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People who live apart together (LATs) - how different are they?

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Abstract

‘Living apart together’ – that is being in an intimate relationship with a partner who lives somewhere else – is increasingly recognised and accepted as a specific way of being in a couple. On the face of it, this is a far cry from the ‘traditional’ version of couple relationships, where co-residence in marriage was placed at the centre and where living apart from one’s partner would be regarded as abnormal, and understandable only as a reaction to severe external constraints.

Some commentators regard living apart together as a historically new family form where LATs can pursue a ‘both/and’ solution to partnership - they can experience both the intimacy of being in a couple, and at the same time continue with pre-existing commitments. LATs may even de-prioritize couple relationships and place more importance on friendship. Alternatively, others see LAT as just a ‘stage’ on the way to cohabitation and marriage, where LATs are not radical pioneers moving beyond the family, but are cautious and conservative, and simply show a lack of commitment. Behind these rival interpretations lies the increasingly tarnished spectre of individualisation theory. Is LAT some sort of index for a developing individualisation in practice?

In this paper we take this debate further by using information from the 2006 British Social Attitudes Survey. We find that LATs have quite diverse origins and motivations, and while as a category LATs are often among the more liberal in family matters, as a whole they do not show any marked ‘pioneer’ attitudinal position in the sense of leading a radical new way, especially if age is taken into account.

1. Introduction – describing and theorising LATs

‘Living apart together’ (LAT) – that is being in an intimate relationship with a partner who lives somewhere else – is increasingly recognised and accepted as a specific way of being in a couple. In social science a number of pioneering studies have examined the incidence and demographic characteristics of those who live apart together (LATs), the understandings that they hold about their relationships, and why they do not live together (eg Levin and Trost 1999, Levin 2004, Haskey 2005, Roseneil 2006, Haskey and Lewis 2006, Ermisch and Seidler 2009). These studies have found that LATs do not only live apart because they are forced to do so, although some do (for example because of housing or labour market constraints). Rather many LATs choose – to various degrees – not to live together, even though it would be possible for them to do so.

There is, however, some disagreement about what this ‘discovery’ means in social terms. Some commentators regard living apart together as a historically new family form where LATs can pursue a ‘both/and’ solution to partnership - they can experience both the intimacy of being in a couple, and at the same time continue with pre-existing commitments. LATs may even de-prioritize couple relationships and place more importance on friendship. Alternatively, others see LAT as just a ‘stage’ on the way to cohabitation and marriage, where LATs are not radical pioneers moving beyond the family, but are cautious and conservative, and simply show a lack of commitment. Behind these rival interpretations lies the increasingly tarnished spectre of individualisation theory. Is LAT some sort of index for a developing individualisation in practice? Compounding these issues, there are also problems in actually defining and measuring LAT – for what is the difference between a boyfriend

or girlfriend, especially one who is ‘special’ or long term, and living apart together? We may be including in our samples people who are not really LAT at all, in that they do not see themselves, and are not seen by others, as long term partners.

In this paper we will take this debate further by using information from the 2006 British Social Attitudes survey to carry out four tasks. First, how can we distinguish ‘dating LATs’ - those who do not regard themselves as an established couple and more resemble traditional ‘steady’ or ‘special’ girl and boyfriend, from ‘partner LATs’ - those who do see themselves as belonging to a couple? Secondly, why do people become LATs? Third, do LATs as a category differ socially and demographically, and to what extent, from people who are married (or in a civil partnership), cohabiting outside marriage, or single (that is without a partner, either co-residential or living elsewhere)? Fourth, to what extent do LATs hold different attitudes about families and relationships compared to these other relationship categories? In this way we can give an answer to the overall question of what living apart together means in terms of social change and personal life.

Publicly, while the acronym ‘LAT’ may be unfamiliar (and there are different terms in different countries), a public understanding – and acceptance - of this situation seems quite common. Thus in 2006 as many as 54% of the 2006 British Social Attitudes (BSAS) survey sample agreed that *‘A couple do not need to live together to have a strong relationship’*, with only 25% disagreeing (Duncan and Phillips 2008). The large majority (around 75%) of those aged between 16 and 44 in Britain also thought that sex outside a LAT relationship (1) was wrong, according to the 2000 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal). This was little less than

the levels found when asked about cohabiting or married couples (Erens *et al.*, 2003). LATs, therefore, were seen by most as good enough for partnering and subject to the same expectations about commitment, as expressed through fidelity, as marriage or cohabitation. It is perhaps not so surprising, therefore, that 21% of the Natsal sample chose ‘one regular partner but not living together’ as the ‘ideal relationship’. Fewer respondents chose unmarried cohabitation (about 18%), although around 45% picked exclusive marriage (*ibid*).

In practice, it seems that around 10% of adults actually do live apart from a partner in Britain, a figure which equates to over a quarter of all those not married or cohabiting. LAT is particularly common in younger age groups, accounting for almost 40% of 18-34 year olds outside a co-residential relationship in the 2006 BSAS – although this was not uncommon for older people with, for example, 13% of BSAS respondents aged 55-64 outside a co-residential partnership living apart together (Duncan and Phillips 2008, see also Haskey 2005, Ermisch and Seidler 2009). Similar figures are recorded for other countries in northern Europe (Levin 2004, Haskey 2005).

On the face of it, living apart together is a far cry from the ‘traditional’ version of couple relationships, where co-residence in marriage was placed at the centre and where living apart from one’s partner, if it was recognised at all, would be regarded as abnormal and understandable only as a reaction to severe external constraints. Hence the earlier description of ‘commuter marriage’ (Gerstel and Gross 1984, Winfield 1985). Living apart was seen as a temporary interruption to conjugal life imposed by the labour market. Even so a new dimension of choice was involved, where one partner (usually the wife) was no longer able or willing to follow the other to the new

