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## **INTIMACY, DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS, AND EMOTIONAL CARE**

### **I: Introduction**

Processes of individualisation and globalisation do distance us from each other physically and emotionally. The effects of transience and the results of consumerism can make maintaining lasting relationships difficult. However, people still need and want to care for and depend on others. Distance makes caring intimacy difficult, but being apart changes how care is offered, it does not make it redundant.

Dual-career, dual-residence distance relationships can challenge pessimistic views of the 'frailty of human bonds' (Bauman, 2003) within consumer capitalism. A distance relationship is one where couples spend much of their time apart, usually working in different towns during the week and travelling to reunite at weekends. In the past husbands may have gone away to work, fishing or to sea, for example. The contemporary distance relationships studied here differ because they are dual-career couples that have emerged as women have entered paid employment and especially as they have entered the professions. Typically, the couples have specialized jobs which make it difficult for them to both find employment in the same town. Instead of a family home to which the husband returns, each couple has their own house or flat, and most take turns to visit each other. The distance is crucial in these relationships, which may involve both translocal and transnational caring (Baldassar et al., 2007: 3-6), as partners shift in relation to each other and to family and friends. Whatever their circumlocutions they provide evidence that current emotional life is not entirely about self-gratification, that lack of proximity is not always disconnecting and, that within a world in which fluidity and plasticity are celebrated, things that move us (geographically and emotionally) might be positively perceived. Appreciation of autonomy is not an inevitable rejection of caring and people are creative in rethinking and reorganizing mutual care within the constraints that they face.

Theoretical discussions of the constraints that globalisation and individualisation processes impose on mutual caring, are evaluated in the first section of the paper. These processes are thought to disrupt the stability and nurturance of traditional communal bonds. The second section of the paper acknowledges some distancing, but also deals with the possibilities offered by doing intimacy differently. Distance relationships, as investigated in an Economic and Social Research Council (UK) funded study, serve as an example. The third section discusses how distance relationships encourage a rethinking of what constitutes satisfaction and its relation to less gendered forms of mutual caring. Primarily, the limitations of talking are weighed against the pleasures that mobility offers. In these distance relationships less physical, more abstract forms of caring have to be relied on, but such emotional support is no doubt central to all relationships. Such emotional care may be less tangible than situated, physical forms of care but is rooted in maintaining connection to the embodied particularity of others.

## II: Love relationships and distance

Globalised processes of individualisation and commodification distance us from each other. Bauman (2003) argues that this makes lasting love difficult to learn and maintain. We become rootless and heartless, divorced from place, time and each other. Global forces of permanent transience are something to which all are becoming prey. Human waste results, especially within a consumer culture based on the instant satisfaction of desire. Once we have satisfied desire by consuming the otherness of a person, and they no longer give pleasure, it is time to dispose of them (see also Campbell, 1987). Accompanying this is a commercialisation of intimate life, debasing it by detouring feminism into individualisation in the way that the protestant ethic was transformed into the spirit of capitalism (Hochschild, 2003). The resulting 'care gap' leaves the vulnerable neglected and carers, who are usually women, overstretched.

Recognizing the debilitating effects of social change is important, but theories of intimacy can reinforce rather than challenge conservative gendered models of care. Despite theoretical efforts to acknowledge the dangers of homogeneity and the 'difficult-to-resist charm and seductive power' of the new (Bauman, 2007: 89), the gendered history of caring is largely ignored. Hochschild (e.g. 2003: 2) is less prone to gloss over the more restrictive aspects of past communal bonds given the limited role for women (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), but she is still pessimistic about the new. Although women and men may develop 'gender strategies – persistent lines of feeling and action' we apparently do this to 'reconcile our gender ideology with arising situations' (Hochschild, 1990: 129). Strategies can be traditional (women do nearly all domestic labour), egalitarian (labour is shared), or transitional (a little of each) (Hochschild, 2003), but this assumes that caring is a thing to divide up neatly; and power too. If women are seen as 'not having power' (Hochschild, 1983: 169) within situations 'that arise as a result of patterns of stratification at work, in families, and in other institutional contexts' (Hochschild, 1990: 139), then it is hard to imagine how caring work could become valued or reorganised. Although women may often value and prioritise care (Duncan et al., 2003), it remains typically thought of as 'work to get out of' (Hochschild, 2003: 2), an activity associated with self-sacrifice, which conflicts with the 'institutionalized individualism' promoting autonomy (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002). As Delphy and Leonard put it '[w]ithin the family in our society, women are dominated in order that their work may be exploited and because their work is exploited' (1992: 18). Care must be done, but doing it will 'hold you back' in the wider world. Women's supposedly natural abilities as carers have historically been used to direct them toward domestic life (Pateman, 1988) and the increasing presence of women in paid work has not substantially altered expectations that they care, whilst it may have given them greater independence and lessened the importance of economic need as the basis for relationships (Giddens, 1992). Nevertheless, many women find themselves doing a 'first shift' of paid (emotional) labour, a 'second shift' of housework, and a 'third shift' of 'at-home' emotion work (Hochschild, 1989; 1997; 2003; see also Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; 1995). Understanding this situation in terms of gender strategies offering only a choice between accepting that

