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Mi Casa es Mi Casa

Women's Navigation of Living Apart Together (LAT) Relationships in Sweden & Austria

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the gendered experiences of women in Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships. It focuses on how LAT as a relational form is negotiated within the contested space of intimacy and coupledom, that is shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations around cohabitation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Austria and Sweden between November 2024 and April 2025, including biographical interviews, participant observation, policy analysis, and autoethnographic reflections, the study examines what it means for women to claim and maintain a home on their own terms.

To conceptualize LAT as a relational practice unfolding within a metaphorical space of intimacy - a space structured by social norms, affective orientations, and struggles over legitimacy and recognition - I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practice* - to trace how relational dispositions are formed and how they orient individuals toward dominant scripts such as cohabitation. As a complementing lens, this study is informed by feminist cultural theory, particularly Sara Ahmed's work on the *promise of happiness*, which offers a critical perspective for understanding how normative ideals of intimacy are internalized and act on women's lived experiences. Finally, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of *frontstage and backstage* visualizes what kinds of allowances LAT provides, particularly how it enables women to manage availability and set boundaries within the realm of intimate life.

Findings highlight how LAT can serve as a form of autonomy enactment, allowing women to opt out of perceived unequal distributions of domestic labour experienced in previous cohabiting relationships. Space, both its presence and absence, emerges as an important axis around which intimacy, autonomy, and wellbeing are negotiated. By mapping these evolving geographies of relating, this thesis contributes new insights to feminist scholarship on intimacy, the anthropology of space, and the cultural analysis of late-modern relationship models. Beyond the academic realm, this thesis invites in space builders - such as architects, planners and policy makers - as LAT offers a lens for reimagining how intimacy, autonomy, and care might be better supported through the spaces we build and the policies we write.

Keywords: *LAT; Living-Apart-Together; Särbo; intimate-relationships; home; anthropology-of-space; qualitative-research; non-cohabiting relationships; feminist-spatial-strategy; cultural analysis; love*

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Lund, 2025-05-25
Julia Stockinger

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Introduction

"You know, we could also think about not living together anymore and try out how that goes? I can't even remember what it was like to live just by myself…"

When my partner said this, I froze. Try out not living together? What is that even supposed to mean? After four years of sharing our lives across different places - gradually weaving together routines, growing accustomed to each other's daily presence, and genuinely enjoying it (at least from my side) - the suggestion felt like a rejection as well as a rupture. Shouldn't relationships move forward over time, not backward? To me, this sounded less like the evolution of a partnership and more like the beginning of the end. At the time, I simply couldn't imagine a future with someone who didn't want to share a home with me since I equated sharing a home with sharing a life. For me, cohabitation had long been synonymous with commitment. And to be frank, the idea of maintaining separate homes seemed not only emotionally unsettling but also absurdly impractical. Who could afford that in a housing market where rent prices are steadily climbing? And isn't that kind of wasteful? To me, it sounded like a suggestion born out of privilege. If he was willing to spend significantly more money just to not live with me - well, wasn't that already an answer in itself? Also… what if we liked it? Worse: what if he liked it, and I didn't? The implications of that were scarier than simply breaking up. It meant re-evaluating everything I thought I knew about intimacy, commitment, and what it means *to be with someone*. It meant entering uncharted relational territory where togetherness didn't necessarily mean shared space - and that was deeply unsettling.

That was a year ago. Looking back now, I cringe a little at my strong reaction. But in retrospect, I have to admit that this moment became the unexpected starting point for this thesis - a project that lies somewhere between personal reckoning and cultural investigation. The discomfort triggered by my partner's suggestion, revealed the extent to which it threatened my internalized model of "the happy relationship". The idea of living apart seemed to contradict everything I intuitively associated with intimacy: emotional proximity, shared routines, and the everyday comfort of physical co-presence. In my mind, love unfolded through daily life together - through the mundane and the shared. The suggestion of spatial separation destabilized that narrative and exposed its underlying assumptions. Yet, paradoxically, the idea also resonated with values I have come to hold dear - autonomy, self-determination, and the preservation of individuality within togetherness. This apparent contradiction becomes even more compelling when viewed through a feminist lens: in a patriarchal society where women

have historically been confined - both symbolically and materially - claims to space, independence, and relational boundaries are profoundly political - and even more so regarding the fetishized concept of the home!

This cognitive dissonance - the contradiction between my emotional, deeply embodied responses and intellectual commitments - became the catalyst for this research. Was my desire for cohabitation a reflection of heteronormative conditioning and class-based cultural norms? Did my rather traditional, catholic, working-class upbringing shape a particular ideal of relational closeness that contrasted with my partner's more liberal, secular, urban, upper-middle-class background? And what about the role of gender in this matter? Aren't discussions about togetherness and autonomy often connected to seemingly "natural" gendered dispositions? Could our disagreement be read not just as an interpersonal conflict, but as a microcosm of broader social and cultural forces?

To explore these questions, this thesis investigates Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships as a legitimate and increasingly visible form of intimate partnership. LAT refers to couples who maintain a committed romantic bond while choosing to reside in separate households. Rather than being a transitional phase or a compromise, LAT can represent an intentional way of organizing relational life. And precisely because it challenges conventional assumptions that equate intimacy with cohabitation, this form of partnership offers an important lens through which to understand how couples are reshaping what it means to be *together* nowadays, in contemporary times. Despite its growing relevance, LAT remains relatively underexplored in academic literature and is frequently mischaracterized or overlooked within dominant cultural narratives of romantic commitment.

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, grounded in approximately six months of fieldwork, and centres on biographical, in-depth conversations with women in LAT relationships in Sweden and Austria. These conversations form the core ethnographic material through which I explore how LAT couples navigate and negotiate intimacy, autonomy, and domestic space within their relationships.

The reason I focus on women only is that societal expectations around the home are deeply gendered; historically, the home has been regarded as primarily a woman's domain (Löfgren, 2003). Besides that, space - who has it and who gives it up – is a key concern in feminist discussion (e.g. Ardener, 1997). Claiming a space of ones own and refusing to share a household, can be interpreted as resistance of economic dependence and unequal domestic burdens that are still disproportionally placed on the shoulders of women. To say no to cohabitation, for women, can be a refusal to be folded back into roles that are even in

progressive countries disproportionally assigned to them. It is important to note that while this research focuses on heteronormative dynamics, it also includes accounts from lesbian and queer relationships. Furthermore, when writing about women's experiences, I refer to those shaped by societal expectations of womanhood in the sense of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who wrote that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.

In addition to these core interviews, I use a variety of methods, including auto-ethnographic accounts, Netnography, expert interviews and media analysis (primarily of Swedish newspapers). As part of my methodological framework, I also analyse Austrian and Swedish policy documents related to intimate partnerships and cohabitation to understand how law functions as a cultural script. Since law and society are mutually constitutive, the legal dimension offers a crucial lens through which to understand the broader cultural context in which LAT relationships are formed and experienced.

This project is personally significant because it gives me the chance to critically interrogate my own assumptions and affective responses around relational norms. At the same time, it has wider social relevance, contributing to scholarly conversations about how intimacy is being reimagined in late modernity, when traditional narratives of love, cohabitation and commitment are increasingly questioned, contested, and reconfigured. Given the spatial dimensions of this reimagining of intimacy, this thesis is also relevant to professionals involved in designing and organising space, such as architects, urban planners, and policymakers.

By foregrounding lived experience alongside theoretical enquiry, this study makes a valuable contribution to current debates on intimacy, gender, space and care ethics. Ultimately, it invites us to consider what it means to be 'committed' today and how intimacy could be reimagined spatially, emotionally and politically.

Aim

This thesis has two aims: to address the macro-level dynamics that shape the societal context in which LAT relationships exist and to explore the micro-level lived experiences of women in these relationships. By framing intimacy as a metaphorical contested space in which LAT relationships compete for recognition, I will address the following research questions:

1. How do LAT relationships challenge the dominant societal and legal norms surrounding coupledom, and how do these norms differ in Sweden and Austria?

2. What factors contribute to women's decisions to enter LAT relationships, and what benefits or affordances does this relationship model provide them?
3. Could the LAT model lead to greater gender equality in intimate relationships?

Background

"All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own is she is to write fiction." – Virginia Woolf

This line opens the first chapter of Virginia Woolf's essay, which has a remarkably apt title for this thesis: *A Room of One's Own*. This slim volume, scarcely a centimetre thick, was first published in 1929, almost a century ago. While the social and political conditions for women have changed significantly since then, Woolf's emphasis on the importance of economic independence and personal space remains relevant to contemporary feminist issues (e.g. Ardener, 1997). Although Virginia Woolf explicitly discussed women's ability to write fiction, this can be seen as a metaphor for a broader issue: self-realisation - whether intellectual, artistic or otherwise - requires withdrawal from the absorbing demands of domestic life, which still disproportionately fall on women. However, a room of one's own is not merely a workspace, but also a symbol of refuge, autonomy and non-relational subjectivity. It signals the right not to be available, to delimit one's own boundaries, and to cultivate a life project that exceeds the immediate relational and reproductive labour.

The gendered sphere of the home

Anthropologists have increasingly sought to theorize space not simply as a physical container, but as a field of power and meaning. As Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) argue, spatial dimensions of culture have moved from the background to the foreground of anthropological inquiry. Their edited volume *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture,* compiles key contributions that reveal how space is not only shaped by culture but also constitutive of it; how space and social life are mutually dependent.

This thesis focuses on a particular kind of space: the home. Far from being a static or purely functional site, the home is a socially charged and symbolically dense space - a "key

arena" in which individuals construct and communicate identity by "appropriating of the material environment" (Garvey, 2001: 47). Although the home is often imagined as the *dull* counterpart to the *adventurous* outside world, the anthropologist Daniel Miller (2001: 3) notes in the introduction to his edited volume *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* , is "the place where most of what matters in people's lives takes place", making it a particularly intriguing context for ethnographic inquiry. Moreover, the domestic sphere has long been associated with women - not just as a backdrop to their lives, but as a space in which their roles are spatially defined and often restricted. Geographer and Social Scientist Doreen Massey (1994) notes how men are typically imagined as mobile, moving freely through public space, while women are more often portrayed as the primary occupants of the home, bound by its walls and responsibilities. However, as social anthropologist Shirley Ardener (1997) reminds us in her edited volume *Women and Space*, the home is also a space where women have often asserted agency rather than simply being passive or powerless. As the ethnologist Orvar Löfgren (2003: 147) observes, "the woman stands as the guardian of home and its many virtues," with notions of womanhood and home deeply entwined in what he conceptualised as "femina domestica". Crucially, however, Löfgren reminds us that this idealized domestic role was largely constructed by men - who also reaped its benefits - underscoring how women's agency in the home has always operated within - and sometimes against - a framework of external definition and expectation. This sentiment is echoed starkly in early feminist rhetoric, such as Susan W. Fitzgerald's 1910 suffrage pamphlet *Women in the Home*, which states: "We are forever being told that the place of women is the home".

House, home or household?

In speaking of home, we often conflate it with household or house - yet, as Mary Douglas (1991) reminds us in her essay *The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space*, these are not interchangeable terms. Douglas explores how solidarity is built within the home, describing it as a form of "mystic solidarity" grounded in a non-market logic of care and obligation. Drawing on Marcel Mauss, she conceptualises the home as a perfect gift economy, where services circulate through delayed, mostly unspoken forms of reciprocity: "debts are remembered well enough, but by keeping them vague there is the hope that repayment may be more than equivalent" (Douglas, 1991: 302). In contrast, the household may function more like a "semi-market" system, shaped by calculable exchanges and clearly defined contributions (p. 298, 298). The distinction between house, home, and household becomes especially intriguing in

the context of LAT relationships, particularly when viewed through a legal lens. If LAT partners do not share a household - that is, no merged chores, budgets, or daily routines - nor a house in its physical, cohabited sense, can they nonetheless sustain a shared home in Mary Douglas's sense of enduring, open-ended solidarity? Her notion of the home as a gift economy - held together by unspoken obligations and delayed reciprocity - compels us to ask: can the affective density of 'home' exist without physical proximity? Or does solidarity depend, at some level, on shared space and shared labour?

In this light, LAT relationships pose a significant reconfiguration of normative domesticity. For women especially, the refusal to cohabit may resonate with Virginia Woolf's century-old demand - not just for a room of one's own, but for a living space that is self-defined, economically autonomous from one's partner, and protected from the subtle erosions of continuous relational availability. The home, long imagined as the natural domain of women, emerges here not as a given, but as a site of negotiation and resistance. It is no longer the default container of intimacy and care, but a contested space where love must be disentangled from enclosure, and where solidarity may be reimagined - across thresholds, across addresses.

Research context: Austria & Sweden

This research examines Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships within two distinct cultural and legal contexts: Sweden and Austria. Rather than focusing on a single ethnographic site, this study adopts a comparative multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited ethnography allows for a comparative exploration of cultural practices, meanings, and institutional logics across different geographic and legal contexts. Sweden and Austria offer a compelling contrast due to their differing family policy traditions, legal frameworks, and normative discourses surrounding intimacy, partnership, and cohabitation. While Sweden and Austria share many similarities - they are both EU members with strong welfare systems and constitutional commitments to gender equality - they differ in how they frame the individual's relationship to family and state. Sweden emphasizes individual autonomy and state-supported independence, expecting women's full participation in the workforce and fostering self-sufficient individuals. Austria, while also having a strong social welfare system, places greater emphasis on the family as a collective unit, where individuals are often understood in relation to family networks rather than as fully autonomous actors. By examining LAT in these differing contexts, this research aims to understand how relational life is shaped by broader

structural and cultural conditions, while also recognizing the agency of women who navigate these configurations.

The Couple Under One Roof: A State-Sanctioned Ideal

To understand the social and political significance of non-cohabitation, it is crucial to examine the normative status of its counterpart: cohabitation. While it lies beyond the scope of this thesis to trace the full genealogy of cohabitation as a normative ideal, it quickly became clear that nation-states have long held a vested interest in how people live together. By encouraging people to live together, particularly in couple-based and nuclear family formations, the state effectively consolidates individuals into units of mutual responsibility. The shared household becomes the basic infrastructure through which care is organized, regulated, and, crucially, offloaded from public systems.

Historical responses to declining marriage rates in the second half of the 20th century in both Sweden and Austria offer telling examples of this logic in practice. In Sweden, the state responded to the rise of informal partnerships with the *Sambolagen* (Cohabitation Act) of 1973, which granted cohabiting couples legal rights similar to those of married spouses (Asland et al., 2015). Over time, this legislation was expanded - first in 1987 to include same-sex couples, and then in 2003, when it was reworked and retitled as the Cohabitees Act - reflecting a shift toward recognizing diverse forms of intimate life, as well as making them accountable, so long as they were anchored in shared domestic space (Andersson, 2017; Walleng, 2017).

Austria, by contrast, reinforced formal marriage through direct financial incentives. Couples were offered a *Heiratsprämie* (“marriage premium”) of 15,000 Austrian Schillings (approximately €4,500 today; Austrian National Bank, n.d.), and marriage rates peaked just before this bonus was discontinued in 1986. Rather than adapting to changing relationship practices, Austria held on to the traditional marital model, using financial policy to preserve it.

Despite their different methods, both states converged on a common goal: binding care and responsibility to cohabitation. What Catrine Andersson (2017) calls “governing through love” encapsulates this strategy - the state legitimizes and supports certain relationship forms, particularly those that promise internalized care: monogamous, stable, cohabiting couples. In doing so, the private household becomes the site where care obligations are assumed and welfare costs potentially reduced.

Naming Intimacy: the emergence of LAT as a term and concept

The term LAT was first coined in 1978 by Dutch journalist Michiel Berkel in an article for the Haagse Post, drawing inspiration from the 1973 Dutch film Frank & Eva: Living Apart Together (Giraud, 2023). The concept quickly gained traction in Scandinavia, where Särbo emerged as a term in the early 1980s to describe non-cohabiting romantic partnerships (Trost, 2016). While Särbo is not a legal term - unlike the term Sambo (for cohabiting couples) - the existence of a specific term for this type of relationship signals a degree of institutionalization, a characteristic that distinguishes Sweden from countries like Austria, where no equivalent term exists. In Austria and other German-speaking regions, the term "Getrennte Lebensgemeinschaft" (separate life partnership) exists, but it is rarely used in daily language nor in legal contexts where there is only made a distinction between being in a married or non-marital partnership with no literal reference to weather one is cohabiting or not. Also, in German academic discussions the German term is avoided in favour of using the English acronym “LAT”. This raises the question: Why is there a specific term for LAT in Dutch and Scandinavian languages, yet not in Austria or the German-speaking world at large? Taking a closer look at the degree of individualisation in Zygmunt Bauman’s and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim’s sense - understood as the consequence of social transformations in late modernity, where individuals are increasingly tasked with constructing their own life paths independently of traditional norms - offers a fruitful approach to unpacking the geographical differences.

LAT and Individualisation

Philosopher Suzanne Langer, as cited in Douglas (1991: 293), suggests that “architecture can also present the largest metaphors of society and religion, it can project meanings about life and death and eschatology into the everyday arrangement it covers.” What, then, might the growing phenomenon of not sharing a home as we see it in Living Apart Together relationships, reveal about contemporary notions of society, selfhood, and even belief?

The concept of LAT as a form of relationship is intimately tied to the process of individualization, which refers to the growing autonomy and self-determination of individuals in late modern societies. As sociologists like Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have argued, contemporary life is increasingly centred around personal autonomy, reflexive life planning, and the pursuit of self-fulfilment.

