Commuter Couples and Distance Relationships: Living Apart Together (2009)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Loving couples are usually expected to live together, but there are a variety of types of couple relationships in which partners do not share a household. Living apart together will be the term used to cover all of these non-cohabitational relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, married or unmarried. Living apart together couples have an ongoing self-defined couple relationship without everyday cohabiting (Levin & Trost, 1999, pp. 280-281). Some living apart together couples live nearby and others further away. Those who live further apart will be referred to as commuter couples and/or distance relationships. Couples living apart together each have their own “home,” so this does not include young couples still living with parents. Some argue that those living apart together are different from commuter couples in giving roughly equal importance to each home. Commuter couples and distance relaters supposedly have a main household and a second apartment, which the commuter travels between (Levin, 2004). However, this distinction is not maintained here because research suggests that most commuter couples and distance relaters give each partner’s household fairly equally importance and take turns to travel between them (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Holmes, 2004, 2006).

Commuting and distance relating usually refers to partners who live apart because they have professional careers that are difficult for them to pursue within the same town. Most dual-career couples find that they need to live apart, or, at a minimum, consider the prospect of living apart together, in order to establish careers in their professions or in order to be promoted (Green, 1997; Gross, 1980). The term “distance relationship” is sometimes used to focus on the particular issues associated with pursuing an intimate couple relationship whilst living far apart (Holmes, 2004). However, “commuting” and “distance” can be used interchangeably to describe non-cohabitation across different locations.

Traditionally, couple relationships have involved cohabitation, apart from exceptional cases of distance relationships such as husbands going away to work at sea or in the military (e.g., Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Tunstall, 1962). The establishment of separate households very near each other shows that some families diverge from the usual expectation that couples cohabit. Some scholars have proposed that non-marital cohabitation has become institutionalised, and that this makes non-cohabitation possible (Levin &
Trost, 1999). Non-cohabitation at a distance now often involves each partner having his or her own house or apartment and taking turns to travel to reunite. Historically, separation between couples most commonly involved men travelling to and from a main family home. These kinds of separations continue within the oil and mining industries, for instance, but the men tend to live in temporary or institutional accommodation while away. Their wives may work, but this work is typically subordinated to the husband’s career and expected to fit around care for the children (Beach, 1999; Gallegos, 2006; McKee, Mauthner, & Maclean, 2000). Note, however, that these commuter couple arrangements may take a different form in developing economies; for example, as reflected in women leaving their homes to market their wares or produce. Distance is also involved when women in poorer countries leave their families for domestic work in wealthier nations (Hochschild & Ehrenreich, 2003). These couple separations are similar to the traditional pattern, except that it is the women rather than the men working away (see the Encyclopedia Entry on transnational families: http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=6361&area=All).

**Importance of the Topic to Work Family Studies**

Commuter and distance relationships have come about as a result of more women working and couples having to manage two careers. These are excellent examples of some of the diverse responses to dealing with the often competing demands of workplace and home life. Much of the focus in the limited research on this issue has been on more privileged couples and tends to focus on cases in which one partner is compelled to migrate to seek work; these couples tend to conform to the absent-husband pattern mentioned above, even if it is now often women breadwinners who are away (Chandler, 1991; Golam Quddus, 1992; Hochschild & Ehrenreich, 2003). There are similarities, but couples compelled to be apart by poverty face different issues than those faced by more privileged couples. For professional couples, separation is not necessarily “chosen,” but there is a dimension of choice, as it is a way to ensure that both partners can pursue professional work that may hold considerable meaning beyond providing a livelihood (see Schvaneveldt, Young, & Schvaneveldt, 2001). For example, one distance relater commented that “you wouldn’t do it if you didn’t think it was very important that you both had a [satisfying] job” (Holmes, 2004, p. 191; see also Gerstel & Gross, 1984, pp. 45-49).

