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Author(s): Duncan, Simon, Carter, Julia and Phillips, Miranda.

Title: Why do people live apart together?

Publication year: 2013

Journal title: Families, Relationships and Societies.

Publisher: Policy Press.

Link to publisher's site: http://www.policypress.co.uk/journals_frs.asp?

Link to original published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/204674313X673419>

Citation: Duncan, S., Carter, J. and Phillips, M. (2013). Why do people live apart together? Families, Relationships and Societies. [Not yet published: Sept 2013].

Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/204674313X673419>

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Why do people live apart together?

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Published in *Families, Relationships and Societies* 2013

Abstract

Interpretations of living apart together (LAT) have typically counterposed ‘new family form’ versus ‘continuist’ perspectives. Recent surveys, however, construct LAT as a heterogeneous category which support a ‘qualified continuist’ position – most people live apart as a response to practical circumstances or as a modern version of ‘boy/girlfriend’, although a minority represents something new in preferring to live apart more permanently. The paper interrogates this conclusion by examining in depth why people live apart together, using a nationally representative survey from Britain and interview accounts from 2011. Our analysis shows that LAT as a category contains different sorts of relationship, with different needs and desires. While overall coupledness remains pivotal and cohabitation remains the goal for most, LAT allows people flexibility and room to manoeuvre in adapting couple intimacy to the demands of contemporary life. Hence, we suggest, LAT is both ‘new’ and a

‘continuation’.

Keywords

Living apart together, LAT, family, couples

1. Introduction

Sociologists and demographers have recently become interested in ‘living apart together’ (LAT) – that is being in an intimate relationship with a partner who lives somewhere else. Around 10% of adults in much of Western Europe, North America and Australasia live apart from a partner, although precise estimates vary according to the question asked and the survey group. This equates to roughly a quarter of all those adults not married or cohabiting (see Duncan and Phillips 2010, Liefbroer, 2012, Reimeidos 2011, Strohm et al. 2009). This ‘discovery’ of another relationship type alongside marriage, unmarried cohabitation and singledom has not been replicated in the worlds of official statistics, formal institutions, government policy and the law. Rather, it is usually taken for granted that ‘single’ in residential terms means ‘without a partner’ in relationship terms. This assumption will be incorrect about a quarter of the time.

Researchers disagree about the social importance and role of living apart together. Is LAT a new way of doing intimacy in contemporary societies, where marriage and cohabitation are increasingly decentred? Or is LAT

simply another stage on the well-established route to cohabitation and marriage? Taking the first view, Levin sees LAT as ‘a historically new family form’ (2004, 223) through which people can experience both the intimacy and satisfaction of being in a couple, but at the same time retain individual autonomy. Bawin-Legros and Gauthier go further and interpret living apart together as fostering ‘a new form of love semantics’ (2001, 39), where couples come closer to pure love, untrammelled by structures, than possible in marriage. Similarly Roseneil (2006) suggests that people who live apart can de-prioritize sexual/love relationships and place more importance on friendship, thus changing the very meaning of coupledness itself. In these interpretations LAT begins to move beyond traditional constructions of family, resonating both with the notion of Giddens’ (1992) notion of ‘pure relationships’, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) emphasis on individualization, and Bauman’s (2003) metaphor of ‘liquid love’. This is paralleled in the demographic literature where LAT is seen to signal an advanced stage of the second demographic transition, whereby changes in family forms, relationship patterns and fertility are fundamentally underpinned by individualistic behaviour (Gierveld 2004, Liefbroer et al 2012).

Alternatively, other studies take a more ‘continuist’ perspective– they

conclude that, ‘despite all the huffing and puffing nothing has really changed’ (Weeks 2007, 6). In this view LAT is just another stage on the well-worn route from singledom to cohabitation and marriage, or is an interruption to cohabitation forced by circumstances like job location (Haskey 2005, Haskey and Lewis, 2006, Ermisch and Seidler, 2009). This involves little that is new, despite the new name; there have always been ‘special’ or ‘steady’ boy/ girlfriends, and ‘courting couples’, just as there have always been temporary couple separations because of economic circumstances. Furthermore, people who live apart (LATs) are not radical pioneers moving beyond the family, but are cautious and conservative (Haskey and Lewis 2006). So instead of ‘a social change in the nature of what it means to be a couple’, Ermisch and Seidler dismissively conclude that LAT just attracts popular attention ‘because it is more prevalent among the better educated, who write about it and comment on society’ (2009, 41). From this continuist perspective, LAT would if anything reinforce the central normative position of marriage and cohabitation.

