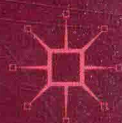


# DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

INTIMACY AND EMOTIONS  
AMONGST ACADEMICS AND THEIR  
PARTNERS IN DUAL-LOCATIONS

MARY  
HOLMES

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN STUDIES  
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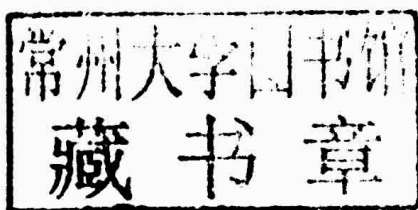


# Distance Relationships

## Intimacy and Emotions Amongst Academics and Their Partners in Dual-Locations

Mary Holmes

*University of Edinburgh, UK*



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# Series Editors' Preface

The remit of the *Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life* series is to publish major texts, monographs and edited collections focusing broadly on the sociological exploration of intimate relationships and family organisation. As editors we think that such a series is timely. Expectations, commitments and practices have changed significantly in intimate relationship and family life in recent decades. This is very apparent in patterns of family formation and dissolution, demonstrated by trends in cohabitation, marriage and divorce. Changes in household living patterns over the last 20 years have also been marked, with more people living alone, adult children living longer in the parental home and more 'non-family' households being formed. Furthermore, there have been important shifts in the ways people construct intimate relationships. There are few comfortable certainties about the best ways of being a family man or woman, with once conventional gender roles no longer being widely accepted. The normative connection between sexual relationships and marriage or marriage-like relationships is also less powerful than it once was. Not only is greater sexual experimentation accepted, but it is now accepted at an earlier age. Moreover, heterosexuality is no longer the only mode of sexual relationship, given legitimacy. In Britain, as elsewhere, gay male and lesbian partnerships are now socially and legally endorsed to a degree hardly imaginable in the mid-twentieth century. Increases in lone-parent families, the rapid growth of different types of stepfamily, the de-stigmatisation of births outside marriage and the rise in couples 'living-apart-together' (LATs) all provide further examples of the ways that 'being a couple', 'being a parent' and 'being a family' have diversified in recent years.

The fact that change in family life and intimate relationships has been so pervasive has resulted in renewed research interest from sociologists and other scholars. Increasing amounts of public funding have been directed to family research in recent years, in terms of both individual projects and the creation of family research centres of different hues. This research activity has been accompanied by the publication of some very important and influential books exploring different aspects of shifting family experience, in Britain and elsewhere. The *Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life* series hopes to add to this

list of influential research-based texts, thereby contributing to existing knowledge and informing current debates. Our main audience consists of academics and advanced students, though we intend that the books in the series will be accessible to a more general readership who wish to understand better the changing nature of contemporary family life and personal relationships.

We see the remit of the series as wide. The concept of 'family and intimate life' will be interpreted in a broad fashion. While the focus of the series will clearly be sociological, we take family and intimacy as being inclusive rather than exclusive. The series will cover a range of topics concerned with family practices and experiences, including, for example, partnership, marriage, parenting, domestic arrangements, kinship, demographic change, intergenerational ties, life course transitions, step-families, gay and lesbian relationships, lone-parent households and also non-familial intimate relationships such as friendships. We also wish to foster comparative research, as well as research on under-studied populations. The series will include different forms of book. Most will be theoretical or empirical monographs on particular substantive topics, though some may also have a strong methodological focus. In addition, we see edited collections as also falling within the series' remit, as well as translations of significant publications in other languages. Finally, we intend that the series has an international appeal, in terms of both topics covered and authorship. Our goal is for the series to provide a forum for family sociologists conducting research in various societies, and not solely in Britain.

*Graham Allan, Lynn Jamieson and David Morgan*

# Acknowledgements

As will become clear, the interviewees in this book not only generously shared their stories, but often shared their food and drink as well. I was given cups of tea, biscuits and even lunch. And almost all responded years later when I bothered them again, asking for an update on their lives. I am most humbly grateful to these couples and individuals, and I have worked hard to respect them and their very human struggles in my analysis. I also thank the other couples who filled in questionnaires for me, but were not interviewed. Their information was very helpful in situating the detailed interviews and thus improving the research.

Bodies instrumental in bringing the research to fruition include the Economic and Social Research Council who funded the study (RES000220351) and Palgrave Macmillan who suggested I write the book. I completed as much of the research as possible before I had to give up the grant in 2005 on shifting to an academic position at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia.

