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Sex, love and security: accounts of distance and commitment in LAT relationships

Julia Carter

Canterbury Christ Church University

Simon Duncan

University of Bradford

Mariya Stoilova

Birkbeck College, University of London

Miranda Phillips

NatCen Social Research

Abstract

Drawing on a 2011 national survey and 50 semi-structured interviews, we explore the differing ways in which those in living apart together (LAT) relationships discuss and experience notions of commitment¹. We found that sexual exclusivity in LAT is expected by the large majority, regardless of their reasons for living apart. The majority of the interviewees also expressed a high degree of commitment to their partner in terms of love, care and intimacy, alongside an appreciation of the increased freedom and autonomy that living apart has to offer. Respondents were divided into four groups according to their perceived commitment: 1. Autonomous commitment, 2. Contingent commitment, 3. Ambivalent commitment, and 4. Limited commitment. Despite differing degrees of commitment, however, the overall finding was that the importance of relating and making relational decisions was central, even in the lives of those living in such unconventional relationship styles.

Key words: Britain, commitment, family, intimacy, LAT, sexual exclusivity.

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Corresponding author: Dr Julia Carter, School of Psychology, Politics and
Sociology, Canterbury Christ Church University, CT1 1QU
Email: julia.carter@canterbury.ac.uk

Commitment and its literature

This paper will explore the extent to which living apart together (LAT) relationships can provide a 'litmus test' to debates surrounding the notion of commitment. The term commitment, like the term 'family', has been extensively examined and theorised in sociological literature and, as with 'family', commitment has considerable meaning for people in everyday life (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). It has also made its way into political discourses on families, creating a re-emphasis on the importance of marriage (heterosexual and to some extent same-sex) (Carter, 2012). Yet, despite this prevalence, understanding what commitment means and how it is lived is not straightforward; while some argue that individuals have become more autonomous, weakening long-term commitment to partners (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003), others conclude that traditional kinship values remain strong and commitment pivotal to personal life (Duncan and Phillips, 2008; Smart, 2007; Finch and Mason, 1993). LAT relationships represent a unique situation since time and distance apart allow individuals everyday autonomy, while at the same time to maintain some desired level of couple intimacy. Or as Levin (2004) put it in her pioneering study, LAT allows 'both/and' - both autonomy and intimacy.

Sociological debates on commitment (see Lewis 2001 for an overview) have revolved around individualisation versus continuity of family forms. Thus some see commitment as both precarious in modern individualised societies and decreasing in significance for couples. Giddens' (1992) 'pure relationship' and Bauman's (2003) 'liquid love' are examples of individualisation stances. According to Giddens, pure relationships are entered into for their own sake and continued only for as long as each individual within the relationship is receiving some form of satisfaction (1992: 58). For Bauman this means that love becomes inadequately represented by commodified short term liaisons and one night stands. Ideas of reciprocal and lasting commitment are clearly not part of these visions, which highlight the fragility of intimacy and long term commitment.

In contrast, others point to the continued emphasis on commitment in intimate relationships (Carter, 2012; Van Hooff, 2013; Mason, 2004). Smart and Stevens (2000) suggest that commitment involves mutual and/or contingent ties, while in her later work Smart (2007) contends that commitment is inseparable from love. According to Carter (2012), it is a process that involves different elements, including love, time and investment. Empirically based research highlights the commitment found in co-residential couples, whether cohabitating (Van Hooff, 2013; Barlow et al., 2005) or married (Lewis, 2001; Carter, 2012). Barlow et al. suggest that cohabiting relationships can involve a whole range of levels and types of commitment from no commitment at all to strong 'marriage-like' commitment. Both Barlow et al. and Lewis go on to suggest that due to the lack of binding and formal ties, non-marital couple relationships can even involve greater degrees of commitment than those who are married, since unmarried relationships are marked by an informality and absence of state control. It is important to note, however, that it is not the relationship form alone that determines levels of commitment; even though an absence of marriage contract may enhance a couple's experience of commitment, ultimately all and any types and/or levels of commitment can be found across all relationship forms.

Critics of the notion of individualisation have focussed on this lack of congruence between theoretical claims and empirical research, (e.g. Morgan, 1996; 2011 and family practices; Jamieson, 1998; 2004 and intimacy; Mason, 2004 kinship and relationality; Smart, 2007 and personal life; Duncan and Smith, 2006 on social generalisation; more recently Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Wilson et al., 2012 and many others). There has, however, been less in the way of an alternative theoretical construct through which to examine current intimacies. Currently, the idea of relationality perhaps goes furthest in providing such an alternative lens through which to understand the ways people make or maintain connections with one another (Mason 2004, Smart 2007). For example in her narrative accounts, Mason found a range of discourses from 'relational inclusion' - involving highly inclusive but habitual forms of relating - to 'relational individualism', where purposeful agency was much more explicitly present in accounts. Even in this last group, however, individuals expressed a concern with how their decisions affected

those around them: agency was always exercised with thought to relationships. Ideas of relationality may, therefore, offer a better way of understanding the fluidity of decisions around personal relationships; these are very rarely selfish, strategic and, 'individualised' decisions but are more likely to be relational, normative and emotional (see Holmes, 2010; Duncan, 2014).