Recent survey evidence of the reasons for LAT, drawing on representative national samples, provides evidence for both the ‘new family form’ and the ‘continuist’ perspectives - although the quantitative emphasis rests on the latter. These surveys construct LAT as a heterogeneous category made up of

several groups according to their reasons for living apart. For example, in Britain in 2006, as many as 40% of LAT respondents were ‘not ready’ to live together (Duncan and Phillips 2010). Of the remaining 60% of more established ‘partner LATs’ almost half cited external constraints to living together because of financial problems (mostly housing affordability) or job/study location. Another 13% of partner LATs indicated ‘constrained choice’ – they put responsibilities to children or elderly parents first, or were waiting to marry.¹ As many as two thirds of respondents said they ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ would like to live with their partner in the future. Nor were LATs as a category particularly pioneering in their attitudes about families and relationships; rather they were part of a younger, more liberal group together with cohabitants and young singles, in contrast to older married people. All this supports a continuist perspective. Yet half of partner LATs also cited more ‘open choice’ reasons for living apart, including those who wanted to keep their own home or who ‘just do not want to live together’ (respondents could choose more than one option). This suggests the credence of ‘new family form’ perspectives. Evidence from France (in 2005) suggests similar conclusions: the majority of people living apart ‘were obliged to live separately because of circumstances’ such as job location, housing or finance (over 60%), while about 15% were ‘not yet ready’ to live together. Overall 70% intended to live with their partner within 3 years. Nonetheless,

a quarter lived apart because of ‘the desire to remain independent’ (Régnier-Loilier et al 2009, 93). Similarly, Liefbroer et al (2012) using a 2004-8 survey of 7 European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Georgia), found that ‘practical reasons’ of job location, housing and finance were mentioned most often as a reason for living apart (ranging from 47% in Germany to 75% in Georgia), with around a fifth ‘not being ready yet’ (from 6% in Georgia to 24% in Romania). Again LATs as a category showed little attitudinal difference compared to cohabiting, unmarried couples, where it was age, not relationship form, which made a difference. Nevertheless, ‘independence’ as a reason for living apart reached highs of 25% in Germany and 21% for France, although dropping substantially in Eastern Europe.

On this evidence these recent surveys take what we might call a ‘qualified continuist’ position. Liefbroer et al (2012,11) conclude that

‘only a minority of people in a LAT relationship do so for ideological reasons. For most, it is a living arrangement entered into out of necessity. For others, it is a convenient – and probably temporary – arrangement’.

Similarly, Duncan and Phillips (2010, 132) although admitting that ‘For some, but not for many others, being a LAT may be experienced as a new family form’, conclude that LATs:

‘as a whole do not show any marked ‘pioneer’ attitudinal position’, where ‘‘steady’ boyfriend/ girlfriend relationships and... those partners who are primarily LATs because of external constraints... are hardly ‘new family forms’’(2010, 131).

We question this ‘qualified continuist’ position on three, interlinked, grounds. First of all, the minority of those living apart who do choose ‘independence’, ‘choice’ and so on in their questionnaire or interview responses are sociologically important; possibly they do constitute an emergent, new and different way of ‘doing intimacy’, albeit quantitatively smaller than sometimes assumed in non-representative qualitative studies. Secondly, compounding this issue is the ambiguity of survey evidence despite its apparent robustness. Many people living apart will have a number of overlapping reasons for doing so, with various degrees of certainty and ambivalence, and sometimes these reasons will be contradictory. For example in our 2011 survey of LAT in Britain (discussed below) almost half (49%) of respondents gave several reasons for living apart, some of which were apparently contradictory (for example they chose

both ‘independence’ and ‘circumstance’ reasons). Some of the reasons themselves suggest ambivalence or indecision. Thirdly is the question of how we interpret these survey responses. Some respondents who gave ‘constraint’ or ‘circumstances’ reasons for living apart might well appreciate the independence that these situations conveniently allow them. Or the responses suggesting ‘choice’ or ‘independence’ may not in fact represent a simple desire for autonomy. Respondents may in fact be exercising a more negative choice – they might ideally want to cohabit but choose to live apart in avoiding what they see as unpleasant situations consequent to cohabitation. Or LATs may feel that obligations to others – like children - shape their ‘choice’ to live apart. All of this suggests a complexity about the reasons for living apart together that is difficult to unpick from survey evidence alone. The ‘qualified continuist’ interpretation might not be so self-evident after all.

A key to resolving these differences and difficulties of interpretation is to examine in detail why people live apart, which is our focus here. To do so, we use a mixed methodology research design, based on new quantitative and qualitative evidence from Britain in 2011.