job location. Even earlier Geoffrey Gorer (1971), in his 1969 survey of sex and marriage in England among the under 40s, found that as many as 44% of ‘the unmarried’ had a ‘special girlfriend or boyfriend’. Fully half of these were ‘on terms of real physical intimacy’, and almost all were completely faithful and expected the same from their partners (*ibid*, 213, see also Schofield 1968). Gorer did not pursue his ‘discovery’ – perhaps the first - of what we might now define as living apart together. This is understandable when, at that time, family and intimacy were virtually equated with marriage, so that even looking at the unmarried as a distinct category was path breaking. And indeed very few of these ‘special’ boy/girlfriends were aged over 25, while as many as 60% already had a day for their wedding fixed. In other words, being a LAT in 1969 was mostly seen, and experienced, as a temporary stage before marriage. Going even further back to Mass Observation’s unpublished ‘Little Kinsey’ report of 1949 (2), living apart was placed the other way round. People could not marry and hence live together because of major external obstacles like lack of housing and/or low incomes, or caring for parents. For some, this meant having no couple partnership at all, while others were left with ‘pre-marital sex’. For ‘serious’ relationships between those in love and awaiting marriage, this sort of ‘living apart together’ attracted some understanding, but not much approval. Nor does this seem to have been experienced as much of a choice or even a proper relationship at all, perhaps symbolised by the respondent who was having sex with her fiancée – because she loved him - but reserving full nudity until living together in marriage (*ibid*, 135).

So how might we interpret living apart together in the early 21st century? Is being a LAT still akin to a ‘stage’, but one which has become more acceptable and available as part of the various flows and transitions throughout the entire life course – a

‘stepping stone’ on the way to cohabitation and marriage (Ermisch and Seidler, 36; see also Haskey 1995). Or, rather, is living apart together a more permanent end-state - a ‘historically new family form’ according to Irene Levin (2004, 223). For by living in this new way, Levin maintains, LATs can pursue a ‘both/and’ solution to partnership. Their choice to live apart no longer means being single or deviantly underhand, as it might have done in earlier periods. Instead they can experience both the intimacy and satisfaction of being in a couple, and at the same time better continue with important pre-existing commitments and identities that living together might otherwise preclude, such as caring for children or dependent parents, maintaining personal social networks, keeping cherished houses or possessions, or simply avoiding the problems they feel might result from living together.

According to Levin, the spread of such open LAT relationships is premised upon the acceptance of cohabitation as a widespread social institution, as in Scandinavia from the 1970s and in Britain somewhat later (Barlow et al 2005). But like cohabitation, being a LAT in Levin’s model is still based on the couple relationship. Sasha Roseneil (2006) also sees living apart together as a new form of relationship, but goes further in regarding LATs as changing the meaning of coupledom itself. Thus she concludes that many LATS share ‘a pronounced tendency to de-prioritize sexual/love relationships and to place far more importance on friendship than conventional relationship mores dictate’ (*ibid* 9.2, see also Roseneil and Bludgeon 2004). This ‘new orientation towards sexual/love relationships’ (*ibid*, 10.3) was found in the ‘regretfully apart’ and the ‘undecidedly apart’ LATs in her sample as well as among the ‘gladly apart’. In this way LATs will often resemble those living without any particular partner more than they resemble cohabitants, where the latter now appear

more traditional when it comes to coupledom. In contrast John Haskey and Jane Lewis (2006) take a more revisionist stance. Empirically, LATs are seen as a diverse and heterogeneous category, likely to have different motives and understandings at different stages in the life course and with different degrees of ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ separation. Fundamentally, however, LATs are not at all pioneers for moving beyond the family, at least not in the way Roseneil describes. Respondents rarely expressed ‘an explicit desire for a new form of relationship or even a rejection of marriage or cohabitation’ (*ibid*, 43), but rather talked about the practical and emotional advantages (and some disadvantages) of living separately. Instead, ‘the dominant theme in all the interviews was caution’ (*ibid*, 45-6) where respondents were conservative both in their approach to relationships and to life more generally. Ermisch and Seidler (2009) are more dismissive, not only is LAT generally just a stepping stone to living together but, they conclude, there is probably no growth in the proportion of LATs in any case. Rather LAT currently attracts popular attention ‘possibly because it is more prevalent among the better educated, who write about it and comment on society’ (*ibid*, 41). Rather than ‘a social change in the nature of what it means to be a couple’, this tends to support their alternative hypothesis that LAT might well ‘be viewed as an even more tenuous form of relationship’ than cohabitation, where marriage sits on top of a commitment hierarchy, and where LATs who are not forced to live apart may show ‘unwillingness to commit to a firm relationship’ (*ibid*, 29). (This view implicitly denies the importance of commitment outside the couple relationship.)

Behind these different interpretations lies the increasingly tarnished spectre of individualisation theory. Is LAT some sort of index for a developing individualisation

in practice? For if cohabitation can be seen as more appropriate for the fluid and contingent world of Giddens' 'pure relationship' dependent only on commitment from within, and maintained just for the individual satisfaction the relationship brings (Giddens, 1991, 1992, Hall 1996), then living apart together should be even more so (Haskey and Lewis 2006). Change and exit should be even easier, untrammelled by the practicalities of joint finances and housing, and less constrained by joint living arrangements. Certainly, Roseneil sees the 'processual, undecided character of many of the non-residential relationships' (2006, 10.2) in her sample as resonating both with the notion of the pure relationship and Bauman's (2003) overall metaphor of 'liquid love' in the new individualised world order. Alternatively, Haskey and Lewis (2006) implicitly ally themselves with the many critics of individualisation theory (eg Jamieson, 1998, see also Duncan and Smith 2006 on cohabitation) when they conclude that almost the last thing on their respondents' minds was any notion of 'radicalism and individualism' (*op cit*, 47).

Section 2, which follows, describes the methodology we have used to follow up these issues, and how this differs from previous research. Section 3 tackles the question of defining 'dating' and 'partner LATs, and investigates how people become LATs, while section 4 asks how far LATs are different, in demographic and social terms, to other relationship categories. Finally section 5 returns to the overall issues of changing families, LAT and individualisation.