Carter (2012) has further sought to define the process of being committed. She identifies the following five dimensions in understandings of "commitment":

- A lifecourse element: stages in life and life events impact commitment, either strengthening or weakening ties.
- Sexual exclusivity: the expectation of sexual exclusivity in relationships can be expressed both explicitly and implicitly.
- Love and longevity: commitment is bound up with ideas about love, as well as desires for and experiences of long-term partnerships (ie. we've been together so long we must be committed).
- Moral and social expectations: although more negotiable now (Lewis, 2001), moral and social pressures remain evident.
- Relationship investments: obligations such as having children together or shared housing and belongings.

Using these dimensions as an exploratory tool, this paper will assess the ways in which individuals who live apart together spoke of and understood commitment and whether these discussions served to de-prioritise or emphasise relational commitment.

Living apart together relationships have been the focus of increased academic as well as media attention and currently around 10% of adults in Britain are LAT (Duncan et al., 2013, 2014). These types of relationships are not new in themselves as they have existed in other guises across the decades (as 'dating' relationships or 'going steady', or as constrained separation for employment reasons; Duncan and Phillips, 2010). What is new, perhaps, is their more overt and accepted presence.

In sociology and demography, the major focus has been on attempting to determine who has LAT relationships and why. Interpretations of LAT reflect these

debates: certain commentators have suggested that some LAT partners choose to live their intimate lives differently, embodying pioneering and more individualised attitudes towards couple life (eg. Bawin-Legros and Gauthier 2001, Roseneil, 2006). Others more conservatively interpret LAT as simply another step between singledom and cohabitation (Haskey and Lewis, 2006, Ermisch and Seidler, 2009). However, more recent findings suggest a diversity of motivations for LAT, involving various mixes of constraint and preference (Duncan et al., 2013). There is also considerable diversity in terms of length of relationship (Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Liefbroer et al., 2012, Duncan et al., 2013).²

Given the range of characteristics within LAT relationships - from those who have just met to those who have been together for over 20 years - there will inevitably be a variety of ideas about commitment. Despite this diversity, Duncan and Phillips (2010), working from the 2006 British Social Attitudes survey, suggests that LAT couples display similar levels of commitment to cohabiting and married couples – at least for more established ‘partner LATs’ (as opposed to the significant minority who were ‘dating LATs’). LAT relationships ‘were seen by most as good enough for partnering and subject to the same expectations about commitment, as expressed through fidelity, as marriage or cohabitation’ (2010: 113-4). By examining how those living apart understand their relationships and commitment, therefore, we hope to establish the extent to which LAT does indeed offer a pioneering approach to partnering. In the next section we discuss our sources and methods used in undertaking this task.

Methods

This paper draws on nationally representative survey data of people in LAT relationships in Britain in 2011, and qualitative interviews with LATs carried out in 2011/12. By combining interview and survey data, this paper takes a ‘qualitatively driven’ approach to mixed methods (Mason, 2006). While we seek the depth of understanding of complex notions in various contexts of social experience, we also recognise the limitation of a purely qualitative paradigm: particularly the drawbacks of small, case study, research. Using data from a large

scale, quantitative survey has given us a general overview of the practices and attitudes of those living apart, while the more detailed one-to-one interviews provide the context, complexities and situations within which these relationships take place.

The survey results presented combine data from three statistically representative general population surveys (NatCen's Omnibus, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and the ONS Omnibus), which together yielded a total of 572 people in a LAT relationship – 9% of all respondents across the three surveys.³ In order to distinguish those in a LAT relationship, the following question was included in all three surveys and was asked of those not currently married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership:

‘Are you currently in a relationship with someone you are **not living with** here?’⁴

This question – with respondents themselves defining the word “relationship” – was designed to be wide enough in scope to include all types of LAT. These LAT respondents were then asked a set of questions about their relationship history and plans, their relationship practices and understandings, and attitudes towards LAT.⁵ Standard socio-demographic information for LAT respondents was also collected on each of the three surveys. These data were then combined into a single LAT survey dataset. The LAT sample was split evenly in terms of sex and it comprised a younger sample of people than that of the general population (61% under age 35 compared to 29% in the general population). Around 3% of LAT relationships are same-sex, 85% of those identifying as LAT are White (similar to the general population) and those in managerial or professional occupations are slightly underrepresented (29% compared with 35% of the general population).⁶ While this source is extensive and statistically representative, detail and contextualisation is consequently limited.

The second source comprises 50 semi-structured conversational interviews focussing on reasons for living apart as well as relationship and caring practices and attitudes. The qualitative sample was drawn using the three national surveys as a sampling frame, purposively selecting interviewees according to the reasons

for living apart given in their responses. These reasons were (1) those who were 'too early' or 'not ready' in their relationship to live together, (2) those who were constrained from living together, chiefly for financial reasons, (3) those who lived apart because of the locational demands of outside agencies, usually employers, educational establishments or institutions like prison or care homes, and (4) those who preferred to live apart. The sample approximately matches LAT respondents from the national surveys in terms of age, occupational group, sexuality and ethnicity, and in reason for living apart.

