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'Going against the grain'? Distance relationships, emotional reflexivity and gender

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Abstract

Intimacy at a distance is becoming an increasingly likely experience for a wide range of people, not only migrants. In the context of globalization and rapid change, many face novel situations and uncertainty around how to feel. Distance relationships therefore provide good examples of how globalised intimacies promote emotional reflexivity. Yet the extent to which distance relationships promote emotional reflexivity is likely to vary depending on the type of relationship and the socio-relational and spatial context. This paper explores that possibility by referring to ESRC funded research involving joint interviews with UK based academic couples in distance relationships[1] and another project analysing online accounts written by UK and Australian internet daters looking for partners. The findings suggest that distance relationships between potential partners online can promote emotional reflexivity that trouble gender relations at an interpersonal level, but that established and committed couple relationships conducted at a distance are more likely to challenge structural gender inequalities. These empirical examples show that globalised social change around gender needs to be understood in relation to different kinds of mobility, not just international migration. Thus, this paper contributes to understandings of the increasing importance of emotional reflexivity in bringing about and in understanding social change under globalised social conditions.

Introduction

Distance relationships can afford new possibilities for doing intimacy and doing gender differently. These relationships come about in a range of ways apart from migratory flows between nations. The desirability of being separated from spouses, lovers, family or friends is not usually celebrated, and some efforts have been made to show that they are less emotionally satisfying (Bunker et al. 1992). However, both statistics and daily examples of fear, abuse and violence against women indicate that there may sometimes be reasons for rejoicing in some distance from men (Markku et al. 2017). Even in more mundane terms, the contempt allegedly bred by familiarity is recognisable. Certainly, there have been shifts in how couples do gender, but inequalities remain (see Gabb and Fink 2015; van Hoof 2013). In short, distance may not always be problematic for intimate relationships; it may allow for new and different practices around gender. However, it may also entrench unequal ways of relating to intimate others (Duncan 2015). These opportunities and inequalities are likely to vary according to the social context, spatial particularities and the type of relationship. The papers in this special issue give us insight into some of those variations. This article uses work the author has done over the last decade or so to address this question of whether intimacy at a distance promotes emotional reflexivity likely to challenge gender inequalities?

I begin with some conceptual framing of intimate distance within globalising processes of change requiring reflexivity. This draws on thinking about emotional reflexivity and distance relationships (Holmes, 2010, 2014) and about 'floating ties' and virtual intimacy (Wilding, 2006, 2017). The article sets out to challenge understandings of transnational intimacy in terms of cosmopolitan and world families (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2013) and to invoke alternatives focusing on connection and emotion as they wheel variously around different forms of distant intimacy. I take an intersectional view that adapts Crenshaw's (1989) original framework in order to move away from seeing individuals as the site and centre in

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which inequalities collide and towards a more relational understanding. Nira Yuval-Davis (2011; 2006) has made such adaptations to consider how gender, race, class, age and other discourses are not additive but work together to constitute experiences of social stratification. Although Yuval-Davis (2011: 8) draws attention to everybody, not just minorities, as having positions in those social structures, there are good analytical and political reasons for attending to marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1989: 139). In this analysis of gender, even the more privileged women in the sample are seen as marginalized *in relation to men*. However, their experiences of marginalization are constituted by relationally achieved 'intersections' or intertwining of gender with class, partnership status, age and location.

In considering the impact of distance on intimate relationships the paper is oriented around debates about how globalisation and related social processes affect the emotional, intimate lives of women in and across particular spaces, both geographical and virtual. I outline the empirical studies drawn on about couples in distance relationships and about people looking for partners through internet dating. I use these studies to set out how globalisation, and the distance it brings, makes and unmakes relationships with unequal effects around gender. New forms of mobility can enhance (emotional) reflexivity and diversify intimacy. The contention is that specific kinds of social contexts, spaces and types of relationships may promote or subvert normative versions of gendering. This may not always work as expected. The analysis seeks to illustrate how intimate relationships are not only produced by globalising forces but contribute to them. The contribution of this work is that it looks beyond conventional horizons to see how the world-making and gendering features of intimacies at a distance depend on the kinds of relationships and emotionalities involved. In a wider sense this can provide new insights into the importance of emotional reflexivity and its role in social change.