2. Methodology

Sources

Our 2011 survey of people in LAT relationships in Britain¹ (hereafter ‘the national survey’) combined data from three statistically representative general population surveys - the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) Omnibus, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey, and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus. Together these three surveys yielded a total of 572 people in a LAT relationship – 9% of respondents.² These LAT respondents were asked questions about practices, experiences, motivations, and attitudes in relation to living apart, and provided socio-demographic information.³

The national survey provides representative data on LAT in Britain, but at the expense of depth and context. Secondly, therefore, we draw on 50 semi-structured, conversational, interviews of around one hour with people in a LAT relationship, which sought to assess practices, meanings and understandings about living apart together in more depth (hereafter ‘the interview sample’). This took the national survey as a sampling frame from which respondents were purposively selected according to the reasons for living apart given in their survey responses. As Table 1 shows, the interview

sample roughly corresponds with the national survey in terms of reason, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, household type and occupational group (although some categories are over or under represented).⁴ This has the advantage of creating an interview sample which, while not statistically representative, is not limited to a particular type of LAT but instead reflects the range and diversity of living apart together in Britain.⁵

**TABLE 1 The national survey sample and the interview sample:
selected characteristics**

	% Survey sample n=572	% Interview sample n=50
Preference	30	40
Too early	31	20
Constraint	19	26
Situational constraint (job/ study location etc)	12	14
Men	49	42
Women	51	58
Under 45	76	56
White	85	86
Heterosexual	97	98
Children in household	24	34

Living alone	33	44
Managerial and professional	29	10
Intermediate occupations	20	32
Routine and manual occupations, and unemployed	41	36

Sources: 2011 survey, 2011 interviews

Analysis

The national survey information was coded for SPSS and analysis proceeded through standard frequency distribution and cross-tabulation. The 50 semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo.

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews was grounded on a close reading of each interview transcript, identifying respondents' discursive rationalisations of their agency and decisions in living apart from their partner. We looked for statements in respondent's accounts that demonstrated either a *preference* for LAT (the respondent talked about the advantages of, and/or their preference for, living apart) or *constraint* in LAT (the respondent talked about circumstances preventing desired cohabitation). At the same time we recorded *stage* statements (plans and ideas about

moving in together, sometimes with marriage and children) and *state* statements (about how current LAT was seen as a continuing and satisfactory arrangement). Finally, we noted statements signifying that living together was thought to be *too early* in the relationship, or that LAT was *situational* consequent to job/study location or a response to demands of an outside agency (like an employer or prison). As many participants expressed combinations of preference and constraint and/or stage and state, we made overall judgements about each interviewee's responses as relatively 'strong' or 'weak'. For example, more statements of one category would make that category stronger (and fewer would make it weaker). Similarly, the way interviewees made the statement, or the context in which the statement was made, would affect this 'strength' assessment (if for example it was hypothetical or heavily prompted). This assessment then allowed graphical representation of the analysis, with qualitative plotting of interviewees' positions on a summary diagram as defined by preference and constraint, state and stage. We used this to visually discover and present social clusters and associations in displaying the whole interview sample; individual interviews were then used to illustrate these. We also plotted other social variables on this basic grid, including the gender, class and age of interviewees, the length of their relationship, and the presence of dependent children

3. Why people Live Apart Together

3.1 National survey patterns

Table 2 presents the distribution of reasons the national survey respondents gave for living apart together. Respondents could choose any number of reasons from 16 available options, or give their own reason (some of which were re-classified among the pre-given options). The distribution of these responses is shown in the ‘all reasons’ column in Table 2. Respondents who chose more than one reason, 49% of the total, were then prompted to choose a main reason for living apart. The distribution of these main reasons, together with the only reason of the remaining 51%, is shown in the ‘main/only’ column in Table 2. For both we have grouped reasons into five main categories – too early/not ready, financial constraint, situational constraint, obligated preference, and preference.

Table 2. Reasons for living apart together: Britain 2011

Reason	All reasons* %	Main /Only reason %
Too early / not ready		
We are not ready to live together/it's too early in our relationship	41	29
We haven't thought about living together	14	3
Financial constraint		
We can't afford to live together	28	17
It would affect my/my partner's benefits	4	1
Situational constraint		
My partner has a job elsewhere	13	8
My partner is studying elsewhere	5	3
My partner is living in an institution (care home/prison)	1	1
Obligated preference		
Because of my or my partner's children	7	5
We have other responsibilities	9	3
Preference		
We are waiting until we get married/ have a Civil Partnership	5	3
I prefer not to live with my partner (s/he wants to live with me)	8	4
My partner prefers not to live with me (I want to live with them)	2	0

We both want to keep our homes	13	5
It's just how things are	19	5
We just don't want to live together	8	5
Other/ None	11	8
TOTAL	*	100

Weighted bases 533, unweighted bases 572

*Respondents could choose more than one option

Source: national survey 2011

The most popular reason chosen for living apart together was that it was too early in the relationship to cohabit, or that the couple were not yet ready to do so. Adding in the small number who simply had not thought about cohabitation, this implies many LATs saw their relationship in terms of a 'special boy/girlfriend' where, if the relationship proceeded, they would eventually cohabit. Altogether, 31% of respondents chose some expression of LAT as a phase before cohabitation as their only or main reason.

Further along this path was the small number of respondents who were explicitly waiting to marry / civil partner (coded under preference) - 3% gave this as their main/only reason.

