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From Motivations to Accounts:  
An Interpretive Analysis of “Living Apart Together” Relationships  
in Mid- to Later- Life Couples

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Abstract

LAT (Living Apart Together) relationships involve two people in a long-term, committed intimate relationship who choose to live in separate households. We present findings from one of the first Canadian studies of this phenomenon, also distinct in its use of an interpretive approach to the phenomenon. Fifty-six mid- to late-life participants (28 couples) were interviewed in-person; data were analyzed through the lens of interpretive inquiry. LAT relationships were constructed by participants as protecting personal independence while mitigating relationship risks associated with cohabitation. Participants further justified their arrangements by drawing on ideas about age and/or gender. Though LAT arrangements may help enact the empowering potential of Giddens’ ‘pure relationship,’ they can represent individual-level solutions to broader gendered inequities in cohabiting relationships.

Families and intimate relationships have been changing in particular ways over the last several decades – in Canada, like many other industrialized countries, this includes declines in family sizes, growth in the proportion of common-law couples, lone-parent families, stepfamilies, and same-sex couples (Statistics Canada, 2011a; 2011b). About 13% of Canadians over 15 years of age live alone (e.g., not in a Census family), up from 3.5% in 1961, largely due to demographic change (i.e., increasing proportions of older persons, who are more likely to live alone due to widowhood or divorce).

Some individuals living alone are actually in long-term committed, intimate relationships, yet choose to remain in separate households (Levin, 2004). This has been described as a LAT (Living Apart Together) relationship<sup>i</sup> - a small but increasing arrangement, which is particularly under-researched in Canada. Understanding LAT arrangements has implications for family research, policy and theory, and family counselling and social work practice. Though knowledge is currently being generated about the characteristics and motivations of Canadian couples who live apart, we know far less about how they explain their non-traditional living arrangements to themselves and others, or how this aligns with their views of themselves and their relationships. These latter concerns reflect the epistemological and ontological perspectives of an interpretive approach to research. To this end, the objective of this study was to qualitatively explore the construction of LAT arrangements by individuals who reside in the same metropolitan area with their partner. Specifically, we examined how mid- to late-life couples in LAT relationships draw on particular ideas as interpretive rationale to support these alternative arrangements.

### **Literature Review**

The only Canadian research we could identify on LAT arrangements were policy analyses of 2001 and 2011 Canadian General Social Survey data (Milan & Peters, 2003;

Turcotte, 2013). These reports suggested that between 7.4 to 8.4% of Canadians “lives apart together,” yet did not distinguish between more transitory dating relationships and those in which living apart is a long-term lifestyle choice between committed individuals. The latter is more common among those in mid- to late- life (Turcotte, 2013). For instance, compared to younger individuals, older persons in LAT couples report longer average relationship durations and less desire to move in with their partner in the future (Turcotte, 2013).

Existing international research on LAT relationships suggests that LAT arrangements are a relatively new (or more visible) and small but increasing non-traditional family form, reflecting demographic, social, economic, and normative change (de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Duncan & Phillips, 2010; Ermisch & Siedler, 2009; Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Levin, 2004). Historical growth in economic prosperity and social welfare, increasing female labour force participation, decreasing fertility, increasing life expectancy (a greater chance of widowhood), increasing proportions of divorces and re-partnerships, and cultural changes related to individualism may all contribute to change in the meanings and forms of intimate relationships, such as reflected in LAT arrangements (Karlsson & Borell, 2005; Levin, 2004; Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009). For instance, in a post-industrial and globalized society, cultural diversification, the civil rights and women's movements, and increasing tolerance of diversity appear to have promoted some increase in individual autonomy (Brym, 2011), which may in part explain the growth in non-traditional lifestyles as well as non-nuclear family forms. The contemporary fluidity and diversity of family patterns is referred to as the ‘postmodern family condition’ (Stacey, 1996).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) believe that family relationships are increasingly “individualized” in contemporary North American society, as a result of social, economic and

demographic forces that loosen structural constraints on these relationships. They and others (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985) believe this coincides with a tendency for individuals to interpret their family and relationship ties as voluntary and based on emotional closeness, relational quality, and personal fulfillment rather than obligation. Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003), drawing on similar concepts such as “the pure relationship” and “liquid love,” believe that this promotes equality and the ‘democratization’ of intimate relationships. Some research suggests living apart may help preserve independence, privacy, time alone, and freedom (for women) from gendered duties (Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Haskey & Lewis, 2006).

LAT relationships have been described as involving fewer “structural commitments” (e.g., shared resources, children, or an interdependent division of labour), and being more firmly rooted in mutual satisfaction and reciprocal exchanges of emotional support (Borell & Karlsson, 2003). As such, Haskey and Lewis (2006) conclude that some forms of LATs can reflect Giddens’s pure relationship: “whereby two individuals stay together for so long as the partnership delivers enough satisfaction to each party” (p.38).