2. Methodology

Research on LAT to date has mostly been based on two types of data. First, studies focussing on what LAT means to participants, and why they become LATs, have

relied on small qualitative samples – for example just 6 for Haskey and Lewis (2006) and 25 for Roseneil (2006), although Levin and Trost (1999) interviewed 100 LATs in Norway and Sweden. In addition, sampling for these studies has generally been selective, thus in Roseneil's design a purposively chosen extreme group of likely individualisers in three particular locations was interviewed, Haskey and Lewis focussed on particular types of LATs defined by relationship type and history, while Levin used a 'convenience sample' relying on self-selection. Other studies have employed survey data, such as the Omnibus survey (Haskey, 2005) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS, Ermisch and Seidler 2009). These studies, however, have mostly been restricted to providing demographic and social incidence information. While some studies have combined both forms of data, as with Haskey and Lewis (2006) or Levin and Trost (1999), such combinations have not overcome the limitations of either data source. These pioneering studies have been essential in setting up the field of study around LAT. But as the researchers involved have themselves pointed out, such restrictions in design also mean that this initial round of research can only give first indications of the nature and experience of living apart together.

The 2006 BSAS survey used here develops from this initial phase of research in two ways. First, it provides a wide range of attitudinal data about families, personal life and relationships, and some information on practice (Park et al 2008). This data is in the form of answers to survey questions, partly gathered face to face and partly by self-completion questionnaire, usually presented either as simple choices between options (agree / disagree) or on a 5 stage Likert scale (strongly disagree etc). BSAS thereby focuses more on understandings and practices than is usual with surveys. At

the same time this data is based on a statistically representative sample of the British population over 18, with a sub-sample of 320 people living apart from their (self-defined) partner (3). We then used SPSS to provide frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and regression analysis of respondents' answers and their associations. The limitation to this design is that breadth is emphasized at the expense of depth. Thus it is difficult to delve within the categories used, or to access in any detail the particular meanings ascribed by respondents to their answers. Statistically, there will also be fairly large standard errors for small sub-groups, so that numerical results should be treated as indications of magnitude.

3 Defining LATs

3.1 Dating and Partner LATs

A particular problem in researching LATs is that there is no easily defined 'cut-off' point in the same way that is apparently provided by formal marriage (a legal status) or cohabitation (physically living together). While all categories can conceal as much as they reveal (for example people can marry for different reasons), this is an especially severe problem for defining LATs, both empirically and conceptually. For what is the difference between a boyfriend or girlfriend, especially one who is 'special' or long term, and living apart together? Hence we may be including in our samples people who are not really LATs at all, in that they do not see themselves, and are not seen by others, as long term partners. Attempting to remedy this, Haskey (2005) defines LATs as longer-term monogamous partners who regard themselves as a couple and are so regarded by others, but differ from cohabitants in that they live at separate addresses. This is sensible enough as a definition, but we can only measure

this statistically by somehow inferring what such partners subjectively experience, or by qualitatively assessing this subjectivity through respondents' interviews.

On this basis, therefore, Haskey (2005) statistically excluded teenagers and young people living at the parental home, as well as students, in distinguishing 'tightly defined' LATs from those who merely had 'a partner living elsewhere' (*ibid* 121). This was on the inferred grounds that either these relationships were probably temporary and/or the individuals involved could not easily take a decision about where to live. This excluded category made up about half of those who reported a partner living elsewhere in the 2002/3 ONS Omnibus survey of adults aged 16 and over in Britain. Alternatively, Ermisch (2000), using 1998 British Household Panel Survey, employed a time based inference of 'coupledom', and only included as 'steady' 'non-residential relationships' those who had been together more than 6 months. This reduced the number of LATs so defined by around a quarter – a similar result to using the same measure in the 2006 BSAS survey (Duncan and Phillips 2008).

The 2006 BSAS allows inference to move closer to people's own understandings by asking direct questions about why partners lived apart, and about what they did together socially. In fact as many as 37% of the unweighted sample (rising to 41% after weighting) said they were not ready to live together, or that it was too early in their relationship. ('Not ready' here will most likely refer to emotional reasons, as the question was linked to one about relationship status, and where affordability was given as a separate response). In fact this was the most common single reason for

living apart. This suggests that these respondents should not be seen as couple LATs in the way defined by Haskey.

A similar breakdown is suggested by BSAS figures on what LATs ‘often’ did together socially. As Table 1 shows, while most went out for a meal or a drink together (as most girl/boyfriends would do), and about three quarters acted as a ‘social couple’ in seeing friends or spending weekends together (as ‘special’ boy/girlfriends would probably do), little more than half resembled long term partners in terms of seeing relatives together (55 per cent), or going on holiday together (56 per cent). That almost 40% often shop together at weekends also suggests short, but regular, periods of quasi-marital co-residence for many on the ‘commuter marriage’ pattern.

Taking both the reasons for living apart and joint social activities, it appears that around 40% of those reporting having a partner living elsewhere in the 2006 BSAS were not LATs in the sense of being a longer term and established couple, albeit living separately. Consequently in the analysis that follows we distinguish between these ‘dating LATs’ - more like ‘going steady’ boy/girlfriends, and ‘partner LATs’ who have more established couple relationships. In practice, this was defined by respondents’ answers to the question about why they lived apart from their partner (see Table 2). The 37% (41% weighted) who answered ‘too early’ or ‘not ready’ were taken to be ‘dating LATs’ and the rest as ’partner LATs’, giving unweighted sub-samples of 119 and 196 respectively - with 5 who did not answer the question. Sample weighting reduced this sample to 274, with 114 ‘dating LATs’ (41%) and 155 partner LATs. As can also be seen from Table 1, while the differences for these

activities between partner LATs and dating LATs as we have defined them are not large, they are in the direction expected in terms of ‘going out’ and acting as a ‘social couple’ (where both categories of LATs show almost identical activity patterns), and for ‘long-term partnering’ and ‘contributing to a joint household’ (where partner LATs are somewhat more likely to be involved).

Table 1. The social activities of those in a relationship, but not living with partners: BSAS 2006

(% ‘often’ do activities together)

	All LATs	‘Partner’ LATs	‘Dating’ LATs
Going out together			
Go out to eat / drink	83	82	85
Acting as a social couple			
Seeing friends	77	73	83
Spending weekends together	75	74	76
Long-term partnering			
Go on holiday	56	61	51
See relatives	55	58	50
Contribute to a joint household			
Do weekly food shopping	38	41	34
None of these	3	4	1
Unweighted base	320	196	119

Source: NatCen’s British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006

3. 2 Partners Living Apart: choice or constraint?