The survey data was produced in SPSS and analysis included standard frequency distribution and cross-tabulation. The statistical significance of associations between variables was assessed through chi-square tests. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically using NVivo. The analysis process involved analysing the qualitative and quantitative data separately along certain themes imposed on and arising from the data. The interview transcripts were also coded for spontaneous mentions of commitment and sexual exclusivity.

The three national surveys asked identical questions to LAT respondents about their contact, relationship practices and attitudes towards sexual exclusivity. The latter was framed by asking whether it was wrong for a person living with their partner, or alternatively living apart together with a partner, to have sex with someone else. Participants could respond on a five answer Likert scale: 'not wrong', 'rarely wrong', 'sometimes wrong', 'mostly wrong' or 'always wrong'. Interviewees in the semi-structured interviews were asked about their attitudes towards LAT, cohabitation and sexual exclusivity; they responded to these questions in both personal terms and more generally in regard to social mores and expectations. Commitment and love were often talked about in response to these questions.

Put together these two sources provide a fairly detailed overview of understandings of commitment in living apart together relationships. While the survey data provides an initial overview of certain aspects of coupledness (contact,

and sexual exclusivity for example), the main focus of this particular paper is the interview data as we want to delve into individuals' meanings and understandings of their lived experiences of LAT⁷.

Commitment, Coupledness and Sexual Exclusivity

The surveys

The vast majority of respondents to the surveys thought of themselves as “a couple” (79% always or usually did), and felt other people saw them this way too (84%).⁸ Very few (7%) said they rarely or never saw themselves as a couple. There was no statistically significant variation in this identification either by age or length of relationship, suggesting that couple identification is present across LAT type and life stage. In addition to couple identification, contact patterns can also tell us something about closeness and intimacy between a couple. The results from the surveys reveal that 68% of respondents saw each other several times a week (21% every day) and only 16% saw their partner less than once a week. Moreover, 44% of those who lived within 1 mile saw their partners at least once every day (see Duncan et al., 2013). Similar patterns have been observed in Australia and France (Reimeidos et al., 2011, Régnier-Loilier et. al, 2009). In addition to regular physical contact, survey respondents also reported frequent contact by phone, text, email or the internet; 86% contacted each other in this way at least once a day (55% several times a day). Only 1% contacted each other once a week or less. Indicatively, the (potentially more intimate) verbal exchange enabled by telephoning or Skype was the most popular form of contact, followed by email or text messaging (see Duncan et al., 2013). In terms of personal contact then, few LAT relationships are ‘part-time’ or distant.

Sexual exclusivity is often considered a basic element of commitment to a partner (Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Carter, 2012). Certainly this was reported as paramount for almost all the respondents in the surveys and interviewees. In the combined national survey data 87% said that it was ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ wrong for a person in a LAT relationship to have sex with someone else. This is little different from attitudes about those in co-residential relationships, where 89% of LAT respondents said that sex outside the relationship was always or mostly wrong (Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Duncan et al., 2013). Similarly, the vast majority of our interviewees agreed that sex outside of their relationship was wrong, no matter what form the relationship took. Six of the 50 interviewees, however, did say that

while sex outside of any relationship was wrong, sex outside a co-residential relationship should be taken even more seriously than outside a LAT relationship.

There is evidence that sex does occur outside partner relationships, albeit apparently less than popularly assumed; the 2010 Natsal 3 survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles among 16-74 year olds in Britain found that just 3.3% of married respondents, and 7.1% of cohabitants, had sex with more than one partner in the last year (private communication from Natsal team). Moreover, this is usually seen as a serious transgression and often means the end of the relationship. For example, Wouters (2004) found that the percentage of young women in Britain who considered an act of sexual infidelity to be the end of the relationship increased considerably between 1979 and 1993, particularly among cohabitants, rising from 30% to 65%. Similarly, while British Social Attitudes surveys show considerable liberalisation around personal behaviour between 1984 -2011 (about pre-marital sex, or same sex relationships for example), there was, in contrast, an increase from 84% to 89% of those saying that extra-marital sex was 'always or mostly wrong'. This is mirrored in the findings from the Natsal surveys which show an increase in the percentages of both men and women stating that non-exclusivity in marriage is always wrong, from 1990-1991 (Natsal 1) to 2010-12 (Natsal 3). The stated norms guiding sexual exclusivity, therefore, appear to be becoming ever more strict and widespread perhaps regardless of actual behaviour.