However, the contribution of individualism to LAT relationships may be overstated (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Karlsson & Borell, 2002; Haskey & Lewis, 2006). In many ways our choices about relationships remain constrained and contextual – for instance, decisions to live apart can be influenced by the labour market, caregiving responsibilities, and established ties to friends and family (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Duncan & Phillips, 2010). Additionally, rather than being individualistic, LAT couples perceive the arrangement strengthens their relationship by preserving some independence and maximizing emotional quality (Duncan & Phillips, 2010; Haskey, 2005; Karlsson & Borell, 2005).

The contributions of individualism to relationship choices can also be critically assessed using concept of “responsibilization” (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1996), which proposes that neoliberal governance promotes a devolution of a regulated responsibility to individuals who (despite being constructed as having choice and aspiring to personal fulfillment) internalize political or economic goals of the state (i.e., to manage their own risks). For instance, among divorced individuals, living apart may represent an attempt to protect oneself by avoiding re-creating the conditions of previously unsuccessful relationships (de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Levin, 2004). From the perspective of responsibilization, this is less a reflection of ‘individual’ motivations and more an internalized imperative of personal responsibility for managing a range of life risks.

In contrast to most existing research on LAT relationships, the purpose of our study is not to assess the contributions of individualistic motivations for LAT arrangements in comparison to other causal factors. Rather, our goal is to examine how various culturally available interpretive resources (including individualism, familialism, and other discourses) are used as rationale or justifications within the context of the social interaction with the interviewer. Stemming from an interpretive perspective (i.e., social phenomenology and ethnomethodology) and the sociology of deviance (for LAT arrangements are relatively stigmatized in contrast to cohabiting relationships), we focus on how individuals make sense of and account for their decisions to live apart, by constructing these decisions ‘post hoc’ through particular interpretive frameworks of meaning (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). This study not only helps address a gap in Canadian family research on LAT relationships, but also a paradigmatic gap in international research on LAT relationships, through an in-depth interpretive exploration of the phenomenon among mid- to late- life adults in two urban Canadian centres.

## Methods

We employed a qualitative, interpretive methodological approach (drawn from social phenomenology, ethnomethodology and discourse analysis). Because LAT arrangements are non-traditional (and participants express awareness of their perceived deviation from traditional social norms), discussion or talk about these relationships can be viewed as including ‘accounts’ and ‘justifications’ (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Accounts and justifications are responses to potentially negative judgements of behaviour that seek, e.g., to neutralize the behaviour, assert its positive value, deny injury, and so on. As Scott and Lyman note, “every account is a manifestation of the underlying negotiation of identities” (1968, p.59). C. Wright Mills (1940) takes a similar approach in his analytic approach to motivations, emphasizing the need to view talk about motivations more as post hoc constructions of the meanings of past acts that align with ideal social identities, rather than objectivist descriptions of experienced a priori causal factors behind rational decisions. This does not mean participants are consciously distorting truth or being unreliable – rather, this is a different view of reality as socially constructed and constantly shifting, and of talk as functioning to help us uphold our sense of coherence and positive identity. In line with this constructionist approach, we drew on the specific tradition of ‘interpretive inquiry’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000) to explore how participants use broader cultural constructs and ideas (about the meaning and implications of cohabitation as well as living alone) as frameworks of meaning for constructing a coherent account of behaviour. Analytic questions included: how is living alone (and cohabitation) constructed by participants to justify their LAT arrangements to themselves and others; and how do participants use broader discourses, ideas and interpretive frameworks in this regard?

Participants were recruited through social networks (via e-mail and social media) and a university media release (resulting in three radio appearances and four newspaper articles). To attract couples more likely to view their LAT arrangement as a long-term lifestyle choice rather than a short-term transitional phase (Turcotte, 2013), participating couples were required to be over age of 25; in a long-term (at least three years) 'committed romantic relationship' (with an opposite or same-sex partner); and reside in the same metropolitan area (either Vancouver or Victoria, Canada); couples were also required to self-identify as having chosen to live separately.

Twenty-eight couples (n=56) were interviewed (each separately, in no particular order) in person by one of two research assistants between July and October 2011. Interviews were loosely structured and open-ended, using a guide; on average, they were between 45 minutes and one hour in length. Participants were encouraged to talk openly and provide examples about their relationship, their decision to live separately (including rationale), and perceived challenges or benefits. A supplement of close-ended questions addressed socio-demographic characteristics.

