



# Pathways to commitment in living-apart-together relationships in the Netherlands: A study on satisfaction, alternatives, investments and social support



Roselinde van der Wiel<sup>a,\*</sup>, Clara H. Mulder<sup>a</sup>, Ajay Bailey<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Groningen, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, Population Research Centre, PO Box 800, 9700 AV Groningen, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Utrecht University, Faculty of Geosciences, Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, PO Box 80.115, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

The non-institutionalised, flexible nature of living-apart-together (LAT) raises questions about partner commitment in the context of the debate about the individualisation of society. We explored how partner commitment in LAT relationships in the Netherlands is shaped by individuals' *satisfaction* with, *alternatives* to, *investments* in and *social support* for their relationship. The underlying theoretical framework is an extended version of the Investment Model of Commitment. We conducted 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with men and women. The major themes that were addressed in the analysis were commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, investments, social support, relationship history and future plans. Participants were emotionally highly attached to their partner, but they doubted their commitment to maintaining their relationship in the future. Satisfaction with the current partner and intrinsic investments, such as emotions and effort, were described as contributing the most to feelings of commitment. Social support, quality of alternatives and extrinsic investments, such as material ties, were felt to contribute the least. Relationship history and life experience played an important role in how middle-aged and older individuals, of whom many were divorced, perceived the four determinants and experienced commitment. In this context, the LAT arrangement expressed fear of commitment and getting hurt, which was further reflected in limited investments. The paper concludes that although emotional attachment appears to be high among people in LAT relationships, they may have a relatively limited belief and interest in life-long partnerships.

## 1. Introduction

Partner relationship arrangements have diversified profoundly in many western countries since the 1960s. Amongst other phenomena, this diversification revealed itself in a rise in unmarried cohabitation, divorce and extramarital childbirth (Lesthaeghe, 2010), and in the increased prevalence or visibility of living-apart-together (LAT) relationships (Carter, Duncan, Stoilova, & Phillips, 2015; Latten & Mulder, 2014). LAT refers to couple relationships in which the partners do not live together (Haskey, 2005). Remarkably, studies in a range of Western countries, including the Netherlands, all show that about 10% of all adults are in a LAT relationship (Asendorpf, 2008; Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras, & Martín-García, 2008; Haskey, 2005; Levin, 2004; Liefbroer, Poortman, & Seltzer, 2015; Lodewijckx & Deboosere, 2011; Otten & Te Riele, 2015; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009; Reimondos, Evans, & Gray, 2011; Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009). The changes in partner relationships can be

seen as indicative of a de-institutionalisation of family life (Hantrais, 2006) and of marriage (Cherlin, 2004) and to be characterised by an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy and self-fulfilment, tolerance for diversity and respect for individual choice (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

The new and de-standardised family models that have arisen suggest, according to some, that commitment is less important in modern, individualised societies (Carter et al., 2015). Commitment refers to a sense of being emotionally attached and wanting to maintain a relationship in the future (Rusbult, 1980). In popular discourse, unmarried cohabitation is often viewed as evidence of this decreasing commitment to life-long partnerships (Duncan, Barlow, & James, 2005; Jamieson et al., 2002). People in LAT relationships (so-called "LATs") arguably show even less commitment than cohabiters. Their relationships typically lack structural investments, such as a joint mortgage or children (Carter et al., 2015), which are public expressions of commitment. At the same time, this lack of structural investments makes

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [r.van.der.wiel@rug.nl](mailto:r.van.der.wiel@rug.nl) (R. van der Wiel).

LAT relationships relatively easy to exit.

On the contrary, it is sometimes argued by cohabiters (Duncan et al., 2005) and LATs (Carter et al., 2015) that their relationships involve higher levels of commitment compared to married couples, precisely due to the lack of formal, legal and structural barriers to separation. Their sole reason for staying together is wanting to be together. Essentially, high and low commitment can be present in all types of relationships (Carter et al., 2015). In view of the changing nature and meanings of partner relationships, partner commitment is an important element in the scientific debate about the individualisation of society. It also carries great societal relevance, considering that those in more committed relationships report higher well-being (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). For these reasons, several studies thus far have investigated commitment in married and cohabiting relationships (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015; Burgoyne, Reibstein, Edmunds, & Routh, 2010; Duncan et al., 2005; Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Jamieson et al., 2002).

However, despite the increasing academic attention for LAT individuals as a significant category in society, little is known about commitment in LAT relationships. Only two studies have addressed this topic, both in Britain: Carter et al. (2015) and Haskey and Lewis (2006). Our current knowledge about LATs' commitment remains very limited and aforesaid studies fail to provide a detailed investigation of the factors underlying commitment in LAT relationships.

The aim of this study is to explore the concept of commitment and its underlying mechanisms in LAT relationships, in order to obtain a better understanding of the meanings of living-apart-together as a modern, non-institutionalised partner relationship arrangement. We address the following questions: *What shapes the partner commitment experiences of those in LAT relationships? And how is their commitment interlinked with their choice for LAT and future plans for their relationship?* As a framework for understanding the mechanisms underlying commitment, we employ an extended version of the Investment Model of Commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2011; Sprecher, 1988). This model predicts high commitment when one feels satisfied with the relationship, perceives few attractive alternatives, has invested significantly and receives social support for the relationship.