This normative attitude towards sexual exclusivity would seem to support the supposition that LAT is usually experienced in a similar way to other relationship practices. Even Bawin-Legros and Gautier (2001) - who see LAT as an individualised, transitory relationship - note that 'fidelity is still expected on both sides' (2001: 45). Sexual fidelity represents a given level of contingency in all relationships since, as exclusivity is increasingly emphasised, partnerships are more likely than ever to end if this is not maintained. Overall, the survey results paint a picture of the majority of LAT couples identifying in relational terms: they see themselves as being part of a couple who are in frequent (often physical) contact with one another. The response of interview participants was broadly

similar and the next section discusses in more detail how interviewees relied upon heteronormative narratives of sexual behaviour in conceptualising notions of commitment.

The interviews

Many interviewees were emphatic on this point: if their partner had sex with someone else, their relationship would be over. There were numerous examples: typically Charlotte (age group 41-50) said, 'if he were cheating, he'd be out', Michelle (18-25) commented, 'if he slept with somebody else, me and him are over', and George (51-60) said, 'there's no point in being in a relationship if you're gonna have somebody else round for whatever'. Sexual relations outside of their relationships were not to be tolerated. Indeed, a number of participants recounted stories of previous relationships that ended because of extra-relationship sexual encounters. Moreover, the vast majority of interviewees also commented that fidelity was to be expected just as much in a LAT relationship as in a co-residential relationship, reflecting the results of the national surveys. Perhaps with the lack of shared residence in common, the desire for sexual exclusivity becomes emphasised as an aspect of commitment that can be evidenced through behaviour rather than material possessions.

The link between sex and commitment emerged when interviewees spontaneously talked about commitment in response to questions about sexual relationships. For example, when asked whether infidelity was more serious when a couple were married compared to LAT, Ben (51-60) responded, 'because there's no marriage doesn't mean that commitment isn't just as strong...it's no more serious...the brick of the commitment- it must be identical'. Wendy (51-60) expressed similar sentiments when she said that sex outside a LAT relationship and co-residential relationship was 'equally as serious because even though you're living apart I still do feel as though you're committed to each other'. Again, Steven (18-25) said, when asked about sex outside of his relationship, 'if you're in a committed relationship, if you're someone's boyfriend, girlfriend, partner, you've changed your Facebook status, you don't have sex with anyone else. Living together or not'.

For these interviewees then, a priority of commitment was sexual exclusivity. Interestingly, for Steven, changing one's status on Facebook to 'in a relationship' may also indicate a certain level of commitment to a relationship. Perhaps Facebook and other social networking sites that allow individuals to 'display' their relationship status are a new means of performing a level of attachment that would previously not have been possible prior to cohabitation (see Finch, 2007). It may be that this public display reinforces, rather than weakens, the fidelity norm – the 'electronic village' approaches the 'traditional village' rather than moving towards 'liquid love'. One might also argue, however, that as relationships are more fluid and less likely to be life-long, it is more necessary to find a means to display a relationship in public.

For most interviewees though, their declaration of sexual exclusivity (whether actually practised or not) was an explicit sign of commitment, and this was just as expected in a LAT relationship as in a co-residential relationship. This stated emphasis on sexual exclusivity aligns with previous findings by Carter (2012) indicating that sexual monogamy becomes a prerequisite of commitment. Nevertheless, there was a minority of interviewees (six out of 50) who did say that having sex outside of a cohabiting or married relationship was *more* serious than sex outside of a LAT relationship (no one said that sex outside of a relationship was acceptable). These respondents seemed to have various reasons for taking this view. Sharon (61-70), for example, had recently – and generally gladly – separated from her husband after he started a relationship with another woman. She nonetheless viewed herself as in some sort of continuing relationship with her husband including a remaining obligation to care for him (encompassing occasional sexual relations). While this aspect of commitment remained, she was also seeing other men. For Sharon, therefore, once she and her husband had made the decision to live in separate homes, seeing other men became less problematic for her. Thus, her movement into married LAT from married cohabitation signalled a decline in some part of her commitment and a simultaneous lowering in the seriousness of extra-marital sexual relations.

Hannah, Neil and Nicola (all between 30 and 50) had been in previous co-residential relationships and all saw cohabiting as symbolising more commitment, either because they hoped to cohabit again in the near future (Hannah and Neil), or because they were deliberately living apart to avoid commitment (Nicola). These participants saw the shared investments of property and possessions as a significant element in their commitment. Since these interviewees placed a high level of significance on the act of cohabitation, sex outside of cohabitation became more serious than outside a non-cohabiting relationship. Finally Tina (18-25), still living in the parental home but soon to leave for university, was in a transitional phase in life. Although she said that living together did not in itself show more commitment, 'you're in a more awkward situation then because you're living with them'. For her, it was not the cohabitation itself that represented a greater degree of commitment but rather the structures binding cohabiting relationships such as shared finances and housing (shared investments), which in turn made sexual infidelity more serious in a co-residential relationship because of the propensity of sexual infidelity to precipitate relationship breakdown.

