts on two fronts. One was to make sure that we talked to each other on the phone every night. And then the other one was to spend as much time together as we could. (TSKK1, 261)

6F: You have to work at it. It’s a lot of work. But uh, you have to do it. If you want to keep your marriage together, that’s what you do. I’ve kept my family intact, so, just—we’ve worked really hard at it. (TSBB3, 377)

6F: Well you know what? It’s darned hard work! It isn’t all exciting. And it’s not easy at all to have a long-distance relationship. It’s not always hunky dory. And that’s what people don’t understand at all. “Oh, you’re so lucky.” Actually, you know, luck didn’t have all that much to do with it. We worked darned hard. (TSBB3, 102)

These efforts would be part of the commitment and trust cycle, paying off for the couple with an increased sense of security in the relationship when they saw each other working hard to keep the relationship healthy. This then fostered their willingness to continue the hard work needed to maintain the relationship at a distance.

**Flexibility**

Three of the four couples who had been in LDRs for longer periods of time emphasized the importance of flexibility. As has been noted, the LDR was not a planned occurrence. Flexibility was needed prior to the LDR as the couples realigned their goals and plans for the future in the light of their changed realities. One participant commented that her advice for couples facing an LDR was, “just to go into it with open minds” (TSBB3, 403). Flexibility once the LDR had started was noted by participants as an important part of staying the course.

3F: I think it’s important to know that nothing’s going to work just the way you think it should! You always have to be flexible and ready to switch gears. You can’t just—there’s no simple or straight path in life so you have to be—bend like the branch in the wind, you know, and be able to go with it. I think that’s so important. Otherwise, you get that image in your head of how it’s supposed to be and then everything’s a disappointment. (TSUU1, 531)
5M: Sometimes something else takes priority, so you have to step back and say, okay, and then what maybe you had planned, or at least in your mind you had planned… isn’t going to happen now, so you just have to say, okay, and just forget about it.

5F: Like on Thanksgiving…. there were all kinds of things going on that we never anticipated! {Laughs} So it’s always something!

5M: But that’s always something that happened. And I think that—you have to be, in my terminology—flexible….Because if you’re rigid you’re gonna, you know, break rather than bend. (TSKK1, 358)

3M: I guess that’s one piece of advice to the person who’s the commuter who’s going into these situations, you know, recognize that—don’t get me wrong, there’s good points and bad points, but the situation you might be going into might not be what you actually experience once you’ve been it for a while. Just recognizing—be prepared for unexpected events to occur. I guess that could happen on both ends, meaning, as to when you’re away and you are home. (TSUU3, 232)

The use of humor combined with flexibility was a coping strategy for a couple who usually did not have fixed times for the lengths of the LDRs or for when partners might be able to visit each other.

1F: He was gonna be there for a couple weeks. And he ended up being there for three and a half months {chuckles} before he came home. And he’d say, “Oh one more week,” before he could come home. “Just one more week before I could come home for good,” and something like that. “Oh, I’ll only be out there one more week.” And it ended up being three months. [1M: Uh hmm] But a lot of the travel isn’t planned to be long term. It ends up being longer term.

1M: Right. I agree. I’ve learned over the years that them telling me it’s gonna be a six-month assignment, uh, I know they mean it’s a year, and I tell my wife two. {R and 1F laugh.} That way I play it safe. (TSEE1, 444)

Flexibility is considered an important trait according to TG Theory for persons who are hypothesized to be more differentiated (Roberto, 1992). Flexibility allows individuals to find alternative solutions to the dilemmas that face them when original plans do not work out, as these LDR couples did. They were able to adapt to what came
their way in the LDR through continued flexibility. Their ability to realign their personal and relational goals allowed them to ‘bend’ with the disappointments and surprises they had experienced, allowing them to continue to move forward with achieving hopes and dreams through the alternate path of the LDR. A strategy that helped them be flexible was their faith that the LDR was part of the bigger picture of them as a couple, and was thus only a “hurdle” (TSGG1, 510), not an insurmountable challenge that signaled the end of their relationship.

**Faith: God and the Big Picture**

Couples interviewed discussed that they had faith the LDR was part of a bigger picture for them as partners. This concept has two parts to it. For some couples, religious faith was a core part of their lives, and they viewed the LDR as part of God’s plan for them. For other couples, they had faith that there would be a positive outcome in the LDR over the long run. These beliefs in a higher purpose helped couples remain positive and flexible in the LDR.

**Religious faith.** For three couples, their faith that this LDR was part of God’s will for them was indispensable to them in deciding to embark on an LDR. Their continued faith in God’s plan helped them continue the LDR. They trusted that God had put them on this path, therefore their task was not in fighting the LDR or worrying about it being right or wrong for them, but finding a way to work through this challenge that they had been given. An example of this was presented earlier in the comments by Couple 6 regarding how their religious faith let them know that they would not divorce and had made a commitment to the relationship and each other prior to the LDR. For this
couple and two others, their “deep faith” (TSKK1, 267) let them know that the LDR was an obstacle, but not a roadblock for their relationship.

4F: I think that’s another piece, is our faith. That we both believe that God brought us together, and He keeps bringing us together. And we can’t get away from each other! {Both smile} We’ve tried! Believe me! I’ve tried to say that it’s over! I can’t do it anymore! You know. And it never lasts. Because I don’t really mean it. I think that’s not about the relationship, it’s more about the situation. (TSMM1, 301)

Because they trusted that God had brought them together, these couples for whom religious faith was central to their lives felt they were on the right course with the LDR because “that’s where God wants you!” (TSMM1, 301) The challenge became not in deciding or reconciling oneself to the LDR, but in determining how to navigate through it.

5M: But…what 5F mentioned before, and I’m truly supportive of what she said, is you have to have great faith, not only in each other, but in our case, in God, knowing that He’s going to do the right thing, and make sure that whatever’s right for the two of us is going to happen. It may not be in the time we want, but it will happen. (TSKK1, 366)

This faith was mentioned as a coping strategy for couples faced with the decision to embark on an LDR as well as for those who were in LDRs already.

4F: I would tell them to really pray about it. And really seek, like, God’s will…because if it’s not part of His plan, it’s not going to work. (TSMM2, 301)

5F: I think that the core is the belief that—faith in God, faith in your relationship, faith in each other. I think that if you’re lacking faith, I don’t think that you can do this. (TSKK3, 174)

The big picture. For other couples, faith was represented by their belief that this LDR would enhance the future for their family and them as a couple. They envisioned the LDR as part of a long-term strategy that would pay off later. They viewed this LDR as a short-term situation that would indeed bring dividends in the future.
1M: I guess thinking back on the reason why, or how, it definitely felt like career growth opportunities by not telling them no, you didn’t want to go. I mean, if you said no, you were pretty well done, and you didn’t have a whole lot of future. (TSEE1, 188)

6F: You have to be really, um, understanding and thinking of the whole scope of things, not just concentrate on the little tiny, you know, just realize it’s a short period of our lives, and we’re in it for the long haul, so it works. It works because we make it work. (TSBB3, 373)

This faith in the larger process and a positive outcome as yet unrealized helped them find the tenacity needed to thrive in an LDR. Faith also helped them conceptualize that there would be an end to the LDR, even though only one couple had a firm end date for their current LDR at the time of the interviews.

**LDR as a Growth Experience**

Facing the challenges of the LDR and making the adaptations needed in order to remain a healthy couple was reported to have made the relationships of these couples stronger. In the context of the trust and commitment cycle postulated by TG Theory, it is reasonable that the joined efforts of the couple to have a healthy relationship at a distance would bring a sense of accomplishment. When viewed in this recursive relational process, it makes sense that a participant in an LDR could say that the LDR had been a good thing for their relationship.

Couples identified a variety of ways they felt that the LDR had resulted in relational growth for them. Communication was an area couples identified where the LDR had brought benefits to their relationship. One participant simply stated, “I think we’re learning things about each other over the phone that maybe we wouldn’t have learned about each other in person” (TSKK1, 656).
2F: Apart from not actually physically being together, every other aspect of our relationship is the same, and has evolved into being even more, or better. For instance, our communication is a lot better now that what it used to be…

R: In what ways, have you noticed?

2F: We’ve both become better at, um, expressing our both feelings and what we’re going through. And I know I’ve become a better listener. (TSGG1, 671)

4M: I think our relationship has grown because of it, in ways that wouldn’t happen if we were together [4F: Uh hmm.] in the same place.

R: How do you see—what strengths do you see, 4M?

4M: Communication. It’s the biggest one. I’m—I don’t like talking on the phone much, in particular. But, I think I’ve grown a little better at it. {Turns to 4F.} It used to be very rare for me to talk on the phone for like, an hour at a time. I did not like it. There’s some days I still don’t. {Turns to 4F and grins.}

4F: And that’s okay. (TSM1, 383)

Appreciating each other more and the time spent together was identified, too, as an important part of the LDR experience that added to the relationship.

6F: Things aren’t nearly as important now as we used to think they are, you know, when he does something to bug me, I think, “Who cares?” And especially when you don’t get to see them every single day, you appreciate everything, every minute you have with them, and the little, like I said, the little things that used to bug you, that’s just an endearment now, not anything to get worried about, and I think that really does help a lot, in a way, that we have that. (TSBB1, 431)

3M: In some ways, it strengthens our relationship because we have this trust and reliance on each other and communication. I mean there’s some positives….Monday through Friday she’s pretty busy almost all the time and I’m that way, too, when I’m working, so when we’re home we value our connected time more than when you’re—like during the summer when we’re together a lot—we both get summers off—uh, yeah, it’s not that sense of “Well, I’m glad you’re home”, and “I’m glad to be home,” you know, make the most of our time in those weekend hours we have. So that’s a positive. (TSU1, 208)

A younger, unmarried couple commented that the LDR was helping them cope with relational tasks related to autonomy and differentiation that would help them when
they were married. This relational need reflects their life cycle stage as young adults and their relational stage of being in a fairly ‘young’ relationship in comparison to other participating couples.