For me the greatest treasures I discovered in Adelaide were Chris Beasley and Heather Brook. Without doubt, any coherence this book may manage to have is due to all those hours happily spent working together and their help in smoothing out sometimes rather crumpled arguments. So successful were our intellectual (and social) adventures together that we now have trouble separating out who thought what. The piffling references to our joint and individual works that appear in the following are grossly insufficient to acknowledge this debt. For the sheer joy of working with you, I thank you both. And thank you 'Carson' (aka Brent) for all the coffee.

Flinders provided other treasures. Firstly, thanks go to Carolyn Corkindale, the Sociology Department's research assistant until her recent retirement. She was an absolute treasure in helping me update my literature search for this book. If I have missed any key readings, it is because I have not paid proper attention to what she found. Thank you to my other Sociology colleagues. I actually do miss you all wandering into my office for a chat! My new colleagues at the University of Edinburgh are only just starting to respond to training on this front, but I thank them for their welcoming collegiality.

Other colleagues deserve a special mention for reading drafts of chapters and giving me feedback. I chose you gloriously picky people to help me try and avoid embarrassing myself in print. Your thoughtful comments have made this book better, although I fear I have not done as much with your generous insights as I would wish. I am nevertheless thankful to Chris Beasley, Heather Brook, Roger Burrows, Lynn Jamieson, Nathan Manning, Ian Burkitt and Brent.

Brent not only read part of the book for me, but his story and mine appear in the book in anonymised form. However, he is prone to happily revealing his 'secret identity' over dinner with friends and family. I rely on them not to spread the secret, but it is exactly Brent's sense of humour about this project and our lives in general that reminds me how privileged we are. So, thank you Brent for always reminding me of the joys of distance relating with you. Here, I share both the joys and the sorrows of all those who participated and I thank the reader for attending.

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# 1

## Introduction

Martin and Lucy were one of the couples I interviewed for the study that forms the basis of this book. Interesting, as I found all the couples, they were the one who perhaps made me think most about intimacy in distance relationships. They clearly knew each other very well, having formed a close and apparently loving relationship over about 20 years. When I spoke to them, they had an ease of familiarity with each other, but were also keen to show the careful efforts they made to be kind and considerate of each other. Martin and Lucy talked with affection and humour about their grown-up children who lived nearby. They told stories about past struggles, and they talked quite a lot, especially Lucy, about washing and ironing and shopping. One of the ways in which Lucy emphasised how supportive Martin was of her was to say that he 'never said [he] didn't want to go shopping'. Indeed both Martin and Lucy thought that doing food shopping together was an important time to talk and to bond, to forge intimacy. Are these colossally boring people? The rest of their story suggests not. Lucy and Martin were ordinary in many ways, but they were unusual in that they were academics who for 16 years had lived and worked in separate towns, reuniting at weekends and holidays. Lucy's job was prestigious and yet rare, and when she got it, they decided the family would not move to the city where it was based, but she would travel to and fro. The other couples I spoke to in distance relationships had not been at it as long as Martin and Lucy. This distance relating makes them different from couples cohabiting every day, and thus distance relaters have often spent a lot of time thinking about and working on being intimate. They do not take it as for granted and therefore can reveal much about intimacy more generally. In addition, their stories illustrate much about the current social environment in which all people must live out their intimate lives. Those lives are

not totally determined by the social framework in which they exist, but the possibilities and constraints faced are the product of particular times and places, and their struggles are shaped around these.

Thus, my research aimed to examine what the experiences of distance relaters can reveal about contemporary intimate life and to what extent intimacy requires proximity. My ESRC-funded qualitative study gathered data on British couples in distance relationships between 2002 and early 2005. Overall, I have questionnaire data on 24 couples (47 individuals, as one person's partner did not participate), and I interviewed 14 couples, 12 in joint interviews plus two women whose male partners were not present at interview. Working as an academic in Britain at the time, I knew that many academic couples, including my partner and I, were in distance relationships. Therefore, I made use of my personal contacts with academics in a variety of disciplines across the United Kingdom, asking these 'mediators' to put me in touch with distance relaters. Thus, in this sample at least one partner in each couple was an academic (see Chapter 3). It is my contention that we might expect this rather privileged group of distance relaters to be at the forefront of individualisation processes, given their high levels of education and the ability to be financially independent, which the women enjoy. However, I argue that rather than understand them as institutionally individualised individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; 2013), it is more illuminating to examine how their intimate lives and selves are constructed in relation to others, and experienced in embodied and emotional ways.