Liquid Love: Intimacy in Late Modernity:

These shifts in cultural values have dramatically reshaped intimate relationships, with marriage no longer being the default institution through which romantic partnerships are structured, as it was up until the 1960s (Lind, 2015). Until the 1970s, four key elements - marriage, cohabitation, sexual relations, and childbearing - were closely intertwined, often occurring in rapid succession (Lanzinger, 2010). For many couples, marriage was the starting point for cohabitation and sexual relations. However, the institutionalization of non-marital cohabitation loosened these once rigid connections, creating more fluid arrangements (Levin & Trost, 1999). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2003) poetically refers to this phenomenon as *liquid love* - a form of intimacy that flows and shifts, unbound by traditional norms or institutional anchors. Yet this fluidity is not without cost: its very ungroundedness can produce anxiety and ambiguity, leaving individuals to navigate intimacy without clear scripts or guarantees.

The transformation in societal norms paved the way for new, non-traditional forms of relationships, such as LAT. For Burkart (1997: 165), the voluntary LAT couple is emblematic of the "exemplary individualized couple," representing the ideals of personal freedom and choice. This notion resonates Giddens' (1992) concept of the "pure relationship, in which the connection between partners exists solely for mutual emotional fulfilment, liberated from the external pressures that traditionally governed relationships - such as religious beliefs, economic necessity, or family expectations. While the concept of the *pure relationship* has been subject to significant critique (e.g. Smart, 2007; Jamieson, 1999) for idealizing a form of intimacy that is not universally accessible as well as having the tendency to reflect a privileged, Western, middle-class context - it remains a useful conceptual tool for this thesis in understanding how intimacy is increasingly framed around individual autonomy, emotional reciprocity, and ongoing negotiation in contemporary society.

Besides that, it seems particularly useful with regard to the Swedish context as it aligns with Lars Trägårdh's "Swedish Theory of Love," which argues that dependency undermines love, and that only mutual autonomy can guarantee authenticity and honesty in human relationships. A striking cultural metaphor of this ethos is *Pippi Longstocking* - a self-sufficient child with superhuman strength and a chest of gold. As Berggren and Trägårdh (2010) write, she symbolizes the ideal of total independence, not even needing parental love or care. The interpretation of the authors is that Pipi's radical autonomy is what makes her friendships so meaningful to Tommy & Annika, the well-behaved siblings that live next to Pipi: they are freely chosen, not based on need or obligation.

Values & Welfare Regimes in Austria and Sweden

Individualisation has profoundly reshaped intimate life. Domains that were once "naturally" perceived as unified - such as romantic partnership and a shared household, or marriage as an economic contract - have become increasingly disentangled. Yet this process is not universal or evenly distributed: it depends on levels of existential security. As Inglehart and Welzel (2005) argue, only when basic needs are met can individuals prioritise self-expression and relational autonomy.

In this respect, Sweden is frequently cited as being at the forefront of modernisation and individualisation (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2010). According to the 2023 World Values Survey, Sweden ranks among the highest globally on self-expression values and is also the most secular country in Europe. Austria, while more modern than many Catholic-majority nations, still leans more heavily toward traditional family values and lower degrees of individual autonomy (WVS, 2023).

In Sweden, individualization and autonomy have been deeply institutionalised within the welfare state (Berggren & Trädårdh, 2010). Through designing legal frameworks in a way that minimises personal dependency and to treat individuals - rather than couples or families - as the primary unit[1] of social rights. This model is ideologically anchored in the mid-20th-century social democratic vision of *Folkhemmet*, or the "People's Home," articulated by Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson in the 1930s. Hansson imagined Sweden as a national household in which all citizens would enjoy equal access to social protection - shifting responsibilities for healthcare, education, childcare, and eldercare from private families to the public sphere. Rather than reinforcing familial interdependence, the welfare state positioned itself as the guarantor of individual autonomy, fostering relationships that are voluntary, equal, and free from the moral burden of dependence on "the charity of others" (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2010: 53) In this sense, the welfare state does not simply respond to cultural values - it helps produce them.

Law, in particular, serves as the mechanism through which these values and welfare principles are codified and disseminated. For LAT relationships, family law[2] is especially consequential: it not only regulates existing relationships but also defines what "counts" as family in the first place (Zartler & Hierzer, 2015). The statuses individuals assume under family-law categories - spouse, parent, dependent - become the legal building blocks for welfare entitlements, determining eligibility and benefit levels. Child allowances, spousal

maintenance, co-insurance, and survivor pensions all hinge on one's legally recognized status. Statuses that LAT partners often have to navigate outside traditional cohabitation frameworks.

Legal provisions in this domain, particularly marriage law (as part of family law), carry substantial symbolic and economic capital. By virtue of their institutional longevity - marriage statutes being among the oldest legal frameworks - they play a pivotal role in shaping, reproducing, and legitimizing norms around intimate relationships. As Mannelqvist (2007: 143) observes, legislation is "imbued with norms and values," and, echoing Åmark (cited in Mannelqvist, 2007: 142), laws are not merely reflective but also prescriptive: they both respond to and attempt to guide social change. For this reason, it is worthwhile - without aiming for an exhaustive legal comparison - to examine, at a structural level, how welfare is organised in Sweden and Austria. Understanding the underlying institutional logics of their respective regimes offers a valuable lens into the broader institutional and cultural contexts in which relationships are embedded.

The Welfare Triad – between Family, State and the Market

To frame this discussion, we can draw on the Sociologist and Political Scientist Gøsta Esping-Andersen's influential work on welfare regimes. He defines a welfare regime as "the combined, interdependent way in which welfare is produced and allocated between state, market, and family," also referred to as the "welfare triad" (Esping-Andersen, 1999: 36). At its core, this framework asks how societies manage social risks - like illness or unemployment - and whether they're borne by families, markets, or the state. The way in which a country distributes responsibility among the three pillars of the triad is what defines its welfare regime.

While both Austria and Sweden aim to buffer individuals from market dependency, the logic behind how they do so differs significantly. Austria, rooted in a conservative welfare model, places strong emphasis on the family as the primary unit of social protection (Esping-Anders, cited in Castle, 1994: 22). In this model, the state offers protection from market dependency, but often in ways that reinforce dependence on the family, particularly for women - a tendency Esping-Andersen observed as a pattern in countries with a strong influence of Catholicisim in which too much state influence was feared to atomize people and put the "sacred family" in danger (Castle, 1994). Sweden, by contrast, follows a social-democratic model based on the adult worker paradigm, in which individuals, regardless of gender, are expected to be fully active in the labour market (Daly, 2011). The Swedish state offers extensive public services - most notably universal childcare - to facilitate labour market

participation, particularly for women. In this model, citizens are expected to sell their labour for a wage, and in return the state shields them not only from market uncertainties but also from the dependency pressures of the traditional family.

The consequences of these institutional logics are reflected in the statistics. While the labour market participation of Swedish and Austrian women (80% and 72%, respectively) is not as different as one might expect given the welfare regime, Austrian women are four times more likely than men to work part-time (48% versus 12%). This is an example of a semi-pre-commodified life path. By contrast, in Sweden, only one in five women and one in ten men work part-time. This demonstrates that the 'male breadwinner' model is more prevalent in Austria, where women's salaries only support the household.

These differences have broader implications: according to the EU Gender Equality Index, Austria has the third-largest gender gap in the EU. This has significant consequences for wealth accumulation and pension outcomes, with women's pensions being, on average, 37.6 per cent lower than men's as of 2024. Consequently, there is greater dependency on welfare pillars, such as the family (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2024). However, when discussing pensions, it is important to acknowledge the significant gender pension gap in Sweden, which stood at 28% in 2023 despite Sweden being considered one of the most gender-equal countries in the world (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023). This is particularly important with regard to LAT, since the focus of this thesis is on women. Maintaining a separate home requires not only emotional independence, but first and foremost material independence.

Previous Research

The Emergence of LAT in Academic Discourse

While living apart together is not a new phenomenon and has long existed in some form, this kind of relationships “have only recently been discovered by social scientists” (Duncan et al., 2012:444). Most research around how intimate relationships are lived is rather concerned with whether and to what extent cohabitation can be an alternative to marriage (see for example Perelli-Harris, et al., 2014). However, there is a growing academic interest in exploring LAT relationships as an alternative to cohabitation. The concept of LAT gained prominence in academic discourse following the Norwegian Sociologists Irene Levin and the Swedish sociologist Jan Trost's (1999, 2004) foundational work, which delineated LAT as a form of

intimate partnership in which individuals maintain separate residences despite being in committed romantic relationships. Unlike commuter marriages, which are driven by external constraints such as work or education (Straver, 1980), LAT is typically characterized by choice, reflecting a deliberate balancing of intimacy and independence (Giraud, 2023). Nevertheless, it's important to mention that choice is not necessarily a defining element in LAT relationships (Duncan et al., 2012).

Most research on LAT relationships focuses on the demographic characteristics and practical motivations driving individuals to choose this form of intimacy (e.g. Liefbroer et al., 2015; Reimonds et al, 2011; Strohm et al., 2009 and with regard to Austria Kaindl & Neuwirth, 2023). Liefbroer, Poortman, and Seltzer (2015) analysed data from ten European countries, finding that LAT relationships are particularly prevalent among younger adults under 24, many of whom view LAT as a transitional stage before cohabitation or marriage. This pattern is often driven by economic limitations, educational commitments, or parental dependence – thus they are in LAT relationships rather by circumstances than by positively choosing it. While this finding highlights the frequency of LAT relationships among young adults, it may reveal relatively little about the more complex dynamics of how intimacy and proximity are negotiated within LAT relationships. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of the liminality, it can be argued that individuals in this age group are often situated in a transitional state - neither fully independent nor fully partnered in a conventional domestic arrangement. For this reason, I have deliberately excluded this demographic from my research to focus on individuals for whom LAT is not a prelude to cohabitation, but a stable, intentional, and possibly long-term relational form. I was interested in talking to women for whom being in a LAT relationship was considered as an ideal not as a constraint.

When it comes to the older cohort, factors such as personal autonomy, career focus, and previous relationship experiences are argued to become more relevant (Liefbroer et al. 2015). Individuals in this group are more likely to possess a greater degree of economic security, which is a prerequisite for choice in the first place. For example, Upton-Davis (2012) highlights that highly educated individuals are disproportionately represented in LAT relationships, reflecting the financial capacity required to maintain separate households. However, besides a reflection of financial capacity, LAT could potentially also carry symbolic value - being seen as ‘independent’, ‘modern’, ‘enlightened’. In certain cultural circles, it might be admired as emotionally mature, non-possessive, or intellectually progressive - values often associated with the educated elite. In Bourdieu’s sense (1984:6), it could be an expression of

cultural capital: one is drawing on their "taste" to make their relationship a reflection of their social and cultural identity.

LAT: A way of undoing gender?

While some individuals in LAT relationships chose this way of living relationships to resist domestic power structures, Duncan & Philips (2010) argued that LAT relationships, although considered a liberal way of living relationships, "do not show any marked 'pioneer' attitudinal position in the sense of leading a radical new way". Similarly, Karen Upton-Davis, argued that for her research participants, the decision to live apart from their partner was seldomly consciously a political act. Nevertheless, Upton-Davis stresses that women's rejection of cohabitation is highly political and that this way of being in a relationship has the potential to subvert gender norms by living apart. This sentiment is in line with bell hooks, who pictures the "homeplace" as a "site of resistance." and brings to the forth a defining characterization of second-wave feminism in the 1960s: "The Private is Political!"

In a Statista (2024) study about single households in Sweden in 2022 according to age groups, it is rather interesting that in the age between 25 and 34, men are more than 1.5 times more likely to live alone than women. In this age group, they have their all-time high when it comes to living alone. While for women the number is rising from 55 years onwards. Of course there are other factors contributing to this e.g. life expectancy, but other research also shows that men are much more likely to re-marry quicker and consequently also cohabit. This gendered dimension of LAT opens the question of why women are less likely to take part of a cohabitating relationship in the second half of their life. Karlsson & Borell (2005) and Upton-Davis (2012) emphasize that women often choose LAT to preserve independence, establishing boundaries that protect their social lives and personal autonomy. This desire is particularly pronounced among women who have experienced cohabitation or marriage in the past, where they may have borne the brunt of domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities. This could also be the reason why older women in LAT relationships report better mental health than middle-aged and older men, suggesting marriage/cohabitation continues to disproportionately support men's psychological well-being (Yucel & Latshaw, 2022).

The Spinster vs. The Bachelor: Societal Perceptions of the Single Household

Conversely, younger women in LAT relationships reported poorer mental health outcomes compared to married or cohabiting couples. The authors suggest that young women's mental health may suffer due to unmet societal expectations and persistent gender norms that equate becoming a wife with fulfilment (Yucel & Latshaw, 2022). Although LAT couples are in a stable relationship, they do not cohabit. This means that in most statistics, they appear as single household. The notion of being single - carries different meanings for men and women. While male bachelorhood is often celebrated, embodying independence and ambition, the female equivalent lacks the same positive framing. Historically, unmarried women have been labelled as "spinsters," a term laden with connotations of exclusion and undesirability. As Claridge (2009) notes in his literature analysis of Virginia Woolf's work, spinsters defied traditional roles of wife and mother, often portrayed as socially isolated or even masculinized. This divergence in terminology used in talking about men and women who are living alone reflects a massive power structure once again reminding us that "an integral part of the oppression of females within a patriarchal society is the continuous hindering of any voluntary decisions they may want to make in their own lives" (Kaplan, 2023:1). While male autonomy is valorised, female autonomy is pathologized. The spinster figure, despite being reclaimed by feminist discourse, persists as a cautionary archetype, reinforcing the notion that women's fulfilment remains tethered to romantic partnership - which is often still represented in the happy, cohabitating couple.

Research Gap

While research on the LAT phenomenon has increased in recent years, much of it has been conducted within the context of demographic studies, focusing on statistical trends and patterns as well as motivational factors to be in such a relationship, rather than on the lived experiences of individuals in LAT relationships. While this research is also interested in the meaning-making processes through which individuals come to live in LAT arrangements, the aim is not to analyse motivational factors and constraints through the lens of a rational choice model - such as those found in business or consumer behaviour theories, where individuals are assumed to identify a need, gather information, evaluate alternatives, and ultimately make an optimal decision. Instead, the focus here is on understanding the embeddedness of these decisions -

how they are shaped by biographical histories, relational negotiations, socio-economic positioning, and cultural narratives.

While LAT has been a topic of interest in Sweden and the Nordic countries - regions where several prominent scholars have significantly advanced the field - *ethnographic research* on the topic still appears to be limited. To the best of my knowledge, one of the few notable ethnographic contributions is the work of Australian scholar Upton Davis, whose research provides valuable insights into the subjective dimensions of LAT partnerships, albeit in a non-European context. With regard to LAT in Austria, I am not aware of any existing qualitative research that has been conducted.

Furthermore, although the motivations for choosing LAT relationships have been examined in various studies, there is a clear lack of research on the impact of legal frameworks on LAT arrangements.

Thus, this research aims to attend to these gaps and contribute to the existing body of knowledge by considering Living Apart Together as an emerging way of doing relationships - one that is deeply embedded in socio-cultural contexts shaped by prevailing ideas of what constitutes a "normal" relationship. These ideas are often reinforced through legal frameworks and language, which in turn reflect and reproduce societal norms. By exploring both the Austrian and Swedish contexts in parallel, this study seeks to understand how such norms influence the lived realities of LAT partners in different, yet comparable, welfare and cultural settings.

Theoretical Framework

Living Apart Together as Contestation of Space

In this chapter, I develop a theoretical framework to understand Living Apart Together (LAT) as a relational practice unfolding within a metaphorical space of intimacy - a space structured by social norms, affective orientations, and struggles over legitimacy and recognition. More specifically, I conceptualize this space as *contested*. Contested spaces are charged terrains - symbolic and material - where struggles over meaning, belonging, and power play out. They are spaces, where people, shaped by unequal access to resources and recognition, confront, resist, or subvert the norms that organize their social worlds (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003). Women in LAT relationships move through this contested field in ways that reflect its constraints while also challenging and reshaping them. Intimacy, in this sense, is not a fixed space but a dynamic, mutually constructed social and emotional field, constantly negotiated through everyday practices.

To make sense of these negotiations, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practice* particularly his concepts of *field*, *habitus*, *capital*, and *doxa* - to trace how relational dispositions are formed and how they orient individuals toward dominant scripts such as cohabitation, marriage, and romantic fusion. Although Bourdieu's concept of habitus already captures the affective and embodied dimensions of social life, I read his work alongside Sara Ahmed's affect theory, especially her notion of the promise of happiness. Ahmed helps illuminate how cultural narratives emotionally "pull" us toward certain life paths, making some forms of intimacy feel hopeful, legitimate, or even morally good, while casting others as selfish, lonely, or doomed to failure. As an additional lens, I draw on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of *frontstage and backstage* to capture how women in LAT relationships manage the tension between front-stage performance and backstage withdrawal within the contested field of intimate relationships.

The Intimate Battlefield: Navigating Field, Doxa & Symbolic Capital

If contested spaces are the sites where social struggles are enacted, then fields are the structured arenas in which these struggles are organized and made intelligible. Fields, in a Bourdieusian sense, are the arenas where social struggles take shape, each governed by its own internal logic

and "rules of the game" that define what counts as valuable or legitimate (Bourdieu, 1993: 72–77). Within different fields, actors compete for economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, negotiating power not through top-down authority but via the ongoing circulation and recognition of these capitals (Akram, 2023). Fields thus become "battlefields" of social manoeuvring (Akram, 2023:11), exerting tangible effects whether or not individuals are fully conscious of their rules or boundaries (Bourdieu, 1993).