4F: A lot of people get married the day after graduation….They don’t work through being out of college on their own, they don’t work—worry about rent, or car payments, you know, they just say, “We’re in it together.” And then three years down the road they hate each other. Well that’s half of it, they never worked through being married. You know, we’re kinda working through all—not all of it, but some of it—before we get married. And really taken the time to figure out our own identities separate from each other. And I really don’t think I would have done if we had been in the same area. I think I would have just continued to be all relationship all everything. And that was kind of the problem why, initially, 4M didn’t want to get married. And he said we weren’t ready. And I just said, I didn’t see why, until like, until a year ago.

4M: Yeah, pretty much.

4F: When I realized, had this huge revelation that I wasn’t ready either. And it wasn’t fair I mean, to ask him to be everything for me. And I think that part’s balanced now. We have more boundaries. (TSMM1, 396)

As a counterpart to maturity for young adults, an older couple commented on how the LDR also helped them have a more mature, settled relationship.

5M: I think number one, it’s made our relationship stronger because we’ve had to work at it, and when you’re with each other constantly, I think you get lazy…. And, I think the, you know, love evolves over time, too, as we all know, and it’s a mature love that you create, I think, on a more rapid basis when you do this, whether it’s by choice or not, and so I think in the long-term relationship that you are much better with each other, and are able to do things and take care of each other on a more mature level than you would be if you were with each other constantly. (TSKK1, 573)

The benefits of the LDR for an individual and couple in the present might extend beyond them into future generations.

4F: I hope I’m kinda breaking free from generational patterns of women’s lives being ruled by men. It seems kind of funny that it would be like that, since my mom taught us to be strong women, but she demands her happiness from my dad, who doesn’t fulfill her. And my grandmother actually divorced her husband
because she wasn’t fulfilled by him either. And I know that my great-grandparents also divorced, so I think there’s a lot of unhappy relationships, and I’m really hoping that I can have a healthy one. And I think the long-distance has actually forced me to be healthy in a way I wouldn’t have if I had the option of being with 4M this whole time. (TSMM2, 231)

As with this participant, looking toward the future with realistic hope was another way that couples showed resiliency. In the way that some of the growth that couples attributed to the LDR reflected the life cycle and relational stage of participants, so do some of their perspectives on their individual and shared futures. These hopes will be presented next.

**Looking Toward the Future**

Couples commented on envisioning a future without the LDR. This was a realistic view toward what may come, not an idyllic vision that life without the LDR would be perfect. Having a realistic view of their possible post-LDR lives helped prepare them for the challenges they might face in this transition.

R: In 20 years, what are you gonna say about this time?

3M and 3F laugh….

3F: I think we’ll look back and say, I don’t know how we did it. That’s what I think, because I think you—when you can stop it, you realize how much less complicated your life can be, although {3F begins to laugh} living together all the time brings its own complications.

R: Yes it does!

3M: Yeah, yeah!

3F: {still laughing} You know, it’s not always greener on the other side! {Both laugh} (TSUU1, 283)

Retirement is a transition that due to the life cycle stage of four of the six couples becomes something to be planned for over the next few years. For most of them, there
were many unknowns, complicated by the LDR situation. For Couple 3, the decision of where they will retire may not be as straight-forward as it might have been were they not now in an LDR.

3M: Eventually, I think I mentioned, 3F and I have talked, eventually, you know...if I’m there long enough, she’ll eventually join me there, but that’s...you know, a year would be fast, two, three, five. Yeah. Someday she’ll want to retire and she won’t want to live here by herself. (TSUU3, 147)

In the above quote, it can be seen how many unknowns about retirement for this couple are encapsulated in one statement—the length of the job for 3M, the LDR, the projected date of retirement for both partners, and then the location where they might be, depending on the timing. At a point in the lifecycle where retirement plans are generally considered to be firming up, this couple still faces many unknowns.

We have seen how worries about health are a factor for some of the couples interviewed. These health concerns were also a factor for retirement planning. Faith again becomes an important coping strategy.

5F: I’m hoping, and I have faith in God, that by the time [potential health concern] happens, you know, that we’ll be together somewhere, and/or have, you know, um, some way to help each other. (TSKK1, 414)

But even for those couples who have some questions about retirement settled, there are still unknowns.

6F: But I wonder a little bit about, um, retirement. When he finally comes home, I’m wondering how that’s going to be, because we’re so used to this not seeing each other all the time, I’m wondering—I hope that we can adjust to that without any big deals, you know. He promised that he’ll keep busy and I’ll keep busy {chuckles} so we don’t just sit around, but I don’t know. When he’s home for about a week, we just sit around and really enjoy each other, but if it got to be, you know, 10 years of that, it might get kind of old. {chuckles} (TSBB3, 363)
These are normal concerns for couples making the transition to retirement, especially couples as experienced as these are at navigating stressors during times of transitions. The LDR does not add new concerns, but adds another layer to the complexity of the decision and the adjustment process to being together again. However, concerns about transitioning to being together again were not limited to the older couples facing retirement. Couple 4 was facing a transition back to being a geographically close relationship in the relatively near future. 4F contrasts her worries now about the LDR with the worries the couple had about being separated.

4F: Now, I worry about can we be together again? Like, not only, is it going to happen logistically, but if we were to live in the same place, would we even like each other anymore? {Laughs. They look at each other and 4M makes a goofy face at her.} Because we don’t know how to live near each other anymore! I have my life here, and he has his life there, and we’re connected. But it’s not the same! (TSMM1, 278)

Another couple took a different view of the future. The male partner described his hope for a future together with his partner was “the dessert” (TSGG1, 503) that came at the end of the LDR. They expressed hope that the LDR was preparing them for what they foresaw as an uncertain future in a changing world, and that they would face it as a couple stronger for the experience of being in the LDR.

2M: If down the line, let’s say, and I’m sure, and I hope we will, stay in [country] and be in and raise children in [country], what happened to us may happen to them. They may have to leave the country for a certain number of years until the situation calms down. Whether it’s her with the children, me with the children, both with the children. So, I think that this experience we’re having right now will help us for all eventualities….We don’t know what’s going to happen. So this period that we’re in is very good. And the result of it, whatever it is, is even better, at the end of this. And I think that’s what keeps me going on. This is all for the betterment of our relationship, as a couple. (TSGG1, 511)
Summary of Resilience as a Core Experience

Resilience emerged as a core experiential theme for these LDR couples through a phenomenological analysis of their interview transcripts. Couples had overcome losses of jobs and dreams which set in motion events which resulted in their LDRs. They were able to access personal and relational resources which helped them maintain a flexible outlook, continue to work to keep their relationship strong, viewed the LDR as part of a bigger picture for their relationship, and looked toward the future with realistic hope.

Discussion of Core Experiences

The six couples interviewed had relational bonds with each other that transcended the distance. Ironically, it was this very bond that they forged together that gave them the awareness that they could endure separation as an LDR couple. The LDR was seen not as the definition of their relationship. There was a sense that they conceptualized their partnership as first and foremost exactly that—a partnership. They were also a long-distance couple, but the long distance was something that came second to their central relational bond.

For these couples, the LDR was part of their overall relational history, not “its own…section in time” (TSGG1, 671). This conceptualization allowed couples to draw on the relational resources they had built prior to the LDR to help them in their current situation and into the future. While the LDR may look like a distinctly different relationship to an outside observer, there was a sense that for these couples only the outer, visible parts of their relationship had changed. They reported the core of their relationship, the trust and commitment, remained unhampered by the distance and actually continued to grow while they were in the LDR. This gave a sense that these six
couples were not just surviving the separation, but instead, were finding ways to grow and thrive as LDR couples. They were drawing on their past relational history and resources to work together in the present to build a future. This is very much what TG Theory describes as the long-term process of a family.

The resources of mutual trust and commitment were the primary resources needed by these couples to navigate the LDR. In that context, partners worked hard to foster this trust and commitment through continued accountability to each other. Ways that they were accountable were most evident in communication with each other. The regular, daily communication allowed partners to ‘be there’ for each other even at a distance, and let each other know that some part of the day was literally scheduled around the partner’s presence on the phone or at the computer. The effort and availability during these times, however limited, fostered the sense that the partner was making effort and being accountable—that is, trustworthy.

Although previous literature on LDRs had found that long-distance couples are very committed to their relationships, it was still eye-opening to me to see just how committed these six couples were to each other. They weren’t devoted to a pie-in-the-sky relational ideal. They were committed to each other because they had already successfully navigated relational and personal stressors, and both partners had proven themselves trustworthy partners in difficult circumstances. Partners continued to show themselves accountable to the partner and the relationship through the ups and downs of the LDR. They were living a mutually committed, trusting, and trustworthy relationship. They simply happened to be doing so at a distance.

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Part of the commitment these partners drew on came from having successfully navigated previous relational stressors. They have worked hard at their relationships. They have paid a price to earn the trust and commitment they share. These were not perfect relationships, but they had been made strong through tests. With each day of being honest with each other about all that goes in the LDR, they built more trust and commitment. They saw their partner putting in effort, and then they knew that this was a sign of their commitment. This increased their trust in each other, and again, the cycle continued.

There was a sense that these couples viewed the distance matter-of-factly, as simply another relational challenge that they would need to address, in the same way that couples who reside together still face relational challenges. As one participant said, LDR couples would need to learn “how to love each other regardless of circumstances….Because if it’s not long-distance, it’s going to be something else” (TSMM2, 303). The distance was not that much different from the significant stressors they had faced when they were in proximity. It was another phase in their relationship, and one that they sensed they were stronger for experiencing.

Partners also built upon a shared belief that the LDR was a short-term hardship that would bring gains in the long term. In that context, they continued to work hard at their relationships. They did not take these relationships for granted. They were committed to each other, in the past, the present, and the future. For them, that was the most important aspect of their relationship.

