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Dyadic distance: From the inside story to a conceptual model

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how partners in intimate relationships experience and construct the meaning of dyadic distance. It challenges the common notions that closeness and distance are two poles of a continuum and that distance can be defined as the absence of closeness. Analyses are based on detailed semistructured interviews that produce a conceptual model of dyadic distance as it relates to the overall perception of the marital relationship. The conceptual model evolved from the first-order meaning (participants’ primary and immediate responses) and second-order meaning (authors’ inductive conceptualization based on participant accounts of their experiences) of dyadic distance in intimate relationships.

KEY WORDS: conceptual model • distance • marital relations • qualitative research

The present article explores how partners in intimate relationship experience and construct the meaning of dyadic distance. Using partners’ accounts, we attempt to develop a conceptual model of dyadic distance as conceptually distinctive from dyadic closeness. The objective of the present article is to contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to intimate experiences in dyadic relationships.

Dyadic distance in intimate relationships, in and of itself, has rarely received scholarly attention. The behaviors used to create closeness have been studied extensively (e.g., Ben-Ari & Lavee, this issue; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Parks & Floyd, 1996) but those that reflect distance remain understudied. The prevailing notion has been that closeness and distance are two poles of a continuum and that distance is the opposite of closeness. However, distance is more than the absence of closeness; it is a separate and distinct phenomenon that deserves further exploration. The present study aims to address this gap in the literature by developing a conceptual model of dyadic distance in intimate relationships.
of closeness. This idea has led to the definition of distance as the absence of closeness. It appears, however, that treating dyadic distance merely as the counterpart of dyadic closeness limits its conceptual scope and our ensuing understanding of the construct and of its ramifications for intimate relationship (Birtchnell, 1993; Hess, 2002). Dyadic distance may be experienced as an *emotional* disconnection from a relational partner, a change in *behavior* to regulate distance, or simply a change in the *meanings* assigned to a specific behavior. The scholarly literature relevant to dyadic distance can be described as being organized around two distinct yet related themes: (i) Dyadic distance as a relationship characteristic and as a relational process; and (ii) the dialectic between closeness and distance as two opposing poles or opposing forces in interpersonal systems.

**Distance as a relational quality and process**

Dyadic distance may be conceived both as a characteristic of the relationship and as a relational maintenance process (Hess, 2002). As a relational quality, the term connotes emotional separation between partners. As a maintenance process, it is conceptualized as part of couples’ distance regulation (Kantor & Lehr, 1975), a process involving certain behaviors to achieve a balance between closeness and distance in a relationship. Use of judicious distancing behaviors in a relationship can facilitate greater intimacy and in this way help prevent relational problems (Hess, 2002; Jacobson, 1989; Pistole, 1994; Ryder & Bartle, 1991).

**The dialectic between distance and closeness**

For the most part, family theory and research have treated dyadic distance as a relationship disturbance, a cause or a sign of relationship distress, feelings of separation from another, limited intimacy, and lack of emotional support (Beier & Sternberg, 1977; Noller & White, 1990). But distance and distancing behaviors can also be a positive ingredient of a close relationship, and essential for it. For example, the avoidance or reduction of involvement with others may serve to accommodate one’s personal needs in intimate relationships (Birtchnell, 1993). It may also provide relief when the relationship has become too intense, and therefore it plays an important role in maintaining healthy intimate relationships (Parks, 1982). Within the context of the dialectical perspective, closeness and distance represent two opposing poles or competing forces in systems of relationship: Connection and autonomy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). As Baxter and Erbert (1999) noted,

>a contradiction is the interplay or tension of unified oppositions . . . that are interdependent with one another at the same time that they function to negate or oppose one another . . . Partner autonomy limits connectedness just as connectedness constrains partner autonomy. (p. 548)
Neither closeness nor distance are conceived as intrinsically positive or negative; both are required to maintain healthy relationships.

We maintain that distance is created not only by the absence of closeness behaviors but also by specific distancing behaviors (Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987; Hess, 2002; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Kreilkamp, 1981). To explore distance in intimate relationships, a deeper understanding is needed of how people experience it in everyday life and what are the constructed meanings associated with such experiences. Consistent with these objectives, three underlying questions guide this study: (1) How do spouses experience distance in their intimate relationships? (2) What means do they use to express dyadic distance? (3) How is dyadic distance related to the quality of the marital relationship?