women's place is in the home, or varying degrees of sharing care 'burdens', fails to challenge the power relations around caring. Caring relations are typically theorised, not just by Hochschild, as an asymmetric giving of care by the altruistic to the vulnerable and needy. More consideration of caring as a mutual interdependence is required (Beasley and Bacchi, 2007). Such interdependence is undoubtedly complicated by the pulling apart of old forms of ties and the impact of 'market forces', but new forms of relating also provide new possibilities for mutual caring.

The 'care gap' is important, but much everyday care is more mutual and somewhat less stereotypically gendered as new intimacies in the form of 'life experiments' (Weeks et al., 2001) can illustrate. Rather than individualism undermining commitments, commitments are becoming reorganised (Roseneil, 2005; 2006; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). This reorganisation has not substantially shifted expectations that women sacrifice their needs for others (Holmes, 2004; Skelton, 2005). There is perhaps some satisfaction for women in being credited as emotional experts (Cancian, 1986), but traditional co-habiting relationships infrequently satisfy their emotional standards (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; 1995). Doing intimacy differently may not mean egalitarian miracles, but it can perhaps disturb sedimented gender patterns and allow dispersion into more mutual arrangements.

Mutuality can only be understood by reconceptualizing satisfaction. Giddens's (1992) description of the 'pure relationship' captures the same apparent trend Campbell and Bauman note, for relationships to be maintained only as long as they are satisfying to individuals. Satisfaction is thought to rely primarily on disclosure of one's self to the other. Although the disclosure of feelings is extremely important, especially to women (Brannen and Collard, 1982; Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; 1995; Peplau, 1994), disclosing intimacy is not the only type of talk which is important, nor the only marker of love. Doing things for each other and even small physical shows of affection can all be part of a mutual caring central in entangling people within intimacy (Jamieson, 1998). Cancian (1986) has argued that non-discursive ways of showing love have been undervalued because of the dominance of feminine styles of loving that privilege disclosing feelings. Touch may be important but pleasure is now arguably less derived from direct bodily satisfaction and more from imagining and anticipating emotions (Campbell, 1987). Taken beyond its 'mentalist' limitations, which tend to disembodify and de-emotionalise (Boden and Williams, 2002), a concept of imagined emotions helps in understanding contemporary forms of intimacy. Where traditional bonds are stretched by distance, couples must reflexively create verbal and more abstractly imagined forms of emotional care. This makes them able to articulate the interdependence of much caring within everyday life.

Distance relationships are one manifestation of increasing geographical mobility and other processes of individualisation, and data on them can help rethink satisfaction and its relation to mutual care. Distance relationships occur between dual-career couples who work in different towns, spend much of their time living apart and have two relatively permanent and non-institutional residences<sup>1</sup>. Many couples, especially dual-career couples, are likely to live apart at some point (Green, 1997: 646) and maintaining a variety of intimate relationships without cohabiting, some at a distance is now a

relatively common occurrence (Haskey, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Baldassar et al., 2007). Whether couples who relate at a distance are more emotionally distant is open to question (e.g. Becker and Moen, 1999; Bunker et al., 1992; Guldner and Swensen, 1995). Bauman (2003) argues that without physical proximity connections become uncertain and therefore people feel the need to 'stay connected', for example via mobile phones. He views these connections as superficial substitutes for more substantive bonds. Bauman mourns what he sees as the rapid disappearance of meaningful forms of intimacy, which he proposes are tied to a sense of place and the proximity of people relating to each other within that space. Face-to-face relating remains central to social life (Urry, 2002), but people do maintain caring relationships at a distance. The major sociological study on distance relationships looked at *Commuter Marriage* in 1970s America (Gerstel and Gross, 1984; for a discussion see Holmes, 2004). Their focus was on work/life balance, but here the focus is intimacy and care.