From the point of view of a more traditional and functionalist view of family life, couples would only live apart when forced to do so, for example because of labour market or financial constraints. As we suggest in section 1, this does seem to be a generally accurate view for partners living apart for 1950s and 60s Britain. But from the point of view of individualisation theory LATs would decide to live apart for their own reasons, as exemplified by Levin's (2004) finding that taking a 'both/and solution' to partnering and family life was typical in her sample from Norway and Sweden in the 1990s. Choice and constraint are not usually discrete categories in practice, however, and as Roseneil (2006) found in her sample there were high degrees of ambivalence about either living apart or together for most LATs, whether 'regretfully' or 'gladly' apart, or just plain undecided. Usually respondents think of both advantages and disadvantages, and various degrees of choice and constraint, and this is reflected in Table 2. This gives a proportional list of the reasons chosen by LAT respondents for living apart (from a number of given options including any specified 'other reason'). The Table hence indicates the overall weighting of choice and constraint in living apart.

Table 2 The reasons for living apart: BSAS 2006

	<i>% respondents choosing reason given:</i>	
	<i>partner LATs</i>	<i>dating LATs</i>
1. Little choice		
Partner has a job elsewhere	15	7
Partner is studying elsewhere	7	9
Can't afford to live together	25	23
2. Constrained choice		
Other responsibilities (e.g. caring for elderly relative)	8	1
Because of my or my partner's children	4	4
We are waiting until we get married	3	8
3. More choice (self or partner)		
I prefer not to live with my partner (though (s)he wants to live with me)	8	7
My partner prefers not to live with me (though I want to live with him/her)	2	0
We just don't want to live together	17	12
We both want to keep our own homes	19	10
4. Other reason		
	14	4
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	196	119

Totals add up to more than 100% as respondents could choose more than one option

Source: NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006

Table 2 points to a diversity of overlapping choices and constraints in not living together. First, sizeable groups of respondents pointed to clear external constraints to living together, with as many as 25% of partner LATs and 23% of dating LATs choosing affordability, with significant minorities choosing job or study location. While some of the respondents making these questionnaire choices may well have liked the living apart these constraints dictated (and some will have also have ticked other, additional, options given in the question), they cannot be seen as deciding to live apart for their own, ‘internal’ reasons. Respondents making these choices may be in partnerships which more resemble ‘commuter marriages’, at least for the partner LATs. Secondly, smaller proportions of respondents indicated somewhat constrained choices in their decision to live apart, mostly because of caring commitments. As we might expect, partner LATs were more influenced by pre-existing caring responsibilities for elderly parents (8%, compared to 1% of dating LATs), although the influence of children was less important with just 4% of both LAT categories saying this. (As the 2006 BSAS showed, one explanation may be that step-parenting with cohabitation is generally accepted - but bringing up children without two residential parents is less approved of, Duncan and Phillips 2008). Only 8% of dating LATs (but also 3% of partner LATs) indicated that they were waiting to get married, and this does underline one significant change from earlier period – compare with the 60% of ‘LATs’ with a wedding day already fixed found by Gorer in 1969. At the same time significant numbers of respondents indicated more ‘open choice’ reasons for being apart, with substantial minorities (especially partner LATs) who wanted to keep their own home or who ‘just do not want to live together’. (Although, again, respondents choosing these options may also have chosen ‘constraint’ reasons)

Putting all this together suggests that while there may be strong elements of desire to live apart for some, and that many find advantages in doing so, for many LATs this is more a constrained situation rather than an individual choice. While a significant minority of partner LATs (but fewer dating LATs) would seem to be taking a ‘both/and’ solution, up to half would seem to fit better into the more traditional model of enforced separation. This is perhaps why eight in ten LAT respondents (both dating and partner) said they ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ would like to live with their partner in the future. Indicatively, the 2000 Natsal sample of 16-44 year olds found that only around 5% - concentrated in the very youngest age groups - saw being a LAT as their ‘ideal relationship’ in 5 years time (compared to over 20% for ‘now’, Erens et al 2003). Ermisch and Seidler (2009), using BHPS data, found roughly similar patterns.

4. Are LATs different demographically and socially?

4.1 Demographic differences

People living apart from their partner can be found in all age groups and socio-economic categories and, it appears, can encompass those with conventional as well as radical social attitudes (Haskey and Lewis 2006, Roseneil 2006, Duncan and Phillips 2008). Using the ONS Omnibus surveys for 2002/3 and 2004 Haskey (2005) and Haskey and Lewis (2006) report that LATs as a whole are over-represented among the younger age groups, at least in Britain. But as the authors suggest, this difference will be heavily skewed by the inclusion in the category LAT of those they presume are ‘teenage “boyfriends and girlfriends”’ (*ibid*, 40). Using the 2006 BSA survey we can better distinguish ‘dating’ and ‘partner’ LATs; do these age differences still hold for the latter, more ‘tightly defined’ group who would be ready to live

together if they wanted or were able to do so? Table 3 shows the weighted results, comparing both dating and partner LATs to cohabitants, married couples, single people and widow(er)s. ('Single' is defined here as being without a partner, either co-residential or living apart. We have excluded widow(er)s living alone from our definition of single on the grounds that they present a particular, non-behavioural, route to singleness – they have been forced into single living because of a partner's death, and in this sense are not behaviourally 'single').

Table 3. Relationship status by age

% in Age group	Dating LATs	Partner LATs	Cohabiting	Married	Single	Widow(er)ed
18-24	50	40	12	1	32	-
25-34	25	19	39	14	16	-
35-44	15	17	26	23	15	1
45-54	4	12	15	21	13	3
55-64	3	6	5	20	12	10
65-97	-	5	2	22	11	85
Total%*	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Unweighted base</i>	119	196	304	1524	726	320

* Including Don't know/ not answered

Source: NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006

Dating LATs are indeed the youngest group on average with 50% in the youngest age group (18-24) but they are by no means restricted to this category (although few are

over 45). As many as 40% of partner LATs are also in the 18-24 age group, suggesting that the youngest adults can also consider themselves as belonging to a couple, and that it would be a mistake to ascribe LATs of this age as simply ‘boy/girlfriends’ on a priori grounds alone. However, significant proportions of partner LATs are found in the 25-55 age groups, with only a small proportion of older people. Cohabitants are also represented in all age groups, although in contrast to LATs bunch in the 25-34 category, while married people are most likely to be middle-aged or older. While single people are, unexpectedly, disproportionately found among the very youngest, they show a fairly even distribution among the other, older, age groups. The specific position of the widow(er)ed, with the large majority over 65, is also made clear in Table 3.