The LDR presented an extra aspect for these couple to consider when planning for the future. Whether it was retirement or getting married, these LDR partners worried
about how the LDR might impact their next transition. What would it be like to have to cope with a life cycle change while also adapting to being together after being apart for so long? And would they then regret the time apart? There were no easy answers for these couples, but they seemed to be aware that each transition, no matter how positive and desired, brings a new round of stressors. They seemed to know that if it isn’t the distance that is a challenge, it’s something else!

Another unexpected finding was the fact that five of the six couples had started an LDR after a significant loss. This put the decision to take the job and start an LDR in a different light, one of carrying on as providers and partners, not as a couple that made the decision solely for financial reasons. An additional surprise was the reported mutuality of these decisions to start LDRs. There was no hint of coercion or other uses of relational power, simply a difficult decision that was made together in the face of financial and familial realities. Even though the decision was definitely ‘Plan B’ it was a course of action the couple committed to as equal partners.

Along with this, there was no sense of blame from any partner toward the other. The couples seemed to be working together to meet the relational needs and challenges that the LDR brought, along with managing their ‘regular’ relational stressors that are part and parcel of a long-term committed relationship. Partners seemed to have the ability and the experience in the relationship to be able to separate out what was a relational concern and what was the LDR situation. This participant sums it up so well:

2M: It’s just…the situation that make it difficult for us to talk, or spend as much time as we would like to together. It’s not really her fault. It’s not really my fault. It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just the way things are. It’s not as easy as it could be.
(TSGG1, 646)
Summary Core Experiences

Two core experiences for the LDR couples interviewed were identified and discussed in this chapter. The first of these core experiences was the interactive processes of trust and commitment that these couples shared before and during the LDR. They reported that their trust in and commitment to each other were among a variety of factors which were strengthened as they met and mastered the challenges of the LDR, both individually and as a couple. A second core experience of resiliency was presented, seen in how the participating couples had persevered to meet and master the challenges they faced in the LDR. The LDR itself was a way that couples interviewed had forged ahead after setbacks in order to fulfill responsibilities to their families, each other, and themselves.

The final chapter of this dissertation will present the implications of findings discussed in Chapters IV and V. Topics will be considerations for therapists, limitations of this study, directions for future research, and the impact of this study on my growth as both a professional Marriage and Family Therapist and as partner in my own long-term LDR.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of long-distance relationships (LDRs) from the perspective of a systemic theory of relational functioning, Transgenerational (TG) Theory. Six LDR couples shared their experiences and perceptions of relationships with each other and their families of origin in individual and conjoint couple interviews. Interview transcripts were analyzed with phenomenological methods to determine how aspects of TG Theory were experienced by the couples, and to explore their core lived experiences. The findings regarding TG concepts were presented and discussed in Chapter IV, and the core lived experiences presented and discussed in Chapter V.

These findings will be summarized and discussed as a whole in this final chapter, and presented from the personal perspective of the researcher. Next, a critique of the methodology used and the limitations of the study will be presented. This section will be followed by implications of these findings for therapists working with LDR couples and families. The chapter will end with a discussion of how this study has impacted the researcher as a Marriage and Family Therapist and as a partner in a long-term LDR.
Discussion of Overall Findings

Two findings from this study are especially salient. The first is the deep level of commitment and trust participants had with each other. Participants reported that this trust and commitment with their partner did not diminish over distance, and in some cases, was strengthened in the LDR. The second salient finding is the flow of multigenerationally transmitted patterns in the families of origin of these couples, which they identified as giving them resources and coping skills for the LDR. Among these were a commitment to their family of origin and independence in the sense of self-sufficiency.

Commitment and Caring

The deep relational commitments of these LDR couples with each other and their families of origin interacted with situational and lifestyle stressors, such as unemployment or the need to provide physical and/or instrumental support for family members. As part of the process of moving forward and reestablishing security for their families while still remaining connected to them, these couples embarked on LDRs as the best strategy to fulfill their commitments to each other and their families of origin.

The LDR was not simply a financial decision. It was a relational decision, made collaboratively by each couple as two individuals who were equal partners in the relationship. The needs of both partners as well as those of the extended family were considered in the decision-making process. In four couples, the need to care for family members factored significantly in the decision to have an LDR.

For these four couples, caring for family members of one or both partners was approached as a simple fact that was not questioned, just as the commitment of partners
to each other was not questioned. As researcher, I can think of no instances in which the need to care for or simply be geographically close to be with family members while the spouse was away was described as a burden or a demand from the family of origin. Nor was there a sense that the commuting partner resented their partner not being with them. I was moved as participants spoke of how important it was to them to be able care for or be with family members, elderly and young alike. It was more moving in that participants didn’t seem to feel this was something that set them apart or was worthy of praise. They weren’t caring for family members or staying geographically close to them to make a point. They were doing it because this was how they believed families should be.

For the two younger couples who undertook the LDR for reasons related to academic studies for one or both partners instead of care-giving responsibilities, they too were balancing multiple commitments to each other, to family, and to building a future. These younger participants were also very glad to be able to be with family members, or were grateful for the support they gave them. There was no sense of these younger participants feeling entitled to the support their family gave them, especially in regards to housing. They appreciated very much what they were given, and those who were able to live with their families were glad to be close to them.

Being linked to these family members was important, although challenging at times, no matter the reason for the LDR or the specific circumstances of each individual couple. LDR couples and partners willingly repaid relational debts to family members by providing direct care and by investing in themselves and the relationship through the LDR. There was a sense of satisfaction in the interviews as couples spoke of how they
had mutually learned to have a healthy relationship at a distance. Couples and individuals were proud of the solid relationships they had crafted over time and miles. They were proud of how they had learned to be independent from their families and each other. Yet this self-sufficiency was not the rugged individualist stereotype that the word independence might connote. In contrast to appearances, these LDR couples were deeply connected to each other and to their families of origin. All couples spoke of the importance of the support their families gave them and how much they themselves felt they brought to the family as a result of their personal and relational growth in the LDR.

**Family Patterns Building Foundations**

The participating couples readily identified multigenerational patterns in their families of origin that they credited with helping them cope with the LDR. These patterns ran strongly through the families, especially those of self-sufficiency and commitment to both family and work. In spite of these strong relational patterns, there was a sense that most couples were in some ways apart from these family patterns, forging a new path. This new path was one that helped LDR participants feel they were giving to their family, by opening up new horizons for current and future generations and by giving to their partnered relationship.

The distance interacted with family relationships for these participants by making some relational processes more overt, such as triangles and the give-and-take between the participants and their families. Although at times family relationships were frustrating, there was also a sense that these couples did feel supported by their families. At the same time, they commented on how family members did not share their views on the LDR or their specific situation. When they discussed this in the interviews, they were
able to take the perspective of the other family members, and credit them with good intentions, such as caring about the happiness and security of the LDR couple. The ability to take these perspectives speaks toward a differentiated stance within the family of origin, which ebbs and flows with the stressors the couple and family might be facing.

The Interviews: Reflections of the Researcher

If I had to use only one word to describe the interviews, I would choose *passionate*. The interviews were full of frank discussions about the positives and negatives of the LDR and of the family histories. There were tears in some interviews, and moments for me where the awareness of the bonds these couples and families shared put a lump in my throat. But there was also much laughter! There was much humor as they discussed their families, their early struggles as LDR couples, and some of the frankly inane things that family members or other individuals have said to them about the LDR. In every interview, there was at least one extended period of laughter.

R: You know, I just have to say, one of the things I notice doing these interviews is how much humor there is every interview, we end up just belly laughing, and I think it’s just something about—

6F: Well you have to. It can be heart-wrenching and it can—and so you just have to—rather than crying about it, you just have to laugh about it. (TSBB1, 80)

It’s important to note, though, that this laughter was not at the expense of others. This humor was directed at the situation or themselves, as in this fairly typical exchange during an interview.

3M: When we first started [the LDR], the first year, we talked first thing every morning (3F: Yep! {nods}) and we’ve gotten away from that just because—

3F: It got kinda cumbersome. (3M: Yeah.) It just was, I don’t know, we weren’t as needy, I guess. We were pretty needy that first year! {all three laugh} (TSUU1, 260)
Participants were compassionate toward those who did not understand the LDR, for all the comments and reactions of these individuals may have been annoying at the time. This was what was so moving for me. Although these participants at times wanted to throw their hands up in the air in frustration with family members, they understood and accepted that these family members had their reasons for viewing the LDR as they did. It would have been so easy to blame family members for some of the relational tensions they identified in the context of the LDR, but these couples did not. Instead, participants showed remarkable insight into the perceptions of their family members and the workings of their families.

At the same time, they did not show idealized views of each other, their families, or their relationships. These partners had been through enough troubles with family and each other that they had fairly realistic views of the relationships in which they were embedded and their overall situation. This may reflect their personal and relational lifecycle stages, in which they had already developed a committed, trusting relationship prior to the LDR. This trust and commitment had been built through challenges over a significant period of time. The couples gave enough of a window into their conflicts and challenges that it was clear that ‘the honeymoon was over’ and these couples had settled down into the work of maintaining a relationship based on realistic views of each other. I believe the commitment and trust they showed to each other was that which was built because they accepted each other’s flaws and idiosyncrasies.

**Summary of Discussion of Findings**

Commitment to family and building upon relational strengths of the couples and the families of origin was credited by the participants interviewed with helping them
cope with being in an LDR. They strove to balance multiple commitments to each other, to family, and to professional paths, and drew upon resources available in the relationships they had. There was a sense of satisfaction as participants discussed their efforts to maintain and strengthen the different relationships in which they were embedded. Just like they must with their money, these long distance couples decided which relational accounts to pay into in the short-term, knowing that the payoff long-term would be to come through the LDR intact and having given the best they could to each other, themselves and their immediate and extended families.