The study<sup>2</sup> reported here, conducted between 2002 and 2004, provides insight into intimacy in distance relationships, and applies this to exploring current theories about how intimate life is changing. The rich qualitative data collected provides a portrait of how some couples deal with the difficulties of maintaining satisfying relationships within conditions of globalisation and its associated mobilities and in the face of processes of individualisation. The study gathered questionnaires from twenty-four couples in distance relationships and fourteen couples were interviewed; all included one partner who is an academic<sup>3</sup>. This paper presents interview data, whereas there is more discussion of information gained from questionnaires elsewhere (Holmes, 2006). The translocal versus transnational distinction (Baldassar et al., 2007: 3-6) is not emphasized with this sample. Interviewees were generally living in different parts of Britain, but five couples crossed between Scotland and England or England and Ireland, thus dealing with distinct political, legal and educational systems if not visa restrictions. Five interviewees were non-British born, and another was a soldier who made frequent tours overseas. Five of those interviewed had immediate family abroad. Just over half the interviewees are identifiably transnational on these terms, but the particular issues focused on here are aspects of caregiving common to translocal and transnational situations, specifically challenges of caring at a distance within the context of social expectations and constraints (Baldassar et al., 2007: 15-16). The majority of interviewees were in their thirties and without children. Couples had been together between a year and just over twenty years, and lived apart for a few months to almost fifteen years. Typically partners took turns to see each other every weekend, nearly all travelling five hours or less each way. Twelve of the interviews were with both partners present, but two were with the woman partner only (Donna and Wendy). Joint interviews may make participants less likely to acknowledge any inequalities in the relationship (Jamieson, 1999: 275; Seymour et al., 1995) but one advantage of talking to couples was the opportunity to observe their non-verbal styles of relating. This helped in telling their stories, but confidentiality was an issue, given the relative smallness of the academic community in Britain. Where participants live could potentially identify them, therefore I refer to the town where the male partner works as Histown, and where the woman works as Hertown. The couples were mostly heterosexual, although two interviews were with lesbian couples. Giddens (1992) has argued that lesbian relationships are at the vanguard in forming pure relationships, especially in terms of negotiating more

equal relationships, including around care work. Lesbian couples might therefore be expected to tell us much about doing intimacy differently. Yet gender operates in same sex couples, even if in ways that challenge associations between female and feminine and male and masculine. Obviously, two couples cannot form a basis for talking about 'lesbian relationships' and indeed what is most noticeable is the similarities between them and the other couples. Whether this similarity is representative of a convergence between heterosexual and non-heterosexual relationships is not knowable from such a small study but such a convergence is talked of in key literature as resulting from greater acceptance of same-sex relationships, and/or a decentring of heterosexual relationships in people's lives (Roseneil, 2005). Including lesbian couples can at least give a glimpse of these issues. Despite the smallness of this sample there is rich data here which can offer insights into caring at a distance, and more generally provoke further thought on how processes of individualisation and globalisation affect caring relationships. Presented here are accounts of how people in distance relationships feel about their relationship and specifically how they responded to a question I asked them about what caring for each other means to them.

### **III: The problems and promises of distant care**

In the past, gendered care usually meant men providing money and protection and women providing nurturance. The economic support a relationship can provide is less important for women now that they can achieve financial independence. As Giddens (1992) suggests, people are in relationships not for economic reasons, as usual in the past, but for the relationship itself. As Donna puts it, she does not need her partner Sam's money. In fact, she earns "about £10,000 more than him" so she's got "more leeway with money anyway".