For all interviewees then, the sexual exclusivity expected in LAT relationships was a part of the commitment to their partner. Where sexual infidelity was seen as more serious in a co-residential relationship (married or otherwise), this was often due to the investments that cohabitation entails: whether emotional (Philip, Hannah, Neil and Nicola) or physical (Sharon and Tina). The interview participants made strong and continuous reference to conventional frames of heteronormativity in their narratives of commitment: normative assumptions that have prevailed throughout the 20th Century. For monogamy and co-residence remain important reference points for these LATs in making sense of their own relationships. Perhaps it is not surprising that those in LAT relationships do sound so conventional; they after all - like others - have limited access to languages and discourses about doing relationships differently (Duncan, 2011).

Commitment and living apart together

The vast majority of interviewees considered their LAT relationship to be committed, and of these, a large number stated their commitment was high and comprehensive. By using a close analysis of their accounts, interviewees can be gathered into four groups based on their stated commitment. Two groups include interviewees who spoke of high levels of commitment in their relationships (28 out of 50 respondents) while the remaining two groups described certain aspects of commitment missing from their partnerships (22 respondents).

It can also be noted that these four groups map onto the LAT categories identified by Duncan et al. (2013); preference, constraint, situational and too early. The commitment groups with their associated LAT categories are defined as follows:

1. Autonomous commitment: these participants were all preference LATs who preferred to live apart, either because of previous negative relationship experiences or a desire for autonomy and they all expressed high levels of commitment in their relationships (six interviewees).
2. Contingent commitment: these participants were largely constraint or situational LATs who were prevented from living together for reasons such as finances, family or caring obligations, or work or study location. While this group expressed high levels of commitment in their relationships this was contingent upon living together in the future (22 interviewees).
3. Ambivalent commitment: respondents in this group were mostly in the too early LAT group, meaning they were not yet ready to live together, and expressed both some commitment and a lack of it in their relationships (17 interviewees).
4. Limited commitment: this group contained preference LATs who were living apart expressly because they said it offered less commitment (five interviewees).

Evidence for commitment was described by the interviewees as embodying: (1) a high level of intimacy in terms of joint decision making, making meals together, sharing confidences, etc., (2) shared hobbies and interests and, for some, (3) a

readiness for cohabitation. Those describing just (1) and (2) above were also likely to express the view that cohabitation offered no more commitment than living apart together. On the other hand, those who mentioned (3) said that although cohabitation in general did involve more commitment, they themselves did not lack any commitment in living apart because they were ready to live together. For participants whose commitment was ambivalent or limited in their relationship, they stated that either: (1) they were specifically using living apart as a means to avoid commitment, or, more likely, (2) that they were waiting to cohabit to gain a dimension of commitment that they were not yet prepared for.

Where relationships were described as highly and unambiguously committed, these participants either did not place significant emphasis on relationship investments (such as shared housing or finances) in their accounts (Carter, 2012) or they stated that these already existed in their relationships. Those whose commitment was more ambivalent also placed great emphasis on the shared responsibilities that are involved in cohabitation and wanted to live apart in order to not take on these responsibilities (yet). The boundaries between these two broad groups are not fixed and it was also evident that interviewees could hold one view for their own relationship and quite another for relationships in general. For example, on a personal level some interviewees reported a strong sense of commitment to their own relationship (perhaps because of other elements to commitment such as love and longevity (Carter, 2012)) - however, at a public level they saw LAT as lacking commitment (due to the investments represented by shared housing perhaps).

Moreover, to complicate matters further, even those who saw LAT relationships as involving less commitment than cohabitation, still usually professed high levels of commitment in their own relationships - just not as much commitment as if they were cohabiting. This complicated picture can be explained using the dimensions of commitment offered by Carter (2012) outlined earlier. LAT relationships may be perceived as involving a limited amount of commitment because these relationships often lack the structural relationship investments of shared housing, finances and possessions. However, this is just one aspect of commitment and if

other aspects are present, such as love, moral obligations or social expectations, commitment can still be highly significant to those in LAT relationships. The discussion below focuses on participants' expressed commitment in their LAT relationships, rather than tackling their attitudes towards LAT and commitment more generally.

Autonomous commitment

The six interviewees in this group all expressed very high levels of commitment, while maintaining a desire to remain apart from their partner. Many came from a position of 'negative preference' for LAT – co-residence and often marriage remained the ideal but LAT was practically and emotionally the safer option (Duncan et al., 2013). These interviewees had previous negative experiences in co-residential relationships and had chosen to live apart as protection against future harm. Charlotte (41-50) explained that given her history of losing all her possession in a previous relationship and her partner having similar experiences, they were committed and determined to live apart: 'but then again it's a fresh approach to commitment'. When asked whether cohabitation would change the relationship, Charlotte responded: 'I think personally for me and him it's probably adding more pressure, than commitment'. It was the freedom that LAT offered alongside a stable and committed relationship that appealed to Charlotte. Michelle (21-30) also found it 'quite hard to be committed [...] because of [her] insecurities' following a searing history of failed and deeply unpleasant cohabitation. Yet Michelle likewise, went on to say that 'we do look after each other like we're married, our relationship is no different to any other relationship really. We still see each other, love each other, commit to each other'.

