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“The Real Deal”: Managing Intimacy Within Friendship at a Distance

Abstract How is intimacy constructed between friends who live apart, at a long distance? Family studies have paid considerable attention to the (re)negotiation processes of personal and intimate bonds within transnational families. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which these structural constraints affect intimate relationships between friends. As significant members of the personal networks of individuals, friends have a supportive role that, in the continuum of other personal relationships (family, co-workers, neighbors, acquaintances), is challenged by the increasing mobility that characterizes contemporary global post-industrial societies. While a significant amount of literature has underlined the negative impact of geographical distance in friendships, other studies have suggested otherwise, stressing the renewed importance of friendship ties between geographically long-distant young adults. This paper explores long distance friendships (LDFs) focusing mainly on two dimensions: the meanings given to intimacy and the practices of friendship at a distance. The main hypothesis is that transformations of intimacy between long-distant friends are likely to be associated with reconfiguration of the meanings given to friendship, as well as to the norms that regulate them. On the one hand, the erosion of friendship is associated with the impossibility of keeping a face-to-face, co-present, accompanying contact, which is part of the expected normative role of friendship. On the other hand, its reconfiguration is mostly associated with those routines and rituals that keep friendship alive by permanently reenacting a sense of self identity and “ontological security” through the “work of memory.” The role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in fostering intimacy within an LDF is also explored, as these have considerably changed the ways we relate to geographical distance and, therefore, the norms that shape intimate relationships.

Keywords Intimacy; Friendship; Transnational Friendships; Long Distance Friendships; ICT

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Introduction: Focusing on Distance Between Friends

This paper focuses on a very simple question: How do friends living at a distance keep their relationship going? Friendship is often represented as a simple combination of two main vectors, time and space. Both are deeply connected, and articulate with other important aspects, such as the *context* in which friendships are embedded. This paper focuses on the importance of space, namely, as it relates to physical distance. Studies, particularly from the perspective of social psychology, have underlined the importance of physical proximity to the maintenance of personal relationships, including friendships, and therefore the negative impact of spatial distance on the nature and quality of those relationships (Fehr 1999). Others have argued otherwise, drawing attention to the fact that much of this emphasis on physical proximity is due to the presumed importance of the spatial proximity of networks in providing (instrumental) support, as well as in face-to-face modes of relationship (Johnson et al. 2009). This paper will try to answer two specific questions: What are the *meanings* given to friendship, when friends live at a long distance? And, what are the *practices* of friendship, when distance comes in between friends? The focus is on exploring how individuals cope with long distance in order to maintain their intimate relations, and their perceptions about how distance affects the nature and intensity of those bonds.

Spatial and geographical mobility being a major aspect relating to the maintenance of intimate ties, one must not overlook the importance of ongoing globalization processes that cross contemporary so-

cieties (though in diverse ways). Economic deprivation and global economy, cultural or ethnic conflicts, war: all are factors that enhance individuals' global mobility and migration, impacting upon their personal relationships, including those with family and friends. Another important societal change relates to global education policies, namely, international higher education programs, which have contributed to the formation of more cosmopolitan younger generations, bred in global environments and experiencing more of the world. These changes are occurring in tandem with transformations in the global labor market, in which high levels of competitiveness demand highly skilled professionals with international experience and expectations. As Allan (2003:515) puts it, instead of this meaning a decrease in the significance of friendships in late-modern societies, “as social and economic transitions become increasingly less predictable and identity less rigid, the salience of friendships may well increase,” as “friends can play a crucial part in helping people adapt to new social identities.” Moreover, with the increasing differentiation of society and the consequent valuing of diversity, friends become important for expressing plural and sometimes contradictory identities, as “one can express different aspects of the self within different friendship clusterings in ways that are difficult to manage when personal networks are more integrated” (Allan 2003:516). This way they play a key role in the validation of the self, in the context of post-modern fluid, contingent, and uncertain societies. Although migration flows and geographical mobility have been a constant in societies throughout time, recent flows have been re-conceptualized through the development of information and communication technologies (ICT).

Due to its features of ubiquity, accessibility, and velocity (sometimes even instantaneity), technology has made communication with long-distant loved ones much easier and more frequent.

In summary, this paper aims to make a small contribution to the conceptualization of long distance friendships (LDFs) from a sociological perspective. This topic has already gained the attention of psychology and social psychology scholars; hence, this discussion seeks to contribute further to this debate by taking a sociological approach, drawing on qualitative methodologies and data, to LDFs as a product of complex social relations.

Conceptualizing Friendships at a Distance: A Brief State of the Art

Sociological literature has made an important contribution to conceptualizing friendship, not only identifying its normative definitions in contemporary societies (i.e., Pahl 2000; 2011; Allan 2003) but also as part of the individual's wider personal communities (Pahl and Spencer 2004; 2010; Spencer and Pahl 2006). However, and contrary to social psychology and interpersonal communication approaches, little or no attention has been paid to the impact of distance in managing these kinds of intimate relations.

To better understand LDFs, one immediately relevant dimension is physical **distance** itself, and the related concepts of separation and mobility. *Space* appears here as a relevant variable, not as a fixed reality (*where* things happen; the venues and places of friendship), but rather as a referent for something that, like its main players, defines itself by *being on the move*. Mo-

bility is the keyword that installs distance—the time and space that mediate between two relevant points: oneself and the friend(s). Elliot and Urry (2010) talk about “mobile intimacy” to describe what they call the new normative model for the 21st century. They argue that contemporary ways of managing intimacy at a distance are both enabled and constrained by three major areas of rapid change: globalization, transformations of intimacy, and the reinvention of personal life (Elliot and Urry 2010:87). Though acknowledging that “friendship has become extremely significant in the rich north, especially for people who do not have children, and has come to structure and organize multiple mobilities” (Elliot and Urry 2010:100), this is not their focus. Rather, they examine family and romantic relationships “on the move,” and acknowledge that mobile intimacy “is spreading to many social relations,” such as “living apart together” (LAT), “business deals in brothels,” “commuter marriages” or “distance relationships,” “love online” or “week-end couples” (Elliot and Urry 2010:89-90). Within this array of personal relations, the impact of mobility on friendship remains a secondary and underdeveloped topic. Likewise, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2014) focus on transnational families to conceptualize the “globalization of love and intimacy.” Nevertheless, in their latest writings, friendship remains an unexplored kind of intimate relationship, including its relations with mobility and distance.