Data were transcribed verbatim and a comprehensive descriptive summary was created for each dyad that focused on segments of data most relevant to our core questions. Participant rationales for living apart were analyzed alongside related talk about the benefits of living apart and how they describe these arrangements to others. After multiple re-readings, inductively derived themes were developed to reflect a) thematic constructions and representations of both living apart and cohabitation (e.g., living apart as a healthy relationship; cohabitation as restricting independence); and b) broader interpretive (e.g., cultural, ideological) ideas drawn on by participants in this process (e.g., age as justifying the inability to cohabit; risk avoidance as legitimizing living apart). Data were sorted and coded according to these themes (using Word 2007 software as a data management tool). Further analytical work entailed working within each

theme to examine complexity and variation, and develop conceptual elaborations and adjustments.

## Findings

### Sample Description

Fifty-six participants (28 couples) were interviewed. Their average age was 59 years (range: 39 to 92); all were heterosexual. A majority (84%) identified as Caucasian, Canadian, or of European/British origin. 41% worked full time, 20% were self-employed, and 30% were retired. Occupational data was not collected in a standardized way, though many mentioned their occupations in the interview. Dominant types included: public or civil service; small business; financial, insurance and accounting; musicians, composers and writers; teaching; construction and housing; health care; and other office or administrative work. Participants tended to have high levels of formal education (e.g., 41% had a university or post-graduate degree). 17% reported an average annual net income (not including their partner's income) under \$40,000; 58.5% reported an income between \$40,000 and \$79,999; and the remaining participants (24.1%) reported an income of \$80,000 and above (CDN dollars).

A high proportion of participants (93%) had been in at least one previous cohabiting (i.e., marital or common-law) relationship. Seven were widowed. LAT relationships ranged from three to 26 years in length (average: 10 years). Four couples were engaged or married. Participants lived an average of 15 minutes (driving distance) apart, ranging from less than one minute (e.g., residing in the same building) to over 45 minutes. **Partners typically tended to see each other in person several (e.g. 3-4 times) times a week, and most often on weekends.** Though 66% had at least one child from a previous partnership, only 26% still had co-residing children. No couples had children from their current partnership.

Below, we explore how participants drew on both individualistic and relational considerations, including a need for independence that was linked to a sense of responsibility for managing personal and relational risks; and a need for protecting and preserving relationships. Ideas about age and gender also entered into their accounts in complex ways.

### **Independence, Self and Individualism**

A dominant theme in participant accounts was the importance of living apart for the self: including both prioritizing personal independence, as well as protecting oneself from potential risk or harm. For instance, participants commented that their LAT arrangements provide the time and space to pursue their own individual interests (such as hobbies or recreation), or that their own personalities necessitate living apart (e.g., “I’m the sort of person that needs time to themselves to revitalize”). They drew on similar ideas about individual wellbeing and autonomy to justify their arrangement. For instance, as one participant noted, his/her own desire for independence reflects a broader issue regarding “People [now] are much more into themselves and really want to be more in control of their own destiny and their own space.” Though couples were often aware of normative judgments from others about their arrangement, some asserted their rejection of social norms of traditional relationships to support their claims that cohabitation was unnecessary. This was reflected in quotes such as: “to have the companionship it’s not necessary to live together”; and “we’re not gonna move in together because everybody else is.” Further, though aware of negative judgements from others, participants frequently cited positive comments they received from others, such as those that were envious of their situation.

To justify living apart, participants constructed themselves as being practically, financially and emotionally capable of living on their own (i.e., not needing cohabitation). As one participant stated: “we didn’t really feel the need to be constantly in each other’s lives

physically.” Likewise, another participant expressed: “I don’t know that I really have this need to live with somebody. I’m handy around the house and I can run a house by myself.”

Participants also suggested that living apart helped them avoid risks to self posed by relationships, providing emotional boundaries and self-protection. This included protection from difficult emotional experiences associated with previous cohabiting relationships or separations (e.g., abuse, emotional hurt and trauma, co-dependency, betrayal, rejection). For instance, one male participant cohabited with a woman with addiction and mental health issues, who resisted his attempts to end the relationship and refused to leave the apartment (“It was so invasive ... never again, not gonna happen”). Another female participant who was raised in an abusive family situation expressed a strong distrust of men that generated caution, reserve and hesitancy, motivating her decision not to cohabit. Another female participant explained how early on in her relationship, her partner’s drinking habits “teed me off a bit” because of her past relationship experiences. She noted that ultimately he “kept himself in check but if he was to become like my first husband I had the ‘out.’” For these individuals, living apart at least initially was constructed as a “safety factor” to protect oneself from risk.

Participants further spoke of wanting to avoid the practical, financial or legal entanglements and risks of cohabitation. Living apart helps participants, e.g., protect “where I live and what I have” that they may have lost in previous separations (such as a home). Two female participants who were partnered to older men expressed concern that their partner may die before them; living apart helped them avoid will and/or estate hassles that could pose challenges when their partner dies. Other participants stated that LAT arrangements allowed them to avoid legal and financial complications of declaring formally as being common-law (e.g., benefits, insurance, shared assets) and dealing with estate issues in the event of separation.