Conceptualising gendered intimacies at a distance

There are considerable challenges for understanding the making, maintaining and unmaking of gendered relationships when multiple cultural meanings and scripts might be coming into conflict or reinforcing each other. Not all cultures necessarily share the perception that distance harms gendered intimacy. There is a Japanese proverb, for instance, that says: a good husband is healthy and absent. Subtly humorous as that may be, it seems different from Western tendencies to see the cord of connection as likely to be snapped by geographical distance (Holmes, 2014). It also suggests a rather different sense of what intimacy might be, between married couples at least. The emotional devotion Westerners might associate with married and other committed couples, especially heterosexual, relationships, may not have the same resonance within Asian and other non-western cultures. However, within cultures, ways of being emotional and intimate also vary considerably according to the type of relationship. Distance will thus be judged differently according to the norms relating to these different relationships. For instance, parental separation from children will be mourned, pitied, tolerated or applauded according to its cultural location, circumstances and the ages of the children. Mothers' separation from children will be judged differently to fathers'. Adult children, depending on their gender, who live within the parental home, may be the cause of much hand-wringing in some cultures and barely worth commenting on in others where that is usual. To complicate matters further, globalisation shakes up norms around intimacy, distance and what to feel. New mobilities across actual and virtual space bring new ties as well as changing old ones. Rather than discussing 'world families' as pioneers of

cosmopolitanism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2013), I want to consider the concept of 'floating ties' as a way to explain shifts in intimacies at a distance.

The concept of floating ties describes a globalised intimate realm in which it is more difficult to take established ways of relating for granted and in which emotional reflexivity is required. To say that ties become more 'floating' recognises some loosening in how we connect to others. However, instead of investigating alleged individualisation, attention to floating ties keeps the focus on relationships and how intimacies are changing (Wilding, 2017). These relations remain vital to most people's efforts to reflexively navigate their way through wider events and structural relations. The active, relational, reflexive navigation involved is emotional, meaning that actions are informed and coloured by interpretations of how oneself and others do, or might, feel. Emotional reflexivity is about how emotions shape our reflections and actions. It describes not always cognitive, but embodied and relational, processes via which people interpret and act on their own and others' feelings. Reflexivity, in a world of rapid change, is fundamentally emotional, and even supposedly 'rational' deliberations and choices are informed by unnamed, often ambiguous feelings as well as by recognised emotions (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes 2010, 2014; Holmes and Burrows, 2012). Fear of risk (Beck, 1992; 1994) is only one of the many ways in which emotions play a part in reflexivity. Reflexivity is not new but has become increasingly necessary for people to make their way through the world (Archer, 2012). What is new in the analysis attempted here is the greater emphasis put on the emotional character of that reflexivity (Holmes, 2010). The aim of such emphasis is to understand how social change occurs at the level of relationships and *affect* structures (Barnwell, 2017).

The claim here is that distance relationships can reveal how emotional reflexivity makes links between interpersonal change within relationships and changes in structural relations relating to gender. This consideration of emotional reflexivity is key to understanding intimacy at a distance, and can enliven broader understandings of global social change. It is a highly relational view of emotional reflexivity that draws on Symbolic Interactionist accounts of selves and the social as formed in interaction. Mead (1967) argues that the self is formed and re-formed via 'conversation' with imagined and actual others – including our fragmented selves. Others have developed this to understand engaging with the generalised other as a means by which individuals take account of others' thoughts and actions (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2007), and feelings (Holmes, 2010). Reflexivity has emotional, bodily and cognitive elements, and its relational practice makes it messy and seldom directed towards a specific goal or plan or choice. Emotional reflexivity is necessary as globalising change parts intimates, and yet contributes to actions that bring about that change.