Drawing from a social psychology and interpersonal communication background, and using a quantitative approach, a few studies have explored the particularities of LDFs. For instance, Becker and colleagues (2009) compare geographically close friendships (GCFs) and LDFs among 100 college students, and

conclude that LDFs are more likely to recover from negative turning points and relationship downturns, suggesting that LDFs should be conceptualized as *flexible* rather than fragile. Johnson and colleagues (2009) also compare GCFs and LDFs among young adults, focusing upon their levels of commitment, and conclude that they are not only high, but rising. Weiner and Hannum (2013) studied a sample of 142 undergraduate students, testing via a web-based survey the quantity of received and perceived social support provided by best friends, and concluded that, although GCFs declared providing more support, no differences were found regarding perceived support. These studies have provided important material to question prior assumptions about long distance (LD) impact on friendships, using quantitative and comparative methods. Aiming to complement these findings, this paper argues for a qualitative approach that can bring helpful insights, by taking into account the meanings individuals give to their actions and to particular aspects of LDFs (i.e., the relevance of face-to-face contact and co-presence, or the meanings of intimacy within LDFs).

What might be the *impacts* of distance in LDFs? Does it hinder intimacy between friends? Literature has traditionally underlined the negative impact of distance in personal relationships and networks in general, both with kin and non-kin. Research on social networks and personal communities has shown that, although the nature of the bonds changes (becoming less dense and more sparsely knit, for instance), the importance of these relations persist (for a revision, see: Clark 2007). As physical proximity is still important for direct support (e.g., of an instrumental kind, cf. Wellman 1979; Chua, Madej,

and Wellman 2011), authors such as Becker and colleagues (2009) have emphasized that distance does not necessarily have a negative impact on relationships of different kinds, pleading for a conceptualization of LD relationships as flexible rather than fragile. As mentioned above, a nonlinear sequence in the friendship trajectory that includes a shift back to the casual friendship level with recovery, after a turndown, is more typical for LD friends (Becker et al. 2009). This means therefore that the impact of LD is not always negative.

Other than distance, another important topic relevant to the present discussion is the *meanings* given to *intimacy* within friendship. The scientific literature, mainly drawing from a psychology and social psychology background, has identified a few dominant meanings. The most common, according to Monsour (1992), are self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, unconditional support, physical contact, and trust. Sexual contact is usually referred to in relation to cross- but not same-sex friendships. Mutual support, mainly when it is directed at reducing loneliness, is also traditionally associated with friendship in literature. Monsour concludes, in his exploratory study, that friendship intimacy is multidimensional, both in cross- and same-sex friendships, with self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness being the most frequently mentioned aspects. Trust and unconditional support also emerged as important dimensions. Parks and Floyd (1996) also unpack the meanings individuals attribute to intimacy within friendship, by comparing them to the definition of *closeness*. Their study showed that three possible relations between the two concepts were possible, with almost half of the respondents viewing them as equivalent, and the

rest either as having quantitative or qualitative differences. The author concludes that closeness seems to be a more appropriate term than intimacy in describing relationships, since respondents were able to provide a wider range of, and richer, definitions for the former than the latter. Yet, none of these studies, nor the research they are based on, explore the implications of such definitions in LDFs.

The same can be said about Jamieson's (1998) sociological work. Jamieson made a very important contribution through defining intimacy as not strictly related to physical contact, namely, sexual contact. Instead, intimacy is defined as referring,

to the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality. Although there may be no universal definition, intimate relationships are a type of personal relationship that are subjectively experienced and may also be socially recognized as close. The quality of "closeness" that is indicated by intimacy can be emotional and cognitive, with subjective experiences including a feeling of mutual love, being "of like mind" and special to each other. Closeness may also be physical, bodily intimacy, although an intimate relationship need not be sexual and both bodily and sexual contact can occur without intimacy. [Jamieson 2011:1]

Intimacy therefore encompasses practices that include kin and non-kin, with friends as relevant actors in its construction. In this work, Jamieson also provides helpful insights into intimacy as it is lived in a transnational context (e.g., transnational families), an approach particularly pertinent to my present reflections, as she questions the globalization of

the term. As she puts it, the fact that "global media circulate stereotypical ideals of intimacy celebrating relationships of individual equals impacting on imaginations across locally-specific social worlds" does not "erase other idealized notions of intimacy or level diversity in practices in lives as lived" (Jamieson 2011:2). However, notwithstanding these important contributions, the meanings of intimacy in friendships lived at a distance, in the context of a global and mobilized experience, remain an underdeveloped topic of research.

The same happens regarding the *practices* of forming friendships and keeping them going. In their seminal work about personal communities in the UK, Spencer and Pahl (2006) try to move beyond the normative definitions of friendship precisely by exploring the practices occurring within concrete relationships. However, these practices are only indirectly approached. This is the case with their notion of friendship types, in which they distinguish friendships on the basis of their complexity, ranging from "associates," those who only share a common activity, to "soul mates," "the most multi-stranded friendships of all," those "who confide, provide emotional support, help each other, and enjoy each other's company" (Spencer and Pahl 2006:69). What friends do with or towards each other is also considered in their notion of *friendship modes*, this time from a dynamic perspective. The ways in which friendships develop across different stages of the life course indirectly refer to what friends do in order to make new friends, maintain them, or lose them. The practices of friendship are here placed in the context of the modes via which individuals cope with, and respond to, the various events that cross their lives,

making them more or less turbulent journeys. Therefore, the authors acknowledge the importance of practices in achieving a scientific and complex definition of friendship; however, only indirectly do they approach these practices, their focus being mainly on the unpacking of a complex definition of friendship, better understood in the context of a variety of significant personal ties—personal communities.