Another third (30%) of respondents chose various forms of constraint impeding cohabitation as their main/only reason, with affordability most

common. These were couples who ostensibly wanted to cohabit now, but found difficulties in doing so.. Only 12% of respondents chose ‘situational constraints’ as main/only reasons (where living apart was a response to the demands of employers, state authorities or other organisations). This included just 8% with jobs elsewhere - in some contrast to many popular accounts where this is assumed to be a major reason for LAT. Similarly, only a very small number admitted to concerns about benefit payments as their main or only reason for living apart, just 1%. While respondents might have been reluctant to admit to this motivation for LAT – and 4% did mention this in their complete list of all reasons - this low figure undermines the ‘moral breakdown’ interpretation of LAT sometimes found in British political discourse⁶.

Many respondents chose various ‘preference’ reasons for living apart together, but in choosing a main reason this was reduced to 30%. In fact of these 8% in Table 2 were what we call ‘obligated preference’; respondents did not live together because of their own or their partner’s children (5%), or because of other responsibilities like caring for elderly relatives (3%). This left 22% who chose more personal preference reasons for LAT – they wanted to keep their own homes, they preferred not to live with their particular partner, they simply did not want to live together, LAT was just

how things were, or they were waiting for marriage / civil partnership (see Table 2). Finally 8% gave other (unclassifiable) main reasons or no reason.

Perhaps surprisingly, in the survey data, social class was not significantly related to reasons for living apart. Constraints to living together appear to be experienced just as much by higher and lower income occupational groups, and routine or manual workers may prefer to live apart together just as much as professionals. Similarly, there is little gender difference in the survey responses. In particular, one reason for LAT where we might expect gendered distributions - 'obligated preference' (where caring for other family was prioritised) - in fact showed similar proportions of men and women. However, obligated preference as a category includes living apart 'because of my or my partner's children' and more women than men actually lived with children (33% as opposed to 15% of men).

There is, however, more significant association between reason for LAT and age. A large majority of the 'too early/ not ready' and 'constraint' categories (as defined by main/ only reasons) are bunched into the youngest age bands below 35 years old and, for both categories, a little over half are below 25. We might assume, then, that LATs in these categories are mainly early on in their relationship, where living apart is a stage before cohabitation – either

hypothetically or idealistically for the too early/not ready category, or more concretely for the ‘constraint’ category. In contrast the ‘preference’ category is spread more evenly across age bands⁷. Nonetheless, as Table 2 shows many respondents have a complex mixture of motives for living apart, and indeed each category is represented in all age bands. Thus some respondents in the ‘too early/ not ready’ category are middle-aged or elderly, while a significant proportion of the ‘preference’ category are young. All this suggests that it is both someone’s age and the nature of the relationship that influences people’s reasons for living apart together, rather than factors like class or gender.

The categorisation in Table 2, like the other recent surveys discussed above, supports the ‘qualified continuist’ view of living apart together. The majority (62% of main/only reasons in this survey) appear to see LAT as a stage before cohabitation, either because of various constraints to cohabitation or because cohabitation was seen as not yet appropriate. Some respondents saw obligations and commitment to others as precluding cohabitation. However, this still left about a fifth who expressed a more clear cut preference for LAT rather than cohabitation – similar to the

proportions discovered in France (2005), Britain (2006) and Germany (2011).

However, Table 2 raises as many questions as it answers. First, as already discussed, half of the national survey respondents gave several reasons for living apart, and their secondary reasons often qualified or even contradicted the main reason. The contrast in Table 2 between ‘all reasons’ and ‘main/only reasons’ suggests this complexity well. Secondly, how should these reasons for LAT be interpreted? Do the ‘preference’ respondents represent people using LAT as a ‘historically new family form’ (Levin 2004), or similarly as an ‘ideological’ alternative to cohabitation (Liefbroer et al 2009)? This seems problematic as the ‘preference’ category includes those couples apparently in conflict over cohabitation (the options ‘I prefer not to live with my partner (s/he wants to live with me)’ and ‘My partner prefers not to live with me (I want to live with him/her)’). ‘Preference’ can also include ambivalence or indecision (‘It’s just how things are’). Hence, clear-cut ‘preference’ for living apart may be even less than Table 2 suggests.

Alternatively, ‘preference’ for living apart could be interpreted as being much greater, as some form of preference was the most popular response among ‘all reasons’ for being a LAT. It may be that living apart together gives couples greater freedom for manoeuvre than in earlier periods or in other living arrangements; they may be using LAT as an ongoing alternative to the choice between cohabitation or relationship breakdown. Similarly, constraints and circumstances may sometimes provide a justification for desired or appreciated autonomy. This may not be rationalised as a main or only reason for LAT. Nonetheless in Levin’s (2004) terms such respondents may be able to simultaneously maintain autonomy and intimacy through living apart, even if this is not explicitly expressed as ‘preference’.