In contrast to cohabitation, living apart tended to be described as promoting autonomy, as in: “we like it because of the independence that we both have. We’re together but we’re not tied down by each other.” Participants explained how LAT arrangements allow them to live an ‘unencumbered’ life that respects individualities and is relatively ‘free and clear’ of obligations. Interestingly, one male participant noted that living apart provides:

*...the illusion of freedom* and greater latitude in doing what I prefer to do at least half of the time and not having to account for all of my movements or every moment of my day. While being firmly connected, there is that extended freedom, which maybe a couple living together doesn’t quite have (authors’ emphasis).

This quote suggests that in part, accounts of the independence provided by living apart are constructions that help individuals maintain a sense of autonomous identity within their relationships. The freedom entailed in living apart was often articulated as “being able to just do what I want to do, my way” and to avoid expectations or pressure to compromise or to ask one’s partner for “permission.” Stated benefits included: “not expecting people to make sacrifices or change”; and “I don’t have to compromise myself, my feelings, my wants, my needs.” This was contrasted against cohabiting partnerships entailing sacrifices, surrender, accommodations, compromises and obligations. Participants appreciated their freedom in routines, habits and decisions, without interruption, judgement, conflict, or obligations to or consideration for their partner. This included choices about eating/food, sleeping, the physical environment, entertainment (e.g., tv shows), scheduling one’s day, and socializing with friends. Participants felt free to do ‘nothing’ or talk to no one, immerse themselves in a project, or transgress minor social norms (e.g., “walk around in my underwear and scratch myself”).

Physical space (the home, as 'space of my own') tended to be viewed as protecting and symbolizing personal freedom. Participants described themselves as strongly attached to their homes and neighbourhoods, such that moving (and thus cohabitation) was both impractical and undesirable. They spoke of how, by living apart, they can maintain the physical space as desired (e.g., decor, furniture and possessions, renovations), and live in that space the way they prefer (e.g., level of cleanliness, etc.). For example, one participant stated: "this whole condo is decorated and everything in it I've collected because I like it. I didn't have to consider anybody else." Additional examples include: "I love coming home to my place, to my space; where I live like I want and it's my world" and "I have my space. I have my freedom ... there are days where I wake up and I just don't have to think about anybody else." Physical space was also equated with the emotional space needed to relax, "de-stress," and maintain mental health.

Cohabitation was believed to increase the risk of dependence, such as needing and "relying on the other person for making decisions all the time or going out or something." For example, one male participant believed a LAT relationship is perfect because "neither one of us is dependent on the other"; another explained how "I'm forced to look after myself... I don't force her to do things for me." Similarly, a female participant stated how "it's easier to keep [her] nose out" of her partner's lifestyle. Many participants feared relying on their partner, and some emphasized that even if they became ill, they would not want to cohabit.

Finally, participants often spoke about employment as a competing interest that justifies their need for time and space to themselves. LAT arrangements provide time to "toss myself into work" and focus (especially for the self-employed or creative

professions); live close to their workplace; or manage or adapt to challenging work conditions (self-employment, shift work, heavy responsibilities, working intensively with many people, stress). For example, one participant believed living apart is beneficial because: “at the end of the day there’s nothing expected from us...both of us need that because we have been in professions where we’re working with people a lot.” By emphasizing the importance of work obligations, participants are in part maintaining a ‘responsible’ identity. This also occurs through constructions of LAT arrangements as contributing to relational well-being and the well-being of others, as described below.

### **Relational Considerations and Familialism**

As well as prioritizing and protecting oneself, participants explained how LAT arrangements helped them prioritize and protect their current intimate and familial relationships. Here, experiences of previous unsuccessful cohabiting relationships were used by participants as examples of the potential harms to relationship (in contrast to harms to self, as above) associated with cohabitation - and LAT arrangements were positioned as avoiding these risks. For example, participants commonly expressed that living together would risk a good thing, because the relationship may not survive associated stresses and tensions (e.g., “I don’t think the relationship would last”). Cohabitation was constructed as a risk in sentiments such as: “if it ain’t broken don’t fix it” and “it’s not worth the gamble.” One male participant noted: “let’s not even consider risking something that might have negatives”; likewise, a female participant expressed: “I love him too much to risk it...so I’m doing it to save the relationship.”

When one is constantly “in each other’s face” (like “caged rats”) irritations, stress and tension were viewed as almost inevitable. As one participant notes: “it doesn’t matter how much

you love somebody, you don't want to be with them all the time. It's a lot of pressure to put on each other." A common theme was that otherwise minor habits or differences in styles or habits can, through cohabitation, develop into "daily annoyances" and larger irritations that "grind" on or "aggravate" each other, and generate conflict, especially if partners are unwilling to compromise or adjust. One participant, for example, stated: "the differences that we had that were okay when we lived apart would get magnified if we ever lived together" and this "would bring into conflict some of the things that don't surface now."