Gendered change happens in the intimate sphere, as the shrinking of the globe creates new jobs, new types of people and new ways of living. Whether or not particular people in particular places want to throw off their old ways of relating, they may find the world around them altering. Not only individuals, couples, and families are on the move, but also practices of intimacy (Jamieson, 2013) and structural level gender inequalities. Here the focus is on how the different intimacies that globalisation might bring are related to feeling, thinking and doing gender relationships and relations differently at a distance. Broadly, these different intimacies include a range of distance relationships brought about by migration across national borders, but also a range of mobilities whereby people do various kinds of travel related to their work (see for example Viry and Kauffman, 2015). Living apart together is one form of non-cohabitation between partners that has been argued to not necessarily alter gendered practices, for example, around housework (Duncan 2015). However, in many such

relationships, couples live near each other. This paper deals with the affordances of physical and geographical distance between partners for doing gender differently (Holmes 2004a, Lindemann 2017a), but adds a consideration of how distance affects potential relationships as well as established ones. The empirical material analysed below looks at gender inequalities attached to intimacy at a distance between UK based academic couples, and between UK and Australian internet daters meeting virtually.

Methods of studying emotional reflexivity in intimacies at a distance

This article reflects on a body of work about emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2010, 2011, 2014; Holmes and Burrows 2012) and to more explicitly consider how it relates to doing intimacy and 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1984) at a distance. This can raise questions about what is meant by intimacy and how it is transformed, emotionally and practically, by a range of different types of distance – including not only geographic distances, but also virtual distances, cultural distances, social distances, economic distances and political distances in an unequal world. New insights can then emerge into the ways in which social and cultural norms, as well as particular geographical and virtual spaces, shape emotional expectations and relationship practices at a distance.

To examine links between emotional reflexivity and challenges to gender inequalities, I use original data from two studies here, the first being a current study on heterosexual internet dating in the UK and Australia. I analyse extracts from over 30 internet daters' online narratives of their dating experiences, most from 7 different blogs describing multiple dates, in one case over several years. There are also three or four collections of internet dating stories shared via discussion forums and in response to online news stories about experiences of internet dating. The sample describes almost 200 different dates. A fuller analysis of this data is part of ongoing collaborative work (Beasley and Holmes, forthcoming). In this paper the data set is thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) with a focus on accounts or parts of accounts that describe what happens in the pre or non-proximate stages of internet dating when couples are spatially separated. Accounts were purposively selected using google searches for 'internet dating blogs' and by seeking blogs attached to internet dating sites, especially the most popular sites. Attempts were made to get a variety of stories from a diverse range of UK and Australian heterosexual daters. This provides empirical examples beyond the typically dominant North American ones. There are limitations to this method, but used with care, it also has many strengths. The accounts collected are likely to be the accounts of those willing to share their experiences for various reasons. They are likely to be certain kinds of people, as generally the blogosphere is populated by white, well-educated, young and middle-class people (Hookway, 2008; Snee, 2013: 147-9). That the sample is drawn from a pool of people who all have some digital competency and internet access is appropriate because those are necessary things for doing internet dating. Nevertheless, there are many internet daters who do not write accounts of their experiences and they might have rather different stories to tell of how gender relations, as overlaid with other inequalities, are affected by their digitally-based dating. The reliability of findings from the textual analysis

can be checked against other interview-based research on internet dating (for example Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Frohlick and Migliardi, 2011; Hillier and Harrison, 2007; McWilliams and Barrett, 2014), but can also reveal things that may be missing from those studies. One advantage of online accounts is that they are produced without the prompting of researchers, and thus can tell us what internet daters feel it is important to relate about their experiences (Hookway 2008; Snee 2013: 147-9) and give a sense of what kinds of narratives are common. I revisit and compare what these people in, or looking for, a couple relationship say about intimacy at a distance. This makes it possible to explore whether different kinds of distance relationship promote emotional reflexivity in ways that tend to lessen gender inequalities.