To address this complexity, we go on to examine respondents’ understandings of living apart together in more depth, using the 50 semi-structured interviews.

3.2 Understandings of living apart together

Figure 1 presents the allocation of all 50 interviewees from the interview sample along a constraint / preference and stage / state grid, as discussed in section 2. Our analysis found four fairly distinct clusters, with relatively few outliers or transitional cases: constraint with stage, preference with stage,

preference and constraint with stage (obligated preference), and preference with state. We comment on each of these clusters in turn below.

As with the national survey, there were no significant class or gender associations with this distribution, with one significant exception - the 'constraint with stage' cluster (obligated preference) in this non-representative sample was mostly composed of women with children. There were also some differences according to age - not unexpectedly more of the 'preference with stage' cluster (mostly 'too early' respondents) were under 40, and more of the 'preference with state' cluster were over 40.

Figure 1 Understandings of living apart together

here

1. Can't live together – constraint with stage (14/50)

These respondents understood their living apart as a temporary stage enforced by severe external constraints to their desired cohabitation.

Difficulties with housing and / or finance were most often discussed and these were usually felt as fairly decisive. Others could not live together because of family opposition to cohabitation with their partner (or even to any relationship) on cultural and religious grounds, or because of the demands of outside agencies like employers or state authorities. Most had active plans about living together in the near future, and many talked about marriage and children. Not surprisingly, nearly all were shorter relationships of under 2 years, and were most likely to live over an hour away from their partners - in fact 5 respondents had partners living abroad. This group represents the ‘constraint’ summary categories in the national survey, accounting in total for 30% of ‘main/only’ reasons (see Table 2).

Craig⁸ was a type-case example; his partner could not move in just then because of her house lease, but she would do when that ended in a year’s time. Peter, who envisaged joint relocation to a mid point between their two jobs with engagement and marriage – all within the next 2 years, called his partner ‘wifey’ and was called ‘hubby’ in return. Annabel and her partner could not afford a house together but were saving to set up in New Zealand, with marriage and children to follow. Ravi really wanted to marry his

partner, but his family were implacably opposed to him marrying someone of a different caste. For Katie, the overwhelming opposition to marriage from her partner's parents on religious and cultural grounds seemed so insoluble that this stage was becoming a constant state, and she was left contemplating some of the advantages of living apart. As she wryly noted:

‘the way he’s been brought up the women- the woman does everything...it’s like having two children. So I do like the days that I know he’s not coming.’

Unsurprisingly, all 7 “situational” respondents (where one partner was required by outside agencies to live somewhere else) shared this “can’t live together” position. In the national survey such situational respondents accounted for 12% of the total (see Table 2). This more obligatory living apart was not only consequent to job location (where some element of choice exists), but was also imposed by state enforced rules about immigration or imprisonment. Thus Henry cited visa restrictions on his plan to bring his wife from Thailand, Stacey’s partner lived in army barracks, and Lisa’s in a restricted bail hostel subsequent to a prison term. Nonetheless,

some found incidental advantages in being apart from their partner, thus Lisa noted that:

‘..if there is a benefit [from living apart] it’s still that you’ve still got your own space, you know I still can get up in the morning and walk around with my makeup half way down my face’

and furthermore she was able to:

‘...see my friends or my family or do whatever I want’.

But this incidental autonomy did not override her strong wish to live with her partner on release from bail hostel and then, in short order, to house hunt, marry and have (more) children. Like most others in this group, Lisa did not see LAT as an alternative family form. Geneva put this normalisation of cohabitation well:

‘I don’t think it [LAT] would work long-term. I don’t understand it. Don’t get it. I d- I don’t. But because human beings are supposed to be together, aren’t they? Natural- it’s a natural kind of biological thing isn’t it?’

This cluster presents a ‘traditional’ or ‘continuist’ position in living apart, in the sense that we come across similar stories of constrained separation in the family surveys of the 1950s and 60s (Author 1). An important difference

now, however, is that respondents could enjoy couple intimacy through LAT without undergoing the tolerated deviancy of ‘pre-marital sex’, or the enforced separation, reported in these earlier surveys. And, as Lisa and Katie show, women may be able to experience greater autonomy with LAT than with cohabitation.

2. Not cohabitation just now – preference with stage (10 /50)

These respondents preferred to live apart just now, but saw their relationship ideally developing further into cohabitation, sometimes with marriage and children. Most of the ‘too early’ category, who did not think themselves emotionally ready to live with their partner, were located in this group.

So Tom, for example:

‘...wouldn’t want to live with someone straight away, to be quite honest. Cause you need to get to know the person ... ‘cause it is a very big commitment when you start living with someone. ...at the moment we’re getting to know each other’ [even though] ‘there’s no reason why ... she can’t live here, there’s plenty of room.’