Wendy (51-60,) also appreciated a level of autonomy in her relationship alongside commitment. She had been with her partner for 13 years and had spent some time living with him before moving out due to his alcoholic and abusive behaviour. For Wendy then, '[LAT] has given me more freedom to do more things but overall I would say yeah you could still be just as committed [as living together]'. For individuals with past or current relationship difficulties, such as Wendy, Michelle and Charlotte, the investments associated with cohabitation were not wanted or

needed for commitment. Richard, (age group 61-70) intended to remain apart from his partner partly for inheritance reasons; he commented:

‘Our commitment is quite strong to each other, if she turned round and told me she’d gone off and slept with somebody else, I’d be devastated, I’d feel just as bad as if someone I was married to told me that’.

For Richard then, the account of commitment in his LAT relationship is no different to that in a marriage. But the investments involved in co-residence were not desired because he wanted to retain his property and possessions for his children after his death. Living apart together provided the opportunity for these interviewees to enjoy aspects of commitment not associated with relationship investments with the added benefit of retaining a desired level of independence and autonomy. Interestingly, it appears that structural investments such as shared housing do not need to be present in a relationship for commitment to be expressed as extremely important and as equivalent to that within a married relationship. This small group represent a desire for both high levels of commitment and autonomy.

Contingent commitment

A large number of participants in this group were prevented from living together due to finances, location or family. This group, therefore, often expressed high levels of commitment and qualified this assertion with the intention of living together in the near future; around half expected to do so within the following two years. Those separated by factors such as housing costs or job location, had concrete plans for achieving this. For some this process would involve a deeper sense of commitment, where LAT and cohabitation were often viewed as stepping stones on the path towards marriage, building up shared ownership of possessions, and sometimes parenting. But there were also those who said that their relationships were as committed as a cohabiting relationship *because* they planned to cohabit in the future (unlike the previous group discussed) and emotionally, were ready to do so. The above group of autonomously committed interviewees expressed a commitment to their partner that was independent of

relationship type (LAT or cohabitation) or relationship stage (intention to cohabit or not) because they had chosen to live apart. In contrast, this contingently committed group expressed high levels of commitment in their LAT relationships because they were prevented from living together but intended to cohabit in the future and were ready to do so.

Both Tom (31-40) and Rachel (31-40), for example, expressed high levels of commitment in their relationships. Tom said:

‘I would hypothetically marry [my girlfriend] at the moment, in the future, not obviously now. But you know what I mean, so I do see I definitely see the same sort of commitment [as in a co-residential relationship]’.

Tom likens his commitment in his LAT relationship to that of a marriage. Similarly Geneva (31-40), who was living apart from her partner to avoid taking on his debt commented about her relationship, ‘I don’t think it’s less committed [than cohabitation], it’s how each individual is committed on a personal level’. Those who had been constrained from cohabiting for some length of time viewed their relationship as equivalent to cohabitation in terms of intimacy and commitment. For these respondents then, their narrative of commitment is independent of shared investments which are either ignored (Tom) or actively not wanted (Geneva). As Geneva’s comment suggests, the more personal aspects of commitment such as love and longevity are prioritised above shared responsibilities.

These personal rather than structural elements to commitment were highlighted by Stephanie (41-50). She described her commitment in the following way: ‘we talk everyday on the phone...we sort lots of things out together, you know banking, insurance, holidays, everything: food, cook- you know, there’s nothing that we don’t probably know about each other’. For Stephanie the amount they did together as a couple, and the level of intimacy in their relationship, indicated a high level of commitment. This was similar to Gemma (31-40) who said:

‘If anyone was to see me and my partner and not know us, you would think we live together because we do everything together. We talk about what we’re going to eat, we just do everything, everything is a joint decision’.

For Gemma, the degree of commitment in her LAT relationship is very high: personal elements of commitment are prioritised above shared accommodation. Moreover, both Gemma and Stephanie mention in their accounts that they do share responsibilities together in terms of joint decision making and some combined financial transactions; these demonstrate highly relational accounts of relationships. Thus, while external, more ‘structural’ factors like shared housing may well entail a part of the complex strands that make up the messy notion of commitment, more personal aspects of commitment such as intimacy and love are equally emphasised and expressed through high levels of care and contact (Duncan et al., 2012) as well as shared decisions and transactions.

A further couple of interviewees who expressed high levels of commitment even asserted that their relationships were more committed than if they were living together. For example, Annabel (18-25) commented that her commitment ‘is probably stronger, you know, because you’re living separately’. George (51-60) related his own experience at length:

You have to put more effort into a relationship where you don’t live in the same [dwelling], where your lives are separate. You have to work at it. You have to want it. You have to make the effort. When you’re living in a relationship together in a house together, when you’re married it’s like you’re lumped together, that’s the way it is [...] you don’t have to work at anything, it’s already there. When you do have separate lives, there are difficulties, you do have to make that extra effort, because you’re taking somebody else’s life into consideration, as well as your own.

According to these interviewees, living apart may require an extra bond of commitment because of the effort required to maintain a relationship involving

separate residences and separate lives. Since the structural aspect of commitment is missing, the other aspects are perhaps reinforced (including sexual exclusivity).