Age is also associated with religiosity (defined here as reporting attending services at least once a week), which in turn is associated with conventional attitudes about family (Duncan and Phillips 2008). As expected it is the married and the widow(er)ed who were most religious in this sense, with over 15% and 18% reporting that they attended services at least once a week, with single people not far behind at 12%. The youngest groups were hardly religious at all in these terms, with 5% of partner LATs, 3% of dating LATs and just 1% of cohabitants reporting attendance (4).

Class and socio-economic status can have a contradictory association with attitudes about family, where on some issues the professional and managerial groups hold more liberal attitudes, and on others more conventional views (*ibid*). However, there was little difference between the partnered relationship groups in the BSAS sample in terms of socio-economic status (defined using the NEC socio-economic groups). All

seemed to show a roughly similar profile to the population as a whole (although compared to partner LATs, dating LATs had a somewhat smaller proportion in intermediate and lower supervisory/ technical occupations, and a slightly higher score in both the professional/ managerial and semi-routine/routine jobs). Single people, and especially the widow(er)ed, were over-represented among semi-routine and routine occupations, with conversely less managerial and professional occupational experience. This relatively flat socio-economic distribution may reflect the age distributions of the various groups, in that many LATs will not have had time to proceed far up the occupational ladder; indeed Ermisch and Seidler (2009) find LAT to be more common among the better educated, irrespective of age.

Overall we find a transitional profile between the four partnered categories in terms of age and associated religious attendance (although note this refers to proportional, not absolute, distributions). Dating LATs are most common in the youngest age groups (18-34), followed by partner LATs who stretch into early middle age. Next are cohabitants (who are particularly irreligious) concentrated in the 25-44 range, with married people (who are more likely to be religious) coming after with more than 60% over 44.

It is an open question, of course, whether this ‘transitional’ profile represents a life course transition (as interpretations stressing the ‘stage’ view of LATs suggest) or rather a cohort effect (as interpretations stressing the ‘new relationship’ view would suggest). Ermisch and Seidler (2009), using longitudinal information from BHPS, find evidence that can be taken to support both views. While they do find considerable flows from LAT to cohabitation and even marriage over time (the stage

view), many LATs – especially older LATs, report no plans to move in together (the new relationship view). Attitudinal differences can provide more evidence on this question, and we turn to this in the next section. Whichever is the case, we would expect these marked age differences between groups to be associated with attitudinal differences, where age is a primary marker of attitudes about family (Duncan and Phillips, 2008).

4.2 Do LATs hold different attitudes?

Roseneil (2006) finds that the LATs in her sample seemed to be moving away from the couple relationship, to de-prioritize love/sex, and to give more importance to friends. Hence Roseneil, like Levin, sees living apart together as a new family form, involving a major departure from more conventional cohabiting or married partnerships. This implies major attitudinal differences between LATs and those in co-residential partnerships. In contrast Haskey and Lewis (2006) found their respondents to be both conservative and cautious when it came to relationships, and with little idea of doing anything new. In their view living apart together is less of a radical departure and more prosaically just one mode of living between other modes (like being single or living together). Implicitly, in this view LAT couples would not differ very much in their attitudes from cohabitants or even married spouses.

We take this discussion further using the larger sample, and the extensive range of attitudinal data, available in the 2006 BSAS. Empirically, we structure the analysis around three key issues. First, do LATs de-prioritize partnering and commitment compared to others; secondly, do they emphasize friends more than others and, thirdly, are LATs more liberal when it comes to ideas about families and relationships

more generally? Throughout, we compare partner and dating LATs as defined above to married people, cohabitants and singles (excluding the widow(er)ed).

Partnering and commitment

Do LATs ‘de-prioritize’ partnering and commitment to partners compared to others?

In fact by 2006 the normative consensus in Britain was that relationships would be strengthened where partners maintained social independence. Almost two thirds of adults over 18 chose the statement *Relationships are much stronger when both partners have the independence to follow their own careers and friendships*, with just over a quarter choosing the alternative *Partners who have too much independence from each other put their relationship at risk*. This is a substantial departure from the 1950s and 60s normative model, where dependent marriage was the ideal. Indeed, looking at both Mass Observation’s 1949 ‘Little Kinsey, and Gorer’s 1950 survey, notions of independence within marriage are rarely mentioned, and then only negatively (Stanley 1995, Gorer 1955).

In this sense, majority opinion has already ‘decentred’ from traditional ideas of partnership, so there is little scope for LATs to act as some sort of individualising pioneers. LATs were, however, even more likely to agree that this sort of independence was beneficial. Thus as many as 83% of dating LATs and 75% of partner LATs agreed with the idea that social independence strengthens relationships, as opposed to 66% of cohabitants, 63% of single people and 60% of the married. Even so, 19% of partner LATs and 9% of dating LATs agreed with the converse statement that independence meant risk (compared with 30% of married couples at the other extreme).

Note however that this consensus does not necessarily mean the decentering of the couple itself, as the questions above asked in the 2006 BSAS presume that partnership remains in the middle of an individual's emotional life; indeed, the 'decentered' option in this question was framed in terms of independence *strengthening* partnership. To try and further understand the strength and nature of this 'emotional centre' the 2006 BSAS asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with two questions about the importance of partners relative to support from relatives and love for, and from, children:

(1) *Relatives will always be there for you in a way that partners might not be*

(2) *The relationship between a parent and their child is stronger than the relationship between any couple.*

Only a minority of adults in 2006 saw partner relationships as more reliable than relatives; even fewer thought that a couple relationships were stronger than that between parent and child. It is certainly not axiomatic therefore, that people's emotional bonds are centred on the couple.

Again, both types of LAT manifest and share this ambivalence about partners in an exaggerated form. As many as 61% of dating LATs and 50% of partner LATs agreed that relatives are more reliable long term, compared to just 37% of cohabitants and 34% of married people. Single people were most like partner LATs at 50%. There is a similar distribution for those thinking children provide the stronger bond. For married people, those actually most likely to have had children, just 36% agreed. This rose to 44% for both cohabitants and dating LATs, and for partner LATs and singles

as many as 52% and 54% agreed. In this way partner LATs, and to an extent dating LATs, are more like single people in a ‘not living with someone’ group. This group places more reliance on relatives and gives children a particularly strong emotional role. Presumably for many LATs and single people this reflects their own experience – they will have actually found relatives and children more reliable or durable as couple partnerships have dissolved.