The second study I use to examine to what extent intimacy at a distance might challenge unequal gender relations is an interview-based study of heterosexual (and some lesbian couples) in dual-residence distance relationships in the UK. This study spans the first decade of the twenty-first century. Twenty-four couples, in which one partner was an academic, were recruited using intermediaries to ensure some diversity in terms of age, class, region, sexuality, type of university and discipline. Lack of reliable statistics makes it difficult to know what occupations distance relaters generally hold, but in my personal networks and the existing qualitative research it was clear that many academics had partners living in different towns. As relatively privileged and highly-educated professionals, interviewing heterosexual academics was useful because they might be expected to be at the forefront of processes of individualization and of more gender equal ways of relating and would provide a good test. They were sent a questionnaire about their distance relationship and from this sample fourteen interviews were conducted (see table 1). 12 were joint interviews with the couple, two were with the women only. Two lesbian couples were interviewed, the rest were heterosexual. Eight years after the original interviews I contacted the couples again and elicited email updates on their relationships from 12 couples (see Holmes, 2014 for details). This provides rich data as a basis for reflecting on the emotional reflexivity involved in relating across geographical distances.

Table 1: COUPLES IN DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

Couple	Ages	Length of relationship (Years)	Years apart	Distance (hours of travel)	Reunite
Donna Sam	41-50 36-40	14	7	4-5	Weekends
Andrew Isabel	26-30 31-35	6	1	4-5	Fortnightly
Joanne Mark	31-35 31-35	10-11	8	3-4	Weekends
Natalie Rebecca	< 20 21-25	1	0.5	2-3	Fortnightly

Briar Marie	25-30 25-30	3-4	0.5	3-4	Monthly
Meg Ben	36-40 31-35	11	5-6	5-6	Weekends
Gwen James	26-30 31-35	9-10	1-2	3-4	fortnightly- monthly
Martin Lucy	51+ 51+	24-26	14-15	4-5	Weekends
Jane Allen	51+ 51+	24-34	5-6	0-2	Weekly
Wendy Harry	21-25 26-30	7-8	3-5	2-3	Weekends
Joe Margaret	36-40 36-40	12	4-5	2-3	Weekends
Claire Hugh	31-35 41-50	10-12	9	2-3	Weekends
Kirsten Liam	31-35 26-30	2-3	2	3-4	Fortnightly
Luke Catherine	31-35 31-35	0.25	0.25	3-4	Weekends

Internet dating allowing emotional reflexivity to challenge interpersonal gender scripts

The spatial, or virtual, distance involved in the early stages of internet dating can accommodate forms of emotional reflexivity that challenge gendered relationships at the interpersonal level. This is not to forget the dangers of internet dating and the insecurities it can promote in women by placing them 'in an open market in open competition with others' (Illouz 2013: 183). However, in the initial perusing of online profiles in search of potential partners, the lack of physical proximity can have advantages for women. Amongst the narratives of some of the women in the sample it enabled a degree of ease in reflexively reacting to the less than egalitarian or progressive views of men they encounter in various kinds of online interaction. One such set of views is that women's function still is, or should be, to reproduce. One man who blogs about his experiences of internet dating cites a woman friend who has encountered such views as she looks for partners who live near her in the countryside.

> There were some astounding men on there [an agricultural dating site], and not in a good way. Having been assessed by some as to whether I'd breed well (estimated breed value ebv is a common term in ag) I was lucky to find [my partner]. If you're in need of entertainment then it's worth having a look! (Country woman, cited by Reader, man, UK, individual blog, 2013).

Here the emotionally reflexive response indicates astonishment, of a mildly horrified kind, apparently prompting a decision to treat the views as a form of entertainment, not to be taken seriously. Feeling astonished, 'not in a good way', also makes her feel 'lucky' to find a partner - we presume without those views. This process of reflecting on her emotions, her unpleasant surprise about the gendered expectations expressed, and her gratitude for her luck in having a different kind of partner, appears to result in amusement, rather than anger. We glimpse this complex of emotions as helping her navigate away from 'astounding [not good] men' and towards finding her present partner.