Ambivalent commitment

Not all interviewees, however, expressed such high degrees of commitment. This group of 22 participants largely involved those who stated they were not ready or it was too early in their relationship to live together. It is perhaps understandable then, that these participants, while on the whole describing some level of commitment, were more ambivalent about it. Since this group involved a number of respondents who felt it was too early to live together, many, although not all, had an expectation of greater commitment to follow. Neil (31-40) had strong beliefs about 'living together and marriage and that sort of thing' so for him cohabitation was 'the next step that just shows that like little bit of extra commitment'. These 'strong beliefs' were given religious sanction for Philip: 'you are more committed when you are in a permanent situation in house' because for him Christian marriage was the only legitimate sexual relationship. For these interviewees, cohabitation and the additional aspect of commitment represented by shared structural investments was something to consider in the future. This highlights the importance of those shared structural responsibilities for some individuals.

Others in this group viewed LAT relationships as lacking aspects of commitment beyond shared possessions. Hannah (31-40), who lived over 100 miles away from her partner, commented 'you don't share the day to day experiences with the other person'; the long distance presented a barrier to intimacy. When talking about cohabitation, Serina (21-30) said,

'I think it [cohabitation] could also make you stronger in the sense that you're always together, you have to compromise, you have to face things that you would usually you wouldn't have to deal with [...] and that will cement you more as a partnership because you're always together and you feel like you're more connected to that person'.

For these interviewees, LAT lacked a certain amount of 'intimacy' that co-residency appeared to offer in terms of shared experiences, daily contact and facing situations together. Nevertheless, all participants in this group reported some degree of commitment to their partner and certain aspects of commitment such as agreed sexual exclusivity and care were prevalent. Interviewees included in this group may well be in transitional phases in their relationships, expecting commitment to either grow and become contingent or autonomous (Hannah and Neil both expressed a preference for cohabitation, they were just waiting for their relationships to reach that stage) or, on the other hand, diminish to a limited level (Philip had not been in contact with his girlfriend for a number of weeks and was waiting to see how the relationship would progress).

Limited commitment

Finally, just five interviewees specifically chose to live apart because of the limited commitment this relationship style was perceived to represent: they wanted to eschew the elements of commitment associated with cohabitation. This often dovetailed with their motivation for living apart – chiefly 'negative preference' or a desire for autonomy. Nicola (41-50), for example, lived apart from her partner because of previous bad experiences with her ex-husband (including both heavy financial loss and physical violence) and because both her and her new partner already owned their own separate properties. Nicola commented about her relationship: 'it's more serious if you live together because you're committing to everything together, obviously if you're living apart you have got your own little bit of separate life'.

Andrew (51-60) similarly chose to live apart because he did not want to progress his relationship and 'make it seem as though it's a permanent [...] relationship'; indeed Andrew went on to say, 'I don't love [my partner] enough to move in with her' (indicating he lacked a desire for both the structural and personal aspects of commitment). For these interviewees living apart was a mechanism through which they could maintain an element of separateness from their partner, while continuing a relationship that suited their needs. This was often a question of

combining safety, autonomy and intimacy rather than the more optimistic vision of allowing simply intimacy and autonomy (Levin, 2004).

Mark gave an account that indicated a relatively limited amount of commitment to his own LAT relationship; he commented, 'I think in some ways, if she was to find somebody who could give her more, then I think I'd actually be quite happy for her'. Mark went on to say that 'I don't think [LAT is] any more or less [committed] just because of the living arrangements, it's more to do with the individual I think'. Thus commitment for Mark is about personal rather than structural elements, which means that the basis for commitment in his relationships has little to do with residence. As Mark demonstrates, the simple fact of living apart, therefore, does not necessarily indicate a lack of commitment in the relationship.

Nevertheless, even interviewees - who used LAT as a tool to keep distance from their partners - still expressed a degree of commitment in their relationships, minimally that they would not have sex with anyone else. In this way LAT relationships can involve a very complicated picture of distance and commitment: *both* separateness from their partner *and* a level of commitment. It is possible that with the lack of structuring responsibilities such as shared housing, other elements of commitment, such as love and caring, become the main determinants for commitment. If even these elements are missing (e.g. Andrew above), it comes down to an expression of sexual exclusivity alone.

Conclusion

Possibly the greatest physical difference between LAT and co-residential relationships is shared material investments: one lacks the shared accommodation that the other, by definition, encompasses. Using the dimensions of commitment identified in section 1 then can help us to understand the complicated picture of commitment in LAT relationships. LAT rarely involves shared structural investments, such as housing (although other shared possessions or shared finances were often present); it was participants' responses to this 'missing' aspect of commitment that determined their overall position on commitment. Reported

levels of commitment in LAT can therefore depend upon relationship stage and reason for living apart: those who are still dating and living apart may report less commitment in their relationships than those who are more established but have chosen to live separately for various reasons.