**Method**

Data for the present study were derived from detailed interviews with 10 Israeli couples (20 informants). A detailed description of the method, including sample characteristics, sampling procedure, and data analysis is provided in Ben-Ari and Lavee (this issue). Although the interview schedule included various topics related to daily experiences in the lives of ordinary couples, the present analysis focuses only on issues pertaining to dyadic distance, particularly on the couples’ experiences, expressions, and constructed meanings of distance. More specifically, we asked, “What does distance mean to you?” followed by probing questions when appropriate, seeking examples and clarifications, from the participants. All quotations provided were translated from Hebrew, the abbreviations H and W designate husband and wife, and the numbers refer to the serial number of the interview.

Data analysis followed the basic principles of qualitative-phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 1998). This analysis has enabled us to describe and explain dyadic distance from the participants’ perspective, and to describe its constructed meanings and its relation to an overall perception of the marital relationship.

**Findings**

We begin by describing participants’ initial response to the question, “What does distance mean to you?” We then move to suggest that the experience of dyadic distance may be conceptualized using first and second orders of constructed meanings. This conception serves as an organizing scheme for the findings. The first order involves the participants’ primary and immediate response to the meaning of the term as they perceive it. The second order represents a higher level of inductive analysis, involving the authors’ conceptualization based on participant accounts of their experiences, suggesting how dyadic distance is related to other individual and couple processes.
The interviews showed that the term “dyadic distance” is difficult to capture. It was often perceived by participants as undesirable or threatening, with connotations of disappointment, frustration, and insecurity. Participants usually dismissed the question or claimed to be unfamiliar with dyadic distance:

I don’t know what distance is, I don’t know how to explain it; most of the time we are not in situations where I can say there is distance. (8, H)

Dyadic distance is not a natural aspect . . . it requires an explanation. It is always a result of something that happened, events that took place. It never comes out of the blue. (7, W)

Participants were apparently not comfortable describing experiences of dyadic distance and did not perceive it as a built-in ingredient of their relationship. They were reluctant to start talking about it and felt that they needed to provide an excuse for its presence. Some couples explicitly stated that distance was not a part of their relationships. Dyadic distance appeared in participants’ accounts as a result of some antecedent occurrences. It was easier for participants to talk about dyadic distance in cognitive terms (i.e., conceiving it, explaining it, providing an excuse) than in experiential terms (i.e., providing a description of the experience in their lives).

First-order constructed meanings of dyadic distance
What are the basic meanings that laypeople construct around dyadic distance? Interview data reveal that participants most often alluded to dyadic distance using its experience and antecedents somewhat interchangeably. For the sake of clarity, we extracted the primary meanings of the construct by identifying units of meaning that follow the statement “Distance is . . .” in response to the question “What does distance mean to you?”

The primary meaning of dyadic distance was expressed in four dimensions: Physical, emotional, communication, and sexual. Many times, when dyadic distance was experienced, more than one dimension came into play.

Physical distance was the most prevalent meaning attached to dyadic distance. It reflects a need to be separate, to be somewhere else or do something different, not share the same space or the same activity with the spouse. The objective is to draw an imaginary line behind which one can keep away from the spouse. One husband used the metaphor of a ball to represent what distance meant for him: Turning inward without the need to maintain any connection with the environment: “Distance is getting inward and inside like a ball with no need or wish for reaching out. I’ll be in one room and she will be in another. When I am not at peace, when I am restless I want and need to be by myself. I want to be in my corner” (6, H).

Emotional distance was rarely mentioned, let alone described. Whenever participants referred to emotional distance they talked about it implicitly and in conjunction with other related constructs: “There is a distinction between being detached because one needs time for oneself . . . not because he wants to be away from me. I can feel which is which . . . I know how to differentiate between the two” (3, W).
It may be that interviewees were reluctant to talk about emotional distance because it was associated with unpleasant experiences. Only one participant described an experience of emotional distance explicitly and directly: “Distance is feeling estranged from her, feeling alienated. I can be at home and yet feel apart. You can be in the same room and yet emotionally detached, very detached” (7, H).

Communication distance was a meaning associated with dyadic distance and involved lack of conversation. The absence of verbal exchange of thoughts or feelings was described as an expression of distance.

We are usually very talkative; when we don’t talk there is distance. (9, W)

Distance for me is the lack of communication, emptiness, when we are at home and don’t talk. If there is physical distance but there is communication it is not as bad as without communication. When there is no communication it hurts and I get even more into myself. (9, H)

Distance as a lack of physical contact. Dyadic distance may also be experienced as an absence of affectionate physical contact, such as touching, hugging, caressing, or having sexual encounters: “I’ll say, ‘don’t touch me.’ I’ll push to the other side of the bed, I’ll turn my back to him, I won’t respond to him” (8, W).