**Critique of Methodology of This Study**

Several aspects of the methodology used will be discussed in this section. First, the use of technologically based interviews will be examined. Next, the use of genograms as a data-collection and preliminary data-analysis tool will be considered. Comments on some of the ethical considerations for therapists conducting research will conclude this section.

**Considerations About On-line Interviews**

Although setting up the interviews to be confidential on-line and the resulting recordings securely stored involved a great deal of investigation and preparation, the results were worth it. For the most part, the interviews ran smoothly. Participants were well-versed in the use of their computers, and other than the challenges faced due to poor internet connections for some participants as noted in Chapter III, the technological aspect of the study went as anticipated. The extra time and attention to detail that went into researching and setting up the interviews via Elluminate was well-spent, as I was able to answer the questions that the more computer-savvy potential participants had
about the security of the platform, and trouble-shoot the few issues that arose during the actual interviews.

Using web-based communications technology might have limited the pool of potential participants to only those who were already familiar with on-line communications. Those who volunteered for the study after hearing about it from a referral source were typically contacted by this referral source via email or social media, and were in turn contacted by me via email. The use of technology for these interviews may have meant that only those couples who had access to and were able to navigate the technological communication process were interviewed. This was a calculated risk in the study design and was acknowledged in the eligibility requirements as a factor that may shape the final participant group.

In general, the use of Elluminate provided a great advantage in that it allowed me to interview participants from all around the world. Although participants were usually together in one location for the interviews, for those who could not be together, the option to be interviewed from their separate locations was welcome. Had this not been available, at least one couple could not have participated, and for another, the data gathering process would have needed many more weeks until they could have been together again in the same location.

These technological advantages in interviewing couples who might otherwise not have been able to participate were counterbalanced by the persistent challenge in interview-based research, finding potential participants who are willing to put in the time needed for the interviews. In general, regardless of occupation or other demographic information, the time required for data gathering through interviews did eliminate a
number of couples. Technology did not appear to be a factor in this process, because the most common hurdle mentioned by those who declined to participate was lack of time to complete the interview process. Only one couple mentioned technological issues as a reason for not participating—an issue which arose after an increase in political instability in the region where one partner resided disrupted telecommunications and internet services. Overall, access to technology was not a concern for those who participated.

As always, there are things that could be improved. Because no participants used a headset or ear phones during the interviews, there was an unforeseen and persistent echo on the recordings which made significant challenges for me in transcription. The interview procedure used, too, benefitted from having multiple computers, so a researcher with only one computer might find it a challenge to transcribe the interviews from the Elluminate platform. Finally, I highly recommend having a continually live back-up link in case an interview has to be rescheduled or falls into place at the last minute. Without this back-up link, I could not have taken advantage of an opportunity to interview a couple who had a last-minute change of plans and was suddenly available during a time when the university system administrator who generated the links with Elluminate was out of the office. Due to his foresight, I had a backup link that I was able to access and use for this pair of interviews. Had this not been available, it would have been approximately 6-8 weeks before this couple could have rescheduled the interviews.

The Use of Genograms

A number of participants asked questions in the informed consent about how the information about their families would be presented in the written dissertation. I was
very careful to state in the informed consent process and again after taping started that locations and names of any family members that might be divulged during the interview would be immediately disguised. I believe that once the interviews were underway, the genogram process itself made discussing the family less threatening. The goal of the genogram was not to ‘find out what’s wrong’ but simply to get information about their perceptions of how their family works and more importantly, how they feel they have been impacted, for better or worse, by the relational patterns in their family. The participants had control over what information was divulged, and were careful as they discussed situations of family members. Participants were very aware of not using the names or locations of family members in the interviews. I took this as an indication of how much they respected their family’s privacy, and understood that these individuals hadn’t consented to be ‘in’ the study.

At times, I doubted whether the actual construction of the genogram was necessary to the data-collection process. However, participants consistently commented during the second interviews that they had been thinking about their family histories and interactions after the first interview. The genogram made a concrete link between the interviews. Participants were very interested in the discussion of the genogram at the beginning of the second interviews and immediately linked their thoughts during the time between interviews to the genogram.

The genogram summaries, although not actually used in the data analysis process, provided an excellent first step in analyzing the data. These summaries allowed me to interact fully with the taped interview while also standing ‘outside’ the data to write the summary. This was a time I could focus on listening to the interview for
content and emotional tenor and not on transcription. The genogram summary process also provided a tool to identify my questions and potential biases in preparation for the second interview. The use of overall family beliefs or patterns on the genogram as well as those for each couple began the process of the coalescing the data for each individual couple.

**Option for Individual Interviews**

An issue that I did not anticipate in the methodology was that although the individual interviews were clearly described as such in the informed consent process, for most participants, it seemed to make little difference if these interviews were done with or without the partner. Usually, couples ended up doing the individual interview within earshot of the partner due to the living situation and location of the computer in their home, or simply opted to have the partner remain present during the interview. I found that partners were very interested in what each other said, and commented at times that these items were things they had not discussed. The ensuing conversations between partners during what were originally conceptualized as individual interviews provided additional windows into the interactions of the couple. I believe, however, that the option of having an interview that could be done individually was an important option to have available for participants who might have wanted this.

As always, there are things that could be improved. Because no participants used a headset or ear phones during the interviews, there was an unforeseen and persistent echo on the recordings which made significant challenges for me in transcription. The interview procedure used, too, benefitted from having multiple computers, so a researcher with only one computer might find it a challenge to transcribe the interviews.
from the Elluminate platform. Finally, I highly recommend having a continually live back-up link in case an interview has to be rescheduled or falls into place at the last minute. Without this back-up link, I could not have taken advantage of an opportunity to interview a couple who had a last-minute change of plans and was suddenly available during a time when the university system administrator who generated the links with Elluminate was out of the office. Due to his foresight, I had a backup link that I was able to access and use for this pair of interviews. Had this not been available, it would have been approximately 6-8 weeks before this couple could have rescheduled the interviews.

As two final notes on methodology, first, I feel it is imperative for licensed mental health professionals who are conducting research to include the legal and ethical limits to confidentiality for us in the informed consent documents. No matter the subject matter or population being investigated or the professional identity of the researcher, this is a core legal and ethical responsibility of our profession. Potential participants need to know that these limits are in place when they are volunteering for a study conducted by a researcher who is also a licensed mental health practitioner. Second, those who are conducting research as MFTs and are interviewing couples or other family groupings might be well-served by including a No-Secrets Policy in the informed consent process, even if no individual interviews are planned. Opportunities for individual discussions may occur due to technological challenges for one partner who might not be able to join the interview because of internet or computer problems, or simply while waiting for the other participant(s) to arrive to in-person interviews. I feel including both of these provisions in the informed consent process is vital to allowing potential participants to
make a fully informed decision when the researcher is also a licensed mental health professional.

**Summary of Critique of Methodology**

The use of technology for interviews did not appear to limit participation in this study but may have shaped the participant pool toward those couples who were familiar with web-based communication platforms. Participants respected the privacy of their family members, which was facilitated by the genogram process focusing on family interactions, not on judging them. The genograms provided links between the interviews and appeared to be of interest to participants. Licensed therapists who are conducting research may wish to consider the use of a No-Secrets policy and discussing limits to confidentiality based on mandated reporter responsibilities in their informed consent processes.

**Limitations of This Study**

In spite of the best intentions, this study shares some of the persistent limitations of previous research into LDRs. First, the sample is 100% Caucasian and heterosexual, and the professions are all what would be considered white-collar. This could be related to the snowball sample, where the network for recruitment originated with myself as a Caucasian, white-collar researcher (Gerstel & Gross, 1982). With the majority of previous LDR studies being conducted with Caucasian couples, the question of whether this demographic group has more LDRs than other demographic groups, or if those in other racial/ethnic groups are not successfully recruited for studies on LDRs (Bercaw, 2001) remains open after this study as well. The findings of this dissertation are not generalizable to non-Caucasian couples. Although this sample was racially homogenous,
there was a wide variety of ethnicities and religious beliefs for these couples. This potentially rich source of information and diversity was not considered as part of the demographics of participants in the study design and presents a limitation of this study.

Another limitation of this study is that in the five couples where there was a distinct commuter and non-commuter, all commuters were male. How this study might have evolved given a sample with more female commuters remains open for discovery. An additional factor is that these couples tended to adhere to traditional gender roles, in spite of the fact that they were living in very non-traditional partnerships. Thus, this study may not be generalizable to LDR couples who adhere to less traditional gender roles.

Recruiting blue-collar workers for this study was not successful, again, in spite of best efforts. Contact was made with a number of potential participating couples in this job sector. However, in each case except for one, one partner did not wish to be interviewed while the other was very willing to be interviewed. (The remaining couple had a sudden change of circumstances and unexpectedly decided to end the LDR.) There appeared to be no relationship between which partner was the blue-collar worker and which one wanted to participate, with similar numbers of commuting and non-commuting blue-collar partners not wishing to be interviewed.

Another aspect of this study that also fits with previous literature is that these couples were all successful couples prior to the LDR, and were also successful in the LDR. This leads to the question of whether only successful LDR couples volunteered for this study (Driedger, 1987; Magnusen & Norem, 1999). There is no way to gauge this, as I did not question further when a potential participant stated that they or their partner did
not wish to participate. Nothing in this study shed any light on the perennial question of whether only successful LDR couples participate in research about LDRs.

The eligibility requirement that participants had spent at least one year together as a couple in the same location did limit the number of possible participants and ruled out one racially diverse same-sex couple who were very interested in participating. A second requirement that limited the number of participants was the exclusion of military couples. Both of these requirements for eligibility resulted in some passionate emails from potential participants who felt that these criteria excluded a large number of participants and did not represent the full picture of the LDR experience. These criticisms are exactly right. The selection criteria were constructed to focus this dissertation on the ‘traditional’ LDR, that is, one that was neither planned nor involuntary, and began after a couple had forged a dream that they would always live together in the same location. The focus on these ‘traditional’ LDRs limits the generalizability of these finding to other groups of LDRs.