However, this does not mean that finances no longer play a part in how couples construct a sense of togetherness and of mutual support. As Caroline Henchoz (2008) has argued, partners work at constructing the economic aspects of their love relations within more romantic, yet contemporary terms of disinterest, equality and autonomy. For example, living in small flats can make prolonged time together difficult for partners, especially if working at home. Joanne and Mark think about how they can best spend money in ways that will allow them to spend more time together as Joanne explains:

JOANNE: I think independently [we] came to the conclusion that it might be a good idea to umm buy a bigger place in Histown possibly arrange some kind of joint finance for, although we would need legal advice for that umm so that I could spend longer there in the long term time and the reason why we'd choose his town to buy because Mark bought before me so he's got more equity he could like physically afford or financially afford to get a two bedroom place instead of a one bedroom place, where I couldn't afford that.

MARK: However with interest rates going up and stuff. So I can't actually afford that

They may struggle in this instance but as Mark says of their only joint bank account, to be spent for pleasant outings and holidays, “if we can’t build a life together at least we can do these other things as well, make sure we’re enjoying ourselves”. It is one way of caring.

There are different types of caring (Finch, 1989), but physical, practical care becomes difficult if people are not together (Baldassar et al., 2007; Holmes, 2004; 2006). Making someone a nice cup of tea, or doing the housework are important ways of expressing love (Finch, 1989; Jamieson, 1998). Looking after someone when they are ill has also been expected of those in love relationships. However, distance relatives cannot always be there to mop a fevered brow or soothe emotional pain. For example:

NATALIE: ... Rebecca was finding [her job] really difficult. She was phoning me up at night crying, and I was just thinking, I’m nearly two hundred miles away and I can’t *do* anything. It was just horrendous.

Illness causes problems for managing bodily care when apart. When Joanne was ill, Mark clearly expended considerable energy trying to care for her, even though absent during the week. However he also got some respite from the daily worries of caring:

JOANNE: And what about when I was ill? ... But it did mean you had to look after me. That you had to come down and visit me almost all the time for a least six months and you had to do my grocery shopping for me and we, we couldn’t do stuff together, I was too sick to go to the cinema.

MARK: I think in some ways during that period it was actually good for me that we were apart cos it meant that while I was away I didn’t have to worry about it. It took quite a lot of emotional stamina to look after you all the time

Distance relatives also find it difficult to maintain other caring relationships with friends and family (cf. Sahlstein, 2004), however this can reinforce the emotional relations between them as a couple (Holmes, 2004). This process was especially evident for couples like Andrew and Isabel, each on a series of short-term contracts:

ANDREW: But I think another important aspect of it though is that because we do move around a lot, we have kind of diminished social networks in some ways. I mean I don’t have any local social network here I mean I know a very small number of people and not many people, I mean the people that I would turn to, leaving out Isabel for a moment, people I would turn to if I had a real crisis are not anywhere near here at all right. ... you lose a lot of emotional and

MARY: So it kind of throws you back on each other for that support quite a lot

ISABEL: Yeah, yeah.

This compelled exclusivity still entails these couples trying to care for each other and maintain wider ties, although Meg and Ben note the problems involved:

BEN: ... you have very enforced *time* together. You have to make the most of that time and sometimes you want to do other things. So we have to spend quality time with each other on the weekends,

MEG: You might rather be working or something ...

BEN: whereas there might be something else happening [with friends].

MEG: Yeah, I suppose being away that's the problem, if I'm away every second weekend, then quite often if someone says, oh "do ya wanna", spontaneously "do ya wanna do something at the weekend?", I have to say, "I can't" and I feel bad about that because- you know - they're my friends and they sort of keep me going through most of the week, for kind of 10 days out of 14 or whatever, that I'm there, not with you.

Meg highlights how caring for others can be compromised, but the centrality of the heterosexual relationship is also shifted given that they may spend more time with friends and colleagues than they do with each other. Sexual infidelity can be a concern. Little was said about such fears (Holmes, forthcoming); not surprisingly in joint interviews. One respondent did reveal that in order to save her partner anxiety, she had misled him about some of her social arrangements involving male friends. Although these arrangements were "completely innocent" she thought that he would feel anxious if he knew. Concerns may arise but distance relating does not necessarily cause affairs and partners may be no more likely to be unfaithful just because often away (Gerstel and Gross, 1984: 105). Other shifts may occur.