While recognizing that dyadic distance is usually a result of some antecedent event, most interviewees could not clearly distinguish between the cause for dyadic distance and the experience of it. They used the two interchangeably, equating an occurrence (e.g., interpersonal conflict) with the experience itself – a feeling of distance resulting from the occurrence and its expressions: “Distance is fighting; everyone withdraws to his or her corner. We both want to stay away from each other. When I feel distant it is probably because I am angry at him so I want to stay away” (1, W).

In sum, participants described emotional distance significantly less frequently than physical distance. In qualitative analysis, what is missing is often as important to consider as what is in the text (Riessman-Kohler, 1993). A possible explanation of the relative absence of references to emotional distance is that participants did not regard all experiences of distance equally. There seems to be a hierarchy based on degrees of bad feelings resulting from a variety of expressions of distance. The least painful experience is distance as an absence of bodily contact, followed by physical distance, and communication distance. The most painful experience is emotional distance. It is important to note that hurt feelings are strongly shaped by an appraisal of the situation. Thus, a lack of bodily contact or physical distance are not as hurtful so long as they are not interpreted as signs of emotional distance.

Second-order constructed meanings of dyadic distance

Constructed meanings of the second order are based on interpretations of participant accounts and rely upon the researchers’ inferences. We examined dyadic distance in relation to other constructs and across three dimensions:
(i) As a general relationship characteristic versus a brief event in the couple’s life; (ii) as an individual need versus a relational process; and (iii) as staying away from one’s spouse versus getting close to one’s self.

**Distance as a relationship characteristic versus a time-limited event.** Dyadic distance can function as an overall relationship descriptor or refer to a particular event in the couple’s life. Some participants referred to dyadic distance as a chronic, ongoing relationship attribute: “There is always distance, because it is always [the case] that she is with her girlfriends and I am with the TV . . .” (6, H).

When dyadic distance is described as a general relationship characteristic, it lacks well-defined boundaries. It is not contained, and can therefore be perceived as describing a chronically unhappy relationship. In this case, distance refers to the couple’s living space, the context in which the relationship is embedded, and serves as a metaphor for the entire relationship. On the other hand, when dyadic distance is described as a single event with clear boundaries in time and space, it is defined as local and temporary: “Distance is always the result of something that happened, events that took place; it never comes out of the blue . . .” (7, W).

When participants referred to dyadic distance as time-limited events, they appeared to feel a need to provide an explanation, to establish a causal relationship. Describing boundaries to their distance experience implies that the episode has an end, regardless of how intense it was. Such a defined event does not spill over to the entire relationship and is therefore less threatening.

**Dyadic distance as an individual need versus a relational process.** Dyadic distance may reflect an individual’s need and at the same time designate relational processes. When participants referred to distance as an individual need, they talked in concrete terms: They knew what they sought, and could visualize it: “It requires physical distance, a wish for a different setting, a need to find some place else, to be by myself . . .” (7, H).

Dyadic distance as a relational process involves abstract structural processes rather than concrete needs. Participants rarely related to this notion of dyadic distance but when they did so they adopted a longitudinal relational perspective, referring to sequences of distance: “Over time we have learned the pattern [of distance]; it has the same nature and is more or less the same, with minor changes, as far as distancing is concerned . . .” (2, W). To some extent, this quotation recalls what Kantor and Lehr (1975) referred to as “distance regulation:” Dynamic, ongoing fluctuations in closeness and distance in intimate relationships. It reflects an attribute of a system rather than of individuals. Emphasizing structural aspects of relational dynamics, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argued that contradictions between autonomy and connectedness reflect a force-against-force dynamic rather than an interpersonal conflict, and are therefore inherent in the routine of a relationship.
Distance as staying away from one’s spouse versus getting close to one’s self. Participants were acutely aware of the distinction between the two types of experiences: The need to emotionally detach oneself from the spouse and the need to move inward, to establish and protect one’s privacy in time and space. To an outsider the two may appear the same, but intimate partners may have two entirely different experiences. The former experience is anchored in the relationship and is oriented toward one’s spouse – a wish to be distant from the partner: “I detach myself emotionally, I want to stay away from him, and I don’t want him around me” (9, W). The second type of experience is oriented toward the self: Getting close to oneself, taking time to turn inward, or needing time and space for oneself:

There are times when I need physical distance . . . when I want to be by myself. I am trying to avoid the presence of others . . . I need to get into myself, into my private world . . . I feel I need to be by myself . . . then I don’t want anyone around me . . . (3, W)

Most often, a need to be close to oneself is reflected in a need for physical distance and it may or may not be associated with emotional distance. In contrast, the need to stay away from the other is experienced mostly as an emotional distance, with or without a physical expression. While both spouses are aware of the distinction between their own “stay away” and “move inward” experiences, they are not always able to differentiate between the two in their spouses. Their own needs for time and space are not always perceived and understood as such by their spouses.

Some of the participating couples developed rituals to signal to their spouses that they needed time and space for themselves:

There are accepted signs that are not talked about. Each one of us can recognize them within the other. (7, H)

He gives us very clear signs, he has his rituals. He goes outside with the cat or takes his peanuts to the back yard. (9, W)

Most couples use accepted signals for the two types of dyadic distance, which are well known to both spouses. Over the years, partners learn each other’s signals, which saves them the trouble of telling each other when physical distance is desired. Such rituals or signs can reduce bad feelings that may follow a verbal request for distance. Couples that have developed a pool of accepted signs to designate the need for distance show that they are sensitive to potentially upsetting incidents in their marital relationship. The problem arises when one partner misinterprets the other’s signal, which can lead to bad feelings and bitterness. For example, the signal given by the wife of couple #9 in the following quotation says, “I need some time and space for myself,” but her husband interprets it as saying, “I want to stay away from you,” and feels hurt:

Wife: I also give clear signs whenever I want my space. I can go to bed or take a walk. He always knows when I want and need my space. (9, W)
Husband: That’s not true. Sometime I get angry about it, I feel hurt, and it drives me crazy when she goes early to bed. I do not say anything, I respect it, but I become bitter . . . (9, H)

To some extent, signals that designate a need for distance represent learned rituals in couples’ lives. They are the result of the partners’ investment in their marital relationship in an attempt to develop what might be called “shared views.” This theme is significant to our understanding of the association between dyadic distance and an overall perception of the marital relationship.

Discussion: A conceptual model of distance

We have attempted to track the expressions, experiences, and meanings of dyadic distance from the point of view of lay couples. Before we discuss the findings and present the conceptual model, a word of caution is in order. Having conducted the interviews with both spouses present enabled us to capture the nature of the interpersonal interactions, including nonverbal communication. Some of our observations are based on interpretation of such gestures. At the same time, the conjoint interviews may have affected some of the findings. Being aware of their spouses’ presence, participants may have been mindful about disclosing thoughts or concealing reasons for distance. In future research it may be useful to conduct separate interviews with each spouse. In addition, expanding the scope of the questions regarding the positive and negative aspects of dyadic distance can enhance our understanding of its role in intimate relationships.

A noteworthy finding of the study is that, from the point of view of laypeople, distance and distancing behaviors in intimate relationships are conceived primarily as negative, threatening, and an indication of relationship disturbance. Participants either claimed that there was nothing like distance in their relationships or were reluctant to describe situations of distance. This is in contrast to the view held by professionals and social scientists according to which distance is an essential ingredient of the relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Birtchnell, 1993; Hess, 2002).

Further analysis has shown that despite their tendency to deny that distance was an integral part of their relationships, participants designated two meanings of distance: Getting away from a spouse and moving inward toward one’s self; the former being a sign of relationship disturbance and the latter a reflection of personal needs or a mechanism used to protect the relationship. Such a mechanism may also involve an exchange of distance being given and received (Birtchnell, 1993). For example, a spouse may recognize his or her partner’s need to be left alone or to have things done her or his way, and, by indulging the partner, he or she is giving distance and the other is receiving it.

As noted earlier, the scholarly literature portrays dyadic distance via two primary distinctions: As a relationship characteristic versus relational process, and as a dialectic between two opposing poles. Our findings, based
on lay people’s accounts of their daily experiences, lead us to conceptualize dyadic distance around three distinctions: As an overall characteristic of the couple’s relationship versus a limited-time event; as an individual need versus a relational process; and as getting close to oneself versus staying away from one’s spouse. In this respect, the current study expands the body of knowledge about distance in intimate relationships and highlights the complex nature of this construct.