This paper argues that to better understand LDFs, we must directly address the importance of **practices**, that is, of *what friends do, together or towards each other*, to keep their friendships alive, when distance is a factor. According to Reckwitz (2002:249), "A 'practice' (*Praktik*) is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion, and motivational knowledge." Schatzki (1996) describes two central notions of practices. The first one describes "practice" as coordinated activity, "as a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings," such as cooking, voting, or recreational practices. The second meaning of "practice" describes it as "performance," as it "actualizes and sustains practices in the sense of nexuses" (Schatzki 1996:90). As Reckwitz (2002) puts it,

a practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the practice...The single individual—as a bodily and mental agent—then acts as the "carrier" (*Träger*) of a practice—and, in fact, of many different practices which need not be coordinated with one another. Thus, she or he is not only a carrier of patterns

of bodily behavior, but also of certain routinized ways of understanding, knowing how, and desiring. [p. 250]

Either being "dispersed nexus of doings and sayings," or "performances" that reproduce, actualize, and sustain these nexuses, how do practices among LD friends contribute to sustaining their intimacy, and the friendship itself? What are the practices of LD friends that contribute to keeping their friendships going, nurturing their intimacy? Exploring this dimension will help us to shed some more light on the nature of LDFs.

Collecting and Analyzing Data at a Distance: Questions of Method

This paper draws on qualitative data collected through a survey of open-ended questions, disseminated via email. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to better capture the subjective experiences of LD friends, as well as the complex meanings they give to friendship lived at a distance. The method also enabled a very important aspect of the study: the reconstitution of the context in which they live their LDFs (LD itself), as well as the (technological) means they use to communicate with their friends (one of which is email). The main purpose of the research was exploratory, thus without the intention of statistical representativeness either of the sample or the results. Instead, this kind of in-depth qualitative approach produces heuristic insights into the hidden dimensions of the studied subject, as well as provides access to the singularity and complexity of experiences. The research follows an open structure (Pires 1997:17) in which the aim is not to generalize empirically from a few cases to a whole population, but nevertheless to produce a different kind of

generalization (analytical-empirical). Moreover, following Max Weber’s (1949) comprehensive methodological proposal, the aim was to identify a few traits of a particular phenomenon (LDFs) that may help us to better understand particular similar cases, in different contexts and in the future. Following this qualitative and comprehensive approach, the targeted population included individuals with at least one friend living at a LD—because either they or their friend had left the country of origin. The sample (or corpus) is qualitative, involves multiple cases, and is constructed on the basis of its internal homogeneity (Pires 1997:73): all individuals shared the common characteristic of living (at least one) friendship at a LD. For the purpose of an initial exploratory approach to the subject, 15 online interviews were conducted, via email. This final sample was achieved through sending the interview questions to a mailing list composed mainly of the researcher’s professional and personal network, and added to via the snowball method. The respondents are between 30 and 44 years of age, 12 are women and 3 men, living in Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the UK. All have therefore a Western cultural background, as well as a high mobility profile, travelling and changing their place of residence often. Education and employment were among the key factors for relocation.

The interview focused on six particular questions, regarding the meanings of friendship, the context and length of separation, the practices for maintaining friendship, the ups and downs of friendship, the role of ICT, and the role of meaningful objects in the process of maintaining friendship. Participants were asked to think of their closest friends who currently lived at a LD and to choose the one they considered

the most intimate to refer to in their answers. All questions were answered by participants, either in English or Portuguese, and sent back to the researcher, via email, during November 2013. They varied in length and depth: some participants wrote longer and more reflexive statements, with an analytical style; others preferred a shorter, sharper, more synthetic style. However, all reflected a high commitment to the research and its subject, evidenced by the level of detail and the complexity of the stories told. They were also asked about their willingness to continue to participate in the study, and all responded positively.

The qualitative data that resulted from the email interviews were subjected to thematic content analysis that followed a semi-inductive approach: the majority of themes were suggested by the material itself (e.g., face-to-face encounters), while a few were inspired by previous knowledge (e.g., the role of ICT). The analysis focused particularly on the questions regarding the *meanings* and *practices* of friendship. A total of 40 thematic categories were constructed, covering many of the meanings previously identified in the scientific literature regarding close distance friends. This kind of semi-inductive analysis enabled exploratory new insights into the topic of LDFs.

Collecting data via email turned out to be an insightful experience in itself as it reflected the ways in which respondents communicated with their LD friends. Therefore, the method reproduced in part the conditions of the communicative context and relationship they were invited to write about. Moreover, the fact that they had to write their answers enhanced reflexivity over a subject which is, in itself, looked at as a very reflexive practice (friends “talk about them-

selves” and, by this process, “become what they are”). Some respondents mentioned explicitly the pleasure of being able to “dive into” the introspective waters of affection and memory. Another important aspect was that, having no face-to-face contact with the researcher, respondents were more at ease in expressing the negative sides of these relationships. As a whole, the method proved quite heuristic, providing illuminating information to grasp the multiple and subjective experiences of LDF.

Findings and Discussion

Not So Much of a Difference: Meanings of Intimacy Within LDFs

The analysis of the collected exploratory data shows that meanings given to intimacy within friendship do not differ much from the definitions already identified in the literature. This does not necessarily mean that those features are developed in LDFs as much and in the same way as in geographically close friendships. In fact, in all cases, intimacy had been constructed *before* relocation, the challenge being to maintain it as *intimate*, to guarantee the conditions for intimacy, *despite* the distance. The time of separation ranged from 1 year to 15 years, 10 out of 15 participants being separated for more than 5 years at the time of the survey. Maybe due to this relative homogeneity of the sample, differences in the time of separation did not suggest differences regarding the meanings and practices of friendship at a LD.