Some of the key issues couples say are important in making their distance relationships possible are flexibility at work, accessible transportation routes, regular communication with their partner, strong mutual emotional support, and good health. Where children are involved, quality care arrangements are also important (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Holmes, 2004, 2006). This makes it apparent that dual-residence distance relationships both arise from and create new social conditions surrounding intimate life and work. Women have gained financial independence and with it, greater autonomy. These economic and social shifts combine with technological changes such as access to, and demand for, faster transportation options or more child-care facilities.
Commuting raises questions about changes in family life as women have gained social status and taken on professional work. New forms of distance relating were noticed in the late 1970s by social scientists researching the increasing numbers of dual-career couples. The Rapoorts' 1978 collection, Working couples, contained Farris’s findings from her master’s thesis on commuting (Farris, 1978). In the same year, Kirschner and Walum (1978) discussed “two-location families” in the first volume of the journal Alternative lifestyles. Attention was on commuter marriages because only married couples living apart would have been observable before unmarried cohabitation became common (Levin, 2004). This early research found that couples typically decided to move apart if a special job or educational opportunity arose for one partner. A diversity of arrangements existed, ranging from tens of thousands of miles of distance and limited contact to much closer proximity and more frequent contact. Weekend togetherness was usual for about half the couples. Once apart, they usually encountered financial strain and struggled to maintain intimacy. Commuter couples found their situation less stressful if both partners were highly career oriented, if husbands were supportive of their wife’s strong career orientation, if they did not have children, if they had a long-established marital relationship, and if they were not too far apart geographically. Distance relationships seemed to indicate that many women were no longer prepared to be the “trailing spouse” (see Green, 1997) following their husband wherever his work dictated. More emphasis was being put on the woman’s career, even if it meant separation.

Research in this area has centrally revolved around evaluating living apart as an attempt to achieve some balance between work and family demands. Work on commuting and other dual-career couples was a key part of attempts to understand how work and family are integrally linked. This was evident in the most comprehensive sociological study of commuting couples, by Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Gross (1984). In the 1970s, Gerstel and Gross had both researched commuter marriages and combined their qualitative data to give them a sample of 121 respondents, half of whom had children. Their argument was that commuter marriages illustrate how the economic system’s demand for mobile workers clashes with traditional patterns of shared family cohabitation. Both Functionalist and Marxist arguments have proposed that the nuclear family suits capitalism’s needs, but Gerstel and Gross’s work challenges this fundamental tenet of early thinking on work and family. They propose that the demands of work and the demands of family are in conflict and that individual families are forced to find ways to juggle these competing demands. Smaller studies on commuting in the early 1990s confirm Gerstel and Gross’s findings, as does much other research on living apart together. The advantages of living apart (as expressed by couples) include a greater sense of autonomy for women and a generally fairer division of household labour. Both partners also noted increased ability to divide work from leisure time and that their time together was of higher quality. Drawbacks could include the problems of maintaining intimacy and dealing with conflict, especially without being able to touch and hug. There was also tiredness from travelling and problems with planning for the future. Despite their drawbacks, these relationships have had some success as an attempt to deal with the conflict between work practices and family needs. The geographical mobility of those living apart, sometimes at a distance, may be part of ongoing circulations...
and life-course shifts rather than permanent migrations (Bell, 2001; Green, 1997; Green & Canny, 2003; Holmes, 2006). It has its problems, but living away from one’s partner is not inevitably dissatisfying (Bunker, Zubek, Vanderslice, & Rice, 1992; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Govaerts & Dixon, 1988; Holmes, 2006; Houghton, 1993; Pollard, 1990). Such relationships are usually highly committed (Borrell & Ghazanfareeoon Karlsson, 2003; Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Holmes, 2004, 2006; Levin, 2004; Roseneil, 2006). Family and relationship demands cannot necessarily be “balanced” against the powerful claims of the workplace, but living apart together can be a realistic and even sometimes rewarding way to work and love within current social constraints.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Within the social sciences, different disciplines have all had an interest in commuting and distance relationships. The psychological literature on distance relationships has focused on evaluating the satisfaction such a lifestyle brings in comparison to cohabiting relationships and usually provides advice. Some claim that commuting and distance can make work more satisfying, but relationships less so (Bunker et al., 1992); others posit that there is little difference in satisfaction between commuting and non-commuting couples and that, in some cases, distance might make relationships more satisfying (Govaerts & Dixon, 1988; Guldner, 2003; Jackson, Brown, & Patterson-Stewart, 2000). The satisfactions are usually similar to those noted in the paragraph above, but problems can arise from the individualised measures of satisfaction usually employed by psychologists. These can overlook the impact of wider inequalities on couples and oversimplify shifting interdependencies between partners. Geographers offer more consideration of the social and spatial context of such relationships and are interested in commuting as a form of geographical mobility that is used to replace migration. This shifting around has been termed circulation (Bell, 2001). Some terms can be confusing, however, as key geographical research on “commuting” initially refers simply to a longer drive to work each day (Green, 1997; Green, Hogarth, & Shackleton, 1999). There is some discussion of dual-residence distance relationships, which concentrates on the sustainability of such lifestyles. This work notes their potentially energy-greedy impacts on infrastructures providing work, transport, housing, and other services (Green & Canny, 2003).