Viewing LAT through the lens of *fields*, allows us to analytically distinguish between two arenas that are often conflated but are, in the case of LAT, deliberately decoupled: the *domestic* field (the material domain of the home, cohabitation, and shared labour) and the *intimate* field (the emotional bonds and ideals of romance and coupledom). This allows us to see how recognition is negotiated across different social arenas, each with its own norms, capitals, and stakes.

Doxa: Invisible Rules of Intimacy

The extent to which certain forms of capital are valued within a field depends on the doxa - those taken-for-granted beliefs, assumptions, and values that seem "natural" and beyond question (Bourdieu, 1977). Doxa is what "goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu, 1977: 164); it reflects the deep, pre-reflexive adherence to the social world as self-evident. Through these pre-reflexive convictions that are woven into daily rituals, language, and cultural narratives, people come to embody social structures and internalize them as if they were natural facts - this is how "the world conforms to the myth" (Bourdieu, 1977: 167). Unlike ideology, doxa operates below conscious thought, silently reproducing hierarchies without overt coercion (Andermahr et al., 1997: 58). People do not question the legitimacy of the social order because they cannot even perceive its arbitrariness.

Doxa only becomes visible when challenged - when a field of opinion forms around an alternative discourse, provoking defenders of the dominant logic (orthodoxy) and those advocating change (heterodoxy) (Bourdieu, 1977: 168). In this way, the field's constructedness is revealed and even apparently stable norms are shown to be historically contingent and open to transformation.

Living Apart Together directly contests the doxa of the intimate field - the taken-for-granted belief that true intimacy requires cohabitation. By choosing separate homes, LAT partners render this norm visible and debatable, turning what once seemed self-evident into one option among many. But this act of divergence is not without consequences: as feminist

scholar Sara Ahmed reminds us, deviating from conventional scripts - queering the path - creates “trouble,” and may in turn get one into trouble (2010: 115). LAT partners, by refusing to be “put back in place” (Ahmed, 2010: 116), are disrupting dominant configurations of intimacy. They become “willful subjects” by challenging the institutional will - the collective force of those whose capital is already recognized and affirmed in the intimate field (Ahmed, 2017: 65).

Embodied Dispositions, & the Promise of Happiness

Thus far, we have mapped the field of intimacy as a contested space, shaped by competition for recognition of one's capital which depends on the doxa of the field. Zooming in, we now turn to the micro-level - the embodied dispositions and affective orientations through which women navigate this terrain. In this regard, Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* and Ahmed’s notion of the *promise of happiness* offer complementary frameworks.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus provides a starting point for understanding how subjects come to desire, reject, or naturalize particular relational forms. Habitus refers to a “system of durable, transposable dispositions” that shapes our engagement with the world (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). These dispositions are not innate, but historically and socially acquired, formed through one’s embodied experiences, social location, and life trajectories (Bourdieu, 2000). They function as an embodied memory, orienting individuals toward certain practices and making specific ways of being in the world feel “natural,” “appropriate,” or even “inevitable” (Bourdieu, 2000). For instance, for many women, the idea of cohabitation may feel like the default, not because of conscious choice but due to sedimented understandings of what intimacy “should” look like. Importantly, habitus operates below the level of reflective thought. It is not something individuals necessarily think about, but something they feel and enact. As McNay (1999: 101) argues, it is a “bodily belief” - a deeply ingrained, pre-reflective sense of what is possible and desirable, rooted in embodied histories rather than abstract reasoning.

Sara Ahmed’s affect theory deepens this insight by showing how those dispositions are affectively charged. Crucially, the feminist scholar is less concerned with defining what affects *are* and more interested in what affects *do* - how they circulate, stick to objects, and shape orientations. In her cultural critique *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed argues that cultural ideals - marriage, cohabitation, family - operate as emotionally

charged promises. Objects, lifestyles, and relational scripts are invested with affective value and operate as "orientation devices" that pull us toward certain futures and push us away from others (Ahmed, 2010: 54). Ahmed also points out that gendered scripts are happiness scripts - "providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good. Going along with happiness scripts is how we get along: to get along is to be willing to be able to express happiness in proximity to the right things" (2010: 59).

While Bourdieu's concept of habitus shows how individuals develop a feel for the game - a *sens pratique* that orients them toward certain practices within a social field - Ahmed adds that this navigation is affectively charged and animated by culturally sanctioned good life. Ahmed thus helps theorize how and why certain relational scripts feel emotionally compelling, and how LAT relationships - by resisting those scripts - may trigger friction, discomfort, or disorientation.

LAT women are not simply dwelling separately from their partners; they are navigating the emotional weight of refusing a path that is promised to deliver happiness. In doing so, they might be framed as "feminist killjoys" who "ruin the atmosphere" and "spoil the happiness of others (...) because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" or in other words, "simply by not finding the object that promises happiness to be quite so promising" (Ahmed, 2010: 65).

This refusal to conform reveals how relational norms are not merely personal choices but structural imperatives deeply ingrained in the collective imagination - aligning with the *collective* dimension that is also underlined in Bourdieu's habitus (e.g., in his book "Distinction - A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste", 1987). In Ahmed's terms, LAT women embody the "deviation from the straight path" - choosing personal autonomy over the collective fantasy of fusion. They expose the discomfort society feels toward those who derive fulfilment outside of traditional relational scripts. Just as the feminist killjoy disrupts the promise of familial bliss by questioning patriarchal structures, women in LAT relationships challenge the romantic ideal that closeness equals happiness.

Negotiating Presence and Absence, Visibility and Withdrawal

While Bourdieu's concepts of field, doxa, and habitus help theorize the structural and intrapersonal dimensions of LAT relationships, they do not fully account for the interpersonal choreography that unfolds between partners. How do women enact LAT in their daily

interactions? What affordances and constraints does this form of relationship-work create? To address this missing layer, Erving Goffman's (1956) frontstage/backstage distinction in "The presentation of the self in everyday life" serves as the final puzzle piece in this theoretical grid.

In Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the frontstage is where individuals perform for an audience, adhering to social scripts, while the backstage is a protected zone of privacy and autonomy. LAT can be understood as a spatial tactic that not only reclaims the backstage within a shared home but expands it into an entirely separate dwelling - excluding not only "the public" but also one's partner as the audience. This allows individuals to manage visibility and relational presence more deliberately, deciding when and how to "perform" intimacy. In this sense, Goffman's framework helps conceptualize LAT as a spatial and relational tactic within a contested field that challenges the normative script of continuous availability and domestic transparency. It also opens up a line of inquiry into how relationships themselves might become increasingly aestheticized and performative when partners use physical distance to regulate their self-presentation - an issue this thesis returns to in the analytical chapters.

Usage of Theoretical Framework

In this thesis, the theoretical framework I have just presented serves as a lens for interpreting the field material introduced in the next chapter. Crucially, it did not precede data collection but emerged alongside the themes I encountered in the field. Rather than adhering to a purely inductive (data-first) or deductive (theory-first) trajectory, I follow an "abductive" logic - after Pierce (cited in Ehn & Löfgren, 2013: 171) - which keeps me open to hunches and surprises and guards against premature closure into rigid categories. In practice, this iterative interplay of data and concepts mirrors the reciprocity at the heart of Grounded Theory (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967), even if ethnologists seldom invoke that tradition explicitly (Ehn & Löfgren, 2013). By privileging this openness, I let the lived realities of LAT relationships guide and hone my analytical tools throughout the research process.

Methodology

An Ethnographic Inquiry

Ethnographies are rooted in the specific, in time and place (...) rooted in the concrete in what real people on the ground are doing and saying (Davies, 2008: 22).

My approach to data collection in this thesis is ethnographic, born out of a desire to capture the lived realities and everyday practices of my participants in rich, contextual detail (Pink, 2007). Following Charlotte Davies's (2008) definition, ethnography here encompasses both the research *process* - fieldwork grounded in qualitative methods and prolonged immersion - and its *product*: the richly descriptive narrative that emerges from this sustained engagement.

Inspired by the concept of "bricolage", as introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss and adapted for cultural analysis by Orvar Löfgren (2015), my methodology brings together diverse forms of material: interview transcripts, field notes, screenshots from online forums, newspaper articles, literary works, policy documents, and auto-ethnographic reflections. These were gathered during six months of fieldwork (November 2024 - April 2025) predominantly in Southern Sweden with occasional visits to Austria.

In what follows, I outline my research trajectory in more detail - how and in what order I engaged with the material, why I chose these particular methods, and the methodological and ethical questions that arose along the way.

Auto-Ethnography

"Autoethnographies show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006: 111)

As indicated in the introduction, the seed for this thesis was planted in a deeply personal context: my own affective reaction to the idea of not sharing a home with a romantic partner. Rather than bracket off this emotional response in the name of "objectivity", I embraced it as an analytic asset and turned my own narratives into Auto-Ethnography. Following Donna Haraway's critique of a "view from nowhere," autoethnography acknowledges that all knowledge is situated and that researchers inevitably shape - and are shaped by - their subject matter (Haraway, 1988). Billy Ehn (2012: 54) captures this dual role neatly: the ethnographer

is “both subject and object of observation”, simultaneously a “research tool and source of information”.

Following Edward T. Hall (1997: 51), I use myself and others as “measuring devices” in moments of cultural contrast - those encounters that throw our own norms and assumptions into sharp relief. Hall notes that we become aware of our own cultural conditioning most clearly when we are confronted with something different. LAT is such a contrasting cultural environment for me. I am not writing from the perspective of someone who is in a LAT relationship; rather, I find myself at the edges of it, stretching out toward its possibilities, grappling with its implications for my own life and relationship. I am, in that sense, a partial insider and a partial outsider.

While I realized that there is an ongoing debate around the boundaries of autoethnography with regard to where to draw the line between participant observation, personal reflection, and what truly constitutes autoethnographic research - some scholars within the department[3] advocate a “go hard or go home” approach - this thesis takes a more pragmatic stance. Autoethnography is used here selectively and strategically: not as the sole mode of inquiry, but as a complementary lens that helps fill the gaps. In particular, moments of self-disclosure are included when they illuminate the affective dimensions of the topic - those instances where personal experience offers insight into otherwise invisible or hard-to-articulate dynamics. It is in these moments that autoethnography becomes most valuable because it enables a deeper, more nuanced engagement with the cultural scripts and emotional negotiations that underpin intimate life.

However, I recognise that writing about my own experiences will inevitably reveal aspects of other people's lives as well (Ellis, 2007: 25). This is particularly evident in this thesis, in which I disclose information about my partner and my interpretation of our relationship dynamics. To honour our mutual privacy, we agreed on which aspects of our shared life could be disclosed, and I regularly checked to ensure that consent remained intact. At the same time, I am aware that, as Ellis (2007: 25) puts it, “you become the story you write”, and that this narrative positioning can have implications not only for me, but also for my partner. Nevertheless, we both share the belief, as Ellis (2007: 22) suggests, that “the value of providing the story to others more than makes up for the discomfort”, and my partner supported the idea that opening up a conversation about alternative ways of being together holds relevance beyond the personal.

Participant Observation in Digital and Physical Spaces

Netnography

From my own experience, the next step in the research process was engaging with Netnography, which is essentially "ethnographic inquiry in the digital sphere" (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017: 2). (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017: 2). For a relationship practice such as LAT, which is often hidden or difficult to observe directly, the digital sphere is particularly relevant. The anonymity it offers can encourage more open disclosure of unconventional desires (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). Online forums, blogs and comment sections became important spaces for exploring how people narrate and negotiate LAT relationships outside of normative face-to-face settings.

My netnographic fieldwork involved participant observation in a specific, active Reddit community devoted to LAT relationships, which had approximately 7,800 members as of April 2025. Following Kozinets' (2002) suggestion, I began my engagement through "lurking" - that is, unobtrusive observation. Being able to observe only, before interacting with people in LAT relationships, allowed me to familiarize myself with the field: I would get insights into how people express their experiences, the questions and anxieties that drive community discussions, and sense the atmosphere or "vibe" within that Reddit group. This phase of unobtrusive observation sharpened my feel for the game, my *sens pratique*, to speak with Bourdieu, equipping me with the shared ground necessary for meaningful dialogue with women in LAT relationships. However, I am also aware of the ethical implications of being a covert researcher - online posts may be publicly visible, but contributors often consider them semi-private. Thus, I approached my role with caution and reflexivity, treating the space with the same ethical sensitivity I would apply to a physical setting. I did not collect or quote posts verbatim without consent, nor did I initiate direct interaction without making my presence and purpose clear. My aim was not to extract data unnoticed, but to listen in a space where people voluntarily share information that help me understand my research inquiry better.

Doing Fieldwork Where LAT Has a Name: Särbo in Sweden

Being immersed in a cultural context where the concept of LAT has a specific name – "särbo" in Swedish - offered me a vantage point for informal, everyday conversations about living apart together relationships. I carried a notebook with me constantly, jotting down field notes from

random encounters, museum visits, and walk-along interviews, capturing impressions and insights as they arose naturally.

To deepen my understanding of how särbo is represented and discussed publicly in Sweden, I analysed Swedish newspaper articles from the past thirty years via the Retriever database. Given my limited proficiency in Swedish, I relied on translation tools like DeepL and ChatGPT to navigate the material. This process revealed an interesting ambiguity: särbo was translated variously as "partner", "estranged partner", "long-distance relationship", or even "separate estate". Only once was it explicitly translated as "Living Apart Together", in reference to a celebrity couple transitioning from särbo to sambo (cohabiting partners). These translation nuances highlight how the concept of LAT remains contextually fluid, ambiguous and only understandable when being presented with its opposite.

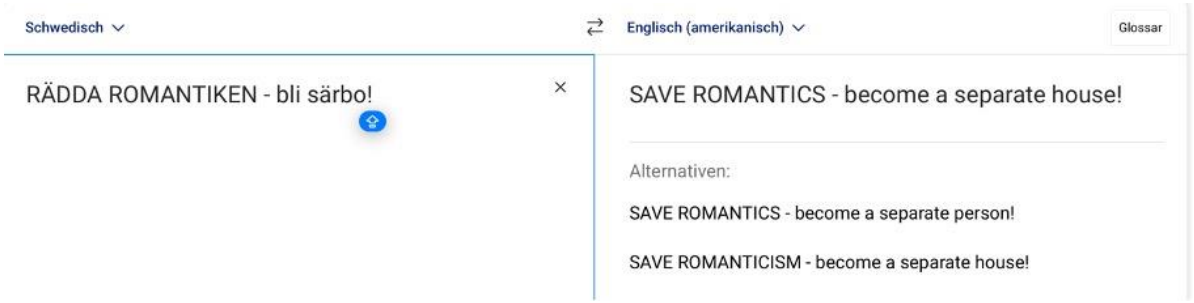

Figure 1: Screenshot of curious Translation (DeepL) of Särbo from Swedish to English

These translation quirks weren't just curiosities - the ambiguity of LAT had implications for participant recruitment beyond the Swedish context. When I posted on my personal social media account that I was looking for people in LAT relationships to interview, the responses revealed confusion. Some people associated LAT with long-distance relationships and asked if they would qualify. Others asked whether it only referred to married couples living apart, and some wanted to know how long somebody needed to be in a relationship to qualify as LAT. These reactions forced me to define my criteria for what constituted a "proper" LAT case. This was an unsettling process, as it meant that I was now deciding who qualified, creating norms shaped by my own interpretations of the literature and the specific research aims for this thesis.

Eventually, I focused on romantic couples who intentionally live apart while maintaining an ongoing, committed relationship. By 'committed', I mean relationships that envisage a long-term future together. Long-distance relationships or temporary separations (e.g. due to studying abroad) were excluded. I focused on women who had been in a relationship for at least three years, however, some studies of LAT include people who have

been together for as little as one year. I would have included polyamorous arrangements too, but all the participants were in monogamous partnerships. Qualifying and disqualifying participants based on these subjective criteria made me aware of the inherent tensions in defining what is considered 'legitimate' within relationships lacking formal markers - a topic to be discussed in depth in the first analytical chapter.

Legal Frameworks and Policy Analysis: Mapping Intimacy Through Law

The role of relationship duration and the meaning of commitment is a highly charged and ambiguous topic - not only in defining the criteria for my research sample but also within legal frameworks. Laws often rely on fixed categories, yet relationships outside of marriage frequently resist such clear boundaries. Just as I had to draw lines, however imperfectly, so too does the law. But creating order is highly political. Creating order is creating norms. It is creating a field that is inviting for some bodies but not for others.

Therefore, as a complementary element to my ethnographic research, I analysed country-specific legal frameworks that intersect with the lived experiences of the women in LAT relationships I talked to. Examining governmental documents and policies concerning marriage, cohabitation, divorce - and importantly, non-cohabitation - in Austria and Sweden allowed me to link the everyday dynamics of intimate relationships (micro-level) with the institutional structures (meso- and macro-levels) that organize and influence them.

This approach is not intended as a detailed legal analysis - I do not have a law degree nor am I a political scientist - but through expert interviews with lawyers from Austria and Sweden, combined with analysis of governmental regulations, I examine how law functions as a producer of norms that shape and regulate intimate relationships.

In-Depth Biographical Interviews

While the aforementioned materials have shaped the framework of this study, the heart of this ethnography lies in the biographical interviews with women who live in LAT relationships. The biographical interview approach “focuses on the subjective interpretation of life events and trajectories”, inviting participants to reflect on how past relationships, personal transformations, and pivotal life events shaped their path toward this relational form (Gomensoro & Burgos, 2017: 152). This method enables engagement with what Bourdieu (1990) terms moments of crisis - when familiar ways of being falter and new relational forms

emerge. Such moments reveal habitus not directly, but through its effects: the tensions, hesitations, and adaptations arising when dispositions clash with social expectations.