By 2006 solo living – living without any partner whether co-resident or apart – seemed to have escaped its image as a deficit identity, the preserve of ‘spinster’ and ‘confirmed bachelor’ stereotypes, people who in some way had failed at normal life, and were inadequate at making relationships. Seven out of ten adults agreed that ‘*You do not need a partner to be happy and fulfilled in life*’ and six in ten rejected the idea that ‘*People who choose to live alone just aren’t good at relationships with others*’. There is little difference between any of the relationship categories for these questions, even for single people.

However, solo living gained less acceptance as a form of parenting, with only two-fifths of BSAS respondents agreeing that ‘*There is nothing wrong with a single woman who lives alone having a child if she wants one*’ and a similar proportion agreeing that ‘*One parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together*’ In this case it was married people who were somewhat less accepting (just 38% and 34% agreed). Cohabitants were markedly less traditional (61% and 56% agreed), followed by dating LATs (57% and 51%). Partner LATs were more intolerant on the first count (just 50% supporting births to single women), but most like cohabitants on the second (58%). Singles were in the middle for both questions (54%). Perhaps these questions

tap more overall attitudes about families and relationships, where attitudes are particularly associated with age and religiosity. The variation between the two questions for partner LATs might record experience, for some, in having children within partnerships (so more disapproving of single women getting pregnant) while subsequently becoming a lone parent and hence becoming more accepting of this.

When asked a direct question about being a LAT - '*A couple do not need to live together to have a strong relationship*' LATs joined single people in 'a currently not living with a partner group' to show particularly high agreement - 75% among dating LATs and 73% of partner LATs, with 62% of single people; this compares to agreement by only 57% of cohabitants and 46% of married people. Presumably the 14% of both dating and partner LATs who disagreed were among the 'regretfully apart'.

Overall then, when it comes to questions about partnering and commitment, LATs show something of a 'pioneer' position in the sense of leading the way, but this is only a matter of degree more than any radical departure. It is rather that they sometimes manifest in a more emphatic form the overall consensus that co-residential couple relationships are no longer an inevitable centre to emotional life. Furthermore, this emphasis seems most marked when LATs' own particular experiences and concerns are at issue. In this respect they often join singles in a 'not currently living with someone' group.

Friends and family

According to Roseneil (2006), LATs will emphasise friendship as opposed to partnership. In the 2006 BSAS sample it was rather that married people were less likely to emphasise friends, other groups were more or less the same. Thus 88% of partner LATs and 85% of dating LATs reported at least one “*particularly close friend you can share your private feelings and concerns with*” (leaving aside partners or anyone in their family) but so did 84% of singles and 83% of cohabitants – while married people trailed behind at just 69%. LATs were, however, more likely to have more than one close friend defined in this way, with 66% of dating LATs and 54% of partner LATs, compared to 50% of singles, 43% of cohabitants but just 36% of married people. There was a similar continuum in terms of what these friends had actually done – fully 95% of partner LATs and 94% of dating LATs had received their help when ‘*facing a difficult problem in your life*’, but so had 91% of cohabitants, 86% of singles and 80% of the married. Not surprisingly, then, 84% of dating LATs and 79% of partner LATs rejected the notion that ‘*Friends are for fun, not for discussing personal problems with*’, compared to 80% of cohabitants, 73% of singles and 68% of the married. In other words friends seem to play an important role in most people’s lives; being a LAT might emphasise this somewhat while being married has the converse effect.

Are LATs then more likely to see friends as more important than family? In fact when it comes to weighing up friends *versus* family there was little difference between categories, with only a minority of around three in ten seeing friends as more dependable than family in times of crisis (*When things really go wrong in life your family is more likely to be there for you than your friends*). Again, LATs, single people and cohabitants, put somewhat less faith in family (little over a third) than

married people (44%). This overall belief in the relative dependability of family probably relates to the persistence of norms about family obligations, as the last two rows in Table 4 suggest. The majority in all groups also thought that people should make time for close relatives even if they have nothing in common with them, although cohabitants and partner LATs were somewhat less convinced. Most even extended this sense of family obligation even to more distant relatives, although again cohabitants were least family oriented in this wider way.

Table 4 Friends and family by relationship category

% agree or agree strongly	Dating LATS	Partner LATS	Married	Cohabiting	Single
Friends are for fun, not for discussing personal problems with	3	8	13	7	10
When things go wrong in your life, family is more likely to be there for you than friends	33	38	44	34	37
People should make time for close family members, even if they don't have anything in common	70	62	69	57	67
People should make time for relatives like aunts, uncles and cousins, even if they don't have anything in common	44	56	56	40	56
<i>Unweighted base</i>	108	174	1343	271	619

Source: NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006

To explore the relative importance of friends and family further, we attempted to force respondents into a somewhat artificial choice between family and friends:

Some people feel that having close friends is more important than having close ties with their family. Others disagree. Where would you put yourself on this scale between these two positions?

[5 point scale, from 1 'Friends most important' to 5 'Family most important']

Given the persistence of norms about given obligations to family, it is perhaps not surprising that around half of all respondents felt that maintaining close ties with family is more important than having close friends (choosing 4 or 5 on the scale), with just over a tenth choosing close friends (choosing 1 or 2). However, this question did expose differences in emphasis between those with or without established partners; hence around 50% of married people, cohabitants, and partner LATs alike placed most faith in family, compared to just 41 % for both singles and dating LATs.

Overall, it is married people who stand out in placing least emphasis on friends (although friends are still important to a majority); it is just that LATs emphasise the role of friends a little more than the other unmarried categories. For some questions, however, partner LATs share the views of other couples (married and unmarried) while dating LATs are more like single people. But both share the overall consensus that while friends are valued, family is probably more reliable in the long run.