I identified couples as in a distant relationship if they typically spent two or more nights apart in a working week. This adapts Gerstel and Gross's (1984, pp. 1–2) definition of a commuter marriage as one between 'employed spouses who spend at least three nights per week in separate residences and yet are still married and intend to remain so'. To some extent, distant couples are 'Living Apart Together' (LATs), but this term also refers to couples who live in the same town, albeit in different households (Levin, 2004; Levin and Trost, 1999; Roseneil, 2006). Gerstel and Gross use the term 'commuter marriage' to distinguish what I call distance relationships from other couples who live apart. As well as including unmarried and non-heterosexual established couples, I did not adopt the 'commuter' terminology as I found it too easily confused with cohabiting couples where one partner has a long daily commute (see Green, 1997; Green et al., 1999). 'Distance relationship' clearly names the focus of my interest in couples who live much of their lives apart, but living far apart is not entirely new.

More traditional forms of distance relationships differ from the dual-residence and dual-career variety I examine. Past and present examples include men working in the armed forces, long-distance truck drivers, fishermen and mining and oil rig workers. Such relationships may share with dual-career versions an experience of emotional distance, better communication, independence (especially for the women), social isolation and feeling different (Gerstel and Gross, 1984, pp. 158–182). However, more traditional distance relationships tend to have more haphazard patterns of separation and reunion and are typically heterosexual marriages in which husbands are absent for some time, while wives stay at the family home and look after the children. The women tend not to do paid work, but are very busy managing on their own and struggling with renegotiating control when their husband is back (Chandler, 1991; Eales, 1996; Gallegos, 2006; Hollowell, 1968; Tisdall, 1963; Tunstall, 1962). LATs might match the general population in terms of class and status (Duncan and Phillips, 2010, p. 123), whereas distance relaters are perhaps more likely to be professionals, because sufficient money and some flexibility are required in order to maintain two residences. Distance does add particular challenges to intimate relating (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2013), some of which are different from those experienced by couples who live apart together in the same town.

### **The similarities and differences between LATs and distance relaters**

Dual-residence distance relating shares some features of living apart together (LAT). Gerstel and Gross (1984, pp. 6–7) argue that commuter/distance couples are different from non-commuting couples in five significant ways that also apply to LATs, with slight variations. Firstly, in commuter couples both partners work rather than the woman waiting for the man to return. In LATs, it is likely that both partners work, and they may take turns to visit each other. Secondly, for both distance relaters and LATs the separation is (to some degree) voluntary (but see Holmes, 2004c). Thirdly, personal career satisfaction and not money is the main motivation for distance relaters, and money is also not a prime motivator for LATs. Fourthly, distance relationships and LATs nearby involve the establishment of a second home, not just staying in a hotel or other temporary accommodation. Fifthly, the couple are usually not planning to get divorced (or to split up) (Duncan et al., 2013b; Gerstel and Gross, 1984, pp. 6–7). However, the miles between partners play a part in how those relationships are done.

Distinguishing distance relaters from LATs is somewhat hampered by limited statistics on non-cohabiting couples. What there is mostly relates to LATs. Haskey (2005) used the Omnibus survey, Ermisch (2000) the 1998 British Household Panel Survey and Kiernan (1999) the European Family Fertility studies of the 1990s. These suggested that around one third of unmarried people in Europe under 35 were in non-cohabiting relationships. However, how many of these were long-term relationships is unknown. Haskey (2005) estimated that around two million people in Britain were seriously living apart together, but not how many were distant from their partner. Guldner (2003, p. 1) estimated that about two and a half million Americans (not including the armed forces) might be in some form of long-distance relationship. His research findings also suggest that around one quarter of those yet to marry were in a long-distance relationship and three quarters had been at some point in time (Guldner, 2003, p. 6). However, his focus is on college students, who are yet to establish careers and thus are rather different to dual-career, dual-residence distance relaters. More recent UK figures suggest that around 10 per cent of adults in Britain are not cohabiting with their partner (Duncan and Phillips, 2010, p. 114). About 3 per cent of LATs are in same-sex relationships (Duncan et al., 2013a). Only about 16 per cent of the LATs surveyed lived more than 50 miles from their partner, two thirds living within ten miles (Duncan et al., 2013b, p. 3). The questionnaires from my study suggested that five hours of travel was about the maximum most couples endured, indicating that being able to get together relatively often and easily is important in maintaining intimacy. Distance and time apart are important in making the commute viable (Gerstel and Gross, 1984, pp. 136–141). LATs living in the same town may choose to maintain separate households, but can ‘pop round’ if they particularly need or wish to. There are particular issues that arise for couples for whom distance prevents them visiting their non-cohabiting partners whenever they like. I want to briefly make some of these distinctions here, but the way the issues play out for distance relaters will be expanded upon in the following chapters.