Time

Time seems to be a property attributed to intimate friends in two major ways: the duration, past ex-

perience, and memory of the friendship; and “time spent together.” The first puts intimacy in the context of (long) duration. Collected data suggested that an intimate friendship emerged as one where *length of time* and *depth* were key factors. Intimate friends are usually those who have known each other for many years, since childhood, adolescence, or another important stage of the life course, within which there was already enough time to share important events and experiences. In this way, time as a catalyzer of intimacy overlaps with the sharing of experiences and important transitions in life.

She is one of my oldest friends with whom I keep regular contact and update about my life, projects, problems, happy events. [Int1, F, 38, PT]

He is an intimate friend since we have known each other for a long time, we have accompanied each other’s growth, the entrance in adulthood, and we have shared many experiences. [Int5, F, 30, PT]

This person is my intimate friend because she walks with me for many years, we have passed through adolescence together, which is a time in life in which friends assume a very important role in our life, in which our availability to relationships is huge. [Int14, F, 40, PT]

As for “time spent together,” this factor places intimacy in the context of (shared) practices. Here, *meanings* and *practices* of friendship intersect, as major dimensions of LDFs. Intimate friends are those who have the privilege of giving to one another one of the scarcest resources in contemporary life: time. Also here, time overlaps with the sharing of experiences.

We spent many evenings together, talking about many different issues (also personal, intimate things that are not shared with many people, or only between us). [Int6, M, 30, NL]

Sharing

In accordance with what has been referred to in international literature and studies, *sharing* is an outstanding feature of the meanings given to friendship. The differentiation factor here is that LD does not seem to be represented as having affected the properties that made these friendships *intimate*. Sharing, though it may have occurred in the past, provides a very important resource for LDFs, a memory and a heritage on which LD friends can rely and feel reassured that the friendship will endure, *in spite of* the distance. This means that the basic aspects of intimacy were built in geographically close, face-to-face relationships, and that LD is a test that these friendships must face and overcome. Physical proximity, even though less possible due to geographical distance, was indispensable to the building up of intimacy, prior to the separation.

“Sharing” takes different forms. Intimacy is made out of sharing everyday life and routines; special life events and experiences; difficult moments in life; important life transitions in the life course (adolescence, adulthood, parenthood); memories and the past; personal belief systems.

Mainly during secondary school, between the 10th and 12th grades, we were together daily, we used to go and come back from school together, we attended the same class, spent free time together, with the same friends. We shared those significant experiences, like

the loss of virginity, romantic setbacks, the choice of the university degree, parents’ divorce, death of family and friends, et cetera. [Int5, F, 30, PT]

My friend is an intimate friend because he is someone with whom I can share (and I do share) my life, from the most routine event to the most significant ones... Even though we are distant and having less contact with each other, when we get together, we still share the same complicity, the same affection, the same interests and ways of seeing the world. [Int15, F, 35, PT]

Sharing life. Talking about our life, worries, joys, and challenges, and we know that on the other side there’s sincerity. I know that even though we are not so [physically] close and we don’t talk so often, nothing changes and the friendship is always there. With other people, even physically closer, I don’t have this feeling of friendship as guaranteed, but with this one I do. [Int14, F, 30, PT]

Trust

Another major aspect of intimacy that stands out in these discourses is the importance of *trust*, in line with the main findings reported in the scientific literature. Trust may be referred to in general terms, but mainly it is about total *self-disclosure*, trusting that person enough to tell them everything about oneself, without being afraid of moral judgments, as well as trusting that he/she will tell us the truth, no matter how hard it is to hear. In this sense, trust implies reflexivity, as well as reciprocity, since it is this open-hearted dialogue that enables fuller self-knowledge, but it can only happen if it goes both ways. Mutual in-depth knowledge, understanding,

and identification are also very relevant aspects of intimacy, arising directly out of trust.

The first can be considered as an intimate friend because she knows many things about me, my past, my present, and because we understand each other, as well as because even though she might not always agree with me, she is an unconditional friend...The second intimate friend can be considered intimate because I know some important matters concerning her affective life, just as she also knows about mine, and we share a mutual understanding, respect, and affects. [Int8, F, 34, PT, living in the UK]

He is a friend with whom I can speak about anything, without any limitations, and vice versa. He is one of the very few people who I could say knows me inside out. We identify with each other in many ways. [Int9, M, 44, UK, living in PT]

With him, there is no censorship, there is complete transparency, complete freedom to be (or not be), complete freedom to think. We’ve always been fully expressed with one another. And most importantly, I trust him and he trusts me. [Int15, M, 38, CA]

That person is an intimate friend because 1) we know each other so well; 2) we understand each other easily; 3) we are there for difficult times; 4) we are not afraid of telling each other things that are difficult to hear or that others may not feel at ease telling us. [Int7, F, 31, PT, living in IE]

The lack of moral judgment is represented as a condition for total disclosure and it may assume two different meanings: not being afraid to be judged

in one’s conduct; not being afraid to be judged as a friend, that is, trusting that the friend will not be judgmental and moralistic towards the friendship itself, and the way one behaves within it.

I didn’t feel that there was anything that I couldn’t say to her out loud. She was (still is) a very open-minded person and that absence of moral judgments is fundamental to me, in a friendship relation. In my personal history, that is especially relevant. The moralization of relationships (in friendship or other relations) is like rust. [Int3, F, 41, PT]

Other meanings of intimate friendships arise from the articulation of time, trust, shared experiences, reciprocity, in-depth knowledge, and understanding, such as freedom, humor, and “space,” as psychological and emotional dimensions.