Three women in this group were partial exceptions. While not feeling ‘too early’ in the relationship to live together, strong feelings of emotional defence and/or insecurity meant they also preferred not to live together just

now. These respondents illustrate the ‘not ready’ element of the ‘too early/not ready’ option in the national survey (Table 2). Gemma, while enjoying holding more relationship power through being a LAT, also feared losing her assets to the Child Support Agency with cohabitation. Hannah enjoyed the autonomy living apart together provided but, recovering from a searing divorce, was:

‘keeping him at arm’s length, ...I’m trying not to get too close ‘cause my heart’s trying to be sensible, and you know, not fall in love too deeply and just make the same mistakes that I did before’.

Michelle was even more self-protective, for her first partner had: ‘emptied my house and... left loads of bills, debt’, while a succeeding partner had become violently possessive and finally attacked her, damaging her eye. Not surprisingly, Michelle had:

‘..kind of learnt from my lessons and ..I don’t want to lose everything in my house, I don’t want to be possessed, I don’t, and I don’t want to be beaten up [small laugh], by someone who’s meant to love me. Um so, yeah, I’ve just, kind of become a bit wary’.

Consequently she did not live with her current partner, even though it ‘was a good relationship’ and they had a son together. Nonetheless, Michelle ‘would love to live with him and have a perfect family, and I fight myself’.

Unsurprisingly, nearly all these respondents were in shorter relationships under two years, and most were under 40 and without dependent children. They represent the large ‘too early/ not ready’ category in the national survey, accounting for 31% of the ‘main/only’ reasons for LAT in Table 2.

This group ostensibly shows a ‘continuist’ position where LAT is part of being early on in the relationship, resembling the ‘special girlfriend or boyfriends’ that Gorer found in his 1969 survey of under 40s in England. Then 44% of ‘the unmarried’ had such a partner, with half of these ‘on terms of real physical intimacy’ (Gorer, 1971, 213). However, in 1969 few were aged over 25, and 60% already had a day for their wedding fixed, whereas for the 2011 LAT group the average age had increased (in the national survey 57% were over 25) and future cohabitation was less assured (in the national survey 46% did not expect to be living together within 2 years). Living apart together as ‘special boy/girlfriend’ nowadays might be more flexible and longer term, with marriage or even cohabitation less likely to be the desired goal than for those engaged and waiting to marry in 1969.

3. ‘Oughtn’t to live together’ - preference and constraint with stage (7/50)

This group showed more of a balance of preference and constraint in living apart. In most cases, this was because of obligations felt to dependants,

usually a child but in one case to an infirm mother. (While several other respondents did provide some care for elderly parents living elsewhere, and this might complicate things, in itself this was not seen as precluding cohabitation.). Most of these interviewees were women who had dependent children and were previously married. They represent the ‘obligated preference’ category of the national survey, accounting for 8% of ‘main/only’ reasons (Table 2).

Obligations to children were felt as much - if not more - for teenagers as for young children - the parental house was ‘their home’. For example Stephanie had ‘to sort my daughter out first, she comes first really’ and arrange her leaving home into independent life. So adding to her worries about getting ‘it wrong the first time round’, cohabitation would have to wait for a year or so. Such obligations were particularly felt for children seen as disabled. Thus Carrie did not:

‘want to rush into it [cohabitation] because my son suffers from ADHD, and he doesn’t deal with change very well. So um, I just want to take it, each day as a t- at a time. I’m not saying it will never happen. I do hope it does happen.’

These obligations to dependents sometimes extended to the other partner, usually a man, who worried about upsetting their partner's children if they lived together. As David put it:

‘the last thing a sixteen year old lad wants is somebody coming into their life and pretending to be dad ... They come first every time and their feelings come first.’

Nor did obligations to children necessarily disappear with their adulthood. Five older respondents raised worries about inheritance issues if they lived with their partner, although this was felt as a reinforcing background to a given decision to live apart for other reasons.

These interviewees mostly saw living apart as a temporary stage before cohabitation, although for Ben this wait was indeterminate when ‘the crunch’ would only come with his mother's death. This group also appears ‘traditional’ in the sense that not living with a partner because of obligations to others was reported in the 1950s and 60s family surveys (Author 1). What is different, however, was that now such individuals could maintain an open and intimate couple relationship, through living apart together, while still taking care of existing obligations. In particular, in contrast to this earlier period, women are now able to mobilize the financial resources to do so.

4. 'Won't live together' - preference with state (19/ 50)

All interviewees in this group preferred to live apart, in the sense that they talked about the advantages of, and/or their preference for, living apart, even though most could cohabit relatively easily in the absence of major external constraints to living together. All saw this as a continuing state, although some admitted to hypothetical or ideal stage ideas about cohabitation. As most lived less than 20 minutes away from their partner, this position was also more practical - they could easily see their partner regularly. Most were in longer relationships of over 2 years. Nearly all were aged over 40, including all 5 of the total interview sample who were over 60, and most had been married before. In addition almost all of the small minority who said they were not in love with their partner (5 out of 6 sample respondents), or in love but not committed (2 out of 3), were in this group. This group parallels the overall 'preference' category in the national survey with 30% of 'main/only' reasons (Table 2).

