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Commuter spouses have a lot to teach us about the 'stickiness' of traditional marriage

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For her new book, sociologist Danielle J. Lindemann, interviewed nearly one hundred commuter spouses—couples who live apart in service to their dual careers—to find out what this unique group might reveal about broader trends in marriage. In Commuter Spouses: New Families in a Changing World - featured today on BBC Capital—Lindemann details what they told her about their unconventional marriages and finds that commuter couples have a lot to teach us about the changing dynamics of

gender, family and work in the U.S. Ultimately, she argues, commuter spouses illustrate the "stickiness" of traditional marriage ideals while simultaneously subverting expectations.

Research on families and relationships shows that people are increasingly thinking more individualistically about marriage and about relationships in general. More and more individuals are entering into these unions for personal reasons, such as self-development, fulfillment, emotional support, and love, says Lindemann. And, she adds, many feel like they can leave the relationship when their union is no longer benefiting them in these ways.

"We might think that commuter spouses would exemplify an extreme manifestation of this self-prioritization trend," says Lindemann. "Yet the couples I interviewed often spoke about how entwined they are in each other's lives."

An example of this seeming paradox can be gleaned in how one respondent, Jeff, characterized apparently opposite aspects of his commuter marriage. He maintained, "[My wife] doesn't need me to live a healthy life. She's very self-assured, as am I...And she's independent. She doesn't need me to be there. So I think that's important, on both sides." Yet, when Lindemann asked him in what ways he and his spouse rely on each other, he answered: "I would say we're sort of relying on each other for everything."

Though spouses live apart for a variety of reasons, including incarceration, immigration, institutionalization and marital discord, Lindemann focused on married couples who both worked and were living apart in service to their individual, professional careers. She wanted to look at couples who had the "choice" to live apart, rather than being propelled into it by financial circumstances, and how couples made those decisions.

Yet the idea of "choice," it turned out, was relative. "The commuter spouses I interviewed did not live apart because of financial necessity," says Lindemann. "In most cases, they could theoretically live on one partner's salary. Instead they live apart because of their devotion to careers. Yet, they did not always frame it as a choice."

When asked if he and his spouse lived apart out of financial necessity one respondent, Ned, said: "You know, I wouldn't. I wouldn't say it was financial necessity. Instead I would call it 'professional necessity.' That we're a two-career couple, and our careers are geography dependent. That we have to go where the jobs are. And so that's why we've had to separate..."

Lindemann's sample was a relatively privileged group: predominantly-white with a majority (71%) having earned graduate degrees. Many respondents discussed the scarcity of jobs that fit their specific training.

"Paradoxically, their high levels of education actually limited their universe of choices, as they saw them," she says. "If there are five national jobs in Very Specialized Field X, and you're trained in Very Specialized Field X, you're going to apply to those five jobs, which may be geographically dispersed."

Although they positioned themselves as highly autonomous, interdependence was a recurring theme among Lindemann's sample group, revealing a tension between these opposing forces. Technology as a facilitator of this interdependence was frequently discussed.

Alexis, for example, told Lindemann that one of her shared rituals with her husband Jim was "going grocery shopping together." Though Alexis and Jim lived fourteen hours apart, the couple would connect virtually via Facetime—she on her iPhone, he on his tablet—as they strode down their respective supermarket aisles, selecting food. Later, their respective

homes, they would cook meals "together."

Alexis told Lindemann that Facetime had been "great" for their relationship. The first time she and Jim had lived apart, she explained, "It kind sucked because you're always on the phone, but now with iPads and Facetiming it's?not like you're there, but it's pretty good."

The couples Lindemann spoke with valued their marriage and families about as much, if not more, than couples who live together. According to a 2010 Pew research study, about half (51%) of Americans said that they had a closer relationship with their spouse or partner than their parents had with each other; among her respondents, it was 59%.

True to expectation, in some ways the commuter spouses Lindemann spoke with demonstrated a progressive approach to traditional gender roles. Previous research has suggested that in the majority of cases where a spouse relocates because of their partner's work, it is the woman who does the "trailing." The commuter couples she interviewed were upending certain gender expectations simply by choosing not to subordinate the wife's career to that of her husband.

"Still, they often reproduced prevailing gender norms," says Lindemann. "For example, in the vast majority of commuter families with children, the kids lived with their mothers full-time. These mothers often think of themselves as 'single parents.'"

In one case that turned out to be the proverbial exception that proves the rule, Lindemann interviewed a forty-eight-year-old government employee, Ethan, who had been living apart from his wife Hannah for the past year of their twenty-one-year marriage. They had two teenaged children who resided with Ethan, while Hannah?a nonprofit director in her late forties?lived in an apartment by herself and took a three-and-a-half-house train ride to see them every weekend.

Both spouses suggested that Hannah experienced some prejudice and Ethan received praise due in part to the atypical alignment of their genders and their roles. Ethan spoke about the social responses to his and his wife's gender roles predicting, correctly, that their relationship would be an outlier in Lindemann sample. Ethan said, "...I think it is much more...accepted and expected that the guy is the one who is going off from the homestead and coming back to home on weekends. And much less often the woman."

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings was that a substantial minority of interviewees felt that living apart actually facilitated their interdependence. Not only did many respondents emphasize the frequency of their contact while apart, about 25% indicated that their separation had drawn the couple closer or made the relationship more interesting in a positive way.

Commuter spouses shed light on family and gender dynamics in general—particularly, the fact that wives continue to do more caretaking and domestic labor than their husbands and men have more leisure time than women.

"The fact that my interviewees still viewed themselves as enmeshed with their spouses despite their separateness also speaks to the entrenched nature of traditional notions about marriage," says Lindemann. "These couples show us that the institution of marriage has a collective hold over even the most seemingly individualistic of spouses."

Provided by Lehigh University

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