She was an intimate friend because we had mental and emotional space to explore each other, I myself, her herself, in the company of each other. [Int3, F, 41, PT]

To sum up, the meanings of intimacy within LDFs do not differ substantially from those described in the literature with respect to geographically close friendships. In part, this may be explained by the fact that intimacy was built up while still in geographically close, face-to-face relationships, with the challenge in LDFs being to keep up the demanding standards of intimacy, a concept with many dimensions, some of which depend on physical proximity (spending time together, doing things together). We can therefore conclude that spatial proximity still matters, at least as far as intimacy building is concerned. Hence, how do individuals cope with

physical distance, managing to keep intimacy up to "acceptable" standards? What are the common practices developed by LD friends to keep their intimate relationships going?

Doing Friendship at a Distance: (Not) Everyday Life and Friendship Practices

Some of the practices individuals develop around LDFs are embedded in everyday life, and LDFs will endure insofar as friends can encompass the ups and downs of a daily routine which is no longer shared. Others are specifically oriented towards the "maintenance" of the friendship.

The "Hows": Face-to-Face Encounters and ICT

Amongst the practices of friendships at a distance, the means of communication used are of utmost importance. One can distinguish between two major forms of keeping contact: face-to-face and through communication technologies (ICT, both "old," like writing letters or talking over the telephone; and "new," like email, Skype, and social media). However, while face-to-face meetings are reported as being one of the most important forms of nurturing intimacy, ICT provides a much less satisfactory means of bridging the gap of physical proximity. Therefore, the latter seems to still matter to LDFs, in fact, much more than popular knowledge and discourse would suggest, considering the hegemony of the "digital and technological culture." This finding accords with John Urry's (2002:259) thesis according to which virtual communication is unable to substitute completely for "co-present interaction," in either one of its three significant bases: "face-to-face" (presence

with people), "face-the-place" (presence in places), and "face-the-moment" (presence at occasions and events). It seems that "co-present interaction is preferred and necessary across a wide range of tasks" (Urry 2002:259), and this also applies to LDFs.

If to Urry (2002) "corporeal proximity" seems to make "corporeal travel" necessary and desirable, face-to-face encounters seem to make LDFs at the same time possible and enduring. The occasional and contingent nature of co-presence pointed out by Urry thus emerges as a particular feature of LDFs. Regular face-to-face meetings, at least once a year, involving having dinner at each other's homes, going out for a coffee, or just getting together "to talk," are mentioned as some of the most important practices that help to keep LDFs alive. In the long run, they become part of a routine dictated by the calendar of visits of the distant friend to the home country. Sometimes these times of contact cannot hide changes in the nature and intensity of the relationship. It is one of the prices to pay for being at a distance, where intimacy can turn smoothly into a *nice relationship*.

Every time she comes back to Portugal, she comes over for dinner at my place, and during her stays, we always meet several times to talk about our life, projects, love life, exchange information about our work, contacts, et cetera. We have a nice relationship. [Int1, F, 38, PT]

This ritualized practice of getting together may happen either during the friend's visits to the home country, or during a visit to the friend's host country and foreign home. "Visiting" is a major way of telling how important that particular LDF still is: to keep it alive, individuals mobilize resources often

difficult to gather, such as time and money. It is usually a two-person event, which enables the re-enacting of intimacy.

I have already visited him in Berlin and he comes to Portugal at least once a year, to spend a few days. So, when he comes to Portugal, we always arrange a few meetings to catch up, face-to-face. When we meet, we do exactly the same we used to do before he left, we go to the movies, to a pub, or out for dinner. Most of all, we talk. [Int12, F, 35, PT]

This last summer, on our way back to Lisbon, we stopped for a week in Paris, where she lives. We stayed at her place, joined families. It was very good. We talked, as always. We were together. I was very much welcomed. [Int3, F, 41, PT]

A similar importance given to face-to-face episodic encounters is reported by Mason (2004) in relation to Pakistani families living in the UK. The regular visits to Pakistan emerge as a way not only of recognizing and maintaining bonds and ties among kin living at LDs but also of building a kinship narrative of the transnational family. Like Mason's Pakistani families, the participants in this study also expected these face-to-face encounters to be a regular occurrence, thus guaranteeing a sequence that enables the construction of a shared friendship biography. It is something not only to be remembered (lived in the past) but also to be anticipated and looked forward to (lived in the future).

At other times, new stages in the life course and new actors in "the scene" of private life make it difficult for intimate friends to meet alone. The participation

of these new actors in "the scene of friendship" is not always clear. It may be seen as an addition to the already existing friendship that does not endanger its privileged intimate nature (see: former quote, Int12). It can also be presented casually, with the meanings and implications for intimacy between friends not being clear. For instance, does it happen because there is no other possibility? Or rather because they want to share their loved ones and bring them into "the friendship scene?" The ways in which these new relations and contexts hamper intimacy must be further explored.

Whenever he comes to Portugal (or, at least, whenever it is possible), we meet. We do it just the two of us, as well as with his girlfriend, now his wife, or with other friends, at dinner parties, going out at night, et cetera. [Int5, F, 30, PT]

However, this contingent and rare physical proximity often underlines the persistence of physical distance that stands between friends, in real life. Face-to-face encounters become symbolic spaces of "doing friendship," metaphors of what intimacy should continue to be, even at a LD.

Whenever my friend comes to Portugal, we try to get together, even if it is only for 5 minutes...Not always is it possible to meet, but we try, even if it is only for that short time. Sometimes it is a symbolic encounter, I feel that, but it's worth it! [Int11, F, 30, PT]

While these practices of "gathering" and "meeting" relate more to ways of reproducing the routines of daily life, which can no longer be shared every day, other practices are more connected to special events

in the annual (social and personal) calendar, such as festivities (New Year’s Eve, birthdays) or scheduled breaks in the work routine (holidays). Spending holidays together becomes an important way of keeping alive the feeling of shared intimacy and daily routines. Concentrated in time and place, holidays are a privileged locus for re-enacting everyday life practices and sharing experiences. They are also the exceptional experience to the rule of a not-anymore-shared daily life.