In the European context, the Netherlands is a fairly individualistic, secularised and prosperous country, but with relatively conservative, Calvinistic family values and behaviours (Felling, Peters, & Scheepers, 2000). In terms of its welfare regime, it can be classified as social-democratic (Esping-Andersen, 2013). Several new demographic trends tend to appear early in the Netherlands (Latten & Mulder, 2014), even though the country is rather mainstream in Europe regarding many other demographic patterns.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Previous literature

The novelty of LAT relationships is debatable and depends on the way LAT is defined. So-called “dating LATs”, distinguished by Duncan and Phillips (2010, 2011); Duncan and Phillips, 2010 from “partner LATs”, resemble the more traditional boyfriend-girlfriend relationships or steady dating relationships and are thus not notably novel. We adopt the definition proposed by Haskey (2005), which is similar to that of Levin and Trost (1999), in which LAT is more than just a new guise of dating relationships. In this definition, only partner LATs are included: those who see themselves, and are regarded as such by others, as an established couple for the long term, living in separate households. This identification as a couple, regardless of intentions to live together (see Lewin, 2017b), is what distinguishes partner LATs from dating relationships. The existing body of research has mostly concentrated on identifying who are in LAT relationships and why (Carter et al., 2015). These two questions are inextricably linked, in that the reasons for living apart vary with the individual's life course stage (Strohm et al.,

2009). For many young people, LAT is a stage in the union formation process, preceding cohabitation and/or marriage (Liefbroer et al., 2015; Strohm et al., 2009). They may not be ready for the perceived greater commitment associated with co-residence (Jamison & Ganong, 2011). Older adults may choose not to live with their partner because they are responsible for taking care of children or elderly parents with whom they live in the same household (Levin & Trost, 1999). For parents, living apart can be a way to protect and prioritise the relationship with their children (De Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013). Alternatively, people may live apart to avoid problems experienced in previous co-residential relationships and to maintain their independence (De Jong Gierveld, 2002, 2004; Levin & Trost, 1999; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). Hence, LAT is relatively common among those who have been in a cohabiting or married relationship before and those who have children (De Jong Gierveld & Latten, 2008; Liefbroer et al., 2015). For women in particular, LAT can offer increased autonomy and control over resources (De Jong Gierveld, 2002; Upton-Davis, 2015), and caregiving responsibilities can be a reason to live apart. External constraints or circumstances (e.g. job locations) are another frequently mentioned reason to live apart (e.g. Levin & Trost, 1999; Liefbroer et al., 2015; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009; Roseneil, 2006). Findings by Krapf (2017) suggest that many long-distance dual-career couples are living apart involuntarily. More generally, living-apart-together can be a way to combine partner intimacy with the autonomy, flexibility and independence of being alone (Duncan, Carter, Phillips, Roseneil, & Stoilova, 2013; Strohm et al., 2009). Instead of a temporary stage only, LAT is therefore also sometimes characterised as a more permanent end-state, epitomising a new orientation towards couple relationships (Bawin-Legros & Gauthier, 2001; Levin, 2004; Roseneil, 2006).

Next to the who and why of LAT, a handful of studies has examined the relationship experiences of LAT couples. Two recent studies found that LAT couples are generally less satisfied with their relationship than married and cohabiting couples are (Lewin, 2017a; Tai, Baxter, & Hewitt, 2014). In a mixed-methods study in Britain, Duncan, Phillips, Carter, Roseneil, & Stoilova, 2014 reported that the relationship practices and perceptions of LAT couples are similar to co-resident couples in terms of sexual exclusivity, emotional closeness and commitment, but are different with respect to caregiving between partners, flexibility and autonomy. In another mixed-methods study in Britain, focussing particularly on commitment, Carter et al. (2015) explored how LATs discuss and experience five dimensions of commitment: a life course dimension, sexual exclusivity, love and longevity, moral and social expectations and relationship investments. They selected participants with a broad range of reasons for living apart and uncovered an equally broad range of perceptions of commitment. The authors distinguished between those with autonomous commitment (gladly apart, high commitment levels), contingent commitment (regretfully apart, high commitment levels contingent on living together in the future), ambivalent commitment (not yet ready to live together, some commitment) and limited commitment (LAT because it requires less commitment). They concluded that participants' stances on the importance of structural investments (such as shared housing) to commitment mainly determined the perception of their own commitment. Highly committed couples attached low value to shared investments, whereas those with ambivalent commitment expressed unwillingness to share the investments and responsibilities involved in cohabitation. This sort of ambivalent commitment was also identified by Haskey and Lewis (2006), in relation to the perceived risk associated with co-residence. Carter et al. (2015) conclude that commitment is an important element of LAT couples' experiences, although it depends on the motivation for LAT and thereby also on the relationship stage (i.e. whether a couple plans to cohabit and/or marry in the near future). Although extrinsic relationship investments are generally low, the authors stress that other elements of commitment can be of great significance in LAT relationships, and several of the LATs they interviewed reported high levels of commitment. Among their participants, living apart was not often a

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