Both LATs and distance relationships raise questions about whether intimacy requires physical proximity, but distance relating can put more pressure on a relationship because being far apart can limit the amount of time a couple are able to spend together. Living at close quarters does not guarantee intimacy (Jamieson, 1998, pp. 8–9), nor does lack of proximity dissolve it. The private world of relationships is not cut off from the public world; the two are defined against each other (Pateman, 1988). In addition, the public world often shapes the private. For example, intimate life has arguably been increasingly colonised

by 'expert' advice and the rules of the market (Foucault, 1990/1978; Hochschild, 2003; Lasch, 1995). Increased geographical mobility and the results of consumerism may bring some fragility to human bonds (Bauman, 2003), but interdependence remains central to intimate lives. This interdependence may require considerably more work when couples have to juggle travelling to see each other on top of the coordination of time, action and resources that Borrell and Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson (2003) note is required in LAT relationships.

Whilst both LATs living near and at a distance can enjoy greater autonomy, greater distance may impose new responsibilities. It is harder to deal with a distance relationship when founding a family or starting a career and easier when the relationship is established but there are no children and the career is in its initial phase. It is most difficult when raising young children and either career or family may need to be compromised to live together. Distance relating is easier when the children leave home as long as partners remain healthy (Gerstel and Gross, 1984, pp. 192–195). For women in particular, the farther they are from their partner, the more they can avoid the domestic, caring labour and emotion work typically expected of them (Ghazanfaraeon Karlsson and Borell, 2005; Holmes, 2004a; Levin, 2004; Roseneil, 2006). However, women in distance relationships seem to find themselves particularly called upon to account for why they are doing their relationship differently (Bergen, 2010; Holmes, 2004a).

This is not an exhaustive list of how distance might make non-cohabitation different, but the rest of the book can provide further evidence to the reader. The following summarises the ways in which distance relaters are distinctive and differ from traditional forms of distance relationship: These are dual-career, not absent husband relationships; the couples are dedicated to their work, and not doing it for money; and they have dual-residences, each a home to some degree. The relationships studied here are not casual; the partners have a commitment to continuing the relationship. I will argue that LATs and distance relationships share many features, but that dual-career distance relating can tell us additional things about the nature of intimate relationships in contemporary life and how they have changed.

## **Changes in intimate life and reasons for dual-career distance relating**

This book argues that dual-residence, dual-career distance relationships are a new, socially significant type of non-cohabitation involving couples. This new type has developed because more women participate

in the workforce than in the past and more of them are professionals. It can be difficult for professional couples (whether heterosexual or of same sex) to live together within economic conditions that are at least translocal and in many cases globalised (see Chapter 5). Sociological work on dual-career relationships extends back until at least the 1970s (e.g. Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976), but distance relationships have remained under-researched (although see Anderson and Spruill, 1993; Bergen, 2010; Farris, 1978; Golam Quddus, 1992; Gross, 1980; Kim, 2001; Rindfuss and Stephen, 1990; Winfield, 1985). This is especially the case in terms of what they tell us about intimacy. There is some work on communication issues (see, for example, Sahlstein, 2004; 2006; Stafford, 2010). Also, distance relationships as a form of mobility connected to migration or employment are the subject of some geographical study (Fall, 1998; Green et al., 1999; Walsh, 2009), but they are not considered within the framework of social changes affecting relationships. Meanwhile, psychologists tend to provide advice as to how to survive such relationships and usually assume, rather than critically examine how, they might deviate problematically from more conventional ways of relating (see, for example, Govaerts and Dixon, 1988; Guldner, 2003; Jackson et al., 2000; Kirschner and Walum, 1978). Sociological studies of different forms of intimacy have looked at similar new forms of intimacy including transhousehold relationships amongst young people (Heath, 1999; 2004), but these may be less enduring relationships than the kind in which I am principally interested. As noted above, work on LATs is perhaps most similar (Borrell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson, 2003; Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Ghazanfareon Karlsson and Borell, 2005; Levin, 2004; Levin and Trost, 1999; Roseneil, 2006), but the differences distance brings require further examination. In terms of sociological investigation of distance relating, the most important work is Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Gross's (1984) study of 121 individuals experiencing 'commuter marriage'. This I discuss and draw on frequently here and elsewhere (Holmes, 2004a).

Gerstel and Gross's research on commuter marriage aimed to challenge the sociological paradigms of the time, which viewed 'the worlds of work and family as separate spheres' (Gerstel and Gross, 1984, p. 4). They dispute functionalist and Marxist arguments about the nuclear family as well suited to capitalist demands for a mobile workforce. Those arguments are premised on ideas of a heterosexual nuclear family as the basic economic unit and cannot account for women's increasing participation in the paid workforce, especially as professionals. Thus, commuting 'points up the strains produced by the coincidence of an