### III A: Shifting Gendered Caring

Distance does bring some sense of 'emotional losses' (Gerstel and Gross, 1984: 68), but this is only part of the story. The couples tended to see distance relationships as "a problem to be resolved" (Jane) and as "a pretty lonely and difficult path" (Martin), leading to "diminished social networks" (Andrew). However, they also talked at length in response to the question on what was good about distance relationships, frequently mentioning opportunities for independence.



Women may find themselves expected to sacrifice independence in order to care, but these women explained how distance relationships could help them maintain some autonomy (Holmes, 2004). Margaret, who had a ten month old baby when I interviewed her and Joe, said that she periodically left the baby with Joe when going to Hertown and this gave her “a certain, ah, liberty, ... which [she] wouldn’t of otherwise had”. Jane, an older interviewee with a dependent teenager and grown children, said she liked her distance relationship because it offered opportunities to “make plans without reference to anyone else” (see also Holmes, 2004; Sahlstein, 2004). Yet this self-gratification may be part of a struggle for more mutual caring. Wendy describes how in her relationship,

when we had lived together previously and he was away during the week and came back on the weekend, ... it was very much like, it was his weekend so I didn’t mind doing stuff to make him have a nice weekend cos he was only home, and it’s always seemed a shame that we had this house together and he couldn’t be there all the time like I was. And then when I got the job here because we’d had, yknow a few months of me doing everything in some respects, ... when I moved here he found it difficult that I wasn’t as willing to do stuff on a weekend, housework wise, it seemed was, yknow sorry as I had been before so that’s possibly a thing that it was awkward for a little, not awkward, difficult for a little while. It took some working out, re-establishing roles if you like (Wendy).

Wendy is less willingly ‘doing stuff to make him have a nice weekend’ as their relations shift away from a more traditional pattern in which she is at home waiting for an absent husband to return (see Chandler, 1991; e.g. Hollowell, 1968). Harry is described as finding this ‘difficult’ and some time is required in ‘re-establishing roles’, which are more mutual. Her shift to Hertown helps facilitate this. Donna is also keen to use distance to resist gendered caring roles (see Holmes, 2006):

I think I’ve kind of got habits of caring for others anyway and for looking after them and protecting them from things going on in the world and I think I quite easily fall into that kind of caring, responsible role. Which to start with I kind of resent its kind of gendered character but also I fall into it ... even when I’m thinking actually I don’t really want to be that kind of person .... [In a distance relationship] it’s possible to not be it or allow bits of it to be there without it being a negative for me. Y’know I can be caring and supportive and all of that but not lose myself in the process ... (Donna).

However, while Donna may be distancing herself within her relationship, she lives mostly with her widowed but independent mother in order to provide some support for her. These are not individuals avoiding care, but ones taking opportunities to resist gendered caring which ignores their needs. Most of the women talk about the joys of being able to come home and be “grumpy” if they are away from their partner (Holmes, 2004). Pleasure may come from escaping gendered caring and emotion work that lacks mutuality.

#### IV: Towards mutual caring and unknown pleasures

If tradition no longer guides actions (Giddens, 1992; Roseneil, 2005), distance relates represent possibilities for caring that is less tied to restrictive ways of doing gender, and perhaps more mutual. The usual 'rules' about loving cannot always be relied upon when proximity is lacking:

you can't see or touch I mean y'know there's no way to resolve things y'know sexually or by y'know by physical contact of any, so I mean these, these are real absences I think that you, you, that are difficult (Martin).

Martin and Lucy are good evidence that these 'absences' can be dealt with because they have been together over twenty years, almost always lived apart, whilst raising a family. It is not easy however, to reorganize caring, even without children:

CLAIRE: Erm yeah I don't know how we would do that, how we cared for each other emotionally

HUGH: I don't think we were always very good at it

CLAIRE: No probably not. I mean tried to do it over the phone and be supportive ... it was important for me to speak to somebody I cared about everyday ...