At a distance, it seems that some women are able to use emotional reflexivity to mobilise alternative views of femininity and relationships that question traditional expectations about young women as childbearers in waiting. They do so in ways that indicate that the rationale for heterosexual coupling does not have the same unquestioned anchoring in reproduction as in the past (Giddens 1991). However, these women have to avoid entanglement with men who think it does in order to achieve more floating ties (Wilding 2016) in which having children is one option. Another woman reports her 'shock' when starting to get to know a man by email. In the second email: 'Why, he wondered, had [she] listed "undecided" next to [her] desire to have children?' (Young woman, Australia, general blog, 2013). Her reaction is to treat this incident with humour, suggesting he keep his 'hands off [her] womb', and she writes in light-hearted fashion about the inappropriateness of this question so early in their acquaintance. Thus, emotional reactions of shock and astonishment, seemingly made mild by not being physically co-present, guide these women in considering how to act in response to unappealing attitudes to women, experienced at a virtual distance. The result of such emotional reflexivity seems to be to take the position of contemptuous dismissal of the men rather than of angry victim.

Doing this emotional reflexivity in virtual rather than physical space illustrates how some women might find ways to avoid sexual passivity and yet manage fear of harassment. Virtual distance relating provides some ability to filter out men who women might have cause to fear. This is evident in another woman's blog:

> I recently received a message from a manboy on Match.com that firstly listed his qualities, among which he included good kisser, good lover (yup odd already and he did not include arrogance amongst his virtues). However, this was not the most worrying part, this came later when he switched to caps in the fourth paragraph to proclaim "and above all she must be OPEN AND HONEST, I DO NOT PLAY GAMES AND I EXPECT THE SAME FROM HER!!!" Okay psycho... Such a fiery approach is never going to work, it comes across as scary and a bit Fritzl (Own woman, UK, general blog, 2014).

This experience is related within a blog post where the author is advising men on things to avoid if they want to be successful in attracting women on the internet. The example above comes under the heading of 'Careful with bringing your agro baggage/misogyny out too early'. Clearly some anxiety or worry is prompted for this woman by the capitalized demand for no game playing. She indicates that her worry is that this man might have violent tendencies towards women by referring to his 'fiery approach' as 'scary' and as reminding her of Josef Fritzl, a man still talked about in 2014 for locking up his daughter in his cellar as his sex slave for 24 years (Connolly, 2009). Thus the kind of distance a virtual start to internet dating relationships involves appears to have been helpful for these women in

promoting an emotional reflexivity that has allowed them to navigate away from the 'not …
good' chauvinism or 'scary' violence against women and towards a presumably more
enlightened partner.

Other stories about internet dating also indicate that initial spatial distance allows emotionally
reflexive interactions that give heterosexual women some control over engagement with
potential partners without entailing sexual passivity. This is further indication of how there is
potential to form ties that are floating in the sense of still informed, but less rigidly controlled,
by previous social constraints such as those on women's sexual practices (Wilding 2017).
The following excerpt from a woman's blog post attached to a major UK dating site is a good
example:

> Personally, I don't see any difference between meeting someone in a random pub or a
> dating website. At least online you have some basic information in front of you about
> who they are, what they look like from different angles (taking selfies in the bathroom
> or on skiing holidays). And it is up to you if you want to proceed or ignore and move
> on to the next one, or just say "hi" and see where this will take you two. Also, it is
> much easier to ignore someone online than get rid of someone who is chasing you all
> over the pub. Plusses all around! (Single Girl, match.com blogger, UK).

Here there is recourse to discourses about individual choice, about it being 'up to you'
whether to proceed to make contact, based on the information gleaned from profile text and
photographs. However, emotions inform this initial part of the process when 'you go into it -
get super excited' (Matchgirl, Young woman, UK, Dating site blog, 2015) or when there is a
sense of relief in avoiding potential physical harrassment attending proximate meetings in a
pub. There is also some implication of a 'female gaze' of excited desire here in the
description of the ability to eye up 'what they look like from different angles'. Instead of
sexual passivity, or waiting to be chased around the pub, this kind of distance gives some
opportunity for excitement and desire to reflexively promote action, to be the basis to 'just
say "hi" and see where this will take you two'. These appear to be fairly individually
navigated opportunities to begin gendered intimate coupling, but shared via blogs they may
also quietly challenge wider gender or 'sexual scripts' (Gagnon and Simon, 2005/1973).