Some of the early sociologically oriented work has been discussed above, and more recent studies have continued to examine living apart together as a work and family issue, but have also placed it within the context of new attention to the diversification of intimate life and to processes of individualisation and globalisation. Much work on forms of living apart together helps illustrate theoretical concerns with changes affecting traditional family and community bonds, and relations of care (e.g., Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992). These changes have arguably made long-lasting love difficult to maintain within the uncertainty of an individualistic consumer society that emphasises personal satisfaction and encourages people to dispose of partners when the relationship ceases to be “good.” However, Giddens (1992) argues that relationships have also become based more on negotiation and ideals of equality (but see
Beck & Beck Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Hochschild, 2003). Efforts are made to equally value the career of each partner (see the Encyclopedia Entry on career prioritisation in dual-career couples: http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=6473&area=All), but debates have evolved around whether these relationships are attempts to maintain more egalitarian gender roles and how successful such arrangements are in solving the problems of combining the demands of paid work with the needs of family life. Gerstel and Gross (1984) focus on cost-benefit analysis, and this approach tends to emphasise financial and career concerns. One question that remains concerns issues of power and inequity in the process of making these decisions, as the outcomes can shift depending on whether the focus is on the individual worker or on the couple as an economic unit. Beyond economic considerations, the benefits (or costs) of these relationships are also not always clear, and, in many cases, distance relating can be an ambivalent experience. For instance, couples complain of isolation, disconnection, and high expectations of time together but also note the improved communication and the sense of romance that is fostered (Holmes, 2004, p. 189). Couples may choose to live apart for reasons other than work or study; for instance, to maintain autonomy, avoid conflict, or better provide care for children or elders. Some people want to avoid the complexities of blended families or spare partners the stress of providing live-in care for ageing parents (Borrell & Ghazanfareeoon Karlsson, 2003; Levin, 2004; Levin & Trost, 1999). For women, and older women especially, living apart helps avoid a return to being burdened with housework. In a Swedish study, 70-year-old Anne says living apart makes it possible “to be yourself after having been married for so long and having been responsible for the home” (Ghazanfareeoon Karlsson & Borrell, 2002, p. 18).

Research on commuting and distance relationships, in all their forms, can help test theories about the extent to which traditional or conventional ways of relating have become less dominant in the face of 21st-century living. Cohabitation, or at least proximity, is thought essential for intimate relationships, but distance relationships and other “life experiments” (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) suggest that people are creative in making bonds with others that do not follow traditional blueprints (Budgeon & Roseneil, 2004; Weston, 1991). The development of communication technology, especially telephones, mobiles, and the Internet, have brought new possibilities for making and maintaining relationships across distance (Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2007; Holland, 2008; Wilding, 2006). There is still much to be done, however, in terms of exploring the complex relationships among individualisation, globalisation, geographical mobility, changing work and communication practices, sexual identities, and the ways in which people love and care for each other.