HUGH: but it was difficult cause if you not the same as just physically giving someone a hug

CLAIRE: Yeah we just couldn't do that and it was hard

Talking has to become more important, but its limitations remain. Telephone and other communication technologies are crucial in maintaining relationships with loved ones not nearby (see Baldassar et al., 2007: 108-136; Wilding, 2006). Like James, participants typically note that this is less than ideal, to be "relying a lot of the time on words, which are useless for, well not useless for communication, but it's just one small aspect of it". Relying on talking may be a problem if touch is used as a major way of maintaining intimacy. Ben implies it is for him, when he says: "I'm not a big talker, I'm a big cuddler". Cuddles and hugs and distance from embodied routines are mourned (Gerstel and Gross, 1984: 62-3; Holmes, forthcoming), but satisfaction is not necessarily sought in a new partner, or affairs, it is extended to broader forms of pleasure.

Mobility has other satisfactions in escaping restrictions of place and routine (cf. Cohen and Taylor, 1992). Bauman (2003; 2007: 104) tends to regard geographical mobility as both a condition of individualisation and as one dissatisfying form of escape which substitutes for trying to 'make *the*

*world* a better place'. This does not quite accord with how these mobile couples present escape as a pleasure, knowingly enjoyed as a transient disruption to the mundane, which enables them to appreciate each other more. The excitement of the new and boredom with the old are often felt, as Joe says:

I think we think we kind of half escaped, you know, in terms of somewhere more interesting or somewhere new, actually. But actually the likelihood is that if we're get together again we'll be living in the old place and that'd be quite boring. So I think there is a sense in which it's more interesting (Joe).

Talk of having 'escaped' from 'the old place' does not portray a sense of miserable dislocation. Indeed, despite repeating that they would rather live together, Margaret notes that if she did "get a job in Histown, [she] would feel a real sense of what [she] was losing; although it would be a wonderful practical solution". One loss might be the romance of travel. The constant travelling to reunite was universally complained of, but as Donna says "sometimes the travel has positive characteristics, cause you actually, you go off from one place to another and leave behind troubles and go and start fresh". Claire concurred that there was some escape from her stressful job each weekend in "that sense of driving away from work" to see Hugh. Kirsten and Liam "tried also to be positive about the travelling in the sense of doing work and kind of y'know having that and quite enjoying the train journeys". But as Liam later adds, it is not so much the travelling but the constant parting that is emotionally wearing, the "waiting around, the saying goodbyes. The extended goodbye[s] were much harder than the travelling". Constant endings and beginnings have to be negotiated (cf. Morgan, 2003; Sahlstein, 2004) and the experiencing of relation to the other is certainly affected.

At times distance can prevent rather than encourage the independence that is highly culturally valued. Couples may feel they have to spend all spare time together (cf. Sahlstein, 2004). Meg and Ben reflect on how this can be restricting:

BEN: ... Ahh, but in a way we might have more independence, ahh, living together, paradoxically, because we won't feel that we've got to sort of eek the most out of our time.

MEG: Yeah, I think that too, because we spend so much of our time to-ing and fro-ing to see each other, and that we have, feel like we have to spend our time together at the weekends. And so. When we used to live together, we quite often would do our own thing wouldn't we?

BEN: Yes. Yep.

These examples do not show people trying to conform to individualist imperatives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2003), but illustrate the importance attached to interdependence. It would be unconvincing to present this sample as having a false consciousness about their situation, or being

docile bodies or cultural dupes. Individualism is a powerful discourse and practice, but agency is exercised within the framework of constraints. Expressing pleasure in more fluid ties does not necessarily mean devaluing connection.

Individual satisfaction is culturally important, but is still a crucial part of relations with others. Campbell and Bauman assume that current social conditions promote emotional disconnection, but looser connections may have advantages. Natalie said she realized that being “happier in general” can come from being “separate in separate cities but still be[ing] together”. Proximity is not necessarily crucial in maintaining emotionally satisfying relationships and less proximity may sometimes enhance rather than weaken relationships. Margaret and Joe for instance, joke about distance as something that “helps break up [their] unhealthy compatibility” (Joe). Donna also notes that

one of the reasons I’ve managed my life the way is so that if anything did go wrong I wouldn’t be left in quite so bereft state emotionally as I was when I left my husband, when my husband and I split up, erm. My life isn’t as tangled up with his as it was with my husband’s. I mean it’s still more entangled than I intended it to be probably, but er y’know, you can’t really always avoid everything, can you? (Donna).