Autonomy and independence were major issues for most in this group, for example Helen became 'annoyed after ten days' when her long distance partner stayed with her:

'I'm used to having things done my way, rather than sharing space.

It's awful, absolutely awful, I know it's really selfish'

She felt ‘...like I’ve got my cake and eat it’ - so even if her partner moved up from London to Edinburgh, she would still prefer him to get his own place. Or as Nicola put it:

‘You can do what you want when you want, you don’t have to ask...I like my own space. ...he’s got a bigger house than mine but I don’t like his house as much as I like mine so...’

Perhaps it was some sort of traditionally gendered “pay-back” for her autonomy that she did her partner’s ironing and house cleaning every week. Andrew, the only person in the interview sample who explicitly saw living apart together as temporary before separating and moving on, took autonomy further:

‘...as a bloke.., it’s quite a good situation. Because I can do what I want... And have the best of both worlds’.

At first sight then, this group appears as a non-traditional relationship or ‘new family form’ version of LAT- these interviewees were not planning or wanting to move in together, they particularly valued autonomy but also desired intimacy, and they were not especially constrained from living together had they so wanted. This is a position rarely, if ever, reported in the 1950s and 60s family surveys (Author 1). Rather living apart together enabled these respondents to ‘have the best of both worlds’ as Andrew put it.

However, a closer look at their motivations for living apart reveals a more nuanced and complex picture. First, 3 young interviewees felt it was too early to move together; LAT was an early stage in their life course that was not leading to anything else. Second, for 6 respondents it was not so much the case that they wanted to live apart - rather, more negatively, they did not want to live with their current partner. This reflects the national survey option 'I prefer not to live with my partner (s/he wants to live with me)' with 4% of 'main/only' reasons (Table 2). Thus neither Wendy nor Janet would countenance living with alcoholic partners, Sharon disliked her clinging and emotionally insecure husband but although separated felt a continuing obligation to him. Gary was more forthright - the problem was that:

'we argue too much together... when she gets a drink in her and ... I've had a drink, then we just start arguing I just hate- I just want her away'

Maggie was repelled by her partner's 'hardcore' green lifestyle (his lack of washing, no central heating, and sporadic toilet flushing). Like Sharon, she also thought her partner looked down upon her as ill-educated and intellectually inferior. Some of these respondents with this 'negative preference' for living apart together consequently held on to idealised desires for cohabitation – if only Wendy's partner would 'stop the drink and

I would love him, so that we could be together’, or Maggie’s partner would offer ‘marriage and central heating’ (the latter particularly important for medical reasons). LAT was a deficit position for these two respondents – ideally they would rather be married. Indeed Maggie saw marriage as ‘the top’, without which ‘society will go downhill’. Third, 3 others in the group, were less antipathetic to their particular partner but sought emotional security as well as autonomy through living apart together. This perhaps reflects the 5% in the national survey who picked ‘it’s just how things are’ as their main/only reason for living apart (Table 2). So while Julie valued her own space, did not want to end up ‘running around tidying up after him’, and certainly ‘could not be doing with mongy men’, she mainly used living apart to protect herself against any repeated infidelity. Similarly, Charlotte and her partner ‘both had us fingers burned.... We both ended previous relationships with literally nothingI lost everything’. As she continued: ‘I don’t want to lose him, so he’s not moving in basically’. We are left, therefore, with only 8 interviewees who, like Nicola and Helen, more clearly preferred to live apart for positive ‘lifestyle’ reasons centred on autonomy and independence.

4. Conclusion

At one level both the analysis of the national survey and of the interview sample can be taken as supporting the 'qualified continuist' view of LAT. Most people who live apart together appear to do so because it is too early in their relationship to live together (although they imagined doing so later on), or they were constrained by external circumstances or agencies from achieving their desired cohabitation, or they felt prior emotional and practical obligations to others which prevented cohabitation. All these circumstances would have been recognised in the 1950s and 1960s. For the majority, LAT is seen as a stage before cohabitation. While a minority do prefer to live apart, many do so for 'negative' reasons such as reservations about their partner, or fears about repeating bad experiences of cohabitation. If only things were different they would ideally cohabit, even get married. Only a minority express more positive preference for living apart together as a relationship form, and for most cohabitation remains as a practical, aspirational, or idealised goal. Overall coupledness remains pivotal, and in the interviews living apart was hardly ever discussed as an alternative 'ok for now' relationship.