Implications for Research and Practice

Living apart together and commuter/distance relationships are difficult to measure quantitatively, and better information is needed on the extent of this phenomenon. Much large-scale survey research fails to portray the complex relationships among family members and couples, especially across households.
The ways information is collected on individuals and families make it difficult to capture couples living apart. Relatively recent surveys have included questions about partners in other households (Ermisch, 2000), but estimates vary depending on different definitions of living apart together. Based on Ermisch’s (2000) analysis of the British Household Panel Survey and Kiernan’s (1999) of the European Family and Fertility Survey, it appears that as many as one-third of those in Europe not married or cohabiting may be having a relationship with someone in another household. Haskey (2005) uses the Omnibus survey to estimate that around 2 million non-married people in Britain are in serious relationships that involve living apart together. However, he excludes those married couples who may cohabit and uses a survey that does not include the over 60s. Figures collected in Norway and Sweden suggest that 8-14% of those who are not married or cohabiting are in living apart together relationships. This probably constitutes up to 4% of those populations, but that may be a conservative estimate given the strict definition used. It is noted that French and German scholars suggest slightly higher figures in their own nations based on broader definitions (Levin, 2004, pp. 228-229; Levin & Trost, 1999, pp. 282-283). In these European figures, it is not known how far apart such couples live. In the United States, psychologist Gregory Guldner (2003, p. 1) has done his own research and claims that one-quarter of non-married people in the United States live in a long-distance relationship. This means that as many as 2.5 million people (not including hundreds of thousands in the armed forces) might be in some form of long-distance relationship. However, he includes relationships between college students and others that may be less serious or lasting and which are excluded by Haskey. All these figures remain tentative, and, given the snapshot aspect of most of their sources, may fail to indicate the importance that commuting plays in dual-career couples’ efforts to combine work and loving.

Various social practices may need to be reexamined in the light of information about distance and commuting relationships. There are important corrections that research into non-cohabitational and distance relationships makes to various potential misconceptions about modern living. Those who live alone when not with partners may be inflating the statistics on single-person households, and they raise questions about common portrayals of lonely singles (Holmes, 2006). There are also considerable policy issues attached to distance relating around transport, housing, and other needs. It has been noted in the United Kingdom, for example, that much mobilities research “overemphasises individualised networking,” and transport policy needs to account better for the fact that “many mobile professionals are constrained by their relationship” (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2006, p. 33). Changes in employment policies could make it easier for people to arrange their relationships around work. However, Hochschild’s research (e.g., 1997) suggests that something more radical than individual leave entitlements might be required.

Employment policies that are likely to be of most help to commuter couples are those allowing flexible work arrangements, which are beneficial to all workers. One exception is spousal hire, which is specifically designed to help couples avoid commuting (see the Encyclopedia entry on spousal supports provided by employers: http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=15014&area=All). This
approach has been most commonly used by universities keen to attract academic “stars.” It may work, but can leave the trailing partner with colleagues who are resentful of their presence if other appointments in the department are then delayed or cancelled. Often, spousal hire simply cannot provide the kind of job the spouse needs or requires (Ferber & Loeb, 1997, pp. 301-303). Flexible working hours and the ability to work away from the workplace can be good for all workers and are mentioned by distance relaters as helpful in making their relationships possible and bearable (Holmes, 2004, 2006). Given the current ease of communication facilitated by the Internet, email, and telecommunication, there seem few barriers to flexible working for professionals. Policies requiring employees to reside nearby should not be applied unless an employee’s presence is really required, as, say, with doctors on call. Frequent meetings that demand employees’ attendance need to be minimised and carefully timetabled. Again, technology should make alternatives possible, although they cannot entirely replace face-to-face connection. Rather than calling for better transport links, communication alternatives can be used to help create more environmentally sustainable ways of working away. No matter what the policies are, however, some couples may continue to choose not to cohabit—for work and other reasons.

Research on distance relationships and commuting couples can assist in the evaluation of the extent to which individualisation is affecting social life. Even non-cohabiting relationships seemingly based on high levels of independence may involve inequalities and interdependence. And caring bonds are maintained across large distances (Baldassar et al., 2007). This area could benefit from more engagement with migration studies and theories about globalisation. Practices of working and loving are currently heavily infused with issues of “race”/ethnicity, religion, security, home, and care. Also, the “everyday migration” that is part of distance relating can be physically and emotionally exhausting, but sometimes exciting. Emotions and bodies need acknowledging in order to appreciate how distance relationships relate to well-being. Variations in such relationships emerge around varied economic wealth, views on gender, work options and practices, and transport and communication provisions. Whether more and more people will relate at a distance depends on women’s numbers and status in the workforce and on major forces affecting labour markets such as recession and climate change. Intimacy and relationships are also being altered as new possibilities arise concerning who to love and how. Heterosexual cohabitation is not the only, nor inevitably the best, way to organise love. More quantitative data on non-cohabitational relationships would help indicate how common such relationships are, providing a richer context for more qualitative research. Knowing more about distance relationships and living apart together can help us understand how current social conditions constrain and/or enable different social groups as they attempt to find meaningful and satisfying ways to work, love, and live.

References


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...](#)).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver/caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:
1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see
Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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