Lovers may not avoid entanglement but can experiment with new ways of relating. This is not a free exercise of agency as their reuniting is done around work and other commitments. Meg explains that “[j]ust sometimes when you want to be together and you can’t be together and sometimes when you are together you really feel like being on your own. It just some, doesn’t always work out”. Emotional, embodied lives cannot be rationally reorganized at will (Holmes, 2004).

#### IV A: Embodied routines

These distant couples indicated that to maintain intimacy they must keep track not just of their lover’s grand emotional states, but of each other’s daily, bodily routines.

NATALIE: One thing about us is though, that I mean we’re not possessed with each other at all. But I mean if I was in Hercity I would know that she’d gone out with Amy that night and I would know she had [inaudible word] or whatever. But I phone up and she’s not there and I’m like: “Where is she?” [laughs]. You know? It’s just kind of, I don’ know it just kinda makes the not knowing each other’s habits.

Wendy, whose partner Harry is in the armed forces, also talks about feeling the need to *know* what is going on in her partner’s daily life, even the trivial. Sometimes when away on exercises “he won’t ring for a week and ... it feels like neither of us have got any idea what the other one’s been doing during the week”, so they try to “speak to each other for a couple of minutes, on an evening ... even if we’ve

not really had a proper conversation, at least we've touched base". Similarly Joe and Margaret say they talk almost always about 'boring things' on the phone "like everything that's happened during the day" (Margaret) and "every detail at work" (Joe). Donna says that she and Sam "might say: so what have you done today or I had this, this meeting that was awful and what happened and talk through that meeting or whatever". This implies that 'trivial' chat about everyday nothingness is important in keeping couples connected, rather than the kind of disclosure of major aspects of the self that Giddens (1992) regards as central to 'pure relationships'. These couples try to hold on to a sense of *knowing* about each other's embodied *and* emotional existence. This knowledge helps maintain a sense of exclusivity thought to be fundamental in marking out intimate sexual relationships (Bawin-Legros, 2004). The couples interviewed are expending considerable reflection on the problems of engaging emotionally without physical proximity, and finding ways to do so.

#### IV B: Mutual emotional support

Mutual support involves more than just practical and physical types of caring, which are liable to be conventionally gendered (Finch, 1989; Hochschild, 2003). These couples conveyed a strong sense of supportive togetherness. This may be part of an idealized presentation of "the perfect couple" (Seymour et al., 1995), but was evident not just from their words, but from their manner of interacting and showing concern for each other within the interviews. Couples with strong relationships are more likely to survive distance, or be willing to be interviewed, but distance also makes couples more reflexive about the need to support each other. This means they can tell us about everyday caring, which usually remains part of unexamined routine for most cohabiting couples. Martin and Lucy are slightly, but not entirely unusual in talking more about the "practical mundane" aspects of caring. The conventions of gender are that such practical work is women's, and these are not inevitably altered by distance relating, although some sharing of them may become more important. Lucy says that for her caring means doing the washing and ironing and shopping for the week. They go shopping together because Martin says "it is valuable if you are not seeing each other every day". Indeed in affirming how supportive Martin is Lucy notes that "you've never said: I don't want to come shopping". Meanwhile, all the interviews contained some expression of more abstract forms of caring, of strong emotional connection and support for each other. Couples described their relationship as "solid", "deep", "close", "intense"; one pair said they had "absurdly compatible interests". Allan, states that it was his "function" to support Jane because the management at Hertown University are "horrible" and this makes her see "the world as brutal". Support is felt across distance, and Joanne is clear that the distance does not reduce her connection to Mark, saying that she cannot imagine "being any closer emotionally or feeling any more supported".

Living at a distance is itself often an act of care, done to allow people to pursue study or jobs which they like. This can bring personal happiness which was lacking and thus improve relationships. Natalie talks about this in relation to recently breaking up with Rebecca and then getting back together:

NATALIE: I just think we're happier in general. ... I think that's more to do with, um, the fact that for quite a while in Hercity I was not employed, and erm, you know I had a lot of personal problems and everything, and I think Rebecca found that really difficult. But now I'm happy. I go to Uni and I'm working and it's just fantastic.