Committed couples distance relating as undoing structured gender relations

A different kind of distance relationship in the form of committed couples who live apart for
their work might more obviously disrupt not just interpersonal scripts but wider patterns of
gender relations. This is an example of how globalization enhances reflexivity and diversifies
intimacy. Under conditions in which migration and movement are faster and more
widespread, old ways alter and intimate ties float free, but also sometimes pool back into
familiar patterns (Wilding 2017). In particular, distance relationships challenge models of
gendered mobility based on ideas of women as 'trailing spouses' (Lindemann, 2017a). There
was resistance to following their male partners amongst the women I interviewed. Joanne, for
example, 'ha[d]n't felt influenced to move and [she] ha[d]n't wanted to move to his town'.
Gwen (26-30 years old, 2 years apart), also noted that in 'stereotypical' terms 'it's the woman
who has the baby, gives up her job and therefore following her husband's career and our
relationship's very different to that' (Gwen, 26-30 years old, 2 years apart). Despite caveats
around possible stereotyping, Gwen sees the general pattern for heterosexual coupling to be

one in which men are career oriented and women give up their jobs and follow their husband's career. She is clear that her relationship with James is very different. She instigated the distance relationship by leaving the town where they met, and he worked, to take up a job in a new city.

Other women in my sample also share their reflections on their distance relationships as a departure from usual mobility patterns. Sometimes there were discussions about reversal, so that men would follow:

> there was all that stuff about you maybe moving over to [where I work], I mean Hugh offered to move over, so I didn't have to do it [commute] so much. He said well why don't I get a job, cos there was a job coming up in [sometown], get a job in [a town nearby] and then we can buy a house and live over this side so Hugh was like completely prepared to do that (Claire ….)

Donna also tells me that her distance relationship with Sam started when she 'got a job this side of the country', and decided to reunite at weekends with Sam who stayed where his job was, across the other side. In a follow up email interview 8 years after I first interviewed Joanne and her partner, Mark, Joanne told me that Mark had moved to the city where she had a job, thus 'going against the grain by actually moving to [her] rather than the other way around'. From what they tell me, it seems all the distance relationships in the study came about when the women moved to take up jobs elsewhere, or didn't follow their partner when he moved. Existing studies suggest that it is not clear whether women instigate or 'choose' distance relationships, or feel they have little control, but such relationships may nevertheless 'undo' gender to some degree (Holmes, 2004a; Lindemann, 2017a). What is less clear is what part emotions play in this. However, Gwen goes on to say that it makes her "very much aware that you [James] are, you're not like that". This seems to denote a sense of gratitude (Hochschild, 2003) for James not being like other men who presumably expect their women partners to follow as they move for work reasons. This is part of a longer discussion between them about various of their friends following more conventional patterns. Gwen's gratitude appears related to this strong awareness, evidenced by reference to others' relationships, that doing things differently is relationally achieved. In heterosexual relationships this means that men have to agree to 'go against the grain'. Thus, while gratitude may not seem revolutionary in a feminist context, it may be a price these women are willing to pay to achieve and maintain the autonomy they experience in distance relationships. In the case of James, the gratitude appears to allow him to feel "there has [sic] been compromises both ways". He implies some pride on his part, as well as indicating the emotions of others when he says that "a lot of people have been surprised by the way we've taken to it, we haven't seen it as being a huge problem". Through this gift of gratitude, these men may be enabled to feel pride that their relationships are subverting the norm of heterosexual cohabitation (Beasley et al., 2012) and recognise their participation in surprising genderings of mobility.

The degree to which distance relationships prompt emotional reflexivity may depend on the degree to which different kinds of distance relationships depart from gendered norms. For example, Wendy and Harry's relationship initially fitted an older pattern of absent husbands (Chandler, 1991), as Harry was in the armed forces when I first interviewed them. As Wendy says in answer to my question of how it feels spending time apart and how it works for her:

we have lived apart pretty much as long as we've been in this serious adult relationship, if you like, so for, in answer to the question, how does it work for us? It just, that's just the way it is.