As one participant noted, "we are different in a lot of ways that might make living together a real pain in the ass." Differences in habits and styles of living were described including: home decor; having guests; bedtimes; cleanliness; time spent talking; and interests or hobbies. Differences or challenges in personality, including emotional 'baggage,' depression, extreme introversion, pushiness, or anger issues were also suggested barriers to cohabitation, as they could damage the relationship. Yet these differences were viewed as acceptable, e.g., "because we don't have to have it on a 24-7 basis." By living apart, potentially irreconcilable differences become manageable.

Cohabitation challenges may contribute to negative feelings that could be avoided by remaining apart. One participant, for instance, spoke of how cohabiting partners may feel obligated to ask each other to join them in activities, resulting in pressure on the other partner to join in, to avoid inadvertently conveying rejection: "when I'm living alone I'm not even faced with the question."

Participants tended to take personal responsibility for past relationship failures, and in doing so referred to past "track records" to explain the risk of cohabitation. For instance, one participant described his decision to leave his first marriage as demonstrating his relatively low

tolerance and impatience. Another participant questions his ability to be a good cohabiting partner, “having had two failed marriages.”

In a LAT relationship, partners can opt for alone time when desired, which could prevent potential negative reactions and difficulties. For example, one participant suggested that if partners have divergent interests, living apart “enables you to pursue your interests without upsetting the apple cart with the other person.” Other participants described how they can avoid bringing negative emotions (e.g., from a ‘bad day at work’) into their interactions, “imposing” it on the relationship. When conflicts do occur, living apart allows couples to control their impact on the relationship by providing separate spaces to which each can retreat. As one participant explained, “if we have an argument I go home and so does she. A day or so later everything has diffused and we’re back to normal.” Another female participant expressed a similar sentiment, adding that this allows each partner to “think it over, decide it’s silly and start to miss each other.”

In just a few instances, participants justified their LAT arrangement by normalizing it, emphasizing similarity to the happiness and commitment of cohabitating relationships. Illustrative excerpts include: “he still comes over most nights and we have the weekends together. Is that really much different than someone who travels for their work?” and “we do everything like a married... I was almost gonna say ‘normal’ couple but... like any other couple.” Geographically close couples in particular emphasized the ease of their connection.

More commonly, however, LAT arrangements were contrasted against cohabiting relationships, and participants suggested their relationships were of better quality. For example, one participant stated: “we do far more in a weekend or when we’re together than the average couple here seem to do in a month.” Participants expressed that living apart not only mitigates

tension (as above), but actively promotes relationship quality, primarily by balancing needs for independence and togetherness. Indeed, participants tended to interpret healthy relationships as those in which, e.g., “you’re both individuals and have your separate lives.” Cohabitation was suggested as contributing to identity loss (and emotional or practical dependence and passivity), as in this quote from a male participant describing an earlier partnership: “the separate part that was the ‘me’ went away and it became the ‘us’” – he attributes his current happiness to living apart, wherein their selves remain “separate, orbiting but not touching.” Other participants emphasized how living apart helps them maintain their sense of self in a relationship, and avoid being so “entangled” that they give too much (i.e., akin to a ‘fixated relationship’: Giddens, 1992). One participant described how she can be ‘true to herself’ rather than always prioritizing her partner’s needs over her own.

Periods of absence were believed to be positive, in that couples do not ‘take each other for granted.’ Cohabitation was constructed (directly and indirectly) as contributing to a stagnancy or complacency, wherein time together has an obligatory quality, with more of the “worries of shared everything” and mundane aspects of daily life. In contrast, living apart was described as beneficial for the relationship because they miss their partner and *want to* spend time with them. Two excerpts are illustrative: “part of the joy of being with her is that we both have this feeling of ‘I don’t need you, I want you’” and “I appreciate the together times more because we really 100% want to be together, when we’re together.”

Participants emphasized that many couples cohabit due to financial need, and acknowledged their personal financial challenges in maintaining separate households. However, they suggested that financial motivations for cohabitation were inappropriate, as in: “I don’t want to move in with somebody because [financially]. I want to do it because I want to” or “we don’t

want to do it just for the wrong reasons and end up being together from that.” In addition, some participants re-interpreted finances as a barrier to future cohabitation: i.e., cohabitation would require the purchase of a separate, new, and considerably larger home, which, due to high housing costs in Vancouver and Victoria, would be almost impossible.