I suspect this emphasis in the selection criteria on having been together as a geographically close couple prior to the LDR unintentionally contributed to a sample in which all couples had established a strong base of trust and commitment prior to even conceiving of an LDR. This is sheer supposition on my part, and may be worthy of testing in a future study. This leads to a discussion of directions for other studies of LDRs by future researchers, which will be presented following a discussion of implications for therapist arising from this study.
Summary of Study Limitations

This study shares the limitations of previous LDR research. The sample was 100% Caucasian and heterosexual, and composed of participants in white-collar professions. The results of this study are not generalizable to other populations of LDR couples.

Implications for Therapists

The participants in this study taught me much about being a more effective therapist with all couples and families, not just those who are coping with distance. One of the first things I learned was the importance of asking how individuals and couples feel they fit into family relational patterns and family histories. The perceptions of the two male commuters who felt that they were on a new path in their family with the LDR, in spite of family histories of work-related travel and relocation resonated very strongly with me. I assumed that they saw themselves meshing into their larger family history as seamlessly as I did. This was not the case at all! Had I not asked in the interview how they saw themselves and the LDR within their larger family context, I would have been operating on the mistaken assumption that they believed they fit very well. This emphasized to me that as therapists we must remain open to exploring how partners and individuals feel they fit within a family history. Connections that appear obvious to us may look very different to the person who is actually living in that family relational history.

Next, I believe that as therapists, we need to be aware of our own biases and assumptions about what makes a healthy relationship. We need to be open to the possibility that LDRs have the potential to be satisfying, effective relationships. As one
participant dryly commented, “Living and working there is way different from visiting” (TSEE1, 587). I think this could sum up the LDR situation. Living and working in an LDR are very different from the ‘vacation’ or ‘escape’ it may look like to an outside observer. It is vital to not equate physical distance with emotional distance.

Along this line of thinking, I believe that Stafford (2004, 2005) is correct when she notes that much research on LDRs is conducted with groups that have higher rates of relational dissolution than other groups, such as military personnel, college students and incarcerated individuals. She hypothesizes that the developmental and situational variables faced by couples in these situations may account for some of the reported higher break-up rates for LDRs in comparison to geographically close relationships. Based upon the responses of the participants in this study, I suspect they might agree with Stafford. These couples were very aware that relationships bring struggles no matter where you live in relation to your committed partner. They were also clear that the physical distance in their relationships came about because they felt they had solid foundations of trust and commitment in the relationship prior to the LDR. Thus, it’s important that therapists do not equate an LDR with a relationship that is struggling or headed for break-up.

I believe the findings of this study indicate that therapists need to be aware of the distance as a factor for these couples and then move past it to address relational issues. It would be very easy as a therapist to attribute relational challenges for LDR couples completely to the distance. This is not the case. The participants in this study recognized that relational challenges exist for all couples, LDR or not. They were very aware that when they were together again as a couple in the same location, issues would arise
between them as they continued their relationship. They did not have a romanticized view that when they reunited all would be ‘better.’ Thus, it would be shortsighted for a therapist to credit the distance between LDR partners as the major source of relational difficulty for the couple. Distance was not the defining characteristic of these relationships for the participants interviewed for this study. As such, I believe that distance should not be a defining characteristic that limits the conceptualization of LDRs, in the same way we would not limit the conceptualization of other relationships, such as blended or single-parent families, to a single descriptor.

If a therapist working with an LDR couple or family focuses mainly on the distance, they would be missing the core relational challenges that bring folks in all types of relationships to therapy—trust and commitment. Once the distance is factored in as a variable with a couple or family, I believe that it is crucial for a therapist to turn toward relational processes that apply to all couples and families: trust, commitment, giving and receiving, the balance of power in the relationship, and so forth. If these processes are not working effectively for the family or couple, distance or no distance, there will be relational struggles.

When working as a relational therapist with persons who might have LDRs in their family but not be in them themselves, it might be useful to be to clarify the give-and-take between family members so that it is overt. Family members of LDR partners may not be aware of the support that they are providing for their relatives in LDRs. LDR partners in this study, however, did recognize these things. Discussing this give-and-take would facilitate both parties recognizing and acknowledging contributions on both sides of the relationship.
Next, I feel it would be important for therapists to hear the concerns that family members might have about the LDR and help them discuss these issues in ways that would allow the family member get the information they need so they know that the LDR is working satisfactorily for their loved one. This is a process that has to be negotiated in any family when relatives have concerns about the committed relationship of another person in the family, but the distance, as it does with other relational processes, calls this process out into the open.

**Summary of Implications for Therapists**

The findings of this study highlight the need to take a broader view of LDRs as relational therapists. The perspective that LDRs can be effective relationships in spite of the distance was emphasized by the comments of participants living in LDRs. For these couples, distance was but one aspect of their relationship, but did not define it completely. Relational therapists working with family members of LDR couples could assist these clients in recognizing the contributions they make to their family members, and to communicating about the LDR in ways that do not increase anxiety for one or both parties.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study opened up a variety of directions for future researchers who want to study LDRs from a systemic perspective. First, along a more Bowenian path in TG Theory, a systemic view on what LDR partners perceive as individual growth for them in the LDR and how that might affect the overall relationship with their partner or family of origin would be beneficial. The issue of differentiation in these couples lends itself to a variety of quantitative and qualitative studies of this concept. The recursive cycle of
independence before and during the LDR, and the recursive interaction of the increased independence of female partners with the “peace of mind” of their male partners who were commuters also present some avenues of study. Examining how older LDR couples face retirement after a period of being an LDR couple would add to the literature on both LDRs and the family life cycle.

Next, for those interested in aspects of TG Theory that pertain more to Contextual Theory, I believe that the interaction between trust and commitment in LDR couples would be a challenging but worthwhile topic to examine. For example, topics such as how couples perceive trust and commitment evolve during the LDR, or the aspects of their families of origin LDR couples and/or partners perceive help them build this trust and commitment with each other would be valuable. In addition, more in-depth studies of relational ethics between individuals, family members, and couples in all different types of LDRs would present some intriguing inquiries. Relational ethics could be examined between LDR partners and their adult children, or between LDR partners who chose to remain ‘behind’ to care for family members and these family members, among many other possibilities.

The importance of this trust/commitment cycle may lend value to the practice of separating out different LDR groups in studies. This is another aspect of LDRs that would benefit from study. The group of participants selected for this study all had solid relational histories behind them as couples in the same physical location prior to becoming an LDR couple. They had thus built their relational resources of trust and commitment before testing them with an LDR. The centrality of this process for these couples was an unexpected finding, and the fact that it was found to work in similar
ways in couples who were in very different parts of the personal and relational lifecycle shed light on the importance of this process for successful navigation of an LDR. Inquiries into how trust and commitment are built in LDRs couples who did not have the opportunity to construct this foundation as a geographically close couple would be of interest.

Given the importance to participants in these studies of support from parents, siblings and adult children, this, too could be an area with many possibilities for future study. It would be valuable to explore the perceptions of family members about the LDR of a relative. I found myself thinking as I interviewed the couples that I would like very much to hear from their parents, siblings, grandchildren, and adult children to get their perspectives on the LDR. This was highlighted by the finding in this study that adult children of older LDR couples provided important types of social support to their parents. Along this path, finding out exactly what behaviors LDR partners found to be the most supportive from their family members would be worthwhile. I did get a sense, as noted in Chapter IV, that family members could sometimes be in a double-bind when giving emotional support. Finding out what specific behaviors were perceived as most helpful from family members would help MFTs sort through this issue with clients who face LDRs either as participants or as a parent or child of an LDR partner.

The interaction of career choice and LDRs might also present opportunities for future researchers. This participant opens up what could be a fascinating look into how career choices may or may not play into the decision or circumstances that lead to LDRs:

6M: I have a job where’s there’s work for me kind of all over the world…whereas my two sisters don’t have a career where they could do that. Neither does my brother. So they really don’t have the opportunity to travel.
Again, I don’t think they would have, if they did have that type of a job where they could move. They seem to be quite happy staying in one place. (TSBB2, 340)

This raises the question of how career choice and temperament interact in the decision to have an LDR. Given that all of these commuters had siblings who had been raised with the same histories of work-related travel and relocation, yet were the only ones in their families of origin who were living in LDRs, there might be some interesting avenues to explore in this topic.

Related to careers, the assertion in previous LDR literature that therapists have culturally influenced biases about LDRs has not, to my knowledge, been studied. This would be beneficial to explore in general and among practitioners in different clinical specialty areas of the mental health field.

No matter what the topic, I challenge other researchers to examine LDRs from a more systemic perspective. I think the powerful, open responses gained in these interviews shows that LDR couples and individual partners do want to discuss the interactions between themselves and their family members. It seemed participants instinctively understood the systemic focus of the genogram and the interview.

I also challenge researchers to take a larger perspective of LDRs as embedded in a global culture, and not solely a phenomenon of Western society. As a global phenomenon, LDRs merit being studied in ways that take into account the cultural environment of both partners. In fact, one participant put into words the reason why I
chose to do the dissertation in the manner I did. His words challenge us to take a larger systemic perspective on LDRs.