Over the time span of six months, I conducted 14 of such biographical, life-course interviews with women who were engaged in LAT arrangements in an age range of 24 to 65 years. These in-depth interviews, lasting between 1.5 to 2,5 hours, were designed to be conversational, allowing participants to guide the dialogue and highlight aspects of their experiences they deemed significant. The interviews with the Swedish interviewees were conducted on site in Sweden either at my kitchen table or at my interviewee's homes. The interviews with the Austrian informants were conducted virtually via Zoom. Although *being there* physically clearly has advantages, the digital setup also proved to have its benefits: I believe that participants sitting in their familiar environment, in their homes, contributed to them feeling at ease and also having some control over the situation. I also got a glimpse into their homes - some participants even walked me through their apartments, holding the laptop in their hands. In this way, the digital format offered a unique advantage: as a complete stranger, I was granted access to an otherwise rather private space.

While the interviews with Austrian participants were conducted in our shared native language, Austrian German, the interviews with participants living in Sweden took place in English - a second language for both of us.

Finding LAT: Participant Recruitment

The first half of the interviews, conducted in November and December 2024, served as a preliminary study and involved young adults aged 24–30 in LAT relationships. Between January and March 2025, I began recruiting more systematically, with a clearer research focus on the Austrian and Swedish contexts. In Austria, a geographically themed Facebook group was highly effective in generating most of my participants. In contrast, similar efforts in Swedish Facebook groups yielded no responses. Instead, I relied on informal, analogue conversations made possible by my presence in Sweden, such as casual exchanges with neighbours in LAT relationships who knew others in similar situations. Ultimately, these personal referrals - what could be considered snowball sampling - enabled me to recruit Swedish participants. The recruitment challenges, particularly in Sweden, may be connected to the private nature of the topic, as well as my status as an 'outsider' who does not speak the language. While no one explicitly stated that they were uncomfortable discussing their intimate

relationships, the lack of response on social media and participants' preference for private meeting spaces suggests that discretion and privacy played a role.

For the analysis, nine women are referred to by their chosen pseudonyms, which I will now introduce. All names have been changed to protect anonymity. Red refers to Austrian informants, Blue refers to Swedish informants to increase clarity throughout the analysis.

- **Jules** (40, Austria): In a seven-year LAT relationship with the father of her young daughter. They've never lived together and don't plan to.
- **Nika** (45, Austria): Lives 1.5 hours from her partner of four years while still sharing a home with her ex-husband and their two children.
- **Anna** (26, Austria): Lives in a LAT relationship with her partner of four years who moved in the same apartment complex as her but in a different apartment.
- **Veronika** (30, living in Sweden): Lives in a LAT relationship with her wife (10 years together) who lives in the same neighborhood. LAT is Veronika's relationship ideal.
- **Leyla** (29, Sweden): Lived apart in the same city from her husband of ten years while raising their daughter. After periods together and apart, they've now moved back in.
- **Aurelia** (25, Austria): In a three-year LAT relationship in the same city. Her dream is to always live apart since having a place to withdraw completely is sacred to her.
- **Maria** (65, living in Austria): Has lived apart from her partner of eight years. She's certain she's "not made" for cohabitation.
- **Gunilla** (65, Sweden): Sees her partner's home from her kitchen window but would not want to risk giving up a space of her own - in which she lives for almost 30 years now - for love.
- **Annika** (60+, Sweden): In a 30-year relationship with her fiancé. They raised a daughter together, but four years ago she moved into her own nearby studio.

Ethical Considerations

Treating Research as Matter of Care:

While ethical reflections on Autoethnography and Netnography have been addressed earlier, this section focuses on the ethical complexities of conducting interviews. Being invited into

the intimate and emotional worlds of participants brings my positionality as a researcher and ethics into close dialogue, which is why they will be discussed together.

Talking about intimate relationships - what happens inside the home, behind closed doors - is a delicate endeavour. My participants made themselves vulnerable by sharing personal stories and the emotional dynamics unfolding within their domestic lives. I do not pretend to be an objective observer in this process. Like bell hooks (e.g. 2005), I believe in writing from where we are implicated. As I shared in the introduction, the idea of physical distance in my own intimate relationship once felt deeply unsettling - almost threatening to my bodily instincts. Yet, intellectually, especially from a feminist perspective, I found the concept compelling. This meant that while I brought certain dispositions to the topic, I wasn't an insider since I am not in a LAT relationship myself.

My position as a young woman speaking with other women certainly shaped the interviews. When talking with women my age, a sense of shared generational experience sometimes emerged. But when speaking with women from older age groups, my youth also marked a clear difference. My gender, too, identifying as a woman discussing topics that are traditionally relegated to the private, and feminized, sphere and culturally coded as "women's concern", likely helped create a space of openness. At the same time, not sharing the lived experience of LAT and entering the conversation as a researcher inevitably shaped the dynamic - sometimes enabling openness, sometimes drawing a line between us.

My presence, my questions, my listening - none of it was neutral. These conversations sometimes stirred emotions, memories, even change. One of my first interviewees, a childhood friend, ended her relationship some weeks after our conversation. The interview had surfaced unresolved thoughts and helped her articulate tensions that had previously existed only as vague discomfort. While the breakup may have happened anyway, she told me the interview accelerated it. Spending nearly two hours speaking about home, intimacy, what is said and unsaid - especially in spaces so often fetishized as sites of domestic bliss and coupledom - can be both revealing and unsettling. What is usually treated as background noise became foreground. Another woman, after sharing her story with me for hours, asked if I had advice - mistaking me, perhaps understandably, for a therapist rather than a researcher. In moments like this, I was reminded again and again that these are not just interviews - they are entanglements. As Donna Haraway (e.g. 2016) reminds us, there is no such thing as objective distance; knowledge is always situated, embodied, partial. I am not outside the field, observing from a clean edge - I am in the middle of it, entangled. And it's not just that I only stirred their world; they stirred mine too. Their stories have stayed with me,

moved me, and helped me not only with this thesis, but also with my personal development, making the idea of living apart from a partner feel less scary, maybe even intriguing. These relationships do not end when the recording stops.

Analysis

Now that the background of this thesis has been outlined, I will turn to the analysis. In the first chapter, I will explore how the act of naming a relational form - of having a term for it - can alter the lived experience of women, turning what once felt like an isolated or personal dilemma into something speakable, shared, and situated within broader social context. In the second chapter I will shed light on how women navigate public scrutiny of their intimate lives and how they tactically reframe their choices to assert legitimacy and redefine intimacy. The third chapter explores what LAT affords women, focusing on agency in the home, the power of withdrawal, and how they assert autonomy over when and how intimacy is performed. The last chapter examines the macro context of LAT, showing how the welfare system relies on physical proximity and how care is negotiated within LAT relationships.

Language and Naming: “It’s like discovering a whole new world”

When I began my fieldwork, I quickly realized that Living Apart Together (LAT) is a term that remains largely unfamiliar in everyday usage - especially in German- and English-speaking contexts I navigated in. Simply saying "I’m researching LAT relationships" was not enough; I had to define what that meant, who it included, and how it differed from more conventional categories, for example long-distance relationships. Since the recruitment of informants has been quite challenging - after all finding people in relationship arrangement with a rather unknown name - I found myself bringing up LAT in casual conversations, hoping that someone would know someone who lived this way and might be willing to speak with me. It felt like I was moving through the world with a sketch of something rare, hoping others could help me spot it. I thought of LAT as this mysterious quarry, a hidden relational ‘species’ in the forest of intimate relationships - something known of but rarely seen, something whispered about in shadows but rarely fully recognized as an actual way of living in a relationship. Like a rare

mushroom growing quietly beneath the forest floor, LAT relationships exist in the margins, thriving in the cracks of normative expectations about intimacy and family. However, as this thesis will show, LAT was not a fixed category waiting to be found but the emergent outcome of a complex web of biographies, circumstances, and relational negotiations. But until I realized this, I kept walking with my sketch, hoping someone, somewhere, might help me locate what I was looking for.

Something unexpected began to happen once I started telling people I was researching LAT relationships. Acquaintances - other students, university staff, casual contacts - would occasionally approach me afterward. Seldomly, they offered to connect me with potential informants. But some would share that having a home of their own - even in a relationship - was a dream they had long held. There was an energy in their accounts that felt almost like relief, as if something quietly longed for had been unexpectedly named. LAT, as a term, offered not just a concept but a kind of permission. It made it possible to imagine that choosing space and autonomy within a relationship wasn't a failure of intimacy, but a valid form of it. In these moments, I was reminded of Sara Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy but in a way that perhaps speaking about LAT didn't kill the joy these women felt, but quite the contrary - it allowed it to spark. Their longings for space, for not always merging lives and homes, may have previously felt misaligned with what they thought is the grammar of love.

After what started as a casual conversation in the university aula, Veronika, 30, from Latin America who now lives in Sweden approached me and we scheduled an interview for the next day. This is when she shared the following:

> "I had no idea it [LAT as a term and concept] even existed - it's like discovering a whole new world. I mean, I only heard about it yesterday, when you told me you were writing your thesis on it, and now I think you might have just changed my life (laughs). But seriously, I felt like - okay, so I'm not just a crazy person who wants to break the frame. I'm not the only one who wants to live like this."

The relief of not "not just being a crazy person" but of navigating a relationship context that also other people align with has been a theme that stood out in many of my interviews. Besides Maria, 65, living in Austria - who came across the LAT concept around 20 years ago through the forum of the lifestyle magazine "Brigitte[4]" - none of my non-Swedish informants was aware that their relationship arrangement has a name. Instead, they often questioned themselves, half-jokingly saying that something must be wrong with them for not wanting to live with their

partner, just like we saw in Veronika's quote above. When I shared in the course of the interviews that there are internet forums in which people who are in LAT relationships share their experiences and seek advice, many asked for the names of these groups. It seemed that in these cases, realizing that what one is already doing is "a thing" - something shared by others, something nameable - had a noticeable emotional and affective impact. It may be interpreted as a form of anchoring, situating their intimate choices within a broader, collective landscape. Naming became a way of transforming what had felt idiosyncratic or even "wrong" into something legible, shared, and legitimate. It is not just about being included in a category; it's about having one's existence made intelligible through shared language. Language, here, is world-making in both a social and existential sense.

In my own experience, finding public discussions about LAT has also been eye-opening. When my partner first suggested that we didn't live together, I felt rejected - and ashamed of that rejection - so much so that I wasn't ready to talk about it with friends yet. So, I turned to the internet, hoping to find a forum or conversation about this kind of situation. It was then that I came across a Reddit thread about LAT. It was a great relief to see that there were others in similar relationships - and not just coping with them but actively advocating for them. It opened a whole new way of thinking for me. Instead of diagnosing my partner as having commitment issues or being avoidantly attached, I began to start being curious and see this as part of a broader relationship discourse. Naming something creates space. It makes room for recognition, conversation, and legitimacy. Words create Worlds.

So for me, realizing that most of my informants had never encountered the term or the concept of LAT before, yet still live in such arrangements, raises the question how they devise and enact alternative ways of relating when they are not operating from an established counter-narrative? It seemed that being in a LAT relationship was less about ideology but more about something else.

Moreover, a transnational dimension becomes relevant. Veronika said that finding out there is a word for her relationship style - and that Sweden, the country she now calls home, has its own term - made her feel seen since it indicates that speakers of that language find it relevant to distinguish a particular practice. Naming is granting her symbolic capital so that she could participate fully in the game within the field of relationships, rather than feeling like she was playing by her own, isolated rules at the margin of the field. Throughout our interview, she insisted she had "broken up with society" - yet, Bourdieu tells us that no one can truly exit the field. Until now, Veronika had been playing at the sidelines with her back turned against a play that never accommodated her. In Sweden, something

shifted. Suddenly, she found herself in a place where there was space for her. Her habitus - those deeply embodied longings she'd carried for years - found a field that felt more accommodating for her preferred way of arranging intimate relationships. And for that feeling of being invited in, the cultural representation in the form of language was important - particularly given the invisibility of LAT in the lives of most of the women I talked to. In Veronika's words:

> "Frida Kahlo was the only reference I had, but even that wasn't a good one, because her relationship was a mess too. So I had no real example of this kind of relationship as something positive, something normal and good that you could actually choose and still be happy. It was very difficult. For a long time, I honestly thought I was just crazy. I kept asking myself: Why am I like this? Why can't I be like everyone else? I don't understand why I don't fit with my culture. And even now, I still carry some of that feeling. (...) But when I discovered särbo I felt validated in a way. I mean, it's so important to have that. When you name something, you take the first step toward understanding it, toward saying, 'This is a thing, it has value, it is an option.' Look at the LGBTQ community - we have so many letters because each life experience is different. With LAT i feel a bit like that."

This underscores the power of language as a form of cultural representation. Veronika even compared it to the LGBTQ+ movement, noting how naming can be empowering: *"Once it has a name, it's easier to explain. LAT. Learn this, then you know."* Veronika pointed out. Having a label gives her symbolic capital. It legitimizes her relationship and allows her to point to an official concept when questioned. Instead of explaining in detail that she and her wife are living in two different apartments, though in the same neighbourhood and that they are still together, happy, and committed, Veronika can simply say, "We're LAT." After years of feeling the need to justify herself, for her sexual orientation as well as her preferred living arrangement, this shift seems to feel rather liberating to her.

Like the matsutake mushroom that Anna Tsing (2015) writes about, it appeared that LAT arrangements (or dreams about it) emerge in unexpected places, outside dominant narratives of intimacy. And just like the mushroom, they are often difficult to locate without the guidance of others who have learned to recognize them. The search for LAT was thus not only about identifying individuals - it became a process of world-making, of co-creating a shared language for something that is still rarely represented. To speak with Bourdieu, naming

LAT gives this way of being in a relationship symbolic power with which one is equipped to compete in the field of intimate relationships. And besides that, by naming LAT, the doxa of the field of intimate relationship comes to the forth. And by being able to perceive the doxa, we unsettle this illusion of inevitability and expose cohabitation not as a natural endpoint of intimacy, but as a historically contingent and socially constructed norm. Naming, then, becomes both an epistemological and a political act.

Särbo - The Meaning of Living Apart Together in Sweden

With Swedish speakers, talking about my research inquiry was more straight-forward since I could refer to the term "särbo", a widely recognized word formed from the prefix sär- (meaning separate) and the suffix -bo (meaning dweller). It exists in direct relation to "sambo" (from sam-, meaning together), a legally and socially institutionalized category for cohabiting couples that are not married. In this linguistic pairing, särbo functions as the marked 'other' - a relational form that is culturally acknowledged but not legally codified.

While we saw in Veronikas example and my experience with regard to reactions that come up when talking about LAT, how a word and the concept that stands behind it has the potential to create a new world, or at least a horizon of how relational life can be arranged; from conversations with Swedish informants I could derive a more nuanced picture how the term is actually understood and used in daily life. Interestingly, younger Swedes rarely talk about their partner as their särbo. Instead, they say they're "dating" or simply call their partner a "boyfriend" or "girlfriend," as I was told in conversations with Swedish university students. Among older Swedes, however, särbo is more common when talking about one's non-cohabitating partner - particularly if they are divorced or widowed. One online commentator explained that beyond a certain age, "dating" or having a "girlfriend/boyfriend" doesn't feel right anymore, thus they would prefer särbo when talking about their non-cohabiting, significant other. Even so, the term can still raise eyebrows.

Gunilla, 65, told me that when she says she is särbo - for example to work colleagues, some people might react in her words "funny". "They maybe find it a bit odd," she said, "but not in a bad way." This ambiguous reaction might be connected to the word's origins: särbo appeared around 1980 as a tongue-in-cheek flip of sambo. Its potential humorous roots[5] help explain why, despite widespread recognition, särbo can struggle to capture the full depth and legitimacy of long-term, non-cohabiting relationships as we can see in the following example of Annika: Annika, 60+, from southern Sweden is in a relationship with her partner for nearly 30 years.

They have an adult daughter together and they lived together in the same apartment for nearly 25 years. But four years ago, Annika left the family home and moved into her own studio apartment only a stone throw away from where her family lives. She and her partner were never married but they got engaged even before their daughter was born. But according to Annika, *"In Sweden, they don't make a big difference whether one is married or just lives together"*. She added that even close friends sometimes didn't know their "official status". Yet when they began living apart, her language shifted:

> "When we lived together, we always said sambo - he would say, 'this is my sambo, Annika,' and I'd say the same. But now, without even thinking about it, we say husband and wife. Maybe because it's awkward to say särbo - it sounds like we just met or something casual. But we've been together for 30 years. So when we're out, like meeting his colleagues or at a funeral, I just say, 'this is my husband.' It's easier. It carries more weight."

This shift in vocabulary is revealing. It seems as if the term and the concept of "särbo" does not carry the symbolic weight to convey the "seriousness" of Annika's three-decade partnership. If they were to call each other särbo, it might suggest to outsiders that they only began their relationship later in life - symbolically rendering all the years they spent cohabiting, raising a child, and weathering the highs and lows of a 30-year bond invisible. In other words, särbo brings together the idea that legitimate couples can dwell separately, but it seems to fail to capture the depth of their shared history. And it also reveals a symbolic hierarchy in how we spatialize intimacy.