Because time spent together was described as an “event” or “treat” to look forward to, couples planned towards it and sought to focus on each other during this time. One participant believes that in a LAT relationship, “you try a little harder” to ensure you have a good time: in cooking a meal, giving flowers, compromising on a tv show, or being more “involved with the person or aware.” Further, participants suggested they have more to talk about when together (having spent more time apart), and do not share activities that one partner has no interest in, making room for more enjoyment during time together. Several added that their relationship retains a ‘dating’ quality; some suggested their sex life was more satisfying as a result.

As well as citing relational considerations, participants with co-resident children frequently described living apart as allowing them to time and space to devote to family and in particular, to protect or meet the needs of co-resident children. For instance, one participant did not want to cohabit (which would require changing homes), because his current home best meets the needs of his two boys. Another female participant spoke of how her children lost their family home in a previous breakup, and she wanted to prevent this from happening again. Others linked the LAT arrangement to not wanting to “blend” families or introduce another parental figure into the household. This was particularly so where the child expressed negative feelings about the new partner, or where custody disputes were occurring. For example, one couple, with five children between them, resisted combining households, to avoid the challenges this might

involve. Another participant described how her LAT arrangement helps protect her son, because he was upset when she was abused in a previous relationship.

### **Age, Life Course, and Generation**

In addition to ideas about the importance of both self and other, participants drew on particular ideas about aging, life stages, and generation to justify their LAT arrangements. For example, one participant stated that her generation that grew up in the 60s “was a little more independent thinking” and questioned social norms, which she believes partially explains the LAT phenomenon in her age group. Another participant expressed that with age-related declines in sex hormones, older persons no longer fall in ‘desperate’ love, so there is no compelling desire to cohabit. Another participant suggested that as she entered menopause, she would be a more difficult person to live with, so it would be better to remain separate. Older people were constructed as more ‘set in their ways,’ and less able to adapt to living with or compromising with others. For example, one male participant articulated:

I think younger people are probably more romantic about relationships: “I want to sleep with you cuddled in my arms every night.” Bleh! (gagging sound) I can’t sleep next to anybody and I get a better sleep in my own bed by myself.

More positive constructions of old age were evident in accounts of older people as confident, independent and able to identify what they want from their relationships with others. Below, one participant draws on the idea of age in complex ways, reflecting ageist sentiments (e.g., older people are cranky and resentful; a desire to stay young), as well as an awareness of how living apart at older ages may violate age-related norms about the expected life course:

We don't want to grow into cranky, resentful people who hate our lives...like it's a way of staying young and sometimes I feel funny about that. Like are we refusing to grow up? And yet I think, but I'm so happy, that why wouldn't [we]?

Participants also tended to suggest that because of their stage in the life course (and the experience this entailed) they did not need to cohabit, and in some cases were more deserving of the 'luxury' of living alone. Age, for instance, is not only associated with a greater likelihood of having achieved a level of financial independence (as in the first section), but also with a greater likelihood of previous cohabitation, marriage and childrearing experiences. Participants who had been previously married with children expressed they have 'been there and done that' and have no need to re-partner in traditional ways, as in: "We don't need to live together. I had a long marriage, 47 years. I don't need another marriage." Another participant, who had been married twice before and is uninterested in re-marriage, stated that she is in her late 40s and does not plan to raise a child with her partner. Due to timing and circumstance, "some of the check boxes for why people might live together don't exist for us."

Though some participants believed that their age, in this way, also made them more deserving of 'finally' living alone, for others, having lived alone for a long time and into old age was viewed as justification for continuing this arrangement, through habituation, as in: "you get set in your ways when you live by yourself ...the longer I did it the more I liked it and it became normal for me."

### **Gender, Equality and the Division of Labour.**

In this final section, we examine in-depth the gendered dimension of each of the above three themes. First, participant gender appeared to have some influence on the specific ways that the above themes manifested in their accounts of LAT arrangements. Secondly, from an

interpretive perspective, the idea of gender was actively used by participants to justify their LAT arrangement in their accounts. Both dimensions will be analyzed in further depth in this section.

As noted in the first and second sections above, both male and female participants viewed their LAT arrangement as helping protect their personal autonomy as well as protect the relationship. More often in women's accounts however, these themes were specifically linked to their previous experiences of household, financial and childcare inequities, in terms of both labour and decisional control. For example, one participant described how in her previous cohabiting relationship, she assumed her partner would contribute to daily tasks, yet:

...if he didn't like doing something it was made for me to take it over so that got tiresome after awhile. So I found that I carried the household more than he did. Whereas if you're living by yourself...there is only you.

As such, women, more than men, tended to interpret living apart as helping them to avoid conflict or resentment related to having to fight or 'beg' their partner to complete tasks. For example, one female participant expressed: "it would be cheaper for us to live together but it wouldn't be worth the angst, anxiety. I feel that I would constantly be picking up after him." Women did not generally problematize men's contributions to household labour, and some blamed themselves for introducing resentment or obligation into the relationship (or for their 'mothering' tendencies, noted below). In this sense, living apart was constructed by women as helping them protect the relationship against themselves.