R: What’s important to know about this that I might not have asked? {Silence, about 7 seconds.}

2M: I’m not sure as to where you want to take your dissertation….But, uh, somewhere in there, I think it’s important…there are certain factors that affect individuals that cannot be quantified….Let’s take our example. We lived, we still live, and we will probably end up living and building a family in a country which is very unstable…and which was very unstable. These things tend to affect people differently. [2F: Yes!] If they affect people, then they affect relationships….So this sort of schools the perception of each individual as to the relationship that they have….I think people that…come from countries with conflict….I think that effects the individuals and the relationship as a whole. Because you draw a line at a certain time about material things, whether it’s something as trivial as a computer that you share together or a house that you’re going live in, you just tell yourself, oh, as long as that person is there, I’m fine with it. My life is going to be okay. It’s not going to be perfect. It’s not going to be the easiest of lives. And it’s not this dream world in which, oh, you can live on love alone. No, it’s not that. It’s that this person I am in a long-distance relationship with…I believe that I will be the most at ease with this person. (TSGG2&3, 431)

In general, a larger systemic view is indispensible in conceptualizing LDRs within the larger relational and social context in which they are embedded. When we have only an individually-oriented perspective of LDRs, we have an incomplete picture of these lived relationships. An individually-oriented perspective also fails to focus on the interactional processes and patterns between LDR partners, and misses the centrality of the relationships these couples have with their immediate and extended families. These are concepts that the LDR couples interviewed for this study understood from the inside out, because they live them every day. Ultimately it is hoped that gaining this systemic perspective of LDRs will open the door for MFTs to develop intervention strategies that will help LDR couples and families manage the challenges they confront.
together as couples and families. I hope this study has provided an entry point upon which future researchers may build.

The Researcher in the Study

There are easier and faster ways to do a dissertation, but I feel the effort expended has been worth it for me. First, I have gained a remarkable appreciation of the complexity of the interaction between trust and commitment in human relationships. I anticipated couples would be committed to each other, based upon the literature review completed for this dissertation and conversations with other LDR couples and partners over the years. But I was not anticipating how deep, how mutual, and how satisfying this commitment was for the LDR couples interviewed. Until I spoke with these couples and immersed myself in their stories, I did not fully understand how significant these processes are in the LDR experience.

Nor did I fully comprehend how trust and commitment interweave in our most important relationships. This interplay literally provided a safety net for the LDR couples in this study. I do not know that I could have truly differentiated between these concepts clinically prior to doing the analysis of these transcripts and teasing out the distinction between trust and commitment and how these processes interact in a recursive cycle. This has changed how I look at trust and commitment as a relational therapist, an educator and a supervisor of fledgling therapists. I think I have a more visceral understanding of the recursive nature of this process and will be able to access this to help clients and my trainees explore how this plays out in the situations that they face. I believe this concept is invaluable for all family relationships, not just couples. To
me, it fits as the embodiment of the attachment system in our daily activities of relationship building and maintenance.

Through this dissertation process, I also gained a deeper appreciation of the other concepts of TG Theory. It is a rare opportunity to ‘be with’ theoretical tenets so intensely for an extended period of time. This process has led me to, I believe, really internalize these principles. I not only know them cognitively, but I have a better understanding of what they look like in action within a relationship at a more intuitive level. There is no doubt in my mind after this experience of mindfully collecting and analyzing data from a relationally-focused perspective that relational, systemic practice is the way that I choose to conceptualize and work with clients. This is because I have examined these concepts from top to bottom and find they fit with the way I am in the world. I am committed to that professional path, no matter what my professional setting, role or clientele may be as I go through my career.

Finally, I gained an appreciation of my own long-term LDR. My husband and I have worked hard for about 19 years as an LDR couple. It’s not easy. But like the work expended on this dissertation, the work expended in that relationship has been worth it. Like the couples interviewed, my husband and I never intended to have an LDR, and we have only vague ideas that ‘someday’ it will end. But like them, we have a safety net of trust and commitment that stretches across the miles to unforeseen locations and unknown lengths of time, a safety net that I was not fully aware of before doing this study. We’ve been at this long enough that, like the participants in this study, we know it’s what’s best for us at this time and we will make it work for us, even though we would prefer not to be in this situation. We too lean on our families and value their
support. Like the participants in this study, there are days that we wonder if the LDR is taking away time we could be spending together. But when the safety net of trust and commitment we share is there, these thoughts, for me at least, become irrelevant. We have trust in each other and a commitment to our relationship. We have a solid grounding in our families of origin. We are most at ease with each other. Nothing else, certainly not distance, truly matters.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
After 18 years of being in a long-distance relationship, I decided to do my doctoral dissertation on LDRs!

I’m seeking long-distance couples who would be interested in participating in this study. I hope to learn about the relationships that long-distance couples have with their immediate and extended families and close family friends. I also hope to learn more about relationship patterns that happen over the generations in the families of LDR couples.

Eligible participants for this study are those couples who:

1) have been in a long-distance relationship for at least a year
2) were in the same geographic location together as a couple for at least a year prior to beginning the long-distance relationship
3) are separated due to work, school, or family commitments (non-military couples)

Participants will be interviewed two different times, once with both partners together and once individually. Interviews will take approximately 1-1.5 hours each, and will be done via web-based communication software, so partners don’t need to be in the same location for the joint interview.

This study is open to all couples in committed relationships meeting the above criteria, including unmarried couples, couples of diverse ethnicity, and LBGTQ couples. If you are interested in participating, or have questions or comments, please contact me via email at ljt7@zips.uakron.edu

Laura Tejada
PCC, LMFT, NCC, Registered Play Therapist Sup, OH Licensed School Counselor

[This study is titled: Kith, Kin, and Kilometers: A Phenomenological Study of Long-Distance Relationships from the Perspective of Transgenerational Theory and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Akron (#20110804).]
APPENDIX B

SAMPLE RECRUITMENT FLYER

Do you and your partner/spouse live in different locations because of work, school, or family responsibilities?

Couples who are currently in a long-distance relationship (LDR) are sought to participate in a research study about interaction patterns between LDR couples and their families and friends. This study will be conducted by a doctoral student who has been in an LDR for over 17 years.

Participants will be interviewed two different times, using Internet-based communication software. Interviews will focus on family interaction patterns that are helpful and not-so-helpful to LDR couples.

Please contact researcher Laura Tejada at 330-724-6197 or ljt7@zips.uakron.edu for more information about participating!

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Akron, Office of Research Services, 1-888-232-8790.
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS REFERRED VIA THIRD PARTY

Your contact information was given to me by [Referral Source]. I'm studying long-distance relationships for my doctoral dissertation. [Referral Source] said that you and your partner might be willing to participate in the study of couples in long-distance relationships and their perceptions of family relationships around the long-distance set-up. I'm in a long-distance relationship myself and come from a long line of 'corporate road warriors' which explains my interest in the topic.

Both you and your partner would be interviewed twice, once together and once separately. Interviews would each take 1.5 hours max, and would be done over the internet, with an application known as Elluminate, which provides secure video/audio chat and secure archives of the recorded sessions.

To be able to participate if interested, you and your partner would need to have been together in the same geographic location for a minimum of one year prior to starting the long-distance relationship, and have been in the long-distance arrangement for at least a year. The separation for this study cannot be due to military service, only for school, work, or family commitments.

If participating in this study might interest you or if you have any comments or questions, please let me know. I may be reached at this email or by phone at 330-724-6197.

Thank you.
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Title of Study: Kith, Kin, and Kilometers: A Qualitative Study of Long-Distance Relationships from the Perspective of Transgenerational Theory

Introduction: You and your spouse/partner are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by myself, Laura Tejada, a doctoral student in Marriage and Family Therapy in the Department of Counseling at the University of Akron. This project is supervised by Linda Perosa, Ph.D., Department of Counseling at The University of Akron.

Purpose: I hope to learn more about the relationships that couples in long-distance relationships (LDRs) have with their extended families and close friends. As a participant, you will be asked to share your perceptions in confidential interviews with me using video, voice and/or text chat over your computer. You will be asked to speak about your own long-distance relationship as well as your thoughts on how this relationship intertwines with the relationships you have with your friends and family. You will be asked about your perceptions of family history as well as current interactions.

Procedures

1. Interviews: You and your partner will be asked to complete two different interviews of 1 ½-2 hours each, the first one together and the second one individually. You will be interviewed using video, voice and/or text chat with a secure application over the Internet. If one or both partners need equipment such as a web camera or a microphone/headset to participate in these interviews, one of these items will be provided by me at no cost to you. All interviews will be recorded. There may be follow-up post-interview phone calls or emails for clarification.

2. Interviews will be transcribed using pseudonyms for all participants, family members mentioned, and locations. I will prepare a scientific report on this research for the University of Akron as part of my academic requirements that will include direct quotes and disguised identities of participants. Findings from this study may also be published for scientific purposes.
**Benefits:** Benefits to participants include:
- A better understanding of your long-distance relationship and/or your relationship with extended family members;
- A better understanding of yourself as a partner and individual in a long-distance relationship;
- Other couples in long-distance relationships may benefit from your knowledge and experiences reported in this study;
- Counselors may learn to more effectively provide counseling to long-distance couples or individuals in these relationships.
- There is also the possibility that you will receive no benefit from participating in this study.

**Risks and Discomforts:** The risks to participation are minimal, but do exist.
- In conjoint interviews, you and your partner may disagree or be uncomfortable with information discussed. If you or your partner feels distressed, please speak with me for brief assistance.
- If more assistance is needed, I may refer you and/or your partner to a mental health professional. As researcher, I will not provide therapy to any participant in accordance with legal and ethical requirements. Each couple participating will be provided a list of contact numbers and websites to locate a qualified mental health professional in their region. Assistance will be provided as needed to participants to help find a suitable therapist, if so desired.
- There is a risk that in spite of all reasonable efforts to disguise identities and locations, your partner or family members may recognize your statements or circumstances in reports or presentations of the results of this study.

**Limits to Confidentiality:** Your identity will be held confidential in this study, within legal and ethical limits. Because I am a licensed mental health provider, I am required to break confidentiality in these situations:
(a) To report to appropriate authorities known or suspected abuse or exploitation of a child, adult, or other vulnerable individual to the appropriate authorities;
(b) To report to appropriate authorities identified imminent danger to a participant or other person.