There is therefore little explicit evidence of Giddens' (1992) ideal type 'pure relationships' (where the relationship is only continued while satisfaction lasts), still less of Bauman's (2003) temporary and commodified 'liquid

love'. This may be a surprising result considering that, if this sort of relationship were to exist, it would probably be most likely among living apart together couples. While LAT may in principle lend itself to the pure relationship model, it does not necessarily follow that this is actually practiced. Similarly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have suggested that it is professional women who are particularly involved in individualisation processes. But as we have seen there is little class or gender association with reasons for living apart together, except in the traditional way that separated and divorced mothers are left living with children. Indeed only three women interviewees mentioned LAT as a means to avoid traditional divisions of labour (and this was never a major stated reason for living apart). More often women described how they carried out the domestic labour services or childcare for their male partners traditionally performed by wives (and men traditionally contributed DIY, dog walking and washing up). In these ways individualisation theorists confuse what people can potentially do (create individual self-projects) with what they actually do (relate to others in more taken for granted 'traditional' ways).

However, these continuations do not mean that living apart together simply maintains traditional ways of moving between between singledom and cohabitation, or that social change is not significant to the understanding of

why people live apart.. As Weeks (2007) suggests, ‘the continuists want to stress the recalcitrance of hidden structures, but in doing so forget the power of agency and of the macroscopic impact of subtle changes in individual lives’ (2007, 7). First, living apart together now provides a more accepted and, for many, a practical and satisfactory response to changing circumstances. People can more easily adapt to unfavourable situations and overtly enjoy couple intimacy, even if desired cohabitation is not possible or appropriate just now. That it is both economically and culturally possible for women to live by themselves, or with their children, and to openly having relationships with partners with whom they do not live, represents significant social change. In the family surveys of the 1950s and 60s similar stories to those told by the constraint interviewees often ended in separation, singledom, or later marriage, often seen as second best, to someone else. Similarly, ‘too early’ special boy/girlfriends can extend and develop courtship through living apart together, practising non-residential intimate and sexual relationships that would once have required marriage to acquire social legitimacy.

Secondly, as the interviews showed well, LATs can more safely manage their emotional and practical lives when cohabitation seems risky, or when they do not want to live with a particular partner, or feel prior commitments

to others. Again, in the 1950s and 60s similar situations often led to prolonged singledom or separation. In these cases LAT is not so much a matter of combining intimacy with autonomy, as combining intimacy with safety or intimacy with obligation. Thirdly, nearly all interview respondents saw at least some advantage in living apart because of the greater personal autonomy, space and freedom it afforded. For example, many women interviewees, echoing 1960s feminism, described the advantages of increased personal autonomy from their male partners. For most this autonomy was more of a circumstantial, if pleasant, by-product of being apart, where living together in a family home remained the ideal. . Nonetheless, experiences of how relationships can be conducted have changed, and expectations of autonomy may persist beyond LAT into cohabitation. In this way LAT can open up new possibilities and expectations in personal relationships and family life.

LAT is not simply a new family form, but nor is it just a stage in courtship or marriage, or a simple reaction to constraints. Rather, LAT is better characterised as flexible pragmatism . As a category LAT contains different sorts of relationship, with different needs and desires around personal autonomy, emotional management, couple intimacy, other family commitments, and how to respond to external circumstances. Potentially,

living apart from a partner allows greater flexibility for individuals than co-residential relationships. This flexibility gives people more room for manoeuvre in conducting their relationships.. LAT therefore combines elements of both ‘new’ and ‘continuation’ or ‘tradition’ as people draw on existing practices, norms and understandings in order to adapt to changing circumstances. In so doing they both rework and reproduce established ways of doing relationships.

Endnotes

¹ Britain includes England, Scotland and Wales.

² Living apart together was self-defined in response to the interviewer question (addressed to all who were not married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting): “Are you currently in a relationship with someone you are not living with here?”. In two of the surveys (BSA and NatCen’s Omnibus) married, civil partnership and cohabiting respondents were subsequently asked “Can I just check ... does your partner live here or somewhere else. (Please include your spouse or partner if you are not currently living with them)?”

³ Questions were the same for all 3 constituent surveys, although small numbers of questions were simplified or omitted for the ONS survey (taken last), where responses to the two earlier surveys had shown little variation.

⁴ The interview sample over represents preference LATs, and those who are older, female, living alone or with children, and in intermediate occupations, while under representing the too early, younger, male and professional).

⁵ We also took a ‘psychosocial’ sample from the survey, of 16 different respondents, in which we carried out in-depth biographical narrative interviews (not used in this paper).

⁶ Ian Duncan Smith, the UK Government Minister for Work and Pensions, cited LAT as a means to benefit fraud, Radio 4 ‘World at One’ 27. 11.12.

⁷ The category ‘obligated preference’ was too small for meaningful statistical analysis, and was therefore included in the larger ‘preference’ category. For the same reason, we added ‘situational’ respondents into an overall ‘constraint’ category.

⁸ All names are pseudonyms

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), grant number RES-062-23-2213 Funder acknowledgement

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