Though a sense of control over one's life and decisions was important for both male and female participants, it was emphasized more by women, and in their accounts was connected to a desire for freedom from worry, guilt (e.g., internal social controls), and disapproval. Living apart facilitates separation of and personal control of financial and

purchasing decisions, which was especially important for women, as in: “I don’t have to ask if I want to buy something”; “I can buy the things that he would disapprove of”; and “It’s not like somebody saying ‘Oh do you really need that?’”

Women also appeared to place more emphasis on a need to avoid becoming dependent on (or passive in relation to) their partner, as a particular risk they faced in cohabiting relationships. One participant, for instance, also connected this to her previous experience:

... I don’t want to be dependent on anybody as much as I was then. Because it took a long time to get to the point where I felt I could make it on my own.

Another participant interpreted her LAT arrangement as helping her struggle against the:

...assumed roles that a woman is supposed to take. So I’m making a statement by doing this.

By saying no I’m not gonna be a wife. I’m not gonna be a mom. I’m gonna be independent.

Furthermore, participants appeared to actively draw on generalized stereotypes about gender differences (in living styles, habits, personality) in relation to the above concerns. For instance, one female participant explained that she could not live with her partner because “he’s more on the ‘guy cleanliness’ as opposed to women’s cleanliness.” Another female participant stated that cohabitation would mean “I’d put myself in the position that most women do, where you feel naturally like you need to be the nurturer” and meet others’ needs. She adds, “like a maternal instinct that you can’t shake off. If somebody is there, you’re gonna look after them.”

In the third section above, we identified how LATs were rationalized by both women and men in relation to ideas of age, generation and life course stage. Here, too, there were gendered differences. For instance, women tended to emphasize the importance of finally, at their age, having the opportunity to live alone without responsibilities for considering or caring for others,

as in: "I don't want to take care of anybody. I've done that all my life." For some female participants in particular, living apart reflected a resistance to an additional new parenting role to their partner's co-resident children, as in the following quote: "he has younger kids. I don't want to be through that whole mom stage thing again."

In addition, several female participants explained how through the experience and development that comes with age, older women become better able to identify and assert their needs for self-determination than in their younger years. One participant elaborated:

I think a lot of women feel like I do when they get to this stage. The kids are grown. Your parents aren't sick... for once in your life it's just about you.

For some, this was also a generational and societal effect: because of the women's movement, women now have more options and freedom to address their needs (e.g., they tend to be more financially secure and have more options for gender equality).

Other participants suggested that older women are more able than younger women to accomplish more practical tasks of everyday life, and are more likely to be financially secure, reducing the need to cohabit. Another participant stated that older women tend to have more friends and outside interests than men, such that they have less need for the close company that cohabitation provides.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings of this study are limited to LAT arrangements among heterosexual couples residing in the same metropolitan area in mid and later life, rather than to homosexual, long-distance, or younger couples. Experiences and rationale among the latter may differ from those presented here. For example, couples living across wider geographic distances may place more emphasis on constraint rather than choice. However, there may also be similarities: long-distance

couples, for instance, also tend to believe that periods of separation enhance relationship quality (Sahlstein, 2004), and seek to prioritize career-related commitments, though perhaps to a greater extent (Holmes, 2006). Future research should also examine the construction of LAT relationships in specific ethno-cultural communities (including overseas partnerships involving transnational foreign workers).

We were unable, in this study, to identify prevalence and examine the characteristics of LAT couples in a way that would be statistically representative of a wider population. Future large-scale survey data on Canadian LAT arrangements is needed. For instance, though economically feasible for study participants, it is likely that LATs are generally not as readily available to, or common among, those with lower incomes. Whether increases in LAT relationships will continue given the potential for future Canadian economic instability in the context of globalization is unknown. Further, more effective identification of LAT relationships in Census surveys in particular (rather than considering them as 'single') will help us acknowledge how individuals in these relationships draw both emotional and practical support from these non-traditional partnerships (Roseneil, 2006; Strohm et al., 2009).

Another limitation of this study is that **we cannot objectively assess the accuracy of participant interpretations of their experiences. Participants did, however, raise interesting ideas that remain to be explored in additional research – for instance, do LATs really lead to better quality relationships? Are LAT arrangements really better for children? And to what extent should individuals need to account for their activities and whereabouts to their intimate partners?**

**In contrast, in this study we focused** on the complexities and nuances of how people speak about and construct their decisions and actions in relation to living apart. For instance, the idea of the traditional, cohabiting relationship was used both as a standard of comparison (i.e.,

when participants suggested they spend the same amount of time together as some cohabiting couples), and contrast (i.e., when participants suggested their relationships were healthier or of better quality than cohabiting ones). The idea of having spent a long time living with others was used to suggest one was 'finally deserving' of living apart, yet in other cases the idea of having spent a long time not living with others was used to suggest that one has become habituated to this arrangement and should no longer co-reside.