**No-Secrets Policy in Individual Interviews:** In keeping with my ethical responsibilities as a licensed relational therapist, I view the participants in this study to be the couple, not individuals. Your information will be kept confidential within the limits above and within agreed-upon anonymous use of information gathered in scholarly reports. However, because I have ethical responsibilities to both participants, to prevent conflicts of interest between myself and each partner, information disclosed in individual interviews that may in my professional judgment impact the welfare of your relationship may be shared with your partner. This will be discussed with the partner making the disclosure prior to discussing this information with the other partner. The person making
the disclosure will be encouraged to share this information with the other partner prior to me making any such disclosures.

**Right to Withdraw at Any Time:** The agreement of both you and your partner is required for this study, and consent for this will be done with each of you separately. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, even if your partner wishes to continue. If one of you chooses to stop participating, I will discuss this with both partners so that both are informed and any concerns are addressed. You may be contacted by me to verify that you do not wish to continue to participate to rule out miscommunications that might be due to technology problems, such as a disruption of Internet service or equipment malfunction. I may stop the interviews at any time if it is in the best interest of the participant(s). You may also request to take a break during the interview or to refuse to answer particular interview questions.

**Confidential Data Collection and Storage:** Interviews will be done using Elluminate, which has password protection and encryption of sessions and storage of recorded sessions. Original interview data and screen names in Elluminate will be accessible by me as researcher and the Elluminate Administrator for the University of Akron, who provides the secure links to the recording sessions and archives. For this reason, you will be directed at the time of log-in to Elluminate to identify yourself with a participant number. No other identifying information will be available to the Elluminate Administrator. Additional information regarding the security of the platforms used to interview participants in this study may be found at [www.elluminate.com](http://www.elluminate.com).

I will not disclose your participation in this study unless required by law. You are free to tell others, but doing so may compromise your confidentiality. Your signed consent forms will be kept separately from all interview information in a secure office at the University of Akron. Backup copies of transcripts of interviews will be kept in a locked storage compartment at the University of Akron. Transcribed interviews without identifying information will be accessible to the research team. Transcribed and original interviews will not be released to participants. Original interview recordings will be destroyed at the end of the dissertation process. Transcriptions will be kept in secure storage for 5 years.

**E-Mail Security:** Because links to interview sessions and other communications from the researcher will be done via email, all participants are advised to monitor their email and passwords, especially those who are sharing an account with other family members. Although links to sessions will expire in a matter of hours, and passwords are required to make contact with the researcher in the web environments, it is advised that participants close out of all sessions when interviews are done, and log out of email accounts once connected to the interview session to maintain privacy.

**Costs and Payment to Participants:** There is no cost to participate in this study. Each partner will receive a $15 gasoline card at the completion of the second interview.
Exclusion: Participants who are not living in a long-distance relationship at the time of the study, did not have a face-to-face relationship prior to beginning a commuting relationship, or who have not been in a long-distance relationship for at least a year with at least one separation/reunion experience will be excluded from this study. Partners who are separated due to military service, marital strife, or incarceration are also excluded from this study.

Contact Information:

Researcher: Laura Tejada, 330-724-6197, lj7@zips.uakron.edu

Project Supervisor: Dr. Linda Perosa at 330-972-6735

Research Participants’ Rights Officer: Ms. Sharon McWhorter, 330-972-8311

Voluntary Consent

Your signature indicates your willingness to participate in this research study.

Laura Tejada has explained all of the above information and has answered any questions I may have at this time about participation in this study. My signature below indicates that I understand the following:

- Participation in this study will include contact by phone and email with Ms. Tejada, before and after the interview, as well as participation in two interviews, one with my partner and one individually;
- Contact information for both partners will need to be provided to Ms. Tejada, and this information will be destroyed at the end of the dissertation process;
- Limits to confidentiality exist, and these have been explained to me;
- Ms. Tejada will provide no individual or couples therapy to any participant;
- Interviews will be recorded;
- Identities and locations will be disguised, but the possibility of recognition by my partner or other individuals exists despite all reasonable efforts to conceal identifying information;
- I may withdraw from this study at any time;
- Interview transcriptions and recordings will not be released to participants;
- Findings from this study will be published in scientific reports.
I voluntarily give my consent to participate in this study. I voluntarily give consent for my interviews to be recorded.

_________________________________________  ________________________________
Participant                                      Date

I, Laura Tejada, certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature of the study and participation, including risks, benefits, and limits to confidentiality that exist.

_________________________________________  ________________________________
Laura Tejada, PCC, LMFT                            Date
APPENDIX E

RESOURCES FOR COUPLES THERAPY

Although it is not anticipated that participation in this research study may be stressful for a couple, it is possible that issues may arise that you and your partner may wish to explore further. I cannot provide therapy to you in the course of this study, but may help you find a qualified couples’ therapist if you decide to do so. The resources listed below may assist you. Because the odds are that one or both of you might be in a different geographic area than the researcher, resources to find qualified couple and family therapists across the nation are listed first, followed by regional resources. If further information is needed, please contact researcher Laura Tejada at ljt7@zips.uakron.edu or 330-724-6197.

Nationwide Directories

TherapistLocator.net at http://www.therapistlocator.net/

This directory lists Clinical Members of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy [AAMFT]. Therapists in this directory have completed a minimum of a Master’s degree in couples and family therapy and have clinical experience in the field. Listings are provided by state, zip code, or name.

Psychologist Locator at http://locator.apa.org/

This directory is located on the website of the American Psychological Association. You may select a search specifically for a psychologist in your area who works with couple/marital issues. Listings are provided by geographic region, name, and/or areas of specialization.

Regional Listings

The local Yellow Pages provides a listing of counselors in a local area, and often have weblinks as well. Search under the headings of Counseling Servs, Counselors Licensed Professional, Marriage, Family, Child & Individual Counselors, and/or Pastoral Counseling. Therapists who are licensed as a Marriage/Couples and Family Therapist usually have credentials with the letters
“MFT”. Psychologists who have been trained to work with couples/families are designated as “Family Psychologists.”

Local or Face-to-Face Referrals

Local clergy and medical professionals often have a list of referral sources for couples and family counseling. Clergy members may themselves be qualified couples therapists.
APPENDIX F
SECURITY PROCEDURES FOR Elluminate

Security features of Elluminate and specific steps I took as researcher to set up interviews will be described in this appendix. Users of Elluminate must grant permission for the program to be used on their computer during the set-up process. Elluminate processes are then protected by passwords for participants and myself as moderator of each Elluminate session used for an interview. Passwords were unique to me as researcher, and were required each time I enter the protected area of the website for an Elluminate session. According to documentation provided by technical support professionals for Elluminate, these passwords are encrypted at multiple levels (Breana, Elluminate Technical Support, personal communication 19 Oct 2010).

Access to Elluminate sessions or ‘rooms’ for interviews was controlled by the university’s Elluminate administrator and the researcher. First, I requested an Elluminate session from the administrator for the time pre-arranged with participants. The Elluminate administrator created two separate links to this specific room, both of which were one-use only and valid only for a predetermined length of time, in this case, a maximum of 4.5 hours per each interview session. One link was accessible only by me as researcher and moderator of the interview session. The second, separate link was emailed by me to participants prior to the interview. At the prearranged time,
participants and myself accessed the session by logging into our email accounts and locating the link to Elluminate. A back-up permanent link to an Elluminate interview room was maintained in case of technical failure of the designated link or in case the interviews scheduled did not allow enough time for the Elluminate administrator to set up a link. This back-up link was used for one couple who scheduled an interview very suddenly due to unforeseen events.

Once each interview was complete, recordings were accessed through a second link that the Elluminate administrator provides to me after the meeting room expired. This email link was not available to participants (A. Bonecutter, personal communication, 12 Oct 2010). My passwords for both Elluminate and my email were required to access interview recordings (Breana, Elluminate Technical Support, personal communication, 19 Oct 2010). Given the presence of so many links in my email account, the password to my email was changed regularly from the time I begin collecting data until the data collection process ended. At no time would the Elluminate administrator have access to my passwords or the passwords and email accounts of the participants.

To ensure that only invited parties logged in to the interview room, a total of three individuals were allowed in the Elluminate session, myself and both partners. The participants could withdraw at any time (AAMFT, 2001) by closing the Elluminate window (Elluminate, 2010). In the event that a participant did not log out of the session at the end of the interview, leaving the link open until it expires, I as moderator was able to close them out of the session, thus closing the link (A. Bonecutter, personal communication, 21 October 2010).
The Elluminate administrator at the university was be involved in the research process only to the extent needed to provide access for me as researcher to each link for interview sessions and access to recordings. Because the Elluminate administrator had access to the display names of participants while generating links for me to access the recorded sessions, participants were instructed to log in as Partner 1 or Partner 2 when joining an interview. The access to display names of participants by the administrator was disclosed in informed consent documents.
APPENDIX G

CONJOINT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This genogram interview guide is a tool to facilitate the phenomenological interview, not serve as a step-by-step checklist (Moustakas, 1994). As information is given in the context of the interview, a sketch of the genogram will be made and labeled according to the notation scheme presented in McGoldrick and Gerson (1985). Please note that the demographic data-gathering process of Items Ic – III on the interview guide will proceed rapidly, allowing time in the interview for focusing on the more important concepts of family and couple interaction patterns and beliefs that impact the LDR couple. Interview probes related to family interaction patterns will be used as relevant throughout the interview. It is probable that not all items on this guide will be used with all couples, because the focus of a phenomenological interview is on the themes that the participants identify as most relevant to their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Interview Protocol

Introduction to Participants

_I will be interviewing you together to learn more about how you see your LDR as a couple. I will also be asking you how you think your families see your LDR. Because I_
am interested in the ‘big picture’ of families, I will also ask you about your impressions of your family relationships and family history.

There are no ‘right answers’, and you may pass on any question. If you are feeling uncomfortable at any time with a question or what is being said, please let me know. You may also stop the interview at any time. If you choose to stop, I will stop interviewing your partner as well. If you wish to stop, please let me know so that I will be certain you have stopped the interview, and were not having problems with the internet connection or other technical difficulty.