Distinctions of proximity and distance are never neutral - they depend on a taken-for-granted point of view. As Ahmed (2006: 16, 17) notes, directional terms like "left" and "right," or "East" and "West," acquire meaning only through the assumptions of a dominant perspective: "left" becomes the site of deviation, "right" that of authority; "East" exists as the exotic "other" only in opposition to the "West," a dynamic Edward Said (1978) rigorously demonstrated in Orientalism. Similarly, the term särbo derives its significance from the normative assumption that living together is the default orientation. In a symbolic field where marriage and cohabitation sit at the center of relational legitimacy, särbo is automatically cast to the margins - its orientation defined by what it is not, rather than by what it is. In contrast, "husband" and "wife" remain powerful signifiers of seriousness and social belonging, even

when used outside the legal frame of marriage and even in a cultural context in which marriage is supposed to have lost its significance for relational legitimacy.

The Righteous Relationship: On Becoming Legitimized

Cohabitation is often imagined as the „natural“ culmination of romantic love - a milestone that signals not only emotional intimacy but social legitimacy. Within what Bourdieu calls the ‘field’ of intimate relationships, this linkage between love and shared living has acquired the status of doxa: an unquestioned, taken-for-granted truth that organizes perception and practice. To love is to live together. Anything else appears either transitional or transgressive.

This doxa is deeply sedimented in both cultural mythology and institutional history. From the religious notion of “becoming one flesh” to Plato’s myth of “spherical people[6]” seeking completion by finding their missing other half, the ideal couple is imagined as not only emotionally but physically and spatially unified. Wanting to live apart when one could live together runs counter to this script.

In my own autoethnographic account presented in the introduction of this thesis, I tried to show how deeply this norm is embodied in how I inhabit the field of intimate relationships. I had equated not wanting to live together with not wanting to be together. So far, my relationship fits neatly within what Ahmed calls the “heteronormative promise of happiness”, a cultural narrative that tightly binds happiness to specific life choices such as falling in love, moving in together, marrying, having children, living together happily ever after. To live apart would have been to deviate from that path I am walking on, and “to deviate from the line is to be threatened with unhappiness” (Ahmed, 2010: 91). That threat, subtle but ever-present, structures the field of coupledom and intimate relationships. Yet, what happens when women seem to ‘choose’ to live apart not as a phase, but as an intentional way of relating?

LAT under the Scrutiny of the Public Eye

In the literature and in statistics, it is frequently distinguished between LAT relationships formed by choice and those shaped by external circumstances. However, this binary overlooks how individual “choice” is always socially embedded. Structural factors -like economic conditions, gender norms, and social expectations - shape decisions in ways that blur the line between agency and constraint. From a Bourdieusian perspective, what appears as personal choice is always mediated by habitus and access to different forms of capital. As such,

preferences and practices around intimate arrangements are not expressions of unconstrained agency, but emerge within a field structured by both visible and invisible forms of constraint. Nevertheless, this differentiation remains heuristically useful, as findings from both online ethnography and in-depth interviews suggest that societal acceptance of LAT depends significantly on the perceived reasoning behind it. When couples live apart due to external constraints - such as work commitments in different cities or unaffordable housing prices that prevent them from moving into shared accommodations - their situation tends to be met with understanding. However, those who "choose" to live apart despite having the option to cohabit often face scepticism or even criticism. This tension was particularly evident in the narratives of my Austrian interviewees, where LAT by choice was frequently questioned or misunderstood within their social circles. In such cases, symbolic boundaries around legitimate intimacy and relational commitment are policed more strictly - suggesting that what is read as "choice" may itself be a marker of distinction, subject to social scrutiny.

Anna, 26, left her rural hometown close to Salzburg for Vienna three years ago when an internship turned into a full-time job. Six months later, her partner joined her - and they deliberately took separate flats in the same building: Anna on the first floor, he on the third - instead of moving in together. Their proximity without cohabitation has raised eyebrows among friends and family. As Anna explains:

> “You could also tell early on that for some, there were big question marks. Like, “Hey, that’s strange. Why don’t you live together if you live so close to each other anyway?” And often, people would bring up how expensive it is. A lot of that came from relatives of the older generation - they understood it even less. (...) There was really a lack of understanding, like, “WHY don’t you just move in together?” They thought it was so obvious. If he’s moving to the same city and into the same building as me, why wouldn’t we just live together? And I think it made some people question what kind of relationship we have if we’re not moving in together. (…) It all comes down to that traditional mindset: you meet someone, you move in together, and then the expected steps follow.”

What is interesting here is that Anna’s surroundings could not grasp why she and her partner would opt for this decision. It is not even critique but almost a form of alienation. Having grown up in a small village in the Austrian countryside, Anna’s choice clashed with the dominant doxa of her milieu. It directly challenged the linear relational model often associated with

traditional relationship milestones. By resisting this "progression", she and her partner create space to explore alternative models of partnership, where cohabitation is not seen as an inevitable step but as a choice that must align with their current needs and capacities; a way of relating that aligns with Giddens concept of the 'pure relationship'.

While all of my Austrian interviewees would share similar stories in which their surrounding would have issues understanding why somebody would chose not to cohabit, Leyla, 29, from a harbour town in southern Sweden, was also made aware of the expectation to cohabit - particularly if children are involved:

> "We became really aware of what people expect from a 'proper' married couple with a kid. Our close friends were super supportive - they understood how we got to that decision. But acquaintances? Not so much. People warned us: 'Your relationship will never be the same,' or even, 'Don't you think your husband might cheat?' Like somehow, not living together meant we weren't loyal. That logic made no sense to me - cohabiting doesn't equal commitment. But there were all these opinions, especially from my mom's friends. Since I lived with her, I'd run into them a lot. They'd say things like, 'Why are you doing that?' And when I asked, 'Why not?' they'd even get annoyed - like, 'Why are we even arguing? You know what's right and wrong.' Like it was obvious."

Leyla's story reveals the strength of a classificatory logic in the relational field - one that continues to privilege cohabitation as the legitimate form of committed intimacy. While her close friends were supportive, having followed the reasoning that led to their decision, the broader moral gaze came from acquaintances - a reminder that the dominant habitus surrounding intimacy remains deeply structured by normative assumptions ("You know what's right and wrong"), even within the Swedish context with a welfare state that encourages individual autonomy probably more than any other. Bourdieu's notion of doxa - those unspoken rules of the game that appear self-evident is useful here. The assumption that cohabitation is a natural step in a committed relationship was not something Leyla or her husband felt constrained by, until pregnancy shifted how others interpreted their choices. In that moment, the "rules" of the field became visible. Her refusal to internalize these expectations can be interpreted as heterodoxical opinion in the fields of coupledom, domesticity and the family, and her decision - though rational and pragmatic according to her understanding - marked her as a transgressor of the implicit moral order.

Swimming Against the Tide: Willful Subjects and Ageing as Gendered Liberation

Most of my interviewees carried with them an awareness that, in choosing not to cohabit, they are seen as transgressors of the moral order. Their relationships are rendered questionable - sometimes even illegible - particularly in light of anxieties around fidelity and financial responsibility. One interviewee even described how, by deciding not to live with her partner, she is viewed as "the devil" within the context of her traditional upbringing. The women I spoke with, seem to experience the relational landscape as a striated space rather than a smooth one, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept - an environment marked by boundaries, limitations, and hierarchies that structure and constrain movement. A contested space. And yet, I was struck by how they navigated this field - not with resignation, but with insistence. I came to see them as Ahmed's "willful subjects," figures who refuse the ease of compliance and persist in their choices despite the costs. In doing so, they embody what Donna Haraway (2016) famously called the ability to "stay with the trouble" - to remain with complexity and contradiction, to inhabit the discomfort of not fitting in, and still to insist on the legitimacy of their relational form.

When I asked my interviewees what they think it was that made "swimming against the tide" possible, the most common answer was: age. In particular, women from the older cohort expressed a sense of relief - describing how, with increasing age, came increasing liberty. They felt freer from social expectations, having already "done their duty" by following earlier life scripts such as marriage, child rearing, or domestic caregiving. As one woman put it, "I did what I had to do. I had what I was supposed to have. Now I'm done and I can do what I want." Andermahr et al. (1997: 19) describe ageing as a "gender-differentiated process," citing feminist perspectives that view the post-menopausal period as a time when the social obligations tied to femininity are eased. They cite Simone de Beauvoir: "It is the autumn and winter of her life that woman is freed from her chains… Rid of her duties, she finds freedom at last… at the very time when she can make no use of it." (Andermahr et al., 1997: 19). This quote draws attention to the deeply gendered and ageist nature of the intimate relationship field in which expectations of caregiving and relational conformity shift over the life course, often becoming more flexible only after women have fulfilled their "duties. Luckily, the women in my research were able to see a way to make use of this new freedom but this also only because they had the financial means and the necessary social and cultural capital to do so. And this gender differentiated process of aging might likely also explain why also in the previous

research it has been found that its oftentimes elderly women who chose to not cohabit, and who are most satisfied with this setting. Annika, 60+, shared:

> "I have a handful of girlfriends telling me, oh, I would like to do the same. I'm so tired of taking care of everything. I'm tired of my husband. I would love to live in a little place for myself. So, I think it's not so unusual for us women. When we have this kind of freedom, we like that… Not always taking care of other people and the household and things like that."

Here, her previous roles - particularly as a mother and in Annikas words "project manager of the household" now provide a form of narrative legitimacy for opting out of cohabitation and by occupying these roles, she seems to have collected sufficient symbolic capital that makes opting out an option.

Changing the field

When analysing the transcripts through the lens of Bourdieu's notion of *fields*, I began to see how the women in my interviews might be able to sustain the pressure experienced in the field of romantic relationships: by simultaneously engaging in other intersecting fields. While they may not comply with the doxa of the romantic relationship field - such as cohabitation as a marker of legitimacy - they align themselves with the doxa of other fields: that of the "good mother," the "creative artist," the "ambitious intellectual".

Besides that, some even seemed to derive a certain pleasure from challenging the moral order, occupying the position of the "rebel", which in turn granted them symbolic capital to navigate their social worlds. Jules, 40, a mother of two, living in the Austrian countryside, offered a striking example of this. She told me that while she might not feel confident in every area of her life, her decision to be in a LAT relationship is something she stands behind completely. When confronted with criticism or scepticism from those around her, she flips the script. As she put it: "Actually, what you are doing is strange. Getting married? Come on, that's so old-school. I frame it as something new, something innovative - what people do these days." In this way, Jules actively tries to convert her deviation from the romantic relationship field into symbolic capital; positioning herself as part of a progressive, contemporary, even avant-garde way of being in a relationship. Curiously, what helped her framing it that way was, in part, her training as a breastfeeding counsellor, during which she learned how child-rearing

practices vary across cultural contexts, often extending far beyond the nuclear family model. Through this exposure, she came to see that the norms she had been raised with, and continued to observe in her surroundings, were not inevitable, but culturally specific arrangements. Confronted with an alternative discourse within the field of the family, she gained the reflexive distance necessary to perceive the doxa that silently structures it.

Maria, 65, who has been in a LAT relationship for eight years, shared how challenging it can be for her friends to understand her decision not to cohabit with her partner - particularly now since her daughter is out of the house. While Maria's decision not to live with her partner was largely accepted when her daughter still lived with her in their two-room apartment in the city of Salzburg, the situation shifted once her daughter moved to Vienna for university. This shift is revealing: as long as Maria's living arrangement could be interpreted through the lens of maternal responsibility, her choice not to cohabit with her new partner appeared socially legitimate. In this context, her decision could be read as symbolic capital, marking her as the devoted mother who prioritizes her child's well-being over her romantic life. Also, Jules seems to navigate to a large extent within the field of family - or rather of the devoted mother. She emphasized how important it is for her older son to have time with her alone, without her new partner present: *"My son needs a lot of mummy time alone. And that's why it's actually good for all of us, the few days of distance we have. It gives him the assurance that, for those days, mummy is only there for the children. That's really important for him."*

Back to Maria. Now that her daughter has moved out, the previously unquestioned legitimacy of her separate living arrangement is more frequently called into question from her social circle. This suggests that without the visible presence of her child, the symbolic framework that once justified her LAT arrangement begins to lose its persuasive power.

> "'Do you have a crisis? Are you not getting along anymore?', they would ask. Well, we have crises like any other couple but we always work through them. But living together is just not an option for me. I'm not suited for cohabitation. And then there's always the financial side: 'But you're paying so much rent! It would be so much cheaper if you moved in together.' But I definitely wouldn't move together because of money. No, I think that would be a really bad option. It's just not worth it to me, because I don't need much money. For example, I hardly ever buy new clothes. If I need or want something, I always go second-hand. Most of my furniture is from flea markets, and I've actually

> found some beautiful things. I'm like a treasure hunter. When it comes to shopping I mostly go to discount stores - but I've realized that Hofer and Lidl have really fresh seasonal vegetables. They have a lot of organic products, even great vegan options. I'm not a vegan, but I do enjoy vegan food. Honestly, I get by just fine. I can't really afford holidays, though. Once a year, I try to make it work. My partner would invite me anyway, because he's financially well off. Maybe one day, I'll accept it. But I'm doing okay. I think you can manage with little. I don't even have a car because I don't have a driver's license. A car would be a huge expense, I think."

Despite modest financial means, Maria draws on a habitus shaped by values of autonomy, frugality, and aesthetic discernment - framing her minimalist lifestyle not as shortage, but as choice or a careful negotiation of priorities. Her fondness for flea-market furniture, second-hand clothes, and seasonal organic produce might not only be about saving money but also about expressing a particular *taste*, a cultivated distance from consumerist norms. In this way, Maria transforms necessity into *distinction*. Besides that, the statement that she would not want to move together due to financial reasons indicates (and also her reluctance to accept her partner paying for her vacation) positioning her as someone who seeks distinction through a more liberated, self-determined way of living. Moreover, not wanting to cohabit for financial reasons is again closely connected to Giddens notion of the 'pure relationship' in which intimacy is decoupled from external structures like economic dependency or institutional obligation, and instead maintained "for its own sake." So with Marias example we can see the conversion of cultural capital into symbolic capital. While she cannot really play on the family field anymore, she keeps on playing in the field of intimate relationships, but she takes on a heterodox position that challenges the norm. She does that by showing a "taste of liberty" - that is according to Bourdieu (1986: 6) characterized by a tendency "to use stylized forms or deny function" - rather than a "taste of necessity".

Thus, LAT only becomes socially "affordable" when it is underwritten - explicitly or not - by capital and a habitus that enables the performance of distinction. For Maria, her professional position as musician - essentially a cultural producer - might shape a habitus that even values unconventional choices. She mentioned that when she is composing, she needs time and space without interruption. In this sense, LAT seems to be a part of a creative, artistic lifestyle. Her home is also her workspace, a place tied to her creativity, where being alone is not a lack, but a condition for producing art. However, this long quote offers another curious detail: Maria says that she is "not suited for cohabitation." She returns to this

point several times throughout the interview, suggesting that it is more than a passing thought - it is a core idea she holds about herself. On one level, this may reflect a degree of self-knowledge, a recognition of her own needs and limits. Yet it also carries the tone of finality - "This is who I am, full stop." Rather than viewing identity as fluid or evolving, Maria appears to categorize herself in fixed terms. This act of self-definition may function as a protective mechanism. It renders her position legible - both to herself and to others - but in doing so, it may also reduce the space for relational flexibility or mutual shaping.

A Matter of Taste

"Aversions to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes" (Bourdieu, cited in Ahmed, 2010: 33)

The reactions from participants' social environments to their LAT arrangements were predominantly sceptical, often framed in moral, economic, or practical terms. Comments ranged from suspicion about the stability of the relationship ("Did you break up?"), to financial advice ("You could save so much money by moving in together"), to outright confusion ("Why wouldn't you move in, if you live in the same city?"). These responses suggest more than just unfamiliarity. Instead, they reflect a form of symbolic alienation to the very concept of living apart together. Drawing on Bourdieu, we can interpret this as a clash between popular taste and a more reflexive, autonomous mode of living. Popular taste, as Bourdieu puts it, tends to subordinate form to function - meaning that people expect intimate relationships to perform a clear function: cohabitation signals commitment, shared space signals stability. LAT disrupts this expectation by decoupling cohabitation from functional considerations such as efficiency for example in saving money by pooling resources. Just as working-class audiences tend to judge art by how well it communicates a story or moral (Bourdieu 1984: 5), many people in the participants' networks judged their living arrangements according to normative scripts. They are seeing their refusal to cohabit not as a conscious aesthetic or ethical project, but as a failure to fulfill the "function" of the couple relationship: to merge homes, finances, and caregiving under one roof. Viewed this way, LAT can be read as a kind of "pure aesthetic" relationship practice, which asserts form (personal autonomy, individualized spatiality) over function (economic pragmatism, normative togetherness), and thus unsettles widely held expectations about what intimate life should look like.

This reading also resonates with my own autoethnographic experience. My partner and I, coming from different backgrounds with regard to class as well as tradition, brought distinct aesthetic orientations to our relationship. For me, his preference for living apart felt not only impractical - why maintain two homes when we would anyways spend most of the time together in one place? - but also like a retreat from the relational labour that intimacy entails in my understanding. I grew up in a three-generational house where space was constantly negotiated, and collaboration and compromise were habitual, almost unconscious practices of living-with-others. His vision felt too lavish, too frictionless, too superficial to my idea of what it means to be together *for real*. But my moral judgments reveal the sediment of my own socialization: a classed and gendered habitus that values proximity, mutual care, and endurance. Where I saw a failure to "do intimacy properly," he saw a conscious resistance to normative cohabitation - less a refusal to commit than a reconfiguration of what commitment could look like. However, at the time, I couldn't yet see what he saw in this arrangement.

