

# The Diversity of Love Journal

## ‘Strangers’ When Reuniting after Living Apart Together Transnationally

---

Article published on [January 20, 2025](#) by [Rashmi Singla](#)

Retrieved from: <https://love-diversity.org/strangers-when-reuniting-after-living-apart-together-transnationally/>

In recent years, the global job market and migration have made many partners live apart together, even transnationally. They often opt to live apart and reside in different countries to manage careers and the restrictions that immigration status imposes upon them.

In [another article](#), I discussed how couples love each other living apart together, even transnationally.

### **They Were So Distant, Yet So Nearby!**

It is more important than ever to comprehend how they cope with living apart. The findings from my recent empirical study showed how these partners love and maintain their relationships across borders (Singla, 2024). [They seem close even though they live together](#). Information about the three couples at the time of the interview would demonstrate their different partner experiences.

However, after meeting again and reuniting after a period of absence, they may perceive each other and interact like ‘strangers.’

## **What Did the Study Show**

Here, based on experiences of the three couples mentioned in the earlier article, out of 20 couples living in 10 countries, with 18 countries of origin relatively young/middle-aged, well-educated, and primarily privileged jobwise, we shed light on the experience of the partner as a ‘stranger’ after geographical separation (Singla, 2024).

## **Getting Used to Each Other After Separation” ... Smooth or Problematic?**

The dynamics of reuniting are interpreted on a continuum, ranging from minor disruption of everyday practice for Janet and ambivalence for Lena to a problematic situation for Sara, who underlines her need to reconnect emotionally before sexual intimacy.

## ***How the Story of Janet and Conner Continues***

Janet from Malaysia has been married to Conner from the Netherlands for 30 years, and they have been living apart together transnationally for the past six years in Malaysia and Afghanistan, respectively, due to their jobs. Janet describes digital contact as fulfilling, frequent, and intense, despite fear and even feeling terrified due to Conner’s posting in a war zone. Moreover, frequent contact, if possible, several times a day, with Conner and information about his safety led to relief and joy for Janet. She explains:

Yes, communication was great. It was very intensive because of the fear of things; we were writing to each other very often and calling each other very often. Because you constantly heard about the bombing, right? He would call me to tell me he was safe if there were an incident.

When questioned about switching between living apart from her husband and reuniting after 3-4 months, she answers, “*Getting used to each other again takes a couple of days.*” She illustrated this through her routine practice of making evening tea for Conner, highlighting the significance of everyday practices symbolizing their intimate interdependence. She pointed out that she forgets to make tea for him the first few days when they reunite. However, her forgetting is interpreted as a minor irritation, unlike Lena’s narrative, which implies ambivalence.

## ***How the Story of Lena and Pedro Continues***

Lena from Denmark expressed appreciation about living apart together with her partner Pedro.

The positive things are that I am freer, I would say. I do not have to stay with my boyfriend every day. It may seem a bit strange to many people, but I can do whatever I want. If I want to go to the gym and swimming pool and train every day, I can do it...

At the same time, she also expressed missing Pedro, as he is relatively less open about sharing the negative emotions online. There is, thus, ambivalence related to balancing between autonomy and fusion, and the time needed to get used to being together with her partner Pedro from Peru/Spain. They have been living apart together transnationally in Denmark and Spain, respectively, for the past eight years due to immigration restrictions.

“*The first couple of days, for me, are difficult when we are together because I like my privacy. I need some time.*” She also commented on her partner Pedro’s response to reuniting after a few months, as he does not express any feelings about perceiving her as a ‘stranger,’

reconnecting immediately. “*He does not feel the same way. Right from when he sees me at the airport, everything is normal for him.*”

## ***How the Story of Sara and Gert Continues***

In contrast, Sara from Germany, in a living-apart-together transnational relationship with Gert from the Netherlands, residing in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands, respectively, finds reuniting problematic. For Sara, the perception of her boyfriend as a ‘stranger’ when reuniting after some months of separation was difficult as she would need time to reconnect emotionally and sexually.

“Because we also have different expectations. When I was here in Copenhagen, and Gert was in Amsterdam, we often saw each other but still had a little bit of time apart. When we saw each other, the first thing he wanted to do was have sex. For me, even though there was just a small time between seeing each other...if it is one month, two months, or just two weeks... he’s always a little bit like a stranger. Therefore, I always need just a little bit of time to reconnect again.”

## **Lessons on How Partners Reconnect After Living Apart Together Transnationally**

These narratives and their interpretation can inspire both couples and mental health practitioners dealing with love, intimacy, and distance. Reuniting after a period of separation requires time for the partners to reconnect, as some may perceive their partner as a ‘stranger’. There is, thus, a need to adapt to the *cycles of departure, absence, and return*, including reunion. Stafford’s groundbreaking findings from two decades ago, in 2005, resonated with this process of adapting to the partner’s absence and reunion. Her findings shifted dominant attention from the dynamics of absence to other aspects, such as departure and getting

together again. These narratives emphasize the time aspect of “being patient in overcoming the perception of the partner as a stranger” and balancing between autonomy and fusion (Holmes, 2014).

Furthermore, these findings imply gender differences in how partners experience reuniting, as narratives of the female participants Janet, Lena, and Sara, contrast with the male participants Pedro and Gert’s narratives, which do not express the perception of the partner as a ‘stranger’ when reuniting. This aspect is a relevant theme for further research.

These couple narratives shed light on the relatively overlooked dynamics of love, intimacy, and distance. These narratives entail “good practices” such as patience when reuniting with the partner during the face-to-face visits. Not only is the period of being geographically apart demanding, but also returning and readapting to each other, especially during the first days, can be difficult. This temporal aspect is almost overlooked in most studies within the intimacy and distance field. These findings have profound implications for intimate couples’ mental health and well-being and can contribute to enhancing their intimacy as well as providing constructive suggestions to professionals dealing with psychosocial services for couples, especially those living apart together transnationally.

## References

- Holmes, M. (2014). *Distance Relationships: Intimacy and Emotions Amongst Academics and their Partners in Dual-Locations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stafford, L. (2005). *Maintaining Long-Distance and Cross-Residential Relationships*. Routledge.

Singla, R. (2024). *Living apart together transnationally (LATT): Promoting Mental Health and Intimacy*. Springer.

---

See other articles on related topics in the rubrics of **close relationship**, **communication of emotions**, **how to love**, **intercultural relationships**, **interpersonal communication**, **intimacy in love**, **modern love studies**.