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Research Briefing

Living Apart Together: uncoupling intimacy and co-residence

by Simon Duncan, Miranda Phillips, Sasha Roseneil, Julia Carter and Mariya Stoilova

- Many people classified as “single” are actually in living apart together relationships.
- Living alone doesn’t necessarily mean being alone.
- Intimacy doesn’t always mean sharing a home.

Over a fifth of those normally classified as “single” are actually in a relationship but not living with their partner – which is 9% of adults in Britain. This sizeable minority has only recently been recognized by social researchers, even though people have long been having relationships without moving in together. In the context of increasing attention to the diversity of ways in which people live and love outside the conventional family, understanding “living apart together” (LAT) relationships is vital for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers who are concerned with couples, families, and individual well-being today.

This briefing paper presents the findings of the most comprehensive study of living apart together in Britain to date.

A multi-method study

The study, conducted in 2011–12, used three complementary methods in order to gain a thorough understanding of living apart relationships:

- **A quantitative representative national survey** of 572 people in LAT relationships¹, which focused on their social characteristics, motivations, attitudes and how they organise their relationships.
- **Qualitative semi-structured interviews** with 50 people in LAT relationships (drawn from the representative national sample), in which they were asked about their experiences, beliefs, understandings and everyday relationship practices in more detail.
- **Psychosocial biographical narrative interviews** with 16 people who are in LAT relationships (drawn from the representative national sample) which explored their life and relationship histories and personal meanings in greater depth, placing the current LAT relationship in the context of the rest of their lives.

(Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council)

Who is living apart together?

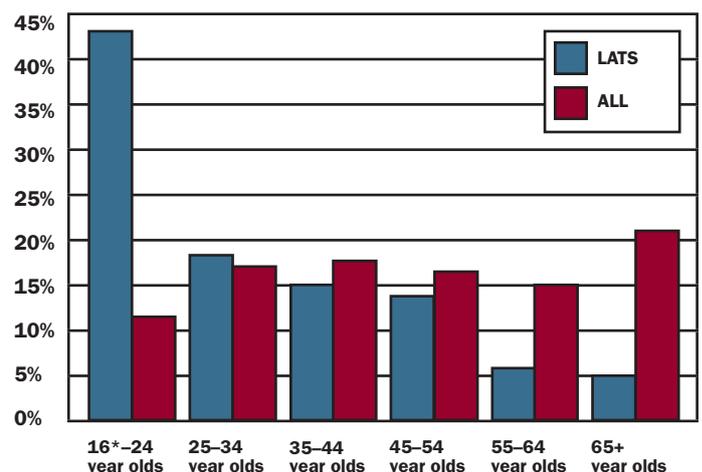
All sorts of people, across the social spectrum, live apart together.

Contrary to the popular view of living apart together as the prerogative of the rich and famous celebrity couple, or the professional commuting couple, people in LAT relationships are broadly spread in terms of social class, differing little from the overall population as a whole. Twenty-nine per cent of LATs in our survey were in managerial and professional occupations, 20%

in intermediate occupations, and 41% were in routine/manual occupations or were unemployed.

People of all age groups are living apart together, but the majority of LATs are young: 43% of our sample was aged 16–24. However, 33% were aged 25–44, and 11% were 55 or over.

Age distribution of LATs and all adults



*‘All’ figure (from British Social Attitudes 2011) refers to 18–24 year olds.

LATs are distributed broadly equally across Britain, and in terms of ethnicity, LATs also largely follow the population as a whole. Three per cent of LATs surveyed were in a same-sex relationship.

LATs are less likely to have a religious affiliation (57% said that they had no religious affiliation, compared with 46% in the general population²), and of those who did have an affiliation, LATs are less likely to attend services. This is, no doubt, correlated with the relatively young age profile of LATs.

Whilst most of the LATs we surveyed were administratively classed as “single” (70%), a substantial minority (24%) were “divorced” or “separated”, 3% were “widowed” and 3% were “married”.

A quarter of LATs live with children (24%) compared with 32% across the general population. A third live on their own (33%) compared with 17% of all adults.

¹ To qualify to take part in the study people had to answer yes to the following question: “are you currently in a relationship with someone **you are not living with** here?”

² The general population reported throughout is based on NatCen Social Research’s British Social Attitudes survey, 2011.

LAT relationship histories

LAT relationships range from new “dating” relationships to long-term, committed couple relationships.

The length of LAT relationship amongst our survey sample was diverse. Whilst 19% had been in their relationship for less than six months, and a further 24% for up to 17 months, 22% had been with their LAT partner for 3–5 years, and 19% for six or more years. Whilst 82% had not ever lived with their LAT partner, nearly a fifth had done so. Married and separated LATs were disproportionately more likely to have lived with their partner in the past.