More complexities are evident when we examine participant talk about self and other as rationale for living apart. Participants spoke not only of actively promoting their autonomy, but protecting themselves from risks that they associated with cohabiting or marital relationships. The latter relationships were constructed as involving sacrifice, surrender, and a risk of dependence that participants sought to avoid. In part, this can be viewed as reflecting participants' past experiences in these relationships; more broadly, however, it may reflect a cultural emphasis on individualism and a societal shift in how we view relationships (Bauman, 2003; Bellah et al., 1985; Beck & Beck Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1992). Even where participants drew on more individualistic rationale, this does not mean they are more 'selfish' or uncommitted. From an interpretive perspective, participants are appealing to individualism (as a culturally legitimated discourse) to explain their arrangements to themselves and others in social interaction. In doing so, they reinforce this discourse more broadly.

Participant emphases on avoiding personal risk can also be seen as part of constructing a responsible, prudent identity (and indeed, some blame themselves for relationship failures). As such, the individualistic thread within participant accounts aligns with the broader political and economic context of neoliberalism, with its discursive emphasis on the idea that individuals can and should control their lives to avoid and manage personal risk (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1996).

Though they frequently drew on individualistic ideals to support their arrangements, participants also emphasized relational considerations such as reducing conflict (that might jeopardize the relationship) and strengthening the quality of the relationship, or protecting the needs of co-resident children. In other words, individual and relational rationales for living apart were not mutually exclusive in participant talk (Roseneil, 2006). An emphasis on protecting the relationship may in part also reflect a desire to avoid constructing oneself as 'selfish' in the interview. This may be especially so for women, who tend to be socialized into a caring, responsive feminine identity, and may be more concerned about appearing selfish to others (Aronson, 1992). In sum, it may not be accurate (or entirely possible) to disentangle self and other-focused ideas as disparate causal 'motivations' for LATs.

Ideas about age and gender were used in complex ways in participant accounts, and often helped women in particular justify themselves as deserving or requiring time and space to themselves. For instance, participants (especially women) drew in part on dominant beliefs about old age to justify the legitimacy of their claims to time and space of their own. Though this strategy may be viewed as an empowering manifestation of agency (and some positive constructions of aging were identified), it may in some cases perpetuate ageist ideas that are more negative (e.g., older people are not able to compromise, do not desire sex; menopausal women are poor company).

The majority of participants were previously divorced, and had children that lived independently. Among these mid- to late-life participants, there was little desire to re-partner in traditional ways (such as cohabitation). Indeed, their previous life course experiences figured largely throughout each of the themes as evidence for their need and desire to live apart.

**Relationship dynamics and expectations can change later in life, especially among re-partnering**

individuals, who may have already experienced more formal rituals and traditions (Humble, 2009), or may seek to avoid situations they perceive contributed to a previous breakup (Brimhall, Wampler, & Kimball, 2008; de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Levin, 2004; Schneller & Arditti, 2008).

Participants (especially women) also drew on gendered stereotypes to justify their LAT arrangement (e.g., gender differences in cleanliness standards). For example, it is noteworthy that no male participants expressed a need to protect their relationship against their tendency to over-nurture or ‘mother’ their partner – reflecting traditional gender constructions (Zvonkovic et al., 1996). Though gendered ideas help participants explain why they could not co-reside, they can inadvertently reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes. Furthermore, women in particular appeared to value living apart because it allows them to avoid gendered imbalances in household tasks and responsibilities, and maintain control over financial and household decisions. Indeed, older women emphasize the importance of a home of their own to set practical boundaries in their relationships and preserve their autonomy (Borrell & Karlsson, 2002; Davidson, 2002). However, these boundaries are also emotional in nature for some women, and for some men.

Although living apart is potentially a manageable solution for women at a personal level, and may enact the ‘democratizing’ potential of the ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens, 1992), it remains an individual solution that detracts attention from the broader issue of gendered inequalities in cohabiting relationships (e.g., divisions of household and care labour; abuse: Gupta, 1999; Greenstein, 1996). In some ways, these systemic inequalities produce LAT arrangements as an individualized response for older women.

In sum, the data from this interpretive inquiry suggests that rationalizing LAT arrangements, as non-traditional (and stigmatized) partnership, involves an active blending of individual and relational considerations (e.g., protecting both oneself and one’s relationship) with

ideas about age, life stage, and gender. The particular ways this is achieved appears to vary by the gender of participants, which may reflect gendered influences shaping the presentation of self, as well as differing life course experiences and systemic inequities.

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<sup>i</sup> Trost (1997) refers to the LAT term as originating from Dutch newspaper journalist Michiel Berkel in 1978.