Family conventionality and liberalism

What of their more general attitudes about family change? While Haskey and Lewis (2006) conclude that LATs are conservative and cautious in everyday life as well as in their own relationships, Roseneil (2006) implies that they are in the radical forefront of value change. Both conclusions depend on the analysis of small, selective samples. We have attempted to assess this more extensively using BSAS questions about attitudes towards (1) traditional attitudes about the value and role of marriage, and (2) attitudes towards gay and lesbian relationships. These are relatively specific issues which can be controversial markers of attitudes about families. They also have the advantage of not directly concerning most LATs.

It is perhaps not surprising the cohabitants were most likely to be least traditional about marriage, and conversely married people more traditional. See Table 5. What is more interesting are the generally low levels of traditionality about marriage overall (even among the married), and that LATs do not stand out as being particularly radical. Indeed, there were proportionally as many ‘most traditional’ respondents among dating LATs as among married people – presumably these LATs would probably marry if they went on to live together rather than cohabit.

Table 5 Traditional and non-traditional views about marriage*

%in category	Dating LATs	Partner LATs	Married	Cohabitan	Single
Most traditional	15	9	15	2	5
Least traditional	54	57	38	75	51
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>174</i>	<i>1343</i>	<i>271</i>	<i>619</i>

* The scale of traditional views uses responses to the four questions in BSAS 2006. 1.

There is little difference socially between being married and living together. 2. A wedding is more about a celebration than life long commitment. 3. Living with a partner shows just as much commitment as getting married. 4. Married couples make better parents than unmarried ones (5).

Source: NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006

The most significant difference in attitudes towards gay and lesbian relationships is the greater likelihood of disapproval among married people. Thus dating LATs were most likely to disagree that homosexual relations are 'always or mostly wrong' (72%) compared with 67% of cohabitants, 61% of partner LATs, 56% of singles, but just 48% of married people. When it comes to gay and lesbian parenting – where parenting seems to stimulate more 'morally absolute' views (Duncan and Phillips 2008) - there is not much difference between LATs, cohabitants and single people (although dating LATs are a little more likely to approve). Rather, it is again the likelihood of disapproval among married people that stands out. See Table 6.

Table 6 Attitudes towards gay men and lesbians as parents

%	Dating LATs	Partner LATs	Married	Cohabiting	Single
Agree gay men just as capable	53	47	23	47	42
Disagree	22	36	52	23	30
Agree lesbians just as capable	57	49	28	52	47
Disagree	19	32	47	22	26
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>174</i>	<i>1343</i>	<i>271</i>	<i>619</i>

Source: NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006

As with attitudes towards partnering and friendship, it is the married who stand out most in overall attitudes about family – if in a traditional way. Dating LATs tend to be more a little liberal or permissive than the other unmarried groups, but partner LATs show little difference.

4.3 Family attitudes, relationship category, and age

As section 3.3 showed the various relationship categories vary markedly by age, where LATs are the youngest on average (with dating LATs the very youngest), followed by cohabitants, singles and then the oldest group on average - married people (see Table 3). Intuitively, we might expect age is likely to be important in

affecting attitudes about families and relationships, as this is a social issue that has changed notably in recent decades, and therefore we might expect to find that older people are more traditional in their views. The 2006 BSAS survey found that very often age was indeed significant in its own right, with older groups most likely to be traditional in their views. This applied even taking into account other age related characteristics such as religion and marital status (Duncan and Phillips 2008).

How far, then, is the relative ‘non-traditionality’ in attitudes about family found for LATs and cohabitants in section 3.4 associated with age, rather than relationship category? We took 3 key indices for each of the issues dealt with in section 3.2, and carried out logistic regression analyses using both relationship and age categories as independent variables (6). This was to test whether relationship category was still significantly related to the dependent (attitudinal) variables having controlled for age, that is taking into account the fact that relationship category is itself correlated with age.

First, for the issue of partnering and commitment, we took the question of whether *‘Relationships are much stronger when both partners have the independence to follow their own careers and friendships’*, or – alternatively – *‘Partners who have too much independence from each other put their relationship at risk’*. This was a question where LATs – on average the youngest group - were more likely to agree with the first statement than other relationship categories (83% for dating LATs, 75% for partner LATs, as opposed to 60% for married people, 63% for singles and 66% for cohabitants). But even controlling for age, both types of LAT were still significantly more likely than other relationship categories to agree with the first statement. In

other words relationship status was not simply a proxy for age for this index, and being a LAT (or not) was important in its own right. Further, controlling for relationship status meant that age was not significantly related to attitudes on this question.

Secondly, for the issue of families and friends, we took the statement that '*Friends are for fun, not for discussing personal problems with*'. In this case, 84% of dating LATs and 79% of partner LATs rejected the notion that compared to 80% of cohabitants, 73% of singles and just 68% of the married. Here controlling for age revealed diametrically opposed results to the first index – age remained significant after controlling for relationship category, and relationship category had no independent correlation. The fact that LATs and cohabitants were more likely to discuss personal problems with friends, and married people less likely, is a function of their age rather than the type of relationship.

Finally, we took the question of whether gay men could be '*just as capable*' parents as a man and a woman, as an index of family conventionality and liberalism. Here, there was little difference between categories, except that married people – also on average the oldest group - were much less likely to agree (just 23% as opposed to between 42% and 53% for other categories). In this case both relationship status and age were significant after controlling for the other variable. Married people were still significantly less likely to agree that gay men could make good parents, compared to LATs (and other relationship categories), however old they were.

These results reinforce what we have already found in the earlier analysis. For issues that directly affect LATs, in this case about the effect of independence in relationships, LATs appear to be somewhat more liberal than other categories. However, for other ‘family’ issues being a LAT in itself makes little difference, rather it is the relative traditionality of married people that stands out.