Despite the fluidity that living apart can offer a couple, LAT was not often experienced as an opportunity to avoid commitment; rather it was described by participants as an opportunity to experience many aspects of commitment while ensuring a level of independence (e.g. maintaining personal space, or not surrendering personal possessions and investments). In fact, perhaps LAT relationships can represent the strongest type of commitment since the couple are not only *not* bound by legal contract, they are also not tied by shared housing or responsibilities. The only thing keeping them together is their desire to stay together- their shared commitment to the relationship and the other person. Moreover, another common feature of participants' accounts was their emphasis on connections with others: whether this was taken-for-granted assumptions of sexual exclusivity; decisions based on considerations of children and other relationships; or relationships with others actually constraining decisions about living arrangements (parents' objections, for example). The importance of connecting with others, whether a consciously made decision or unconscious, remained paramount.

It is clear that family life is extremely important to the individuals in this study; the importance of relational decisions is evident in explanations for living apart involving concerns over protecting children and the individual's desire to be in a relationship with another despite various obstacles. Relating to others, no matter the format this takes, remains a central and key component of personal life; and the centrality of traditional values continues, despite the unconventional appearance of LAT. The significant emphasis on sexual exclusivity highlights the liminality of all relationships, including LAT, as they sit in this ambiguous position between popular notions of individuality and evidenced experiences of traditionality. For LAT though, sexual exclusivity may be especially pivotal as some other aspects of commitment, such as shared housing are missing.

It might be tempting to conclude that intimate relationships are becoming more diverse and complex over time, with the increased visibility of LAT as a leading example. In contrast these accounts of LAT show that relating to others, normative traditions, and commitment remain important features of people's relationship experiences. While there may be change in terms of how people are *able* to live their lives, there remains a considerable amount of continuity in how they *do* live their lives.

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² There is limited data on LAT relationships, particularly time-series data, given the only recent interest in them. Thus trends in the proportion of relationships that are LAT cannot be ascertained.

³ There is a very small chance of respondent overlap in the three surveys.

⁴ On two of the three surveys, (BSA and NatGen Omnibus), we also checked whether respondents who were married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership were living with their spouse/partner.

⁵ A small number of questions were simplified or omitted for the ONS survey (which was conducted last), where responses to the two previous surveys had shown little variation.

⁶ For more information on these demographic distinctions see Phillips et al. (2013). Interestingly, there was little significant variation in LAT relationship practices and attitudes by gender or class. In contrast, there was some significant variation by age (Duncan, 2014).

⁷ The survey data has been explored in more depth in Duncan et al. (2014) and Phillips et al. (2013).

⁸ 'Do **you personally** think of yourselves as "a couple"?' and 'Do **other people** think of you as "a couple"?'.

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Authors' Biographies

Julia Carter

Canterbury Christ Church University

Julia Carter is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her research interests include marriage and relationships, families and personal life, and gender and sexuality. She is particularly interested in intimate relationships and the role these play in an ever-changing social context. Previous publications have focused on marriage and narratives of love, sexuality, and commitment and, more recently, LAT relationships. Her wider interests include gender and popular culture and she has recently undertaken some research into the practices and experiences of weddings and the role of agency in understanding these processes (in collaboration with Simon Duncan).

Simon Duncan

University of Bradford

Simon Duncan is Emeritus Professor of Comparative Social Policy at the University of Bradford. He has particular research interests in families, relationships, and personal life. Recent research considers living apart together (LAT), agency and bricolage, the changing nature of personal life between the 1950s and today, and the gap between assumptions and the realities of teenage motherhood. He is currently undertaking research on weddings, together with Julia Carter. He has previously researched on European, regional and local gender geographies, on local social relations and the local state, and on comparative housing provision in Europe.

Mariya Stoilova

Birkbeck College, University of London

Mariya Stoilova is a Lecturer in Sociology and Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, UK. Her research on intimacy, family transformations, and gendered citizenship focuses on UK and Eastern European dynamics, policy implications, and practice development. Her recent publications include 'Mind the gap: The changing face of gender (in)equality in Bulgaria after 1989' (in Ramen and Hassenstab, eds, Palgrave, forthcoming), 'Living Apart Relationships in Contemporary Europe: Accounts of Togetherness and Apartness' (Sociology, 2014, Vol.48(6) 1075–1091 with Roseneil et al), 'Why do people live apart together?' (Families, Relationships and Societies 2(3): 323–38, with Duncan et al., 2013), Citizenship and Reproduction/Reproducing Citizens (special issue of Citizenship

Studies, ed. with Roseneil et al., 2013) and the co-authored book *The Tenacity of the Couple Norm* (Palgrave, forthcoming).

Miranda Phillips

NatCen Social Research

Miranda Phillips is a Research Director at NatCen Social Research – Britain’s largest independent social research agency. She is Co-Director of British Social Attitudes and an editor of the British Social Attitudes Report series. Her particular research interests include attitudinal research in general, and specifically views about living apart together (LAT), couples and families, and the welfare state. Miranda works on a wide range of research projects and social surveys, including cross-sectional and panel studies, and has an extensive publication list.