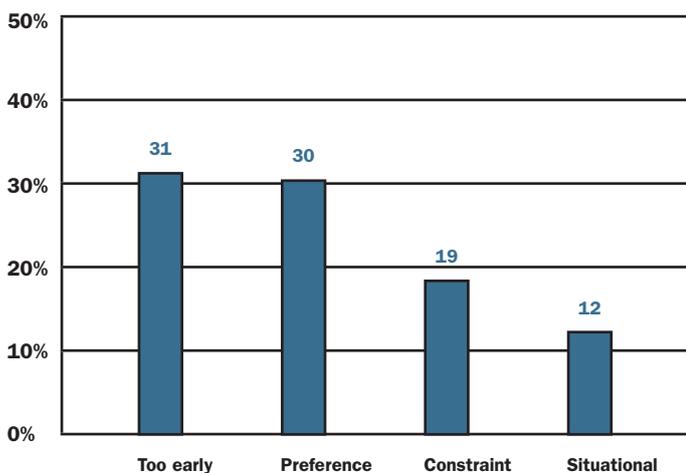
Our biographical narrative interviews allowed us to understand current LAT relationships in the context of an individual’s life-time relationship history, and here we also found considerable diversity of experience:

- younger people who had never cohabited with a partner and who previously had had a few short-term LAT relationships, some of whom were hoping to live with their partner, others of whom were not considering this;
- people in mid-life, most of whom were married to, and all of whom had previously lived with, their current LAT partner, for whom the LAT relationship was the most significant intimate relationship in their life, and most of whom expected to live together again in the future;
- people for whom the current LAT relationship came after the breakdown of a previous significant cohabiting/married relationship;
- people for whom the current LAT relationship was part of a complex relationship history, which included several cohabiting/married relationships, and a number of other intimate relationships.

Why do people live apart together?

People have many different reasons for living apart, and even when they feel prevented from desired cohabitation by factors external to the relationship, they often appreciate the freedom and autonomy being a LAT gives them.

Reasons for Living Apart



When asked for the main reason why they did not live with their partner, the survey respondents can be divided into four groups:

- **Too early:** 31% said that it was too early / they were not ready to cohabit, or they hadn’t thought about living together.

- **Preference:** 30% gave answers that expressed a preference for not living together, including wanting to keep their own homes, prioritizing other responsibilities, or children, and “just not wanting to live together”.
- **Constraint:** 19%, most of whom said that they couldn’t afford to live together.
- **Situational:** 12% said that their partner had a job or was studying elsewhere, or was living in an institution (such as a care home/prison).

Perhaps surprisingly, only 8% were living apart from their partner for work reasons, only 3% were waiting to get married, and only 1% admitted to benefit issues being the primary reason for not cohabiting.

The semi-structured interviews explored people’s reasons for living apart from their partners in more depth, and found that much “preference” was in fact either *negative* preference or *obligated* preference.

Those expressing *negative* preference would, in an ideal world, prefer cohabitation, but described how their current partner was unsuitable, or how they had insecurities about cohabitation because of previous bad experiences.

Those expressing *obligated* preference described how they chose not to cohabit with their partner because of pre-existing obligations to others, particularly their or their partner’s children, or infirm parents.

Whilst there were relatively few clear-cut expressions of LAT as a “lifestyle choice”, nearly everyone interviewed appreciated the autonomy and personal space that living apart provides.

The psychosocial analysis of the detailed life histories and relationship stories offered in the biographical narrative interviews revealed the complex web of personal biographical and relational factors that play a part in living apart together relationships.

We found that putting physical distance into, or keeping distance within, an intimate relationship, was often one or more of the following:

- **a way of trying to protect the self from further emotional pain and/or abuse.** These interviewees had had previous troubled relationships which had left their mark, for example a previous partner’s death or aggressive/controlling behaviour, or a history of abandonment and fractured relationships in childhood and later life.
- **a way of trying to protect others, particularly children and other family members.** These interviewees were putting their sense of familial obligation and a desire to ensure the well-being of dependents before living with their partners.
- **a way of trying to sustain, or make possible, the LAT relationship itself.** For these interviewees, living apart actually made intimacy possible that would be threatened by too much close, day-to-day contact, interdependence and/or emotional intensity.
- **a way of prioritizing the self, and felt needs for self-realization and autonomy.** For these interviewees, having time and space to pursue their individual paths and passions – whether a career or time-consuming leisure activity – was more important than living with their partners.