5. Living Apart Together, changing families and individualisation

As a category, LATs have quite diverse origins and motivations. First, is our distinction between ‘dating’ and ‘partner’ LATs, where the former –up to two fifths the total sample of LATs - considered that either themselves, or the relationship, were not ready for living together. Second, a substantial proportion of the reasons chosen by partners for living apart together indicate external constraints of affordability or the job / education market. Only some of the reasons chosen for living apart together fit easily into Levin’s ‘both/and’ model of people who are together emotionally and intimately, but choose to live apart as their individual solution to modern life (if sometimes with various constraints). While all statistically created relationship categories, like these used here, will show diversity (for example married people will contain great variation by age, income, class, religiosity and ethnicity), these differences of origin and motivation within LATs as a category point to significant differences in type. Certainly ‘steady’ boyfriend / girlfriend relationships (our ‘dating LATs’), and ‘commuter marriages’ (those partners who are primarily LATs because of external constraints), are hardly ‘new family forms’

It is not so surprising, therefore, that as a category LATs as a whole do not show any marked ‘pioneer’ attitudinal position about families and relationships in the sense of

leading a radical new way. Often LATs are somewhat less traditional, more liberal or more permissive than other groups (with dating LATs usually the most liberal or permissive group), especially for questions more directly reflecting their own personal situations. However, this is a matter of degree rather than radical departure, and on most questions LATs and cohabitants are quite similar, as they are in age and religiosity. Rather, it is the relative traditionality of married people that stands out.

See Table 7 for a ranked summary of the indicators used in section 3.4.

We must be careful to remember that these ‘liberal – traditional’ rankings are only relative - for the British population as a whole has moved on from the 1950s model of the traditional family, although less so where parenting children is concerned (Duncan and Phillips 2008). Perhaps LATs can hardly be a radical departure from erstwhile conventionality where departure has already happened en masse. Finally, we should also note that some of these differences seem more associated with age rather than relationship type, where LATs and cohabitants are on average the youngest and married people the oldest.

Table 7 Relationship category by attitudinal position: summary

	Dating LATs	Partner LATs	Cohabitants	Singles	Married
Most liberal	12	1	6	2	-
More liberal	2	10	4		-
Middle	2	5	4	8	3
More traditional	1	2	4	8	1
Most traditional	1	-	-	-	14
TOTAL	18	18	18	18	18

Source: section 3.4

Some LATs may well be pioneers for new, individualised forms of living, loving and caring, like some of the respondents in Roseneil's purposive sample of likely individualisers (Roseneil 2006). Others may well be particularly conventional, like most of the sample used by Haskey and Lewis (2006) and generated through ONS. For some, but not for many others, being a LAT may be experienced as a new family form. In this sense the empirical results reported here do not 'disprove' this aspect of individualisation theory. However, what the results here do disprove is the slippage where an increase in the number or visibility of the category LAT is taken as indicative of an increase in individualisation, or even of the spread of the 'pure relationship' and 'liquid love'. This conclusion is just a particular case of the general lesson from family research – it is a mistake to confuse changing family forms with

changing family process. Equally, for example, increasing cohabitation does not necessarily mean decreasing commitment between partners or less good parenting. In turn, this is another reflection of the general theorem – categorical form and substantive process should not be confused, and detailed empirical research is necessary to link the two (cf Sayer 1992).

Notes

1. Referred to as ‘non-cohabiting regular relationship’. See Natsal Table 7.1
2. The 1949 Mass Observation (MO) report into sexual attitudes and behaviour in Britain, colloquially known as ‘Little Kinsey’ (although it considers family, friends and relationships as well as sexual behaviour) was mostly written by Tom Harrison in 1949-50 but remained unpublished at the time. The typewritten chapter drafts were subsequently published, for the first time, in Liz Stanley’s *Sex Surveyed* (1995). The original drafts, with editorial comments, notes and deletion, as well as much supplementary and supporting material, including pilots, additional survey material field notes, respondents’ questionnaires and letters, are held in the MO archive at the University of Sussex.
3. The 2006 British Social Attitudes Survey was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (Park et al 2008). The sample comprised adults aged 18 and over in Britain, calibrated to match the population by region, age and sex. The survey was carried out through face to face interviews, supplemented by self-completion questionnaires for particular topics. The ‘new family’ module questions used here was

asked of 3197 respondents (2775 for questions included in the self-completion questionnaire).

4. In BSAS 2006 12% of the adult population reported attending religious services at least once a week, similar to the 10.1% found by Tearfund's larger 2007 survey.

Actual attendance appears to be lower with the English Church Census finding 6.1% attending churches in England over census weekend in 2005. See Ashworth et al 2007.

5. Each respondent scored between 1 (most traditional views) and 5 (least traditional).

Scores were created by reversing the numerical values for the first three statements, so that the most traditional view was changed from 5 to 1 and so on; the values for the four statements were summed, divided by four, and rounded. The 1 to 5 scale was then recoded into most traditional views (1 and 2), middle (3) and least traditional (4 and 5). Not answered or 'don't know' for any of the four questions was excluded.

6. Results were similar using different codings for relationship status (eg combining or separating different types of LATs, or comparing LATs with all relationship types or just married respondents.

The results of the three variable models referred to are as follows.

Model 1: dependent variable – relationships stronger / risked when both partners have independence (0= relationship at risk if independent, 1=relationship stronger if independent)

Model 2: dependent variable: “Friends are for fun, not for discussing personal problems with” (0 = neither/disagree; 1 = agree)

Model 3: dependent variable: a gay couple can be as good parents as a man and a woman (0 = neither/disagree; 1 = agree)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B (co-efficient)	Std. Error	P value	B(co-efficient)	Std. Error	P value	B(co-efficient)	Std. Error	P value
Relationship status (LATs reference)									
Married	-0.681	0.176	0.000	0.419	0.314	0.184	-0.671	0.181	0.000
Cohabiting	-0.516	0.209	0.015	0.202	0.382	0.598	-0.012	0.213	0.956
Single (incl. sep/div, single)	-0.604	0.203	0.003	0.356	0.348	0.308	-0.043	0.189	0.820
Widowed	-0.882	0.232	0.000	0.406	0.367	0.270	0.116	0.274	0.671
Age category (65+ reference)									
18-24	0.517	0.202	0.011	-1.374	0.359	0.000	1.958	0.210	0.000
25-34	0.284	0.152	0.064	-1.668	0.301	0.000	1.958	0.200	0.000
35-44	0.159	0.129	0.220	-1.683	0.240	0.000	1.692	0.185	0.000
45-54	0.147	0.144	0.308	-1.167	0.199	0.000	1.544	0.199	0.000
55-59	0.210	0.174	0.231	-1.487	0.274	0.000	1.009	0.236	0.000
60-64	0.181	0.174	0.299	-0.751	0.243	0.002	0.795	0.229	0.001

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