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How Partners Love Each Other Living Apart Together Transnationally

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It seems natural that partners who love each other experience intense desire and longing for union, preferring to be and stay close to each other, striving for unity. How, then, is it possible for partners to love each other while living apart, even transnationally?

Love Is a Union

The traditional concept of love as a union and unity is a cultural belief that is widely recognized, with other related connotations commonly accepted in folklore myths, public views, and scholarly literature (see, for review, Karandashev, 2019, 2022, 2024).

For centuries and across many languages, the *unity metaphors* have been entrenched in the cultural models of love (Kövecses, 1988, 2005).

This cultural concept assumes that partners who love each other tend to live together. Living under the same roof and sharing geographical proximity is a culturally conventional image of a couple who are

partners in an intimate relationship. The couples who committed to conjoining their lives and building families commonly cohabit.

Why Do Many Partners Live Apart Together?

However, in recent decades, an increasing number of couples living apart together (LAT) have challenged this traditional cultural notion.

The increasing globalization of the job market and migration, especially over the past four decades, have made many partners live apart yet intimately together. Partners in such relationships choose to live apart as a suitable option to manage their careers, autonomy, and the restrictions imposed upon them by immigration status. These couples do not fit into the traditional “gender order,” where the partner (usually the wife) follows the spouse who moves to another nation. Moreover, such couples challenge the idea of belonging to just one nation because the two partners reside in different countries.

What Did the Study of Transnational Couples Living Apart Reveal?

This article is about couples who, due to some circumstances, live in distance in two different countries and maintain intimacy in their relationships and the next article deals with how, when they reunite after geographical separation, they perceive each other like ‘stranger’ (Singla, 2024).

I will tell what I’ve learned in my recent empirical study about the ways these couples live apart together transnationally (Singla, 2024) Since number of such couples is increasing, the knowledge of how they deal with such living apart together are more important than ever.

So Far Apart, Yet So Close!

How do they live together yet still close? Specific details of the three couples at the time of the interview would be suitable here to present their diverse experiences of the partner.

The Story of Janet and Conner

Janet met Conner from Holland, also working in the international development sector, in Africa; they fell in love and got married. They have been a living apart together couple for the past six years, as he was posted in Afghanistan and Vietnam, while Janet was in the Philippines at the time of the interview, living there since 2003. Janet is originally from Malaysia, has no children, and has a harmonic relationship with her partner's parents. At the same time, she underscored transparency and trust between her and Conner.

The Story of Lena and Pedro

Lena, a 31-year-old Danish student, met Pedro, a 39-year-old Peruvian, during her master's degree exchange in Spain.

I conducted a face-to-face interview with her in Copenhagen, where she resided and worked for a multinational company. They have been a living apart together couple for almost eight years. Lena informed us that Pedro has been in Spain for ten years, and his family remains in Peru. He studied and worked with electronics and recently obtained Spanish citizenship. Though Lena was critical of the immigration restrictions as an obstacle to their reunification in Denmark, she also expressed optimism about Pedro's moving there shortly.

The Story of Sara and Gert

On the other hand, the third couple, Sara and Gert, were meeting and travelling across continents, yet Sara emphasized the experience of the

partner as a ‘stranger.’ Sara met her partner Gert, 30, in South Africa, where she had moved for an internship. They have been a living apart together couple for five years, with a period of four months when they broke up before they got together again.

I conducted a face-to-face interview with Sara, 25, in Copenhagen, where she has lived and studied for the past four years. She was born in Germany, and when she was four years old, the family moved to Denmark. Gert is from Holland and lived 2½ years in Copenhagen to get his degree in engineering. Sara described their relationship as a roller coaster ride with good times, bad times, and good times. They have travelled to different countries, including Tanzania, where Gert worked, and Hong Kong, where Sara studied for a semester.

What Do We Learn about the Love of Couples Living Apart Together?

These narratives elucidate how the couple living apart together transnationally maintain their relationship dynamics despite the challenges in proximity and lack of cohabitation they experience. These couples are able to maintain unconventional forms of intimate relationships across nations through a range of “good practices.” Partners in these couples have relatively more autonomy and emotional intimacy than couples living together.

Both in the Global North and Global South, the couples have challenged the breadwinner/homemaker’s gender order (Singla, 2015).

Digital technology contributed to maintaining emotional intimacy for Janet and Conner; they emailed each other several times a day.

However, Lena and Pedro were not satisfied with the digital contact, missing the touch as well as the spontaneity. They were critical of the

racial discrimination and restrictive immigration regimes affecting them in the European context. For Sara and Gert, the impact of digital technology and migratory restrictions was less significant, as their privileges allowed frequent face-to-face visits.

On the other hand, their relationship reflected the challenge of reuniting, experiencing the partner as a ‘stranger’, as covered in the next article. Thus, we can say that the interactional states of being together and apart are intertwined, mutually enabling, and constraining in multiple ways.

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