We have spent holidays together; often covering great distances and paying for each other’s travel costs if needed. [Int9, M, 44, UK, living in PT]

We even spent holidays together, and New Year’s Eves, for instance. I think it’s what’s possible, given the context. [Int5, F, 30, PT]

When a face-to-face contact and meetings are not possible, that is, for the great majority of time during a regular year, “old,” as well as “new” forms of LD communication are used. Email contact is the most cited means of communication, substituting for telephone calls and writing letters, in the long run. As time passes, telephone calls become reserved for special occasions, or to when something serious happens, something that requires immediate attention. These results are in line with those of Wilding (2006), who showed how ICT contributes to improving the quality and quantity of contact and communication; of Wang and Wellman (2010), who underlined the role of ICT in enhancing social connectivity and increases in number of friends; or Utz (2007), who demonstrated the way ICT makes it easier to maintain relationships over distances.

We mainly talk through the Internet, plus phone calls and texts when we want it to be special; birthdays. [Int2, F, 33, PT]

We keep regular contact, though we don’t speak by Skype as often as we would like to. But, if something important comes up, we talk. Also by email and Facebook. [Int4, F, 31, PT]

Skype and social media (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp) are also mentioned. Sometimes they stand as specific new forms of communication, while at other times they replace older forms of communication.

We used to regularly write (very long) letters to each other, then we began exchanging correspondence in the form of lengthy cassette recordings, finally we adapted to email. [Int9, M, 44, UK, living in PT]

We write each other long emails (about the topics we used to talk about during evenings we met), and stay in touch with WhatsApp. [Int6, M, 30, NL]

However, contact is often irregular and mentioned as not being enough, or being a weak substitute for face-to-face, in the presence of the other, contact. Thus, these exploratory data suggest that spatial and physical distance still matters to LDFs. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that we are talking about intimate friendships which go a long way back in the individual’s personal history, with intimacy having been built upon many years of mutual physical presence. While this paper is not focused on understanding the specificities of friendships built mainly on the basis of ICT from the beginning, other studies have extensively explored the

topic (e.g., see: Boase et al. 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Bryant and Marmo 2012).

Common to both major means of keeping contact (face-to-face and ICT), *talk* is a determining feature of LDFs. As mentioned above, *sharing* (experiences, feelings, emotions, and time) is an important dimension of intimacy. It is therefore not surprising that the content of talks with LD friends is also structured around this issue. Talk has the purpose of keeping that sharing experience alive, and therefore becomes a major feature of LDF practices. Often, this act of talking is self-referential, in the sense that friends talk about (and share) the friendship itself. The meaning of this tautological practice is uncertain and must be further explored, specifically when LDs are concerned. However, it can be advanced that part of its role is to restate the special status of the friendship, as built upon particular intimate ties, thus reassuring both parties involved in the face of the “threat” of distance. This seems to emerge as a particular feature of LDFs.

We usually discuss our lives and the lives of the people close to us, how we are feeling, what we plan for the future. [Int2, F, 33, PT]

The pretexts and subjects differ, but they are always related to our life (mainly internal life), problems that each one of us are facing at the moment, things that we wish to think through with someone of trust, advice we want to ask for. We talk a lot about life, friendship, romantic relationships, work, ourselves; of the things we want to change, of the obstacles, but also of successes. [Int10, F, 40, PT, living in CA]

The burden of distance is then managed through the mastering of the use of talk and time, trying to condense all relevant slices of life into confined moments. This seems to be another specific feature of LDFs: the capacity to generate inventive ways of keeping a relationship going with less frequent (though not necessarily less intense) contact. The extent to which close distance friends use the same kind of strategies is to be further explored, but one can expect that they may be less of a resource, to the extent that physical proximity erases the need for exceptional acts and moments.

The “Whys”: “Catching Up,” “Be There When Necessary,” and “No Reason in Particular”

A second important dimension of friendship practices is related to the reasons pointed out by individuals for maintaining contact with their LD friends. Three main reasons stand out as particularly relevant in describing the content of these friendship practices: “catching up,” affective and emotional support, and the absence of a need for particular reasons to enter into contact. All of these are very much based on dialogue, as “talking” to friends becomes the easiest way of keeping updated on important issues and events, either in person or through ICT.

“Catching up” thus seems to be an overdeveloped practice in LDFs: it is almost as if with geographically closer friends it becomes more difficult to justify such a practice, made redundant by the constancy of physical presence. Which means that, ironically, LD friends may be more up to date with certain kinds of information about each other than close distance ones, since the latter may not feel the same need to explicitly “catch up.”

Regular emails with a lot of catching up on our daily lives (maybe monthly?); regular visits; catching up in person as often as possible (every 4 months). Quality of catching up generally is very good. [Int7, F, 31, PT, living in IE]

We try to keep up-to-date with each other's lives and spirits and state of mind. We make a special effort to be in touch when we know the other is going through a significant moment in life. [Int9, M, 44, UK, living in PT]

Emotional support, being present when important things happen in each other's lives, is also an important preoccupation of LD friends. As if distance automatically impairs the ability of friends to provide the necessary support in times of need, LD friends spend extra energy on reassuring themselves (and their friends) that, despite distance, they are still able to provide assistance, even if on different terms and mostly of an emotional kind.

We try to talk as much as possible and keep updated in relation to each other's life, share things, ask for advice, et cetera. We also get in contact often when we need some advice or help related to work. [Int5, F, 30, PT]

This connects partially with what Mason (2004) found in her study of Pakistani transnational families paying visits to kin in Pakistan, as well as Urry's definition of co-presence as “face-the-moment,” with travel being a means of attending and experiencing special moments. The difference, however, is that while Mason (2004:425) highlights mainly special family events (weddings, deaths, funerals) or religious ones, and Urry (2002:262) mentions “political, artistic, celebratory, academic, or sporting occasions,” emphasizing a collective dimension, LD

friends tend to focus on special “internal” moments or events in life, related to emotional well-being, self-reflexivity, and personal development.