Emma:

We're like a little team and when we've got decisions to make we'll make them together. And if I'm having a good day I think, "oh I'll ring him and tell him", if I'm having a bad day then I'll ring him and sob down the phone.

George:

I couldn't have survived the last 33 years without her. Not without her help and input at various times.

Michelle:

We do look after each other like we're married... I don't like to fill out an application form, single, married. I'm not single and I hate ticking "single" ... There should be a bit more light on relationships like this.



Being a LAT: attitudes and experiences

Most LATs consider themselves to be securely "coupled" with their partner.

A large majority of survey respondents saw themselves as part of "a couple" (79% always or usually did), and felt that other people saw them this way too (84%). Only 7% said that they rarely or never saw themselves as part of a couple. A majority disagreed that "living apart puts our relationship at greater risk of breaking down" (66%) and that "living apart makes me feel less secure when I think about the future" (54%), with only 13% agreeing with the first

statement and 19% with the second. Considerably more disagreed (46%) with the statement that "living apart limits the extent to which we can have a close relationship" than agreed with it (29%).

In general, respondents were more likely to have positive attitudes toward LAT relationships than negative ones. For example, 50% agreed that "living apart gives me more freedom to be with friends and family" (23% disagreed), 47% agreed that it gives greater financial independence (25% disagreed), and 39% agreed that it "gives me more freedom to develop my career" (31% disagreed).

Nearly all survey respondents felt that sexual exclusivity in LAT relationships was important: 87% felt that it was "always wrong" or "mostly wrong" if someone in a LAT relationship had sex with someone else. This was little different from views about sexual exclusivity in co-residential relationships, where 89% thought this was always or mostly wrong.

The biographical narrative interviews revealed a more complex picture than the attitudinal statements about sexual exclusivity in the survey. In re-counting their "life and relationship histories", about two thirds of the 16 interviewees talked about either themselves or a partner having had "overlapping" or concurrent sexual relationships, generally, but not always, without their partner's knowledge and approval. Whilst some of these experiences were described as the source of considerable emotional distress, people were rarely moralistic or judgemental about them, and treated them rather as part of the normal "messiness" of intimate relationships. However, none spoke about being in such a situation at the time of the interview.

Conclusions

Living apart together is found amongst all sorts of people in Britain today because it gives people flexibility and room to manoeuvre in adapting couple intimacy to the demands of contemporary life. For many, this form of relationship allows them to meet their needs and desires in balancing closeness and personal autonomy, and at the same time to adapt to external circumstances. It enables them to find time and space for other family or work commitments, to deal with the difficulties of finding housing, to grapple with relationship problems, or just to allow their relationship to develop at its own pace. Rarely ever straightforwardly chosen or determined entirely by outside forces, living apart together is a way of being a couple that responds to the complex array of life circumstances and personal histories that people carry with them in relationships. Living apart is not necessarily a permanent state, and many LATs are young people who will go on to cohabit. However, many others are in committed, long-term LAT relationships that are seen as meaningful and important on their own terms.

Policy Implications

Living apart together is a relatively common relationship practice, yet it is ignored by the Census, and most other social, family and household surveys. LAT is rarely recognized by those collecting administrative information about users of services in the public and private sectors. Many people who are in relationships are currently misrecognized as "single". On the basis of our research, we suggest that:

- Living apart together should be a relationship status that is recognized and counted by those producing statistics and seeking to understand contemporary relationships and families.

- Consideration should be given to extending legal recognition to those in LAT relationships who wish to "opt-in", in order to secure recognition, for example, as next of kin by health care providers.
- Those providing personal, health and social care services, particularly relationship counselling and family support, should recognize the prevalence of living apart together relationships, and audit how they take such relationships into consideration in the provision of services.
- The design of domestic and communication technologies and services should consider the needs of those seeking to maintain intimate relationships across distance.

The Research Team: Professor Simon Duncan, Miranda Phillips & Professor Sasha Roseneil (principal investigators) and Dr Julia Carter & Dr Mariya Stoilova (researchers).

Professor Simon Duncan
Centre for Applied Social Research
University of Bradford, Richmond Road
Bradford BD7 1DP
Email: s.s.duncan@bradford.ac.uk

Miranda Phillips
NatCen Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London EC1V 0AX
Email: miranda.phillips@natcen.ac.uk

Professor Sasha Roseneil
Birkbeck, University of London
26 Russell Square
London WC1E 7HX
Email: s.roseneil@bbk.ac.uk

Project Website: www.applied-social-research.brad.ac.uk/livingaparttogether