Womens Agency in the Home: Having a Space of One's Own

Loving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter: home as overflowing and flowing over." (Ahmed, 2006: 11)

The home occupies a central place in the lives of the women I interviewed. Each of them spoke about how much they love their home - how it reflects their taste, their personality, their self. Their homes are extensions of who they are. What they love most about their home is that it is theirs. A space where they don't have to justify their choices or negotiate compromises. A space where they can be entirely themselves.

When asked what their home symbolizes to them, many responded without hesitation: freedom. They love their homes because no one but themselves decides when to clean, what counts as "tidy," or which rhythms structure daily life. They love it because no one challenges their sense of order. Because they are free to set their own rules they feel are necessary for making a space liveable. This resonates with Mary Douglas's (1991) idea that home is made through the imposition of meaningful order - bringing space under control.

Strong Enough to Lift a Horse: Reimagining Self-Sufficiency through the Spirit of Pippi Longstocking

In this way, autonomy and self-sufficiency emerge as key themes in my interviews. The ability to live alone, manage a household, and make both aesthetic and logistical decisions becomes an assertion of agency. These capacities are framed as achievements: markers of competence, pride, and self-definition. As Gullestad (1993: 148) notes, "being able to 'manage by oneself' is highly valued," particularly for groups denied such independence. My findings suggest this is especially resonant for women, for whom living alone - without financial dependence on a partner - marks a significant break from gendered traditions of dependency on fathers, husbands, or the family unit as a whole. In this light, a home of one's own becomes a space of authorship, autonomy, and resistance.

This ethic of self-determination reminds of the cultural figure of *Pippi Longstocking* who represents a gendered ideal of radical independence and resistance to normative expectations of "the good girl". In many ways, the women in LAT relationships seem to embody a grown-up version of this refusal: declining the role of "the good woman" who makes herself small to prioritizes relational harmony, cohabitation, and availability. Like Pippi, they resist domestication - both in the literal sense of sharing a home and in the symbolic sense of conforming to normative scripts of femininity. As the German theme song of the Swedish classic the proclaims, "Ich mach' mir die Welt widdewidde wie sie mir gefällt" ("I make the world the way I like it") – a line that captures the spirit of willful autonomy these women articulate in shaping relational life on their own terms.

Gunilla, 65, who has lived alone in her apartment in Lund for over 30 years, captured this sentiment. When asked what it is that she loves about her home she would answer:

> "I made it. All of it. Everything. And I know I have a solid economy. I did it myself… I really did it myself. You know, when Hugo (her ex-partner with whom she lived in that place 30 years ago) and I were buying furniture, we never really agreed. We just had such different ideas. Ah... I remember those moments so clearly. But now? This place - it's all mine. All mine. (...) I have to have it clean, everything in its place. I love flowers. It has to feel cosy. It has to feel like me."

The repetition of notions such as "all mine", "I did it" me, myself and I underscores how important it is to her that this space is unnegotiated, unshared, fully hers. This isn't simply

about a preference for tidiness or coziness; it's about the ability to fully project and maintain a self-image without compromise. Her attention to detail seems to be part of a larger effort to make the space reflect and reinforce her identity. At the same time, the economic dimension - her pride in having "a solid economy", a phrase that recurs throughout the interview - signals a form of self-sufficiency that is deeply affective, bound up with dignity, independence, and self-worth. This echos Goffman's (1956) idea of the "presentation of self": just as people present themselves through dress, speech, or demeanour, the home becomes a stage for performing competence, independence and taste. The home is a symbolic and material extension of the self. As Ahmed (2006) notes, it becomes saturated with bodily presence. It is a space where identity is not only expressed but expanded, flowing over.

The Affordances of Distance & Space

"I was never able to have my own space, and I just kept thinking - I need my own space, I need it! And I was like, how is this not possible? Why is this so hard? (...). I'm married to a woman - I'm already breaking the rules. So why shouldn't I also have my own space?"

While the majority of my informants at some point in their lives had the romantic ideal of being in a romantic relationship that includes cohabitation and other markers of the heteronormative *promise of happiness*, but at some point let go of that ideal and accepted that it will not materialize in a way that actually makes them happy, Veronika (30) is one of the few informants who said she had always wanted a place of her own. For her, having her own space is a way to get to know herself better - to learn who she is without having to align her rhythm to anyone else's. The implementation of this dream however took time. After years of cohabitation with her wife Beatriz, Veronika first tried to carve out space by turning the guest room into her version of a "man cave." Eventually, she moved into that room entirely, while Beatriz kept the shared bedroom as her own. The final step was getting her own apartment just a stone's throw away from their old home, where Beatriz still lives. Finally Veronika had a room for herself and she would share that this arrangement "changed the relationship in all the best possible ways".

What fundamentally changes for Veronika when she begins living apart from her partner is the ability to choose when and how intimacy happens. Living apart allows for a dynamic and intentional management of what Goffman (1956) might call the frontstage and backstage of the self. In many cohabiting relationships, the home is imagined as a shared

backstage - a zone of comfort, mutual vulnerability, and unmasking. But Veronika's experience complicates that idea. For her, intimacy within shared space also meant a constant exposure to the gaze, needs, and subtle emotional expectations of the other. What she longs for is not separation from her partner per se, but the possibility of a backstage behind the backstage - a space of radical privacy, where she is not beholden to anyone, and where even the performance of being okay is suspended. When Veronika said she wanted to "stay alone and not shower for two days" or that she needed time when "no one was asking why [she] was being distant," she points toward this need for a space untouched by surveillance, even the intimate surveillance of love. From a Goffmanian perspective, this could be seen as the desire to loosen the mask, to momentarily step outside the roles we perform for others. Yet, Goffman (1956) also argues that we are never not performing - so even in radical privacy, Veronika is both performer and audience. So maybe it is then a loosening of the performance that is triggered by the gaze of the other, the gaze of the partner that requires on the performance of the good partner, the gaze that asks for closeness, care, attention - something Veronika is not able to perform, putting on that mask is in some situation unbearable to her.

This resonates strongly with other participants, particularly among the younger cohort. Aurelia, for instance, described how she needed time alone to simply lie in bed and "stare at the ceiling for the whole afternoon" - to do nothing, and to do it without explanation. Since developing chronic fatigue following COVID-19, even the passive presence of another person creates pressure in moments when dealing with 'the other" is too much. "Just knowing that he is in the apartment, and I am in the bedroom resting makes me feel bad. I felt I had to entertain him so he wouldn't be bored," she said. In these narratives, the very presence of the other - the gaze, even when gentle - becomes a demand.

Living apart allows Veronika and Aurelia to regain control over when to be "on" and when to withdraw, to regulate access to their emotional and physical selves. By claiming space outside the gaze of a partner or the public, Veronika and Aurelia "buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them" (Goffman, 1956: 70), asserting control over when and how intimacy is performed. This selective visibility becomes a key tactic in negotiating the contested terrain of home, gender, and relational expectations; and the capacity to retreat, rest, and "just exist" without consequence becomes a key affordance of LAT relationships for this cohort. From an affective perspective, these accounts also demand that we pay attention to *what presence does* - how space, co-presence, and the gaze structure experience. Who is allowed a backstage? And when does the presence of the beloved become an imposition, rather than a comfort?

For Annika, her irregular working schedule as a nurse provided moments of withdrawal from the roles she inhabited within the family home. On weekdays when her daughter and husband were at school or work, she often had the house to herself which offered her a kind of backstage in Goffman's sense - a private, restorative space where she could momentarily step out of the performance of caregiving and domestic responsibility. In this case, not space but time afforded a boundary. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the home became constantly occupied, erasing that backstage entirely. With no space to retreat to, Annika described the sensation of being swallowed by the demands of family life. Eventually, this led her to search for a space of her own and, ultimately, to move out. In hindsight, she admits that she finds it hard to comprehend how she managed to find the strength to make that decision. At the time, however, it felt like the only option left. Annika never considered leaving her partner, but she understood he might leave her over her decision to move out. It was a risk she was willing to take, as living together had become unbearable.
Ahmed's (2010: 97) reflections on the "unbearable life" help illuminate this shift:

> "A bearable life is a life that can hold up, which can keep its shape or direction, in the face of what it is asked to endure. (...) The unbearable life 'breaks' or 'shatters' under the 'too much' of what is being borne. (..) where the 'too much' is experienced as the breaking point of a long history of involvement or the endurance that sustains suffering insofar as it is borne."

For Annika, the unbearable was the accumulation of a long history of unseen care work, now intensified by spatial compression and lack of breathing space. Her decision to move out, then, becomes not only an act of self-preservation but a response to a threshold crossed, where domestic endurance could no longer sustain itself.

"Quality Time" and the Compartmentalized Individual

The examples above have shown how individuals manage their "backstage" - separating when they step into the role of partner and when they reclaim time for themselves. This can be understood as a form of compartmentalization: a self for the self, a self for the other. In the context of LAT, this split takes on an added dimension. By separating the household from the romantic relationship, participants often frame their time together as "quality time": time that is intentionally carved out to "spend it with someone, giving them your full attention because you value the relationship" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). This framing imbues everyday

interactions with a heightened sense of intentionality and meaning. This makes "quality time" a curious phenomenon. It suggests an aestheticization of the everyday - a selective curation of moments that are *marked* as special, meaningful, or "worthwhile". In this sense, quality time becomes a symbolic act of intimacy and also a form of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984).

Since Annika (60+) lives in her studio apartment which is only 300m away from the apartment she lived in with her family for over 25 years, she and her partner would actually spend more time together compared to when they were cohabitating. Annika shared that she has been very tired and frustrated in that setting since she was the only one who took care of the household - but now, her relationship is separate from that and she feels she has much more time on her hands that she can spend with her partner to do "nice things". Although it is mundane activities such as grocery shopping, walking the dogs or coming over for a coffee - these are now qualified and marked as extra-ordinary. Similarly, Veronika shares that by living in close proximity but different apartments, their relationship dynamic shifted completely: "When we were living together we were not having a quality time together, we were just there. And when you live with someone you kind of take for granted that the person is there."

What emerges from these accounts is that, particularly for LAT couples living in close proximity, spatial separation appears to enable a renewed appreciation for the mundane. The small, everyday interactions, precisely because they are no longer assumed, become intentional and marked. Rather than being lost in the blur of daily domestic routine, they are rendered visible and meaningful. It is as if the ordinary becomes extraordinary when it is no longer guaranteed.

In my own relationship, it seems as this is also one of the main reasons my partner suggested to try out living apart together. To separate the sphere of work (household and employment when working from home) from the sphere of leisure. Particularly because I use our home also as my office, and he sometimes too, there is a collapse of roles within the sphere of the home. Rather than compartmentalisation - there is a merging. While I experience this merging as organic, allowing for spontaneous moments of connection that blur the lines between work and intimacy, for my partner this lack of separation leads to fatigue from the perceived difficulty shifting between "worker" and "partner" roles. Being in "work mode" requires containment for him, and spontaneous interactions feel intrusive rather than connective. What this situation illustrates is that even within the same material space, people can experience profoundly different realities. This analysis aligns with Edward T. Hall (2003) who argues that individuals from different cultural backgrounds occupy distinct sensory worlds in how they perceive, filter, and respond to their surroundings. He challenges the assumption

that being in the same place leads to a shared understanding, emphasizing instead that people tune in to different aspects of their environment and relate to space in divergent, embodied ways. These differences become especially visible in moments of tension, when interpretations of a shared space start to clash (Hall, 2003). Where I might see an open-plan room as flexible and intimate, he may experience it as a site of sensory intrusion - a collapse of identity roles. And while we may share elements of a common cultural background, our habitus is differently shaped by gendered socialization, classed experiences, and the particularities of our upbringing, producing divergent dispositions and sensibilities.

What matters to my partner is having quality time together - time that is intentionally carved out, where we can both be fully present and not mentally "halfway at work" as he would frame it. For him, a LAT arrangement might offer the spatial and psychological clarity needed to make that kind of presence possible. And it would support him in constructing his own sensory order that aligns with his threshold of comfort with regard to proximity and distance. Yet for me, this clear-edged distinction between work and intimacy feels somewhat uncanny, even performative - as though closeness must be scheduled and contained within predefined boundaries. Interestingly, some of the women I interviewed expressed similar ambivalence:

In the case of Nika and Jules, spending time at their partner's place is very scheduled, very regular, very well planned and for both of them, it resembles the feeling of being on holiday. While being on holiday initially sounded positive, particularly for Nika having only quality time together for her it feels as if something is missing. The relationship, while pleasant, lacks the embodied density of shared everyday life. Her statement underscores the relational cost of compartmentalization: when intimacy is confined to scheduled intervals, the porousness and friction of daily co-presence - its unplanned encounters, silences, and routines - are diminished. Nika's situation further exemplifies the complexity of overlapping roles and spatialities. She lives in a large house with her two daughters and her ex-husband Martin, with whom she maintains a cooperative, though affectively neutral, domestic arrangement. They occupy separate areas within the home and continue to share practical responsibilities such as meals and laundry. However, Nika shared a moment in which the compartmentalised boundaries began to blur: She and Martin decided to go skiing in a ski resort not far from their home - that exceeded their usual utilitarian interaction. Engaging in what she described as quality time with Martin, normally reserved for her LAT partner, introduced a sense of ambiguity. "Can this be considered cheating?" they wondered, semi-seriously.

Notably, both chose to keep the event from their respective partners, highlighting the emotional nuances of compartmentalised intimacy.

Despite her investment in the LAT model, Nika articulated a sense of longing. “We just don’t have an everyday life together,” she said, referring to her LAT partner. She compared the relationship to a soup missing a crucial ingredient. Her reflections resonate with Lynn Jamieson’s (1998) concept of privileged knowledge - the deep familiarity acquired through cohabitation and continuous shared presence. While Jamieson is careful to note that such knowledge does not automatically yield emotional closeness, Nika’s experience suggests that it can nonetheless provide a felt sense of intimacy that episodic togetherness struggles to match. “With my ex-husband, I only needed to look at him to know what he was thinking,” she remarked. “You don’t have that with someone you see every other week.” This can be connected to Mary Douglas (1991) note, that a shared home provides access to significant information about each other's daily routines and is typically organized through “successive mutual consultation”. Thus, as part of the field of the home - significant information seems to be embedded.

The final tension with compartmentalisation and the construction of “quality time” lies in its performative and often less 'authentic' quality, especially when compared to the ‘raw’, unstructured flow of the everyday. Leyla, who spent the first year of motherhood in a LAT arrangement, reflected on this dynamic. Because her husband didn’t live with her and their daughter, she felt an ongoing pressure to prepare their child for his visits - bathed, dressed, fed, "presentable" - so he could enjoy quality father-child time. Looking back, Leyla described this as emotionally and physically taxing: so much labour happened in the *backstage* to speak with Goffman, so that what appeared on the *frontstage* - those few curated hours - could feel effortless. Importantly, she clarified that her husband never explicitly demanded this; the pressure came from within. This is precisely what reveals the power of her gendered habitus: she does not need to be told to act this way. It is an implicit knowing, a feel for the game, as Bourdieu would say. The fact that she feels compelled to have her daughter “presentable” for the father's visit, and to manage the backstage labour invisibly, shows how deeply internalised the norms of the “good mother” are.

Quitting the Job of the Service Women?

Although this thesis focuses on Living Apart Together (LAT) arrangements, women’s care work remains a central thread - precisely because, for many, the unequal distribution of care responsibilities is a key reason for choosing not to cohabit with a man again. In these cases,

LAT seems to be a strategy of self-preservation. A refusal to be reabsorbed into the taken-for-granted expectations of gendered care.

For both Swedish and Austrian women in the older cohort, the burden of domestic and emotional labour in previous cohabiting relationships emerged as a recurring and defining grievance. Many described how they "naturally" ended up doing everything alone, often referring to themselves as "maids," "service women," or, in Annika's words, "the project managers of the house". "We used to joke about it - my friends and I," she said,

> "and they range from their 40s to their 70s - but it's always the same story. The women are the project managers of the family. Whether she's 45 or 75, she's the one running the logistics: school, food, meetings with teachers, everything. The men? 'He's not doing that much at home,' says the 40-year-old. And the 70-year-old nods in agreement."

Even now, living apart from her husband, Annika continues to manage the family logistics - sometimes, she said, knowing her partner's schedule better than he does. Despite physical separation, mental labor persists

Nika's story from Austria resonates with similar themes. While she continues to perform most of the domestic labour, the shift following her (unofficial) divorce marked a significant emotional change: expectations evaporated. The pressure to be a "good wife," to maintain an ideal of fairness within the household, and to hope for reciprocity dissolved to a large extent, she said. By removing the romantic and moral framework of marriage, the emotional weight of housework diminished. The labour remained, but it became less charged. She remains committed to her role as a mother and plans to maintain that role until her children become independent and move out. Her ex-husband remains the main breadwinner, and his income is still crucial for the family. But as she explicitly pointed out, once those roles end, so do also the circumstances that keep them under one roof.

Letting go of the hope that domestic labour will be reciprocated also surfaces in Jules's LAT arrangement. In her previous marriage, she said, the imbalance was constant - but so too was the expectation that it would, or should, one day improve. However, what follows now, was the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back - that contributed to the dissolution of their marriage. After confronting her husband about routinely staying late at work, her now ex-husband replied: "I stay longer at the office because when I come home, I have to work again." Jules described this experience as brutally honest and incredibly painful.

> "And I just thought: What do you think I've been doing all day? I was working 25 hours a week, taking care of a toddler, and still doing everything at home. I couldn't just come back from work and say, now I'm done, and do nothing. My child still needed dinner, care, attention."