She notes that this was 'normal' but that 'it did change' when she shifted to a job in the town where I interviewed her. In shifting from being a partner waiting for her husband to return to their shared home, she realised she 'wasn't as willing to do stuff on a weekend, house work wise' and it was 'difficult for a little while. It took some working out, re-establishing roles if you like'. This account seems to indicate that moving to dual-residence distance relating prompted some anger, or frustration on her part about her willingness to do the housework when she was also away during the week, and that this reflexively led to a 're-establishing' of less conventionally gendered divisions of labour (see Holmes, 2004a; 2014). Despite being called to account for these departures by significant and generalised others (Bergen 2010, Holmes, 2014), the growing incidence of these more woman-oriented commuting patterns (Holmes, 2014) is both indication and instigation of positive changes around gender.

There is then some circularity in how emotional reflexivity might differentially reinforce or challenge inequalities. I have suggested that departing from gendered models of mobility might promote emotional reflexivity, which challenges other forms of gendered inequalities around divisions of labour, which prompts further emotional reflexivity and so on. Affect is structured and structuring. However, questions remain about how this might work beyond coupling at a distance.

Discussion: Gendered intimacies at a distance in different kinds of relationships

We have seen how some kinds of distance relationships might promote emotional reflexivity likely to challenge gender inequalities. The examples given relate to forms of coupling, or seeking to couple at a distance. The participants quoted are mostly white, young and heterosexual (as far as can be ascertained in relation to the online narratives). The gendered scripts around couple relationships are perhaps particularly wedded to patriarchal ways of relating. This may make them a good choice for seeing how thinking, feeling and doing gender differently can come about. However, to focus on coupling at a distance might leave lacunae in our understanding.

Looking at a range of kinds of distance relationships is therefore important in order to know more fully to what extent they 'undo' gender through the degree and kinds of emotional reflexivity they promote. This special issue, and I hope future work, will offer a more varied set of examples of the emotional effects of different kinds of distance on a variety of relationships including parental, sibling and extended family relationships as well as friendships.

Non-proximate relating in virtual space appears to offer the heterosexual women in this sample some room to manoeuvre away from constraining and harmful kinds of gendered couple relationships. The fears about violence or harassment experienced by the women looking for partners are well founded, but must be managed if they are to proceed. Emotional reflexivity is prompted by coupling at a distance, but in varying ways.

Emotional reflexivity, as prompted by heterosexual coupling at a distance, entails managing those relationships around other relationships. The diversity of intimate life has arguably

increased under globalised conditions, making this a complex, relational task (Holmes, 2014). The above analysis gives some glimpse of the ways in which some women and men feel about and do distance relating in relation to generalised and significant others. These committed couples in distance relationships measure themselves against what they think are 'normal' relationships and they are called to account by others for their difference and their departure from gendered scripts that are under alteration. They also must *do* their relationship around family relationships and friendships (Bergen, 2010; Holmes, 2014). Couple relationships might still be expected to take some precedence over other kin relations and over friendships, however some suffusion between family relationships and friendships has been noted (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Whether this extends beyond 'Western' cultures is something this special issue might begin to consider. Whatever the case, there is some evidence that virtual space may require more careful management of one's own and others' emotions because it brings together more diverse mixtures of people than typically the case in offline proximity (Holmes, 2011). The now common internet dating practice of being in simultaneous online contact with more than one potential partner suggests emotional reflexivity is required around when a relationship is serious enough to become exclusive. This may subvert heterosexual scripts around (serial) monogamy (Beasley and Holmes, forthcoming), but further research may be required to determine the gendered patterns.

Finally, the increased diversity and complexity of intimacies within processes of global change not just promotes, but requires, emotional reflexivity. Definitions and doings of coupling have shifted as part of ties becoming more floating and we can see examples above of women and men trying to make and remake their relationships in train with these shifts. They may not always be sure how they feel and what they should do, yet feelings colour and shape their deliberations and actions (Holmes, 2010; Burkitt, 2014). The capacity to make sense of emotions, in and through interaction with others, is therefore vital to being able to navigate social change and to move in 'positive' directions. What feels safe or good or empowering might be difficult to predict or enact. This reflexivity is not exercised in isolation, it is done in interaction with other people as well as with meanings and practices and structural relations that might be hard to move. Some women do sometimes find spaces to couple differently, as the above analysis indicates.