She really likes to talk to me about troubles, nice things she has with guys she spent time with, talk about her family, et cetera. It's very intimate contact, and we maintain that contact via extensive emails and WhatsApp. A few weeks ago she had issues with a guy she slept with, and I could comfort her via WhatsApp and email (it also helps her if she can write down what she experiences and how she feels about it). [Int6, M, 30, NL]

The need for permanent reinforcement or restatement of the special status of LDFs is also visible in the way LD friends stress that they do not need any particular pretext to get in touch with each other. The statement is that friendship is, in itself, a sufficient “pretext” to make contact, in spite of the LD. However, behind this “bright side of everlasting friendship,” that does not seem to need specific routines, a darker side emerges: frequency of contact is reported as irregular, raising the shadows of friendships eroding and fading away. And although individuals are quick to explicitly declare that such irregular (or almost non-existent) contact does not affect the friendship, it is something that requires further exploration.

I can't indicate a precise frequency of contact. We can stay for a month or two without talking, and after that we can talk every day. It depends on our lives, whether we have or not news in our lives we wish to tell and share, or just if only we miss each other and feel the urge of knowing about each other. Therefore, there is no particular motif or subject. [Int12, F, 35, PT]

The Impacts of Distance

None of the participants in this study explicitly mentioned the positive impacts of LD on their friendships. Rather, they developed an ambivalent discourse, both denying major negative impacts and referring to eventual negative or neutral impacts. In fact, saying that LD may not be fatal to a friendship is different from saying that people think positively about living a long way from each other. It is possible that the participants in this study see LD as something that may even benefit a friendship, whilst still missing their LD friends and preferring to live closer. The general concern was to underline that LD had not negatively impacted on the *quality* and *nature* of the bond.

I don't think we have a space and time distance between us. What we have/are is just the same. [Int3, F, 41, PT]

The contact is not very regular though from both sides (mine and theirs), but that does not make me feel less close to them. [Int8, F, 34, PT, living in the UK]

In tandem with these declarations contradictory feelings emerged regarding *time* (considered as not being “enough”). Confronted with the need to deal with the insurmountable distance, friends try to adjust their expectations in regard to the quality of their bonds, as well as the frequency of contact. Lack of a shared daily life, common experiences, and time spent together emerge as major obstacles to keeping intimate friendships as they “used to be.” LD friends then tend to rely on memory (past shared experiences) and the belief that common values will endure. However, as social science studies

have shown, common values emerge from common experiences, therefore making it difficult for friends who develop very different lifestyles to keep their intimacy other than on the basis of *past* and *memory* (Adams 1998; Adams and Graham 1998).

We have a nice relationship, but I should say that it is difficult to have the same quality relationship that we had when we were students and we met in the coffee shop every weekend. I believe it is because we have different careers and we live in different places, we do not share so many experiences as before. Though I believe we still share a lot of common values and goals and those old shared experiences (memories now). [Int1, F, 38, PT]

This feeling of imminent danger or loss haunts the discourses of LD friends and is indirectly mentioned in terms of regret for the lower frequency of contacts. The counterpart to this, as mentioned above, is that distance also provides the justification for regular “catch ups” that keep friends up to date.

Nevertheless, the fact that all contacts must now be “condensed,” in the sense that friends must be able to catch up on each other's important events and daily life in (very) few encounters, is also regretted. Physical contact is also missed, as a form of interpersonal exchange that involves emotional investment and return.

I feel that we end up by telling things in a more accelerated way because there's no time to go deep into many subjects and because, as there isn't a more daily contact, we end up by not sharing our daily life, but rather the most important things that happen to us. [Int11, F, 30, PT]

It is also when asked about the “ups and downs” of these friendships that the importance of distance arises as an obstacle, as something that brings more complexity to the already difficult process of managing conflicts within LDFs. LD is seen as aggravating misunderstandings, given the impossibility of being closer and more attentive to the other’s well-being. This happens despite the fact that LDFs provide far less opportunity for minor bickering and the kind of grating on each other that can come from very frequent contact. Moreover, distance also becomes an obstacle when there are happy moments to share. Even though friends try to adjust to what they describe as the “new state” of their friendship, these critical turning points make more salient the need for physical intimate contact, such as hugs, verbal and non-verbal contact (such as gaze), or simply the constant presence of the other. Through all these means friends validate each other’s experiences, in a dialectical and reflexive process. Since certain turning points are critical to the personal life course and identity formation, involving multiple readjustments to social roles (parental, professional, conjugal, etc.), LD intimate friends are particularly missed in the reflexivity process that is then embarked upon. These are certainly aspects that deserve further exploration.

About the downturns, I will be “egocentric” and talk about the special events in my life: the birth of my children and the fact that my friend was not in Portugal for neither of them. How I missed sharing with her, live, individually, each one of the births. Of course, I have sent her photos, we spoke on the phone, but I missed very much her hug, her gaze to them. Then, it was a time of discovery, for me, and sharing came

as a natural thing...but it was not possible to write her entire emails about each one of my children’s deeds. Besides, that is not our kind of friendship. I miss her company and her presence. [Int13, F, 40, PT]

Final Remarks

Within this paper I have discussed the implications of LD for intimate friendships, from a sociological qualitative perspective. Two dimensions of this subject have been explored: the meanings individuals give to intimacy in the context of their LDFs, and the friendship practices they develop in coping with distance to (re)construct intimacy. Qualitative data were analyzed with the purpose of bringing heuristic insights to the topic and adding to the definitions of intimacy already identified in the scientific literature, such as the importance of *time* spent together, *trust*, *self-disclosure*, and *sharing experiences*. One important point is that, amongst the friendships reported, intimacy had always been constructed prior to the critical moment of physical separation and increased geographical distance. Thus, time also referred to the fact that these friendships went back a long way in personal history and involved a memory of shared past experiences, which played a key role both in defining these relationships as intimate, and investing different kinds of resources in maintaining them.