This moment encapsulates what Hochschild & Machung (2012) termed "The Second Shift" - the unpaid labour, disproportionately shouldered by women, that begins after the formal workday ends. But it's more than physical chores; it's also the mental load: the relentless, invisible work of remembering, anticipating, and managing. Her ex-husband's literal 'hiding' at his workplace mirrors what Mary Douglas (1991: 296) described as the *free-rider* problem in the moral economy of the household: someone who benefits from a shared infrastructure without contributing fairly to its maintenance. And over time, imbalance becomes a felt reality. In this light, Jules's decision to divorce her husband and live apart with her next partner can be read as a reconfiguration of the terms of domestic life. A LAT arrangement offers her something cohabitation did not: a space where care is no longer silently assumed but can be actively negotiated. And yet, paradoxically, in refusing cohabitation, she has also become the alone caregiver for her children - carrying all the labour and responsibilities on her shoulders. Nevertheless, she considers herself "lucky" to have a partner who is willing to be part of this rather unconventional way of living as a family. She and her partner never lived together - not even when she returned from the hospital with their newborn. It was clear from the beginning that he will stay in his home to which he is quite attached according to Jules, while she is staying in her home with the children. While she manages nearly all aspects of parenting and household logistics, her partner, as she put it, "lives like a bachelor on the days he's not with us."

That phrase stayed with me, and I could not help but ask her directly, whether she thought that this setup was fair. Without hesitation she answered: "No, it's not fair. He is the father, so he should contribute equally. But it wasn't fair when I lived together with my ex-husband either." Cohabitation, her example showed, does not necessarily create fairness - it merely obscures inequality better. At least now, she said,

> "I don't have to negotiate everything, and my partner is not allowed to have any demands with regard to order and tidiness since it's my home. And I have somebody to reach out to whenever I need help with something - like technical stuff. Also, he would babysit in

> case I wanted to do something in the evening. So I can't think of a more practical arrangement."

Drawing on Ahmed's concept of affective economies (2004), we can understand Jules's current living arrangement as a feminist reorientation of domestic space. In conventional cohabiting relationships, the home often becomes a site where women are expected to care, manage, clean - the list goes on. The space itself becomes "sticky" with these expectations; it accumulates affective residues of obligation and gendered responsibility. In her LAT setup, Jules has begun to detach those expectations from her domestic environment. While she still carries the load of parenting and household labor, she no longer feels structurally or emotionally responsible for sustaining her partner's comfort. He cannot demand tidiness, nor expect a dinner waiting for him because he does not live in her apartment.

The same applies to Nika's case - since she is not the partner of her cohabitating ex-husband anymore - she does not feel responsible for sustaining his comfort. What Ahmed helps illuminate here is how emotions are not confined to individuals but circulate and attach to spaces and bodies. By refusing cohabitation, Jules and Nika have effectively unstuck the affective expectations of romantic partnership from their domestic space. This way, the home has been reclaimed as a space on their own terms.

Yet this withdrawal also introduces a paradox: by expanding the backstage, women in LAT relationships may enable a more curated, aestheticized, and performative form of intimacy. The separate space becomes a site of emotional and bodily maintenance, allowing them to "recharge" or recalibrate outside the partner's gaze. In this way, relationships risk becoming more stylized and stage-managed, with intimacy presented as a polished "performance" when partners meet again.

While the previous chapters have rather focused on the embodied experiences of women in LAT relationships - *the micro-dimension of intimacy*, domestic labour and autonomy- it is equally important to consider the *broader structures* in which these relationships are situated. Zooming out to the macro level, while still engaging with women's lived experience, reveals how LAT is shaped by wider institutional and political dynamics.

Politics of Proximity

The research began with the premise that cohabitation within romantic relationships is neither inevitable nor natural, but rather a socially constructed norm. While humans may be inherently social beings (*zoon politikon*, as Aristotle framed it), inclined towards communal life (University of Vienna, Institute of History, n.d.) - this does not mean that the isolated couple or nuclear family unit is a natural or necessary form of living together. Rather, the cohabitating couple is a particular arrangement that has been institutionalised, normalised, and moralised through various social, economic, and political forces.

While romantic partnerships, the domestic sphere, and the family are often imagined - even in official state discourse - as private refuges from the market and the state, this is a misleading assumption. For instance, the Austrian government asserts that "as a general principle, the state does not interfere in these private matters" (Marriage in Austria, n.d.). This statement specifically refers to the obligations couples take on upon marriage in Austria, with "cohabitation" listed as the first example of many. However, despite this claim of non-interference, the state's involvement can become quite direct: if one partner leaves the shared home against the will of the other, this may carry legal consequences. Austria is one of the few countries in the world that still applies the concept of fault-based divorce in which a partner deemed responsible for the relationship's breakdown can be ordered to pay maintenance to the other (Schmidt, 2024).

Yet the state's regulation of intimacy often begins well before unions are formalized e.g. through marriage or registered partnerships (registered partnership is an option in Austria but not in Sweden). Simply sharing an address makes a relationship legible and therefore governable. Where, and most importantly, with whom one lives, becomes a key mechanism through which the state (both in Austria and Sweden) assigns responsibility, redistributes care, and defines eligibility for support. A shared address is it is treated as proof of relational entanglement, triggering the assumption of economic interdependence and caregiving responsibilities. This assumption renders cohabitation not merely a private living arrangement but a crucial pillar of welfare governance.

Weightless Relationships

Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships disrupt this logic since the couple does, by its definition, not share the same address. And oftentimes, they also do not perform commitment in ways that are materially recognized: there is no shared lease, no merging of bank accounts, oftentimes no wedding ceremony as proof. By withholding these formal markers, acts of commitment become subtle, tactical interventions within a contested relational and spatial field. And also, with regard to more mundane traces of a shared life, it turned out that besides slippers and toothbrushes - and in some cases a drawer for clothing or toiletries - the women I interviewed leave only very slight imprints of themselves in the material environment of their partners' homes.

According to the legal scholar Nausica Palazzo (2021), while the state has an obvious interest in promoting the formation of networks of care - since care is an essential feature of a well-functioning society - the law is not seeking to attach legal consequences to situations that "lack commitment". This presents a structural challenge for LAT relationships, which makes them subject to legal and cultural misrecognition, not because this relationship inherently lacks commitment, but because they resist the spatial and institutional forms through which commitment is typically legible to the state. Commitment in LAT relationships is rather intangible, weightless - closely aligned with how Giddens (1991: 6) conceptualized the 'pure relationship' in which "external criteria have become dissolved" and the relationship is sustained as long both parties derive "mutual satisfaction" from it. Commitment becomes more discursive than material, making it harder to register within normative frameworks of recognition.

By not being a legal category in either Sweden or Austria, LAT relationships remain outside the grasp of institutional recognition. As language functions as an "intellectual technology that renders realities governable" - the absence of a designated term or legal status effectively places these relationships beyond the reach of formal regulation (Rose et al., cited in Andersson, 2017: 608). Without the vocabulary to name them, the state struggles to categorize, monitor, or manage them. The are manageable on the individual level but not as a relationship unit.

Through their weightlessness, LAT couples, in a sense, evade the spatial discipline imposed by normative relational scripts. They become *nomadic* figures in Deleuze and Guattari's terms - "slipping through the 'striated spaces' of power" (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003: 32). These couples resist being fixed in place by the typical markers of relational

legitimacy: shared addresses, marital status, or household registration. Their spatial practices remain largely opaque. However, as the following example will show, this invisibility can have concrete and often detrimental consequences for those navigating these institutional fields.

When care systems fail: "I felt like I was fallow through a grid"

It is a Sunday afternoon, and I am speaking with Jules (40), over a video call. She sits on her couch, her laptop resting on the table in front of her. Behind her, a row of white-framed family photos hangs on the wall. Jules' life revolves around her children; everything else comes second. Like many mothers in Austria, she is working part time while being the prime carer for two children aged three and eight. Despite being in a committed relationship, Jules identifies - and is officially categorized - as 'alleinerziehend', a legal designation in Austria that differentiates single parents from single individuals (alleinstehend). Because her LAT partner is not registered at her address, the state recognizes her as the sole adult in the household, making her eligible for social benefits designed for those raising children alone. In this sense, her address becomes more than a logistical detail - it operates as a signifier that positions her in a very specific way within the state's administrative and welfare frameworks. It signals to the state that no other adult is present whose income, time, or care could be shared and who consequently could be made responsible as a first safety net of economic and care support.

When couples share an address, the state interprets this as a pooling of resources and a natural form of care provided by a partner. As a result, cohabiting couples are assumed to constitute a self-sustaining unit - one where each partner functions as the first line of care, with governmental support acting only as a fallback when the internal pool of resources proves insufficient. In the case of LAT relationships, the absence of a shared address, signifies to the welfare state that the familial safety net is considered inapplicable, and the responsibility shifts from the private to the public domain. However, once Jules' maternity leave ended and thus also the health insurance that was connected to it, there was one moment in which the Austrian state did not catch her:

> "When my maternity leave ended, I panicked - I felt like I was falling through a grid. I couldn't return to work yet because I still had to care for the children. I also couldn't get health insurance via AMS (Austrian Public Employment Service) since I didn't meet the requirement to be available for the labor market for at least 25 hours per week. At the same time, I couldn't be insured through my partner because we weren't married or living

> together for at least six months. Paying for health insurance myself would have been impossibly expensive, and I refused it - after all, I had been working all my life. For a moment, I even considered getting married - just for that."

This sense of "falling through a grid" captures the experience of navigating a bureaucratic system that fails to accommodate realities outside of its predefined categories. The anthropologist Susan Leigh Star (1990) compares her personal experience of being allergic to onions in a fast-food restaurant reveals the boundaries of standardisation, as a metaphor of how infrastructures are often exclusive. When individuals do not fit into established classifications, the system does not adapt but rather exposes its own rigid boundaries, rendering certain experiences invisible or untenable. Austria's healthcare system, widely regarded as comprehensive, operates on a logic that privileges two primary categories: the economically autonomous worker or the dependent spouse within a nuclear household. Those who do not fit these categories, like Jules, risk exclusion from basic entitlements that most Austrian residents take for granted. If welfare cannot be claimed via the state or the family, Jules welfare faith is left to the free market as the last welfare pillar according to Esping-Andersen's welfare triad.

Austria's social security model aligns with the historical legacy of conservative-corporatist welfare states, where the family remains a key site of care and economic support (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Matznetter, 2011). By tying social benefits to household arrangements, the Austrian state subtly incentivizes cohabitation and traditional family models, externalizing caregiving responsibilities to the private sphere rather than expanding public welfare provisions. When looking closer at how co-insurance is regulated and under which circumstances it can be assumed, it becomes clear how care is legally recognized only under specific relational and moralized terms. According to the Austrian government: "The prerequisites for co-insurance are that they have lived with the insured person in the same household for at least ten months and have been running the household for him/her free of charge for this period" (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, n.d.). This formulation reveals the assumption that care, to be legitimate and eligible for state support, must be unpaid and rooted in a presumed familial bond. Since Jules has not performed this work for her partner as they are not sharing a household, she is also not eligible for co-insurance.

By contrast, Sweden's universal healthcare system embodies a different ideological framework, one in which the state assumes direct responsibility for individual welfare rather than delegating it to family structures (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006: x). Moreover, social rights are granted based on residency rather than employment or marital

status, ensuring access to healthcare and welfare support regardless of household composition. As Mannelqvist (2007: 147) puts it: “It is not possible not to be part of the system”. If Jules were a Swedish resident, she would not fall through the welfare grid. And very likely, she would not even get to a situation in which she would not be able to work in paid employment despite having two small children. In Sweden, not only is the right to care more comprehensively institutionalized, but access to childcare is structured in a way that actively supports parental employment. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education, around 50% of one-year-olds and 90 % of two-year-olds attend preschool (Skolverket, 2023) and municipalities in Sweden are legally obligated to offer a childcare place to every child from the age of one, provided the parents are working, studying, or actively seeking employment. By contrast, in Austria, only around 32% of children under the age of two are enrolled in formal childcare (Statistik Austria, 2023).

Despite Sweden’s welfare model which is known for placing minimal responsibility on the family, cohabiting couples are assumed to be pooling resources as well. Thus, when it comes to welfare entitlements, the Swedish state, much like the Austrian, calculates benefits based on *household income*. This means that simply living together at the same address, as presumed intimate partners, has implications on one’s eligibility, regardless of any formal declaration of shared economy or care responsibilities. The intimate and the administrative intersect quietly here: two adults under one roof become a unit in the eyes of the state. Looking at this through de Certeau (1984), we can see how the state is using territoriality as a strategy to classify, control and discipline.

This assumption of a pooling of resources has deep historical roots in the institution of marriage. Historically, marriage was not primarily about personal affection but predominantly functioned as an economic contract. As the historian Marareth Lanzinger (2010:13) points out, marriage was fundamentally concerned with the transfer and securing of resources, with sentiments such as love occasionally serving as a complimentary addition. Marriage enabled the extension of property and the consolidation of wealth, as each partner contributed something to the union. Even when material assets were minimal, the bride or groom was expected to contribute their “lieb und treu” (love and faithfulness), which signified an obligation to help and support the other (Langer-Ostrawsky, 2010:54). Lanzinger and Langer-Ostrawsky (2010) argue that historically, marriage functioned primarily as an economic arrangement - an alliance aimed at managing shared resources and, ideally, building wealth. As Mary Douglas (1991) notes, the success of a household is its continuation, by its ability to sustain and reproduce itself.

The focus on functionality and was also confirmed by the curator of the exhibition "How Did People Live in the Past?" at the Kulturen Museum in Lund, Sweden. During a walk-along interview through the museum, she explained that relationship quality, particularly in agrarian contexts, was assessed through functionality: how well couples could work together. Affection was a welcomed attribute. In contrast, the discourse around intimacy has shifted significantly in late modernity: love has moved from being a "welcome side effect" to becoming the very "cement" that is expected to hold a relationship together (Coontz, cited in Andersson, 2017: 605, 606).

This shift, as some scholars argue, has led to a form of "governing through love" - where emotional bonds are mobilized as instruments of social and political regulation (Andersson, 2017; Osterlund, 2009). Yet, as LAT relationships show, love without a material component, such as a shared address, remains largely invisible to the state. As a consequence of this invisibility, bonds between couples committed in less tangible ways - such as Maria, 65, who would say that she is "legally nobody" in relation to her long-term partner because they do not share a household - are rendered illegible in bureaucratic terms. Though emotionally real and enduring, such relationships carry no weight in assessments of eligibility or entitlement.

But how committed, or willing to care for one another are people in LAT relationships?

During fieldwork, I came down with the flu and found myself largely confined to bed. In moments like these - when physical vulnerability heightens one's dependence - I felt especially grateful to share a home with a partner who could step in: cooking meals, picking up groceries, and going to the pharmacy on my behalf. Since we had moved away from our hometown and consequently our families as an important care-network, he had become my default caregiver - and I his. This experience raised an important question for me, one that I began posing to the women I interviewed: What happens when you're sick? Who takes care of you? Maria (65) shrugged: "I never get sick." Except for that one time - when she had Covid and was stuck in bed. Her LAT partner and her daughter dropped off groceries and walked her dog. Gunilla (65), said she relies on two close friends in her neighbourhood. "We have our little care pact." They are not only buying groceries, medicine and cooking for each other when sick - they also have an eye on each other's apartment when one of them is out of town. Jules (40) has her father she feels she can always rely on. As a general impression - when it comes to sickness or

emergencies - the women from the 40+ cohort I interviewed seemed to have a strong network of kin that cared for them when they were unwell.

When asked about the future, when they or their partners might no longer be able to manage the household by themselves, many expressed intentions to rely on public professionalized care, largely provided by the welfare state, such as assisted living or retirement homes. However, nearly all insisted on the desire for privacy even then: “a room of one’s own,” with the partner ideally in the next room or wing. One informant had already discussed these plans explicitly with their LAT partners and laughed about how they'd told their partners, “You can live next door, not next to me in bed.” Jules is playing with the idea of retiring in a tiny house in the garden of the house her son will inherit one day - indicating that the family as a welfare pillar is still considered.

But caregiving is not always hypothetical. Annika’s partner broke his hip shortly after she moved into her own apartment. “He fell while I was out having lunch with my friend.” she recalled. And when I’m sitting with a friend like that, I don’t want to answer my phone, so I had the volume off. Later, I finally checked my phone and saw that my husband had texted me maybe 10 times, saying: “Call me, I’ve fallen, I’m lying on the sofa, I can’t move.” She rushed home in a taxi. “When I got there, I saw him laying there and I said, ‘You should’ve called an ambulance!’ And he said, ‘But I called you.’” He was taken to the hospital, had surgery, and recovered well. But for Annika, the moment sparked something deeper. “I remember thinking: Oh no. Do I have to move back to take care of him? I really didn’t want to. I had just settled into living alone”. This reaction reveals a tension between two coexisting dispositions: on the one hand, the internalized script of the caring woman - deeply sedimented through decades of gendered socialization, where caregiving is felt to be part of the unspoken "rules of the game", the doxa within intimate partnerships and family life with regard to what happens in ‘bad times’; and on the other, a more recent, hard-won disposition toward independence, cultivated through lived experience and the rather conscious pursuit of carving out space for her own needs. As it turned out, she didn’t have to move back in but still be there for her partner in a way that is compatible with her needs.

> “Still, I wanted to make sure he’d be okay, so I asked my daughter to help me clean up the house and make it nice for when he came back. We did that, and when he got home, he was able to manage pretty well on his own. I helped him a bit - drove him to appointments and did some food shopping - but we still kept our separate lives. I think

> in the future we'll keep helping each other like that, but we won't move in together full-time just because of illness. That's a line we've both agreed on."