1. The Family Context: To set the stage for the interview, I’d like to get a general idea of your current situation. I will begin first with basic facts.

   a. What are your ages?

   b. What is your marital status?

   c. What are your gender identities?

   d. What job field(s) are you in?

   e. Do you have any children?

      i. What are the ages of the children?

      ii. Where do the children live?

   f. How long have you been in an LDR?

   g. How far apart are you?

   h. Which residence is the primary residence?

   i. What patterns do you have for visits?

      i. How did this pattern evolve?

      ii. Who is the traveler?
2. Extended Family and Friends: Because I am a family therapist, I am interested in learning more about your extended family, and also those friends who become like family. I will ask some questions about these folks next.

   a. For both partners: Tell me about your parents? Your siblings? Nieces and nephews? Where do these folks live? What are their ages? Occupations?
   b. What other individuals are important to your family? Where do they live? What are their ages? Occupations?

3. The LDR: Now I’d like to learn more about how you both learned how to have an LDR.

   a. How did the idea of having an LDR come up for you two?
      i. What strengths in your relationship do you think helped you decide to commute?
      ii. What were your concerns when you began the LDR?
      iii. How are those concerns relevant/not relevant now?
   b. What strengths help you continue as an LDR couple?
   c. What challenges did you overcome when you started the LDR?
      i. What challenges are you currently facing as an LDR couple?

4. The LDR Couple Themselves

   a. How do you remain connected at a distance?
   b. How do you balance your needs for connection?
   c. How do you balance your needs for emotional ‘space’?
d. How do you explain the LDR to each other?

e. How do you see the LDR fitting into the larger picture of your relationship over time? In 20 years, what will you say about this time as an LDR couple?

f. What emotions have you experienced throughout the LDR process?

**Checkpoint: Inquire as to participants’ comfort with the interview so far, and inquire if there are any concerns they wish to bring up at this time.**

5. The LDR Couple in the Context of the Families

a. How did you present the LDR situation to your families?

i. What were their responses?

b. How do you see your families adapting to your LDR?

i. What strengths do you see in your families that help you as an LDR couple?

ii. What aspects of your families are not helpful to you as an LDR couple?

c. How is the LDR discussed in the different families?

i. Who are the pivotal persons for communication?

d. How do you see yourselves ‘fitting’ into the families as a couple? As individuals?

e. How do you balance connecting with family members versus connecting with each other during visits?

f. How do you think your families ‘make sense’ of your LDR lifestyle?
g. How do you as a couple interact with members of the immediate and extended families-of-origin?
   i. How have these patterns adapted over time?
   ii. What events do you see as impacting these adaptations?

h. How do you interact with important family friends?
   i. How have these patterns adapted over time?
   ii. What events do you see impacting these adaptations?

6. Closeness and Distance
   a. How do family members maintain relationships with each other in proximity? At a distance?
   b. How do family members know when to give each other ‘space’ or when to be emotionally closer?
   c. How do families accommodate different individual needs for privacy?
      For connection?
   d. What does trust look like in the families?

**Checkpoint: Inquire as to participants’ comfort with the interview so far, and inquire if there are any concerns they wish to bring up at this time.**

7. Summing Up
   a. What do they appreciate the most about the partner in relation to the LDR? Their family and friends?
   b. What is important to know that was not asked?

Thank the participants for their time and cooperation.

Schedule individual interviews with both participants at this time.
APPENDIX H

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: Present the genogram constructed from the information in the conjoint interview on the whiteboard function of Elluminate. Inquire if there are any changes that the participant would like made. Repeat this process with the disguised description of the couple and their circumstances. Document and make revisions requested.

1. The Family Context

   a. What thoughts might have arisen after the genogram interview?

   b. What strengths in your own family of origin helped you cope effectively with the LDR?

   c. What do you think your partner might say are strengths of your family?

   d. What do aspects of your family do you feel might work against you as an LDR couple?

   e. What do you think your partner might answer to this question?

   f. What information might not have been told to your family about living in an LDR? To your partner’s family?
g. What might your family understand about the LDR that your partner’s family might not? Vice versa?

**Checkpoint: Inquire as to participants’ comfort with the interview so far, and inquire if there are any concerns they wish to bring up at this time.**

2. The Individual in the Family Context
   a. How do you see yourself in your family history as an LDR partner?
   b. How do you see yourself in the history of your partner’s family as an LDR partner?

3. Moving to the Big Picture
   a. What advice do you have about handling family dynamics for those who are in LDRs or thinking about starting one?
   b. What advice do you have as a partner for LDR couples or those who are thinking of starting one?
APPENDIX I

GENOGRAM SUMMARY PROTOCOL

This genogram summary protocol is based on the works of McGoldrick & Gerson (1985) and DeMaria, et al. (1999), with aspects of interview topics related to LDRs included to structure the genogram summary in accordance with interview topics.

1. Family Context
   a. Household composition at both locations, including ages and occupations
   b. Information about the LDR, including residence and visitation patterns, and how these patterns evolved
   c. Communication patterns between LDR partners and members of the social support network
   d. Summary of extended family information
   e. Summary of information about important individuals

2. Life cycle fit: How life cycle milestones coincide with expected ages and timelines of society
   a. Congruence of ages of members with expected life cycle phase
   b. How events are spaced out or ‘piled up’ for the family
   c. Career cycle stage of LDR partners
3. Pattern repetition over generations
   a. Patterns of functioning, including gender roles, career choices
   b. Patterns of emotional relationships, such as closeness and distance, or family boundaries, and how families have maintained or lost emotional connection at a distance
   c. Patterns of structure, such as hierarchies, involvement of extended family or other support network members in the family, noting how family structure responded to the commuting lifestyle

4. Life events and family functioning: how families adapt to changes
   a. Coincidences of life events, such as a ‘pile up’ of stressors
   b. Impact of life cycle changes and other transitions
   c. Anniversary responses
   d. Social, political, and economic events, including family migrations
   e. Coincidences of life events in relationship to commuting
   f. Impact of life cycle changes and other transitions
   g. Social, political, and economic events in relationship to commuting
   h. How does the couple see patterns of interactions with family and friends adapting over time?

5. Relational Patterns
   a. Relational strengths stated by the LDR couple
   b. Concerns and challenges faced by the LDR couple
c. How does this couple report they balance closeness and distance with each other? With family and friends? Comment on relational patterns if relevant.

d. Family balance and imbalance: how roles and patterns mesh or ‘stick out’
**APPENDIX J**

RESEARCHER NOTES TEMPLATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Notes</th>
<th>Descriptive Notes</th>
<th>Autobiographical notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytic notes will go here. These notes will include researcher thoughts on codes, themes, and content.</td>
<td>Descriptive notes of interview content goes here.</td>
<td>Notes here will discuss the self-as-researcher, personal thoughts on the experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K

IRB APPROVAL

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

September 2, 2011
Laura Tejada
17 East Bracebridge
Akron, Ohio 44301

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator

Re: IRB Number 201108044 "Kibb, Kin and Kilometers: A Proposed Qualitative Study of Long-Distance Relationships from the Perspective of Transgenerational Theory"

Thank you for submitting an IRB Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects for the referenced project. Your protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and has been approved under Exemption Category #7.

Approval Date: August 29, 2011
Expiry Date: August 29, 2012
Continuation Application Due: August 15, 2012

In addition, the following is/are approved:

☐ Waiver of documentation of consent
☐ Waiver of alteration of consent
☐ Research involving children
☐ Research involving prisoners

Please adhere to the following IRB policies:

• IRB approval is given for not more than 12 months. If your project will be active for longer than one year, it is your responsibility to submit a continuation application prior to the expiration date. We request submission two weeks prior to expiration to ensure sufficient time for review.
• A copy of the approved consent form must be submitted with any continuation application.
• If you plan to make any changes to the approved protocol you must submit a continuation application for change and it must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
• Any adverse reactions/incidents must be reported immediately to the IRB.
• If this research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, you must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.
• When your project terminates you must submit a Final Report Form in order to close your IRB file.

Additional information and all IRB forms can be accessed on the IRB web site at:
http://www.uakron.edu/research/orsup/compliance/IRBforms.php

Cc: Linda Perosa – Advisor
Cc: Stephanie Woods – IRB Chair

☑ Approved consent form/s enclosed

Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Akron, OH 44325-2182
330-972-8686 + 330-972-6281 Fax

The University of Akron is an Equal Education and Employment Institution
NOTICE OF APPROVAL

August 22, 2012

Laura Tejada
17 East Brookside
Akron, Ohio 44301

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator

Re: IRB Number 20110804-2 "Kin and Kilometers: A Qualitative Study of Long-Distance Relationships from the Perspective of Transgenerational Theory"

Thank you for submitting your Application for Continuing Review of Research Involving Human Subjects for the referenced project. Your protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and has been approved under Expedited Category #7.

Approval Date: August 22, 2012
Expiration Date: August 29, 2013
Continuation Application Due: August 15, 2013

In addition, the following is/are approved:

☐ Waiver of documentation of consent
☐ Waiver or alteration of consent
☐ Research involving children
☐ Research involving prisoners

Please adhere to the following IRB policies:

• IRB approval is given for not more than 12 months. If your project will be active for longer than one year, it is your responsibility to submit a continuation application prior to the expiration date. We request submission two weeks prior to expiration to insure sufficient time for review.
• A copy of the approved consent form must be submitted with any continuation application.
• If you plan to make any changes to the approved protocol you must submit a continuation application for change and it must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
• Any adverse reactions/incidents must be reported immediately to the IRB.
• If this research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, you must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.
• When your project terminates you must submit a Final Report Form in order to close your IRB file.

Additional information and all IRB forms can be accessed on the IRB web site at:
http://www.uakron.edu/research/orssp/compliance/IRBHome.php

Cc: Linda Perosa – Advisor
Cc: Stephanie Woods – IRB Chair

Approved consent form/s enclosed