Practices of LDF are deeply rooted in the expectations friends develop in relation to each other and how they readjust to the experience of living at a distance. One of the major contributions of this paper is related to the persistence of the importance of co-presence, face-to-face meetings, contacts and interactions, to “catching up” intimacy. This seems

to be a particular feature of LDFs: in spite of the frequency of use of ICT, and the acknowledgement of their importance in bridging the gap of physical proximity, face-to-face meetings are reported as crucial for re-enacting and nurturing intimacy. A result that agrees with authors such as Urry (2002:259), according to whom “co-present interaction is preferred and necessary across a wide range of tasks.” Despite the fact that LD media are very much used, namely, those made possible by technology such as telephone, emails, chat programs, Skype, only when friends “get together” do they feel that their intimacy has been completely re-enacted. As one of the participants stated, “a Skype chat can never replace the real deal.” Significant differences are therefore perceived between face-to-face contacts and technologically mediated ones, when it comes to sharing routines and daily lives, but mainly when it comes to managing and solving conflict. Moreover, with face-to-face contact being perceived as so essential in maintaining levels of intimacy and commitment within LDFs, and with those contacts being so limited in time (often once a year or less), friends develop multiple strategies to cope with the restrictions imposed by distance, among which is the “contraction” of interaction in episodic events or meetings, that condense the essentials of “being an intimate friend.” In this sense, LDF practices are closer to rituals than routines, since they carry an important symbolic dimension and involve an affective commitment that contributes to maintaining the identity of the group (Fiese 2006) or the dyad.

Another contribution of this paper is to highlight the importance of talk as a specific friendship practice, particularly within LDFs. The mastery of talk

that concentrates relevant slices of life in confined moments is a particular strategy for “catching up” intimacy among LD friends. Talk is a self-referential act: friends talk about (and share) the friendship itself. When LD friends talk, they do it in a particular way, covering mainly bigger issues, as well as the friendship itself, in a self-reflexive and somewhat compensatory practice that contributes to maintaining the relationship. These discourses may become more demonstrative and are marked by high levels of self-disclosure, suggesting a *performative practice of friendship* that avoids the dangers of drained personal memory and affections due to geographical mobility and distance.

Another strategy used to cope with distance is related to extraordinary events by which everyday life practices and sharing of experiences are re-enacted, such as spending holidays together, organizing special dinner parties, or spending Christmas or New Year’s Eve together. Through these extraordinary events, friends *display* (Finch 2007) their relationships, thus re-enacting and confirming their special and intimate status. This is another contribution of this paper: the relevance of looking at friendship from the point of view not only of practices (what friends *do*) but also of display (what friends convey about their friendships). This insight adds to the literature about friendship in general, and LDFs in particular, adding insights from the sociology of the family. As Finch (2007) claimed with respect to families, friendships also have to be “displayed,” as well as “done,” with displaying meaning that friends’ actions have to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others. LDFs thus seem to have a particular capacity to generate inventive ways of keeping

a relationship going with less frequent (though not necessarily less intense) contact.

The reasons attributed to the contact they sustain at a LD are closely related to the meanings given to intimacy. Contact is oriented towards giving and receiving emotional support, sharing experiences, and, most of all, “catching up” on each other’s lives. Also, LD friends tend to rate their relationships as “being the same as before,” with their nature not being affected by distance. Therefore, they tend to get in touch “for no reason at all,” just because they feel the urge, no “excuses” needed, “just get in touch because we remember each other, because we miss each other, and because some times are good for both of us to talk.” This is rooted in a process of the *naturalization of friendship*, as an ever-lasting, reciprocal, personal, and non-instrumental kind of relationship. However, this bright and easy-going side of LDFs, derived from its naturalization (in spite of the intense reflexivity that surrounds it), hides a darker one, that begins to emerge when talking about difficult moments lived throughout the relationship. The memory of those turning points brings to the surface the need for physical contact, non-verbal communication (eye contact), or simply of a face-to-face talk to resolve problems and conflicts.

One of the limitations of this study is the homogeneity of its sample in terms of social and cultural background, being mainly composed of highly educated, white, urban, and western individuals. Future studies should enlarge the scope of the empirical material, both regarding the characteristics of the sample, and the items covered by the interview questions. Diversity regarding age, gender, social

and educational background, ethnicity, or stage of the life course should be explored in the future.

Future directions for the study of LDFs should also include the relevance of gender to build and display LDFs, namely, the relationship between gender and self-disclosure. This topic has been widely explored in quantitative studies, but nevertheless still lacks the richness of meaning that a qualitative approach may bring. Other than differences, commonalities between men’s and women’s perceptions and practices in relation to LDFs should be explored, with respect to changes in gender roles in post-industrial societies. The collected data also suggested other important aspects of LDFs that deserve to be explored in future research, such as conflict resolution, the role of (shared) memory in managing relations, the role of material culture (e.g., objects), the effects on, and of, the contexts that surround those relations, or the ways they evolve across their own trajectory (with “ups and downs”). Finally, another important aspect to develop in the future would be the “extreme cases” perspective. For instance, considering those for whom silence and distance tune harmoniously to entail better friendships, and how this relates to memory and its role in the reassurance of the self. The nature of such diversity in ways of living intimacy at a distance is discussed by one of the participants in this study:

[Since separation] I have done nothing more than calling him once every one or two years. That’s all I’ve done. Physical contact is now very limited, but contact through memories never stopped and is still very vivid. Ups and downs never happened since we were separated, ups and downs used to happen when we were clos-

er, in contact with one another. Since we’ve split, things have always been great between us. Never had any issue, never had a disagreement, no ups, no downs, just the sweetness of fantastic memories. [Int14, M, 38, CA]

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