One of the most powerful takeaways from our conversation was Annika's subtle redefinition of care as a spectrum of actions rather than an all-or-nothing arrangement. Annika's account unsettles the normative conflation between love and limitless giving. "I'll visit him, drive him, shop for him. But I won't be his nurse. And I don't want him to be mine. If that's ever needed, professionals should do it. I don't want to lose what we have by turning into his caregiver." In Goffman terms - what Annika and her partner agreed upon is a refusal to a role switch from an equal partner to a care-giver. And it also makes visible to what extent individuals feel that they can rely on the public realm in taking care of them and their significant others.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the gendered experience of women in Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships in Sweden and Austria and how this experience is shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations of righteous intimacy and coupledom. Through a multifaceted methodological approach - drawing on 14 in-depth biographical interviews, participant observation in both digital and offline contexts, and autoethnographic reflection - I examined how LAT as a relational form is negotiated within a contested terrain where cohabitation remains a powerful ideal. The theoretical framework that guided this research combined Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, Sara Ahmed's notion of the promise of happiness, and Erving Goffman's front stage/backstage distinction. By putting these theoretical perspectives into dialogue with each other and the empirical material I gathered over the course of six months, I was able to get a deeper understanding of how women navigate the contested metaphorical space of intimate relationships. In this concluding chapter, I return to the three research questions that have guided this thesis. One by one, I will revisit and respond to them, drawing together key insights from the analysis.

RQ1: How do LAT relationships challenge the dominant societal and legal norms surrounding coupledom, and how do these norms differ in Sweden and Austria?

This thesis has shown that LAT relationships challenge dominant social imaginaries of what intimacy is supposed to look like. Despite differing national, cultural, and personal backgrounds, the women in this study share one experience: they inhabit a relational form that remains socially and legally ambiguous. Rather than being seen as a valid choice, LAT is often perceived as a deviation from the "proper" model of coupledom - one firmly anchored in shared domestic space. Its distance from traditional institutions like marriage, or marriage-like partnerships which are still deeply imbued with a promise of happiness and regarded as the "natural" path - renders LAT relationships suspect or simply invisible.

In the Austrian context, the concept of LAT is largely unknown. Most women I interviewed had never encountered the term and did not know their way of relating had a name, let alone that it was part of a wider discourse. Without a name or cultural narrative to situate themselves within, they often found their way of relating met with confusion, scepticism, or even alienation. Consequently, they frequently found themselves needing to explain, justify, or even defend their choice to live apart from their partners. For many in their social circles, LAT appeared suspicious, selfish, or simply incomprehensible. But critiques often also relied on functionalist arguments, highlighting that living apart was seen as impractical and inefficient. Particularly the functional arguments indicate that the rejection of LAT stems from a clash of relational aesthetics. In this view, the home's primary function is to keep the family together and provide shelter, rather than serve as a space for self-expression or personal autonomy. This reflects Bourdieu's notion of distinction through taste: the dominant social logic values the practical, collective function of the home over the more individualistic or aesthetic dimensions of intimacy that LAT relationships embody. Where some of my informants experienced LAT as an intentional, emotionally meaningful configuration - bearing resemblance to Giddens's notion of the "pure relationship" - their social environment often interpreted it through a more traditional lens, framing it as a failure to commit, morally wrong, or simply impractical.

Even in Sweden - a cultural context that is known for encouraging self-expression values - LAT remains marginalized. While the term "särbo" - the Swedish equivalent to LAT - provides a symbolic point of reference, it does not seem to carry the same weight or level of recognition as its counterpart "sambo" (cohabiting partners), which has frequently been described as equivalent to marriage (regarding its function but also perceived legitimacy). It

seems as if “särbo” lacks the symbolic markers typically associated with what constitutes a “proper” relationship - such as duration, sacrifice, and domestic entanglement and it also fails to account for a shared history as a couple. This observation is reinforced by my finding that indicates that “särbo” is primarily used to describe relationships formed later in life and is rarely applied to younger adults. This distinction matters, since my findings suggest that age in particular plays a crucial role in how LAT is perceived. LAT seems to be more easily accepted when practiced later in life, once the normative milestones of cohabitation, marriage, and child-rearing have been fulfilled. Under these circumstances, people are perceived to have “earned” the right to live apart; they are understood to have accumulated sufficient capital - economic and symbolic - to deviate from the dominant script.

Beyond social norms, LAT relationships challenge legal frameworks by revealing the limitations in how states recognize and regulate intimacy. In both Sweden and Austria, cohabitation - signalled through shared addresses, or assumed under marriage, or (in Austria) registered partnerships - functions as a bureaucratic shorthand for relational legitimacy. It is through this shorthand that access to welfare benefits is granted or restricted. When a couple is recognized as a household unit, the state assumes a pooling of both tangible (e.g. income) and intangible (e.g. care) resources. Consequently, shared living arrangements become tools of welfare governance, positioning the couple as the first line of support, and allowing the state to step in only as a secondary safety net. This logic rests on what I termed the *politics of proximity* - a set of institutional assumptions that equate physical closeness with responsibility and legitimacy.

LAT relationships disrupt this legal grammar. By living apart and often foregoing formal markers such as marriage, shared finances, or a shared address, LAT couples fall outside the state’s established categories for recognizing and regulating intimacy. As such, they are rendered largely invisible in legal terms. While such invisibility can offer a degree of freedom - allowing couples to bypass the spatial discipline that assumes a family household is the primary unit of care and economic interdependence - it also carries structural consequences. On one hand, LAT couples may benefit from being assessed as individuals rather than a household, potentially gaining easier access to certain welfare provisions. On the other hand, they are not formally acknowledged as units of mutual care or responsibility, which limits their rights and protections in times of need. This duality reveals a deeper structural fragility: the legal and bureaucratic apparatus remains ill-equipped to accommodate intimate relationships that do not conform to the spatial logic of cohabitation.

RQ2: What factors contribute to women's decisions to enter LAT relationships, and what benefits or affordances does this relationship model provide them?

The life trajectories that made the women in this study come to be in LAT relationships are diverse. But my findings suggest that there are two broad patterns that explain why the women in my interviews turned to LAT relationships: The first pattern involves women who have previously cohabited - either with current or former partners - and who found themselves disproportionately burdened by domestic labour. These women described feeling absorbed by the work that has automatically been ascribed to them and opting out of cohabitation emerged as a necessary form of boundary-making. By disentangling intimacy from domesticity, LAT offered a framework in which care work and emotional labour were no longer assumed but rendered visible and open to negotiation. In this sense, LAT emerges as a feminist tactic: a spatial and relational reconfiguration that resists the naturalized collapse of womanhood into homemaking. The second pattern includes women who articulated a more dispositional or existential need for autonomy. Often engaged in academic, artistic, or project-based work, these women emphasized the home as a space that must accommodate more than relational life. Their accounts resonate with Virginia Woolf's assertion that "a woman must have a room of her own if she is to write fiction" - or, more broadly, cultivate a self beyond domestic demands. LAT, for these women, supports the maintenance of multiple subject positions: partner, mother, professional, musician, thinker. It allows them to structure their daily lives in ways not continually organized around the needs or presence of one's partner.

A common thread between these two patterns is the practice of compartmentalization which is considered a hallmark of modern life (Arvidsson, 2004: 48). Rather than merging spheres of life, LAT allows for their intentional separation. It enables a more dynamic and deliberate management of the frontstage and backstage of the self. In contrast to dominant imaginaries in which the cohabiting home is imagined as a mutual backstage, many of the women I interviewed sought for the possibility of a backstage behind the backstage - a space of radical privacy secluded from the gaze of the partner - where they could simply be, unencumbered by the expectation to be "okay," nurturing, or available. Living apart allows them to regain control over when to be "on" and when to withdraw, to regulate access to their emotional and physical selves.

Besides that, having a room of one's own emerged in my research as a critical enabler of agency. Spatial autonomy not only offered women a retreat from relational demands

but also created the conditions for what I describe - drawing on Haraway - as a process of *becoming-with*: a mutual shaping between self and environment (2016: 136). To shape the space according to their rhythms, needs, and aesthetic preferences. This act of inhabiting space on their own terms can be interpreted a feminist act of claiming territory. Importantly, this spatial extension, this *flowing over* in Ahmed terms, allowed for a deeper kind of self-recognition - an encounter with one's rhythms, preferences, and needs - outside the shaping influence of a partner or the lingering authority of the family of origin.

RQ3: Could the LAT model lead to greater gender equality in intimate relationships?

While throughout the thesis I insisted on framing LAT as a feminist practice and tactic, this research has shown that LAT should not be mistaken for a feminist utopia.

On one hand, the LAT model can certainly open new possibilities for more equitable relational arrangements. As my findings have shown, when partners do not share a household, the traditional assumption that women will automatically take on domestic labour is disrupted. Each partner becomes responsible for their own space, and domestic labour can no longer hide behind spatial proximity. Instead, it must be made visible, discussed, and negotiated. In this sense, LAT has the potential to undo some of the gendered scripts that cohabitation tends to reproduce. It also subverts the breadwinner–housekeeper binary, since both partners maintain independent households and, in many cases, independent economies. And it also provides women a vital space to step back from the relentless demands of the “good woman” role - he one who keeps the home as the family’s backstage, yet is herself denied any *real* backstage - a space that, as I’ve shown, is essential for sustaining one’s well-being.

But LAT should not be misunderstood as one-dimensional feminist celebrations of choice and agency. Instead, it requires a more nuanced approach to autonomy, since, as Jules's case illustrated, autonomy often comes at a hidden cost. By refusing cohabitation, she retained full control over her domestic sphere - but with that control comes the full weight of caregiving duties, since she remains the primary caretaker of her children and the sole manager of a family household with a partner who occasionally takes over to “babysit”. This points to the ambivalence of autonomy: a concept often framed as emancipatory, but which, in lived reality, can morph into overload. The example of Jules underscores a critical tension: opting out of normative arrangements may increase her perceived freedom within the domestic sphere, but it does not dissolve structural inequalities. LAT can render these inequalities even more

visible by isolating the labour women are expected to perform - now without even the thin promise of reciprocal support.

While the research questions are answered, a host of new questions emerged. Those questions particularly refer to how to reach gender equality in the domestic sphere and to the role of the family (including the couple unit) as a welfare pillar. If autonomy alone does not equate to gender equality, what alternative models of cohabitation, collaboration, or care might support more equitable living? How can people live together - spatially or relationally - in ways that promote cooperation without absorption in the demands of the household and its beneficiaries? In ways that allow for intimacy without erasure of the self?

And on a more macro level: The current legal and bureaucratic systems largely operate on the logic that one roof equals one economic and care unit. LAT couples destabilise this formula. They may live separately yet support each other through illness, childcare, or crisis. They may not be recognized as a legal unit, yet function as one in practice. Conversely, cohabiting couples may share a home while leading largely autonomous lives.

If this logic begins to break down, it raises practical and ethical questions: Who is responsible for whom? Should the state step in where once a spouse or cohabiting partner might have - as it is already the case now in the case of adults who are registered without a cohabiting partner - decoupling care from the private sphere of the couple?

In an era of increasingly diverse relational forms, should individuals be able to formally designate a "maintenance partner" - regardless of marital, sexual, or biological ties - who is entitled to state-supported benefits in exchange for providing care? Such a system would remain within a framework of privatized care but offer more flexibility in how that care is structured and recognized.

What emerges here is a new terrain of intimacy and responsibility. If shared space is no longer the sole metric of a committed relationship, then what is? And if care - perhaps better framed here as maintenance, to emphasize its ongoing labour and less romantic connotations - can no longer be tied to physical proximity, how can it be tracked, rewarded and made sure that it is provided in the first place? These questions are not merely theoretical. They carry material implications for how social institutions allocate resources, how legal systems recognize kinship, and how we, as a society, define relational legitimacy. Without re-thinking the current frameworks that rely on rigid markers - such as a shared address - as a signifier to a commitment

to step in in times of crisis, we risk leaving those who love, care, and support outside traditional domestic norms without recognition or protection.

Applicability

Opting out of cohabitation with a romantic partner is more than a lifestyle choice - it reflects deeper negotiations about how people want to be together while remaining distinct individuals. In this light, spatial arrangements - particularly the play between distance and proximity - become powerful tools for asserting identity, reclaiming autonomy, challenging normative domesticity, and reimagining what togetherness can look like.

These insights are particularly relevant for those who shape our built environments. What would it mean to design homes that support separation rather than assume constant togetherness? Could we envision housing models not structured around the couple unit, but instead accommodating alternative forms of intimacy, autonomy, and care?

Historical housing experiments - such as the early 20th-century socialist vision of kitchenless apartments (see, for example, Puigjaner, 2014) - demonstrate that domestic labour, particularly cooking, can be collectively organized to ease the burden on individuals, especially women. During my fieldwork, I visited the collective housing project Röda Oasen in Malmö, where about 40 residents (approx. 30 adults and 10 children) share communal dinners four nights a week. With a rotating schedule, each person cooks only two or three times a month in a professionally equipped communal kitchen. Although most apartments have their own kitchens, residents who prefer to participate in the collective cooking are supported. This model points toward alternative care infrastructures that move beyond the private nuclear household and offer innovative ways of organizing domestic chores.

While living in a collective does not resonate with everyone, and having two households is usually more expensive than sharing one, another option is to rethink how shared spaces are designed. Instead of layouts based on shared bedrooms and open plans that assume constant closeness, architects might design for “separateness within togetherness” - emphasizing walls, doors, and spaces for withdrawal, alongside shared spaces for connection (potentially also third-spaces outside of the apartment itself). A home that reflects the fact that intimacy and autonomy are not opposites, but interdependent.

Beyond housing design, the insights from this research hold important implications for policymakers. However, before effective policies addressing LAT

relationships can be developed, there is an urgent need for more accurate and inclusive data collection that recognizes LAT as a distinct and increasingly common demographic category. Current data systems often obscure these living arrangements, leading to policies that overlook or marginalize individuals who live apart yet maintain committed partnerships. By establishing more precise and inclusive demographic categories, policymakers can build a stronger knowledge base to better inform social services, healthcare entitlements, and welfare benefits - making them more flexible and responsive to diverse household compositions.

Regarding applicability in the academic realm, this research has shown that LAT is a highly generative concept for feminist research - not just in terms of relationship structures, but also in the anthropology of space, architecture, and welfare politics. Much of the existing literature on gender and space examines how the home itself is a deeply gendered space. LAT, however, raises the possibility of alternative spatial imaginaries. Anthropologists such as Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003: 7,8) have criticized the fragmentation of research on gendered space, calling for deeper, more focused inquiries. By situating women's LAT relationships at the intersection of gender and spatial practice, this research responded directly to that call.

Finally, I hope this thesis can be part of a growing conversation about reimagining intimacy, care, and how we live together - or apart. I hope it helps in lessening the grip of stigma, especially on women who carve out space for themselves, and makes room for new, more bearable ways of being together – whether that means mi casa es tu casa or mi casa es mi casa.

Footnotes

[1] For instance, Sweden has no-fault divorce, no widower's pension, and limited maintenance obligations between ex-partners. These features signal that long-term unions are not presumed to generate lasting financial interdependence. Instead, the state steps in to provide security, allowing individuals to exit relationships without economic penalty.

[2] Beyond family law, property law - as codified in the Swedish and Austrian civil codes - also plays a critical role. These provisions govern ownership, co-ownership, inheritance, and tenancy rights, all of which carry significant material consequences. In Sweden, for example, de facto rights accrue to long-term cohabitants - granting protections similar to those of marriage - whereas Austrian law typically reserves such protections for formally married couples or registered partnerships.

[3] The appropriate use for Auto-Ethnography as research method has been a topic for discussion among scholars at the Department of Cultural Sciences/Ethnology at Lund University during the thesis defence seminars in April 2025.

[4] Since the forum of the "Brigitte" Magazine is no longer active, I contacted the editors of this magazine to get ahold of the discussion 20 years ago, but unfortunately, it has already been deleted from their archive I was told.

[5] While this humorous origin story helps explain why people might react "funny" as pointed out by Gunilla, it remains a tentative explanation - in part because the sole published reference is a Wiktionary entry rather than a peer-reviewed study. Further research into contemporary usage and official records would be needed to confirm how widespread and enduring this jocular connotation really is.

[6] In her book "Radical Tenderness" Seyda Kurt (2021:51) introduced the myth of the „spherical people" who were robbed of their state of „wholeness" by the gods, who forced their division into two separate halfs. From this moment onwards the fate of all beings on earth was to find their missing other half. Leaving everyone behind in a state of incompleteness.

[7] I only mention the 40+ cohort because with the younger cohort I did not discuss care that much. Only one participant said that only when she is sick, she would like somebody to live with her (Gabriella), or that when starting a family (Ilena) she might consider moving in with her partner – preferably not in the same apartment but ideally in a shared living collective, like the one in Röda Oasen, Malmö.

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Appendices

Interviews

Anna (2024-11-27). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Annika (2025-02-17). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Aurelia (2024-12-06). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Gabriella (2024-12-03). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Gunilla (2025-03-25). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Ilena (2024-11-26). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Jules (2025-02-09). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Lara (2024-12-07). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Leyla (2025-02-27). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Jules (2025-02-09). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Maria (2025-01-29). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Nika (2025-01-30). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Svenja (2024-11-27). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Veronika (2025-01-31). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Swedish Lawyer (2025-04-04). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Austrian Lawyer (2025-03-22). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Curator at Kulturen Museum (2025-03-07). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Housing Collective Röda Oasen (2025-01-27, 2024-12-06). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.

Kvinnojouren Lund (2025-04-04). Interviewer Julia Stockinger.