

Commuter marriage study finds surprising emphasis on interdependence

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Credit: Jeff Belmonte / Wikipedia

The concept of marriage may be in flux, but a new study of commuter marriages—in which a married couple lives apart in service to their dual professional careers—appears to confirm that married people still see interdependence as a key feature of their unions.

The study, "Going the Distance: Individualism and Interdependence in the Commuter Marriage," draws on data from in-depth interviews with 97 people who are married but live apart from their spouses due to their individual career pursuits.

In it, the author, assistant professor of sociology at Lehigh University Danielle Lindemann, explores how the seemingly conflicting cultural norms of personal autonomy and a commitment to the institution of [marriage](#) play out "on the ground" from the viewpoint of the participants. Her analysis—which will be published in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*—finds that commuter couples indeed engage in discourses about two subjects that operate in tension: independence and interdependence.

"Although the study participants positioned themselves as highly individualistic, interdependence was a key theme in their responses as well," says Lindemann. "Perhaps more surprisingly, a substantial minority of respondents indicated that their non-cohabitation, in fact, enhanced their interdependence."

Lindemann acknowledges that married couples may live apart for a number of reasons. However, her study specifically focuses on college-educated, dual-earning couples as prior research has suggested that commuter marriage is more common within this group than in other segments of the population.

Among her findings:

- The majority of respondents identified as highly interdependent despite the individualized structures of commuter marriages
- Many respondents—emphasizing, in particular, the co-management of tasks—underscored how integrated their partners were in their everyday activities despite their geographic

separation

- Nearly half engaged with the theme of "apart togetherness"—thinking of themselves as connected despite the physical separation
- More than 75% described the usefulness of [communication technologies](#) for task sharing
- A substantial minority interpreted their cohabitation as paradoxically facilitating their interdependence—15.5% of respondents from 9 couples engaged in this narrative
- 66% of respondents said that had felt judged negatively for their lifestyle—mostly by family members
- Female respondents spent more time discussing both individualism and interdependence
- The narrative about non-cohabitation facilitating interconnectedness was more common (though not exclusive) among respondents who lived geographically further apart and saw each other less frequently

Lindemann always sought to interview both spouses in a relationship, but it was not a necessary criterion for inclusion in the study. Fifty-six of the respondents were married to other people in the sample.

An "extreme manifestation" of major transitions

Lindemann presents commuter marriage as particularly fertile ground to examine the cultural tension between marital interdependence and the shift toward the "individualization" of the American marriage.

This shift, she writes—citing the work of Andrew J. Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University—has been largely driven by "...the decline of the male breadwinner/female homemaker model, decreasing task specialization between the genders, the increasing democratization of marital decision-making, and the increasing ability of each partner to

provide financially for himself or herself."

"Commuter marriages may be viewed as an extreme manifestation of major transitions in the nature of work and family that have been taking place in the U.S. since the 1970s," says Lindemann. "The study results not only shed light on this under-studied population but also broaden our understanding of the evolving cultural meaning of marriage."

"Just Because You Don't See Each Other, It Doesn't Mean You're Not Together"

In addition to engaging in parallel narratives around individualism and interdependence, nearly one half (48.5%) of participants in the study engaged with the theme of "apart togetherness"—seeing themselves as connected, despite the distance.

According to Lindemann, this frequently came up in response to the question, "What do you like the most about being married?"

From the study (all names are pseudonyms): "For instance, Katie, a banking professional in her mid-30's, replied that she enjoyed having her husband 'there,' adding 'We've learned that just because you don't see each other, it doesn't mean you're not together.'"

Lindemann writes that eighty respondents received this question and, perhaps paradoxically for non-cohabiting couples, "enjoying each other's company" (41.3%) and "companionship" (30.0%) were the most common themes.

One respondent, a 60-year-old director of a company named Matthew, described both the emotional and practical aspects of the "apart togetherness" he has experienced with spouse Trudy, from whom he has

been living apart due to their individual career pursuits for twelve years.

"Emphasizing both the emotional and task-sharing aspects of marriage, Matthew gave his relationship an interdependent frame, despite the fact that he and his wife had not lived in the same household, except on weekends, for over a decade," writes Lindemann.

Reliance on communication technologies

When asked a series of questions about their communication, more than three fourths of study respondents discussed the usefulness of communication technologies for managing and sharing tasks.

In contrast to previous studies of non-cohabitating couples (largely based on research from the 1970's and 1980's), this study's respondents described being in near constant contact via cell phones, texting, email, instant messaging, and video chat.

From the study: "...respondents saw these technologies as facilitating inter-reliance. That is, [they] had the capacity to be reachable at virtually any time, so that they could rely on each other—not only emotionally, but financially and logistically as well."

"One of the more surprising findings is that 15.5% of [respondents](#)—a substantial minority—interpreted their non-cohabitation as paradoxically facilitating their interdependence," says Lindemann. "Some went so far as to suggest that their communication with their spouses in fact improved when they were geographically separated."

More information: Danielle J. Lindemann. Going the Distance: Individualism and Interdependence in the Commuter Marriage, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12408](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12408)

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