To integrate the various experiences and meanings attached to dyadic distance, we propose a conceptual model that brings together the three distinctions suggested earlier. Specifically, we suggest that a relation between the overall quality of the couple’s relationship and event-related fluctuations in dyadic distance on the one hand, and between individuals’ needs and relational processes on the other are most significantly reflected by the distinction between dyadic distance as “getting close to one’s self” and “away from one’s partner.”

Our conceptual model outlines four levels of constructed meanings of dyadic distance, ranging from a cognitive ability to identify the dual meaning of distance (i.e., getting close to oneself vs. staying away from one’s spouse) to the creation of a shared view of these different meanings:

- **Level I: The cognitive ability to differentiate between the two meanings of distance: “I’m staying away from you” and “I’m getting close to myself.”** Most interviewees were able to cognitively differentiate between these two meanings. They were aware that physical distance was not necessarily an expression of emotional distance, and that the physical and emotional were two different experiences and meanings of distance. But a few interviewees were unable to distinguish between the two experiences, neither in themselves nor in their spouses. For example, one husband (couple #6) said that “there is always distance because it is always that she is with her girlfriends and I am with the TV,” indicating that he has not distinguished between the various meanings of distance.

- **Level II: The ability to identify and differentiate between emotional and physical distance in oneself.** The ability to distinguish between emotional and physical distance evolves from one’s awareness of the difference between “I’m staying away from you” and “I’m getting close to myself.” One woman (couple #3) described her need to be by herself as follows: “I need to get into myself, into my private world . . . then I don’t want anyone around me . . .” She clearly differentiated between this experience and the times when she felt emotionally distanced from her spouse. Most participants were apparently able to make the distinction between the two meanings of distance in their own experiences and behaviors, and believe that the need for distance is legitimate and not harmful to the fabric of marital relations. We assume that as long as participants use both terms to designate the different experiences, they are able to identify the two experiences within themselves.

- **Level III: The ability to identify and differentiate between emotional and physical distance in a partner.** Marital partners are not always able to
identify the two meanings of closeness within their spouses. Couple #9 exemplifies a case in which both spouses were able to recognize the two meanings within themselves, but the husband was upset when he misinterpreted his wife’s message about her need to get close to herself as an expression of her intention to stay away from him. Such confusions are avoided when each partner sends recognizable signals that are accepted as such by the spouse. A few couples talked about known and accepted signals that, although not explicitly talked about, were recognized by both partners. These “learned rituals” are instrumental in preventing misunderstanding and bad feelings. We argue that investment in creating a pool of known signals demonstrates the couple’s commitment to developing “shared views” of distance.

- **Level IV: The development of shared views of emotional and physical distance.** Over the years, some couples have learned not only to identify signals of emotional and physical distance in the other but also to develop a similar understanding and shared constructed meanings of the two. The following husband and wife accounts (couple #7) exemplify such a shared view:

  **Husband:** At the beginning she didn’t like it that I wanted to spend time by myself. But she changed and now she sees things from a different perspective. This has led to a dramatic drop in the number and frequency of our arguments. The quality of our time together improved significantly. She accepted that sometimes I need to be by myself. She also learned to appreciate spending time by herself.

  **Wife:** I agree, it used to be a very loaded issue. Over the years there were changes in how we both see spending time together and alone. There are accepted signs that are not talked about that signal different types of distance. Each one of us can recognize them in the other. I am not threatened by him wanting to be by himself anymore; I am not insulted.

This exchange demonstrates that shared views of distance may actually reflect dyadic closeness in two ways. First, the construction of shared views of distance indicates that partners have communicated about the various expressions and meanings associated with distance. Furthermore, talking about such a difficult topic as distance and its meanings requires a great deal of trust and intimacy in a couple. Second, having shared views of the various meanings of distance enables partners to identify potentially unpleasant situations and thereby strengthen their relationship.

**Conclusion**

To date, dyadic distance has received considerably less scholarly attention when compared with dyadic closeness. The present study explores lay people’s accounts of their experiences of distance in their intimate relationship. It contributes to our understanding of the nature of dyadic distance by differentiating between two levels of constructed meanings: (i) The
participants’ immediate experiences and meaning, and (ii) the researchers’ interpretation and conceptualization. This higher level of inductive analysis highlights the central role of shared views that the partners develop. We maintain that a couple’s shared view of distance is a reflection of dyadic closeness. This conception adds to the multiple conceptualizations of distance in intimate relationships by challenging the commonly held notions that closeness and distance are two opposite poles of the same continuum and that distance is merely the absence of closeness.

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