Like many of the women in the study, Natalie finds that distance from her partner, gives her a greater sense of autonomy (Holmes, 2004). For her this is not so much to do with distance from her woman partner, but with having a job and going to university, so that she is not so reliant on Rebecca emotionally. Independence may make a happier interdependence possible. The gendering of this interdependence is no doubt complex; some clues to it appear in evoking the concept of emotional support. The data suggest that the gendered aspects of emotional support are not sedimented like in conventional forms of care. Some of the men, for example, seem more comfortable with tactile expressions of care, than verbal ones. Some are cuddlers, not talkers. However, several of the men, speak of their recognition of the importance of talking and listening. James says that caring means "being erm hugely supportive of what each of us want to do". If this means being apart, they must turn to caring "on the phone or sending emails or whatever" (Andrew). They have to engage in "listening to the other person and then y'know comprehending that" (Luke). Emotional support has to often rely on talking, when partners are seldom co-present. This talk is different from disclosure of self-secrets (Giddens, 1992). It is more about discussing "administrators hassling [you]" (Isabel), or just being able to "get things off [your] chest" (Gill). This support has to involve more talking about and imagining of emotions and pleasures, and can be more mutual. What it cannot do is forget bodies. Such attention to emotional support and how it can be given, is not necessarily confined to those in distance relationships, but may be a feature of many busy couple's lives in a world where time and space to be together is limited.

## **V: Conclusion**

People do often struggle to maintain emotional connection within current social conditions such as long work hours and globalised patterns of inequality (Hochschild, 1997; Hochschild and Ehrenreich, 2003). Not just couples, but parents and children, other kin, and friends are having to do things differently (Baldassar et al., 2007; Roseneil, 2005). This is easier for those with more material and other resources to call upon (Baldassar et al., 2007). However mutual caring can survive distance.

Caring at a distance requires more abstract understandings of care as 'emotional support', but such support is no doubt also crucial to cohabiting relationships. The reflexivity distant couples must employ means they can tell us about the everyday emotional caring often taken for granted in cohabiting relationships. 'Emotional support' can take many forms and is difficult to articulate as people try to work out new ways to care. Showing care through doing practical things for someone remains

important (Jamieson, 1998), be it giving a hug or making their dinner. When distance prevents such care, couples have to work out how to provide 'emotional support' for the other person in order to remain 'close'. How gender is done shifts in these changes to love relations, some of which may be improvements.

Being apart is not inevitably emotionally traumatic or alienating. Women in this study reported that distance could give them some relief from gendered caring obligations and duties. There is also the excitement of new places and people, the escape involved in both short term travel and longer term migrations. Some disconnection is felt by these participants but they also describe how distance and constant mobility can make partners more reliant on each other as other sources of support become more difficult to access. On the other hand, looser connection can actually be enjoyable at times, and the imagined perfection of being together can act as a tantalising form of escape from highly rationalised daily lives (cf. Cohen and Taylor, 1992). Equally, for these participants, strong support for partners includes some encouragement to be independent, to 'do what they want to do'. It is possible that 'emotional support' allows some greater freedom in going beyond conventional doings of gender within caring relationships. At least it seems to allow more gender mutuality in caring to be signified by couples as an expectation. Mutuality is connected to independence, which is socially valued. Distance relaters share in those values, meaning that separation is not always experienced as loss. Individualisation may involve a focus on self, but this project requires relations with others. How to combine individuality and togetherness is a pressing problem within current social conditions, but here we glimpse some apparently quite successful efforts to resist disconnection. The 'emotional support' talked of by distance relaters includes efforts to recognise bodily needs but overall remains a rather vague concept. Its vagueness is probably its charm for those trying to find new ways of relating which can tolerate greater independence and equality without creating too much emotional distance.

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<sup>1</sup> There are less elite versions of living at a distance, both within Western and other nations (e.g. Fall 1998; Hollowell 1968; see Roseneil 2006), but these typically involve the husband travelling temporarily away from the family home to work; rather than maintaining two residences. Women's increasing participation in paid work and especially in the professions has produced a new pattern of distance.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time I was in a distance relationship and systematically included my own experiences by having my partner and I complete a questionnaire and recording us talking through the interview schedule.