Conclusion

Emotional reflexivity is not about 'choosing' how to be intimate, but is increasingly vital to the relational navigation of more floating ties, which can undo the gendered constraints of both interpersonal interactions and wider structural relations. Distance relationships are an example of floating ties. Here I have considered two different kinds of distance: that between internet daters interacting online before they meet in person and that between academic couples in the UK in committed but dual-location distance relationships. In the former can be glimpsed some of the ways in which emotional reflexivity is used to achieve change within gendered interpersonal relationships, and in the latter I have argued that their emotional reflexivity contributes to a wider undoing of structured gender relations.

Distance relationships, at least for these women, provide some opportunities for doing femininity and heterosexual relationships differently. Women can use the distance of virtual communication to question or avoid the men who view motherhood as 'natural' and inevitable, and their feelings of astonishment can help divert them towards men who think (and we assume do) gender differently. The physical distance in online communication can

allow women to reflect on their fears of being the target of harassment and other forms of violence, and yet feelings of excitement can also enable them to use this communication to be active in finding sexual partners. For committed couples in distance relationships, the distance from partners is itself subversive of heteronormative expectations about cohabitation (Beasley et al. 2012) and of usual patterns of gendered mobility requiring women to sacrifice their work to be with male partners. Many of the women and men I spoke to were reflexively aware of this and there were delicate discussions about the place of gratitude (women) and pride (men) in enabling these couples to go 'against the grain'.

People come to do intimacy at a distance for a variety of reasons to do with globalisation processes, their economic circumstances, the possibilities available, depending on the intertwining social positions they occupy. It is difficult to determine what degree of choice is involved (Holmes, 2004b), but emotional reflexivity is vital in how all these factors are felt and navigated. Howsoever it is that they come to do intimacies at a distance, these women and men feel and are usually made to feel that they are different. Intimate distance relationships can depart from dominant and yet changing gendered scripts in which women are sexually passive, subject to physical harrassment, and expected to follow where men's work takes them. Departing from these scripts is reflexively infused with feelings and actions that can challenge wider gender relations, whether consciously intended or not. How able particular women are to translate their feeling and thinking into more egalitarian practices might be limited by how the structural intersection or intertwining of gender with other inequalities such as age (Beasley and Holmes, 2015) constitutes them in relation to others in specific situations. This article is but a first step in examining how emotional reflexivity is vital to understanding these situated processes of social change.

These small scale studies cannot give conclusive answers about whether different types of emotions or emotional complexes involved in reflexivity might be more likely to promote wider structural change rather than interpersonal shifts. However, in these samples, anger and frustration, and possibly gratitude and pride, seem more likely than astonishment and fear to be linked to shifting wider gender inequalities.

The kinds of emotions evoked, and indeed the degree of emotional reflexivity prompted by doing intimacy differently, seems to vary depending on how far they depart from norms. Thus, it appears that the dual-residence distance relationships discussed both emerge from, and promote, anger and frustration about usual gender scripts and practices. These women subvert scripts positioning women's paid work as secondary and making them primarily responsible for housework and caring for others. Yet other emotions such as gratitude and pride play a part and are perhaps a little more difficult for these independent-minded women to know what to do with. Nevertheless, the departure from convention makes these women reflect on how they feel about that departure, often in interaction with their male partners, and may prompt further departures.

The seeming circularity of emotional reflexivity is important in helping understand social change under globalised conditions. Such change is not about linear progress towards better or worse social conditions, but can be appreciated as a spiralling movement with no clear starting point. In this movement emotions are reflected and acted upon in interaction with, and in relation to, both significant and generalised others. Emotional reflexivity both prompts and is further prompted by shifts in practices of intimacy at a distance. This spiralling account of social change may better account for the relative slowness in amelioration of gender and other inequalities and help explain its differential impacts.

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